

**THREADS OF INEQUALITY: NARRATING THE SOCIO-
REALISTIC CHRONICLE IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S A FINE
BALANCE**

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Abstract:

Rohinton Mistry, an Indian-born writer living in Canada, grapples with a dual identity, maintaining a connection to his homeland in his writing despite his geographical distance. His literary portfolio comprises three novels *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, a collection of short stories. *A Fine Balance* delves into societal inequities that afflict the majority, with Mistry notably delineating his concern for the Parsi community distinct from his worry for other Indian groups. The central focus of the work revolves around the breakdown of human relationships. The discrimination and imbalance portrayed within the narrative arise from the mistreatment of untouchables and Dalits by the high-caste villagers, viewing them as subhuman. The story unfolds against the backdrop of an impersonal, fearful metropolis, with characters grappling with dislocation, loneliness, and estrangement.

Keywords: Struggle for survival, exploitation, downtrodden, caste, creed, social, political, and economic inequality.

Rohinton Mistry, a social humanist, is outraged by the ongoing offenses committed against the oppressed and suffering people. In his book *A Fine Balance*, this is where Mistry works passionately to expose the problems of society to bring about change. Mistry wants the numerous issues that people face to be understood for there to be peace in society. Mistry's humanism is unquestionably characterized by its criticism of the battle for identity and survival. His protagonists' aspirations and hopes are linked with their optimism and desperation for modern living. As a realist and humanist, Mistry uses his writings to illustrate the fundamental contradiction of ordinary people. His humanistic beliefs and artistic philosophy reveal his revolutionary ideals. All types of feudal exploitation and tyranny are uplifting to the oppressed and disadvantaged, notably the wicked social practices of casteism and untouchability.

Mistry is now the voice of this revolution as a result. This paper's primary goal is to illustrate the challenges the characters encounter in the modern world. The –City by the Sea, Mumbai, serves as the setting for the novel. This is a city where the people, the skyscrapers, and the terrain are all subject to ongoing, irreversible change. The Internal Emergency serves as the book's overall setting. The condition of the average person, especially those who decided to reject this anti-democratic era, was terrible. Every Indian was kept under observation during this time. The gaze was now omnipresent, as Mistry puts it. Everybody was under suspicion; everyone needed to be looked into, and all of a sudden, new student unions appeared that demanded complete compliance with their demands and standards of conduct. Students and professors who expressed their honest opinions were immediately imprisoned and disappeared. 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 and accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured: this tragedy is not fiction. All is true. (12)

A Fine Balance opens with a portrayal of the lives of four characters: Dina Dalal, Om, Ishvar, and Maneck Kohlah, who come together to live in Mumbai city. In addition to Om and Ishvar, who came to Mumbai in search of employment, and Maneck Kohlah from Kashmir, who came to Mumbai to study, Dina was a widow who had led an independent life. Ishwar Darjee, his young nephew Omprakash Darjee, their employer Dina Dalal, a middle-aged widow, and

Maneck Kohlah, a paying visitor, are all disturbed by an emergency, a defense of an unsteady leader. Due to their reliance on the lives of the tailors, Ishvar and Om, Dina, and Maneck are only incidental victims of the emergency. All of them are aware of something stifling their lives, though they cannot link it to the existing political scenario in the country. Their struggle for survival, as far as they are concerned, does not have a political angle to it. They all believe that the oft-heard word emergency is a sort of game played by the power center, and it would really affect ordinary people like them. Hence, each in his own way tries to connect the pervasive discomfort and insecurity to their problems of the here and now. Very soon, when their simplest dreams get thwarted, they are forced to realize the mayhem created by the emergency. The narrative describes their backgrounds and their loads of woes and miseries. Mistry shows how the commoners are the worst sufferers. In her speech in the novel, the Prime Minister declares, as Mistry writes in his book *A Fine Balance*,

There is nothing to worry about just because the emergency is declared. It is a necessary measure to fight the forces of evil. It will make things better for ordinary people. Only the crooks, the smugglers, and the black marketers need to worry, for we will soon put them behind bars. What we want to do is provide houses for the people. Enough food, so no one goes hungry. Cloth at controlled prices wants to build schools for our children and hospitals to look after the sick. Birth control will also be available to everyone. And the government will no longer tolerate a situation where people increase the population recklessly, draining the resources that belong to all. We promise that we will eliminate poverty from our cities, towns, and villages. (265)

For Ishvar and Om, the huge cut-outs of the Prime Minister with inspiring slogans for hard work and sincerity are mere markers in the confusing labyrinth of the city streets. However, they realize the implication when they are forcibly bundled away to the Prime Minister's meeting to fill in the numbers. With neither the promised tea nor the free bus ride, Ishvar and Om return thirsty and tired. For Dinabai, their absence is the usual sign of the arrogance of the labor class once their meal is assured.

As part of the slum evacuation program, the tailors' shanty is bulldozed to the ground, causing another trauma. Ishvar is happy that their sewing machines are at least secure at Dinabai's. They pack everything they own into a trunk, which they then drag around the city

while looking for a place to live. They understand that they must pay the policeman even to sleep on the station. Mistry writes, –It’s terrible! He thinks they were mistaken for beggars—dragged into the police truck—and God knows where they are now.¶ (324)

Ishvar and Om’s arrest by the police from their leased footpath home to work as construction workers as part of the City Beautification Project is the third blow of emergency in their lives. They are not scavengers or street children. Ishvar protests, but he is ignored. For reasons that are entirely beyond their control, they are coerced into a truck and forced to leave behind their daily bread and butter for a period of time. During this time, Maneck makes an effort to calm the anxious Dina. When they return to the little town near their ancestral village, an unjustified police raid at the market place deals them their final and fatal blow. Ishvar and Om are brought against their will to a sterilization camp in a town close to their ancestral village. People like Thakur Dharamsi had to sell the patients they saw at their clinics in order to survive since, unless a government worker can show two or three sterilization cases, his salary for the month is withheld.

The Thakur, the one responsible for their family’s ruin, was angered by Om’s act of spitting at him, and, in retaliation, he ordered another operation on the already sterilized Om. The nurses’ explanation is that Thakur has a special interest in the boy because he has a testicular tumor. Sterilization dashes Ishvar’s hopes of doing a reversal procedure on Om. As a result of gangrene spreading to Ishvar’s injured feet from the beautification project, his legs must be removed. They travel back to —our city,¶ Mumbai, with a little cart equipped with wheels for Ishvar and a rope for Om to pull it before becoming beggars. Dina, back at her brother’s, covers herself with the unfinished quilt, recollecting the events and experiences concealed in the rightly knit patches. Wadhawan in *Parsi Community and the Challenges of Modernity: A Reading of Rohinton Mistry’s Fiction* remarks:

A Fine Balance gives hideous particulars of the iniquitous emergency imposed by the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi in 1975, and especially it projects the lives of the four unfortunate people, namely Dina Dalal, Omprakash, Ishvar Darji, and Maneck Kohlah, connected by the same thread of overpowering fate. The lives of these characters from different social categories are _adversely affected by the political juggernaut of the emergency. (79)

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Some of these changes—such as the rise of conflict in the cold beverage industry—occur as a result of life's struggles. However, the imposition of an internal emergency is what causes the majority of upheavals in the book. The internal emergency manifests itself in many different ways, including the forceful displacement of the impoverished from cities, the forced labor camps, and the sterilizations. The Internal Emergency receives harsh criticism from Mistry. He shows that all the avowed promises of the Emergency to abolish bonded labor, child labor, sati, the dowry system, child marriage, and the harassment of backward castes by upper castes have never materialized. Instead, as Mistry shows in several instances in the novel, a nexus emerges between the police and the established hierarchy, either the upper dominance in the villages, the land, or building mafias in Mumbai.

Mistry's sympathy for the poor and worry over authoritarian, repressive behaviors during the two-year internal emergency are revealed in the novel's various scenes. In the course of the story, Mistry offers several illuminating political observations. The changes in rural life, the evolving aspirations of the lower castes, and the efforts made by the upper castes to maintain the status quo are clearly defined. A major instance is the violence perpetuated by Thakur Dharamsi and his henchmen against Narayan's family during the week of parliamentary elections. The generation gap is shown in the aspirations of the lower castes.

Narayan, who is intelligent, wants to utilize his rights, though. He wants to cast his own ballot in the elections rather than allow the men of the landlords to fill in the blank ones. Mistry demonstrates the unscrupulous electoral rigging in rural India in terse words. The majority population does not accept Narayan's own tailor shop or his criticism of the abuse of the caste system. Here, Mistry gives graphic details of ruthless exploitation, tortures, booth rigging, and the sufferings of the poor and downtrodden. Even after twenty years of independence, nothing changes. Mistry writes:

The government passes new laws and says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals. _More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, and walk where I like. Son, those are dangerous things to want. You changed from Chamaar to tailor. Be satisfied with that'. Narayan shook his head. _That was your victory.' (142-43)

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Narayan disagrees with the officials that despite being a Chamaar, he is still not allowed to visit the temples of the upper castes, drink water from the village well, or travel wherever he wants. The Dalits were made aware of their basic right to vote because of Narayan. Mistry writes:

When he attempts to assert his right to vote, thumb print? I will sign my full name. After you give me my ballot, Two men in the line behind Narayan were inspired by him. _Yes, give us our ballots, they said. _We also want to make our cannot do that; we don't have instructions'. _You don't need instructions'. It is our right as voters... _After we vote'. This time he did not laugh but raised his hand as though in farewell and left the booth. The men seized Narayan and the other two. They forced their thumbs to the ink pad and completed the registration. Thakur Dharmasi whispered to his assistant to take the three to his form. His men urinated on the three inverted faces. After the ballot boxes were taken away, burning coals were held to the three men's genitals and then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard throughout the village until their lips and tongues melted away. The still-silent bodies were hanging down from the tree. When they began to stir, the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks, and the three were hanged. (145-46)

Thakur's men misinterpret his desire for voting rights. Thakur viciously tortures Narayan and his two pals before hanging them in the village square. Other untouchables suffer random beatings, have their women raped, and have their huts set on fire. Thakur determines that Dukhi's family needs to receive special justice. His arrogance goes against all that people revere. Mistry writes:

His arrogance went against everything we hold sacred. What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder; he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society's timeless balance by crossing the line of caste, which had to be punished with the utmost severity. (147)

On the Thakur's orders, Dukhi, Roopa, Radha, and the daughters are set afire alongside Narayan's lifeless body. Thakur Dharamsi referred to the occurrence from the book, Two are missing, in his statement. Mistry writes:

Son and grandson Well, never mind, these five will do. Only through the red birthmark on his chest could they recognize Narayan. A long howl broke out from Radha. But the sound of grief soon mingled with the family's death agony; the house was set alight. The first flame licked at the bound flesh. The dry winds, furiously fanning the fire, showed the only spark of mercy that night. The blaze swiftly enfolded all six of them. (147)

The shameful and horrible murders of Narayan and his companions are always the hapless victims at the hands of the heartless upper caste. Dukhi Mochi's friend also fears for his family: "With wide-open eyes, he is bringing destruction upon his household" (95). Above all, this incident is not a socially and morally acceptable one. The untouchables lose their identities as human beings because of their mistaken beliefs. Mistry writes, "There must be a lot of duplication in our country's laws... For politicians, passing laws is like passing water. It all ends down the drain." (143)

On the other hand, the untouchable children are very eager to learn like the upper caste children. But they are brutally beaten up by the teacher. This kind of bold insult shows the suppressed and oppressed people's mental aggression towards the upper caste. Mistry writes:

Shameless little donkeys! Off with you, or I'll break your bones! You Chamaar rascals? You are getting very brave by 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? Wanted to look! Well, I will show you now! I will show you the back of my hand! Holding on to Narayan, he slapped him six times in quick succession across the face, then delivered the same number to his brother's face. (109-10)

Then, Mistry cites the upper caste response of male children among its low caste neighbors as an example for the Brahmins. This is the result of disorder in the universe brought on by some misbehavior in this world's natural social order. Then there was increased vigilance and a more rigorous adherence to the caste system, which obviously meant more floggings and beatings, which is the real disorder. Moreover, it is also the site of the recurrence of caste-based brutality. The lower castes are beaten, tortured, and killed for a number of minor offenses. Partha Chatterjee's comments on caste may suggest what is at stake in Dukhi's refusal to endure hereditary,

The essence of caste, we may say, requires that the laboring bodies of the impure castes be reproduced in order that they can be subordinated to the need to maintain the bodies of the pure castes in their state of purity. All injunctions of dharma must work to this end. (Chatterjee, 194)

Then, caste divisions exist in India not only between the poorer and upper strata but also inside each class. Additionally, there is a class structure among the untouchables. There is caste within caste; thus, the sweeper group, for example, is inferior to the darker community. Mistry points out that:

Narayan's mother advises him not to deal with the lower caste among them. What nonsense is this, calling him back tomorrow? We are not going to deal with such low-caste people! How can you even think of measuring someone who carts the shit from people's houses? _... I think, ma, that you are wrong. _I think I should sew for anybody who comes to me, Brahmin or Bhunghi. You do, do you? (133–34)

For instance, Bhunghi is the lowest among the low-caste people. He desires to get a suit stitched for him, which is not appreciated by Dukhi's wife. She warns her son Narayan not to even stitch a suit for the Bhunghi. It is significant to note that only Ashraf, the Muslim tailor in town, stitches clothes for Dukhi, as no Hindu tailor would sew for an untouchable. This curse of untouchability is deeply rooted in the Hindu psyche. Through Dukhi's story, we are brought to the time of the post-independence struggle of postmodern man with discrimination and disparity erected by the upper-caste people in India. It is ironic that pledges of fighting against caste injustice were taken out but are still to be redeemed by the speaker who comes to spread the Mahatma's message and says, Mistry writes:

What is the disease? You may ask. This disease, brothers and sisters, is the notion of untouchability, which has ravaged us for centuries, denying dignity to our fellow human beings. This disease must be purged from our society, from our hearts, and from our minds. No one is untouchable, for we are all children of the same God. Remember what Gandhaji says: Untouchability poisons Hinduism like a drop of poisonous milk. (107)

Dalits were commonly banned from full participation in Indian social life. They were physically segregated from the surrounding community. Dalits, or untouchables, could not enter

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a temple or a school and were required to stay outside of villages. High-caste people took elaborate precautions to prevent incidental contact with dalits. Actually, this is Dalit discourse; here, human beings are treated worse than animals; they are deprived of education, social, political, economic, and personal development. Here, Mistry speaks less about the Parsi community but much more about other communities in India that were and are oppressed under the dominance of upper-caste communities.

Mistry implies that the needless arrogance of the upper castes in trying to maintain social supremacy led to the consolidation and emergence of the Dalits in Indian politics. The rise of the Dalits as a political and social force in the 1990s in India and the caste warfare in the countryside are hinted at by the novelist Omprakash's contempt and defiance of Thakur Dharamsi on their return to the small town near their ancestral village. Mistry's novel makes an astute political comment because it shows that in rural India, the upper castes aggravate social tensions by their insensitive and churlish behavior.

Mistry unequivocally demonstrates how bureaucracy and vested interests work together to maintain the status quo while pretending to save the country from population expansion. Because he arranges numerous sterilization camps, Thakur Dharamsi, the upper caste ringleader, gains a reputation as a political figure during the Emergency. He makes use of his dominant position to ensure that Omprakash is castrated and has his testicles removed. Thakur Dharamsi exacts revenge in this fashion on the lower castes in his community, whose only transgression was to educate their kids and send them to tailoring school instead of having them labor with leather as -Chamars, as was their custom. Thakur Dharamsi's cruel misuse of authority shows that the trend of criminalization of politics and the politicization of crime has been rampant in India in the last decade of the twentieth century. It started during the period of internal emergencies. This is an astute political insight by the author. Mistry also hints in his novel that constant oppression by the upper castes would lead to violence and an uprising by the lower castes. When Ishvar goes to register a complaint at the police station about his nephew's castration, the constable on duty is perturbed. So, in a way, Mistry is quite clairvoyant and hints at the rise of the numerous Dalit Senas in several states in India as retaliation against the upper caste oppression they had to suffer.

The book stands as a scathing attack on the degeneration of political morals, agonizing over the insensitivity of the ruling classes and coming down heavily on the subversion of various

institutions. While dealing with the lives of common people in post-independent India, the novel captures the socio-political and cultural turmoil of this period. Mistry achieves the remarkable feat of mixing historical slices with the personal lives of the characters and attempts to portray the reality of India by weaving together four worlds in the fabric of the novel. The novel is not only about the shared lives of these four major characters, who at one stage lived under the same roof, but it also speaks about their separate entities. 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 British colonizer; as one of the characters says, —Of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed.‖ (581)

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 novel's protagonists. Ishwar and Omprakash traditionally belonged to the low caste of cobblers that is called –Chamars.‖ Social repression and bleak prospects made their forefathers push them into a more respectable profession—tuning. 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 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 reclaim 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 secure recesses of the parental home, Maneck has to face the disturbing emotional displacement of urban college life. In an India trying to reconcile it with the emergency, Maneck has to swallow the insults of seniors and endeavor to adapt himself to the repressive political atmosphere in college. Mistry creates the character of Avinash, a fiery student activist, as a foil to Maneck, and in the brutal political murder of Avinash, Maneck understands his own

limitations and escapist tendencies. Unable to confront these realities, Maneck seeks a way out through suicide. This brings into focus yet another perspective on the sense of displacement in the novel.

Mistry authentically portrays Mumbai and its social ills, such as child labor and the beggar problem. The description of the Beggar Master, 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. Their lives in Bombay symbolize the anguish, pain, anxiety, and restlessness of the 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 laborers, and finally released from this inviolable hell by the Beggar Master. Their inability 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.

All four main characters are lonely and struggling for identity and survival. Social circumstances, loneliness, and a sense of rootlessness bring them together and forge a bond of understanding as they struggle to survive. The human spirit displayed by these four characters of different class backgrounds and ages, despite repeated setbacks, upholds Mistry's subtle political theme of how human beings can endure and survive with some dignity despite oppressive circumstances. Ultimately, the four main characters are struggling to maintain 'a fine balance' in their lives.

Thus, one of the major concerns of *A Fine Balance* is the exploration of the Indian experience through the eyes of a Diaspora writer. Mistry has a keen understanding of Indian society. This permeates both the rural and urban environments as well as the political events depicted in the book. To portray a comprehensive picture of life and the challenges of the individual, Mistry frequently compares history with fiction. In this work, the effects of social and political circumstances on the middle class and the marginalized population are highlighted. It is important to understand that Mistry's depiction of Hindu culture is not a fair ethnographic picture of Indian society. He contends that caste discrimination is fundamentally unfair. Dukhi, Narayan, Ishvar, and Om's lives are heavily chastised for losing their sense of purpose due to the

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inhumanity of untouchability. Humans must be treated with respect, and the harmful effects of discrimination must be eradicated from society as well as from everyone's hearts and minds.

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