

Power Abuse in Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a powerful and moving novel that is set in India during the period of Emergency in the mid-1970s, a period marked by political unrest and social upheaval. The story follows the lives of four main characters from diverse backgrounds whose paths become intertwined in unexpected ways. The characters are Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow; Maneck Kohlah, a student from a hill station; Ishvar Darji, a tailor; and his nephew Omprakash. Together, they navigate the challenges and hardships of life in a society undergoing significant transformation. The novel explores themes of resilience, friendship, and the impact of political and societal forces on individual lives. "A Fine Balance" delves into themes such as caste discrimination, political corruption, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. The novel has been praised for its rich character development, vivid portrayal of India, and its ability to capture the complexities of the human experience. It is a powerful indictment of the authoritarian regime of Indira Gandhi and the human rights abuses that took place during that time. *A Fine Balance* can be interpreted as a reflection of the world of cruelty and power abuse. Power politics is in the form of, Casteism, sexual exploitation, sterilization, savagery, torture, and ruthless killing. Dukhi's wife is raped by the watchman for plucking oranges without the permission of the landowner. There are many such instances in Mistry's novel where the untouchables and the underclass are exploited for simple reasons like casting vote and shifting their jobs. Then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi's declaration of Emergency suspended civil liberties and enforced censorship in 1975. The present paper tries to interpret *A Fine Balance* in terms of the power abuse during the state of Emergency rule in an unnamed city of India.

Key words- Casteism, emergency, human relationships, miseries, untouchables, power abuse.

Introduction

Post-coloniality, post-feminism, and post-modernity do not totally depend on the word 'post' to indicate the order of sequence is a key insight. These terms are not simply about what comes after colonialism, feminism, or modernity; they are about critically examining and challenging these dominant discourses and opening up new spaces for thought and action. (Bhabha 1994). Colonialism has had a profound impact on the lives of people around the world, and that this impact continues to be felt today. Post-colonial scholars seek to give voice to marginalized and subaltern groups, and to create new narratives of history and identity. Post-feminism challenges the traditional feminist focus on gender equality. It recognizes that gender is a complex and multifaceted category, and that it intersects with other factors such as race, class, and sexuality. Post-feminist scholars seek to explore the diverse experiences of women and to create new feminist theories that are inclusive and empowering. Post-modernity challenges the Enlightenment ideals of rationality, objectivity, and universal truth. It recognizes that knowledge is always situated and partial, and that there is no single, objective view of the world. Post-modern scholars seek to deconstruct dominant narratives and to create new spaces for diversity and dissent.

Though India became free from British rule in 1947, it still proved that colonialism did not end. The main purpose of invasion is to establish business and exploit the resources so as to be benefitted. Post Second World War period is marked for colonial rule. In the other words, Post colonialism is self-imposed colonialism as it made difficult for them to come out of the colonial influences Neil Larsen in his *The Postcolonial Unconscious* observes that, —[...] there are some excellent accounts bringing into clear focus the failures of postcolonial leaderships to extend and democratize the momentous social advance represented by decolonization (2011). Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* with its realistic and plausible characterization represents subaltern agency speaking volumes about the self-colonization in independent India. Shashi Tharoor in his book review on *A Fine Balance* makes a succinct observation as –I would have called this a great Indian novel. It is an astonishing work of suffering, death and degradation in contemporary India which nonetheless manages to leave

grounds for hope amongst the many reasons for despair (India Today, March 15, 1996). The novel is a chronicle of India's history from the tempestuous times of India-Pakistan partition in 1947 to the Prime Minister's assassination in 1984. The story outlines the mid-1970s with the declaration of internal Emergency in India. It opens with the Parsi community in an unnamed city by the sea that is similar to Bombay. Belliappa K.C. observes, —Mistry, among his contemporaries, stands out as the master of the quotidian in view of his amazing grasp over little details and seemingly trivial incidents (2012). The novel encompasses rag pickers, beggars, suicide victims and most importantly the personal misfortunes of the four characters which mirror during the State of Internal Emergency declared by Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. This state of Emergency suspended civil rights in 1975. Communal harmony of Ishwar, Omprakash, Maneck Kohlah and Dina Dalal in facing the Emergency period is the crux of the novel. Mistry highlights the significance of economic, social, political and historical upheavals of India by depicting the background of each protagonist. The tyranny of the caste system in rural India is reflected through the lives of Ishwar and Omprakash's forefathers who were tailors. Maneck Kohlah's background unveils the pathetic story of India's partition. Dina's past underlines the state of poverty that middle class societies face in an underdeveloped nation like India. Ultimately, the novel is a record of the predicaments of the four protagonists intersecting with the national history of political upheavals. Rao Nageshwar observes the novel in the light of realism, —A Fine Balance is a harshly realistic novel. Told almost entirely from the point of view of subaltern and petty-bourgeois characters (2004). National liberty remains enigmatic. It showcases the traits of colonial rule in the independent India. Marginalization, oppression, exploitation in the name of caste, race and religion are the postcolonial features prevalent in the novel. Rule of Emergency depicting the national crisis is the crux of the novel. It clearly pictures the oppression, dictatorship and political misuse of power by the unnamed Prime Minister of India. The Emergency period of rule between 1975 and 1977 by the then Prime Minister to subside internal disturbance adopts cruel dictatorship in the forms of forced mass sterilization, press censorship, arresting the leaders of the opposition parties, destruction of slums in the name of city beautification and so on. This leadership of the Prime Minister of post independent India has made an unforgettable mark in the history of Indian democracy which is no less than the oppression of British rule for 200 years. Batra, Jagdish rightly

observes Mistry's postcolonial concerns as, -His innate humanity compels him to extend the scope of postcolonial concern for the deprived and the downtrodden to his other compatriots also (2014). All the four protagonists of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* speak about the incidents of Emergency period of Indira Gandhi's rule. Moss Laura observes that the novel, -[...] traces the day-to-day lives of fictional characters through non-fictional incidents in the 1975 state-of-Emergency (2000).

Power Abuse

Power abuse is a pervasive theme in Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance*. The novel is set in India during the Emergency, a period of authoritarian rule in the 1970s. During this time, the government had broad powers to arrest and detain people without charge, and there were widespread reports of torture and extrajudicial killings. The novel's four main characters—Ishvar, Omprakash, Dina, and Maneck—all experience power abuse in different ways. Ishvar and Omprakash are forced to flee their village to escape religious violence. In Bombay, they are exploited by their landlord and by the police. Dina is forced to flee her home after it is demolished by the government without warning. Maneck is arrested and tortured by the police for his political activism. In addition to the state-sanctioned power abuse of the Emergency, the novel also explores the ways in which power can be abused in everyday life. For example, Ishvar's landlord takes advantage of his tenants' vulnerability by charging them exorbitant rent and evicting them without notice. Dina's employer, Nusswan, is a wealthy and powerful businessman who exploits his workers and pays them low wages. Mistry's novel shows how power abuse can have devastating consequences for individuals and communities. It also shows how the powerless can resist and overcome oppression. Some specific examples of power abuse in *A Fine Balance* are the police arrest and torture Maneck without charge, demolishing of Dina's home without warning by the government. Exploitation of Ishvar and Omprakash's landlord with exorbitant rent charges, Nusswan paying his workers with low wages and the ultimate torture of police on Ishvar and Omprakash.

Mistry's novel shows how power abuse can manifest in different ways, from the state-sanctioned violence of the Emergency to the everyday exploitation of workers. It also shows how the powerless can resist and overcome oppression.

Resisting Power Abuse

Despite the hardships they face, the four main characters in *A Fine Balance* find ways to resist power abuse. Ishvar and Omprakash start their own tailoring business, which gives them a measure of independence and dignity. Dina opens a boarding house, which provides her with a means of income and a sense of community. Maneck continues to fight for his political beliefs, even after being tortured by the police.

The novel's message is that even in the face of oppression, there is always hope for resistance and change.

Jason Fernandes on his blog reviews the novel *A Fine Balance* as, –I believe the novel has the feel of a 19th century Russian tragedy. If you like dark tragic novels with a social or political conscience like those of Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy, then I think you might enjoy *A Fine Balance* as a modern, post-colonial, equivalent (2015). The realism and the narrative style remind us of Charles Dickens' portrayal of poverty, caste, envy, superstition, corruption and bigotry. The novel mirrors the cruelty and corruption during Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency. Sen Shamayita observes that, —Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* depicts the political ambience of India marred by a semi-totalitarian rule. Corruption and torture shape the Socio-economic conditions of the country and personal relations among citizens (2017). *A Fine Balance* begins in 1975 with the accidental meeting of Ishvar, Omprakash and Maneck Kohlah in a train. The train gets delayed as a man attempts suicide by throwing himself on the railway tracks. The inhuman attitude of the co-passenger is reflected in the novel as Why does everybody have to choose the railway tracks only for dying? grumbled another. –No consideration for people like us. Murder, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police-custody death— everything ends up delaying the trains. What is wrong with poison or tall buildings or knives? (1995 5). Ishvar and Om who are chamar turned tailors go to the city on the bank in search of employment. Accidentally they share Dina's flat when she starts her business of promoting readymade clothes to a private firm. Maneck comes to the same city for higher studies and finds difficult to live in the rat-infested students' hostel and unbearable ragging. He readily agrees to share Dina's flat as paying guest. Declaration of Emergency and its strict rules are totally new to the common people. Ishvar and Omprakash stay in Dina's home to work as tailors and earn a living through selling dresses with a contract to Revoir Export Company. Ishvar, Omprakash, Maneck Kohlah and Dina Dalal symbolize

poverty, illiteracy (except Maneck), unemployment, exploitation and homelessness framed against the background of the anonymous metropolis of India. Dina Dalal is brought up by her older brother, Nusswan, after her father's death and her mother's nervous collapse. In the pursuit of happiness, she marries Rustom Shroff against the will of her brother but her marital happiness ends within three years with the tragic death of her husband. She refuses to remarry and maintains a fine balance between her financial independence and destitution. Ishvar and Omprakash support her in sewing clothes for an export company. Dina helps the tailors in sharing her apartment when they become homeless after their shanty flat is demolished by the government under the scheme of slum clearance policy. Maneck, a Parsi young student who is uprooted from his idyllic hill station joins to live with Ishvar, Omprakash and Dina. Very soon they move from distrust to trust and friendship to love. Though their races, religions, cultures and social back grounds are different, they are connected with one another by kindness and love. Their association reflects communal harmony. Paradoxically, the state-of-emergency in the novel destroys the lives of the people cutting across the barriers of caste, gender, and class. The novel also portrays the world permeated by cruelty. The ill-treatment of Thakurs on lower castes is a fine example of abuse of power. They wage caste war against the untouchables and perpetrate violence. Untouchables become the victims of the caste system. To escape the oppression of their native villagers, Ishvar and Omprakash who belong to low caste chamars (leather workers) become darjiis (tailors) by migrating to the city. Mistry brings out the unbelievable levels of cruelty that humans can impose on their fellow beings. Chopping of hands, pouring of molten lead into ears, beating, torturing, and sexual abusing are very common. Narayan and the other lower caste villagers rebel against Thakurs. The ruthless killing of Narayan for claiming his right to vote in elections is a fine example of violence. All this exploitation is because of the poverty, illiteracy, and ignorance. The rebellious lower caste villagers are tortured and murdered. Mistry throws light on oppression which affects human relationships causing caste, class and gender discriminations at various levels. Ishvar Darji and Omprakash liberate themselves from caste stereotypes by becoming tailors in the city. Ishvar and Omprakash traditionally belong to the low caste cobblers known as chamars. Unable to bear the caste degradation, their forefathers decide that their successive generations should make a shift of their existing profession. It highlights the human will to disengage from the fetters of the subaltern existence. Maneck exhibits lots

of patience and tolerance to the insults and adapts himself to the repressive political atmosphere in college. Maneck's education makes him to understand life when he says, 'Some things are very complicated to separate with scissors, Good and bad are joined like that' (361). However this philosophy of Maneck breaks when he meets Avinash, a fiery student activist, who is brutally killed in the name of politics. Unable to digest the brutalities of oppression in one way or the other, Maneck understands his own limitations and escapist tendencies. It is a sad note in the novel that Maneck seeks a way out in suicide. The footpaths, the slums, the teeming offices, the tenements, the Parsi enclaves in the novel serve as fine examples of Mistry's sense of belongingness for his native land. Beverly Schnellar in his journal article

Visible and Visitable says that Mistry integrates the history of India which is relevant to the theme of the novel. In his words, 'The use of history is not limited to images and metaphor as the State of Emergency is a violent character in the novel, and as such, needs to be explored' (2001). Though Mistry visits India very rarely, his persistence of literary journeys is worth reading. Mistry's characters become the templates of exploitation in the name of caste. Thakurs exhibit the recurrent violence to preserve their social supremacy in the form of physical and psychological abuse. Their sole intention is to keep the people of the lower caste poor, ignorant and weak forever. Lazarus Neil compares Mistry with Mulkraj Anand in creating subaltern characters:

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, and similar incidents, recounting casual brutality on the part of elite or upper-caste characters and the devastating effects of these on the lives of subaltern characters, are to be found in such celebrated [...] as *Untouchable* and *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand (2011).

State of Emergency

The City Beautification Scheme dismantles the slums and colonies which makes the poor homeless. A new strategy is formulated for beggary problem and the pavement dwellers by turning them to bonded laborers. Om Prakash says, 'We don't have to worry about cancer; this expensive city will first eat us alive, for sure' (1995: 85). Ishwar asserts, 'I am sick of the city, nothing but misery, ever since we came, I wish I had died in our village. I wish I had also

burned to death, like the rest of my family' (103). A work force is organized very much on the lines of slave workers. Beggars, pavement dwellers, tailors, carpenters, rag pickers, scrap dealers and hair collectors are all driven to work on specified sites. Mistry draws a vivid picture of the brutality of treating the poor people as bonded laborers. Fundamental rights like liberty and freedom of expression are totally out of question. A fine example of political dictatorship is the instance of family planning operations carried out by the government during Indian Emergency. When Om Prakash goes to get his ration-card, the official enquires if Om Prakash had undergone vasectomy operation. He insists on the compulsion of getting sterilized to possess a ration-card. In a fit of rage Om Prakash responds as, -What kind of choice is that, between Food and Manhood? (1995 205). Irrespective of being young or old, married or unmarried are compelled to undergo family planning operation during Emergency. Ration cards are issued to those men who produced family planning certificate. Their manhood was at the cost of food. Gifts like transistors are offered. Ishvar and Om become the victims of Emergency by undergoing vasectomy operation.

The major blow of Emergency is when Ishvar and Om are picked up by the police from their rented footpath dwelling to work as construction workers as part of the city beautification project. Ishvar's protest that they are not street beggars is never heard. They are forced into a truck and are compelled to abandon their daily work style for several days. The final and fatal blow to their lives is an unwarranted police raid at the marketplace on their return to the small town near their ancestral village. Ishvar and Om are forcibly taken to a sterilization camp of the town near their ancestral village. Provoked by Om's act of spitting, Thakur Dharamsi orders another operation on the already sterilized Om. Ishvar develops gangrene during his daily labour work which results in the amputation of his two legs. They return to the city with a little trolley fitted with small wheels for Ishvar. It is pulled by Om with a rope. This makes them to give a picture of beggars. Dina returns by covering herself with the unfinished quilt recollecting the events and experiences concealed in the rightly knit patches. Mistry's sympathy for the oppressed and concern at authoritarian oppressive practices during the two year period of Internal Emergency marks his responsibility as an Indian Diaspora writer. Shah Nila identifies -[...] the quilt as the novel's 'central message', acting as

'eyewitness [to] collective human efforts' and gesturing towards the 'composite picture of a total India' offered by Mistry (2004).

Complexity of Human Experience

The novel is a realistic portrayal of exploitation, domination, oppression for many centuries in the political, religious, and communal spheres. The conflict between Hindus and Muslims, pyromania, and bloodshed lead to the burning of shops and houses. Mistry mirrors the communal conflicts of 1984 after the death of Indira Gandhi when the Sikhs were ruthlessly burnt alive. Mistry reflects the internal colonization in post-colonial India through caste exploitations and religious rifts. Plight in the form of exploitation and injustice of the common people remain the same as it was in the rule of the British colonization. Indian government in the post-independence period has failed to eradicate poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. Through the world of Maneck and his friend Avinash, Mistry gives an elaborate understanding of the Indian college campuses where student politics and ragging, nepotism in staff recruitments, scam in admissions, selling examination scripts, interference of the government in curriculum, intimidating the faculty to name a few instances. In other words, Indian education system is also corrupted in Mistry's observation. Avinash's death remains a mystery and the burns on the body reveal that his death is not an incident of the train accident but it is a case of student politics and police custody. Falsehood and hypocrisy of the politicians is exemplified during the pre-election speeches of leaders. For them "Passing laws is like passing water, it all ends down the drain." (1995 143). The illiterate villagers are cheated, and the ballot papers are manipulated by the political followers.

Mistreatment of animals for earning money for their livelihood serves as a good example of violence against animals. The Monkey Man tortures his monkeys Laila - Majnoo and the dog Tikka. These animals entertain people under the perpetual threat of beatings from their master. After the death of the animals, the monkey man substitutes his two children. His cruelty and sadistic nature is extended to the human dimension. Another character in the novel is the beggar master, a Fagin-like character who leads a team of mutilated beggars. The beggars in turn give their hard-earned money to the beggar master. When the landlord

harasses Dina Dalal by employing the thugs to collect the rent, it is beggar master offers protection to Dina.

The power of domination occurs surreptitiously. Characters like Nusswan illustrate this kind of power. After his father's demise, Nusswan runs the Shroff's household by controlling everybody in the family. Dina and her mother depend on Nusswan. This dependence makes him to interfere and dominate with Dina's money, dresses, education, and friendships. In her childhood, Nussawn commands and expects Dina to obey his orders. His clothes were the most frequent cause of Dina's punishment. In the later part of her life, her widowhood and subsequent impoverishment makes her to seek Nusswan's help. This financial support enablesto dominate and exercise his power on his sister. After the death of her husband, Dina becomes self-employed though tailoring. Ishvar and Omprakash Darji sew clothes for lower wages. Though they support Dina's sales, she does not give any unwanted importance to them and takes care not to allow them to know about her marketing suppliers. The exploitation of Dina does not have any violence, but it is manipulative which is sophisticated. Dina is affectionate and kind to her tailors. She is tactful in extracting work from them. She exhibits concern and attention when Omprakash has pain in his arm. Having gained confident through her financial freedom, she denies her brother's suggestion of her getting remarried. Nusswan's words. -Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the enlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with him|| (63-64) for which she replies, — I can always go to the Towers of silence and let the vultures eat me up, if that will make you happy|| (64). Takhar Jennifer observes Dina as a new woman who proves to be extremely independent-minded and smart, -[...] Dina manages to go on living or rather surviving without having to depend on her brother's reluctant charity. Each day is a permanent struggle against Daab - Chaab's lusty fingers, her despotic brother and against the ghost of Rustom which haunts her|| (2020).

Conclusion

The paradox of the novel is that the bad is rewarded and good is punished. Towards the climax, Thakur Dharmasi enters politics by becoming in charge of organizing family planning operations. He is expected to become a Minister very soon. Ashraf Darji is heavily injured by police atrocities and almost lies dead on the road. Young Om Prakash who is hardly twenty years old, gets forcibly castrated. Ishwar Darji turns to be legless beggar because his legs get amputated on account of infection. With no other alternative left, Dina goes to her brother Nusswan to lead rest of her life. If the reader tries to analyze the suitability of the title, the novel speaks about the imbalances of life. The other version of observation is to balance life despite the disturbances caused. Brooke Allen observes the climax of the novel as, -What makes the final pages of *A Fine Balance* heart-breaking is not that we see the protagonists' lives so hideously diminished but that in spite of it all they are still laughing (2002). Dina makes a quilt from the multi-colored patches of fabric left over from her sewing business. The quilt symbolizes the factor that life must be balanced despite the mishaps and disappointments. Mistry's dictum of balancing lives despite exploitations sways between joys and sorrows. *A Fine Balance* is a courageous spirit of Dina, Narayan, Ishwar and Om Prakash whose attempts at survival become the microcosm of all the poor in India

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