

Quest for Identity in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Vijayalakshmi. M.

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Courtesy: <https://pencanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Rohinton-Mistryred7.jpg>

Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's novels reflect interest in the importance of personal and cultural identity. It is obvious that Mistry has well depicted his deep attachment and nostalgia for his homeland. The social and cultural nostalgia helped him to create a sense of loss. He recognizes the consequence of religion and rite in the construction of human identity. Mistry's fiction can be read within this framework as the quandary of an individual as he/she seeks to cope with the contradictions of the past and the present, community and self, family, and community. The novels, *A Fine Balance* throw light on the dwindling Parsi community in India to which Mistry himself belongs and is well informed of their lifestyles, customs and traditions. *A Fine Balance* is a richly woven novel interweaving the slums of Bombay with the middle-class Parsi lifestyle. Dina, the protagonist, fights for her independence and individuality but she faces the continuous failures and threats by the society. Finally she loses her flat and forced to go to her brother's home as a servant. The novel also illustrates the deeper insight of political, nativity and struggle of suffering people. It focuses on the deep structure of the individual's existences of human life. *A Fine Balance* is taken up for analyzing the human sufferings in which Rohinton Mistry ultimately gives a space of endless sufferings of the individuals.

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Key words: Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance*, Parsi lifestyle, Dina, the protagonist, political issues of suffering people.

Identity Crisis

Identity crisis or a quest for identity is basic to the human world. It is innate in every man. So search for identity is an archetypal and a universal motif in literature of all ages. One of the traits that distinguish man from other forms of life is his quest for the meaning of life, the passion to understand the mystique of universe, a desire to acquire a comprehensive vision of reality.

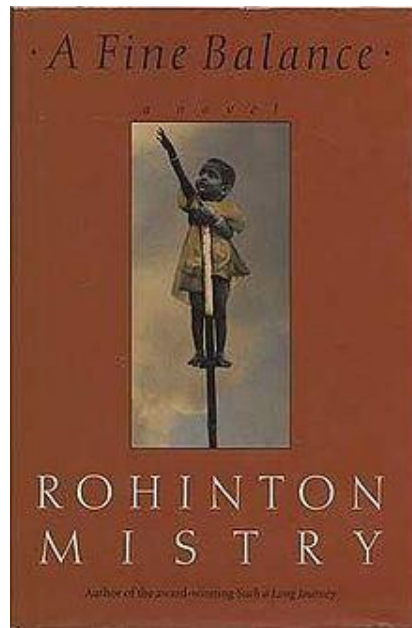
Rohinton Mistry's Novels

Rohinton Mistry's novels deal with all the problems which a normal person faces in his or her life. A humanistic approach is a non- technical approach. It is holistic in nature. It considers the need for self-reflectiveness and self-actualization. It is a concern to growth. The humanistic approach paves the way for people to step into their own potential, through active engagement with their own journey of growth. It recognizes the spiritual nature of human beings and works to help people integrate all levels of their experience: body, thoughts feelings, spirit, and soul.

Rohinton Mistry's Characters

Rohinton Mistry's characters grow in self-knowledge and fight against an aggressive social environment to create a new world and freedom. His protagonists are young and middle age people. His novels deal with the major Indian social problems and imbalances of Indian society where the protagonists themselves are the downtrodden and the underdogs.

A Fine Balance



A Fine Balance is a powerful novel that has been compared to the works of Tolstoy and Dickens. It is a rich study of a difficult time in India's history, featuring complex and flawed characters. *A Fine Balance* is about man's inhumanity to man and the indomitableness of the human spirit. Indeed, Mistry's celebration of courage, generosity, self sacrifice and hope in the face of pervasive misery creates a moving testament. Set against a thoroughly Indian background, it combines Dickens's vivid sympathy for the poor with Solzhenitsyn's controlled outrage, celebrating both the resilience of the human spirit and the searing heartbreak of failed dreams.

The novel is all about the importance of maintaining a fine balance in our lives by striking the right cord. There is a constant need to keep working at the wheels of life. Every character herein faces a number of obstacles in the course of life. Life for them is never smooth sailing. Some hurdles are nature sent whereas the others are man-made. All of them struggle very hard. Some of them successfully maintain a fine balance; and the others not being able to do so, bow down to the forces of fate. Fate comes in different guises before which man is helpless.

The Oppressed and the Oppressor

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The novels myriad characters are grouped as the oppressed and the oppressor. The oppressed suffer in silence and those who dare to counter act are reduced to the state of a mere nothingness. An unchallengeable feature of Mistry's humanism in *A Fine Balance* is the theme of condemnation of struggle for peace. Ambition and dreams of his protagonists are tied with hope and despair about the life of the modern world. Mistry shows the basic ambivalence of common men, as a realist and humanist through his works:

You cannot draw lines and compartments, and refuse to budge beyond them. Sometimes you have to use your failures as stepping-stones to success. You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair ...In the end, it's all a question of balance. (FB 231)

Main Characters are from the Parsi Community

Rohinton Mistry shows the sufferings of poor characters from the Parsi community and atrocities of two untouchables from the village in *A Fine Balance*. He uses four main characters- a woman and three men. Each of the four protagonists has own story. The four main characters converge in Dina's apartment as refugees from contracting caste, gender, or social roles. They each live in an unimportant position in the context of India. They are transferred by the community and try to centre their own individuality. The apartment is viewed as the worldly site of individuals in a troublesome society. Their life in Bombay is contrary to their expectations and symbolizes the anguish, pain, anxiety and restlessness of people cut off from their native villages. The novel is about sufferings and pain of the poorest people. From this way, *A Fine Balance* is the story of the heroic struggles and hideous misfortunes that is based on physical, psychological and social sufferings.

Three Major Themes

The novel is a wonderful presentation of three major themes. It blends political history with the personal life of the individuals. The first is the life of middle class and urban world, Dina Dalal. She is a pretty widow in her forties who is struggling hard to lead an independent life. Second, there is another world symbolized by Maneck Kohlah, a sensitive Parsi boy. He feels life a great burden to lead and lift. The last, the novel focuses another sight into rural India provided by Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash who struggles to exist in this world.

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Search for Identity

The search for identity is processed by a team of four major characters from different background mingle with each other as a joint force, they want to prove their self-identity in the society. Dina Dalal, the protagonist of the novel suffers at her younger age of the death of her parents in succession. She is guarded by her brother who wants to protect her as a bird in a cage. By nature, Dina is a lover of humour and independent existence. She cannot find comfort in her brother's custody. She is forced to marry a rich gentleman but she prefers to marry a compounder namely Rustom Dalal. Before being settled in her marriage life, Dina loses her husband in an accident. The Emergency of 1975 shatters all her hopes and she is pushed again to her brother's concern. Thus Dina's identity fades away in the society as an independent woman.

Dina Fights for Her Independence

Dina fights for her independence and individuality but she faces the continuous failures and threats by society. Finally she loses her flat and forced to her brother's home as a servant. At this stage the feminist may argue that by creating the event of Dina Dalal's coming back to her brother's house, Mistry does some injustice to her. It shows that it is difficult for a woman to live independently without any sort of male-protection. Even Beggarmaster's protection helped her to live safely for a few more years. But here the fact is that Dina Dalal, like other three protagonists, is disturbed considerably because of the prevailing political situation, National Emergency proclaimed by the Government of India. That is why she loses her freedom.

After Mrs. Shoroff's death, despite of her keen desire to pursue her education, Dina is not allowed even to matriculate. Nusswan, her brother, tries to impose his will on and suggests to her that she could marry a person of his choice, but Dina protests and asserts her individuality. She marries Rustom Dalal, whom she loves intensely. Dina is the symbol of the "new woman" who refuses to be acquiescent and submissive and does not accept the stereotypical feminine role assigned to her. Even on that cruel night, when her husband dies, she behaves 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." (FB 46)

Construction New Lives

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Dina Dalal, Ishvar and Omprakash Darji and Maneck Kohlah, a young student, are painfully constructing new lives which become entwined in circumstances which no one could have foreseen. At first, Dina and her tailor, Om, are apprehensive about each other's concerns. Om tries to spy on Dina in order to find out the export company so that he can directly contact them and get orders. As the novel advances, circumstances conspire to deny them their modest aspirations. They all discover that there are other forces at play larger than their individual self. Each faces irrevocable damages.

Dukhi Mochi is Omprakash's grandfather, a lower caste *chamaar*. He decides to send his sons, Ishvar and Narayan to city for their better future. When they grow up in the city, Ishvar stays in town as Ashraf's assistant in tailoring shop, Narayan comes back to the village who becomes successful in his life. On the Election Day, Narayan goes to the polling booth and tries to register a genuine vote. He fights against the Thakur Dharamsi the local Don for the rights of low class people. But Thakur's men beat Narayan and took him to Thakur's farm. There, Narayan and two companions are tortured and hanged by them. Other untouchables are beaten and their women are raped. At the end, Narayan's entire family is murdered by Thakur. From these causes, Ishvar and Om decide to migrate to Bombay. Ishvar's and Omprakash's life in the village describe terrible poverty, public disturbance and caste violence.

Dina chooses to leave her home, because she wants to assert her individuality and sense of self. She has grown up in Bombay, but her sense of independence after her husband's accidental death keeps her away from her family. She resolves to restructure her life without being economically dependent on a man. For her, life is a series of emotional upheavals and relocations of emotional bonds. Emergency made both Dina and Maneck fail in their attempt. In the name of poverty alleviation and civic beautification, beggars are carried away and made to be slaves in labour camps. Dina Dalal's new family creates an idyllic space where different cultures mingle and people of different classes transgress sanctioned spaces in symbiotic equations.

Rebuilding Her Life

Dina refuses to buckle under pressure and resolves to rebuild her life without being economically dependent on a man. Dina Dalal, whose fortunes the readers follow in the first part

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of the book, hopes to live as an independent woman after her husband's early death, managing a small tailoring business and maintaining her own apartment. She fetches two tailors, Ishvar and Om and starts working for Au Revoir Exports. She embodies the woman who is far ahead of her times, she is completely independent and free thinking. Greedy landlords, a mean and ignoble brother who never cared for her because of his hypocritical ideals and only bullied and used her, and sheer misfortune robs her of this modest dream after years of struggle. After the early demise of her husband, Dina tries to regain her foothold on life but indeed, the road towards independence and self-reliance proves bumpy and full of obstructions.

Impact of National Emergency

Dina emerges as an independent dressmaker with the tailors. In the beginning, Om and Ishvar are not close with Dina. They doubt her and even try to get the direct orders from the companies, because they feel that they are over controlled by Dina. Both tailors find difficult to adjust themselves with the life in metropolitan city. They find no identity with their village and city dwellings. They stay in a small shack in the slum but are chased from there because of the city beautification project. Left alone on the street, they search for accommodation, even their employer Dina refuses them to stay in her house. Besides, they are crushed in the worst outcomes of the Emergency; Om, who is yet to marry, is sterilized to be impotent. In the act of preventing Om from sterilization, Ishvar loses both his legs and left in the street as beggar. The life of these two tailors is also lost with no identity. The loss of identity in Maneck's case is full of ecological concerns. Maneck and his family live by a hillside and nature is one of their family members. Farokh's long walks during evening times give him mental comfort forgetting his tensions. The fall and the forest are their companions.

A Journey of Self-Discovery

Maneck represents the young hero who is on a journey of self-discovery, whereas Ishwar and Omprakash - the two tailors, uncle and nephew, represent the hard working lower class who always strive for better. They struggle to come out of their abysmal conditions as untouchables in their village and come to town and work for Dina. They hope that their fortunes will change in the city and they will be able to lead a decent and comfortable life. Ishwar hopes that some day he would be able to find a good match for his nephew Om and dares to hold out for it. The

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misfortunes that later fall on them are unbelievably dreadful. Dina is forced to make Ishwar and Om spend several nights on the streets as they were illegally living in her apartment. On one of these nights, the two men get rounded up with the other street dwellers and taken to a work camp far outside the city. Trouble emanates when they have no way of telling Dina about their whereabouts. They eventually come back to the city only to leave again for their village when Ishwar decides that Om needs a wife. Their misfortunes do not stop following them even in their village.

Dramatic Events

Mistry leads up to the dramatic events in their village described with loads of fore shadowing and short diction and sentences. What finally happens to Ishwar and Om is utterly devastating. Misuse of power and emergency collapse their lives. Now, Ishwar and Om return to the city once again as beggars. Ishwar ends up legless on a trolley and Om is castrated; a victim of sterilization targets on the eve of his wedding. Maneck, finds himself in extreme despair and ends up throwing himself under a train when he hears what has happened to his friends.

Shankar, the Beggar

The happiest person in the novel is a beggar called Shankar, nicknamed Worm, whose legs and fingers were chopped off soon after birth-he has nothing much to lose and scoots about on a little trolley, wise-cracking and helping people. Everybody else has hopes, and is therefore vulnerable. It is clear in the novel that the political situation of the nation is responsible for the sufferings of the common man. The characters of the novel pay a heavy price for their simplicity and their lack of understanding of the national politics during the time of Emergency.

About Political Injuries and Domination of Land Lords

The novel is mainly rooted with beautification, sterilization, state-of-emergency, political injuries and domination of land lords. Its protagonists - Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow in Bombay, Ishwar and Omprakash, two village tailors from low caste as labourers and Maneck Kohlah, the college-student as paying guest of Dina. They all become victims of the turbulence caused by the

state of emergency. Their attempts at survival become the microcosm for all the suffering people in India. They are also suffering quite a lot to get an identity in their society.

Impact of Economic Development

The fourth main protagonist, Maneck suffers the loss of his beloved foothill Himalayan town, which has been sacrificed to the altar of Economic Development. In the name of bringing modernization, roads were built, that polluted the town and ruined the serene and lush environment. The coming of multinational firms meant shutting of shop for successful, yet small, business like that of Maneck's father's Cola Company. Maneck's every loss is a loss for the Indian middle class, whose morality, hopes and desires, he embodies. His death at the end of the novel is shocking but insightful of the losses that the Indian middle class has borne and still continues to suffer.

Riots against Sikhs

There is another shock that awaits Maneck before his death. When he comes back to India in 1984, for his father's funeral, he is witness to mob violence and arson against Sikhs in New Delhi, as Indira Gandhi has been murdered by her Sikh bodyguards. He picks up old newspaper at home to find it rife with attacks against Indira over human rights violations and other misconducts during the Emergency. But these attacks are short-lived and Indira Gandhi is duly exonerated as she is re-elected Prime Minister in 1980, after having lost the democratic elections called in 1977, right after the emergency. It was in these old papers that Maneck found news about Avinash, his idealistic activist friend who had gone missing during the Emergency.

Avinash was tortured and killed in police custody for anti-Emergency and anti-Indira slogans and demonstrations. Such was the situation during the Emergency that along with all civil liberties the fundamental rights were taken away from the common man. The police had become an ally in the Governments depressing record of human rights abuse. Those entrusted with the protection of the poor had become their worst enemies! This sad story doesn't end here; Avinash was the only son of a poor retired government employee. With three sisters, Avinash was entrusted with earning enough money to pay dowry for all his three sisters. Avinash's death, forced his three sisters to commit suicide and save their father from the financial hardship as well

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as social stigma of not being able to provide dowry for his daughters. This is the psychological trauma that Avinash's old parents have to go through. This is just one story out of the many ghastly tales that Mistry brings to the readers.

Maneck has a peaceful education in a hill-station, then he is sent to the ruthless city by his parents for his higher study. He is continuously humiliated by his seniors in the college. He learns and suffers more from the society at different ways and levels. It affects his mind severely and forced him to commit suicide on the train tracks. Emergency made both Dina and Maneck fail in their attempts to survive of their life.

Backgrounds of Protagonists and National Events

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry highlights crucial events in the country's chronicle by the background of each protagonist. The tailors and their forefathers' life reflect the cruelty of the caste system in rural India where unbelievable horrors are committed on the lower caste. Poverty drives the untouchables to depend upon the higher caste people to feed their family. For example, The Thakur obtains cheap labour from the lower caste villagers. When the workers demand their due wages, they are threatened with violence.

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." (FB 95) This incident is not a socially and morally acceptable one. The untouchables lose their identities as human beings because of mistaken beliefs for them. "lot of duplication in our country's laws,... For politicians, passing laws is like passing water... it all ends down the drain." (FB 143)

On the other hand, the untouchable children are very eager to learn like the upper caste children. But they are punished brutally beaten up by the teacher. This kind of bold insults show the suppressed and oppressed people's mental aggression towards the upper caste. This is also the message that Mistry's Thakur Dharamsi wished to send to the Untouchable Chamar families who had sought democratic equality in defiance of caste hierarchy. What the readers see here is a conflict between the terms of nationhood and those of caste stratification, which have their roots

in Hinduism. The casualty in the conflict is the principle of democracy upon which equality of citizenship depends.

Violence against People

In this novel, violence against the body takes its most radical form in the compulsory sterilisations. Ishvar and Om are captured and sterilised by the landlord who is also responsible for the torture and murder of their family. Om is castrated on an impulse of the Thakur, while Ishvar suffers the fate of many victims. Ishvar wounds turn septic, then gangrenous and eventually his legs are removed. There is a sense in which the evils of this society are historically connoted on physical violence that its wounds self-inflicted.

To Conclude

A Fine Balance is an absorbing and moving text about life of common, vulnerable people who scuttle about on this globe and whose lives are caught in the vicious cycle of poverty. The novel depicts the picture of the present-day India, shows the sufferings of the outcasts and innocents trying to survive in a cruel and hostile world and grapples with the question of how to live in the face of death and despair. The poor who are the main characters in this novel are also maimed, mutilated, poisoned, homeless and hopeless. He proposes a world in which nothing can really change or improve the condition of the poor and the deprived. The society is a place only for the rich, the corrupt, the oppressive and the unscrupulous. They keep growing luxuriantly. Mistry concludes the novel on the intriguing note that no matter how much the lower and deprived class struggles it will always find it difficult well nigh impossible to break the very shackles of poverty. It will be suppressed, driven into extreme survival struggle by the fraudulent and the malicious system.

Rohinton Mistry, in *A Fine Balance* pasteurizes sufferings of bottom of the society. Low class people are humiliated by the upper class people. No one is ready to show any mercy on the humanitarian grounds. Thus, Rohinton Mistry expresses their personal feelings over suffering heroes. The government's plan to connect the hills to the city is a great blow to the Kohlah's family and the other villagers do not feel too much as they expect more job opportunities in the city side. Farokh sends Maneck for higher studies to Bombay giving him Dina's address. Like

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the tailors, Maneck also does not like the life in the city. Moreover, he is tortured by the seniors in the college hostel. Then he comes to stay as a paying guest in Dina's house. There he develops friendship with the tailors. Dina resists the relationship of Maneck with the tailors. So, *A Fine Balance* is a novel which searches for identity in various aspects.

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Vijayalakshmi. M
 Assistant Professor
 Government Arts and Science College
 Sivakasi - 626124
 Tamilnadu
 India
Rvgfamily17@gmail.com