

Alienation, Betrayal and the Struggle of Meaning in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Manohar Kumar Pathak

Research Scholar, Department of English, L. N. M. U, Darbhanga, Bihar, India

ABSTRACT

Rohinton Mistry is born in Bombay in a Parsi Family and lives in Canada since 1975. He has published so far, a collection of short stories, Tales from Firozsha Baag (1987), and three novels—Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1995), Family Matters (2002) all of which have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize and a novella The Scream (2006). His third novel A Fine Balance, a generic realist novel, is concerned with life worlds deprived of meaning explained in a more traditional way. The novel captures all the cruelty and corruption, dignity and heroism of India. Novel aspects are broader transcends the narrow confines of the Parsi community and features Parsis, Hindus, Muslims as well as Sikhs while in Mistry's earlier novel the main concerned was with the Parsis of Bombay. Novel underlines the central importance of tolerance and solidarity, 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. Historical events of the recent past are presented from the points of view of characters of average standing in life.

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A Fine Balance is merely a family saga but it reflects the key elements of 20th century Indian history from the perspective of Parsi as well as the Hindu and Chamaar community. This means that novel presents history from the margin. 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. The characters flow from distrust to friendship and then to love, the novel makes an enduring panorama of the human spirit in an inhuman state.

Keywords:- *Margin, Protagonist, Deprived, Parsi Community, Historical Event*

ARTICLE:-

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-Canadian writer (in a Parsi family of Bombay) born on 3 July 1952. Presently, he is regarded as one of the most significant writers of postcolonial writing. Mistry has won many prizes for his contribution to the world of literature. India becomes independent on August 15, 1947 but majority of Indians initially welcome the departure of the British, the colonisers leave behind a political and military vacuum which has serious consequences. Especially ethnic or religious minorities that have prospered during the time of the Raj, such as the Parsis or the Sikhs, complain that the British have left too early. As portrayed in *A Fine Balance*, they fail to cope with the conditions of modernity for example acceleration, industrialisation, etc. as well as postcoloniality and compensate by daily meeting for tea-time and yearning for times past. Sikhs, usually retired soldiers, and Parsis celebrate the British rule as a time "when life proceeded in an orderly fashion, without daily being threatened by chaos."¹

Nostalgia for bygone times constitutes an attempt at ordering a confusing reality: Consolation, as always, was found in muddled criticism of the colonisers who, lacking the stomach for proper conclusions, had departed in a hurry, though the post-mortem was tempered by nostalgia for the old days. 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. Whereas the newly-formed Pakistan is to provide the Muslim community with a home, the Indian nation-state is dominated by the Hindus. 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, finds himself trapped by history 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. 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."²

In Bengal, and especially in the Punjab, the massacres between Hindus and Muslims reach the dimension of a civil war. 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. 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."³

Drawing attention to the fact that the public and the private are inevitably intertwined in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry appropriates hair as a leitmotif. Dina cannot remove the plaits which she so detests and which her brother requires her to wear after she has got herself a new (shorter) haircut. The length of Dina's hair symbolises the amount of freedom she is entitled to; the longer the hair, the less freedom she is allowed to enjoy. After the violence and aggression ends, Dina's ordeal is miraculously lifted. Nusswan explicitly testifies to the link between the public and the private sphere explicitly. *A Fine Balance* surfaces in situations which can be understood without taking recourse to cultural difference, and it is such instances that will be examined greater detail in the following. In this section, I will concern myself with Maneck and argue that it is not only displacement that leads to Maneck's problematic life. Maneck Kohlah's life is emptied of meaning to the degree by which his social relationships are affected by death or estrangement. Such an argument can help to explain why Maneck's suicide is not cryptic but simply a reflection of his dissatisfaction with human existence and, as such, logically follows from his bleak outlook on life. Of prime importance in this context is Maneck's problematic relationship to his father. Farokh Kohlah owns a shop in the mountains of North India. Maneck, his son, attends the local school and helps his father in the evenings. He identifies with the rural area and his father's job and wants to continue his father's business after his retirement. The pastoral world of his childhood is a perfect world. Within this realm, meaning does not have to be constituted by a conscious effort because it is already there. The bliss experienced during his childhood becomes an important point of reference for Maneck throughout the novel; the more so because, metaphorically speaking, Maneck is discarded from the Garden Eden of the Himalayas. Although Farokh Kohlah only wants the best for his son, i.e. a better education than the village school can offer, his decision to send him to a boarding school is a catastrophe for Maneck, as the following quote illustrates: The boarding school they selected was eight hours away by bus. Maneck detested the decision. Maneck feels an ache of betrayal when he learns of his father's plans for him. He feels cheated by a father assumed to be reliable and loving. His father's breach of faith, as well as the loss of satisfaction hitherto gained from working in the shop, contributes to the collapse of the ordered universe of his childhood. As a

consequence, Maneck is faced with despair, rejection and loneliness, all of which result in an alienation from his family. That the alienation from his father leads to a fatal erosion of meaning in Maneck's life becomes particularly obvious in the Epilogue of the novel. Here Maneck accuses his mother of having exiled him:

“You sent me away, you and Daddy. And then I couldn't come back. You lost me, and I lost—everything.”⁴

Bearing in mind the importance of place for an individual's identity, the loss of a familiar environment affects Maneck fatally. Metaphorically, the loss of home/identity is conveyed by the notion of the slippage of a house. Maneck's self has lost touch with his surroundings, something which becomes evident when in an epiphany at the end of the novel he relates the loss of meaning in his life to the misery characterising his father's life. Maneck does not realise that he is not the only one whose world is deprived of meaning. Farokh's world is abruptly changed, too, by the intrusion of multinational companies. The ensuing competition with foreign products destroys his soft-drink business; eventually, Kohlah's cola cannot prevail over Coca-Cola's marketing strategy. As a consequence, Farokh, too, is faced with a loss of meaning:

“Returning home through the gloom, he decided there was no meaning in going for walks from now on. If meaning there was, it was too new and terrifying for him to explore.”⁵

A Fine Balance, 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. *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 feels a strong affinity to her father, a philanthrope whose fervour to ease suffering eventually leads to his death in the course of a medical campaign into the interior of the country. After his death, Nusswan presides over the household, whose personality represents the antithesis to his father's character. His behaviour as replacement father is hard to stomach for his sister. Not only is she forced to neglect school because she is burdened with the entire household work, her brother also restricts her personal freedom because he is convinced that his sister needs a strong hand. His pedagogic ideal, however, is grounded in a mistaken notion of his father's character:

“He had always perceived his father to be a strict disciplinarian; he had stood in awe of him, had even been a little frightened of him. If he was to fill his father's shoes, he would have to induce the same fear in others.”⁶

Nusswan's personality is too weak to tolerate a teenager's harmless deviation from an adult's norm. Arguably, a stronger and more mature character than Nusswan would have met his younger sister's provocative behaviour with indulgence. Nusswan, however, discloses the shortcomings of his own personality by establishing an authoritarian family regime based on surveillance and corporal punishment. As a consequence, meaning for Dina becomes scarce in an autocratic system characterised by restriction and tyranny.

The effect of the misery suffered under her brother's guardianship is that Dina becomes obsessed with the idea of personal freedom. Already in the Prologue of *A Fine Balance* it becomes evident that she holds independence in high esteem. For Dina, there is a close connection between one's material conditions and the question of meaning in a person's life: Having to rely on Nusswan's money means losing her freedom; giving in to her brother's rule equals giving up her independence. Therefore, Dina's small tailoring business is not least of all an attempt to escape the sphere of her brother's influence. One could also say: Dina relies on male career patterns of entrepreneurship in order to leave behind a male sphere that prevents her from coming into her own as a modern woman. With Om and Ishvar working in her flat, the struggle for independence eventually becomes a struggle for control. Dina decides to maintain her distance in order not to lose control. She locks them in when she leaves the house, thereby relying on strict boundary maintenance. Her decision is motivated by the fear of losing both control and independence at the same time. Dina is anxious to lose her intermediary position in the process of manufacturing and selling

dresses. She assumes that control guarantees economic success which, in turn, is to guarantee independence from Nusswan. 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. Emptiness has to be understood both on a literal and a metaphorical level. It should not be omitted that Dina Shroff is exposed to two conflicting impulses, i.e. her fear of isolation and her misgivings about dependence. While both impulses pose a threat to the source of meaning in her life, fighting one necessarily favours the other. By fighting isolation, i.e. by investing into social contacts, Dina has to make a commitment which will affect her independence. Fighting dependence, i.e. maintaining absolute personal independence, on the other hand, might very well thwart any hope of finding soul mates. Exerting control over her employees means that she has to keep up a distance, which will preclude a friendship from developing. In the long run, however, Dina cannot have it both ways. Only one source of chaos can be fought, only one kind of order can be institutionalised. In the course of the novel, Mistry emphasizes human company as the overriding necessity. Dina longs for a social life because the effects of isolation and loneliness threaten her with disintegration. When Dina accepts Maneck as a lodger, and Om and Ishvar spend the day in the flat sewing, the implications of loneliness are reflected explicitly. She reacts with jealousy to the gradually developing friendship between Maneck and Om because she herself is longing for company. She feels lonely when Om and Ishvar have left the flat.

CONCLUSION:-

A Fine Balance conveys these interests onto the front line that is the India of Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency, a landscape populated by frowning colleague and stoical unconventionalities whose overwhelming characteristics take the book past the domain of that narrative authenticity in some cases seen as symptomatic of the writer's composition. It additionally utilizes an assortment of scholarly tropes and talks as it weaves its story texture, making a blanket which continues and supports the two characters and readers as they experience the thrilled variances of a threatening, upside down world. This ethnic personality additionally impacts on Mistry's style, confounding its innate hybridity. Nilufer E. Bharucha has remarked of the Parsis:

“As a diasporic people, they have perfected the art of existing in a state of liminality, partaking of different cultures yet ultimately retaining for themselves the refuge of their formative ethno-religious identity.”⁷

Mistry's style seems to have advanced its trademark highlights—the deliberate lucidity of the European tale raised by the dialogic vitality of eastern narrating customs—to manage the different interpellations philosophies.

REFERENCES:-

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