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## ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*: THE EMERGENCY AS MISFORTUNE

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### ABSTRACT

**T**his paper attempts to analyze critically the 1975 emergency period as a misfortune with a special reference to Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* (1995). This analysis assumes its importance as most of the political and historical narratives on the emergency period view it as a political problem and technically analyze its implications on the Indian democratic system. The historians interpret their data either by excluding certain facts from their account as irrelevant to their narrative purpose or in order to reconstruct, and they include in their narratives an account of some events for which the facts regarding the explanation of its occurrence are lacking. In either case as Nila Shash says, "the historian interprets his material by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds" (Shash, 1998; 97). Thus they, by and large, ignore the question as to how the emergency affected the lives of the common people. Therefore, the study of the fictional narratives on crucial socio-political events like the emergency becomes very significant as they view the historical events and present an intimate view of life while providing a holistic picture of the perceived reality of an event. Further, this paper discusses the realistic treatment of the emergency in this novel by asking a question as to what aspects of the emergency have been the thematic concerns of this novel. In what way this work assumes importance as a novel on the emergency and broadly as alternative narratives to historical accounts? Another inquiry the paper attempts to do is to see how the emergency excesses have been the thematic concerns of this work. Finally, it is concluded by showing how unique this novel is as an emergency narrative.

**KEYWORDS** :critical, socio-political, narrative, the



emergency period, fiction, realistic, historical .

### INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry, a diasporic Parsi fictionist, shot into fame with the publication of *A Fine Balance* (1995) that won Governor General's award, Giller Prize, Royal Society for Literature's Winifred Holtby Prize, Los Angeles Times Award for Fiction and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize too. His other works have been received well by the lovers of India fiction. Being part of a minority community in India, and having subsequently migrated to Canada, Mistry brilliantly captures the social and political life of India. In most of his major literary works he reconstructs his childhood experiences and memories to narrate the historical crises such as the Bangladesh war with Pakistan, the

emergency and Babri Masjid riots that India has witnessed. His preoccupation with politics forms an important subtext in all his novels. He allows contemporary issues, such as corruption, politically motivated schemes, political decisions, layman's sufferings, caste-problem and the dominance of *zamindars* over the downtrodden masses, to occupy considerable space in his novels. His unique literary technique makes him voice these crises with realistic and critical views. Most of his novels meet the Lukácsian view, who argues in *The Theory of the Novel*, that the novel form must have "a strict compositional and architectural significance in order to constitute a meaningful, conceptual totality" (Quoted in Eli Park Sørensen, 2008; 344). Mistry's novels, while constituting a meaningful and conceptual totality of the politico-historical events do not present the events and parts of history as mere decorations, but he makes them occupy positions where they receive particular meanings defined in relation to the overall structure of his works. *A Fine Balance* is one such fictional work that captures the socio-political texture of India and creates characters which are larger than life.

### The Emergency as Misfortune in *A Fine Balance*

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) has been one of the comprehensive and realistic fictional representations of the emergency. It is unique in both historical and artistic viewpoints and it succeeds as a realistic novel in its form and content. The Guardian, a British national daily, describes it as, "A masterpiece of illumination and grace. Like all great fiction, it transforms our understanding of life". The novel records a phase in the post-independent socio-political history which covers the period from independence to the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi with a special focus on the emergency. The socio-political incidents of this period between 1975 and 1984 are presented artistically in a realistic mode. The novel attempts to reconstruct the historical and political discourses on the emergency without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. As Kambourelli rightly observes:

[The text is a] fragment collection of memories, . . . [which] work to reconstruct a more immediate and personal history-the writer's own. What we end up with is a new, curiously paradoxical form that we might call historiography metafiction rather than historical fiction (Kambourelli 80).

As a historiographic metafiction, *A Fine Balance* works to situate itself within historical and socio-political discourse to bring out the nuances of human experience to critically interpret the social crises of the emergency period and its consequences.

Going through the atrocities, social injustices and misfortunes during the emergency, Mistry as a chronicler of post-colonial period of India presents the adverse impact of this politically manipulated development on the lives of the common people in the country. After his novel *Such a Long Journey* which discusses the political crises of the 1971, he chooses the year 1975 for his novel *A Fine Balance*. As he says:

In *Such a Long Journey*, the year is 1971. It seemed to me that 1975, the year of the Emergency, would be the next important year, if one were preparing a list of important dates in Indian history. And so 1975 it was (Gokhale 6).

He chooses this year to unravel the socio-political implication of this villainous emergency rule for the common people. Indira Gandhi, the Congress Party, and India's social injustice again serve as the villains in *A Fine Balance*, which takes as its epigraph the warning from Balzac's classic, *Le Pere Goriot*:

"Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair, 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."

Balzac's admonition proves appropriate as the story of four characters unfolds in a finely crafted

novel. The first of the four doomed characters to appear is Dina, a Parsi woman, who was brought up by Nuzwan, a domineering older brother after the death of her father and mother. She finally escapes endless arguments with her brother when she marries against his will, but after three years of marital happiness her husband Rustum Dalal is killed in a traffic accident. As there is no compatibility with her brother she refuses to return to her brother's house and decides to remain in her flat independently. This seems to be a defiant and independent act for a young Parsi widow who is different from that of a traditional one. Before long, she hires two village tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, both low caste Hindus, to assist her in sewing women's clothing for *Au Revoir Exports*, an export company. Like Dina, the tailors too have rebelled against traditional conventions by daring to move out of their caste as *Chammars* (leather-workers) and to train as tailors. They settle in a slum in the city which is under the rule of the emergency. Within the short period they find themselves homeless after their shanty is demolished by the government. Dina Dalal's dependence on these tailors allows them, with misgivings, to share her apartment. Before long they are joined by Maneck, a sensitive Parsi student, who is the son of Dina's girlhood friend. He too has his problems, more invented than real, but he is nostalgic, feels alienated from his family, that lost its lands in the 1947 Partition and now owns a failing general store. He has been sent to the city from their mountain home to attend college and train as an engineer, a profession that his parents see as the only hope for his financial survival. Placing such a disparate quartet into a cramped apartment and chronicling their everyday life in minute detail is what Mistry does best. He shows how each member of this disparate quartet aspires in this changing society to transcend the constraints of birth, caste, or sex in a modern, urban world where anything seems possible. His narrative depicts how these characters and their relationships develop from wariness into trust, then into love for each other. Unlike Mistry's earlier fiction, *A Fine Balance* goes outside the secure flat and beyond the city by the sea into the village of the two tailors and the idyllic mountain home of the student.

All too soon, though, the collective harmony of the four unlikely companions is shattered by the world outside the four walls that enclose and protect them. The economic, social, and political crises of the society they live in are the invading forces which affect their harmonious life. Dina struggles to make ends meet and to fill the demands of the woman who heads the clothing exporters. The two tailors, just when their lives have taken on some order, return to their village for a wedding and fall victim to India's crudest social constraint: the caste system and then to the forced sterilization imposed during the emergency. Although Maneck's problems seem self-imposed or a result of his overdrawn sensitivity, he finally succumbs to what he considers the hypocrisy of his country's government and kills himself. The agonizing social account of all the major characters of this novel makes the readers reflect seriously on the socio-political crises and the evils of the emergency period. As Balzac rightly observed that the tragedy of this novel is not a fiction but is true.

At the end the tailors survive as beggars on the streets, one of them turned into a eunuch as village retribution for his arrogance in disobeying the caste system. Dina, after she loses her apartment, is sentenced to her brother's home as a domestic labour. Every afternoon she secretly provides a meal for the tailors who worked for her in better days. And the account of "great misfortunes" comes to a close. That the one member of the foursome best equipped to succeed economically should kill himself is heavy with irony. In contrast, the less fortunate survive by achieving what one character calls "a fine balance between hope and despair."

Thus, the narrative merely skims over the agony of these haunting characters. They endure all kinds of humiliation that comes in the form of torment in a government-run work camp, torture, violation of human decency, bitter disappointments and disillusionments. There are other interesting



supporting characters such as Dina's bigoted brother, who represents a particular social class in India, the Beggarmaster who shares the secrets of street life, and the mysterious proofreader, who serves as the novel's philosopher.

Just as he did in other novels Mistry spends time in this novel criticizing political leaders like Indira Gandhi and her followers. One passage draws a brutal picture of the prime minister addressing a rally and incorporates the shallowness, emptiness, delusion, and self-serving attitudes Mistry sees as characterizing both Smt. Gandhi and the Congress Party, which ruled India after independence. Even the attack on the Sikhs' Golden Temple during the Smt. Gandhi's rule plays a prominent role. Although such acts into open condemnation are potent, the novel is at its best when the fictionalized facts of the characters' lives speak for themselves. Broad in its range, powerful in its execution, numbing in its reality, *A Fine Balance* asks what Hilary Mantel calls an "age-old" question:

"In the face of the world's beauty, in the face of the self-evident fact of altruism, how can atrocious conduct occur, how can hideous beliefs survive? The question is age-old, and Mistry has no answers, but it is evident from the seriousness and weight of the present book that he believes that novelists should go on asking, and asking" (Mantel, 1996, pp. 4, 6.)

It is true that Mistry answers this overriding question indirectly. The old proofreader says:

Let me tell you a secret: there is no such thing as an uninteresting life," and goes on to tell Maneck that he would like to hear his life story because "It's very important. . . . It's extremely important because it helps to remind yourself of who you are. Then you can go forward, without fear of losing yourself in this ever-changing world" (594-95).

Although in this novel the characters' lives appear to lose their importance, although the balance between hope and despair has almost tipped, the age-old question is well asked to keep the significance of the creative writer's inquisitiveness.

What Mistry attempts to do in this present work is the reconstruction of the political event by interfacing history and fiction. It is to examine humanity snowed under the social and political repression. Therefore, he narrates in a realistic mode the story of how the interference of the emergency rule became a misfortune in the lives of the ordinary people. Further he shows that the atrocities on the common people continued even after independence and were at their peak during the emergency. Mistry tries to balance the disruptive forces generated by the state of emergency and the experiences of hope, desire, and tragedy at the individual level, evoking a very concrete sense of the historical era during which the four major characters of the novel— Ishwar, Omprakash, Dian Dalal and Maneck--- toil and struggle through everyday life, constantly obstructed and regulated by what appears to be an endless series of accidents, coincidences, and random forces. Although Indira Gandhi is never named in the novel just like the city by the sea in Mistry's text is never named as Bombay, it is built around very specific and easily identifiable historical events. While unfolding the socio-political history of this period Mistry attempts to show the vulnerability of the average man's life in a frenzied political crisis where his simplest wish for a square meal a day and a wife to carry on the family are shattered.

*A Fine Balance* is a designer's quilt prepared with too many different socio-political patterns of the tumultuous life of the 1970s. The tumultuous life is the result of the despotic mechanism of the law which makes things of life as haphazard and mysterious as they are of Kafka's Joseph K in *The Trial*. Hence, the despotic mechanism unleashed during the emergency on the common people and its consequences are one of the thematic preoccupations of this novel. Its relentless attention to power, injustice and enforced social orthodoxies makes this novel to have the scope and ambition of those sweeping chronicles of the 19th century Russian society—by Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy who narrativised the socio-political turmoil in fiction caused by despotism.

Mistry's attempt to capture the atmosphere of embattled authoritarianism emerged during the state of emergency and its adverse effect on the common men and women makes his novel a true fictional account of the emergency. The characters and their lives portrayed in the novel appear to be tossed from order to chaos and back again by the myriad upheavals of fate. The oppressions imposed on the millions of innocent people during the state of emergency made Mistry to view India as a nation which instead of learning from the oppression of the colonial past, is doomed to repeat it.

The design of the story is quite simple. Between its opening chapter, "Prologue: 1975" and the concluding one, "Epilogue: 1995," its 16 Chapters offer a kaleidoscopic view of the emergency. Thus the novel emerges as a parallel to the history of modern India as it sets out to narrativise the Indian political turmoil in the mid-1970s.

### CONCLUSION:

Rhinton Mistry concludes his realistic account of the emergency rule with intense dissatisfaction at the state of affairs and his anger at the shame being practiced by hypocrites in the name of democratic and constitutional provisions. The satire he uses brings out the co-existence of the mutually incompatible elements and forces, the essential contradictions in the lives of people pulling the mask off their faces holding them up to ridicule. It is used to expose the fraudulent and the spurious and lay bare the injustices practiced in a nation that considers itself highly democratic and civilized. If there is heavy dose of satire in the novel there has to be a strong element of irony also, because satire without irony is devoid of animation and liveliness. Mistry makes his ironic element work more subtly, causing pin-prick feelings of discomfort. The tailors' and Dina's life offers a classic example of fate's ironic turns and twists.

Another important thing about the novel is its structure. Its structure makes use of various time frames and memories that break the barriers in way that makes the past merge with the present. This structure is consciously designed to symbolically represent the chaos that surrounds the lives of the common man during the emergency period. While narrating the chaotic situation of the emergency period, Mistry deviates from the conventional narrative style and invented in its place a montage technique that uses segments of scenes and events from diverse time frames and pastes them in one place. In the beginning this technique originated in the visual art, painting and film-making to create shock-effect on the readers.

The shock-effect on the readers is maintained throughout the novel. If the major part of the novel deals with the theme of the emergency it also succeeds in giving a brief account of the post-emergency period. The withdrawal of the emergency rule and the elections that defeated the dictatorial prime-minister, the media that voiced extensively about the abuses during the emergency, testimony of torture victims, outrage over the countless deaths in police custody have been a part of this epilogue. It also records how a sensitive youth like Maneck would respond to the social disaster of his country where the innocent and helpless people like Avinash's three sisters could see no alternative except committing suicide. Maneck is very disappointed as he asks, 'What sense did the world make? Where was God, the bloody fool? Did he have no notion of fair and unfair? Couldn't he read a simple balance sheet?' (p. 595). He realized that neither God nor the state is concerned with the abundant misery the common man experiences in this world.

*A Fine Balance* occupies an important place in the Indian Writing in English which is firmly grounded in political crises of modern India. Mistry succeeds in his fictional narrative to show how the emergency, as a socio-political event, appears as an anti-human force and affects the lives of the characters in the novel. What is important about the novel is that it successfully transforms political

history into a work of art by investing it with symbolism and compelling art of narration. There exists a fine balance between the virtue of a historian and of a fictionist. As Joan F. Adkins aptly points out, "Through the transformation of history into art form, the author shapes and orders an event which, in its over-powering reality, is difficult" (Quoted in N. S.Gundur, (2008; 94).

To conclude, as the present analysis shows, Mistry deploys literary techniques such as symbolism, satire, irony and unbridled imagination in his treatment of the theme of emergency to show the 'governmentality'. It is a term coined by philosopher Michel Foucault, which refers to the way in which the state exercises control over, or governs the body of its populace. The analysis of the novel shows how thousands of common people who live from hand to mouth are entirely at the mercy of the socio-political upheavals of their society. They are often subject to periodic sweeps of the city to provide crowds for political rallies and conscript manual labor for civic beautification schemes. Each time they are beaten down emotionally and sometimes physically. It is very unfortunate to see that these things happen again and again. Whenever the commoners are subject to such assaults they have to pick themselves up and start over again to continue their miserable journey till their last breath. In spite of the fact that it has been critically commented as the fiction with jointed news paper articles, *A Fine Balance* is an important work of art as it blends art and history to present a humanistic vision of the political turmoil of the emergency period.

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