

ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE* AND DYSTOPIA

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Abstract

A Fine Balance is Rohinton Mistry's third book and second novel, set in "an undisclosed city" (unmistakably Bombay) in India. The story spans around nine years, beginning with the declaration of National Emergency in 1975 and ending with the killing of the Prime Minister of India and its aftermath. Through the presentation of its surroundings and characters, the novel studies deplorable post-independence Indian society. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a dystopia because the novel presents the decline of Nehruvian consensus, a system of governance that evaded left and right extremism. From Rohinton Mistry's point of view, democracy in India remains fragile and he addresses the burning issues of poverty, political decay and state despotism, Dalits in rural areas, whose fate has not changed over the millennia. Thus, this study attempts to map Rohinton Mistry's dystopian vision of post-independence Indian society in *A Fine Balance*.

Keywords: Dystopia, Poverty, Caste Prejudices, Political Decay, State Despotism.

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A Utopia is a place that is thought to be ideal in every way, most notably social, political, and moral aspects. Dystopia is the polar opposite of utopia: a state in which human life conditions are severely poor, as a result of hardship, oppression, or terror. Dystopia, derived from the Latin *dys* and the Greek *topos*, means as "bad place." If "utopia" denotes an "ideal" situation, "dystopia" denotes a position where everything is flawed. According to M. H. Abrams, "The term dystopia ("bad place") has come to be applied to works of fiction, including science fiction, that represent a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination" (414). The dystopian genre envisions worlds or societies in which life is unbearably difficult as a result of deprivation, oppression, or fear, and human society is defined by human suffering, such as filth, oppression, sickness, overpopulation, environmental degradation, or conflict (Green).

Patriotism and nationalism were the important themes of pre- independence Indian writers in English. The literary scenario changed with the post-independence writers as they gave more importance to challenges of handling postcolonial Indian society. More noticeably, the Post-modern themes in Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh's novels looked into the impact of independence on the Indians. "The period of the National emergency can be identified as a crucial historical watershed that marked the beginning of Indian intellectuals' reassessment of the meaning of Indian Democracy and the 'achievements' of the postcolonial state" (Srivastava 4). Similarly, Rohinton Mistry traces the breakdown of Nehruvian consensus and a shift in socio- economic and cultural paradigm in *A Fine Balance*. *A Fine Balance* is a historical novel that spans Indian history from partition to the horrors of the Emergency in 1975. The novel sheds light on establishment of a state of emergency in an autocratic manner, resulting in the systematic terrorization of political opponents and the

general public. The Emergency interferes into the lives of the four major protagonists - Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om - in an unpleasant way, eventually leading to their loss and ruin. "The novel brilliantly presents a panoramic picture of the poor struggling for their 'survival of the fittest' in the metropolitan city where 'a roof to cover the head' is a dream" (G. Kumar 76).

A Fine Balance, unlike Rohinton Mistry's earlier work *Such a Long Journey*, has a broader perspective. Mistry begins the novel with a quotation from Honore de Balzac, revealing the series of tragedies endured by the common people during the period. Mistry does not make up a fictional account of the people's hardships. The novel contains Parsis, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs, and goes beyond the constraints of the Parsi community. Mistry focuses on the difficulties confronting the newly developing postcolonial nation state, national identity conflicts, and the atrocities of the Emergency period. The novel brings out a bleak picture of reality asserting that Indira Gandhi regime has become increasingly dark and cynical. Major as well as minor characters of the novel live on the exploitation and violence, and people struggle for their survival.

The two tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, are on their way to the home of widow Dina Dalal via train at the beginning of the novel. They meet a college student named Maneck Kohlah on the train, who is also on his way to Dina Dalal's flat to be a boarder. Maneck travels to the city from a small mountain hamlet in northern India to get a college diploma in case his father's soft drink business can no longer compete due to the construction of a highway near their village. On the morning when Ishvar and Om and Maneck's train arrive in the city, a State of Internal Emergency is announced. The Prime minister propagates that the purpose of the Emergency declared is to re-establish stability, peace, and order, as well as to safeguard democracy and national unity. The Prime Minister's decision is met with mixed reactions. For some, it is just a government "Tamasha". The government wants to fulfil three major goals: beautifying cities by eradicating slums and removing people sleeping in "illegal" places at night, enforcing strict population control measures, and enacting the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) to quell internal unrest and "anti-national" activities in the country. Unfortunately, all of these are being horribly abused by

unscrupulous parties in order to settle old grudges and for self-aggrandizement, as well as the police-mafia nexus to promote their own purposes.

Mistry voices the irony of the situation through the characters. Political stunts and campaign rallies relating to elections are popular in India. Mistry vehemently opposes the role of politicians in compelling regular people to attend rallies to listen to the party leader's speech. He portrays the destitute slum dwellers and beggars being picked up and brought in trucks to the outskirts of the city to listen to the Prime Minister's speech. While highlighting the benefits of the Emergency and her Twenty-Point Programme for the ordinary man, Rajaram compares politicians mockingly to the numerous categories of individuals in a carnival. Politicians do not practise what they preach; Mistry cites an example of the Prime Minister's ambitious Twenty-Point Program in which she mentions providing housing for the needy, regulating population growth, and eliminating poverty from cities, towns, and villages, but none of these things actually happens. Ishvar, Om and others, on the other hand, are evicted from their shanties and denied shelter. The slum is demolished in the guise of improvement of the city, and the residents are sent to a remote work camp, where they are underpaid for backbreaking labour that they have done for years. A large number of labourers are laid off and sold to the Beggar master in order to accommodate the influx of newcomers in. Besides, Ishvar and Om are required to give Beggar master protection money for a year in exchange for their "freedom."

A Fine Balance provides a pitiful account of the tribulations of pavement dwellers, slum dwellers displaced from their shacks during demolition, public demonstrations against government policies, police demonstrating their superiority through the use of lathi charges, and bureaucrats abusing their power by threatening the lives of citizens. Ishvar and Om are the best examples of the Thakur's heinous crimes committed in the name of enmity and revenge. Mistry describes the role of the officials in charge of the sterilisation process in great detail. The officers merely obey Thakur Dahramsi's directions, therefore the innocents are targeted without knowing the truth. As a result, Ishvar is sterilised and Om is castrated. Ishvar has both legs removed to prevent the poison from spreading throughout his body. Both uncle and nephew are reduced to beggars, with the young pushing the crippled Ishvar

around on a moving platform. Ishvar fails to understand the way the government functions and reacts: "What kind of life, what kind of country is this. We are not less than animals to them" (AFB 661).

Avinash, a student activist and Maneck's close friend, also criticises the Prime Minister's role. He mysteriously vanishes and is eventually assassinated, which is referred to as "the new sinister brand of law and order." Avinash's three sisters also commit suicide in order to relieve their father of the financial burden associated with their marriage. Such occurrences make one ponder whether or not things have truly changed. When Maneck returns to the city after eight years working in the Gulf, he is taken aback. But before that, Mistry introduces readers to the mayhem and carnage that ensued following the Prime Minister's assassination at her official residence by her Sikh bodyguards. Following her assassination, a Sikh massacre burns the capital for three days, with the police and army standing by as spectators and political officials apparently encouraging the rioting mob, primarily goons, to avenge their beloved leader's murder. Maneck is at a loss for words when a Sikh cab driver takes him from the airport to the railway station. When he returns to the city eight years later to hunt for Dina Aunty and his friends Ishvar and Om, he is so traumatised by what he sees that he commits suicide by jumping in front of a speeding train.

Conclusion:

Bobby Newman identifies the following as the characteristics of dystopian literature: "a) suspicion of scientific social planning, b) the unhappiness of the characters portrayed, c) suspicion of sources of control of behaviour outside the individual, d) violation of presumed inherent need to struggle, and e) suspicion of behavioural methods of governance" (167). Similarly, Rohinton Mistry exposes dark and cynical vision of a post-independent Indian society during the Emergency period and provides a voice for subaltern class in this novel by re-narrating history from the oppressed masses' perspective. The novel is a reflection of the reality of India, its predatory politics of corruption, authoritarianism, oppression, and brutality. Additionally, it provides insight into rural India, emphasising injustice, the horrors of deprivation. Citizens are subjected to continual observation and live in a dehumanised

condition as a result of the merciless social restraints and limits imposed by the government. The novel depicts the period of transformation brought about by the Prime Minister, who imposed a state of Internal Emergency. The Prime Minister and her government become a symbol of the malevolent political elite who dictate the dystopia. Ignorance, poverty, inefficiency of the state apparatus, overpopulation, merciless family planning programs, and communalism are among the evils of dystopias that fracture fraternity of the country. By using realism, Mistry transforms the book into a political and social message rather than a piece of fiction.

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