

Human Predicament in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry was born in Mumbai on July 3, 1952. He is a member of the Parsi religious minor community which is a marginal ethnic group hailing from Iran. He is a remarkable writer belonging to South Asian Diaspora and is often compared with Salman Rushdie. Albeit his emigration to Canada, it is his nurturing in Mumbai which is reflected in all his writings. He is a writer who makes up a part of the Indian Diaspora. His journey begins with nostalgia for the homeland mingled with fear in a strange place to go on to locating Indian a matrix of western culture. His novel 'A Fine Balance', set against the emergency measures, is a powerful and painful examination of a humanity beset by social and political oppression. He shows how the abuses of power threaten to destroy the dignity of the individual. The novel was about the lives four people from Mumbai Maneck, Dina, Ishvar and Omprakash, who struggle with family and work against the backdrop of the political unrest in India.

Keywords: predicament, untouchability, caste oppression, rootlessness, migrancy

The universe is structured unevenly and is filled with dissimilar races. Social scientists and political thinkers across the world have suggested solutions to make it even and similar. India is a country which enjoys the state of being called a "sub-continent" because of its diverse culture and takes pride in finding *unity in diversity*. Despite this pride, people are naturally divided in terms of religion and language which ultimately creates disparity among the people by devaluing each other. This disparity leads to human predicament and disrupts the normal course of life on this earth. Warnock has expressed his insight of human predicament on the needs and interests of common man; biologically looking for the fullest contentment but

"there will absolutely be no reason to believe that his total satisfaction, meaning thereby satisfaction of all his needs, wants and interests, is, in any order of priority, even logically possible, let alone practically" (Warnock: www.econ.iastate.edu/).

It is the existentialist outlook of human predicament that life is an endless game of birth and death. This human predicament keeps both laymen and intellectual thinkers constantly striving till the end, the accomplishment of the search. An ordinary man strives to assert his place in society through his contribution or achievement. It is the tendency of the philosophers to always approach the

question from the rational point of view. Shandon L. Guthrie says,

"Thus people desire to determine the meaning of their lives and not the mere abstract notion of 'life' as existence" (45)

Robert C. Solomon presents an explicit view of the human predicament;

"the irresolvable confusion of the human world, yet resists the all-too-human temptation to resolve the confusion by grasping toward whatever appears or can be made to appear firm or familiar—reason, God, nation, authority, history, work, tradition, or the other worldly, whether of Plato, Christianity or utopian fantasy" (328).

When this ideology fails, man is confronted with problems. The personal capabilities enable man to pursue the life he values most. The Nobel laureate, Amartya Sen emphasizes that this is true freedom and should therefore be the focus of all developmental effort.

This paper throws light on the human predicament that is apparent in Rohinton Mistry's fiction, *A Fine Balance*. It is an attempt to discover chiefly the notion of human predicament and to explicate how it affects the fields of knowledge and religion. This study is most relevant in the existing scenario where many divisions and

inconsistencies exist in society on the basis of religion, language and race. It is obvious that resistance always co-exists with power, whenever power is exercised, people show their resistance and that eventually leads to human predicament.

Being a Parsi, Mistry vividly projects the emotional lives and personal relationships of Parsis in his writings. He presents a captivating slice of their lives and he also strongly believes that the Parsi community has preserved its ethos and culture in a predominantly Hindu society. It is the goal of every community to preserve its long cherished tradition and in the opinion of Mistry, Parsi community in India has achieved this goal.

It is our tested ideology that a traditional family promotes harmony in the society, values of love and compassion are promoted; gluttony and selfishness are demoted and welfare of others is fostered. Contentment is the key to happiness and peace. But this materialistic, capitalist and competitive world has made all this the most difficult task. It is the primary duty of every member in a family or society to cultivate the sense sacrifice and contentment.

Rohinton Mistry considers 'community' not as a divisive entity, but as an aid for social change. His portrayal of contemporary India becomes a social appraisal and provides the readers a distinctive outlook into the functioning of social institutions. Mistry particularly laments on the erosion of human values and condemns the social evils that bring about social imbalance. As his ideology is deeply rooted in his faith in humanism, he strongly condemns the suppression and oppression of poor by the elite which is very common in the contemporary society. Untouchability and religious intolerance are obvious scenes in India which affects the normal course of life of the common man. Mistry's characters are tormented by the socio economic cultural pressures and inspire the individuals to develop an intimate understanding to adopt themselves to the social environment. In his opinion the suppression of the untouchables is inhuman and sordid. He uses history and geography to his convenience in his writings by employing his characters in historical and geographical environment; Mistry's characters are too authentic enough to be rejected as fictitious.

Mistry brings alive his childhood city of Bombay in his novel *A Fine Balance*. Dina Dalal manages with her small income and even provides refuge and livelihood to Ishvar Darji and Omprakash, the poor tanners from the far away cast ridden village. They struggle together not only for survival but also for human dignity. Ishvar's father Dukhi Mochi was a man of relentless spirit, but he was driven to the streets of the city as a cobbler by the torments of a local upper caste fellow Thakur. By these characters, Mistry shows the suppressed are in an unending misery and the nation's ills cannot be alleviated as the ruling and elite class shows no interest or determination to transform the society.

Mistry's deep sense of humanism is seen in the treatment of characters from lower strata to whom wickedness is unknown. In the novel, in addition to the characters Om and Ishvar who came from the village, there are other characters living in slums like the monkeyman and the hair collector. They seem to be more humane and more sympathetic towards the sufferers than any other human beings. Similarly, Ibrahim, the rent collector is truly a pathetic person as he has to follow the command of his owner much against his wishes. Dina's commendable response to the inconsistency around her, and the lessons of integration she had learnt made her an endearing character. The quilt stitched by Ishvar and Om represents the uneven community and the quilt of assorted colours, sizes, shapes and textures stand for different sections of the people. Ultimately the stitching of differences and disparities of the society is the fundamental theme of the novel. The quilt also represents a shared documentation of the trials, tribulations and triumphs of their lives:

"Calling one piece sad is meaningless. See, it is connected to a happy piece-sleeping on the verandah. And the next square-chapatis. Then that violet tussler. When we made masalawada and started cooking together. And don't forget this georgette patch, where Beggarmaster saved us from the landlord's goondas...So that's the rule to remember, the whole quilt is much more important than any single square." (*A Fine Balance*, 490)

Dina Dalal's life of misfortunes is finely balanced between optimism and anguish, yet with dignity. The novel

is set in a gloomy period of Indian history, which eventually makes it unquestionably a 'fine' novel. Mistry considers literature as an exact medium of promoting humanism in mankind. Ishvar and Om Prakash are characters who can be effortlessly identified with millions of poor in India. Bharucha points out,

"This is also the dilemma of most Parsis, whose diverse diasporas throw back at them fragmented, fractured images – whose broken mirrors reflect their once glorious past, their reduced present and their insecure future". (35)

The first was the middle class, urban world of Dina Dalal, a pretty widow in her forties, who managed to live an independent life with the two hired tailors and a paying guest. Then, there was a glimpse into rural India provided by Dina's tailors Ishvar Darji and Omprakash Darji, the rural untouchables from *Chamaar* caste who struggled to rise above their assigned caste roles and enhanced themselves by becoming tailors. They had to endure the cruelties of the upper caste people and their future seemed dark and hopeless. There was another world symbolized by Maneck Kohlah, a sensitive Parsi boy, who hated the city life and was desperately eager to return home to the Himalayas soon after his studies.

All these four major characters struggled a lot to lead a dignified life. They were displaced, felt lonely and struggled for their survival and identity in the society. Social circumstances, sense of isolation and rootlessness brought them together and made them create a bond of understanding among themselves. Their miseries, their joys, their sharing of the same food, sense of adventure, experiences of migrancy and the time they spent together made them aware that life was often 'a fine balance' between hope and despair.

But at the end, these four people's destiny fell into the hands of cruelty and the political turmoil turned their lives upside down. Dina lost her independent life and depended on the assistance of her brother; those tailors Ishvar and Om were turned to beggary because of the sterilization and the castration done to them. Maneck, who was very much disillusioned in his life, ended up in suicide. As a result of their exodus, these four migrants suffered a lot, faced lots of problems and in the end they lost their valued resources in their life. When the notion of the Migrancy

experience is taken, the problems concerning the Diasporas would incorporate not only the question of identity, but also the question of culture, power, the impact of geophysical conditions, the pattern of isolation, fear of survival and living in – between. The novel *A Fine Balance* also explores such human predicaments with specific consideration of the following themes: (i) the impact of geophysical condition on human behaviour, (ii) living in – between (from roots to routes), and (iii) the pattern of isolation and fear of survival.

Dina Dalal, after her settlement in the city, she rebuilt her life without depending on others. She became as a strong, progressive and an independent woman. Though the house she had rented was shabby, she managed to live in the flat and she made her earning by employing the two young men for tailoring. She also accommodated Maneck as her paying guest against the oppositions from the landlord through the rent - collector. The landlord, who harassed Dina Dalal, never appeared in person and his power was embodied in the rent - collector who intimidated the tenants. As a migrant, she thus faced a lot of oppressions and she was forced to manage their menace by posing Ishvar as her husband and Om and Maneck as their two sons: "...he is my husband. The two boys are our sons. And the dresses are all mine...Go, tell your landlord he has no case." (*A Fine Balance*, 414)

But her protest did not last very long, after finding the truth, the landlord demonstrated his power through the rent- collector and the two goondas, thrashed Ishvar, Om, Maneck and vandalized their flat:

Fluff from the shredded cushions floated around, settling slowly to the floor. Dina picked up the slashed casings; she felt dirty, as though the goondas' hands had molested her own being. The ripped dresses and paan – soiled bolts began bearing down heavily on her. How could she explain to Au Revoir? What could she possibly tell Mrs. Gupta? (*A Fine Balance*, 431 – 432)

Mistry is more concerned with the untouchables, whose voices are always suppressed by the upper caste and the politicians. In *A Fine Balance*, he portrays the brutality committed on the two untouchables from the village. After independence, the Constitution of India included several laws to eradicate 'untouchability' by

imposing rigorous punishments. But all these efforts still have not gained any success as observed by Mistry in his novel. They are economically and sexually exploited; besides, they are denied their right to education. All these make them lose their identity as individuals and they simply become faceless and voiceless. The lives of their fore-fathers' replicate the cruelties of the caste system in rural India where the lower caste people were subject to unimaginable horrors. Even, Ishvar in his childhood too had seen, heard and faced such caste oppressions and violence. For example, Ishvar's father Dukhi was once defiant against his landlord, he was beaten up and deprived of his wages; Ishvar and Narayan were punished rudely by the teacher for entering the school and touching the study equipments. So, ravaged Dukhi decided to abolish his villagers' caste rule, caste system by sending his two sons Ishvar and Narayan to the nearby town, to learn tailoring from his Muslim friend Ashraf.

So, the *Chamaar* children grew up as the tailors. After some years, Narayan returned to his village, practised as a tailor and also fought against Thakur Dharamsi, the upper caste man in that village for voting rights. All these acts by Dukhi and Narayan enraged Thakur Dharamsi, so he decided that Dukhi's family deserved special punishment for "distorting society's timeless balance and crossing the line of caste." (*A Fine Balance*, 142) and he killed the entire family ruthlessly burning them alive. The only persons in the family who had escaped this violence was Ishvar and his nephew Om (Narayan's son), as they were not in the village. As a result, the tailors Ishvar and Om took refuge and employment in Bombay city and the city offered Ishvar and Om the opportunity for social and economic advancement that were denied in their village. Their migration to the city represents the fact that the city 'holds out the promise of liberation from traditional oppression – class, caste or ethnic' and 'an escape from traditional bonds of community, caste and family'. But as the novel advances, circumstances conspired to deny them their humble ambitions. In the first six months, they were homeless and jobless and lived a wretched life in the city, under their guardian Ashraf's friend Nawaz's kitchen sunshade. Nawaz ignored their pleadings for job in his shop. So, the tailors had to search for work from morning to evening every day. They even did some menial works

that was not sufficient even for their meal. Most of the days, they slept with empty stomach digesting the scoldings and insults of Nawaz.

After six months, they were offered tailoring job by Dina and got their residence at Jhopadpatti, where the two men, Thokray and his assistant Navalkar built and rented huts and shacks illegally in the government land. The tailors resided in a poorly built shack which also had leaking roofs. The poor tailors, since they were new to such big city, could not find routes easily even to their own home. They found it very difficult to catch the morning train and reach Dina's house from the railway station. So through this, Mistry discusses in the novel about one of the major predicaments of Bombay- the accommodation. In the Bombay city, one can easily get a job, but to have a shelter is very difficult. So, Ishvar and Om continued their search for adequate food and shelter and struggled to find them. They were also denied their ration cards as their residence at Jhopadpatti did not have street or building number which would have offered them both 'validation' and 'viable existence.' The denial of the ration card implied social exclusion and deprived them of access to basic amenities, such as water, sanitation, electricity and garbage disposal. Mistry also underscores this social and material marginalization through the location of tailors' slum, which is situated beyond the last stop of the bus route. Consigned to creating and occupying the illegitimate homes, Om and Ishvar were denied the security and thus, on the whole, the city made them 'urban poor'. So, for both Ishvar and Om, the city which at once seemed to be an ocean of opportunities to prove themselves, now turned out to be an aggressive and killing one. In this novel Mistry, also shows how the tailors are torn between admired idealizations of the city and the material realities of daily urban life. Ishvar's vision of the city was perilously positioned between being open and welcoming, on the one hand, it was treacherously inhospitable. In spite of this, he tried to boost Om's spirits. But Om responded by stating: "This expensive city will first eat us alive, for sure". (*A Fine Balance*, 77) He became sick, exhausted, disgusted and tired of the city life and at one point, in frustration he said: "I am sick of the city. Nothing but misery ever since we came. I wish I had died in our village. I had also burned to death like the rest of my family." (*A Fine Balance*, 91)

Mistry is hence depicting courage and simplicity pitted against institutional might. An almost Kafkaesque struggle against the system and its reductive features – exemplified in the mass family planning movement or the slum demolition – occurs in *A Fine Balance*. And ultimately there is a failure. If the characters drive a fine balance between “hope and despair” -the terms are always mentioned together by Mistry, circumstances tilt in favour of despair alone. Thus Mistry’s novels deal with an “essentially tragic case” of human predicament.

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