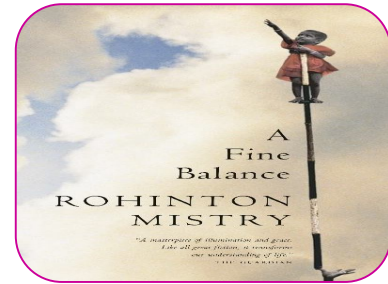




REPRESENTATION OF FAMILY IN MISTRY'S A FINE BALANCE

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper, an attempt has been made to show how Rohinton Mistry portrays the concepts of family with reference to his novel *A Fine Balance*. In his text, Mistry explores the caste system, authoritarian political power, strict family values and the resultant struggle in the individual psyche. He depicts the slow disintegration of family values and harmony at the hands of powerful economic and political entities.

KEYWORDS: Family, Mistry, Caste System, Indian Novel

INTRODUCTION:

The story of four individuals who meet, reside in, and work in a sizable, congested metropolis and valiantly fight to survive in the face of extreme adversity is told in *A Fine Balance* (1997). The majority of the novel is set in 1975, but while it delves into the histories of modern India and each main character, it also provides a fleeting look at the mid-1980s in the epilogue and earlier eras of the twentieth century. The novel's sixteen chapters provide each of the key characters with more in-depth attention after their initial introductions in the prologue. Mistry places chapters showing the key characters living and working together in between the biographical ones. The novel is far from chaotic, even though the action swings back and forth in time from 1975. One of the most diverse countries on earth, India is made up of numerous different ethnicities, religions, civilizations, political systems, and linguistic groups. These are all fairly represented in the characters and politics, both past and current.

FAMILY IN A FINE BALANCE:

A Fine Balance is about Dr. Shroff and his family. He has one son Nusswan and a daughter Dina Dalal, who is the real protagonist of this novel. Shroff is a patriarch who ran his nuclear family in a strict manner and he dies unexpectedly leaving the family with no direction to follow. Mrs. Shroff has no significant role in the family after the death of her husband since Nusswan takes over all the power into his hand. It is found that familialism took prominence as Nusswan wanted his sister Dina to be under his control so that he could be in charge and ensure the welfare of the family as a whole, he did not care much for Dina's desire to be her own master; however, he is not successful in his attempt. As an immediate action to display his power he stops the services of the maid, who did not accept his sexual advances, and asks Dina to do all the household chores. The authoritarian patriarchal system in the family is very clearly seen in the manner in which Dina is often beaten up by Nusswan without any

reason. He slaps her and strikes her palm with a ruler. He also compels her to get married to the groom that he chooses.

Dina's rebellion is indicative of a desire to be free of subservience to others. She gains access to power by exercising her choice in selecting her life partner Rustom whom she meets as part of a music show. Nusswan sends his mother to a nursing home, after his marriage, where she dies. He wants Dina too out of the house and this she makes easy for him by making her own choice regarding Rustom. The atmosphere that prevailed in the family after the death of both parents becomes unbearable for Dina who gives up her ambition of becoming a doctor. For the short time period after her marriage to Rustom, she leads a happy life which is short lived as she loses him soon in an accident. She is left with neither parents nor husband and is forced to live like an abandoned woman, alone. She had been taught tailoring earlier, which helps her to start her own small business in tailoring. As a widow she has to face many struggles in life. Relief comes in the form of an opportunity from the manager of a large export textile company, Mrs. Gupta. Dina gets a lot of orders through her but she soon finds it difficult to complete all the work on her own and has to hire two more tailors to run her business smoothly. A solution is found when she receives Ishwar and Omprakash, two rustic migrants, looking for work, at her door. Following them, there comes Maneck Kohlah, a student from a hillside town of Himalayas, who joins as a paying guest in Dina's house.

A family setup is established with Dina as the head. Dina practices strict control over all the members in her house. Her position seems to be the locus of control as one can notice when both Ishwar and Omprakash fall silent whenever Dina arrives. In fact, they hate Dina for being very strict and for practicing power politics on them. Maneck is from a nuclear family. His father Farokh Kohlah who ran the family was a true patriarch. He was very strict and wanted his son to follow all his instructions. Farokh had owned property and wealth. He had run a very happy family. Unfortunately, the family was terribly shaken by the India-Pakistan Partition and Farokh had lost all his properties, which affected him terribly. Globalization issues are also found in this novel. It was the arrival of multinational companies that caused the closure of Farokh's company. He then sent his son to Mumbai to study about refrigeration which was when he lived at Dina's house. After his studies, Maneck is sent to Dubai to work. He returns from there only for the funeral of his father. Maneck's life was a failure due to the existential crisis and depression arising out of the working of social and political forces. He finally commits suicide as that seemed to him to be the only way out of his difficulties. Rohinton Mistry shapes his character Maneck Kohlah based on his own outlook and understanding. Mistry's experience with Emergency in India is reflected through the realist views in his novel and his portrayal of Maneck. Mistry allows Maneck to reflect most deeply on his own real experiences. He sympathizes with the other characters and tears up at the idea that "life seemed so hopeless, with nothing but misery for everyone..." (FB316)

Another family in this novel is that of Dukhi Mochi, his wife Roopa and their children Narayan and Ishwar, who live as part of a joint family. They live a hand-to-mouth existence. As a family belonging to a caste low in the hierarchy, they are ill-treated by the people of the upper castes. Dukhi does not want his sons to carry on with the family profession in the village. Instead he wants to send them to work in the city. Narayan and Ishwar go to the city of Bombay and work as tailors. Changes take place in the family only when the father decides that his son would not follow their traditional profession. Narayan and Ishwar find that everything is different in Bombay, including the lifestyle. Their poor economic background makes the city life appear strange to them. They had worked under a man called Ashraf in the village. Since Ashraf was going through a bad time, Narayan leaves Ishwar in the city and returns to his village to establish his own tailoring shop. Narayan's son Omprakash, however, does not like to practice his grandfather's profession and decides to go to the city with Ishwar. Coercive power interferes in the use of physical or mental force in impressing one's way on others in the family, not caring whether others are unwilling or indifferent. A bad time for the Dukhi's family starts when Narayan announces that the people of Chamaar would vote. On hearing this, Thakur Dharamsi, a politically influential person, maims the whole family by setting their houses and property on fire. By the time Omprakash and Ishwar reach their village from the city, nothing remains except ashes. Life

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appears to be of little or no value in the working of the power processes. But the same power process played in Ishwar's and Omprakash's life also. Omprakash was forcefully castrated. This is a sort of revenge that Dharamsi took on Omprakash who spat on him when the former revealed the truth about the death of his family members. External locus of control is evident here because the entire family of Dukhi was controlled and was badly affected by Dharamsi. After all the above said incidents, Dina is left all alone. Living in a very disturbed state of mind, she has no other choice but to go back to her brother. Once again it is evident that the individualistic locus of control gives way to authoritarian locus of control. In patriarchal societies, crimes against women are common, as they are seen as being inferior to men and hence oppressed. These crimes may include rape, abuse, and even burning of women. Female children are also viewed as being less valuable than male children. This is evident in the novel, as having daughters was frowned upon; mothers were beaten by husbands and some were even ordered to "discreetly get rid of the newborn" (114).

The suppressive role of women, as portrayed in the book, is important in understanding the significance behind some of the characters' actions, such as Dina's. Her choice to move out of her brother's place to be on her own and remain unmarried despite his wishes gives the impression that she is strong-willed and self-confident, though she is crossing the culture assigned gender boundaries. Following gender stereotypes, societal class distinction plays a crucial role in the characters' fates in *A Fine Balance*. The novel is set in India of a time when social hierarchy was divided into castes, with the lowest in the hierarchy labeled as the "untouchables". People of lower castes were prohibited from walking through upper caste areas and were brutally punished for defying the wishes of those higher than them. They were essentially treated as slaves. In the novel, these "untouchables" were punished harshly for even insignificant deeds perceived as crimes. Ishvar's grandfather discusses how "[the upper caste men] accused [a lower caste man] of stealing...they chopped off his left-hand fingers" (110). Another example of caste inequality appears when "[a lower caste woman] refused to go to the field with the [upper caste man's] son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square" (111).

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, it can be said that *A Fine Balance* is thus a repository of the various individual, familial, political and societal sufferings typical to the Indian context. The stringent caste system, authoritarian political power, strict family values and the resultant struggle in the individual psyche are captured in the ensemble of characters in the novel. The disintegration of family values and harmony takes place slowly at the hands of powerful economic and political entities.

WORKS CITED

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