



## STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL: REVISITING INDIAN HISTORY THROUGH ROHINTON MISTRY'S A FINE BALANCE

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**Abstract-** The present paper aims to investigate the inevitable and continuous struggle for survival in the historical, political, economical and cultural background. Rohinton Mistry a Bombay (now Mumbai) born Indian-Canadian author is known for his great success in the field of Literature. His second novel *A Fine Balance* (1996) strengthened Mistry as a successful and effective writer by getting Giller Prize, the *Los Angeles Times'* award for fiction and the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Prize. *A Fine Balance* (1995) is a story of four main characters namely Om Prakash, Ishvar, Maneck and Dina Dalal whose lives come together during a time of political turmoil after the State of Internal Emergency in India. The novel exposes India's socio-cultural aspects of caste system, poverty, inequity and exploitation of common man especially those who are treated as untouchables. Mistry's characters battle against the cruel system of landlords and discrimination to balance their life. The novel deals with the human efforts for dignity during the period of internal emergency and how people struggle to sustain a balance amidst social discrimination and humiliation of an aggressive milieu.

**Keywords:** Discrimination, Humiliation, Struggle, Survival, Resilience

### I. INTRODUCTION

Literature shows life in every dimension. Through literature one can gain experiences without literally undergoing that. Writers use this power of literature to make humans comprehend the complexities of life and give them hope to continue life amidst all social injustices, political bias and familial mess. Literature is universally uplifting to the human mind since it deals with the depth and nuances of characters whose aspirations, decisions and resolutions are identified with humans.

Rohinton Mistry a Bombay (now Mumbai) born Indian-Canadian author is known for his great success in the field of Literature. He was born in 1952 to a Parsi family and spent 22 years in Bombay. He studied Mathematics from the University of Bombay and got his graduation. In 1974 he emigrated from Bombay to Canada with his wife and settled in Toronto. He studied English and Philosophy at the University of Toronto in part-time as he was working as a bank clerk. He got his second degree in 1982. Mistry wrote his first short story, 'One Sunday', in 1983, which won the first prize in the Canadian Hart House Literary Contest. In the following year he won the same award for his short story "Auspicious Occasion" and he became the first writer to win it two times. In 1985 he got the Annual Contributors' Award from the *Canadian Fiction Magazine*. Mistry took writing seriously and he left his job to become a full-time writer with the help of a Canada Council grant. In 1987 he published his first book, a collection of connected short stories called *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from the Firozsha Bag*. His debut novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) placed Mistry in the forefront of international authors. The novel won many awards and recognitions such as Canada's Governor General's Award for fiction, the Commonwealth Writer's Award for Best Book of the Year, and the WH Smith Books in Canada First Novel Award, and it was nominated for the UK-based Booker Prize -- now known as the Man Booker -- and the Trillium Award. His second novel *A Fine Balance* (1996) strengthened Mistry as a successful and effective writer by getting Giller Prize, the *Los Angeles Times'* award for fiction and the Royal Society of Literature's Winifred Holtby Prize. It was also an Oprah Book Club selection. *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* were both shortlisted for the finalist for the Booker. In 2002 he published *Family Matters* which won international acclaim. It was also nominated for the Man Booker and won the Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize. His latest book is a story, *The Scream*, illustrated by Tony Urquhart

(2008). In 2011, he was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize and in 2012 won the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Readers undoubtedly would get inspired by Mistry's characters and their distinctive ability and unflinching capacity to fight against the existential and catastrophic threats to survival. Though Mistry makes his characters as Parsis, one can identify oneself with his characters and their state of consciousness during the struggle for survival.

Mistry has explored the day-to-day lives of Indian Parsis whose name signifies "Persians," and who are considered as the descendants of Persian Zoroastrians. Parsis, or Parsees, are the ardent followers of Iranian prophet Zoroaster. They emigrated from their own homeland and came to India to avoid religious tyranny by Muslims. In the beginning they chose Diu in Kathiawar to settle but soon shifted to Gujarat, where they stayed for about 800 years as a confined agricultural community. The situations of the Parsis went into a greater change with the establishment of British trading posts at Surat. They were more influenced by the European systems and they got interested in commerce and nurtured their skill. When Bombay came under the close control of the East India Company the Parsis from Gujarat came to settle there. The expansion of the industry and their ability as merchants made them achieve success and progress in heavy industries especially in railways and shipbuilding. By the 19th century they became a wealthy community.

Mistry's characters fight and struggle for their space in family and society but they get disappointed and cornered by both. The unrelenting spirit in trying times can be clearly seen, in the life of his characters. Readers would definitely wonder at the challenges that the characters face just to survive. One may think Mistry has exaggerated things but then the author confirms that they are very real and he has exposed the authentic details in his novels. The seemingly inexorable demands of daily life are depicted in all his novels. His characters are memorable since one can see them in one's own life. Though the characters have common and limited dreams and expectations they suffer unnecessary tortures due to the harsh situations of the society that they belong to. Their dreams get shattered as they cannot fight against the much stronger forces in the name of authorities. The beauty of the characters lies in how they bend like a grass even to the strongest wind and change their course of life according to the circumstances and continue to live life like a stoic. In each battle of life they conquer by their tolerance and perseverance. The downtrodden people's yearning to live a decent life and their disappointments are clearly picturised in the novel. In everyday lives one can obviously read or hear about the caste, communal and cultural problems that arise in the society. The insults, disgrace and shame the characters undergo are not something imaginary but it happens to one of our fellow human beings. Mistry investigates the traditional structure of society and studies how to lead life amidst discrimination, oppression, poverty and loss of opportunity.

*A Fine Balance* (1995) is a story of four main characters namely Om Prakash, Ishvar, Maneck and Dina Dalal whose lives come together during a time of political turmoil after the State of Internal Emergency in India. Through the days of desolation and expectation, they become inextricably intertwined with their circumstances. Mistry shows the adventures of downtrodden people as they drift from place to place and from one social environment to another for their survival. In one of his interviews he comments that life itself is a journey and one's shifting of places starts from the time of one's birth. He shows that during the period of Emergency in India, the fundamental rights of the people were declined; the press was censored, with the new law MISA anybody could be imprisoned without trial. Mistry brings to light that there were countless deaths in police custody. He boldly attacks the political injustices and the insensitivity of the ruling classes. During elections, the illiterate villagers are cheated and the ballot papers are filled by men hired by the politicians. Mistry displays the struggles of various characters with varied situations and events through this novel.

The novel exposes India's socio-cultural aspects of caste system, poverty, inequity and exploitation of common man especially those who are treated as untouchables. Mistry's characters battle against the cruel system of landlords and discrimination to balance their life. The novel deals with the human efforts for dignity during the period of internal emergency and how people struggle to sustain a balance amidst social discrimination and humiliation of an aggressive milieu. Narayan and his two friends after they have fought for their own voting slips in the local election:

Throughout the day, at intervals, they were flogged as they hung naked by their ankles from the branches of a banyan tree. Drifting in and out of consciousness, their screams grew faint... In the evening, after the ballot boxes were taken away burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away. The still, silent bodies were taken down from the tree. When they began to stir, the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks, and the three men were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square. (178-179)

The problems of caste are also exposed through Om Prakash and Ishvar who belong to the caste of Chamaar which make them to be untouchables or Dalits. Mistry unfolds the untold miseries of the Chamaar caste people at the hands of upper caste people. In order to escape from the oppressive caste system in their village they come to Bombay to try their tailoring skills. Their battle for existence shifts from the hands of village authorities to the authoritative politicians of the city.

During the course of the pulsating narrative, without any obvious authorial intrusions, Mistry sharply criticizes the internal Emergency. He shows that all the avowed promises of the Emergency to abolish bonded labour, child labour, sati, dowry system, child marriage 146 and harassment of backward castes by upper castes never materialized. Instead as Mistry shows in several instances in the novel a nexus emerges between the police and the established hierarchy --either the upper dominance in the villages or the land/building mafia in Bombay.(Kapadia 130-131)

According to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, "Untouchability is more than a religious system. It is also an economic system which is worse than slavery.... As an economic system it permits exploitation without obligation"(Ambedkar).Mistry states that Dalits face cruelty by upper caste members of society.

Mistry introduces the young man, Maneck Kohlah, a Parsi, who represents youthful countenance of modern India. Maneck is forced to move from his homeland in the hills to the modern city Bombay for his education. The characters, places and the experiences are so real and readers happen to feel all that amidst their daily life. The novel transforms the understanding of people and their position in the world. Human nature is capable of an enormous range of experience with open mindedness and flexibility. There is a constant process of becoming in one's personality and abilities. People cannot be categorised or labeled or reduce people to part components. The different levels of experience and existence that people inevitably confronted with alter and shape the human behavior.

Mistry brings out the theme of nepotism, corruption, and government interference in the educational institutions which destroy the dreams and desires for excellence in the minds of the students. Maneck's friend Avinash helps him to understand the worst educational system in the hands of politicians in India. Maneck is not able to fight against the system and chooses his next option to leave abroad and returns after eight years to India. Maneck meets Dina Dalal in whose home he took shelter when he was in Bombay. He finds her in her brother's home and she has almost lost her eyesight. With much heavy heart he goes out and on the way he meets his other two friends who are reduced to the level of beggars. By seeing life's harsh realities Maneck loses his balance and chooses death over life.

Through the character of Dina Dalal, a Parsi woman who becomes a widow at the age of twenty two shows how the skill of balance is needed in life. Dina wants to lead an independent life after her husband's death and does not want to return to her brother's house which is the representation of the patriarchal system. She starts tailoring for an export company with the help of Om prakash, Ishvar and her paying guest Maneck. But things get changed and Dina is sent out of her house by her landlord. She is left with no choice but to return to her brother's home.

The study concludes that every individual is expected to handle the demands and the forced limitations or restrictions of the society and culture. Rohinton Mistry's characters struggle to survive amidst physical ailment, emotional weakness and mental illness. The response or the reaction by an individual is more important in certain circumstances or events. Mistry's characters help readers to develop mental toughness amidst the inability or helplessness. Though society prevents them from continuing the march towards certain dreams it cannot stop them from changing their dreams. They accept changes during crisis, choice or

chance. They bury the regrets of their past and focus on building a new life by reconsidering their life and circumstances. Mistry has aptly blended history with fiction. As Joan F. Adkins observes, "Through the transformation of history into art form, the author shapes and orders an event which, in its over-powering reality, is difficult" (qtd. in Gundur 94). Though, Mistry carves his characters facing utmost difficulties and challenges the characters leave their power of endurance as their legacy.

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