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QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

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Abstract

World literature has an abundance of writers whose writings have prospered while they were in exile. A major contribution in this regard has been that of the Indian writers, like Rushdie and Naipaul, who live as world citizens - a global manifestation of the exilic condition. Indian diasporic writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry and Hari Kunzru have all made their names while residing abroad. Rohinton Mistry, the writer of genius has established himself as one of Canada's most critically acclaimed writers who has gained a magnanimous popularity in the world of literature. He has published a collection of short stories and three novels which have met with a good deal of acclaim and he is the only author all of whose novels have been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* met with high critical compliments and it has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. *A Fine Balance* deals the four characters – Dina Dalal, Om and Ishvar Darji and Maneck Kohlah who come to live together during the emergency period of Indira Gandhi. With attention to the detail of his characters' everyday lives, his writing is full of examples of search for pattern in the chaos of a dislocated life.

Key-Words

Mistry, *A Fine Balance*, World, Booker Prize, Chaos, Canada.

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World literature has an abundance of writers whose writings have prospered while they were in exile. A major contribution in this regard has been that of the Indian writers, like Rushdie and Naipaul, who live as world citizens - a global manifestation of the exilic condition. Indian-English writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Vikram Chandra, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Sunetra Gupta, Rohinton Mistry, and Hari Kunzru have all made their names while residing abroad. Rohinton Mistry, preeminent Indian born diasporic writer has established himself as one of Canada's most critically acclaimed writers who has gained a magnanimous popularity in the literary world. He has published a collection of short stories and three novels which have met with a good deal of acclaim and his all novels have been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

Although Rohinton Mistry 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. As a Parsi and also a immigrant in Canada, Rohinton Mistry look at him as a symbol of double displacement and this is a recurrent theme in his literary works. Critics have praised Mistry's growth as a writer and his transparent style, commonly drawing comparisons to Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, and Thomas Hardy. Rohinton Mistry's sound knowledge of India's history is reflected in *A Fine Balance*. It's a magnificent story that can be irrefutably termed as a master piece which was three times short listed for Booker Prize. Mistry belongs to the class of those writers whose endeavour

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is to give voice to the anguish and melancholies of the poor and vulnerable segment of the society. *A Fine Balance* presents the same segment of the Indian society, whose lives are caught in the inhuman cycle of poverty. Most of his novels locates native Bombay, portrays a scenic image of India, as a lively and interesting picture of a city whose vivid environment is shown with remarkable clarity. An Australian feminist writer Germaine Greer, criticized *A Fine Balance* is “a Canadian book about India” (Ross). His characters’ symbolize reality of life and his books discover the heartbreaking status of India’s frantic destitute even as he balances this despair by presenting the dignity and bliss they sense in easy pleasures and their extended relations.

Bombay is the locale of the story in *A Fine Balance*, which Rohinton Mistry left behind for Canada at the age of twenty-three. This ‘imaginary homeland’ - something of a literary capital within South Asian diasporic writing today - has inevitably led to comparisons with Salman Rushdie, another Bombay born author now based abroad. However the differences between the two men are perhaps as compelling as their similarities. Both Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1996), are set in Bombay during the administration of Indira Gandhi and the state of emergency. Where Rushdie’s novel gravitates toward the Muslim middle classes, Mistry’s seems more at home among the Parsi community and the poor. Both (whether it is Rushdie’s Booker of Bookers or Mistry’s Booker shortlisted) have enjoyed a good deal of critical and commercial success. But Rushdie’s work is often magic realism; Mistry’s writing is typically based on harsh realities. A. G. Mojtabei reviews that Mistry “needs no infusion of magic realism to vivify the real. The real, through his eyes, is magical” (Mojtabai). Several reviewers have pointed out that in casting his novels in some of the most turbulent periods of India’s modern history; Mistry is able to effectively appropriate historical fact for his own fictional needs.

A Fine Balance focuses on the unlikely friendships of four disparate people who come to live together during the turbulent period of Indira Gandhi's 1975 bid to retain power. No fewer than 100,000 people were arrested and detained indefinitely without trial; many times that number was harassed mercilessly. The hardships facing people in Mistry’s books - events such as casual death, amputation, casual murder, and a forced castration—can be difficult to read, although Mistry has been extolled for his ability to portray his characters’ humanism and natural joy despite their horrific struggles. As it follows the lives of four diverse individuals, who found themselves together as the result of a series of unfortunate events portrays clearly in this novel.

Dina Dilal, an impoverished middle-class Parsi widow who has to escape from the clutches of her domineering brother. The apartment represents her attempt to maintain her freedom, but she cannot afford the rent on her own. She is first convinced to take in a fellow Parsi as a boarder, Maneck Kohlah, whose parents have sent him to the city from his

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beloved Himalayan hill country so that he can earn a degree. Then she hires two tailors to do piece work, Hindus whom she allows to live in the apartment: Ishvar Darji and his seventeen-year-old nephew, Omprakash. *A Fine Balance* is concerned with characters on the move. The four main characters of this novel [who] undergo from a sense of rootlessness (Novy Kapadia). Maneck's remark on his native is "Nothing is as fine as one's native." (Mistry 7) Maneck occupies a special position in the text in that the effects of migration are made most explicit in his story. Maneck Kohlah experiences two instances of displacement. Like Om and Ishvar, he is forced to migrate to Bombay, and thereby moves from a rural to an urban region. In accordance with his community's capitalist ethos, Maneck afterwards leaves Bombay for Dubai. Maneck's situation in Dubai can be understood almost exclusively by referring to his homelessness and he feels "trapped" and "exiled (Mistry 584). Dubai merely contributes to a confusion of Maneck's sense of identity by prolonging his displacement: "His uprooting never seemed to end" (Mistry 585). Unlike Om and Ishvar, Maneck lacks the ability to adapt to his environment, a shortcoming which results in his eventual suicide. Maneck frequently remembers his home while he is in Dubai: "Not one day had passed during his long exile that he did not think about his home and his parents" (Mistry 584). Memory, however, is far from being a solace. Emigration has brought about isolation. Isolation is however regarded as the diasporic experience.

In *A Fine Balance*, "the Emergency intrudes obtrusively into the lives of all of [. . .] characters leading to their eventual loss and destruction" (Bhatnagar). The Emergency violently ends friendships. Om and Ishvar lose Ashraf who is beaten to death in the course of a police action, and Maneck loses Avinash, a student leader, who disappears and is tortured to death because of his critical attitude towards India's official policy. Moreover, with Ashraf dead, Nawaz denounced and Dina too protective of her independence at first to offer them shelter, Om and Ishvar are eventually down-and-out in Bombay. Due to the government's beautification programme, the two of them are not allowed to sleep on the pavement, and their hut in a jhopadpatti (i.e. a slum) is destroyed in the course of the cynical vision of a more beautiful Bombay, "actually speaking, sleeping on the street is breaking the law...we are sleeping here only because your men came with machines and destroyed our jhopadpattis" (Mistry 325).

After India's gaining independence in 1947 the majority of Indians rejoiced at the departure of the British colonizers. However as history shows Indians proved unable to cope with the immense responsibility of being their own rulers. The Parsis who had thrived during British colonization suffered hugely at the departure of the colonizers and complained that the latter had left too early. Instead of trying to cope with their new status within post colonial India most of them chose to celebrate the past and long for it. This is what Maneck's parents used to do during their gatherings with friends, while of course, following British fashions.

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"Consolation, as always was found in muddled criticism of the colonizers who, lacking the stomach for proper conclusions, had departed in a hurry, though the post-mortem was tempered by nostalgia for the old days" (Mistry 209).

Even with their unlike settings, the four develop into something like a family, as they bend over on each other in the face of financial hardship, personal troubles, and political turmoil. Dina herself from the political tumult of the period: "Government problems and games played by people in power," she tells Ishvar. "It doesn't affect ordinary people like us" (Mistry 86). The lives of a cast of colourful characters - including the local Beggar master, a guilt ridden rent collector, a hair collector who takes his work a tad too seriously, and even a litter of nearly untamed cats - become entwined with the principles, providing an unusually detailed and richly textured portrait of a community of the urban poor. But inexorably, measures catch up to the little group and the force of their friendliness for one another proves no much for the force of a society that offers little financial opportunity, little real prospects for single women, distinguish against religious minorities, and is embark on a genuinely evil campaign of mass sterilizations of reluctant public. All of these forces come to bear on the apartment dwellers in ways that range from the merely sad to the truly horrific. Their dreams and hope of devastation is undeniably a real heartbreak.

Mistry inscribes the problems of degenerating urban Indian society, ethnic difference, caste system, fatal consequences to people are laudable. *A Fine Balance* brings us the reality of the character's imbalanced life and his psyche of his Bombay. All the ghastly proceedings disrupted "fine balance". The deprived and underprivileged society needs equality with everyday requirements. If the inequality survives, the balance will not survive.

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