

Chapter -4

Representing Life in ‘*A Fine Balance*’

The title of the novel itself is undoubtedly an appealing one and hints at varied things, which need to be understood. As the Title ‘*A Fine Balance*’ suggests, Rohinton Mistry brings all the pictures / perceptions into one frame. The thought – provoking novel by Mistry mingles pain with joy, merges sorrow with laughter, tragedies with comic interventions, and at length despair with Hope. Lives of all Four significant characters’ touch tragedies, sometimes even in an inhuman spirit, but in spite of that, in the last paragraphs of the novel, we witness lines to laugh at! Indeed, such a balance of things! Rohinton Mistry makes one of the chief characters [Maneck Kohlah] speak:

‘Some things are very complicated to separate with scissors, Good and bad are joined like that’ (*A fine Balance*, 361)

In *A Fine Balance*, personal things continue to go ahead, while the national currents / political happenings find details, in the middle. Rohinton Mistry mingles the two, with a mastered hand. The novel is entirely distinguished, in its story-line, growth of the plot and character-sketches so far. Personal lives appear to get mingled / influenced by the national and political happenings. Lives of the protagonists take all turns and twists, along with the flowing currents on the political scene. Everything goes ahead in synchronization with other things, be it Corruption, Caste System, Poverty, Population Explosion and Gender Discrimination.

Rohinton Mistry is stated to be a ‘Writer from Elsewhere’, whose writings reflect and communicate deep compassion for life and human beings. This deep

compassion and painful dimensions of life continues in Mistry's second novel 'A Fine balance'. The lives of four major characters are interwoven who try to overcome their hurdles but fail to maintain the fine balance in their life. It is a conscious effort to embrace more of the social reality of India:-

'Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft arm chairs, you will say to yourself: Perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your won insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But be assured; this tragedy is not fiction. All is true' (A Fine Balance, 24)

He writes about the questions of one's survival and self - worth, going through troublesome family dynamics and difficult social / political constraints. Mistry, an Immigrant himself, born and spent his early twenties in the hustle – bustle of Mumbai, migrated to Canada. Evidently, the pathos of migration and a sense of rootlessness, apparently seems in his writings, and in *A Fine Balance* also! Mistry makes one of the protagonists, Ishwar Darji [who has migrated to the city] 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' (A fine Balance, 103)

Mistry is known to write within a realist framework. He states about the cruel truths of life, harsh happenings and losing identities. He dives deep into the psychological make-up of the characters. He applies his pen beautifully on the influences and effects of socio-political scene upon an individual's life, clearly seen in *A Fine Balance*.

'With great empathy and wit, the Bombay-born, Toronto-based Mistry evokes the daily heroism of India's working poor, who must cope with corruption, social anarchy and bureaucratic absurdities. Though the sprawling, chatty narrative risks

becoming as unwieldy as the lives it so vibrantly depicts, Mistry combines an openness to India's infinite sensory detail with a Dickensian rendering of the effects of poverty, caste, envy, superstition, corruption and bigotry. His vast, wonderfully precise canvas poses, but cannot answer, the riddle of how to transform a corrupt, ailing society into a healthy one' (Publisher Weekly)

Rohinton Mistry, through his works, explores the threads of bond, love and relationships at the heart of his community. He elaborates about the cultural identities and the unique characteristics of his community and people. He appears to throw a light and entirely embrace the syncretic nature of the diasporic Parsi experience whether that be in North America or in India.

Despite living for long in Canada, he feels entangled with his roots of coming from a Parsi family, an endangered community in the Hindu glorifying land of India. Indeed, his pathos of going through 'Double Displacement' find a stark expression in his pieces of writings, so in *A Fine Balance*. It's about land of India, which we find in his Literature so far. Mistry, born in Bombay in 1952, definitely seems to know the 'city of dreams' so well. *A Fine Balance* was published twenty years after he left Bombay, returning only to visit, but Mistry found no difficulty in summoning up the city. He explains,

'When you have grown up in one place and spent the first 23 years of your life there – that's how old I was when I left. It's almost as though you are never going to be removed from that place' (Tweet.org)

It's interesting to know that *A Fine Balance* wasn't thought of, as a long Novel initially, containing approximately 700 pages, but as a short Novel, 'with the image of a woman at a sewing machine' In an interview, Mistry stated,

'As I began writing, though, the story grew and I found myself getting interested in other details of the characters' lives: Dina's life and where she had come from, why the tailors were there and where had they come from, and so on. So, it all

just grew and I was enjoying myself. It seemed to be working as I wrote so I began letting the canvas grow, as it were, letting it expand. I quickly realized that if I continued in this way, it was going to give me a unique chance to tell not just a story set in the city, but also a story about village life. India still lives in its villages (about 70-75 per cent of the population is rural) so this had a particular appeal for me. The novel would give me the chance to write about this student who comes from the North, the foothills of the Himalayas. I had travelled a little bit there, and found myself writing about it. That's how it turned into such a big book' (Tweet.org)

Along with the title, the picture on the cover of the book is supposed to be analyzed and elaborated, for it's a significant 'Symbol', which conveys a deep meaning. This poignant picture draws one's attention and more than that, rises several questions – Which sect of people does the child represent? Why are her feet, tied? Whose is the hand, which plays the controlling role? It portrays a girl child of hardly three or four, standing on a long *bamboo* and somehow maintaining the balance in the air. One hand of the little girl in the picture lies open towards a side. The poor child imparts an expression of anxiety, confusion and longingness, as if she's been waiting for something to happen or calling for help in one or other manner. On the other, there is a hand, which is controlling this long *bamboo*, with the thumb merely! Apparently, the child belongs to an unprivileged background, for her clothes are slightly filthy and added to it, the child's feet are tied to the bamboo, with a piece of cloth. The novel includes an episode itself, where a child is tied in the similar manner, who's dancing and entertaining people around and at length, people ask the *tamasha* – performer to stop it, for its torturing the child, to an intolerable extent. Evidently, the cover picture conveys, much more than a simplified picture. In the picture, someone's hand is making the child stand / dance in such a crucial status, which probably signifies the 'Political Powers' of a country, which in a significant manner,

controls the lives of common public. It symbolizes the pitiable manner; people are destined to go through hardships due to the leaders' policies / actions, but unfortunately, they are chained and hence, bound to get influenced badly. Absolutely, the picture throws a light on the central theme of the Novel – a stark contrast between the two sects, whereas one's controlling, while the other ones are bothered to suffer / suffocate.

In the magnificent Novel, *A Fine Balance*, the setting is 'Bombay' [Mumbai now], though the name isn't clearly mentioned, but it can be sensed evidently, through the mentioned circumstances of the maddening hustle-bustle of the city. The Novel offers a wonderful mixture of hope / despair and pathos / laughter. In the opening scenes of the Novel, the picturesque details of the over-filled local trains of Mumbai are mentioned, with a touch of Wit and Humor. We're introduced to the interesting characters of Maneck Kohla, Ishwar Darji and his nephew Om Prakash Darji, in the very opening pages, where conversations happen, with a touch of Humor,

‘Give the train a dose of opium and it will run like the bullocks’ (A Fine Balance, 4)

The opening scenes elaborate about the struggles of survival, one need to go through, whether it’s about getting an inch to stand in the extremely crowded local train, or to find an opportunity of employment. Through the opening conversations, it’s stated, in an ironic manner, that human lives are of trivial significance, and it puts a question mark upon the fatal haste / hurry, which drags the residents of Mumbai. When the train stops, and it’s hinted that a dead body is found on the track, a passenger asserted, in a candid manner,

‘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?’ (A Fine Balance, 5)

How ironical it is! Instead of pondering about the death of a person, the delay of the train is being discussed about! Unfortunately, in the cruel procedure to survive, sensitivities of human beings have come to an end, and one’s pathos is of no significance, for the other! It asserts beautifully, how the ‘City of Dreams’ teaches one to ‘push’ others in the path and make place for oneself. It explains, how a man from rural regions of India feels, when he reaches in the over-populated city, with hundreds of aspirations and hopes.

It throws a light upon the gripping hands of ‘Mumbai’, which leaves people with no alternative to go for,

‘But sometimes people have no choice. Sometimes the city grabs you, sinks its claws into you, and refuses to let go’ (A Fine Balance, 197)

In a stark contrast to the humored dialogues, the details about imposed

‘**Emergency**’ in the entire country appear into the Novel. The conversations of random people in the train, about the Emergency, expresses about its deep effects on their lives,

‘What Emergency?’

Prime Minister made a speech on the radio early this morning, something about country, being threatened from inside.

Sounds like one more government *tamasha*’ (A Fine Balance, 5)

The first reference of Emergency comes in *A Fine Balance*, when a dead body is found upon the railway track. It’s the same train, in which Ishwar, Om prakash and Maneck are travelling, and thus we come to know about the Emergency, first time though it appears time and again in the Novel.

Here, ‘Emergency’ era of Indira Gandhi plays the role, of the backdrop of the tragic events so far. The Novel exposes the transformations happened in Indian society since independence in 1947, to the Emergency called by so called Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Mistry is generally critical of Gandhi in the book. Gandhi, however, is never referred to by name by any of the characters, and is instead called simply "the Prime Minister". Here, it’s noticeable to know about the crucial period of ‘Emergency’ and its consequences / effects in the entire nation,

‘In India, "the Emergency" refers to a 21-month period from 1975 to 1977 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi unilaterally had a state of emergency declared across the country. Officially issued by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed under Article 352(1) of the Constitution, because of the prevailing "internal disturbance", the Emergency was in effect from 25 June 1975 until its withdrawal on 21 March 1977. The order bestowed upon the Prime Minister the authority to rule by decree, allowing elections to be suspended and civil liberties to be

curbed. For much of the Emergency, most of Gandhi's political opponents were imprisoned and the press was censored. Several other human rights violations were reported from the time, including a forced mass-sterilisation campaign spearheaded by Sanjay Gandhi, the Prime Minister's son. The Emergency is one of the most controversial periods of independent India's history' (wikipedia.org)

As a pure coincidence, Maneck, Ishwar and Om prakash get to know that they all three, entirely new to the 'terrible' city of Mumbai, are looking for one address of Dina Dalal, a Seamstress. A bond amongst the three, though Maneck is a scholar, belongs to a privileged family, while Ishwar and Omprakash are utterly poor. Maneck is a young man, from North of mountains, while Ishwar, with his seventeen-year-old nephew Om prakash has come from a village, in quest of employment. The entire novel revolves around these significant four protagonists [Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohla, Ishwar Darji and Omprakash Darji] where everybody owns a distinguished story to share.

We are introduced to the protagonist **Dina Dalal**, who appears to be a woman of strength, stood on her own, all her life. Dina's father was a Doctor, who passed away in a snake bite and then the family's responsibility shifted to Dina's older brother Nusswan Dalal. . Dina's father death symbolizes the death of idealism. Her brother represents antithesis to his father's character, whereas Dr. Shroff approach was idealist, Nusswan has internalized with a pragmatic approach together with an obsession for authority and control. His sister Dina becomes the victim of his obsession for authority and control.

Dina could never have a great bond with Nusswan and it worsened, as Nusswan considered himself, the Head of the family now. Nusswan wanted young Dina to do household chores, in order to cut down the expenditure of hired help, after Father's demise. Evidently, Dina wasn't an adamant person, but she didn't appear feeble at all. One day, after swallowing last gulp of tea, Nusswan instructed Dina

to wash his dishes, while she responded with a sense of anger,

‘I am not your servant. Wash your own dirty plates. You said we would each do our own work. All your stinking things you leave for me’ (A Fine Balance, 18)

Nusswan considered Dina, a ‘Little Tigress’. When their mother intervened, and asked Dina not to talk in such a rude manner to her elder brother, she firmly stated that “We must share and share alike.”

It asserts what a courageous spirit Dina has, even at such young and tender age. It was merely the beginning, as Dina continued the spirit to stand strong, and challenge the things, whatever stopped her, instead of giving up on the circumstances. Dina didn’t let herself submit, in order to please her Brother, despite the fact that he’s attempted hard to dominate her. Nusswan kept a watchful eye upon every trivial thing, Dina would do, whether it be her dresses she wore, or outings, she had with friends. When Dina grew up to a marriageable age, Nusswan started to look for potential partners, which angered Dina. She didn’t approve any, instead found a lovable man Rustom Dalal, herself, who wasn’t rich enough, but loved her well. It wasn’t appreciated by Nusswan, for Rustom was a medical pharmacist, while Nusswan was making endeavors, to get a well-to-do husband for Dina. Nusswan commented badly upon her ridiculous decision to marry Rustom, but nothing could stop Dina. Nusswan had to persuade himself, and participate in the marriage [to show to the community] thereafter.

Though, gradually things go to normalcy, Dina and Rustom got married and began a novel phase of life. 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. She didn’t succumb to the pressures, but lived on her independent decisions / terms.

The happiness of the two came to an end, when one day, out of sudden, Rustom met with an accident, which took his life, after mere Third Anniversary of their

marriage. What a shock to Dina! Even on that cruel night, when her husband passed away, she behaved 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’.

Dina has beautifully managed to stand in a vigorous manner all her life, but on the other side, we observe a soft side of her feminine self. When Rustom passed away, she showed herself strong to the world, but she couldn’t forget him easily and recalled the previous days and even the smallest of things about Rustom. She did mourn, but in a silent manner,

‘There she followed the exact habit of housework that she had developed when Rustom was alive. At the end of the cleaning she made tea. There in the privacy of the dingy kitchen she sat with her cup, remembering, sometimes crying softly, and the tea usually went cold. She often poured it away after drinking half a cup. After following this secret pattern of mourning for some weeks, she began allowing a part of herself to pretend everything was normal, the flat was occupied, the separation temporary. There didn’t seem to her any harm in it, and the make-believe was so comforting.’ (A Fine Balance, 54)

In the course of narrative, author emphasizes human company as the overriding necessity. Dina Dalal desperately longs for a social life because the effect of isolation and loneliness threaten her with disintegration and distress.

For a year, approximately, Dina lived with her brother Nusswan and sister-in-law Rubi, but when she realized that she was going to be burdensome, she packed her belongings and moved out, the very next day. Dina firmly refused to accept Nusswan’s offer to go for re-marriage, being entirely unaffected with the rich profiles of the approaching suitors. Hurt and furious by Dina’s refusal, Nusswan called her a ‘Shameless Woman’, asking in a commenting manner that for you it’s possible to live a full life, get married again have children or do you prefer to

live forever on my charity?

Evidently, Dina is a woman of heightened Self-Respect. She didn't assert anything after this to Nusswan, and shifted to Rustom's flat the next morning and through the guidance by Rustom's uncle and aunt she managed to get good amount of work of sewing, for her living sans any assistance around. Whatever endeavors / attempts are required to be made, Dina preferred to live on her own, with no help from her brother. Dina chooses to be displaced because she wants to preserve her individuality and self-respect. We can see that in Dina's character there are two conflicting impulses, i.e. her fear of isolation and her misgiving about independence. While both these impulses pose a threat to the source of meaning in her life. By fighting isolation and by investing into social relations, Dina manages to make a commitment which will affect her independence.

She resolves to reconstruct her life in a novel manner, which was absolutely challenging for a Parsi woman in that period. Dina Dalal emerges as a woman of 'substance', despite going through all sorts of threatens on the path. Jennifer Takhar, in an article named 'Girl Power: Mistry's Female Characters' beautifully analyses the character of Dina Dalal,

'Dina proves to be extremely independent-minded and smart: she educates herself in Bombay's public libraries and selects her own husband, who dies in a road accident after three years of wedded bliss with Dina. 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. We must not forget the additional necessity of Dina having to make enough money to keep a roof over her head.' (Jennifer Takhar, 4)

As the years' pass, Dina's business of tailoring imparts her more profits, but her eye sight goes weak, as she's continuously performed the embroideries and

sewing, which caused the fatigue. Doctor instructed to let her eyes rest, and hence, she started to search for two efficient tailors, who could do the sewing for Au Revoir Exports in her flat, and she would be able enough to earn for herself. She eventually found the two, Ishwar Darji and his nephew Omprakash Darji, who continue to do the sewing sans breaks, accomplishing the orders. Soon, a third member Maneck Kohlah, entered her flat also. Maneck Kohlah, a Parsi boy, belonged to a privileged family, who always had disagreements with his father and was called a ‘Slow Coach’ for materialistic success! Maneck is a scholar, who’s studying about ‘Refrigeration and air-conditioning’. He hated his hostel life during college, for it had ragging sessions which tortured him, to an unbearable extent.

In the Third section “A Village by the River,” the saddening stories of the village, from where Ishwar and Omprakash belonged to, are mentioned, with an intense touch of grief. It displays specific rural experiences of Exploitation and Frustration, depicting the sombre concern for the marginalised / oppressed sect of this vast country. It’s a fact that India still lives in its villages and rural regions, to a significant extent.

The Novel *A Fine Balance* portrayed the truth, how Ishwar’s father Dukhi Mochi led his life, in the midst of the curse of untouchability towards ‘*achoot jaatis*’, which was highly prevalent in the entire village. Dukhi was saddened with his work to carcass leather from a dead animal’s body, for he felt his that own skin became impregnated with the odour that was part of his father’s smell, the leather-worker’s stink that would not depart, even after he had washed and scrubbed in the all-cleansing river.

Troubled by the trade and its associated consequences, Dukhi Mochi, had decided to take his two sons, Ishwar and Narayan, to Ashraf Darji in the next town, so that his sons could learn sewing and go ahead with a somewhat better life. Dukhi

seems to share a great friendship with Ashraf, who not merely keeps the two boys with him, but considers them his own children, in the circumstances of misery. How ironical it is, to witness that a Muslim assisted Dukhi, while the Hindus were oppressors towards lower castes. The harmony, in which Hindus and Muslims reside, puts a contrast to the naked / harsh truth of the *Brahmins* and *Thakurs*, who exploited the '*achhoot jatis*'. Gradually, such a bond develops between Ashraf Darji and the two boys, that once, when communal riots happen and "the men in white shirts and khaki pants" move around, in search of Muslims, Ishwar and Narayan save Ashraf Darji [whom they call Ashraf *Chacha*].

Indeed, the ugly / darkened face of the village, which was filled with 'untouchability,' oppression of women from lower caste, exploitations on the ground of castes to a fatal scale, was a regular event, in the boundaries of village.

'For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death—the stones had ceased at first 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. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord's field, had been forced to eat the landlord's excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged.' (A Fine Balance, 122)

The cruelties, in the name of caste, reach to an extreme, when we witness that Assembly Elections are going to take place and Narayan, standing in a long queue to vote, states that he would sign and mark, instead of the thumb. Thakurs [people from upper caste] couldn't stand such a reaction from a 'Chamaar'. Few others in the queue, inspired by Narayan, stated the similar thing, which fuelled the anger

of the Thakurs. They dragged Narayan and other two fellows and hung them naked by their ankles as a punishment from the branches of a banyan tree, where they were brutally murdered, but it wasn't enough. All family members of Narayan, including Dukhi, Roopa, Radha and daughters, were dragged, chained and eventually the whole hut was set to fire. Thakurs punished the 'courageous chammaar – tailor'. This loss goes beyond words, for Ishwar and Omprakash, who're working in the town, distant from the family and they get to know this heart-breaking tragedy, much later. Evidently, "A Village by the River" fails to appear as a beautiful / soothing village, as the ironical name suggests,

‘The village was by a small river, and the *Chamaars* were permitted to live in a section, downstream from the Brahmins and landowners.’ (A Fine Balance, 106)

The Fourth section of *A Fine Balance*, The Small Obstacles throws a light upon the fatal things which Mumbai [though unnamed] offers to the crowds of thousands, who come to the ‘city of dreams’, in quest of something which may make their lives, better. Rohinton Mistry, with long descriptions, imparts the merciless pictures of the superfast city – The endless queues for toilets, people sitting on the roadsides / railway tracks, quarrels upon trivial things and crowds approaching the ‘slums’ sans any space to live.

The pathos of sustenance in village / city is distinguished to various degrees, but both bestow sorrows to human existence. Lives of ordinary people remain more or less, similar, whether they are in their rural boundaries where they are born and brought up or it’s the new city of opportunities. Both aren’t welcoming to the masses, who are unprivileged / have-nots. For the privileged / rich people, it’s beneficial to live accordingly, and even exploit the marginalized ones, but the unfortunates are the ones, who are standing on the margins. The poor ones are unfortunately destined to live [like cattle] sans human dignities. They go through a sense of ‘rootlessness’, where they fail to find a home / shelter to soothe their bodies / souls. Most of the fiction is about Middle-Class, for the authors belong to Middle-Class themselves, but *A Fine Balance* is an intensely woven novel, asserting about the very poor. Neither villages, nor ‘advanced’ cities can afford to impart the characters, a sense of relief from their woes. Mistry makes Om Prakash Darji say,

‘We don’t have to worry about cancer; this expensive city will first eat us alive, for sure.’ (A Fine Balance, 85)

It’s evidently observed that Ishwar Darji and his nephew, Omprakash Darji, go through a series of unbearable sorrows, one after another, depicting the pathos of

the masses, who we see living on roadsides, or performing menial works and somehow attempting very hard to live, merely live! In spite of the sorrows and pain, Ishwar appears to be a man of Optimism, which he unbelievably manages to live with. He's filled with pain inside, but owns a ready-made formula of optimism, asserting 'The human face has limited space. My mother used to say, if you fill your face with laughing, there will be no room for crying.'

For the two tailors, Ishwar and Omprakash, this world isn't a better place, and occasionally worse, than expected. In the village, Caste exploited them, and in the City of Gold [Mumbai], Class did the worse! Ishwar had such a troublesome childhood, where beatings / punishments were a part of daily routines, it's unfortunate to observe that he's become a person, who doesn't get affected by pathos anymore, or at least he doesn't appear so. Life had made him such strong, that he laughs at times, when a normal person would cry upon! It's not that he has ceased to get hurt, but he's been habitual of a life, treating him in an ugly / cruel way. What an irony!

During the days, when Ishwar was attempting hard to sustain somehow in Mumbai, it turned tough, to an unbearable degree. They were forced into a truck wherein "underfoot, stray gravel stabbed the human cargo". The tailors were forced to abandon their work for a number of days for reasons beyond their control. When the problems go too bad to handle, Ishwar wails, "What kind of life, what kind of country is this, where we can't come and go as please?"

The ironies and paradoxes in the world of politics occur in *A Fine Balance*, to the extremes. Hundreds of people, from all the *jhopadpattis*, were forcibly ordered to be collected in the buses, where the masses [like cattle] were taken to the wide-spread grounds, where 'The Prime Minister' would deliver a speech. The city is filled with filthy '*kachhi basti*', where people are bound to live sans any sort of human dignity. Thousands of beggars / rack pickers are destined to

spend lives in poverty, to an intolerable degree. Especially the critical time of 'Emergency' worsened the circumstances, when the things went unlawful, when no rules / regulations were left essential to be kept, when all of the fundamental rights were gone. The unjust actions / laws of politicians worsen people's miserable lives, 'for politicians, passing laws is like passing water ... It all ends down the drain.' We observe a huge gap between what political leaders assert in high voices, from the stages and what they actually perform, during the period of their governance, so far! One of the characters' state 'If government kept their promises, the god would come down to garland them.

Indira Gandhi was found guilty of cheating in the elections, but instead of resigning Prime Ministership, she twisted the law in her favour, turning against her opposition in a despotic effort to keep her throne. Tyranny became a regular fare. Public meetings and processions banned, opponents and presumed opponents thrown in jail without trial, destitute street dwellers forced out of the city ruthlessly, in the name of civic beautification and *garabi hatao*, forced vasectomies and tubectomies in the name of birth control, terrorizing the helpless poor, events with grave consequences were driven to insignificance by their frequency! One of the characters in *A Fine Balance*, says, "of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed". It seems as if the native rulers have merely replaced the foreign rulers and the Indian government has failed to resolve the basic problems of poverty, hunger, unemployment, illiteracy and disease.

A Fine Balance is not, at heart, a political novel indeed, its concern is with the lives and aspirations of the powerless human beings who populate its pages. Politics and politicians play walk - on parts, and the injustices they perpetrate are merely one more failing of the human condition, that is Mistry's real interest. 'Living each day,' as one of his characters observes, 'is to face one emergency or another.'

In Lawrentian terminologies, Mistry's novel deals with an "essentially tragic age". Ishwar and Om prakash have gone through heights of such oppressions, which puts an instance of the sorry state of the country, during the period. They live in utter poverty. Once, Ishwar tells Dina, how people are unfortunately bound to live 'like goods in a warehouse.' He asserts,

'No, *Dinabai*, Next time I go searching for accommodation, you should come with me, see how families live eight, nine, or ten people in a small room, sleeping one over the other on big shelves, from floor to ceiling, like third-class railway berths or in cupboards, or in the bathroom, surviving like goods in a warehouse.' (A Fine Balance, 541)

Ishwar and Om, first taken to Police Station, as mistaken for beggars, then tortured by the Police and at length, left on the roadside, where the two were left with no options. They had to work as laborers to collect / carry gravel on a construction site, which was an 'Eternity of Hell' for the two, especially Ishwar who wasn't of appropriate age / health to work such hard.

'With the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned in to night. With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy. There's even a new law called MISA to simplify the whole procedure.' (A Fine Balance, 346)

Rohinton Mistry hits, with a tone of Sarcasm upon the curse of 'Corruption' which seems to be highly prevalent, in the Police Department and other government offices, also. When Om prakash goes to get the ration-card made, in the concerned office, he's firstly asked to get the 'vasectomy', for the officials were instructed to do sterilization, to as many people as possible. It throws a light upon the entirely inhuman / unjust things, which were imposed upon common citizens, during the difficult period of Emergency. Om prakash, states, in an evident tone of anger,

‘What kind of choice is that, between Food and Manhood?’ (A Fine Balance, 205)

A Fine Balance talks about human relationships, sense of friendship and a great bond amongst people, who appear entirely distinguished from each other. Dina Dalal seems to develop a bond with the tailor Ishwar Darji, while Om prakash Darji and Maneck Kohla, young boys of approximately similar age wander all around together, exploring and enjoying varied things.

In the beginning phase, Dina herself isn’t beyond manipulative, when Ishwar and Om prakash are desperately hunting for work. Initially, she hires them to sew for her at a meager wage, keeping the big profits for her own. Dina, being a hard core professional, remains carefully not to impart them undue importance. Even though they sustain her own existence, Dina doesn’t allow the two to know her suppliers and the Au Revoir Export Company.

As time passes by, and especially when circumstances go bitter, Dina’s behavior changes towards them! Dina isn’t merely an exploitative employer to Ishwar and Om prakash, but turns protective and caring on occasions. When Om prakash develops a painful arm, she herself rubs an ointment, much to the surprise of the two men. Later she allows them to stay in her small flat, in order to save them from Police atrocities. When the Novel concludes, Dina even risks Nuswaan’s wrath. Feeding the two, she wonders how long her good deeds can go on. Once, she asserted, “Compared to theirs, my life is nothing but comfort and happiness. And now they are in more trouble. I hope they come back alright. People keep saying God is great, God is just, but I’m not sure.”

Dina begins to empathize with the two victimized tailors, with Maneck giving voice to her silent sympathies. She provides them her verandah to live in, when they returned to her in a state of shock. Later, she shares the kitchen with them also! Sorrows minimize the distances, to an extent!

The four began to have meals together, Maneck teaching Ishwar, “Eating with

fancy tools”! Initially, Dina doesn’t approve an educated Parsi boy mingling with an illiterate tailor Om, but as time passes, she understands the bond between the two. Once, Dina states,

‘I was not angry with your shameful act because of any harm to me. I was ashamed for you, to see you behaving like a loafer. Like a roadside *mavali*. From Omprakash I cannot expect better. But you, from a good Parsi family, and I left you to watch after them, I trusted you.’ (A Fine Balance, 337)

In the microcosm of Dina’s place all prior hierarchies and ethnic prejudices have come to an end. This is also represented by the semiotics of food. Food shared by all the four protagonists in narrative promotes the inter-cultural exchange among the people belongs to different sections of society. Dina now starts sharing her beloved Chine cups with the tailors. By sharing the cups which have been hitherto till now inaugurates a sense of equality between herself and her lodgers.

The sharing of food in ‘A Fine Balance’ allows for transcendence in togetherness, which has the power of fighting back of the meaning in the character’s lives (Manoj Kumar, 52).

How ironical it is to observe, that Dina married a man below her monetary standards in her youth, but as a status of contradictory perception, she still believes that a certain distance needs to be maintained. Dina appears to be a ‘woman of complexity’, at times. She asserts that there is a difference and you cannot pretend there isn’t - their community, their background.

Gradually, when severe difficulties fall upon Ishwar and Om prakash, Dina’s heart begins to melt and a sense of care / concern blossoms. Dina allows Ishwar and Omprakash to sleep in her flat’s veranda, while previously, she didn’t even let their trunk to be placed in her house! Earlier, she had different set of cups for the tailors to be used, and kept a careful eye upon their actions, counting the hours of sewing and reminding them to work sans any breaks, but eventually her

tendencies change. Though, the class and sect hierarchies take long to dissolve, we witness it happening at length. The small flat of Dina Dalal plays the role of a sort of world in itself, where four persons are living in a harmony, irrespective of the differences they possess or the backgrounds they belong to!

The consumption and digestion of the same food becomes indicted of an altered & tempered relationship between them. Obviously, Dina has undergone a transformation from difference to sameness. The collective consciousness of all the four character mingles in harmony in the same dwelling place.

Rohinton Mistry, in *A Fine Balance*, offers a deep understanding of human life. The sense of vacuum / nothingness which invades one's life is portrayed in this significant novel. It arises several questions - How our lives become meaningless at times, how we grow utterly helpless, how we fail to make any endeavor to make our circumstances better, how we continue to reach to a well of poverty / filth despite the attempts to get rid of it? At intervals, life appears good / joyful, but why the chains of pathos come again? Why such sorrows in life? As Ishwar Darji puts it, 'Stories of suffering are no fun, when we are the main characters.'

All the four main characters of the narrative suffer from a sense of displacement. Dina Dala indulges in looking back at her life with the essence of regret & bitterness. She often oscillates between the subconscious & conscious levels of her psyche. Her oscillation has a long account. The other two chief characters of Om & Ishwar had hardly having consistency in their lives. The collective consciousness of oppressed & downtrodden has been best displayed by the consciousness of both the protagonist. Both suffer from double displacement in the novel initially from rural domain to urban and secondly, from a road side dweller to an occupants in Dina's flat. The fourth character Maneck Kholah experiences displaced twice like Om & Ishwar. Firstly he is forced to migrate to Bombay and thereafter from Bombay to Dubai. The individual psychology of Maneck is clearly visible in his longing for his people & his roots.

Mistry employs displacement with the reference of Om & Iswar. In the Epilogue, Ishwar suggests that distance is a difficult thing. He maintains that places can change people you know for better or worse. Similarly Maneck's mother testifies that distance is a dangerous thing.

A profound philosophy is imparted, through the well-drawn characterization and the conversations / dialogues, they have, so far! The role, memories play in our lives, is elaborated upon,

'Memories were permanent. Sorrowful ones remained sad even with the passing of time; yet happy ones could never be re-created, not with the same joy. Remembering bred its own peculiar sorrow. It seemed so unfair; that time should render both sadness and happiness into a source of pain. So, what was the point of possessing memory? It didn't help anything. In the end, it was all hopeless.'

(A Fine Balance, 389)

In *A Fine Balance*, the reader feels enriched / evolved, after reading through such food for thought. It won't be hyperbolic to state that the novel transforms one's insight towards life, to a significant degree. In a dialogue, where Maneck Kohlah says,

'God is dead, that's what a German philosopher wrote,' which shocks Dina Dalal! She frowned, "Trust the Germans to say such things," and asked Maneck, if he believed so?' (A Fine Balance, 227)

Maneck responded that he used to believe, 'But now I prefer to think, that God is a giant quilt maker, with an infinite variety of designs. And the quilt is grown so big and confusing, the pattern is impossible to see, the squares and diamonds and triangles don't fit well together anymore, it's all become meaningless. So, he has abandoned it.'

As the novel, *A Fine Balance*, advances to its climax, the circumstances of the

protagonists go wrong to an inhuman extent. The corrupted evil characters attain good, while the poor ones consistently go through worse and the worst, at length. The *daakoo*, Thakur Dharamsi, who burnt the entire family of Ishwar and Om, had become in-charge of Family Planning, entered politics in Congress, and would soon be a Minister. Ashraf Darji [Ashraf Chacha] who's been a helpful man all his life, was grabbed and later abandoned by the Police, with severe injuries and almost dead, on the roadside. In the '*Nussbandhi Mela*', Omprakash, a man in twenties, about to get married, was castrated in the name of sterilization. His 'manhood' is vanished. Ishwar Darji, who kept sewing all his life, was turned to be a "Legless Beggar", for he went through the operation of sterilization, which caused a severe infection in his leg. Dina Dalal is left with no choices, but to go to her brother Nusswan to spend the rest life.

The last part of *A Fine Balance*, is 'Epilogue 1984', which states about the atrocities occurred upon people from Sikh communities, after the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was killed by a Sikh. Thousands of citizens were murdered sans any crimes committed. Indeed, innocent people were even burnt alive! It marked the controversial period of the year 1984, which gave birth to the 'riots', which took lives of common public!

How all expectations/ dreams / aspirations break loose! Maneck Kohlah returned from Dubai and soon, left to have a good quality time with his old friends, pondering,

'It didn't always have to end badly; he was going to prove it to himself. First, he would meet all his friends: Om, happily married, and his wife, and at least two or three children by now; what would their names be? If there was a boy, surely Narayan and Ishwar the proud grand-uncle, beaming away at his sewing-machine, disciplining the little ones, cautioning them if they ventured too close to the whirring wheels and galloping needles. And Dina Aunty, supervising the

export tailoring in her little flat, orchestrating the household, holding sway in that busy kitchen' (A Fine Balance, 687)

The four protagonists work together on a quilt, patched together from remnants, and each square comes to symbolize a different moment of their lives together, so that a sad memory is immediately followed by a happy one, each sewed seamlessly to the other. 'Losing, and losing again, is the very basis of the life process," says a minor character towards the end of the novel, "Till all we are left with is the bare essence of human existence.'

Things went worse towards the end, nothing positive / good occurred to any of the protagonists, but 'Hope' is still not vanished. *A Fine Balance* is about life, and therefore about loss, but in the process of describing life and loss, Mistry gives the reader very much more than the bare essence. In an interview, Rohinton Mistry asserts,

'Given the parameters of my characters' lives, given which they are, how can you expect them to have any more happiness than they have found? I think that the ending is a hopeful one: The human spark is not extinguished. They continue to find humour in their lives. This is an outstanding victory in their case.' Perhaps there's a lesson to be learnt here. The expectations that those of us who have grown up in privileged circumstances have of a happy ending is so far beyond the reach of the 'thousands and thousands of Ishwars and Oms in India today, people who keep going relentlessly in spite of the odds' as to be beyond imagining.'

(Tweet, org)

The despair, grief, pain, negations, is kept in '**A Fine Balance**' with undying Hope and Optimism.
