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HISTORY AS A MARKER OF OTHERNESS IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S "A FINE BALANCE"

Adina CÂMPU[1]

Abstract: *Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born writer belonging to the Parsi community. He has been living in Canada for the past thirty years where he is currently one of the most celebrated writers to emerge out of the multicultural framework of the country. This paper deals with one of the ways in which he constructs cultural difference/Otherness in his second and most famous novel to date "A Fine Balance" first published in 1995. The book is set in an unnamed city that the reader can easily guess is Bombay and it concentrates on the terror experienced by people during the State of Emergency of 1975-1977 underlining the most unsightly and hideous aspects of life such as poverty, despair and violence.*

Key words: *Emergency, post-independence, Partition, public, private.*

1. Introduction

"A Fine Balance" is Mistry's second novel set in an unnamed city that the reader can easily guess is Bombay, the author's native city. The year is 1975 when Mistry emigrated to Canada and the year that Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency setting herself up as India's virtual dictator. The novel has received wide critical acclaim and numerous awards, among which the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Fiction and the Commonwealth Writers Prize can be mentioned, and was short listed for the prestigious Booker Prize. The book concentrates its attention on the terror experienced by people during the Emergency underlining the most unsightly and hideous aspects of life such as poverty, despair and violence. In this novel Mistry expands his area of interest moving beyond Parsi life to embrace the fate of the wider Indian nation at the time of the infamous

Emergency. He concerns himself here not only with members of the Parsi community but also with lower caste Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. It is mainly a list of characters from the margins who find themselves at the mercy of the Brahminical and pseudo-secular elites shaping India in the 1970s. *"A Fine Balance"* can be labelled a historical novel as it presents some of the most important events in the history of post-independence India and the way these affect the lives of ordinary people. The point of view of the people in power, the actual actors is not given but instead, we deal with a view of the ones who suffer the consequences of their actions. The book focuses on two such events: the Partition coupled with Indian Independence in 1947 and the State of Emergency between 1975-1977.

[1] Department of Foreign Languages, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

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Though a comprehensive presentation of these historical events is beyond the scope of this paper I consider that a certain amount of information is essential to an accurate understanding of the problems under investigation.

2. Historical Facts

India had been a British colony for many years, but in 1946, after Indian nationalists had long fought for a sovereign state, British officials decided they would grant India independence if its leaders could agree upon a form of government. The New Congress Party and the Muslim League could not agree, and violence between Muslims and Hindus erupted throughout the country. Indian and British officials agreed upon a solution to the bloody quarrel: They would partition India into two separate nations – India and Pakistan. Unfortunately, this did not put an end to the bloodshed and many people had to leave their homes: Sikhs and Hindus in Pakistan moved to India and Muslims in India moved to Pakistan. The violence between Hindus and Muslims is presented in the novel and the reader is also witness to the impact it has on the lives of characters such as Narayan and Ishvar as well as Farokh Kholah.

On August 15th, 1947, the day after Pakistan achieved independence, India became an independent nation too. Jawaharlal Nehru served as the newly independent state's first Prime Minister. His inaugural speech, delivered at the stroke of midnight on the 15th of August, 1947, pointed to India's long history of ups and downs.

"At the dawn of history India started on her unending quest, and trackless centuries are filled with her striving and the grandeur of her successes and failures. Through good and ill fortune alike she has never lost sight of that quest or forgotten the ideals which gave her strength. We end today a period of ill fortune and India discovers herself again"[1]

But the heralded good fortune was yet to come. Nehru was generally considered a successful leader and the nation was at peace during his time in office. After he died in 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri came to power. Shastri's rule was more violent and bloody, he declared war on Pakistan after it invaded two regions of India. He died suddenly in 1966 after only twenty months as prime minister and was succeeded by Indira Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru's only daughter. Her appointment to the head of the ruling Congress Party was considered a compromise between the right and left wings of the party; however right-wingers in the party continually questioned her leadership. Shortly after her New Congress party won a landslide victory in 1972, her opponents in the Socialist Party alleged that she had committed electoral malpractice In June 1975 the High Court ruled against her, which should have meant that she would lose her seat and be obliged to stay out of politics for six years. Rather than submit to the judgment, Mrs. Gandhi instructed the President of India to announce the State of Emergency just before midnight on 25th of June 1975. She imprisoned her political foes, passed laws that limited personal freedom and placed the nation's press under strict censorship. She demonstrated her mastery over time itself by introducing constitutional amendments conferring on herself retrospective immunity from prosecution in respect of past or future criminal offences. Perhaps the most sinister elements of the Emergency were initiated by Indira's son and so-called heir, Sanjay Gandhi. In the guise of *'beautification'* a process of slum clearance and family planning was instituted. In practice, the

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former meant clearing the poor away from areas they had improved and made habitable all by themselves so that these slices of real estate could be used by Sanjay's friends, the property developers. The latter meant that people were forced or tricked into allowing themselves to be sterilized, in order that *'motivators'*, conscripted to impose the unpopular measure, could meet the targets imposed on them by employers empowered to bestow or withhold financial rewards. Sanjay Gandhi became extremely powerful during the Emergency because his mother saw him as one of the few people she could trust. When she felt certain that she had effectively quelled her political opposition, Gandhi finally called for open elections in 1977. However, she misjudged her support and she and her party were defeated. She left office but returned to Parliament in 1978.As Sanjay was killed in a plane crash in 1980, Indira began to prepare her second son, Rajiv, for the leadership of the New Congress party. She ruled as prime Minister again from 1980 until her assassination in 1984.In the early 1980s, several of India's different populations sought more independence from the central government. Sikhsa extremists in the Punjab region resorted to violence to voice their demands for autonomy. Gandhi responded by ordering an army attack on the Sikhs' holiest shrine, the Golden Temple of Amritsar, in June 1984. More than four hundred and fifty Sikhs were killed in this attack. In November 1984 Gandhi was assassinated in her own garden by two of her Sikh bodyguards. Under Mrs. Gandhi's leadership India's democracy suffered immensely. Besides the abusive measures during the Emergency, Gandhi also increased the use of military force in the nation, and she fostered a culture of nepotism.

3. Interference of the Public Historical Sphere with the Personal Intimate One

3. 1. The Partition of 1947

Although the doing of the people in power, all the events narrated above have had a considerable impact on ordinary citizens such as the protagonists of this novel. 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 immensely 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.

"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).

If we consider the situation of Farokh Kohlah we discover that it is not only nostalgia for times gone by but also a more pragmatic sadness over the departure of the colonizers as he had lost huge plots of land constituting the majority of his estate in the Partition. He is now left with only a small shop to run out of which the family has to manage to earn their living.

"Once, though, Maneck's family had been extremely wealthy. Fields of grain, orchards of apple and peach, a lucrative contract to supply provisions to

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cantonments along the frontier – all this was among the inheritance of Farokh Kohlah, and he tended it well, making it increase and multiply for the wife he was to marry and the son who would be born. But long before that eagerly awaited birth, there was another gorier parturition, when two nations incarnated out of one. A foreigner drew a magic line on a map and called it the new border; it became a river of blood upon the earth. And the orchards, fields, factories, businesses all on the wrong side of that line, vanished with a wave of the pale conjuror's wand" (Mistry 205).

Farokh has to fight for the lost land but hope of getting it back is very scarce. His fight, though, is not only for the financial gains that the recovered land would bring him. We learn that he is a fierce lover of nature which turns out to be one of the things he cares most about. He gets all his energy and lust for life from the long walks in the forests. The fights and chaos brought about by the Partition are contrasted with the peaceful and orderly rhythm of nature.

Nevertheless, he is not the only character in the book whose life is shattered by the Partition. The violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims reach unimaginable proportions in certain regions.

"…communal slaughter at the brand new border had ignited riots everywhere, and sporting a fez in a Hindu neighborhood was as fatal as possessing a foreskin in a Muslim one. In certain areas it was wiser to go bareheaded, for choosing incorrectly among fez, white cap, and turban could mean losing one's head." (Mistry, 87).

Ishvar and Narayan are witnesses to all this aggression while they learn the trade of tailoring in the house of the Muslim Ashraf Chacha. They repay the Muslim's kindness to them by saving the latter and his family from the hands of an angry Hindu mob ready to slaughter and burn to the ground everything Muslim.

Though part of an upper-middle class family and living in the city Dina, too, feels the consequences of historical events even if not directly. As a young teenager she has a very troubled relationship with her brother whose strict and abusive rules she finds difficult to obey. As a result of the violence accompanying the Independence and Partition she is banned from leaving the house, a fact which traps her within the confines of her brother's tyranny.

"But a few days later riots started in the city, in the wake of Partition and the British departure, and Dina was stuck at home with Nusswan…..When the curfew was lifted, Dina flew off to school, happy as an uncaged bird, eager for her eight hours of Nusswan-less existence" (Mistry 25).

Miraculously Nusswan allows Dina to throw away her plaits after the curfew as if the riots and aggression had touched a sensitive chord in his heart. She has gained a new right just like the country she resides in has gained independence.

3.2. The State of Emergency

The second historical event, the State of Emergency, has an overwhelming presence in the novel and devastating consequences for the existence of many characters. Ishvar and Omprakash are probably the ones who suffer the most. In the name of the so-called *'beautification'* programme their shack in the *"jhopadpatti'*[2] is destroyed by bulldozers, they are not allowed to sleep in the railway station or on the pavement and they are taken by force to a work camp where conditions are

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almost unbearable for any human being. In this context the slogan of the government: *"The nation is on the move!"* (Mistry, 303) seems more than ironical because moving which should stand for progress and advancement does in fact stand for destruction and homelessness. Individuals lose their human dignity and basic rights. Ishvar and Omprakash are horribly mutilated by the enforced sterilizations and subsequent infection which causes Ishvar to lose his legs leaving him in the impossibility of practicing tailoring and thus earning his living. Very significant in this respect is Omprakash's remark: *"You really thought they would help? said Om. 'Don't you understand? We are less than animals to them.'"* (Mistry, 540) And as if this were not enough Ishavr and Om lose their good friend and mentor Ashraf who is beaten to death in the market place in the course of the irresponsible actions which characterized the State of Emergency. A man in the sterilization camp accurately summarizes the situation: *"When the ones in power have lost their reason, there is no hope"* (Mistry, 535)

Not only the very poor are powerless in the face of the terror of the Emergency. Maneck loses the only friend he had managed to make at college- the Students Union leader, Avinash, who is tortured to death by the police for speaking against government measures. It is again ironical that Avinash is the one who introduces Maneck to the game of chess. The use of chess as a metaphor for life fits on several levels and Avinash tries to use chess to teach the naïve country boy about life; not very successfully apparently. The chessmen are divided in function, pyramid style, like the structure of a society. At the top are the king and queen, who are protected and insulated by the various layers of defense below them: rooks, bishops, knights. The major and most dispensable layer consists of the identical pawns. Because they have no individual identities, these pawns are easily expandable. India's pawns are the poor, like Avinash, the homeless, like Ishvar and Om, all of whom exist at the bottom of the social pyramid. Unfortunately the reader discovers that rich people do not make any effort to understand the drama of these individuals. An example would be the attitude expressed by Nusswan and Mrs. Gupta of Au Revoir Exports. Dina's brother is supportive of government measures considering that:

"People sleeping on the pavements gives industry a bad name. My friend was saying last week – he's the director of a multinational, mind you, not some small, two-paisa business – he was saying that at least two hundred million people are surplus to requirements, they should be eliminated…..got rid of. Counting them as unemployment statistics year after year gets us nowhere just makes the numbers look bad. What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be a mercy" (Mistry 372-373)

Nusswan calls the Prime Minister *"Our visionary leader"* and the Emergency *"A true spirit of Renaissance"* (Mistry 371) which is again highly ironical because one of the most important values associated with renaissance is the celebration of the human spirit, the very spirit which is crushed during the Emergency. Similarly, Mrs. Gupta, the owner of Au Revoir Exports is the capitalist who prospers in a socialist setting. Like Nusswan she is very ignorant of the fate of the poor and dispossessed and praises the Emergency benefits. Indeed, the State of Emergency gives her the possibility to pay low wages and make a good profit without fear of union leaders and strikes. She is the voice

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of the wealthier class who supports Indira Gandhi and fails to see the humanity of the people below her. She relies on the empty but logically balanced rhetoric of Gandhi's corrupt government to justify her own actions in business.

It is to be noted that Mistry exposes the pomposity and the absurdity of the actions of the political regime in memorable satirical scenes. The chapter wittingly entitled *"Day at the Circus, Night in the Slum"* is representative of this. Here, Ishvar, Om, Rajaram and all the people living in the hutment colony are forced to get on buses in order to attend a Prime Minister speech. The metaphor of the circus is introduced as government officials arrive in the *'jhopadpatti'* to gather the people for the speech.

"Their performance on the tightrope of mud soon collected a crowd. A puff of wind caught the umbrellas; the men wobbled. A stronger gust pulled them off balance.
The audience began to laugh. Some children imitated the funny walk. The visitors abandoned their sandals to the mud and, mustering dignity, walked towards the water tap queue" (Mistry 258).

The episode is an occasion to describe the idiosyncratic exaggeration those in power indulge in. It is one of the occasions that serves, once again, to show that description, even when it is seemingly neutral and objective, can be a weapon for incisive political commentary. The absolute alienation of the forced audience from the political discourse is made clear even before the rally by the deliberately ironic comments of the slum dwellers to the party workers when invited to attend the rally:

"'Tell her how happy we are! Why do we need to come?'… 'Ask your men with cameras to pull some photos of our lovely houses, our healthy children! Show that to the Prime Minister!' (Mistry 318-319)

Moreover, descriptions of the activities of the audience during the political speeches illustrate the latter's complete lack of relevance to the concerns of the slum dwellers. The commentary of the hair collector, Rajaram - *"'See!' said Rajaram. 'I told you it's going to be a day at the circus – we have clowns, monkeys, acrobats, everything'"* (Mistry 325)- makes the otherwise unformulated criticism of the masquerade of fawning politicians, rehearsed hand-clapping exercises and various gimmicks to get the audience to clap obvious.

A *"drum roll of water"* (Mistry 258) accompanies the spokesman invitation to the rally and modifies his pitch. When despite the reward offered – five rupees, sandwiches and tea – most people prove unwilling to go Sergeant Kesar orders his men to block the slum exits and force people to get on the buses. Ironically, Monkey –Man is prohibited from bringing his monkeys because their presence might give the prime minister's speech the appearance of a circus while her political acolytes bow in front of her with humiliation. Everything seems staged and fake. The stage on which the rally is to take place is bedecked with flowers and illuminated by colored lights, and there is even an eighty foot cardboard-and-plywood cut out of the Prime Minister, with arms outstretched, an outline map of India forming a battered halo behind her head. Compared to all these massive decorations Indira Gandhi and her speech seem less impressive. Her gesture of flinging the garlands with which she has been overwhelmed into the crowd is not well received:

"'Her father also used to do that when he was Prime Minister' said Ishvar.

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'Yes', said Rajaram. "I saw it once. But when he did it he looked humble.'

'She looks like she is throwing rubbish at us,' said Om.

Rajaram laughed. 'Isn't that the politician's specialty?' (Mistry 263)

Mistry takes the parody a step further when a helicopter takes to the sky scattering packets of rose petals, one of which fails to open concussing an onlooker, and the event is 'blessed' by the presence of Sanjay Gandhi floating above in a hot air balloon dropping above the audience leaflets outlining the Twenty - Point Programme. The words of the master of ceremonies are hilarious and ridiculous:

"Yes my brothers and sisters, Mother India sits on stage with us, and the son of India shines from the sky upon us! The glorious present here, now, and the glorious future up there, waiting to descend and embrace our lives! What a blessed nation we are!" (Mistry, 266)

The farcical situation reaches the climax when the giant cutout, disturbed by the wind whipped up by the helicopter's blades, hovers over the crowd below:

"The crowd shouted in alarm. The figure with outstretched arms groaned, and the ropes strained at the moorings. Security men waved frantically at the helicopter while struggling to hold onto the ropes and braces. But the whirlwind was much too strong to withstand. The cutout started to topple slowly, face forward. Those in the vicinity of the cardboard-and-plywood giant ran for their lives" (Mistry 267).

The rally breaks up and ambulances *"Come to collect the casualties of the eighty-foot Prime Minister's collapse"* (Mistry 267).

Sadly the implementation of the Twenty-Point programme will have a direct and destructive effect upon the lives of Om and Ishvar. The Prime Minister expressed through this her wish to provide houses for the poor, control population growth and eliminate poverty from cities, towns and villages. But rather than adopt a rational and humane approach in dealing with these problems, coercion, abuse and tyranny are used to achieve the objectives both in the course of the narrative as in the the historical reality. A few days after the rally, Om and Ishvar return home to the devastating sight of their "jhopadpatty" being razed to the ground according to "City Beautification" plans so much praised by the complacent middle-class as we have already seen above. All this is carried out by the ubiquitous Sergeant Kesar, representative of the law who will be encountered at each unhappy turning point in the lives of the tailors. It is left to the constables to explain what is being done to the disbelieving slum dwellers. The paradox of these decisions taken in the higher echeleons of power is that the eradication of the slum is followed by the erection of two giant billboards with the Prime Minister's face.

However, the next point of the programme is yet to be implemented. City beautification has to be followed by the elimination of poverty. Officials step in to legally allow the elimination of poverty by giving the representatives of the law the power to arrest the inoffensive beggars. The tailor's next ordeal is the experience of being lifted from the streets being brought by force to the work camp where they are coerced to backbreaking labour and treated like slaves. As a representative, though a reluctant one, of the law and the state, Sergeant Kesar has had to do many such lawful but humanly shameful jobs, and the guilt of his actions for decisions

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made by the powerful elite haunt him. The proceedings are contrasted with the reaction of the beggars as they try to protect themselves from the callous cruelty of authorized institutional officials towards the disempowered poor. The description of the conditions in the work camp that builds to the development issue in the novel adds to the sense of unease with government policy.

The tailors' return to the city marks their involvement with a new type of urban subalternity, as controlled subjects to whom Beggarmaster is a protector. The final blow to their human dignity will take place with the forced implementation of another government policy – sterilization as a way of population control. The irony of how *'development'* and *'beautification'* institutionalize cruelty and exploitation is obvious. The implication is that any urban development and government measure works in conjunction with the so-called 'law' to exploit the poor. They take place invariably at the cost of humanity.

Mistry prefers to refrain from presenting directly his opposition towards Emergency. There are instances in the novel where his characters voice their anti-Emergency opinions directly but these are scarce. However, in this illustrative scene he brings to the fore the excesses and absurdities of the political regime.

4. Conclusion

In presenting history Mistry concentrates on those moments or processes that are produced in the construction of cultural Otherness. According to A.K. Singh

"The prime aim of literature is to initiate dialogue where it does not exist, particularly between the people and the communities that share a certain geo-socio-eco-political and cultural space" (Singh 109)

anonymity and heartlessness of the entire *"A Fine Balance"* offers the social articulation of Otherness from a minority perspective, focusing on the world of the deprived classes with their aspirations and assertions. The proliferation of alternative histories of the excluded produces a pluralist anarchy on the one hand and recreates the nation it belongs to on the other. This novel tries to uncover the suppressed or neglected or misrepresented chapters of Indian history and present the writer's point of view as well. This re-narration of history from his own personal perspective helps the writer to construct his own story of both his community and nation.

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[1] Cited in Herbert, M. *"Bookclub-in-a-Box: Rohinton Mistry's 'A Fine Balance'"*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc, 1995.
[2] A settlement of huts; a slum in India.

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