

## **Public/ Private (Hi)Stories: Reading Rohinton Mistry's A**

### ***Fine Balance***

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Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) is a critique of the darkest period in the history of independent 'modern' India - The Emergency. Mistry in this realist historical novel brings four ordinary people - Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow who fiercely holds on to her independence, Maneck, a sensitive, young college student; Ishwar, a Dalit born into the Chamaar caste and trained to be a tailor; and Omprakash (Om), Ishwar's young and fiery nephew - to weave a horrifying picture of the Emergency period (1975-77). It is a realist text on account of it being a vivid and detailed depiction of the lives of the characters and their respective surroundings. It is a contemporary historical text because it portrays the material conditions of the Indian society and politics during the Emergency period and the pre-independence period, to a certain extent. The portrayal of caste, corruption and autocracy accentuates the sense of helplessness and desperation of the characters to survive all odds. It is a sharp critique of a system which renders the people mere spectators of their own lives. Mistry's novel can be read as a fictional documentation of that period, for the novel becomes a site for the confluence of

history and fiction. This aim of this paper is to analyze o how stories of ordinary lives can be woven together to portray a larger picture – that of an ugly history.

Though *A Fine Balance*'s primary focus is on the lives of the four major characters during the Emergency it does not merely stop at that. The text never mentions the name of the city or that of the village in question; it does not name the Prime Minister in question; it does not give precise dates for the events mentioned. The narration seamlessly progresses and goes back in time (in history), and thus history is appropriated by the (hi)stories of the characters in the text. For instance, Dina's recollection of the Partition is highly personal - she was forced to be "cooped up inside the flat with Nusswan" her brother (25). The end of the curfew marks a very important day in Dina's life, because Nusswan jubilantly agrees to throw away the plaits she had chopped off. The choice of not naming the most powerful character of the story - the Prime Minister and the city in question has further implications. It indicates that these (hi)stories are not particular to any time or place and warns that these (his)stories are most likely to repeat in the future. One can then read Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* not only as a bitter lesson in history but also as a warning issued to the citizens of the world.

With a history behind each character, the text tries to portray the lives of people belonging to the different stratas of Indian society. To say that the four major characters are representatives of their strata would not be far-fetched. But

Mistry's success lies in the way he personalizes and individualizes the stories. Dina Dalal is a young Parsi woman, independent and strong-headed. Her story narrates the travails of the wealthy Parsi community, the middle-classes, and how their lives are shaped by the political affairs of the state. For instance, Mrs. Gupta, the export manager of Au Revoir Exports, is glad when the "minor irritants" in her way are disposed of: "the Prime Minister's declaration yesterday of the Internal Emergency had incarcerated most of the parliamentary opposition, along with the thousands of trade unionists, students, and social workers. 'Isn't that good news?' she sparkled with joy" (73). But for Dina, it brings in new worries; she wonders if the tailors, Ishwar and Om, whom she had recruited, would turn up. Her livelihood hinges upon the tailor's arrival and their work. When the tailors ask her what the Emergency is about, Dina replies "government problems – games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us" (75). The entire text is a testament of the inaccuracy of this statement. Mistry's novel reiterates the fact that "games played by the people in power" are inextricably linked to the lives of common men. It is capable of affecting and altering their lives permanently.

Maneck's story portrays nostalgia for the united country as it was before: "[A] foreigner drew a magic line on a map and called it the new border; it became a river of blood upon the earth" (205). With this simple statement, Mistry alludes to the bloody history of the Indian Partition during 1947. It shows how ordinary

lives are sometimes irrevocably altered, and as a result, personal history as well. Impersonal and objective as it may seem in historiography, the “cartographic changes” have far reaching implications. People whose lives are affected by such changes and decisions are caught in a tide of events over which they seem to have no control. “Ten years later, when Maneck was born, FarokhKohlah, trapped by history, was still travelling regularly to courthouses in the capital, files were shuffled and diplomats shuttled from this country to the other” (205) .

Maneck is slow to realize that the decisions made by the State and the consequent turmoil in the country are too close to his own life. He is indifferent to everything around him and turned to the memories of an idyllic past - the mountains. His friend Avinash’s attempts to educate Maneck about the Emergency and its repercussions on the common man is lost on the latter. Avinash is a pedagogue whom Mistry uses to educate the reader on the Indian Emergency. Avinash says:

Three weeks ago the High Court found the Prime Minister guilty of cheating in the last elections. Which meant she had to step down. But she began stalling. So the opposition parties, student organizations, trade unions – they started mass demonstrations across the country. All calling for her resignation. Then, to hold on to power, she claimed

that the country's security was threatened by internal disturbances, and declared a State of Emergency. (245)

The short, almost staccato sentences indicate Avinash's attempts to stir Maneck into action. Eager to evoke a reaction from Maneck, Avinash adds that the fundamental rights have been suspended and leaders and students are being arrested. However, bored and indifferent, Maneck is clearly disappointed with Avinash. Later, though he moves out of the college hostel to Dina Aunty's dilapidated little flat; he is constantly haunted by his thoughts about Avinash. In the end, after his return from the mountains, he stumbles upon a newspaper article which reports the suicide of Avinash's sisters. Avinash, himself is found dead on the railway tracks under suspicious circumstances. One would not be wrong in assuming that his death had everything to do with the Emergency and his involvement in student politics. Towards the end of the text, Avinash's chess set that had fallen into Maneck's possession and forgotten at Dina Aunty's flat returns to Maneck. This chess set remains as a symbol for Avinash's memory and Maneck's sense of guilt about his indifference. Many a time, Maneck tries to get rid of the chess set, but it always seemed to return to him. He hugs that chess set and everything it symbolizes - Avinash, Om (Maneck had tried to teach the game to Om), and "the game of life" (501), and hurls himself before an oncoming express train. The Emergency period which murdered Avinash and later forced his

sisters to commit suicide; the vengeful power hungry Thakur; the evil of casteism and the corrupt bureaucrats who left Ishwar a cripple and Om a eunuch, and forced the pair to resort to beggary; the unrelenting landlord who evicted Dina out of the little flat, thus reducing her to the status of an unpaid drudge at her brother's home; the 'development' which changed the idyllic mountains into something crass; and the loss of everything he knew eventually unhinges Maneck. Robert L. Ross, commenting on the irony of the situation, says: "That the one member of the foursome best equipped to succeed economically should kill himself is heavy with irony" (243).

The story of Ishwar and Omprakash is, perhaps, the most elaborate one in the narrative. Beginning with Ishwar's father Dukhi, the text gives a vivid description and profound insight into the caste-system in India. The caste-system pervades the lives of the Dalit family where Dukhi pretends not to know of the ignominies his wife endures to feed her children. Their story documents the atrocities lashed out at the lower castes by the upper caste Hindus. Punishments (read tortures) like chopping of fingers and wrists (96), tonsuring a woman and forcing her to walk naked in public (97), molestation and rape (99), were meted out at even the slightest errors perceived or imagined.

The news was of the same type that Dukhi had heard evening after evening during his childhood; only names were different. For walking

on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death – the stones had ceased at first sight of blood. Gambhir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress... (108)

Mistry in his portrayal of these atrocities, sharply criticizes the caste-system in India. These acts of injustice, cruelty and dehumanization are so common that the Dalit child very early in his life picks up the codes that he has to follow:

Besides tanning and leather-working, Dukhi learned what it was to be a Chamaar, an untouchable in village society. No special instruction was necessary for this part of his education. Like filth of dead animals which covered him and his fathers as they worked, the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere. And if that was not enough, the talks of adults, the conversations between his mother and father, filled the gaps in his knowledge of the world. (96)

Events in political history become a character, often intruding into the lives of ordinary men. History is personalized in Mistry's text i.e. the political history is portrayed through the experience of the characters. The movement started by the Indian National Congress to eradicate the caste system is juxtaposed with the day-

to-day harsh lives led by Dukhi and the other Dalits in his village. The irony is not lost on the reader. Even the events of the Partition are brought to us through the characters' firsthand experience of it: "Disturbing things were happening around them. Strangers belonging to a Hindu organization that wore shirts and khaki pants, and trained their members to march about like soldiers, had been visiting the district" (122). Thus, the documentation of public history unfurls through personal history.

Mistry also manages to portray the history of the Kashmir riots through the character of Rajaram, the hair-collector (174). Ishwar and Om live on the fringes of society and for this reason the narration of their story seems richer. By detailing their lives elaborately, Mistry draws a bleak picture of the "City by the Sea" which critics have identified as Bombay and the 'Village by the River'. Mistry, in his realist historical fiction, narrates the myriad lives of the slum-dwellers, the bureaucrats who are corrupt, the Family Planning measures etc. This and other events are the true reminders of the political atmosphere of the country.

In Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, the characters who try to lead their lives in the comfort of their own small worlds also get entangled in the political affairs of the times. Their world is constantly shadowed and haunted by the political, corrupt, autocratic world. In one instance, Om sneaks off to have some time alone in the beach. Even in that serene afternoon, he is encountered by the statue of the



‘Guardian of Democracy’ and ironically by the posters “extolling the virtues of Emergency. The obligatory Prime Ministerial visage was prominent. Small print explained why fundamental rights had been temporally suspended” (191).

As the Prime Minister addresses the crowd, extolling the government’s declaration of Emergency, enumerating the benefits of the new law, Om and Rajaram are engaged in a card game knowing little how the Prime Minister’s declaration would eventually mar their lives. Mistry’s success lies in creating a myriad of stories through the personal stories of many characters. These myriad strands are intricately interconnected forming an integrated whole - the public history of India.

Mistry’s appropriation of history makes it more accessible to the reader. The text is detailed and full of remarks hinting at the larger historical events which interminably deter the characters from living a peaceful life. Maneck wonders in exasperation and dismay:

...What sense did the world make? Where was God, the Bloody Fool? Did He have no notion of fair and unfair? Couldn’t He read a simple balance sheet? He would have been sacked long ago if He was managing a corporation, the things He allowed to happen . . . to the

maid servant and the thousands of Sikhs killed in the capital, and my poor taxi driver with a kara that wouldn't come off. (595)

But no god comes to the rescue. *A Fine Balance* may seem to be a series of unfortunate accidents or coincidence but, a close reading of the text reveals the larger implications. Beverly Schneller remarks that the State of Emergency can be read as a “Hydra-like occurrence, in which the tentacles of government reached across the entire subcontinent, destroying lives in its wake” (243). The Sikh taxi driver who informs Maneck about the assassination of the Prime Minister and the riots that followed once again reiterates the belief held by the common man that their lives are not affected by the course of history. He then enumerates the effects of the “games played by people in power” (75):

... That means you left before the Emergency ended – before the elections. Of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed. Government still keeps breaking poor people's homes and *jhopadpattis*. In villages, they say they will dig wells only if so many sterilizations are done. They tell farmers they will get fertilizer only after *nussbandhi* is performed. Living each day is to face one emergency or another. (581)

The Sikh driver's observation aptly sums up the perspective of the common man and more so for the Dalit and the people living on the margins of society. The

“Hydra-like occurrence” is an everyday experience. It is this quotidian that evokes the helplessness.

What Mistry has achieved in *A Fine Balance* is the conflation of public history and private (hi)stories. To a reader uninitiated into Indian history, the text is indeed a rich pedagogic text. It does not claim to be accurate, yet the discerning reader can fill in the gaps to glean the larger perspective. *A Fine Balance* does not specify that the city it portrays is Bombay, but critics and readers seem to identify it as Bombay. The achievement of Rohinton Mistry lies in the fact that the text seems to have blended history and fiction seamlessly and made it accessible to ordinary readers.

#### Works Cited

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