



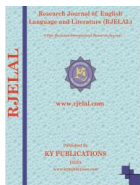
THE SUFFERING OF PARSI COMMUNITY ROHINTON MISTRY'S "A FINE BALANCE"

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry belongs to the burgeoning crop of Indian novelist writing in English. This fiction engages not only with the experience of a diasporic writer but also with the Parsi community located within the national schemata. A fine balance is a social fiction that deals with the Parsi middle class in Bombay. Mistry brings the four disparate characters together to the city to make each of the quarter's individual concerns reflect the predicament of the times – Dina, Maneck, Ishwar and Omprakash represent different age groups. The character struggles to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair. The main focus of this paper to portray the struggles of the character face in the contemporary world.

Keyword: Parsi, Social, Economic, Struggle, Hope

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry's novels deal with the problems of a normal person faces in his / her own life. His character grows in self-knowledge and fights against an aggressive social environment to create a new world and freedom. His protagonist is young and middle-aged people. All the four-character in the novel struggle very hard to maintain a fine balance. Mistry shows the Sufferings of poor character from the Parsi community.

A Fine Balance Has three of its many chapters entitled – 'The city by the sea', 'The village by a River' and 'Mountains'. The novel brings together those residing in the mountains, the village and the cities, and collapses them all together to make for its national allegory about the emergency. Mistry brings the four disparate characters together to the city to make each of the quartet's individual concerns reflect the predicament of the times – whether social, political or economic. All four characters-Dina, Maneck, Ishar and Omprakash-

represent different age-groups and different social categories. The Parsi woman Dina Dalal trying to survive under the rule of her brother Nusswan. The daughter of a respected doctor, Dina's aspirations crumble with her father's death and her mother's disintegration into a kind of widowed renunciation. Regarded as a burden by her brother Nusswan once he takes charge of the household, Dina is forced to give up her studies and asked to marry one of the rich suitors her brother parades before her. However, she defies her disciplinarian brother to marry a man of her choice, and even though she becomes a widow soon after like her mother, she does not emulate her conduct Nusswan notices :

No wailing, no beating the chest or tearing the hair as you might expect from a woman who has suffered such a shock, such a loss. But he also remembered their mother's dignity on a similar occasion and the disintegration that had followed in its wake.

He hoped Dina would not follow the same pattern. (46)

Dina once again defies the demeanour that is traditionally expected of a widow. Trying to restructure her life post her husband's death, she attempts to preserve the fierce independence in her nature by rebuilding her life through economic self-reliance. To escape subjugation, she rebels against the brother who is unable to understand her strange idea of independence which meant "working like a slave to earn a pittance" (369). He tries to remind her that Parsis are a broad-minded lot as compared to other communities in their treatment of widows and spinsters. The community not only has the highest divorce rate but is also liberated in its treatment of widows who are not seen as family liabilities:

Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with him, For you, it is possible to live life, get married again, have children. Or do you prefer to live forever on my charity. (52)

As a young Parsi widow, Dina is regarded as a problem in wanting to retain her individuality and acquire a sense of self by being a lowly-paid seamstress. There is no property division to speak of, as the Parsi patriarch takes over everything and clarifies that Dina can live on his terms and remarry in passive compliance or fend for herself. Thus, in comparison with other communities, though the women within the Parsi community are accorded much more freedom, the rules remain essentially patriarchal.

The novel opens with the flashback of Maneck and tailors travelling together in a Bombay local to reach Dinabai's house, through which the disparate elements of Indian reality are brought together in a single snapshot. Each character's past is interspersed with a parallel narrative of India's other half-its villages- that runs alongside the main narrative cation happening in Bombay.

Gender inequalities are too exist, for example, the birth of a male child has rejoiced, but no such celebrations occasion the birth of the girl. The choice of a profession is determined through heredity and caste lines are a part of 'dharmic order' that is set in stone and preserved. Mistry reflects on the lives of tailors forefathers who were chamaars to begin with. As a tanner, Dukhi mocha is the burdened inheritor of caste laws but chooses to defy tradition by making his sons, Ishvar and Narayan, apprentice as tailors. By turning to tailor to get a modicum of dignity, he breaks off from the time honoured tradition of meek compliance to the caste system.

Caste oppression remains a reality even after twenty years of independence and untouchability is rife. The disaffection between high caste Hindus and the untouchables proves to be a ground for amiability between the disposed untouchables and Ashraf, the Muslim, who teaches the chamaars his tailoring skills. The caste-based politics remains a reality in the hinterlands of post-independence India and Gandhiji's dream about harijins remains simply that a dream. Things do not change much even after they better their plight somewhat by becoming adept as tailors. His sufferings bring in measure but the status quo remains unchanged.

Though the lower castes are influenced by leaders' rhetoric of expunging caste prejudices, ungodly casteism remains reverential by the higher castes as the hoary 'law of Manu.' Centuries-old tradition remains unchanged in the villages but the city takes strides towards change, as the "school in town now accepted everyone, high caste is low. The village school continued to be restricted" (141)

The low caste is made conscious of their subordination time and again by the high-caste feudal lords who connive with the bureaucracy in post-independent India to prolong their rule and stall any attempt at change. Along with bureaucracy, social reality in villages comes to be controlled by the Zamindars, who now wield control through rigged elections and both capturing to thwart democracy as the pillar of identity.

Maneck's family comes in the form of giant city-based corporations with their modern assembly

line production of soft drinks which puts the indigenous Parsi manufacturers like Maneck's father out of business. The old geniality and casual approach to commerce are brutally overtaken by modern advertising arrogance and cut-throat competition. For the Zoroastrian minority, change comes with partition accompanying independence that brings in a shift in the social order. Paris like Maneck Kohlah's father bemoan the past privileges upon losing his territories with the partition having redrawn the nation's geographical boundaries.

A Fine Balance sheds light on the reality of Indian villages in the post-independence times, where rural feudal forces work in close conjunction with political modes of oppression. Nation's politics reaching the villages acquire a feudal tenor where the rulers are not politicians but village lords who collude with politicians. Thakur Dharamsi becomes a big man in the Congress party. Like city-bred politicians, he is shown bent upon preserving the hierarchical power structures. As a result of the caste wars that carried on for generations, the visiting untouchable tailors are forcibly castrated to avenge the humiliation caused in the past. The government's apathy continues in the form of family planning which forces vasectomy upon people through the nussbandi melas. With Ishvar's coercive sterilization, Om is castrated as a part of revenge by Thakur Dharamsi whose connivance with the bureaucracy suggests criminalization of politics in modern India.

Amidst the emergency imposed affliction on post-independent Bombay, the four protagonists are bought together in their everyday struggle for survival. Each member of Dina's house tries to transcend the crippling tradition set barriers/constraints of birth caste, class or gender. Dina's struggle for economic independence makes her an unwitting participant in tailors' everyday struggle when she is drawn to the political whirlwind of the emergency through her employees. Her initial insularity that stems from a muted class consciousness and suspicion gives way to a more humane understanding and sympathy:

She knew that everything she did was done from self-preservation –to keep the tailors

from being picked up again by the police, and to have them out of sight of nosy neighbours and the rent collector. Now Ishvar and Om were wrapping her in the mantle of kindness and generosity. Deceit, hypocrisy, manipulation were more the fabrics of her garment, she thought. (388)

With tailors' gratitude, Dina's class consciousness melts and her stance softens. A sense of compassion makes her less rigid and more accommodating, especially when she does away with the practice of maintaining separate cups for the tailors and treats them like family. Dina's personal predicament is mirrored in the tailor's helplessness against the autocratic regime. Briefly, Dina's cramped dwelling becomes what Trikha calls a harmonious "cross-fertilization of cultures"¹² Under the strain of Emergency, it becomes a space that transcends political disintegration through compassion where humanity is recognized underneath the fabric of difference. However momentarily, 'sailing under one flag,' the quartet epitomizes the triumph of humanity against odds. And for the rotting nation divided along religious and linguistic lines, they are proclaimed by Mistry as the conscience keepers of modern India, exemplifying how a democratic country should ideally be, despite its class and cultural divide.

Conclusion

A Fine Balance pasteurizes the sufferings of the bottom of society. The novel depicts the pictures of present-day India. In this novel, the reader cannot say who suffers more among the four major characters, because each character is presented with its own sufferings has reason to suffer. Each character amazes value before others. The characters struggle to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair.

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