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Research Article

STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND THE CULTURAL/SOCIAL DIFFERENCE IN A FINE BALANCE BY ROHINTON MISTRY

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ABSTRACT

The paper intends to explore how *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry reflects the reality of India's post colonial greedy politics of corruption, oppression, exploitation and violence. Mistry's strong opposition to social and class differences have extended the spectrum of contemporary reality through this novel. The narrative centres within urban setting that is the tiny cramped house of Dina Dalal in Bombay. The novel also offers an insight into rural India that focusing on injustice, cruelty and horror of deprivation. In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry portrays atrocities committed on two untouchables from a village and suffering of the poor characters from Parsi community. Mistry uses four main characters a woman and three men, and a handful of extraordinary minor ones. Each of the four protagonists has their own story and the characters begin to live together under one roof in the city. The novel is an analysis about the sufferings and pains of the poor people and individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

A Fine Balance, like *Such a Long Journey*, is concerned with life worlds deprived of meaning. In two ways can *A Fine Balance* be said to present a departure from the agenda of Mistry's debut novel. First of all, Mistry's second novel is narrated in a more traditional way and explores postcolonial Indian times.

If *Such a Long Journey* displays elements of magic realism, *A Fine Balance* is a traditional realist novel vividly representing postcolonial India from diverse aspects. Secondly, the scope of Mistry's second novel is broader. While his debut is in the main concerned with the Parsis of Bombay, *A Fine Balance* transcends the narrow confines of the Parsi community and features Parsis, Hindus, Muslims as well as Sikhs. Finally, while *A Fine Balance* underlines the central importance of tolerance and solidarity, thereby echoing *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry's second novel enacts transculturalism and intercultural understanding as ways of constructing an identity and as remedies against a reality that is felt to be deprived of meaning. Those instances of the text which can be read as inscriptions of 'Otherness' within a postcolonial frame of reference will be pointed out.

Fine Balance falls into Lukács' paradigm of the historical novel. Historical events of the recent past are presented from the points of view of characters of average standing in life. Luven(1995) writes "A *Fine Balance* is not merely a family saga but narrates key events of 20th century Indian history from the perspective of the Parsi as well as the Hindu Chamaar community. This means that *A Fine Balance*, like *Such a Long Journey*, presents history from the margin." (p. 33) Mistry offers versions of historical events inflected by the community membership of its protagonists. Two events are crucial in this context: India's Independence (1947) and the time of the Indian Emergency (1975-77), during which most of Mistry's novel is set. Rothermun(1997) states that "In the aftermath of 1947, India is split into two separate nation states, following Jinnah's claim that India has always already consisted of "two nations," i.e. Hindus and Muslims." (p. 114)

Whereas the newly-formed Pakistan is to provide the Muslim community with a home, the majority of Indian nation-state is Hindu. However, a conflict ensues between India and Pakistan over areas on the border, and *A Fine Balance* sheds light on several of its aspects. As a farmer living in the north of the country, Maneck's father Farokh Kohlah, for example,

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finds himself “trapped by history” (205) when he has to give up a large part of his estate and becomes a poor man with only a small shop left: “A foreigner [i.e. Mountbatten] drew a magic line on a map and called it the new border; it became a river of blood” (205). Farokh complains about the arbitrariness of Mountbatten’s decision, which leaves him struggling against an anonymous bureaucracy in his fight for his lost land. At the same time, Farokh Kohlah fights for more than material advantages, he also struggles for the preservation of nature as the most important source of meaning in his life. His struggle to preserve an idyllic nature as a source of meaning also is a fight against the ramifications of chaos brought about by Partition.

Mountbatten’s borderline does not only provoke the loss of land of those living on the border; it also leads to violence and aggression “when communal slaughter at the brand-new border ignited riots everywhere, and sporting a fez in a Hindu neighbourhood was as fatal as possessing a foreskin in a Muslim one” (87). In Bengal, and especially in the Punjab, the massacres between Hindus and Muslims reach the dimension of a civil war (122). In *A Fine Balance*, Narayan and Ishvar experience the warfare during their apprenticeship. The new home they have found with the Muslim Ashraf Chacha is in danger of being destroyed by inter-communal strife. The precariousness of their situation becomes manifest in the discourse of racism circulating everywhere: “Better to drive out the Mussulman menace before we are burned alive in our huts. For centuries they have invaded us, destroyed our temples, stolen our wealth” (123). While Farokh struggles with the consequence of the loss of his land, and the Hindus are faced with racism and violence, Dina experiences history differently. Her family’s comfortable material position allows for a withdrawal from the public sphere so that Dina is not confronted with the effects of Independence and Partition directly. However, significantly, the public events have private consequences for her. Sentenced to remain within the domestic sphere, Dina is forced to face her brother’s tyranny. Independence/Partition becomes responsible for an erosion of meaning in the life of the fourteen year-old because she is forced to remain indoors and to face her brother’s despotic regime: “But a few days later riots started in the city, in the wake of Partition and the British departure, and Dina was stuck at home with Nusswan” (25).

One of the central figures of 20th century Indian history is Indira Gandhi. The events surrounding the Indian Emergency 1975-77 are closely linked to Nehru’s daughter. The Emergency has preoccupied many Indian artists of recent times. The fact that Rushdie, Mistry and others revisit the trauma of the Emergency testifies to “the strong socio-historical awareness of the continent’s novelists.” (Walder, 2003) In 1975, a national court finds Indira Gandhi guilty of having manipulated the election of 1971. She is to give up her mandate in Parliament, which would have also meant to step down as Prime Minister. However, Indira declined to resign and declared a state of internal emergency, in the course of which she retroactively changed the law according to which she had been sentenced for election malpractice. Fundamental rights were suspended, the press was censored, and strikes were forbidden. The forthcoming General Election was postponed, and dissidents were incarcerated. As part of an attempt to counter the growth of the population, a mass sterilisation

scheme was launched, which, officially, was designed to keep a balance between the growth of the population and the economic growth of the country.

While Mrs. Gandhi apparently feared that the Indian economy was outpaced by a population explosion, it was the poor of North India who suffered from violent sterilisation against their will in particular. The Emergency meets with undivided criticism and, for the first time, the opposition in Parliament speaks with one voice. The intellectuals are unanimously of the opinion that the country is “decaying from the top downwards,” (561) as Vasantao Valmik has it in *A Fine Balance*. In *A Fine Balance*, “the Emergency intrudes obtrusively into the lives of all of [...] characters leading to their eventual loss and destruction.” The Emergency violently ends friendships. Thus Om and Ishvar lose Ashraf who is beaten to death in the course of a police action, and Maneck loses Avinash, a student leader, who disappears and is tortured to death because of his critical attitude towards India’s official policy. Moreover, with Ashraf dead, Nawaz denounced and Dina too protective of her independence at first to offer them shelter, Om and Ishvar are eventually down-and-out in Bombay. Due to the government’s beautification programme, the two of them are not allowed to sleep on the pavement, and their hut in a jhopadpatti (i.e. a slum) is destroyed in the course of the cynical vision of a more beautiful Bombay. In this light, the government’s parole “THE NATION IS ON THE MOVE” (302) acquires an ironic quality: For the tailors, ‘moving’ does not signal a spiritual departure or an Enlightenment meta-narrative of progress; in the context of the novel ‘moving’ comes to signify mass-scale homelessness.

The Emergency curtails any kind of individual freedom: ‘What kind of life, what kind of country is this, where we cannot come and go as we please’ (541). It develops a dynamic of its own which cannot be impeded. Ashraf, for instance, calls it an “evil cloud” (521), thereby referring to its demonic power and chaotic impact on the common man. According to Om, poor people like himself and his uncle are “less than animals” (540) to the government.

They are, however, also looked down upon by the rich who affiliate themselves with the government. A case in point is Nusswan Shroff who defends the beautification scheme: Counting them [i.e. the homeless] as unemployment statistics year after year gets us nowhere, just makes the numbers look bad. What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be a mercy. (373) That Nusswan regards the Emergency as being inspired by “a true spirit of renaissance” (371) is nothing short of cynical. For the values associated with the Renaissance are of course diametrically opposed to those characteristic of India under the Emergency. Instead of supporting the cause of humanism, liberalism and the arts, mid-70s India, as it is (faithfully) depicted in the novel, displays corruption, stark social injustices and anarchy: “With the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night” (299). According to a minor character “silly things like evidence are not necessary anymore.

The Hindus Omprakash and Ishvar Darji occupy prominent positions in *A Fine Balance* insofar as both are crucial in illustrating the novel’s central concern of how to make life liveable under unfavourable conditions and adverse

circumstances. Apart from the fatal impact of political forces during the Emergency, one aspect is of particular importance in this context: "India's cruellest social constraint," caste.

Any discussion of the effects of caste on Ishvar and Om must necessarily include their family background. "The Hindu family saga of A Fine Balance originates with Dukhi Mochi, Ishvar's father and Omprakash's grandfather. Dukhi Mochi belongs to the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers. This is significant, for, as V.S. Naipaul points out, "the worker in leather is among the lowest of the low, the most tainted of the tainted." (Naipaul, 1995. p.60) Together with the other chamaars in the village, Dukhi lives on the carcasses of dead animals, the hides of which he receives in order to produce sandals and harnesses. His social status is that of an untouchable. As such, he does not formally belong to any of the four main castes of Hindu society, i.e. Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders and peasants) and Shudras (craftsmen and servants). Untouchability is a stigma; other castes avoid contact with Dukhi because he is deemed impure.

Hinduism explains caste by recourse to the concept of *karman*. The Hindu believes that his position within the caste system is determined by his behaviour in a previous incarnation. A reincarnation as a Brahmin, for instance, is taken as a sign that one has acted in accordance with his duties as a representative of his respective caste. However, unlike class, the system of caste is not a meritocracy: "Class is a system of rewards. Caste imprisons a man in his function." The system of caste postpones social mobility to a future incarnation. A future incarnation, however, will only bring about a rise to another stratum if the individual conforms to his present caste status. Thus the social status quo is not to be questioned; paradoxically, it better be affirmed if the individual wants to improve his standing in life.

It is crucial to realise that Mistry's portrayal of Hindu culture is not an impartial ethnographic account of Indian society. He suggests that stark injustices are inherent in the practice of caste. The inhumanity of untouchability is severely criticized as a contributing to an erosion of meaning in the lives of Dukhi, Narayan, Ishvar and Om. An example for the cruelty and arbitrariness that characterises their treatment by their betters is illustrated by the following quote:

For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death – the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord's field, had been forced to eat the landlord's excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged. (108-9)

After his sons Ishvar and Narayan have been beaten up for entering the village school, Dukhi appeals to Pandit Lalluram because he has faith in the Brahmin priest of whom it is said that even an untouchable could receive justice at his hands" (112). However, Dukhi has to realize that justice is a concept which he as an untouchable does not have a claim to. Being

outside society, Dukhi is also considered outside the scope of justice. Mistry's portrayal satirises Pandit Lalluram as an unmannered, gluttonous reactionary who is not interested in justice for all. Relying on this legendary reputation for justice, Dukhi sat at Pandit Lalluram's feet and told him about the beating of Ishvar and Narayan. The learned man was resting in an armchair, having just finished his dinner, and belched loudly several times during his visitor's narration. Dukhi paused politely at each eructation, while Pandit Lalluram murmured 'Hai Ram' in thanks for an alimentary tract blessed with such energetic powers of digestion. (112)

The injustice done to Ishvar and Narayan and their futile appeal to justice deprive Dukhi of meaning and satisfaction with the life he leads as an untouchable. Because the system disregards his hope of transcending himself in his children, Dukhi, for the first time in his life, questions his identification with the order of caste. He revolts, and eventually transgresses the restrictions of caste, a reaction that becomes manifest in the decision to remove his sons from the immediate impact of discrimination.

Like Maneck, Narayan, Ishvar and Om are displaced. Maneck's father forces his son to move to Bombay for a better education, Ishvar and Narayan migrate to the city where they are apprenticed as tailors. In contrast to Ishvar, who remains in the city, his brother Narayan returns to the village after his apprenticeship, and turns into a radical political activist. While his father opposed occupational restrictions based on caste, Narayan fights for the constitutionally guaranteed political participation of untouchables in the election process.

Although his father warns him that he will risk his life, Narayan complains about a life not worth living. He testifies to an erosion of meaning when he laments that "life without dignity is worthless" (144). By taking on the fight against the corruption and the nepotism of the parliamentary elections, Narayan takes on the fight against an existence deprived of dignity. By and by she [Radha, Narayan's wife] brought a lamp to the porch. Within seconds it attracted a cluster of midges. Then a brown moth arrived to keep its assignation with the light. Dukhi watched it try to beat its fragile wings through the lamp glass. (143) The moth's futile attempt to reach the light is symbolic of Narayan's endeavour to break with traditional caste regulations. Narayan disregards the invisible boundaries of caste in a way resembling the moth that does not realise that there is a boundary between itself and the light. For Ishvar, Narayan's death and the subsequent extinction of his family means that, like Nusswan for Dina, he is now responsible for his next-of-kin. Ishvar takes on the role of father for his nephew Omprakash. When Om is subsequently castrated by Thakur Dharamsi, in the meantime risen in the hierarchy of the Congress Party Ishvar has, in fact, failed as a replacement father because the family line cannot be perpetuated anymore: "I have let down your dead father! Our family name will die without children, it's the end of everything – everything is lost!" (535). Because Ishvar fails to fulfill his culturally preordained function, his life is also drained of meaning.

A Fine Balance demonstrates three things with respect to caste: First of all, the novel explores the effects of untouchability on individuals. For Dukhi and his children it is responsible for despair and an erosion of meaning in their lives, which is only delayed and not successfully countered by a transgression of

caste restrictions. *A Fine Balance* explores the injustices of caste and probes the implications of defying it. While Narayan opts for political resistance, Om and Ishvar suffer from escape and exile. Secondly, *A Fine Balance* makes clear that while loyalty and trust in the socio-cultural system of religion are undermined, Hinduism is not necessarily affected by this. Although caste has lost its potential to structure life in a way that guarantees meaning, Hinduism remains a major point of reference for some of the novel's characters, Ishvar being a case in point. Thirdly, the gruesome practice of caste as a cultural system is more prevalent in a rural context than in an urban one. Although the constitution of 1949 defines the Indian nation as "secular," untouchability has not been practically abolished country-wide. Already Mahatma Gandhi in the 30s and 40s fails to convey the message that "untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk" (107). In his wake, the Congress Party has been too weak to implement the nondiscrimination of untouchables nation-wide. As one travels far enough from the metropolis, the notion of untouchability still remains a reality. *A Fine Balance* illustrates the fact that the farther away from the centre of power one travels, the weaker the influence of that centre becomes.

While it is really all "four main characters of this novel [who] suffer from a sense of rootlessness," (Kapadia, 1998, P.128) Maneck occupies a special position in the text in that the effects of migration are made most explicit in his story. Maneck Kohlah experiences two instances of displacement. Like Om and Ishvar, he is forced to migrate to Bombay, and thereby moves from a rural to an urban region. In accordance with his community's capitalist ethos, Maneck afterwards leaves Bombay for Dubai. While the reasons are pecuniary, the "Petroleum diaspora" (Jeffrey, 1994, p.101) is not viewed favourably by Maneck as a country offering a lucrative job. Describing Dubai to a Sikh taxi driver in the Epilogue, Maneck characterises it by mentioning "lots of big hotels. And hundreds of shops selling gold jewellery and stereos and TV's" (585). Instead of imagining the dollar paradise of Dubai as a place guaranteeing a comfortable income and thus material security, Maneck emphasizes the superficiality of the place. Money and glamour in a "clean and gleaming Dubai" (592) are revealed as a shallow facade depleted of substance and meaning. Despite a generous salary, Maneck feels "trapped" and "exiled" (584).

Maneck's situation in Dubai can be understood almost exclusively by referring to his homelessness. The vocabularies of 'trap' and 'exile' indicate that Dubai is regarded at worst as a punishment and at best as a place to be stuck in. In marked contrast to his year spent in Bombay, Maneck does not mention any friendships able to lend meaning to his life. In fact, after eight years he does not even know the country of his adoption in any detail: "He searched his mind and realized he did not know the place, didn't want to. The people, their customs, the language – it was all as alien to him now as it had been when he had landed eight years ago" (585). Dubai is a place that Maneck has not identified with, and which, consequently, has not transformed into a home for him. Dubai merely contributes to a confusion of Maneck's sense of identity by prolonging his displacement: "His uprooting never seemed to end" (585). Unlike Om and Ishvar, Maneck lacks the ability to adapt to his environment, a shortcoming which results in his eventual suicide.

Maneck's time in Dubai can be read allegorically as man's (futile) struggle to find meaning in life. *A Fine Balance*, like *Such a Long Journey*, suggests that a loss of meaning at the time of the action is often closely related to experiences in the characters' past. Dina is a case in point. She loses two beloved people, her father, when she is still a child, and her husband, when she is a young woman of 24 years of age. These traumatising experiences determine the disposition of her character as an adult. Focusing on the ramifications of her father's death and afterwards discuss the implications of her husband's fatal accident, both instances underscore that the loss of meaning as the central issue in *A Fine Balance* must not be sought in events of cultural specificity solely but also demands to be accounted for in terms of archetypal experiences.

Dina Shroff's fear of dependence is only one aspect of the impending erosion of meaning in her life. The second major factor threatening her subject position is death and loneliness. Both her fear of dependence and of loneliness are anchored in a second traumatic experience, the loss of her husband Rustom. Rustom's death haunts Dina's mind, and it seems that it cannot be compensated. His demise confronts Dina with isolation and loneliness, concomitant with which is an erosion of meaning in her life. Isolation, loneliness, and loss (of meaning) are conceptualised in terms of a void: "When the human weight did not materialize, she awakened to emptiness, relearning the loss in the darkness before sunrise" (47). Emptiness has to be understood both on a literal and a metaphorical level. It signifies a space unoccupied by a person as well as a hollowing out of a belief into a meaningful life and an ordered cosmos. The fear of an erosion of meaning is thus imagined as a horror vacui.

As seen above, *A Fine Balance* enacts the loss as well as the process of meaning in various ways in post colonial India. But in addition to that, Mistry elaborates on his theme on a philosophical level as well as on an intertextual level. The relevance is once again not so much on cultural difference but on universals.

Achieving a balance requires an attitude of acceptance: "Some things cannot be changed, you just have to accept them" (82-3). Balance as acceptance is a stance that can accommodate death and loneliness as well as change and loss. In fact, "loss is part and parcel of that necessary calamity called life" (565). However, in the context of the novel balance means more than a patient suffering of what destiny has in store. Balance presupposes an effort, i.e. a drawing on sources of hope in order to juxtapose them to sources of despair.

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