

The Delusion of *A Fine Balance*: Mistry's Fiction

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's characters talk about a balance in life, and from the very beginning to the end, they strive to achieve it. They fail, but without even realizing that they have failed. *A Fine Balance* is a 1995 novel by Rohinton Mistry, an Indo-Canadian author, which is set during the era of Emergency and ranges the assassination of the Prime Minister as well. The book won the Giller Prize in 1995 and was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1996. The background of the book itself is full with political, social, economic and religious turmoil. There is no balance. Characters from different classes are put together for better comparison as well as coherence. Destiny brings them together, they communicate, correspond and co-operate until fate takes the charge of their 'balanced' life. The backdrop of the Emergency adds to the intensity of human failure. The whole occupation of the government was a fail, bringing every possible kind of crisis upon the country. The composure of the society and economy is sacrificed in the name of people's welfare. This paper is an approach to go through the novel considering the contrast between reality and assumption. Is "a fine balance" a reality or just a delusion? Is it a Miraj that we chase and never achieve? What does this "balance" mean, after all?

Key Words: Delusion, Life, Balance, Failure, Truth, Equilibrium

But it was an unrefrigerated world. And everything ended badly. [Page 505]

Rohinton Mistry's characters talk about a balance in life, and from the very beginning to the end, they strive to achieve it. They fail, but without even realizing that they have failed. As says one of the characters of the novel, *...if you fill your face with laughing, there will be no room for crying.* [Page 506] Only one of them who is wise enough to realize the failure and unable to cope with it, ends his life. The others live on with the delusion.

A Fine Balance is a 1995 novel by Rohinton Mistry, an Indo-Canadian author, which is set during the era of Emergency and ranges the assassination of the Prime Minister as well. The book won the Giller Prize in 1995 and was also

shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1996. *A Fine Balance* was also adapted for the stage in 2006 and 2007 in London by Tamasha Theatre Company. The background of the book itself is full with political, social, economic and religious turmoil. There is no balance. Characters from different classes are put together for better comparison as well as coherence. There is one Parsi lady Dina Dalal who had become a rebel for her love, two cobblers Ishvar and Om who want to break the stereotype by doing tailoring, and one student Maneck Kohlah who wants a homely atmosphere rather than a disgusting hostel life.

Destiny brings them together, they communicate, correspond and co-operate until fate takes the charge of their 'balanced' life. These four people are like

four ends of a square that hold the poise of one another. If one of the ends loses the equilibrium, the symmetry gets ruined. When Dina Shroff's landlord asks her to vacate the house, she is forced to return to her torturous brother. Ishvar and Om, the tailors have to find jobs somewhere else, and Maneck, the most sensitive of them all, moves back to the hostel. Later, the Emergency takes a toll on their already dissipated lives. Maneck accepts the job offer from Dubai and takes a diversion from the present disruption.

Dina accepts the slave-like life at her brother's house. Ishvar and Om are the duos who fall directly into the churning centre. Forceful Family planning campaigns conducted by the government spare no one. They sterilize not only the aged Ishvar but also the unmarried Om. Later, the use of infected tools leads to the amputation of Ishvar's legs. Om falls prey to the personal grudge of Thakur Dharamsi who orders his castration. The two tailors have no option left other than begging.

On his return to India, Maneck first performs his father's funeral and then moves to Bombay in the hope of a new start. He urges to balance what he lost while living in a remote land by now developing his father's business and reviving his bond with the other three 'ends'. He is not ready for what he learns from Dina. Either being decisive or impulsive, he jumps in front of an express train. One of the passengers' dispassionate comment from the first chapter echoes in our mind, *Why does everybody have to choose the railway tracks only for dying?...What is wrong with poison or tall buildings or knives?* [Page 5]

Mistry, in one of his interviews, says that *A Fine Balance* had to be narrated in the

first person, through the lens of the student Maneck, who scanned the lives of the four prime characters. That is why we find his thoughts being expressed after every major event, unlike those of the other characters who either speak or are indulged in some action. Nowhere are they acting like observers. At the end of the book, the prudent observer has enough of the world and he signs off.

A Fine Balance pictures the world in layers. Every layer has a certain kind of human species with its way of life. There is a world of beggars that has been detailed in the book. This world has physically deformed but mentally powerful characters. They are awfully clear of human emotions to the extent that one of them has to admit that, *You'd be surprised how much beggars are like ordinary human beings.* [Page 509] One of the female beggars is deprived of her child only to add a miserable and joyless tinge in her eyes that would help in the *begging business*. It is strange that even begging is a business. But it exists. Their illusion of life is already a horror, and, they further add terrible logic to it.

Be it the village or the town, your native country or a foreign land, there is always something irking, a missing piece that shakes the *balance*. Dina loses her reliable support system, her husband, but accepts the fate and attempts to supply for her loss by being financially independent. Ishvar and Om have to find some respectable occupation and not the traditional cobblers' work. Maneck is pursuing his college but he misses a homely environment. Dina's flat is their little recluses, a new world that gives them a sense of integrity. Here, they join the pieces of cloth to create a beautiful craft. Maneck has Om and Dina's aunt to call a family.

But they get robbed of their haven by some goons of the landlord. The destroyed flat echoes their shattered hopes and dreams. Now the scattered pieces are hard to fit together. The symmetry is broken. The four people give life another try but again come around disheartened. But there is no room for grief. As says the Beggarmaster, *Regret is a luxury I can't afford*. [Page 506] He sells the body of his murdered beggar friend. A dark truth stares right into your eyes and you look for corners.

The backdrop of the Emergency adds to the intensity of human failure. The whole occupation of the government was a fail, bringing every possible kind of crisis upon the country. The composure of the society and economy is sacrificed in the name of people's welfare. Maneck, on his return to India, gets closer and closer to the disaster till it comes to a blank point before him. The already disassembled lives of the four main characters get further blows.

Be it Dina or Om or Ishvar or Maneck or Ashraf or Beggarmaster or anyone out there in the world, a human being tries to balance on the rope tied between the two poles of Birth and Death, Truth and Myth, Pain and Smile. We have to chase the Miraj, as there is no way out. Once on the rope, you have to act "balanced". Because in this world, those who can't act composed, are not acceptable. When Maneck returns for his father's funeral, he feels a guilt lump in his throat for not embracing his father as he was- a nature lover to the core.

Later when he realizes the world is an unrefrigerated one, he has no father but his ashes only. His senior Ashwin and his three sisters are dead. He has complaints to the Almighty for not maintaining the *Balance Sheet* of Karma. Dina, Om, Ishvar

and the taxi driver are "happy prisoners" of fate and chance. But Maneck has always a tendency to walk away and set himself free. During the Emergency also, he takes a job in Dubai and is saved from the aftermath that his friends deal with in India. On his return also, the blows that he gets are unbearable. He walks away again, this time, once and for all.

This is worth debating whether living on with time and fate or running away means having a "balance". The Beggarmaster explained it at the best, *What chance do we have, when our beginnings and endings are so freakish? Birth and Death- what could be more monstrous than that? We like to deceive ourselves and call it wondrous and beautiful and majestic, but it's freakish, let's face it*. [Page 530] See how ridiculously precise and "balanced" is the thought itself. To accept what we are and what our life is, not necessarily positive, but real. All the characters except Maneck still hold to the rope.

Maneck, as claims the author of the book, is a touchy observer. He imagines a joyous side of the world and gets his vision shattered. The little courageous steps that he put on the rope of hope, couldn't find "a fine balance" and he came collapsing down, ending the whole act.

However, there might be a chance that Maneck, like the Beggarmaster or any other character in the novel, knows the dark humor of human life. But instead of still dragging along the amputated willpower on the platform of hopelessness (as Om drags along the handicapped torso of his uncle Ishvar) or being a slave to fate seeking mercy (as Dina does at her brother's house) or still acting manly even after being snatched off the purpose (as Om is living on after his castration), he chose to end the peril very bravely. He had

tried to walk away many times earlier. First, when he left his native place and his father to study in the big city. Secondly, when he moves out of his hostel and politics to seek a peaceful abode at Dina's home. Next, he moves to Dubai with a job offer. Finally, when he is back in India and gets back on the track (at least as he thinks), life receives him with resentment. This time, he is determined not to escape.

Leave alone the detracted lives of people in general, even the backdrop of the novel is a plethora of messed-up things. First of all, the Emergency was a disaster for the country. The government forced inhuman rules and regulations on innocent people. Sterilization camps, mass arrest, and whatnot. Adding to it was the communal unrest that unleashed violence against a particular community. Maneck's taxi driver was forced to rid of the tokens of his religion to save his life. *I am manacled to my religion- a happy prisoner*, says he when Maneck suggests him to remove his *Kada* (a metal bangle) and it doesn't come off. [Page 669]

The lack of *balance* between the villages and cities is another issue. Villagers have to leave their homes to find a reasonable livelihood in the alien cities. The filthy little houses when compared to posh apartments show a wide gap in standards. Maneck's native place is somewhere in the Kashmir Valley which is at contrast to the dessert Dubai where he leaves for to study and work in refrigeration. The abundance of nature makes him think that everything in life can be this much pretty. It can be preserved for long as people do at his place in the chilly weather. But once out in the real world, he is compelled to think, *Did life treat everyone so wantonly, ripping the*

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good things to pieces while letting bad things fester and grow like fungus on a refrigerated food? [Page 505] Again, the class and caste differences echo the social imbalance. Thakur Dharamsi's inhumane revenge on Om is just one of the few testimonies of the trouble.

There is no equilibrium of compassion among family members themselves. Other than the fast bond of Om and Ishvar, all other bonds of family and friendship seem to fall apart. Be it Dina and her brother or Maneck and his father or the Beggarmaster and his mother and half-brother- all are somehow putting up with relationships. Only Ishvar and Om go hand in hand in every hardship. Their bond of blood is the strongest. The Beggarmaster receives the truth about the messed-up family structure so normally bad formally. It is ok for him to know that a stranger beggar lady is his step-mother and his friend, who is dead, is actually his half-brother. He is also *fine* and *balanced* when he has to sell the dead body of his murdered friend as he can't afford the cost of cremation and selling would bring him further money to carry on with his plight.

That is how you establish the equilibrium, by subduing your human nature, by sacrificing your urge to express, by mortifying your earnestness to revolt! The delusion of "a fine balance" is what drags people from the very beginning of their lives to the end. You have to hold on until either you fall or the rope breaks down; meaning either you willingly give up or fate lets you down. Life is like the game of chess that Om couldn't get nor Maneck could explain, *Sometimes, no one wins*. [Page 480]

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