

The Integration of Character and History in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* begins with a train journey. The implication seems to be that journey has been a popular metaphor of life in which interrelated accidents abound. Thus, Ishwar and Om meet Maneck in the stuffed train compartment where Maneck accidentally drops his books upon Om, and a little later they are surprised to discover that they are heading towards the same destination- Dina Dalal's apartment. Maneck is a student who is looking forward to being Dina's paying guest, while the Darjis seek to attain jobs for themselves. The train they are in suddenly stops as someone is found on the railway tracks- "Maybe it has to do with the state of Emergency", someone shouted" (5). Nobody exactly understands what the state of Emergency means except that it is "something about the country being threatened from inside" (5). It is this sudden halt that causes Maneck to drop his books upon Om whereby the men meet for the first time in an effort to become friends. Though the historical event of 1975 is merely a blurred presence in the first, yet it would from now on embody a disrupting force in the lives of people, especially the Darjis who would be the most affected by it.

History does not constitute an accidental force, but the implication is that it is experienced differently by different individuals at different levels of the social strata. Laws and controlling instances are at work everywhere in the novel but we never receive a clear, concrete, and unified sense of power; rather, it operates in dispersed forms, embodied and manifested through representatives and agents, seeping through relations at all levels of society. This "effect" of dispersion has everything to do with the way the historical dimension operates in the novel. The

meaning of the historical paradigm framing the text and its characters is to some extent separate from the level of individual experience. Coincidences, random events, and accidents (or what appear to be accidents) constitute a large part of the novel's mechanisms of cohesion, the bolts and screws holding the text's events together (Park: 348).

History and its relationship with the novel has been a topic of debate among scholars. Bharucha criticized the novel for failing to present an integrated picture of history and argues that the novel appears to be written from "fragments of newspaper reports, with the author riffling through the pages of old newspaper, from 1975-84" (66). Ross has questioned whether the exposure of the corruption and the inhuman practices of the Indira Gandhi government is a topic of interest today. However, Mistry's text explores the link between the historical dimension and the struggles of the individual characters.

When Ishwar enquires to Dina about the state of emergency, she replies: "Government problems- games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us" (76). And yet the entire novel is about how the "government problems" determine the fate of the Darjis. The Darjis arrive in the city by the sea to secure livelihoods for themselves. Gradually their lives are entwined with Dina Dalal's life.

The issue of caste injustices is explored in "A Village by the River." It is an insight into the family of the Darjis who originally belonged to the Chamaar caste. Om's grandfather, Dukhi sought to free his progeny from the oppressiveness of the caste system by giving them an education which could earn a livelihood for them. Thus, the succeeding generations after Dukhi sought mobility in terms of their social and economic status. Om and Ishwar come to Bombay to earn money but they never wish to settle permanently there. Rather, there is always a desire to go back to the familial space even though it has unleashed only atrocities on them.

However, the act of returning brings disaster into their lives. After becoming a skilled tailor, Ishwar's brother Narayan returns to his native village in order to establish his business there. This becomes a source of jealousy for the upper caste households. Also a son is born to Narayan

while women in Brahmin families in the village fail to produce male heirs. Gender oppression prevails in all the castes in the village. Narayan's son, Om is subject to more care and affection than his sisters. Caste atrocity is heightened in the scene in which Thakur Dharamsi kills Dukhi's entire family, excepting Ishwar and Om who are coincidentally saved. Narayan's progressiveness, his desire for transformation proves fatal for his family. And much later when Ishwar and Om return for Om's wedding, they again encounter Thakur Dharamsi, now a prominent politician, who orders the doctors to castrate Om. Om's only act of defiance and resistance is his spitting upon the Thakur. In the "Village by the River," though caste oppression is depicted in its extreme, violent forms, the omniscient narrator is present only as a 'gaze.' And this gaze is a distant one wherein events of violence against particular groups are told, but no resistance to violent structures is offered directly. Though Rupa's sexual assault is told by the omniscient gaze, the gaze doesn't allow Dukhi to voice himself but only turn his back when Rupa comes home disheveled. The narrator distances himself from the characters and does not directly identify with them.

The Darjis' stay with Dina at her own apartment is somewhat relaxing. The four major characters share a familial space. The Darjis are also endowed with pride and determination. Earlier when due to the beautification project their slums are leveled by government bulldozers, they refuse to seek Dina's aid and settle for themselves a small space outside the chemist's shop until they are removed from there too. Later they are forcefully shifted to a government construction site where labor is enforced upon them. The weight of all the political activities, which are inhuman and brutal in nature, falls upon them. From the declaration of emergency to beautification projects to sterilization, the Darjis are the immediate victims.

Mistry's attempt to present the Dalit characters in the context of the larger historical narrative of the making of a nation is crucial. The time frame under which the novel and its characters function is significant in the sense that while on the one hand the Indira Gandhi government is on a development drive on national level, the cruelties on the local level

remains unaddressed, unsolved. The “Village by the River” acts as a microcosm of the arbitrariness of the national narrative.

Hence, the lives of the Darjis function in the larger historical context of the 1970s. Their narrative is granted a sense of universality since places are never named in the novel. It is by attributes that Bombay can be imagined as a “city by the sea.” The lives of Ishwar and Om end in tragedy. A strange relationship however has been permanently established between them and Dina. Dina’s handmade quilt, intended as Om’s wedding present, remains unstitched, incomplete, implying the unending continuity of life and its struggles. In the end, this quilt lies upon Ishwar’s shoulders as a cushion, a visual patchwork of life.

In the novel, bodies carry the scars of incidents and accidents, and become symbolic of deterioration that continues around them. Men and women, on the level of the bodily, become a part of the political processes. Johnson argues, “The amputation of Ishwar’s legs, the result of an infection caused by the vasectomy that Ishwar receives towards the end of the novel, marks his body, yet again, with the history of violence and oppression to which he has been subjected, and Om’s castration not only removes his ability to have children but also drastically alters his bodily schema. Once thin and nimble, by the novel’s epilogue Om has become overweight and lumbering, the result of his castration in the sterilization camp oversee by Thakur Dharamsi. Thus, control over the body through both direct and indirect manipulation of its constitution leaves indelible traces” (231).

The act of returning in the novel leads to disastrous events. When Ishwar’s brother Narayan returns to his village after becoming a tailor and garners success, the upper caste families in the village become jealous and angry. Narayan, one of the few characters in the novel who raises a voice of firm resistance against the goons of Thakur Dharamsi, gets killed with his entire family except Om and Ishwar who narrowly escape. Om is castrated on the orders of Thakur when he returns to the village for his marriage. When Maneck visits his hometown it is for the funeral of his father. He encounters a reality that leaves him even more

empty- that of capitalist endeavors overtaking the serenity of the town. After his years in Dubai, when he returns back he thinks that Om must be happily married and Ishwar must be a proud grand- father and that Dina Dalal must be running a successful export business. All these expectations and assumptions are contrasted by what Maneck himself sees. The grim reality is shown through his gaze first and he finds himself unable to face his old friends. Dina returns to live at her brother's house eventually after years of resistance. For all, everything fall apart and crumbles down. Each faces his and her fate except Maneck who can no longer hold the weight of reality within him when he commits suicide in the final pages of the novel. As Sorensen argues about Maneck's life in Dubai, "These great expectations, as evoked during the stay at his parents' home, stand in contrast to an existence abroad in total alienation... what Maneck's life has become abroad is precisely a thread upon which static, isolated images indifferently pass by" (356).

Sharmani Gabriel argues that the novel "is fuelled by the desire to root narrative in the realities of diverse social, political and class formations of Indian national life" (76). The narrative captures the turbulent transitional period towards globalization and capitalism. When Dina is on her way to sell an old violin, she has to briefly take shelter in an old bookshop while a procession of people striking against the influx of south Indians into Bombay passes away. Later when she starts her business she herself hires men who had come to the city looking for jobs. It is one of the many instances in the novel where the political and historical dimensions seep in effortlessly but whose ramifications are later very stringent. Morey observes, "all characters and relationships are affected by the machinations of the capitalist economy: from the piece-working tailors and their well-intentioned employer Dina, who is nonetheless implicated as an exploiter of cheap, non-unionized labor... to the beggars whose place in the warped economy of beggary is determined by the severity of the mutilation... it emphasizes the text's interest in moral culpability and the impossibility of total insulation against the taint of money in a society where anything can be bought or sold" (112).

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