

Capturing Contemporary India (Fine Balance)

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Abstract:

This is the most somber and latest novel. In *A Fine Balance* India once again becomes the central source of concern. The Narration takes us to the mid seventies when the Prime Minister imposes Emergency without any consultation of the Cabinet. The story revolves around the lives of four protagonists each very different from the next. They find themselves thrown together in the same humble city apartment: Dinabhai, a widow who refuses to remarry and fights to earn a meager living as a seamstress; two tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, uncle and nephew, who comes to the city in the hope of finding work; and a student Maneck Kohlah, from a village situated at the foothills of the Himalayas. Maneck's father has sent his son to a city school. Primarily, Mistry manages to bring forth the horror and devastation wreaked by the Emergency in all its vivid portrayal. The novel is considered to be a vehement commentary on the political and social environment of the times and the beautiful tragedy of emergence. The novel begins in 1975 with the accidental meeting of Ishvar, Omprakash and Maneck Kohlah in a train. The first chapter recounts the story of Dina Dalai from the age of twelve and the death of her father to the age of forty-two and the hiring of the tailors. The second chapter introduces us to the manager of Au Revoir Exports, Mrs. Gupts. It is through the approval of Mrs. Gandhi's action we are confronted with the complicity of the Indian business houses. In the third chapter we are again taken to the times of Ishvar and Omprakash's story. The starkest depiction of Caste oppression is in this chapter. The fifth section deals with the story of Maneck. His story carries the ecological denudation of the Himalayas and the death of indigenous enterprises. In its particular theme the novel is about Mrs. Dina Dalai, who becomes widow three years after marriage, resolves to remain financially independent takes two Hindu Tailors as boarders to sew dresses for an export company. The two tailors are Ishvar and his nephew Om, who left their village in an effort to escape the repressive Caste system. Maneck, who is the son of the old school friend of Dina is sent to attend the college as the family falls in business. The crux and central concerns of the novel revolves around the dialectical and dialogical interactions of these characters. The dreams, ambitions, the trials, failures and success of these characters in the face of the oppressing order of the society. For four months a family is evolved in the social, emotional interactions of these characters. Eating and sleeping together, sharing the dreams, meals and the space, the characters transcend the barriers of Caste, religion and economic status. The cramped and constricted space becomes a haven from the political and social turmoils of the society. These four characters experience unpleasant encounters and are repeatedly saved from the quaint character, the Beggarmaster. All this narration of the novel is at the backdrop of the emergency period imposed by Indira Gandhi's rule.

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Mistry after lulling the readers to the false sense of contentment and security experienced by the characters, brings in a severe jolt into the lives of the characters. The readers are reminded of the turmoils in the outside world and the terrific tragedy that hits the lives of these four characters. On their visit back home, Om and Ishvar are forcibly sterilized and mutilated on the grounds of social Caste discrimination. Maneck goes abroad shocked by the sudden murder of his friend in the clashes of ideological activism. Dina unaware of all these happenings feels betrayed and left alone. She completely remains ignorant of the reasons that thwart the progress of her companions. She fails to understand why the tailors failed to come back. As an immediate reaction to the sudden course of life, she feels letdown by the people in whom she has reposed trust and remains alone. Dina and tailors carry on with indomitable spirit because they have learnt to practice 'A *Fine Balance* between hope and despair'.

Mistry succeeds to the best possible extent to depict the cruelty experienced by innocent and untouchables during the state of emergency. The characters representing the people from all walks of life in Indian society, realize the implications of repressive Caste system. The tailors stand as the representatives of village system. Dina is a representation of Urban Indian women folk. Maneck becomes a symbolic representation of younger generation of India. The lives of these people are battered with the tragedies of life supported and monitored the intrusive, hostile and adverse government that existed in Indian in the Seventies and continues to exist in the form of liberal Democracy.

Mistry maintains *A Fine Balance* of his own on the lines of Rushdie's *Midnight Children* and *The Moors Last Sigh*. The mixture of characters private life with public history goes on par with the blending of misfortunes of the people with a dash of hope egging the sensibilities of the readers. Mistry creates a Dickensian masterpiece of sympathy combining the indomitable spirit of human desire and hope as well as the despair of unfulfilled dreams. With the confluence of these streams the novel becomes a symphony of corruption, cruelty, hope, despair, desire and kindness. The right connotation of title 'Fine Balance' illustrates the ideal state of being where the middle ground must be between compassion and gullibility, kindness and weakness. It is from these dimension, the destinies of the characters is wound up with the state of emergency in 1975. The continuation of their inextricable path is followed until the bloody assassination of the Prime Minister in 1984.

After introducing the characters Mistry manipulates the story in a way that the reader is shuffled between various time phases that mark each major historical upheaval. The crucial events in the country are chronicled in the process of unfurling the background of each protagonist. The background of Ishvar and Om's forefathers depicted the tyranny of the Caste system in rural India. The unimaginable horrors perpetrated on the lower Castes in rural India are realistically depicted in the background of the tailors characters. In the background of Maneck Kohlah the saga of India's partition when religion became unavoidable instrument in the emergence of two nations is portrayed, bina's past explicitly brings forth the sense of squalor and failure of the middle classes struggling to improve their economic status in an undeveloped nation. The novel becomes an interweaving of national history with the personal protagonism of the characters, which has become a characteristic in the immigrant literature. Though the setting of the novel is the dominant political milieu, political reading will only force the readers to misconstrue the novel

While dealing with the socio-political-cultural turmoil of the period Mistry concentrated on the pessimistic image of his mother land. His clinical observation provides a deep insight into the interiors domains of rural India and refers to the atrocities perpetrated on the Untouchables. The world of the Chamars is particularly explored. The obedient compliance with the tradition of the caste structure

surviving the humiliation with forbearance is carefully depicted. The characters who defies to comply with the tradition are put to physical humiliation. Budhu's wife's head is shaved off and was made to walk nakedly through the square as she refuses to go the field with Zamindar's son. Dukhi's wife is subjected to rape. The victimization of the helpless people though constructed with imagination is tinged with reality. Defilement of the Brahminhood, temple precincts, chanting of the mantras is portrayed with social vividness and the animosity of the higher class people is also appropriately represented with aptness. Savita Goel in her essay *UA Literary Voyage to India: Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance* while interpreting the novel from these aspects, looks at another dimension effectively portrayed. She observes: "The novel, on one hand, is realistic portrayal of trains crossing the new border, carrying nothing but corpses, the conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims, fanatics burning shops and houses, involved in arson and bloodshed and the entire country in the grip of communalism" (Jasbir Jain *Writers of the Indian Diaspora*, 193). The novel also succeeded in depicting the communal riots and conflicts caused by death of Indira Gandhi. The ruthless burning of the Sikhs in the post Independent India brings in the reminiscences of the atrocities perpetrated on the untouchables in pre Independent India. From another perspective Amina Kaza Ansari in the article "Text/Subtext: Reading A Fine Balance" considers the novel as a mixture of the forces of conscience and consciousness. He observes: "While the conscience finds its manifestations in thought process and actions of the fictive characters, the consciousness is implied to the socio political leanings of the author in a social scenario devoid of all perceptions and practices of ethics and morality". (Jasbir Jain. *Writer of the Indian Diaspora*. 184). Encounters between the symbols of conscience and the emblems of evil invariably ends in the victory of the evil forces. The section "The Circle of Reason" illustrates this perspective. When Mistry sums up the dominant status of the protagonists destiny in the words of Vasantarao Valmik, it leaves the readers shattered.

As an innovative method in narration Mistry creates the facilitator, the motivator, the slumlord, the Thakur and Bala Baba. The facilitator and the motivator represent the corrupt bureaucracy. While Slum Lord and Thakur are the symbols of oppression, Baba symbolizes the sway that ruthless Godmen holds over the illiterate people. Through these facilitators History is revoked in a macabre way. The story of Avinash carries strong allegorical undertones with the murder of Rajan, an engineering student. The suicide of Avinash's sisters echoes the suicide of young girls in Kanpur city, who could not restore their father's humiliation in his failure to provide respectable dowry. In a Dickensian way the novel interweaves number of left over fabrics. Each piece different in texture and colour stands for the significance of memorable occasions of the characters. The tilt in the narration takes number of metaphorical significations. The lives of the minor fictive persons are sown together in patches and stand to be highlighting at the culmination of the novel, the desolateness of Dina. This aspect is evocatively conveyed in the perception of her very life. It becomes a symbol of time as each piece constitutes only to become 'the bed time story', when Dina returns to her past each night. This yearning for ultimate happiness of every character emphasizes the sordid helplessness of the Indian society. In spite of the stark and vehement representation the novel reveals the positive commitment for humanitarian concerns.

The novel with its magnificent narration leaves some pertinent relevant questions in relation to the past history of India and its contemporaneity. It is really a peculiar feature of the novel that Mistry chose not to name the Prime Minister or the city by the sea, when their connotations are blatantly obvious. So the natural question that haunts the readers is whether the recognition of the elements make any difference in the attitude of the narration. When it comes to the portrayal of Nusswan, the readers

are confronted with the ambiguous portrayal of Nusswan entirely as a villain carrying the redeeming features within in his inner personality. His emotional responses and feelings towards Dina are kept in darkness through out the novel.

Dina's social and domestic position demands a comparison between the roles and functions of women in India and in America. Though Dina's portrayal to some extent reflects the condition of women in her culture and class the status of Om's sisters is naturally brought for comparison and the readers are left to make their own subjective drawings.

The depiction of Post Independent India is with much religious and ethnic violence. It brings in the description of the mutual slaughter of Hindus and Muslims after partition (1947), during which Ishvar and Narayan saved Ashraf and his family and the hunting down and killing of Sikhs after the Prime Minister's murder, witnessed by Aaneck. The behaviour of the characters is contrasted with the hatredness that inspired these terrible acts. But the political leaders are not above the religious fanaticism of the people. Dukhi observes bitterly. ' that at least his Muslim friend treated him better than his Hindu brothers' (115). From these examples Mistry tries to prove that ethnic and religious loyalties stands to be diffused before the personal associations and understandings.

From another perspective, Dina's primary goal becomes self-reliance, after her husband Rustom's death. But in the progress of the novel and in her interaction with new friends she changes her ideas - "We will see how independent you are when the goondas come back and break your head open" (p.433), Dina says to Maneck. She examines the rhetorics of self-realization and experiences a different meaning of self-realization.

Most of the primary characters are portrayed as hostile characters to the Prime Minister's emergency policies. But few characters like Mrs. Gupta and Nusswan support and endorse the decisions of Prime Minister. Mistry makes the comparison possible between the supporters of PM and parties in today's world.

Maneck sees Chess game as the game of life and Avinash's chess set becomes an important thing. When Om says: "The rules should always allow someone to Win" (p.410), Maneck replies: "Sometimes, no one wins" (p.410). Mistry's perception is to reflect the events of the novel resemble the various moves and the positions of chess.

The distancing of Dina from the political ferment of the period: " Government problems N games played by people in power:" she tells Ishvar. "It does not affect ordinary people like us" (p.75). But in the end it fails to influence all of the people drastically. Dina and Maneck refuse to involve themselves in politics while Narayan and Avinash are unavoidable.

Ishvar questions the reasons for incarceration, when Ishvar and Om are incarcerated in the labour camp. "It's not a question of crime and punishment - it's problem and solution," says the foreman (p.338). If the presence of the problem is true, the humane solution to the number of homeless and beggars will be further delayed. The novel represents this pertinent problem.

From a different perspective, the novel brings in the issue of people at the bottom of the social and economic heap blame the middleman for their present status. Dina who makes her living through the other character's labour or like other character Ibrahim the rent collector. If middlemen are found to be making money immorally and striking the novel leaves the question of finding the real villains. This leads to the summing up of the beggar master. In the world of cruelty, simple categories of 'good' and 'bad' decide the applicability. The Beggar master is found to be redeeming himself by his thoughtful acts and by the seriousness with which he takes his responsibilities toward his dependents. When Beggar

Master draws Shankar and Shankar's mother, he represents a freak just like the other two. The vision of Mistry in this aspect remains ambiguous. "People forget how vulnerable they are despite their shirts and shoes and briefcases" says Beggarmaster, "how this hungry and cruel world strip them, put them in the same position as my beggars" (P.493). The question Does *A Fine Balance* show people's vulnerability or their fortitude? becomes a significant and relevant question.

Depicting another contemporary related issue the Government's population control programme it is enforced with violence and cruelty. The seriousness of the implementation programme with sterilization quotas and forced vasectomies makes one of the characters to question the social relevance and its validity. Dina tells Om, for example: "Two children only. At the most, three. Haven't you been listening to the family planning people" (p.466). This portrayal automatically leaves the question now might family planning be implemented in a humane fashion?

Another thematic concern subjected for interpretation is that after the death of Dina's father, her family life is blighted until she marries Rustom. She withdraws herself from her natural family life in the later life, acquiring worldly wisdom. It only through the interaction of Ishavar, Om and Maneck she realizes the constitution of the family. But what are the basic tenets in constituting the family and the examples of conventional families are left to the wisdom of the readers and the meaning is constructed beyond the textual meanings.

When it comes to the thematic element of clinical scrutiny of the characters, except Maneck, Ishvar, Om, Dina manage to survive in their diminished ways. This theme of Survival with its Universal connotations finds illustration in the light of these characters past, childhood, families and their characters.

The novel's mild comic ending with Om and Ishvar clowning around Dina's house questions the very appropriateness of the title. Is the ending appropriate or off-balance? This question erodes the very base of the novel.

To interpret another significant element In this novel is to consider seriously the vivid portrayal of the life of the members of the untouchable Caste in remote villages. It leads to the probing how an apparently anachronistic system has survived into the late 20th century? It leads to the questions of other related comparative models of discrimination that survived into the late 20th century. It makes the readers to identify the relevant resembling social systems with which an acquaintance is found. Why only few of the victims fight the system as Narayan does? Another pertinent question that the novel leaves is why do few people leave or flee the villages: Is it out of necessity or social conservatism, respect for tradition.

Even though texts emerge out of a series of subtexts and they are artfully weighed against each other, Rohinton Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* is an example of the superior kind. It is a saga that spans the momentous event of India's history from the turbulent times of the country's partition in 1947, through the horrors of the Emergency in 1975, to the macabre aftermath of its Prime Minister's assassination in 1984.

The story is built upon four characters whose predicaments intersect during the "State of Internal Emergency" declared by Prime minister Indira Gandhi. Two tailors, Ishwar and Omprakash Darji, along with a student, Maneck Kohlah, are propelled by circumstances into the life of Dina Dalal, a parsiwindow, who struggles to make ends meet in a heartless metropolis, ostensibly Mumbai. Mistry manipulates the story in a way that the reader is shuffled between various time phases that mark each major historical upheaval. He highlights crucial events in the country's chronicle by depicting the

background of each protagonist. The lives of the tailors' forefathers reflect the tyranny of the caste system in rural India where unimaginable horrors are perpetrated on the lower castes. In Maneck Kohlah's background lies the pathetic story of India's partition when religion became the unnatural reason for the birth of two nations. Dina's past underlines the sense of squalor and failure that middle classes often face rather helplessly in an underdeveloped nation struggling to improve its economic status. The combination of the real with the fictive gives *A Fine Balance* its peculiar flavor of the historical as the "contemporaneity of its texture and the historicity of its orientation together acts as a parallel for lives of individuals" (K.Damodar Rao 128). The dominant setting of novel is India's political milieu but to assess the novel in this perspective is to give it a restrictive reading. The novel is not a political one. It may be read as an effort at interweaving national history with the personal lives of the protagonists in a manner that is characteristic of immigrant Indian English writing.

The element of the humane runs through the novel which is "informed by the experience of double displacement" and is imbued with the authors sense of "identification with and alienation from their new and homelands" (Bharucha57). As a parsi and then an immigrant in Canada, Mistry sees himself as a symbol of double displacement. This sense of displacement is a recurrent reality in the lives of the novels protagonists. Ishwar and Omprakash traditionally belonged to the low caste of cobblers or "chamars" Social repression and bleak prospects made their forefather push them into a more respectable profession tailoring. It highlights the human will to disengage from the fetters of subaltern Existence. In the novel, these men, though employed as tailors, are constantly aware of their roots within the Indian social framework and are beset always by a sense of fatalism and guilt that is the lot of the lower castes. As history would bear testimony, dwindling avenues of work economic compulsions and the lure of the metropolis take them away, like many others, from their familiar rural environment. They are two of the thousands of such displaced, hesitant, struggling individuals who fight incessantly to secure a place in the maddening crowd of urban life. The emotional displacement of adopting a new professional identity and the physical displacement of moving to the city combine to give Om and Ishwar a yearning to repossess the simple pleasures of rural life. Such feelings are accompanied by a complex sense of alienation to which they finally succumb and end up as beggars on the streets of the metropolis.

Maneck Kohlah, the young man from the pristine slopes of the Himalayas is another victim of this sense of double displacement. Apart from the geographical transition from the hitherto cocooned secure recesses of the parental home, Maneck has to face the disturbing emotional displacement into urban college life. In an India trying to reconcile itself to the Emergency, Maneck has to swallow the insults of seniors and has to endeavour to adapt himself to the repressive political atmosphere in college. Mistry creates the character of Aviansh, a fiery student activist, as a foil to Maneck and in the brutal political murder of Aviansh, Maneck understands his own limitations and escapist tendencies. Unable to confront these realities, Maneck seeks away out in suicide. This brings into focus yet another perspective on the sense of displacement in the novel.

For Dina life is a series of emotional upheavals and relocations of emotional anchors. Traversing the road of life, she is a lonely figure who experiences shocking forms of abuse. Her acute sense of displacement is more emotional than physical as her consciousness flits between ephemeral periods of happiness and seemingly endless bouts of pain. This may be marked in the dichotomy between her brief marriage to Rustom Dalal, her fleeting affair with Fredoon, her successful but short lived tailoring enterprise and the abuse at the hand of her brother, physical intimidation by her land lord, the collapse of

her tailoring venture with Ishwar and Omprakash, and her final humiliating return to her brother's house as an unpaid domestic. Dina's transition through life is cyclic in a sense. She begins life in her brother's house and after experiencing the vagaries of life, returns to it in a pathetic state of self-defeat.

It would be interesting to note the shades of J. Alferd Purfrook's sordid monotony in Mistry's characters. Their brief victories in life's long-drawn struggle give an overwhelmingly humane touch to the novel. Pruforck's sense of alienation, how-ever is not akin to Mistry's characters. Their efforts against the buffets of fate unite them and their glory lies in struggle ,not victory .This places the novel many notches above a piece of pure historical fiction, or one of the picaresque tradition.

By "privileging the marginal" (Bharucha 59) the author follows the trail of post-colonial writing which negates the Western post-modernist stance that does not acknowledge the existence of a world outside the text. Situationally, it is the world outside the text that gives the novel its character and contributes to the impact of the plot. Rushdie suims up this peculiar propensity of immigrant writers in "Imaginary Homelands" when he describes their writing as an "endeavour to repossess their own history...whose fragments haw been lost" (10-11). In a fictive technique reminiscent of M.H. Abram's lamp/mirror hypothesis, Mistry's writing becomes at once the reflection of outside reality and the expression of inner, experience. The protagonists are the perennial victims, doomed to bear the burden of their country's chequered history personally and socially. It is these same protagonists who introduce a strange facet of incongruence into the text. Coming as they do from disparate social strata, their interaction would appear unreal to those who have had a close brush with realities of the Indian social scenario. It is impossible for such a reader imagine, let alone accept, the close communion that Ishwar, Omprakash, Maneck and Dina enjoy. The apartheid of the strict caste system disallows such a communion and it is perhaps impossible for people of such varied social backgrounds to ever interconnect in such close proximity with each other. It is here that language becomes the link and deregionalises the characters.

The writer is able to interconnect, on the human level, a plausible dialogue between the protagonists who hail from different linguistic regions that are a hallmark of the country's cultural pluralism. English, therefore, becomes a compatible vehicle for all the fictive characters to communicate in. It serves as the unifying quotient in the novel's realm of plurality. Mistry consistently uses Indian English, reinforcing, in the process, the status of the language as an Indian one with its own special syntactic and phonetic characteristics. In fact, he goes so far as to find it unnecessary to introduce any glossary to elucidate words like "*faroksy*" and "*kanasori*" which non-Gujarati readers would find difficult to comprehend. Language and characterisation go a long way in emphasising the "ethnic pluralism" (Griffiths, Ashcroft and Tiffin 215) of Indian life and are reflective of the multiculturalism of the nation in the text. In *A Fine Balance* language becomes a "neutral vehicle for communication between contesting language groups" (Ibid. 284) as Mistry succeeds in adapting a colonial tongue to local needs. This adaptation is characteristic of the postcolonial enterprise in which the essence is conveyed in a "language that is not one's own but a spirit that is one's own" (Raja Rao 296). This is the book's "international dimension" where in the writer's "national consciousness", rather than his "nationalism", evokes a humanist vision and negotiates between the meanings of cultural and political enormity (Fanon 199). Such a vision simultaneously strengthens the historical sweep of the narrative and liberates it from the narrow confines of time and space associated with a traditional historical narrative.

Arising out of these dimensions of the novel are the forces of conscience and consciousness. While the former finds its manifestations in the thought processes and actions of the fictive characters,

the latter is implied in the socio-political leanings of the author in a social scenario devoid of all perceptions and practices of ethics and morality. Dina, Maneck, Ishwar, Omprakash and, to a lesser extent, Avinash and his sisters, emerge as conscience keepers within their restricted existence. By imbuing them with propensities that are humane, Mistry contrasts them with the savage allegorical figures who ruled the roost in the days of the Emergency in India.

In an inventive manner of characterization, the author creates the persona of the administrator, the Facilitator, the Motivator, the Slum-lord, the Thakur and Bal Baba. Each of these men are parasites feeding on the helplessness and gullibility of the common man, destroying those who dare to question their ideology or defy their commands. The administrator represents the state machinery involved in brutal coercive sterilizations; the Facilitator and the Motivator represent the corrupt bureaucracy that takes a hefty cut for providing basic amenities; the Slum-lord and the Thakur are the agents of social repression, letting loose their goons on all those who try to break free from the chains of the strict codification of social groupings; Bal Baba symbolises the hold that ruthless godmen have over an illiterate, superstitious populace whose monetary donations pander to the desires of the godman's body rather than the spirit. History reasserts itself in macabre ways in this fictional framework. The story of Avinash has strong allegorical undertones as it has parallels with the tragic murder case of the engineering student, Rajan, during the Emergency. The suicide of Avinash's sisters is reminiscent of the combined suicide of three young girls in India's industrial city of Kanpur who could not bear to see their father's humiliation and social scorn for not being able to provide them respectable dowries for marriage.

Encounters between the symbols of conscience and the emblems of evil invariably end in the victory of the latter. The section entitled "The Circle of Reason" reiterates this dictum and leaves the reader shattered when Mistry sums up the dominant strains of the two protagonists destiny through the words of Vasant Rao Valmiki: "Loss is essential. Loss is part and parcel of that necessary calamity called life." This brutal truth embodies the writer's consciousness which assesses the tragedy of history in subtle yet clear ideological terms. Mistry's perception of and reaction to the dark periods of Indian history are never clearly stated but are always implicitly conveyed. The book stands as a scathing attack on the degeneration of political morals, agonising over the insensitivity of the ruling classes and coming down heavily on the subversion of institutions. Mistry makes no secret of his loathing for the powers that be and places the blame at the door of heartless politicians.

The central trope that unites the forces of conscience and consciousness is the image of the patchwork quilt. It is a piece of collective needlework that the protagonists indulge in after completing their respective chores. Made up of a number of leftover fabrics from Dina's tailoring concern, the patchwork quilt takes on the function of a leitmotif in the novel. Each piece, different in colour and texture, comes to symbolise various memorable occasions in the characters' lives and stands for the alternating cycles of happiness and sorrow. Ishwar and Omprakash sum it up with the sensitivity of an artist surveying his world:

Calling one piece sad is meaningless...it is connected to a happy piece-sleeping on the verandah. And the next square chapatis, then that violet tussar, when we made masala vada and started cooking together. And don't forget this georgette patch, where Beggarmaster saved us from the landlord's goondas....Before you can name that corner, our future must become past. Time is without length or breadth. The question is, what happened during its passing and what happened is, our lives have been joined together....Like these patches. (599-600)

The quilt takes on a number of metaphorical significances. On one hand, the lives of the minor fictive persona are reflected in its patches sown together; on the other, it highlights Dina's sense of despair and desolation at the end of the novel. This is evocatively conveyed when she perceives her life as a succession of images associated with specific pieces of the quilt. It becomes her "bed time story" as she returns to her past each night, covered by the quilt which remains incomplete as the last corner patch is never sown.

More importantly, it becomes a symbol of time as each piece constitutes the trials and tribulations or fleeting happiness that intervenes in her life and she adds a piece to mark the occasion. Omprakash sees time as a "bolt of cloth" from which he wanted to "cut out all the bad past, snip out the scary nights, stitch together the good parts and wear it like a coat, always live happily"(383). This intense yearning for happiness only serves to emphasise the sordid helplessness of each of the main figures.

India's pluralistic culture and languages, its extremes of rural and urban reality, parallels between the lives of individuals and the nation, multiplicity of voices and meanings, and the repudiation of the possibilities of absolute truth are all subsumed in the complex image of the leitmotif.

Ironic in vision, brooding in tone, amorphous in realities, *A Fine Balance* needs to be read as an expression of the predicament of self in the Indian urban/rural context. In spite of the stark life that it represents, the novel reveals an underlying moral purpose and a positive commitment to justice and humanitarian concerns. Mistry, as a diasporic writer, holds literary thought and literary language in *A Fine Balance* that is as much an act of "affiliation and establishment" as an act of "disavowal, displacement, exclusion and cultural contestation" (Bhabha 5).

The endeavour to write a novel about one's native country on the basis of memory has been an irresistible challenge and a compelling necessity for a number of exiled or immigrant writers who have been cut off from their ethnic roots. Their backward glance home conceals their desire for their lost home and their "criticism of the reality of home reaffirms the same longing, though in an inverted manner" (Kirpal 6). Salman Rushdie too, in *Imaginary Homelands*, contends that "writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt" (10). The act of expatriation may result in the loss of "first hand knowledge of economic, political, social changes, of current jargon, of debate, even of such geographic elements as landscape, climate and even vegetation" (Parameswaran 43), and it seems that the expatriate writer has to work harder than the 'native' writer to create authenticity. Any writer who writes about his homeland from the outside, must necessarily "deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (Rushdie 11). Nonetheless, it is precisely the fragmentary nature of these memories the incomplete truths they contain, the partial, explanations they offer, that make them particularly evocative for the transplanted writer. For Rushdie, these "shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains, fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numerous qualities" (12).

Canada-based, Indian (Parsi) writer, Rohinton Mistry's literary voyage continues to bring him to India. In his latest novel, *A Fine Balance* (winner of the prestigious Commonwealth Writers Prize, 1996), which is reminiscent of his earlier works - *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and *Such A Long Journey*, he again tries to revision the history of his homeland, his community and family and reveals his diasporic consciousness.

The present paper explicates Mistry's nostalgic perspective of the political and social chaos underlying India's colonial and post-colonial experience. *A Fine Balance*, set in Indira Gandhi's India

and more specifically during the time of emergency is a stark and moving portrait of life during this period. It reflects the reality of India -the predatory politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence and blood-shed. The paper also gives an insight into rural India, illustrates the injustice, the cruelty, and the horror of deprivation and portrays the trauma of India along communal, religious and linguistic lines.

While dealing with the lives of common people in post-independent India, the novel captures the socio-political-cultural turmoil of this period. Mistry achieves the remarkable feat of mixing historical slices with their personal lives and attempts to portray the reality of India by weaving together four worlds in the fabric of the novel. The first is the middle class, urban world of Dina Dalai, a pretty widow in her forties. Then there is a glimpse into rural India provided by Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash - chamars who liberate themselves from caste stereotypes by becoming tailors in Bombay and gradually get caught in the quagmire of this nether world. There is an-other world symbolized by Maneck Kohlah, a sensitive Parsi boy, whose perambulations bring the reader occasionally into the predatory world of the university student. The novel is as much about the shared lives of these four major characters, who at one stage live under the same roof, as it is about their separate entities. ,

Mistry has concentrated on the pessimistic image of his lost motherland, gives an insight into rural India and mentions the atrocities committed on the untouchables. The chamars spent their life in obedient compliance with the traditions of the caste system and survived with humiliation and forbearance as their constant companions. Buddhu's wife refused to go to the field with the zamindar's son, so they shaved off her head and walked her naked through the square and Dukhi's wife was raped in the orchard. They were helpless victims and their crimes were varied and imaginative; a Bhungi had dared to let his unclean eyes meet Brahmin's eyes; a chamar had walked on the wrong side of the temple road and defiled it; another had strayed near a puja that was in progress and allowed his undeserving ears to overhear the sacred shlokas. When Dukhi became the father of two sons, he feared for his family's safety and as a precaution, he went out of the way to be obsequious. The children of the low castes were denied the right to education; Ishvar and Narayan were caned severely when they entered the classroom. When Narayan wanted to assert his right to vote, he and his companions were hung naked by their ankles from the branches of a banyan tree and the thakur's men,

urinated on the three inverted faces. Semiconscious, the parched mouths were grateful for the moisture, licking the trickle with feeble urgency.... 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. (146)

Their bodies were displayed in the village square and their entire family burnt alive. The writer, here, focuses on man's inhumanity to man and on the deprivation, inequities and injustice faced by the underprivileged in India.

The novel, on one hand, is a realistic portrayal of trains crossing the new border, carrying nothing but corpses, the conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims, fanatics burning shops and houses, involved in arson and bloodshed and the entire country in the grip of communalism. On the other hand, it faithfully describes the communal conflicts of 1984 caused by the death of Indira Gandhi when the Sikhs were ruthlessly burnt alive.

Mistry stresses the fact that in postcolonial India the plight of common people has not ameliorated and they have to face the same exploitation and injustice as in the rule of the colonizer, as one of the character says, "Of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed" (581). It seems as if the native rulers have merely replaced the foreign rulers and Indian government has failed to resolve the

basic problems of poverty, hunger, unemployment, illiteracy and disease. A considerable percentage of people live below poverty line leading a hand to mouth existence and the gap between the rich and the poor has widened. The writer draws a pathetic picture of near-naked people in Bombay slums, with meagre possessions, lean, emaciated babies, hungry and crying whom the parents fed with "half rotten bananas and oranges and scraps scavenged the night before" j(330). The chill penury and wounds of India are shown too obviously.

Outside the platform, a woman sat in the sun... drying her laundered sari, one half at a time. One end was wound wet round her waist and over her shrunken breasts, as far as it would go. The drying half was stretched along the railway fence. (281)

The writer, describes the saga of a poor old man who underwent a vasectomy, and his groin filled up with pus which lead to his death. He went in for this operation because of cash bonus and gifts, he had wanted to help with his grand daughter's dowry, again, portraying the shameful aspect of Indian society.

Mistry "finds Bombay oppressive and overcrowded" (Cyrus Mistry 11). When he went back to Canada he told Hancock that Bombay had appeared very grim and bleak to him, "Bleak was the picture I created when I was here. That's exactly the way it is" (148). The underprivileged section of Bombay do not even possess one square of land to live comfortably.

Eight, nine or ten people in a small room. Sleeping one over the other on big shelves, from floor to ceiling, like third-class, railway berths. Or in cupboards, or in the bathroom. Surviving like goods in a ware house. (Mistry 471)

The writer presents a cross-section of Bombay - the huge slum across the road wearing its malodorous crown of cooking smoke and industrial effluvium, the long queue for water, accompanied by quarrels, lack of basic amenities, open air toilets, the familiar sights of beggars with their begging bowls and the beggar master paying the police every week to avoid harassment. Mistry's authentic portrayal of Bombay and its social ills such as child labour and beggary problem bears a close affinity to Meera Nair's film Salaam Bombay. The description of the beggarmaster with his imaginative mind, training his beggars and dressing them with a variety of wounds manages to raise a laugh as their chill penury is juxtaposed with the lighter side of their lives.

Depressed and demoralized by the ruthless murder of their entire family, pressured by joblessness and hunger and envisioning a bright future for themselves, Ishvar and Omprakash migrate to Bombay like Rajaram who says, "thousands and thousands are coining to the city because of bad times in their native place. I came for the same reason" (171) and "the city grabs you, sinks its claws into you and refuses to let go" (172). Their lives in Bombay symbolize the anguish, pain, anxiety and restlessness of people cut off from their native village. Like nomads, they moved from Nawaz's awning to their slum dwelling, then to the railway platform and then to the entrance of a chemist's shop where they were mistaken for beggars, compelled to slog as labourers and finally released from this inviolable hell by the beggarmaster. Their incapacity to find a home, despite numerous efforts is touching and pitiable. They are caught in an inescapable dilemma, between two worlds-their native village which they abandoned because it held a bleak chance and Bombay which has failed them despite promises-they stay on as marginal men, unable to discard the old and to find peace in the new.

Mistry discusses another perspective of Indian reality, i.e. gender discrimination and asserts that every aspect of Indian society is 'gendered' conferring specific advantages to men and disadvantages to women. Women are relegated to a sub-ordinate status in family and society. They are expected to be

dutiful daughters, loving mothers, submissive daughters-in-law and faithful wives. Patriarchy defines the precincts of women and even a slight infringement on their part is sufficient to arouse the wrath of its representatives. After marriage women become the property of their husbands to be abused and bullied. Women are thrashed by their husbands, and if daughters are born, are ordered to discreetly get rid of the new born and they are strangled, poisoned or starved to death. When a son was born to Radha and Narayan, sweets were distributed and everyone rejoiced with them at the happy occasion. However, when daughters were born to them, no sweets were distributed. When Shankar's mother was born, her drunken father slashed off her nose in his rage, disappointed with the mother for producing a daughter instead of a son. Avinash's three sisters were aware of their father's sad plight at not being able to afford dowries for them. In order to spare their parents the shame of three unmarried daughters, they committed suicide by hanging from a ceiling fan. The writer highlights the injustices done to women, interrogates the marginalisation of women in the male-dominated society and contends that inequality between the sexes is caused by the cultural construction of gender differences.

Dina's brother, too, illtreats her, does not allow her to visit her friends, makes her do the household chores and she is expected even to polish his shoes. After Mrs. Shroff's death, despite her keen desire to pursue her education, she is not even allowed to matriculate.

He tries to compel her to marry a person of his choice, but Dina protests and asserts her individuality. She marries Rustom Dalai, whom she loves intensely. Dina is the symbol of the 'new woman' who refuses to be acquiescent and submissive and does not accept the stereo-typical, feminine role assigned to her. Even on that cruel night, when her husband died, she behaved in a very dignified manner, "No wailing, no beating the chest or tearing the hair like you might expect from a woman who had suffered such a shock, such a loss" (46). She refuses to disintegrate and resolves to restructure her life without being economically dependent on a man. Her quest for selfhood and her emergence as a strong, progressive and an independent woman forms the quintessence of the novel. She fetches two tailors, Ishvar and Om and starts working for Au Revoir Exports.

Through the world of Maneck and his friend Avinash, Mistry gives us a glimpse into the evils of Indian campus the shameful ragging, nepotism in staff hiring, bribery for admissions, sale of examination papers, special privileges for politicians' families, government interference in the syllabus, intimidation of faculty members and student politics in the campus. Avinash's death remains a mystery and the burns on the shameful parts of the body reveal that he did not fall off a fast train but it was the case of student politics and of wrongful death in police custody.

The Indian society is decaying from top downwards. The corrupt leaders have exchanged wisdom and good governance for cowardice and self-aggrandizement. For votes and power they play with human lives and accept money from business-men needing favours. The pre-election speeches of leaders are crammed with false promises of powerful laws. For them "passing laws is like passing water, it all ends down the drain" (143). During elections, the illiterate villagers are cheated and the ballot papers are filled by men hired by the politicians. The novelist lays bare the election system of the world's largest democracy and the hypocrisy of the politicians.

A Fine Balance, reminiscent of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* faithfully reflects the period of emergency in India, when the world's largest democracy spent twenty two months as the world's largest banana republic. Every atrocity known to have been committed during the emergency occurs to Mistry's characters and the novel becomes a template for a stark and unsparing portrait of that time in India. With

the curtailing of the fundamental rights of the people, everything became topsy turvy, the press was censored, with the new law MISA anybody could be imprisoned without trial and there were countless deaths in police custody. Valmik, the proof-reader says, I am inspired by the poet Yeats. I find his words relevant during this shameful Emergency - "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (556). Under the City Beautification scheme, hutment colonies were demolished and millions were rendered homeless, a new strategy was formulated for beggary problem and the pavement dwellers were made to slog like bonded labourers.

The most brutal aspect of emergency was that anyone, young or old, married or unmarried was compelled to undergo family planning operation. Ration cards were issued only to those who had a family planning certificate and people had to choose between food and manhood. Incentives like transistors were offered for this, as in Salman Rushdie's story "The Free Radio". Ishvar and Om, too, became victims of emergency and the writer gives a heart-rending account of their vasectomy, the removal of Om's testicles just before his wedding and the amputation of Ishvar's legs, turning them into crippled beggars.

The novel is not just a sordid drama of their lives, it is also about caring and sharing and the close relationship that the four characters gradually built up. Dina's kindly gestures of applying balm on Om's hand, permitting the tailors to sleep in her verandah after their traumatic experience, Maneck missing his college and helping Dina to complete the dresses, their idea of eating together and the friendly moments they spend together brightened their bleak lives. Maneck feels that if "there were a large enough refrigerator, he would be able to preserve the happy times in this flat, keep them from ever spoiling" (440).

Dina and the two tailors have to struggle a lot and they encounter the challenges of their lives very boldly. It seems that they have learnt to accept their fate and to make the best of it. As Vasant Rao Valmik, the proofreader says that "the secret of survival is to embrace change and to adapt" (230), one should learn to use one's failures as the stepping stones to success and one has "to maintain *A Fine Balance* between hope and despair.... In the end, it's all a question of balance" (231). Though, Dina in the end becomes dependent on her brother, yet has a satisfying relationship with Ishvar and Om. In the end, now nearly blind Dina sits with her two erstwhile tailors, now turned beggars, feeds them with massoor dal and chapatis, sharing memories of times past and the novel ends with the warmth, thrill and pleasure of sharing.

The book is rich in a Dickensian cast of minor characters and Mistry succeeds in "drawing a veritable gallery of memorable characters - the proofreader Valmik driven from his profession by a virulent allergy to printing ink, to a new job of hiring crowds and shouting slogans in rallies and the rent collector who cannot help smiling even though "his life had become the plot of a bad Hindi Movie, minus the happy ending" (90) and who at one point gives up, "It's no use. I cannot do this job, I hate it..." Besides these, there is Rajaram, who driven by extreme hunger transforms from barber/hair-collector to Family Planning Motivator and then to a murderer, who kills two beggars for their lovely hair. Finally, he becomes the highly venerated Bal Baba in a saffron robe and superstitious Indian crowds wait in long queues for darshan of this so-called holy man, who predicts the future. He has no charges, but all donations are mostly welcome by the Bal Bala Foundation, any much amount" (601). This provides another facet of Indian reality.

In this novel, like his earlier works, the writer once again succeeds in recreating the Parsi ambience. The rich culture, customs and traditions of the marginalised Parsi community are fore

grounded and scenes describing the Parsi death rites and funeral ceremonies give the reader a glimpse into the Parsi world view. Faces like priest Dustoor Framji, known as Dustoor Daab-Chaab for his propensity to squeeze young women who come his way, and Dina Dalai herself, with an innate kindness that sits on her form like her favourite blue dress are totally convincing.

Mistry wants the readers to read his account of the myriad lives that animate *A Fine Balance* as a faithful rendering of reality. The Balzac quote at the beginning of the book, "this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true" seems to imply this. However, his vision is marked by pessimism and despair.