

Depiction of Slum Life in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry has become one of the pre-eminent writers of the post-colonialist writing movement. Although he now lives in Toronto, he sets his novels primarily in his native Bombay, combining a natural, direct style with simple description to present an honest and loving image of India. With attention to the detail of his characters' everyday lives, his books often explore the tragic circumstances of India's desperate poor even as he balances this misery by presenting the dignity and joy, they feel in simple pleasures and their extended families. Caste system has been a glaring, tragic fact of life ever since *Manu Smriti* divided the society into four castes—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Although condemned for oppressing and exploiting the lower caste, especially Shudras, the system has been justified as sanctioned by the scriptures by interested parties in spite of several social reform movements initiated in the twentieth century by Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar, who worked for social equality all through their lives. Abolition of untouchability and ending discrimination on the basis of caste is a fundamental principle of the Indian Constitution, yet we find that it is still being practiced in various parts of the country, especially in rural areas. The main action of the novel, *A Fine Balance* is centered on the relationships between Dina Dalai, a middle-aged Parsi widow struggling to maintain her independence, Maneck Kohlah, the young Parsi student whom she takes in as a boarder, and Ishvar and Omprakash Daqi, two Hindu tailors whom Dina employs to work out of her apartment. The novel chronicles their individual stories while developing the narrative of their lives together during a tumultuous period in modern Indian history.

Key Words: Post-colonialism, Slum, untouchability, manipulation, Parsi community

Introduction

Indian English Literature in English originated as a necessary outcome of the introduction of English education in India under colonial rule. By Indian English Writing, we

mean that body of literature which is written by Indians in English. It could be in the form of poetry, prose, fiction or drama. It is now recognized that Indian English literature is not only part of commonwealth literature, but also occupies a great importance in the world literature. Among the twentieth century writers Rohinton Mistry has become one of the pre-eminent writers of the post-colonialist writing movement. Although he now lives in Toronto, he sets his novels primarily in his native Bombay, combining a natural, direct style with simple description to present an honest and loving image of India. With attention to the detail of his characters' everyday lives, his books often explore the tragic circumstances of India's desperate poor even as he balances this misery by presenting the dignity and joy they feel in simple pleasures and their extended families. Critics have praised Mistry's growth as a writer and his transparent style, commonly drawing comparisons to Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, and Thomas Hardy.

As a Parsi, Rohinton Mistry is part of a dwindling community of less than 1, 25, 000 people worldwide, most of who are concentrated around Bombay. Parsis are descended from the religious followers of Zoroastrianism who fled from what is now Iran to avoid forced conversion to Islam. While India offers them a safe haven, present day Parsis are subject to marginalization as well as widely-held stereotypes, both positive and negative. Closely knit as a community, Parsis are often treated as a little-understood and foreign presence by the Hindu-dominated nation of India. Mistry grew up in this charged atmosphere in a Parsi area of Bombay. Mistry is an author belonging to Parsi community of Indian origin residing in Canada. He migrated to Canada in his early twenties as he wanted to become a Pop singer. He has confessed it even in various interviews that he migrated because it seems to be the fashion at his times. Youngsters of his generation used to migrate for better education, better career prospectus and other opportunities. Mistry is one writer who basically deals with the themes of Immigration but has also experimented with the various Indian languages. In all his fiction the pain and grief of leaving his motherland can be easily observed. In fact, being away from India for quite a longer period doesn't affect his memories and his emotions towards his birthplace. We can find a strong influence of Indianness in his novels. His fictional world is characterized by a sense of crisis of identity, nostalgic memories and a sense of alienation. He marks a definite departure from the general run of Indian English novelist in many ways. His novels concern more of human problems than issues arising out of regional loyalties. His character steps out of themselves and question not only the

atmosphere which impinges on their consciousness but their own self-indulgent attitude keeping them away from facing the truth. His criticism of the political, the civilized and the mean world is not guided by a sentimental extolling of Indian philosophy and value of life by a genuine faith in the reliability of the primitive value of sensuousness, passion and action. Nilufer Bharucha remarks:

Rohinton Mistry's texts are at the macro level splendid celebrations of Indian English while at the macro level they faithfully capture the rhythms of the Parsi Gujarati idiom. Unlike earlier Indian English writers, Mistry does not use Indian English to merely create a comic effect. He uses it consistently and naturally and thereby conveys its present status as one of the several Indian languages with its own distinctive phonetic and syntactic feature – a part of the phenomenon of global 'englishes'. This is a postcolonial mode of resistance offered by other contemporary writers too – like Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, Upmanyu Chatterjee and Bapsi Sidhwa among many others. (34)

Indeed, *Such a Long Journey* demonstrates manipulative nature of language, and how truth and reality can often be very different from what it appears. Even Mistry has beautifully used various names to produce an element of interest in his fiction. Like former Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi has never been addressed with her name in the entire novel *Such a Long Journey*; she has always been addressed as the "Prime Minister". Mistry has used native terminology so the Indian readers can correlate with his fiction as well as to create a sense of satisfaction. In the words of Charu Chandra:

While exposing the political corruption at the national level through third person narrative of newspaper reporting is Mistry's typical mode of resistance, it is more pungent when he attacks bloody minded super power like USA for their international domination. (56)

He is magical in depicting situations with realism and down-to-earth worldliness. Mistry has a knack for painting the insignificant into significant, giving adequate word visuals for gestures, facial expressions and nuances of behavior making the depiction vivid and effective as in case of the Violinist Daisy, the way she plays her violin the description is beautiful.

A Fine Balance

The main action of the novel is centered on the relationships between Dina Dalai, a middle-aged Parsi widow struggling to maintain her independence, Maneck Kohlah, the young Parsi student whom she takes in as a boarder, and Ishvar and Omprakash Daqi, two Hindu tailors whom Dina employs to work out of her apartment. The novel chronicles their individual stories while developing the narrative of their lives together during a tumultuous period in modern Indian history.

The story of Dina Dalai is primarily that of overcoming the barriers of prejudice. The exigencies of Dina's straightened financial circumstances mean that she has to open up her apartment, and her life, to strangers. As the story progresses, she learns that her prejudice is a barrier that she has erected to protect herself from the outside world rather like the wall in *Such a Long Journey*; she also discovers that her self-imposed emotional isolation can be stagnating and suffocating. Eventually, she comes to understand that it is the process of learning to open herself up to new people and to new experiences, and to adapt to changing circumstances, that will sustain her.

The story of Maneck Kohlah and his family traces the micro-level impact of Partition. Mistry's novel shows how when India and Pakistan separated in 1947, the drawing of a line by government officials affected the lives of individuals and families. Maneck's story portrays the tension between his father, who is averse to change, and Maneck, who cannot understand his father's inability or unwillingness to change.

Caste system

Caste system has been a glaring, tragic fact of life ever since *Manu Smriti* divided the society into four castes—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Although condemned for oppressing and exploiting the lower caste, especially Shudras, the system has been justified as sanctioned by the scriptures by interested parties in spite of several social reform movements initiated in the twentieth century by Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar, who worked for social equality all through their lives. Abolition of untouchability and ending discrimination on the basis of caste is a fundamental principle of the Indian Constitution, yet we find that it is still being practised in various parts of the country, especially in rural areas. It is to escape such gross discrimination that Dukhi Mochi sends his sons to his friend Ashraf in the town, so that they change their ancestral trade and become tailors, although he is ridiculed and criticized for his decision.

Dukhi's Adversity

Dukhi belongs to the lowest Chamaar caste in the village. The Chamaars' livelihood depends on the death of a cow or buffalo in the village, their job being to remove the carcass, which is sometimes given free or has to be paid for, depending on whether or not the upper-caste owner had been able to extract enough free labour from the Chamaars during the year. The Chamaars skin the carcass, eat the meat, and tan the hide which is turned into sandals, whips, harnesses and water skins. Every leather-worker stink.

Dukhi learns the ancestral profession at the age of five and the odour of dead animals lingers on his body. The Chamaars live in a small, secluded downstream corner of this village by a river—away from the Brahmins and landowners, who treat them worse than filth or scum of the earth. Anyone accused of or caught stealing, like Bhola, has his left-hand fingers chopped off, but he is considered lucky because he doesn't like Chhagan, lose his hand at the wrist. They keep their ears to the ground for a dying or dead animal in the village and help one another in removing the carcass and skinning it. They live from hand to mouth and are made to slave for free for the upper castes; their women are molested and raped; they are mercilessly beaten for the most trivial offences, and made to toe the line dividing them from the upper castes.

Their living conditions force them to steal as does Dukhi's wife Roopa. She gets up very early in the morning and goes around stealing milk from cows in order to feed her sons Narayan and Ishvar. She takes only a little from each cow so that the owner would not sense a decrease in the yield. Dukhi knows about it; his only fear is that she is not caught in the act. Once when she is caught stealing oranges from an orchard, she is raped by the watchman on duty who threatens to get her arrested by shouting and then much harder punishment would be in store for her. She returns home and behaves as if nothing has happened. Dukhi says nothing, and they eat the oranges.

The upper castes feel jealous of the Chamaar couple having two sons and aspersions are cast whether the sons are really Dukhi's. The Pandits advise a more stringent observation of the dharmic order in the Darkness of Kaliyug. As a result,

the village saw a sharp increase in the number of floggings meted out to members of the untouchable castes, as the Thakurs and Pandits tried to whip the world into shape. The crimes were varied and imaginative: a Bhunghi had dared to let his unclean eyes meet Brahmin eyes; a Chamaar Had walked on the wrong side of the temple road and defiled it; another had strayed near a puja that was in progress and allowed his undeserving ears to overhear the sacred shlokas; a Bhunghi child has not erased her

footprints cleanly from the dust in a Thakur's courtyard after finishing her duties there—her plea that her broom was worn thin was unacceptable. (FB 101)

To top it all, Dukhi has to mind the Thakur's cattle in exchange of milk for Narayan and Ishvar, but when the herd strays into neighbour's property, he gets a thrashing instead. The Chamaars talk about their exploitation by the upper castes among themselves but can't do anything except to abuse the Brahmins and Thakurs behind their back. They call the upper-caste landowners bastards, hypocrite, High-Class Shit who is vegetarian in public, meat-eaters in private. But they can do nothing besides.

Dukhi starts training Narayan and Ishvar for their ancestral trade from an early age. But when a dying buffalo's horn pierces young Ishvar's left cheek and the child collapses, Dukhi is worried. The buffalo's horn leaves a permanent gash on his son's cheek; he now smiles with half his face.

Working hard for Thakur Premji, Dukhi happens to break the heavy mortar while trying to powder a sack of red chilies. Though he is hit hard on his foot and it is bleeding, the Thakur hits him with a stick, orders him to get out of his house and doesn't pay him for the work done. Dukhi hobbles home, cursing the Thakur and his progeny. He then moves to a nearby town and starts working as a cobbler on a street corner, where he meets and befriends Ashraf, a tailor. In those heady days of independence, there is lot of talk regarding eradication of social inequalities but nothing is done in practice. In the village his sons are not even allowed to enter the school. When they try to sneak in during recess, they are publicly beaten by the teacher and humiliated. The village pundit Lailluram tries to justify the teacher's action; he only gives Dukhi an ointment to apply on his sons' backs to lessen the pain of caning. Dukhi has to hear a long and tedious lecture on the caste system and how one must perform one's duty as lay down in the scriptures. He throws away the ointment the Pandit gave him as it looks like boot polish. It is then that Dukhi makes up his mind to send his sons to Ashraf in town to be apprenticed to him as tailors. Ashraf receives Narayan and Ishvar, warmly and affectionately.

Local musicians refuse to play at Narayan's wedding at the behest of the upper castes and musicians from the town are brought in at the last minute. Narayan and Radha have a son Om. But people in the village have not forgiven Dukhi for making his sons a trade other than leather-working. Dukhi and his wife are overjoyed when the sons present them with a newly-stitched vest and a choli, respectively. Roopa folds both articles, wraps them in sacking,

secures the parcel with a string and hangs it from the roof of the hut, safe from floodwater and rodents.

Untouchables

The advent of freedom makes no difference to the attitude of the Brahmins and Thakurs with regard to their less fortunate brethren. When, in time, Narayan sets up his tailoring shop in the village, he has no customers. The untouchables are closer to Muslims because they are certain that the Muslims have behaved more like our brothers than the bastard Brahmins and Thakurs.

Narayan's son Om now works with his uncle Ishvar as Ashraf Chacha's apprentice as Narayan's business picks up in the village. Later he builds his own hut. The happy news spreads within their community, and outside it.

Among the upper castes, there is still anger and resentment because of what a Chamaar had accomplished. One man in particular Thakur Dharams ... "There is a dead cow waiting for you," he notified Narayan through a servant. Narayan merely passed on the message to other Chamars, who were happy to have the carcass. (FB, 134)

Narayan is looked upon as their unofficial leader by the Chamaars of the village. This riles Thakur Dharamsi no end. He lines up everyone in the village on Election Day outside the booth, has their fingers inked and sends them home. Later, he collects the ballot papers and gets them stamped in favour of the highest bidder. Narayan resents it, but Dukhi advises him to keep quiet as one man or one community's stamping ballot papers in favour of a particular party is not going to change the system at all.

At the next election, however, Narayan wants to stamp his own ballot paper and two others in the line join him. Thakur Dharamsi arrives on the scene with his men. Narayan and his two companions are seized and taken to the Thakur's farm, where they are tortured to death. The election process continues as usual. In the evening, Dukhi and his family are burnt alive in their hut. Only Ishvar and Om escape the carnage as they are away in town with Ashraf Chacha.

The young Om simmers with rage when the two return to the village for the last rites of the family. The police merely register a case, with the sub-inspector refusing to note down details in the First Information Report: "What kind of rascality is this? Trying to fill up the F.I.R. with lies? You filthy achhoot castes are always out to make trouble! Get out before we

charge you with public mischief!” (FB 148) When Ashraf Chacha tries to intervene, he is told off rudely: “This matter doesn’t concern your community. We don’t interfere when you Muslims and your mullahs discuss problems in your community, do we?” (FB 148). This is definitely conveyed to Thakur Dharamsi by the sub-inspector. He must now be regretting messing the chance of burning alive Om and Ishvar with the rest of the family.

Family Planning

Form a local thug, Thakur Dharamsi becomes leader of the ruling party during the Emergency days. He is put in charge of the district family planning programme, pocketing all the incentive money and auctioning the victims herded by his men for vasectomy and tubectomy to the highest bidders, for all government servants are to provide at least two volunteers for the family planning programme otherwise they won't get their salaries. This is when Ishvar and Om arrive there from the city. Ishvar wants to select a suitable bride for the eighteen-year-old Om and fulfill his responsibility as a responsible parent, even though Om is in no hurry to get married.

Ashraf Chacha has lined up four brides-to-be for Om from the Chamaar community. The three are in a celebratory mood. One evening as Thakur Dharamsi emerges from the family planning centre, Om strides defiantly towards him on a collision course, but Ishvar pulls him back. Om spits his paan on the ground and the arc of red ending several feet short of the Thakur who stops and immediately recognises Om and says very softly, I know who you are.

Thakur takes his revenge when both Ishvar and Om are rounded up and forcibly sterilised at the filthy family planning camp, with overworked doctors and dirty equipment. What is worse, Om is castrated. This shatters Ishvar; it ruins his world; all his dreams come to naught. Later, Ishvar’s legs have to be amputated because of the faulty vasectomy operation. The uncle-nephew duo returns to the city as beggars, with Om pulling Ishvar seated on a moving platform with wheels. Nobody recognises the erstwhile tailors. Only Dina Dalai remains their benefactor. Their caste has ruined their lives, with the powerful demon Thakur Dharamsi appearing as the villain—first as an upper-caste landowner and then as in charge of family planning operations in the district.

Slums are an integral part of all cities; they are called eyesores of a metropolis. Dharavi, on the outskirts of Mumbai, is the biggest slum in Asia. Rohinton Mistry has realistically and graphically portrayed life in a slum in ‘Small Obstacles’ and other sections of his novel, *A Fine Balance*, though we get a foretaste of a slum when the train carrying

Ishvar and Om and Maneck Kohlah enters 'City by the Sea'. As the train slows down to a crawl, Maneck's books are knocked out of his hand; they fall on Om and they become acquainted.

Glimpse of City Life

As Om looks out of the window to see where the train has stopped, he sees a row of shacks behind the railway fence, alongside a ditch running with raw sewage. Children are playing a game with sticks and stones, with an excited puppy dancing around them. Nearby, shirtless man is milking a cow. The acrid smell of a dung-fire drifts towards the train. They could have been anywhere.

When they start working for Dina Dalal as tailors, Ishvar and Om move to a regular slum when they hire a shanty from the slum landlord Navalkar. Om hates the place but Ishvar assures him that they are there only for a short while. As soon as they have saved enough money, they would go back to their village. Alas, this never happens. The city sucks them in as it has several thousand others before and after them.

Settling Down

An old woman tells Om about the time of water supply in the slum. Rajaram, a barber-turned-hair collector, helps the tailors settle down by telling them how to squat on the railway lines for defecation in the morning till they memorise the railway timetable better than the station master and adjust their timings accordingly. Rajaram also invites the tailors to eat with them till they are able to cook for themselves. He also directs them to the rations office for obtaining a ration card, which is available for two hundred rupees and which they cannot afford. He also shows a short cut to the railway station which saves them travel time to and from work every day.

The other slum dwellers include drunkards, wife beaters, a juggler as a monkey-man with two half-starved monkeys and a starved mongrel, and the other riff-raff of society. Om wonders how people can live in such sub-human conditions and yet be happy like the singer who belts out cheerful songs in the evening on his harmonium after begging for a livelihood throughout the day in trains.

Originally a barber, Rajaram gave up his profession long ago; he now collects hair from wayside barbers, beauty parlours and saloons, classifies and stores them in his hut, later selling them at a profit. He regrets that the hair business is monopolized by the priests at Tirupati, where thousands of devotees get their hair shaved every day, the output being a huge

hill of hair which is sold to the export companies for making wigs abroad. Om shares Rajaram's fascination for long, lustrous hair, the demand for which is endless, but is stopped from making fun of their employer Dina Dalal's beautiful, long hair. Rajaram promises to give the tailors free haircuts if they let him have their hair in exchange. Om becomes enamoured of a young woman Shanti he has seen bathing early in the morning and keeps fantasizing about her.

One day while returning home from work by the short cut suggested by Rajaram, the tailors are rounded up by a posse of policemen along with ticketless travellers and they curse Rajaram but the latter dismisses it as a periodic police raid. Rajaram gives them news of the Prime Minister's enemies having being jailed since the proclamation of Emergency; they include union workers, newspaper people, teachers, students, the jails being full of them.

Living conditions become more difficult and miserable with the onset of monsoons. The roof of the tailors' shack starts leaking; they can hardly sleep. Rajaram helps them again by spreading a plastic sheet over the leaking area. All that he needs a ten-rupee note occasionally to have sex with a woman in his shack; he borrows the money from Ishvar and forgets to return it.

The Monkey-man entertains the crowd one evening after work with the antics of his monkey-couple and the dog. A woman in the slum gives birth to a daughter and Ishvar gifts her piece of chiffon he has slipped in his pocket from the scraps littering Dina's floor. Om remains sullen and unmanageable, both at work and after work.

Rally of the Prime Minister

One early morning, the slum dwellers are forced to board the waiting buses through threats of eviction for a free ride to see their beloved Prime Minister. Rajaram, who has been to such rallies earlier, is cynical, others are disinterested for they fear losing a day's wages, but they have no choice. Everyone is herded into buses and taken on a long trip to the outskirts of the city where the Prime Minister, surrounded by her sycophants, addresses them on the benefits of the Emergency and outlines her Twenty-Point Programme, while her son showers rose petals on the gathering from a hot-air balloon and throws leaflets outlining the measures taken for the amelioration of the lot of the poor and the under-privileged in the country.

When the speeches are over, people rush to the refreshment booths allotted to them for free snacks which soon run short. They are paid four rupees per family instead of the five promised per head as a rupee has been deducted as bus fare. What is worse, the buses drop them halfway to their dwellings and they have to trudge the way back home.

Displacement

But their life in the slum is short: The slum is razed to the ground and its inhabitants are transported to a work camp on an irrigation project. They are engaged there as labourers breaking stones, are paid arbitrary wages, and given sub-standard food. As more people are brought in, several workers are laid off and the wage bill manipulated. Ishvar and Om find their way through the recommendation of a crippled beggar Shankar; they are now under Beggar master's protection and pay him fifty rupees each per week for a year to remain out of trouble.

They now search for a place to sleep at night and manage to bribe a night watchman outside a chemist shop. It is a noisy place but they soon get used to it and the company of beggars, labourers and the other roofless in the city. But one night this shelter too is gone as the police raid the streets and descend on all people sleeping in illegal places at night. This is done in the name of Beautification; Ishvar and Om are shelter less again. It leaves permanent scars on their psyche but that is the lot of all the poor in the City by the Sea.

Ishvar and Om find shelter in Dina Dalal's flat after such horrendous experiences till they decide to go back to their village to select a bride for Om and bring her back to the city. They are aware of the problems facing them but they can't help it. The city, as Rajaram says, sucks them in.

Conclusion

Mistry's fiction reminds readers of the importance of telling stories, both personal and cultural, to remember the past in order to go forward. This may be applied to Mistry himself as an author. Many critics have wondered why Mistry does not write more frequently about living, as an immigrant, in Canada and why Mistry's fiction is so particularly located in India during the post-Independence period. Mistry is telling readers about the past that he is familiar with. Indeed, he prides himself on this familiarity. When he is criticised by Germaine Greer for his "unreasonably cruel depiction of India" Mistry responds by calling her remarks "asinine". He retorts by asking, "[s]he wants to say that those four months [she spent in India] teaching the daughters of high society put her in a better position to judge India than I am in, having grown up there and spent 23 years before emigrating?" (Jam Books). Mistry feels that he has the authority to write about India and that his portrayals are legitimate. He is writing from experience and about his history, his culture and his past.

In an interview, Mistry discusses the importance of remembering the past - which, as discussed, is a central theme in his writing. He states that there is, "...a great difference

between remembering the past which is creative and life enhancing and trying to preserve it which is detrimental and debilitating” (McLay 17). Mistry’s willingness to expand the boundaries of history in order to fictionalize historical event in his writing is an example of a positive form of remembering that is not stagnant. This is closely related to other motifs that run throughout his fiction; namely, the importance of expanding and adapting and of crossing boundaries. As Mistry himself states about the lines that people set up to separate themselves from others, “...lines are artificial and there are stronger forces at work and if such a line is made to persist it will lead to chaos or lead to even more problems” (McLay 17). Ultimately, what is demonstrated to be important is the struggle to live morally and to cross the lines that divide in order to make meaningful associations. The barriers are artificial and impermanent and the challenge for Mistry’s characters is to live morally and to survive life’s journey.

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