

Between Dignity and Despair: Examining Male Suffering and Resilience in the Socio-Political Context of *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to explore the various facets of male suffering and endurance in Rohinton Mistry's well acclaimed novel, *A Fine Balance*. Set against the backdrop of political and social turbulence during the Emergency years in India, the novel depicts the lives of four different characters that are trapped amid unwanted and unnecessary conditions and endure suffering. Their decisions show how they are trying to strike a fine balance between maintaining their dignity and dealing with despairing realities of life. Through the experiences of characters like Ishvar and Om, who endure caste-based violence, economic hardship, and political oppression, Mistry unpacks the pervasive struggles that Indian men face in maintaining dignity under degrading conditions.

This study delves deep into the inner struggles of these characters who have to endure cyclic exploitation and marginalization in order to emphasize the traumatic sense of despair embedded in their daily life. The novelist shows how the external forces, including governmental control, economic inequality, and social prejudices, compound personal suffering, pushing men to the edge of despair. Notwithstanding, even amid such despairing conditions, Mistry also reveals the magic of resilience and small acts of hope that enable his characters to persist. This paper seeks to analyse the portrayal of male suffering and the complex intersection between masculinity and vulnerability in *A Fine Balance*, shedding light on the human spirit's capacity to endure despite relentless hardship. The study ultimately underscores the importance of examining male suffering within India's socio-political context, offering insight into how literature captures the enduring struggle for dignity amid systemic adversity.

Key Words: Male Suffering, Resilience, Socio-Political Environment, Hope, Rohinton Mistry.

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Rohinton Mistry is one among the most influential authors in the field of contemporary literature. Born in Bombay (Mumbai), India on July 03, 1952, Mistry belongs to the Parsi community, an ethno religious group in India that practices Zoroastrianism. His father's name is Behram Mistry and mother's name is Freny Jhaveri Mistry. He received his primary education at St. Xavier High School. It was here, that he wrote a short story "the Autobiography of a Cricket Bat." He graduated from the University of Bombay in 1975. In the same year, he emigrated to Toronto, Canada with his wife Freny Elavia. Initially he worked in a bank while pursuing his passion for writing. Around 1980, he gets himself enrolled at the University of Toronto, where he studied English and Philosophy.

Mistry's writing journey started with the genre short story. His cultural and religious background has highly contributed to his literary sensibility. He has a knack for writing about common people struggling amid a grave historic, socio-religious or political event. Though he left India long ago, he keeps writing through his memories from India. Mistry is part of the literary circle known as South Indian Diaspora. Writers from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan living in diasporic conditions are referred with this identity. Thus Rohinton Mistry along with Michael Ondaatje, Bapsi Sidhwa, Uma Parameswaran, and Mohsin Hamid are among some contemporary South Asian writers living outside their native place. His reputation as a writer grew with the publication of his first novel *Such a Long Journey* in 1991 which won the Governor General's Award for Fiction and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best Book. He was shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize thrice in 1991 for *Such a Long Journey*, in 1996 for *A Fine Balance* and in 2002 for *Family Matters*.

Mistry has delineated fictional marginalized characters against the backdrop of Indian society and history. His works often deal with human beings who constantly try to search their own self while struggling with painful family dynamics and challenging social and political constraints. He addresses issues related to the suffering of common humanity amid various social, political and historical existential crises. Their internal struggle is aggravated because of external factors. History of Indo-China War, India-Pak War, Emergency Years, Demolition of Babri Masjid, Mumbai serial Bomb Blasts and Communal Riots are some noteworthy historical incidents with which he incorporates his fictional narratives. The pen of Mistry vividly describes the helplessness, silence, painful struggle and hopes of the poor and downtrodden.

Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance*, is a thought provoking narrative set during the enforcement of state of Emergency (1975-77), in India by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. This leads to a nationwide political turmoil, forced sterilization and curbing of civil

liberties across the country. The novel also depicts the injustice, oppression, exploitation, violence, destruction and a reign of uncertainty in India along communal, religious and linguistic bounds. The rights of people were suspended, public meetings were banned and even strict measures were laid down on the press. Mistry has highlighted the horrors of political and social reality of those emergency years which have made miserable the lives of subalterns. Through the four downtrodden characters, the writer has delineated the suffering of common humanity. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* has attracted critical attention from scholars and critics alike with its publication. Emphasizing the fate of these subalterns in the ossified caste system of India Aroop Saha says that: "*A Fine Balance* concentrates on the miserable life of untouchable characters who try to change their living condition by entering the centre from the periphery, but their attempt falls apart when it comes into conflict with reality" (21).

The plot of the novel brings together four different characters: Dina Dalal, a widow; Ishvar Darji and his nephew Om Prakash, tailors; and Maneck Kohlah, a young student. Each character is battling with his/her own problems and conditions. Dina is struggling to build her own identity and place in a patriarchal society. Ishvar and Om have left their home and came to city to escape poverty and violence that followed their family's lower-caste status in the village. Maneck Kohlah is a young student belonging to a wealthy family who has come to stay with Dina as a paying guest.

All these four characters live and work together and subsequently their lives get interconnected. Casting the differences of class, caste and gender aside, they formed their own family. Here they provide comfort, support and companionship to one another amid the evils of world outside. They tried to make a balance in their disordered lives, and succeeded too in building a miniature ideal society. But the enforcement of the state of Emergency threatened the fragile balance they had maintained so far.

One by one Rohinton Mistry takes us back into the past of each character to reveal the injustice, struggle and suffering they have endured. Though Dina has her own share of tragic tale to relate, but the delimitation of this study allows the researcher to delve deep into the suffering of male characters. So it would be necessary to discuss how Ishvar and Om's life histories are burdened with the brutalities of caste system and the accompanying violence. The novel certainly has highlighted the dreams and sentiments of poor working class people in India. Not only the shaping but also the shattering of their dreams got projected here due to political upheaval. Talking about the trails and sufferings of average Indian, Adate Suryakant writes: "The most obvious accomplishment of the novel is its realistic portrayal of the brutalities of lives of the people, who are living in dire poverty. The novel evokes the readers' sympathy. Mistry uses the tradition of Victorian realism to talk about the evils of modern India and to give a voice to middle and lower middle class Parsis" (125).

It is fitting that Mistry opens his novel with a citation from Balzac's *Le Pere Goriot*:

Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft arm chair, you will say to yourself: perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own

insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured: this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true. (Epigraph, AFB)

The theme of suffering is in the centre of this novel delineating the incessant hardships in the lives of main characters. Set against the backdrop of Emergency Years (1975-77) in India, the novel marks the political repression, social chaos and subsequent manipulation of human rights. The lives of Dina, Ishvar, Om and Maneck manifests the various facets of human suffering that they have to cop up with because of discrimination, injustice, poverty and orthodox social hierarchy in India. Interpreting the novel as a realistic one Dr. Reman Kumari asserts: “*A Fine Balance* is a brilliant example of a prototypical realistic novel. Apart from exhibiting the classical features of Social Realism as defined by Raymond Williams, it predominantly dramatizes the very ordinary, day to day realities of Indian life. Nonetheless, it describes the hopes and aspirations, the pain and suffering of the average Indian” (90).

Although Rohinton Mistry presents a picture of present day disordered Mumbai city, he often uses flashback technique to revisit the past of chief characters. We get the information that Ishvar is Om’s uncle. The family tree takes us to the life of Dukhi, Ishvar and Naryan’s father, who was a Chamaar by caste, an untouchable. The cycle of caste oppression can be seen in the three generation of this chamaar family beginning with Dukhi. He has been the victim of the prejudice of high caste people. He has endured insulting and despairing conditions in his life for being a chamaar. This illustration from the text clearly shows the oppressive behaviour of high class people: “The Thakur’s wife was watching from the kitchen window, ‘Oiee, my husband! Come quick!’ She screamed. ‘The Chamaar donkey has destroyed our mortar!’... ‘What have you done, you witless animal! Is this what I hired you for’” (104).

The subalterns are also human beings and have the same feelings as the upper class people have. But they are cursed for touch may defile the high caste people and for the same reason they are not allowed to enter the temple. They are relegated to the margins of the society because of this discriminatory concept of untouchability. It embitters Dukhi to a great extent. The novelist voices his despair as:

What is it, what’s bothering you?’ ‘I was just thinking that . . . thinking how nothing changes. Years pass, and nothing changes.’ Dukhi sighed again but not with pleasure. ‘How can you say that? So much has changed. Your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth . . . ‘Those things, yes. But what about the more important things? Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals. (142)

Dukhi dreamt a different life for his sons. He thought that they could never lead a dignified life if they keep doing the same job of their caste. He wished to change their life, but it also had grim effects on him. Dukhi was treated as an outcaste even in his own community when he encourages his sons to not to follow the profession of a Chamaar. Mistry writes about the consequences of Dukhi’s decision as:

It soon became known in Dukhi's village that his children were learning a trade other than leather-working. In the olden days, punishment for stepping outside one's caste would have been death. Dukhi was spared his life, but it became a very hard life. He was allowed no more carcasses, and had to travel long distances to find work. Sometimes he obtained to hide secretly from fellow chamaars; it would have been difficult for them if they were found out. The items he fashioned from this illicit leather had to be sold in far-off places where they had not heard about him and his sons. (118-19)

The evil effects of caste system then can be seen in the next generation. Dukhi's sons, Ishvar and Narayan, represent the second generation and their life is too larded with suffering. Mistry shows an example where Ishvar and Narayan are brutally thrashed by the school teacher for entering the classroom and touching the reading material. They are denied the right of getting decent education. And how can one imagine that any student can learn amid such discriminatory system where they are hated and insulted. The teacher screams: "You chammar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school!" He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry. The schoolchildren fearfully huddled together. 'Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of learning and knowledge? Answer me! Is it?" (110).

All this took place when India was gaining her independence from the British Rule. But Indian subcontinent was divided into two nations based on religion. Millions have to leave their native place and migrate after the partition. The suffering of those million can only be felt and need not to be explained. But even after independence, the change in society was lacking. It's because change can never take place over night. So the struggle and suffering of these subalterns passed on to the next generation. The cyclic oppression and discrimination then victimized Ishvar and from Ishvar to the representative of younger generation, Om.

As the narrative progresses, the readers witness the oppression of these poor people remains the same and their suffering is overlooked in practice. It is evident from the fact that Ishvar's brother, Narayan was brutally murdered and his whole family was burnt alive, except Ishvar and Om, by the cruel Thakur the village simply because Narayan demanded the right to vote. After losing their whole family, Ishvar and Om decide to move to big city like Mumbai in the hope of change and better living conditions. But their expectations and hope shattered though not for the last time. It was just the beginning of a new discriminatory phase of their life.

Even though they got job and shelter in Dina's house, sufferings keeps chasing them. The slum was destroyed by the government and they are forced to live on the pavement. The laws of government curbed their basic rights and left them on the mercy of corrupt government officials. In the name of city beautification and poverty eradication, thousands of poor people were cheated and used for selfish ends of various political leaders. Mistry severely criticizes all those brutal actions and activities that are meant to torture the oppressed during the Emergency.

Just like puppets. Ishvar and Om are made to attend political rallies since politicians require mob to clap for them. And if they refuse to do so, policemen beat them with stick. The police brutality is evident during the slum evacuation programme. Their shack is bulldozed to the ground. The people resisted to return to their shacks and for a while police lose control. And then the police rallied and beat them back. People fell, were trampled, and the ambulances supplemented their siren skirls with blaring horns while children screamed, terrified at being separated from their parents. Ishvar says: "Heartless animals! For the poor there is no justice, ever! We had next to nothing, now it's less than nothing! What is our crime, where are we to go?" (295). Their helplessness and suffering can be felt through his hopeless words.

Ishvar's wish to get his nephew married again takes them back to their village. But their misfortune is waiting here for them. Their dream of happiness and normal life comes to an end with the sudden police raid at the behest of Thakur. Ishvar and Om are again forcibly picked up with a number of other subalterns and compulsorily sterilized. Om is castrated at the order of Thakur while Ishvar keeps begging to the doctors to save him. Ishvar begs:

Doctorji, you are like mother and father to us poor people, your good work keeps us healthy. And I also think nussbandhi is very important for the country... Please Doctorji! Not my nephew! Cut me as much as you like! But forgive my nephew! His marriage is being arranged! ...Our family name will die without children, it is the end of everything - everything is lost!' (534-35)

Doctor's wrong operation causes gangrene on Ishvar's legs. And readers witness that finally his legs have to be removed completely. They are reduced to beggary on the streets of Bombay. So, the tailors suffer lot and completely lose their identity in the society. The remark of Ishvar reminds us how profoundly wounded their soul have been: "... stories of suffering are no fun when we are the main characters" (383).

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