



Moral dimensions in Rohinton Mistry's "A fine balance"

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* was full of vivid images. The crisp verbal pictures do not detract but enhance the overall impact of the free-flowing storyline. The novel begins with the image of a woman at her sewing machine. The covering stories in this novel are neatly inter-woven. He uses memory and imagination to depict a wild period in Indian history. The author claims that his novels are not researched in formal sense of the word but that he relies on articles, newspapers and magazines to collect material. Author says, "The way the main characters the tailors Ishvar and Omprakash endure suggest that dignity is inherent in the heroic manner in which they strive to survive".

Keywords: Rohinton Mistry's, a fine balance, free-flowing storyline

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry the socio-political novelist has arisen as an arduous writer on the world literary scene. As an Indian who now lives in and writes from Canada he was a writer of the Indian Diaspora. He has published within a span of ten years only three works. His maiden anthology of short stories *Tales from Firozsha Baag* was followed by remarkable first novel *Such a Long Journey* which heralded his arrival as a gifted novelist. His latest novel *A Fine Balance* has received a worldwide acclaim and is considered a landmark in the history of Indian fiction. Rohinton Mistry as a powerful storyteller of contemporary and social political life shot into fame recently on being accepted for the respected Booker Prize for his novel *A Fine Balance*. Rohinton Mistry has very sound knowledge of India's his story. The endeavor to write a novel about one's native country on the basis of memory has been an irresistible challenge and a compelling necessity for a number of immigrant writers who have been cut off from their ethnic roots.

Dimensions of Mistry's Novel

The content of a realistic novel as usually defined was intercourse among a few credible characters and between them and the reader who knows them by their public actions their intimate words and their unrecognized impulses. But this was also the area of moral concern. Both in fiction and in life an attitude towards the behavior and motive of individuals related in and to a natural and social world almost necessarily become moral as it becomes engaged. Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance*, that this long ambitious epic of a novel has been seen to be "stunningly good" was an indication of Rohinton Mistry's stature. One of the first impressions one has on a reading of the novel is its rich and varied characterization. The four major characters are two middle class Parsis and two Hindu untouchables of the chammaar

profession whose lives become inextricably linked together under Emergency Rule of 1975-1977. The way their paths criss-cross is delineated makes for a fascinating study of interrelated to the moral dimensions of the lives of Rohinton Mistry's characters. No less important than the major characters are the lives of a host of minor and middling characters, the moral implications of whose lives are equally compelling.

The political-historical dimension of the novel was also obvious. However *A Fine Balance* was not merely a political novel. Rohinton Mistry succeeds in interweaving national history with the personal lives of the protagonists. Thus though the dominant setting of the novel was India's political milieu, "what galvanizes this novel" to use John Ball's words, was "the way the intersection of the political and the personal was given such compelling moral resonance." Rohinton Mistry may not be a moralist but his novel has moral dimensions: *A Fine Balance* was a richly detailed, humane narrative of the intertwined fates of four ordinary lives of "the dispossessed" as put by Mistry. The main action of the novel was set in a City by the Sea ostensibly Bombay and takes place during the Emergency of 1975. The 'narrative hub' within this urban setting was the tiny cramped house of Dina Dalal a young Parsi widow striving to maintain her independence as a dress maker. When failing eyesight threatens to end her tailoring career and the independence it provides she refashions herself as entrepreneurial middle person hiring two slum-dwelling tailors in her back room and takes in as a paying guest a student Maneck Kohlah who was the son of an old school friend. The narrative starts with these people the whole jing-bangtrio landing on the doorstep of Dina Dalal. The narrative then arcs back in time to bring the reader the separate stories of the four individuals their past and the circumstance that made this meeting in the present inevitable. The political angel naturally offers a fertile ground

for studying its moral implications. Though there are no obvious authorial intrusions Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* carries a sharp indictment of internal Emergency. The very description of the excesses of Emergency like the eviction of the poor from the cities the forced labour camps the mass sterilizations gains effects because of the way they are shown to intersect and adversely affect the lives of the fictional characters. That was to say the novelist has given us all the necessary facts using his art and leaves the act of applying moral labels to us.

Rohinton Mistry's credit as a creator of characters that even the minor characters and their actions address moral questions. The rich cast of memorable minor characters has earned Rohinton Mistry the appellation of being Dickensian in his art of characterization. The character of the Beggarmaster an influential strongman is truly interesting. He maintains and protects a beggar army in the metropolis in return for which he is paid from their earning. Retribution was swift upon those offenders or defaulters trespassing into his domain. Dina thinks he was a 'peculiar' and 'fearful' character who mutilates children's bodies to make them profitable beggars and a slave to money as he goes around with a briefcase chained to his wrist. Maneck says that "He's just a thoroughly modern businessman." However the Beggarmaster was not without his redeeming qualities the human angel comes through at times he is not being business like. In his own way he understands and cares for his beggars and tells Dina and others' "they surprised how much beggars are like ordinary human beings." Rohinton Mistry also chronicles the harassment of backward classes by upper castes in the villages through the story of Dukhi the chammaar. Intense caste oppression drives Dukhi to change the future of his sons Narayan and Ishvar and turns them into tailors. Even twenty years after independence Untouchability is still rife in rural India in spite of laws as lamented by Narayan. When Narayan asserts his right to vote he was brutally tortured and hanged by Thakur Dharamsi and his henchmen. As special punishment for daring to "misrepresent society's timeless balance" Dukhi and his entire family was burnt alive. Though narrated in terse and detached prose this is a particularly moving section of the novel which bring to life the sordid living conditions of the low-caste Indians in the villages.

The upper caste leaders connive with the bureaucracy to preserve their interests during the emergency. Thakur Dharamsi achieves respectability as a political leader because he organizes many sterilization camps. His cruel misuse of power indicates the beginning of the trend of criminalization of politics and politicization of crime. Naturally the novel raises many questions of political correctness as it shows that forces of privilege combine to suppress the lower castes the rural and the urban poor for self-gain. As John Ball says political positions are inevitably moral ones and engagement with the political dimensions of life may lead to a strengthening and clarifying or to a weakening and corrupting of moral views. Thus in fiction *A Fine Balance* the point of view that matters most and was least like the geographical one was the author's set of values what he considers important especially morally for this gets at the heart of the novel the characters being and doing. The way the main characters the tailors Ishvar and Om Prakash endure suggests that dignity is

inherent in the heroic manner in which they strive and perhaps in their insuppressible sense of humour. *A Fine Balance* can be read as an expression of the predicament of the self in the Indian rural context. In malice of its stark practicality the novel reveals a fundamental moral purpose and a positive commitment to justice and humanitarian worries. Like a wise novelist Rohinton Mistry manifests his moral views for the most part in the actions and contours of his characters and in little cues along the way.

References

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