CHAPTER - IV

A FINE BALANCE: PARSBI MARGINALIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF DIASPORA

Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair, you will say to yourself: perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured: this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true (Honoré be Balzac’s, Le Père Goriot).

The text is prefaced by a warning from Honoré be Balzac’s, Le Père Goriot. The warning itself divides people from birth into those who have a future and those who have no future. The novel is an attempt to show the spirit of struggle for survival. It is important to note that our politicians for some trivial gains are distorting the image of secular India. R. Carroll has a point in this context of cultural assimilation and cultural exclusivity:

People can be ‘different’ in various social ways while still sharing the same culture. The rhetoric of distinctiveness has reminded, may change without the culture itself alter very much. In other words when an individual changes socially, the cultural premises (and the logic which gives order to the world) do not necessarily change. What is changed is the way of expressing the basic truth, not truth themselves (Carroll 145).

Mistry artistically suggests that cultural differences are deliberately raised to distort the harmonious environment of the society. He presents the idea of family by
assimilation of the characters of two different castes and classes of society as the circumstances forced them to live as a family. It is described analytically how the reservations of caste and class melt and a new hybrid culture emerges. The novelist makes a serious effort to attain balance between hybridity and exclusivity of culture. The metaphor of quilt powerfully suggests the assimilation and exclusiveness of different cultural background of the characters. Mistry strongly establishes the idea of a balanced approach in life - inwardly as well outwardly through the title of the novel:

    The diversity and plurality which has been noted as aspects of post-modern society have a particular value so far as they promote an attention to the radical otherness of different cultures. There is thus a new, post-modern form of cross fertilization taking place (Trikha 215).

As a chronicler of post colonial period of India in his present novel he covers the period from independence to the assassination of Smt. Indira Gandhi then Prime Minister and with a special focus on the state of emergency caused by some political manipulations. Mistry says himself:

    In Such a Long Journey, the year is 1971. It seemed to me that 1975, the year of the Emergency, would be the next important year, if one were preparing a list of important dates in Indian history. And so 1975 it was (Gokhale 6).

The novelist presents the intensive impact of political development on the lives of the common man in the country. John Clement Ball deliberately compares the two literary works revealing the how emergency and political upheaval in India affected the life of layman. As Ball says: “Midnight’s Children is mesmerizing, sensational, and politically explosive. A Fine Balance may not be as innovative or daring, but in
its quieter way it is just as skilled and no less politically charged” (Ball 238). The novel presents the realistic picture of Indian society in the different fields of life seeking a typical balance between tradition and modernity; ethics and materialistic advancement. It presents the true account of cultural hybridization and cultural exclusivity in the lives of people. As John Ball has a view that *A Fine Balance* in its careful exploration of diverse gender, class and religions in the subject position, is a much more inclusive work than its predecessor. It is:

A super abundant social spectrum of Muslim rentCollectors and tailors, Sikh cabbies, wily beggars, corrupt slumlords, profiteering police, radical students, and- in a cameo no less unflattering than her appearance in *Midnight’s Children* and *Such a Long Journey* – Indira Gandhi herself (Ball 83-84).

The politics of diaspora is interpreted analytically through the experiences of characters. The ending of the text highlights how difficult is it to attain a balance in life in post modern conditions. Mistry himself has confessed, “Post-modernism is so terribly clever - far too clever for me. Faithful to the story and characters is what concern me most” (Gokhale 6). The novelist highlights the situation of Parsis with their problems, prejudices and other concerns in radically changing conditions in the postmodern era of Indian history, as Peter Morey observes:

In postcolonial India the Parsis have seen their prominence decline and their previously disproportionate influence shrink, as Indian society has shaped itself through secular, and latterly, Hindu paradigms. As well as numerically declining population, there is also a sense of narrowing opportunity for young Parsis in India. The attraction of the migration to the west - such as that undergone by Rohinton Mistry - has correspondingly increased (Morey 11).
The condition of the Parsis is like *Trishanku*, a mythical character hanging between Earth and Heaven. They were neither accepted by the British nor could cope with the Indians after independence. They distanced themselves from the Indian culture due to their sense of racial superiority and could never hope to be accepted by the British due to their colonial mind set and racial discrimination. Thus, they have to face identity crisis and ambivalence as a result of temptation for British due to their identity and estrangement from Indian culture and traditions. This ancient pre-Islamic religious group of Iran had to face a lot of sufferings and tribulations from their dispersion to present day. The diasporic experience of Parsis may be understood as Stuart Hall asserts:

The Diaspora experience…is defined not by essence of purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of Identity…Diaspora identities are these, which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves a new through transformation and difference (Hall 224).

Being a double Diasporic author himself Mistry distinctly projects the experiences of displacement of his characters within the country and outside the country. Here Mistry shows the parallel situations of Diaspora within the country through the experiences of Om and Ishvar, who face atrocities and tortures in their own native village. Mistry focusses upon their lives in the big city amidst their fellow men and their dissatisfaction with the city life and their desire to go back to their native place is highlighted in the words of one of his major characters Ishvar: “Nothing is as fine as one’s native place”(8). Uma Parameswaran makes a comment on the situation of displaced people whether they move voluntarily or under pressure with the remark that either way displaced they have to face *Trishanku* like situation and they are used
to transform into a very crucial “hybrid condition of non-belonging in both homeland” (Singh 35). Mistry points out the incidents of cultural clashes and displacements hybridity of culture in the post modern era.

*A Fine Balance* (1995) is one of Mistry’s the most imaginative and admirable work. Speaking to Paul Wilson, Mistry discussed the multiple sources and how the novel came into existence. It begins with a single impulse. He seems to be haunted by the image of a woman at a sewing machine. From there, he builds up the story of Dina, a widow who runs a small dress-making operation out of her flat on the edge of a sprawling urban Indian slum. To make ends meet, she takes in a student boarder, Maneck Kohlah and provides accommodation for two former “untouchables”, Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash, who work for her as tailors. The central action of the novel takes place in 1975, the year Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency to save her political life. It keeps her in power for a few more years but it was a measure that brought unforeseen misery to millions of ordinary Indians, and of course one that touches the lives of Mistry’s characters with brutal directness. Mistry feels that after Indo-Pak war in 1971 which is the political backdrop in *Such a Long Journey*, the next great event is the 1975 imposition of Emergency. Although, he did not experience it since he left India in the same year yet he, “wanted to tell the story through the eyes and the voices of the dispossessed, the ones at the very bottom” (Wilson 4). It is a ‘conscious effort to embrace more of the social reality of India’. The narratives of the novel depict reality of the multi-ethnic groups in the society and their misfortunes and hardships seem exaggerated to those who do not have sensitivity to feel their pain and agony.

It is a story of Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow in her forties; Maneck Kohlah, belonging to a North Indian hill town; and Ishvar and his nephew Om, the Chamaars
turned tailors’ from a remote rural area. Their inner voyage and external circumstances present a paradox. The contrast between internal and external reality is balanced through an alternate reality, despite all the odds and crisis. The novel begins with the prologue, dated 1975, showing the dispersal state of all the chief characters and ends with an epilogue dated 1984. Excluding Prologue and Epilogue, the novel is comprised of sixteen chapters, consisting of sixteen hundred fourteen pages revealing the socio-political developments in the country in a realistic manner. The novel presents the period of 1975 to 1984 its socio-political incidents with the author’s personal experiences, his viewpoint and analysis and in terms of his historical understanding:

[The text is a] fragment collection of memories, . . .[which] work to reconstruct a more immediate and personal history-the writer’s own . . . what we end up with is a new, curiously paradoxical form that we might call historiography metafiction rather than historical fiction (Kambourelli 80).

The chapters ‘city by the sea’ and ‘For Dreams to Grow’ highlight the family background of the protagonist Dina, her love and affection for her father, Dr. Shroff, her hatred for her elder brother Nusswan and her mother, for imposing various restrictions. Dina’s marital relations with Rustom, ends with the death of later. Mrs. Gupta the export manager of Au Revoir Exports is the only character from the elite class in the novel. Dina falls under the crisis right at the beginning as:

Dina Dalal seldom indulged in looking back at her life with regret or bitterness, or questioning why things had turned out the way they had cheating her of the bright future everyone had predicted for her when she was in school, when her name was still Dina Shroff (15).
The death of her father followed by her mother changed her life. The relationship between Nusswan and Dina became coarse and he often humiliated her. Dina wandered around in museums and markets. She is aware of modern libraries well equipped with music rooms and it makes her “forget the troubles of this world” (30). It is not just the depiction of Dina’s love for music but of Mistry fondness for music as well. Throughout his writings he subtly reveals his hobbies such as cricket and music with comments like:

Music verily, is the mediator between intellectual and sensuous life [. . .]. Tell him to hear my symphonies and he will say that I am right in saying that music is the one incorporeal entrance into the higher world of knowledge which comprehends mankind but which mankind cannot comprehend (Crístopher 7).

Dina comes to know about several cultural groups that sponsors concerts and recitals in the city. She visits the concerts regularly and here she meets Rustom Dalal, a pharmaceutical chemist. Dina marries Rustom. The meeting is a recollection of Mistry’s own meeting with his wife. In an interview with Angela Lambert, Mistry says he met his wife Freny Elavia at a music school ‘where she was taking voice and piano lessons and I was doing classes in music theory and composition’. After a couple of years of Dina’s marriage, Rustom died in a road accident, causing a severe loss to her. The death of Shirin Aunty followed by Darab uncle breaks her internally. She feels alone “as though she had lost a second set of parents” (57). One loss after another comes in her way and it makes her firm and determined. Nusswan is shocked to see ‘new’ Dina as “no wailing, no beating the chest or tearing the hair like you might expect from a woman who had suffered such a shock, such a loss”(46). To compensate for marginalization he praises Parsi community and feels proud:
Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband’s funeral pyre, be roasted with him (52).

Due to her early losses Dina is failed to fulfil her teenage ambition to become a doctor. With the help of Dina’s character, Mistry is successful in creating a ‘New Woman’, who is energetic and enthusiastic, seeking a path of self-realization through stitching. Bernard Shaw claims that he does not “regard woman as an animal of another species” and further insists that “what woman had to do was not to repudiate their feminity, but to assert its social value; not to ape masculinity, but to demonstrate its insufficiency”(Shaw 463). Mistry does follow the same path in his major descriptive work. In this novel however, he is successful in judging and analyzing the woman’s capabilities and drawing her out of the gamut of conventionalities, into a new individual.

It is Mrs. Gupta, who suggests Dina to dominate the subordinates. She is against big factories for its strikes and “leaders like that Jay Prakash Narayan encouraging civil disobedience simply at all creating problems. Thinks he is Mahatma Gandhi the second” (65), she stressed on Dina by saying that “you are the boss, you must make the rules. Never lose control” (66). It is she who believes in ‘power politics’. “How power operates and who has power over whom no matter who we are or where we live, we must certainly be exercising power over somebody else” (Venaina 8). The paradoxical situations are created by political events, and multicultural fabrics of the society. Due to the emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi the entire scenario for the lower class people was changed. This major political event isolated the marginalized groups into special kind of cultural ghettos whose members
being viewed as stereotypes by outsiders. By remaining in the cocoon of their low economic vicious circle they cut themselves from the main stream. The border line between the elite and the down-trodden becomes prominent when Mrs. Gupta the only elite in the novel appreciates the internal emergency:

This event alone would have enough to ensure Mrs. Gupta’s happiness, but there were more glad tidings; minor irritants in her life were also being eradicated—the Prime Minister’s declaration yesterday of Internal Emergency had incarcerated most of the parliamentary opposition, along with thousands of trade unionists, students, and social workers. Isn’t that good news? She sparkled with joy. . . . Thank God the Prime Minister has taken firm steps, as she said on the radio. We are lucky to have someone strong at a dangerous time like this. . . . The Need of the Hour Is Discipline—that’s the Prime Minister message on the poster (73-74).

It is the ‘power politics’ of Dina to show her domination over the tailors. Whenever Dina went out to deliver the dresses she always padlocked the door from outside. Ishvar inspires Om by saying that ‘fight’ and ‘struggle’ is essential to win life. To Ishvar “patience is needed for dreams to grow and give fruit” (82). Ishvar feels that if “something cannot be changed; you just have to accept them” (82.83). On the contrary, Om is ‘fighting’ and ‘struggling’ and revolting against Dina’s bossism. He makes an effort to bring a change. The main cause of poverty arises from the hegemony of the upper-class on the lower-class which is elaborately discussed in the forthcoming chapters of the novel.

Ibrahim, the rent-collector, is appointed as the landlord’s spy, blackmailer, delivers of threats, and humiliates the tenants. With the passage of time “his
attendance at Friday prayers became irregular” (87). Ibrahim being minority community of India is also marginalized. He is a superstitious person who goes to jyotshis, fortune-tellers, palmists and astrologers to over-come his traumas. He thinks, why he keeps working, collecting rents? Why not jump from one of the buildings?:

Twenty-four years of drudgery and deprivation during which his youth disappeared, and the bright ambition of his youth season become tainted by bitterness. . . .He asked himself what it was he had done to deserve a life so stale, so empty of hope. . . .His older daughter died of tuberculosis, followed by his wife. Then his sons disappeared into the underworlds, returning periodically to abuse him. The remaining daughter, just when he was beginning to think she would redeem everything, left to become a prostitute (87–90).

The perspectives shift back and forth, occasionally without warning and produce a paradoxical situation where balance seems a distant reality. While the post-colonial boundation forces the writer to raise the question of individuals as well as social identity, the post-structuralist framework dismantles either of the identities and precedes further to make possible the recognition of multiplicity. Dina is not afraid of Ibrahim who forced her to vacate the flat. She is successful in compromising with tailors and tells Ibrahim that they came to do her cooking and cleaning. The journey of Dina from Dina Shroff to Dina Dalal and ending as widow, she overcomes every hurdle and finally strikes ‘a fine balance’.

‘In a village by a River’, Mistry paints the rural India where casteism continues to flourish. In 1950 the Indian constitution declared that all Indians would be equal under the law and no discrimination shall be made in the name of religion, caste, creed or gender. The chapter reveals the history of Ishvar and Om. The writer
explores the marginalized condition of the lower-castes and the untouchables. It is rightly said that “marginal people know how they live and they know how the dominant culture lives. Dominant culture people only know how they live” (Schulman 219). Dukhi Mochi, cobbler by profession, belongs to Chamaar caste, dared to change the vocation of his sons Ishvar and Narayan by sending them to Ashraf tailor. Dukhi is happy to restore and preserve the profession which was followed by his ancestors but he does not want his children to suffer. Dukhi is successful in taking a stand against the upper class and this is one of the positive signs for the marginalized community in India. Mistry also focussed on the humiliation of women giving birth to girl child. The baby boy is always welcomed:

The birth of daughters often brought them beatings from their husbands and their husband’s families. Sometimes they were ordered to discreetly get rid of the newborn. Then they had no choice but to strangle the infant with their swaddling clothes, poison her, or let her starve to death (99-100).

The birth of two sons at Dukhi’s house frustrates the upper-caste. They feel that “something was wrong; the Law of Manu had been subverted” (100). Mistry portrays the trauma of the Chamaars and indicates that the only way they can escape the humiliation is by striving towards upward social mobility. Ashraf belonging to a Muslim minority community acts as a helping hand in changing the vocation of Dukhi’s sons. In the village, leaders of Indian National Congress are spreading Mahatma Gandhi’s message regarding the freedom struggle and the struggle for justice. They declared:

We have been slaves in our own country for too long. And the time has come to fight for liberty. . . . What is this disease? You may ask. This
disease, brother and sisters, is the notion of untouchability, ravaging us for centuries, denying dignity to our fellow human being. This disease must be purged from our society, from our hearts, and from our minds. No one is untouchable, for we are all children of the same God. Remember what Gandhiji says, that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk (107).

After independence also the nation is passing through a terrible disease called untouchability. The upper-caste people are suppressive towards the lower-caste, if they crossed the limitations imposed upon them. Dukhi finds himself in a miserable condition. “I spit in their upper-caste faces. I don’t need their miserable jobs from now on” (105). He dares to break the laws implemented by the upper-class by changing the vocation of his sons Ishvar an Narayan from Chamaar to tailors. Dukhi is successful in realizing his ‘self’, and the quest for ‘self-realization’ is marked by the urge to be free. ‘Freedom’ means “the individual coming to terms with his own past and with himself, accepting his limitations and going on from there, however terrified he may be” (Harishankar 10).

The fear and atrocities of upper class people are depicted in the narrative minutely and Dukhi and his family become the symbol of downtrodden people who want to live a life of equality and self-respect but caste discrimination does not allow them. It is true and Mistry himself admits that he has no direct experience of rural life but even then he portrays it realistically. As Rushdie points out:

our physical alienation from India inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (Rushdie 10).
According to *Manusmriti*, *varnas* were classified on the basis of profession, with the passage of time this profession based system was changed into birth based social division and divided the society on the principle of graded inequality. Manu divided the Hindu society into four *Varnas*: the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Shudras. Though, Hindu social reformers claim that untouchability is not a code of Hindu society and none of the *Varṇa* is termed as untouchable. But Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a social thinker, does not believe in this interpretation of *Manusmriti* and rejects this plea on the ground of the principle that, untouchability is the integrated part of caste system. He has a firm belief that without abolishing the caste system; untouchability cannot be eradicated. He thinks that *Manusmriti* is too intellectual to comprehend for an illiterate Hindu and he knows only three barriers in the social interactions. First prohibition is against the inter-dining; the second prohibition is against the inter-marriage, while untouchability is the third barrier. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, in one of his scholarly essay ‘Untouchability and the Caste System’ comments:

> Unfortunately, the sanction behind the caste system is the religious sanction. I say unfortunately because anything which has a religious sanction becomes by virtue of it sacred and eternal. To the Hindu, caste is sacred and caste is eternal. If caste cannot vanish what hope is there for untouchability to disappear (Ambedkar 41).

A ‘new identity’ in a multicultural society is given to Ishvar and Narayan by Ashraf. It is a fine example of ‘fusion’ and ‘assimilation’. The ‘Chamaars-turned-tailors’ is the stepping stone for them. During the riots, Hindus-Muslims shed blood of each other. Dukhi and his friends are against the speeches. They like Muslims. “The Muslims have behaved more like our brothers than the bastard Brahmans and
Thakurs” (123). The boys are successful in saving the lives of Ashraf Chacha, by changing the name of the shop from ‘Muzaffar Tailoring’ to ‘Krishna Tailors’. The changing of name acts as a tonic for Ashraf. They destroy the Urdu magazines and newspapers to acquire a ‘new identity’ for better prospects. Dinshawji in *Such a Long Journey* states “names are so important” (74).

Narayan insists upon his son, Omprakash to learn the tanner job. He wants to preserve his identity. While massaging Narayan’s feet Om says, “We both have the same smell. It’s an honest smell” (141). It is rightly said, “through the historic phases that have transformed savage tribes into civilized nations. We carry within us not only our pasts but the past of the race. Neither must be denied” (Harishankar 161). After his apprentice, Narayan also is planning to vote in the coming election.

Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals . . . . More than twenty years have passed since independence . . . I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like (142).

Thakur Dharamsi is in charge of voting process. Narayan is hanged by the people of Thakur Dharamsi. He blamed Dukhi as “Dukhi had dared to break as he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society’s timeless balance” (147). Dukhi, Roopa, Leela and Rekha are set ablaze by the men of Thakur. By portraying the hardships and crude realities of life, Mistry applies the realist theory of identity. Where our social identities are both constructed and real. Narrating the story of misfortunes the construction of identity and the reality of identity overlap:

On the one hand, identities are constructed because they are based on the subjective theoretical constructs and values that we bring to our
interpretation of our personal experience; on the other, identities are also real because they refer outward to casually salient features of the social world, features that can accurately describe and explain the complex interactions among the multiple determinants of a person’s experience (Mohanty 201-16).

It is the accountability and sensitivity of Mistry that makes the reader feel the depth of the struggle of these characters for survival and balance. Darwin’s theory ‘Survival of the Fittest’ is appropriate for analyzing *A Fine Balance*. Not only the major characters but also the minor characters do fight for their survival and up to some extent maintain ‘a fine balance’, as struggle is an everlasting journey which continues after ones death. For their survival the tailors left the town and entered the city, where they come across Rajaram in the chapter ‘Small Obstacles’. The tailors are in their dispersal state struggling hard for their existence:

Struggle [which] is an essential counter part of political and economic struggle. Since cultural hegemony continues to play an invaluable role in the production of subjects who are compliant toward the economic and political domination of internal as well as external colonialism, and since it legitimises the acceptance of one mode of life and the exclusion-or extermination-of others, the function of cultural criticism and struggle is to contest continually the binary oppositions on which such legitimation is founded (Mohamed 132-139).

Though the name of the city is not mentioned but the atmosphere and setting reveals that it is Bombay, Mistry’s birthplace. Being a realist he portrays the squalid, sordid and seamy side of city life. Rajaram helps the tailors in adopting the city life. For slum people railway tracks and bushes act as latrine where they squat. The hegemony
of the superior over the inferior is revealed when Om describes one of the disgusting events about his grandfather’s friend Dayaram who “was forced to eat a landlord’s shit once, because he was late ploughing his field” (170). Rajaram who was a barber is presently a hair-collector and is also in a dispersal state. He possesses indepth knowledge pertaining to hair. “The hair is chopped off. But there is a whole life connected to it. . . .By their hair shall you know them? Health and sickness, youth and age, wealth and poverty-it’s all revealed in the hair” (174). He narrates the story of the sacred hair of prophet’s beard that disappeared from the Hazrat-Bal mosque in Kashmir. Rajaram falls under crisis and it seems he is unable to maintain consistency in his life as he says he is “still waiting to meet one who will treat me as his equal. As a fellow human being-that’s all I want, nothing more” (174). The tailors are asked to give up their manhood in exchange of ration card. The facilitator, who keeps the proposal in front of them said, “since the Emergency started, there’s a new rule in the department-every officer has to encourage people to get sterilized” (178). Mistry portrays the dark realistic picture of marginalized and lower-caste people surviving in the city of fantasy and dream. People belonging to minority community in India face discrimination not only in village but in the city also - the metro - what an irony:

In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minority shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, or to use their own language (Kallen 14).

After depicting the vivid images and complexities of rural and urban India, Mistry makes an effort to soothe their eyes and heart by portraying the landscape of north India in the chapter ‘Mountains’. Maneck Kohlah, a young Parsi student quit the hostel and lives in Dina’s flat as a paying guest. He is in a dispersed state. “His
homesick imagination made him see the hills float through the again, passing from nimbus to nothing” (201). Dina after major setbacks succeeded in maintaining ‘a fine balance’. Whenever she falls under crisis, she is helped either by Nusswan, Zenobia or by tailors and Maneck. These people act as ‘helping hand’ to each other and through ‘comic relief’ they overcome their hurdles. They ‘get together’ and preserve their identity either ‘individually’ or ‘collectively’. “God only know how Aban has managed to live all these in some tiny hill town. Especially after being born and brought up in our lovely city” (204).

Farokh Kohlah (Maneck’s father) damaged his one eye while preparing the Kohlah’s Cola. “One eye is sufficient for the things I am looking forward to seeing. . . The ugliness of the world would now trouble him only half as much” (207). Whenever Maneck thinks of leaving the mountains which has come to considered as his universe, it makes him panic. During every vacation the relationship between father and son becomes more and more coarse and bitter. It reminds the relationship of Gustad and Sohrab in Such a Long Journey. The changing scenario of mountain disheartened Mr. Kohlah. It looks as if the mountain began to leave him. “It started with roads. Engineers in sola topis arrived with their sinister instrument and charted their designs on reams of paper. . . Roads, wide and heavy-duty, to replace scenic mountain paths too narrow for the broad vision of nation builders and World Bank officials” (215). The effect of Emergency had reached the mountain causing drastic changes. Mr. Kohlah is unable to control his emotions towards the changing surroundings. Emotions are an inseparable part of society, he is forced to concede to its demands whether he likes it or not. Emotions play a vital role in preparing the realistic ground. If Mistry is said to be paradoxical for his “revolutionary thinking” it is not because the “usual relations are reversed” (Bentley 296) instead the reversal
making his art revolutionary is channelized to a balance insuring a solution to every problem. The main aspect of revolutionary literature is that if both imagines and actualizes the principle of unifying the ranks in the struggle against poverty, discrimination, caste-system through literature. The novel is a fine example of changing society. Mistry acts as a revolutionary writer or an artist whose meaningful works is closely linked with the masses giving expression to their thoughts, feelings, emotions and serves as their loyal spokesman. Only by speaking for the masses he can educate them. Mr. Kohlah is aghast to see “the brown rivers getting black, completing the transmogrification of his birthplace where his forefathers had lived as in paradise” (216). He can observe the decaying of the paradise and in near future he shall fail to regain it. He is physically affected:

Coming upon a favourite tree, he would stop under its branches a while before moving on. He would run his hand along the gnarled trunk, happy that an old friend had survival another day. Many of the rocky ledges that he used to sit on to watch the sunset had been removed by dynamite. When he did find one, he rested for a few minutes and wondered if it would be here for him the next time . . . . There was no place to escape. Not for himself, at any rate. His dreams had succumbed, as they must, during their collisions with the passing years. He had struggled, he had won, he had lost. He would keep on struggling (217-219).

Mistry oscillates between home (Bombay) and abroad (Canada), personal and impersonal. He is unable to maintain ‘a fine balance’ as all his five works are focussed on his native land and around Parsi world. Mistry’s skilful blending of his
characters’ personal affairs with communal concerns situates theme and lends them significance as social being:

The secret of survival is to embrace change, and to adapt . . . all things fall and are built again, and those that build them again are gay . . . you cannot draw lines and compartments, and refuse to budge beyond them. Sometimes you have to use your failures as stepping-stones to success. You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair . . . it’s all a question of balance (230-231).

It can be said that Mistry’s A Fine Balance is an appropriate title. The four characters and the minor characters do come across ‘hope’ and ‘despair’. It is positively infected with what Saleem Sinai, in another great novel of the Emergency Midnight’s Children calls “an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole reality” (Rushdie 84) The only companion to Maneck in the hostel is Avinash, who is the President of the student Union and Chairman of the Hostel Committee. He is also in his dispersed state. He is away from home and lives in the hostel. It is he, who taught Maneck to play chess. Avinash’s father suffered from tuberculosis. For the marriage of his three sisters, he has to collect money. With the declaration of Emergency various projects are implemented by the government to change the country’s scenario:

The mood was euphoric. The students fervently believed their example would inspire universities across the country to undertake radical reforms, which would complement the grass-roots movement of Jay Prakash Narayan that was rousing the nation with a call to return to Gandhian principles. The changes would invigorate all of society, transform it from a corrupt, moribund creature into a healthy organism that would, with its heritage of a rich and ancient civilization, and the wisdom of the Vedas and Upanishads, awaken the world and lead the way toward enlightenment for all humanity (243).
The chapters ‘Day at the Circus, Night in the Slum’, ‘On the Move’, ‘Beautification’ and ‘What Law There Is’ enlarge the scope of struggle of the major and minor characters during the Emergency. The narrative is fragmented. Mistry enlarging the canvas has made a remarkable use of stream-of-consciousness technique with flashbacks in a fine blending of time past and time present. After describing the ‘individual’ journey of the characters he is successful in accommodating them under one roof making their journey ‘collective’:

Future time, the time of anticipation and possibility, and past time, the time of conditions and memories, have to do with present time because things future, while not existing, can be matters of concern in the present, and things past, while no longer existing. . . .The past both yields to the present and conceals itself from it, and the future both withholds from the present and grants something to it. . . .In other words, present time provides us a sense of the unity of our temporality

(Harishankar 194)

The element of nostalgia is strongly revealed through Maneck. His memories splash around his past. The present objects help him to reveal his past. Whenever he plays chess he is reminded of his relationship with Avinash. His only regret is that he could not say Good-bye to him. Maneck remembers Avinash along with everyone and compares them with the game of Chess:

Everything I do is chess, Avinash had once said. Now he was under serious check. Had he castled in time, protected by three pawns and a rook? And Dina Aunty, playing against her tailors, making her moves between front and back room. And Daddy, attempting to take on the soft-drink opponents who did not observe the rules of the game, who played draughts using chess pieces (271).
The shacks of tailors are destroyed making them homeless. As per the new Emergency law illegal constructions are to be destroyed to make the city beautiful. “With the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night” (299). Various banners and slogans are raised all over the country. “THE CITY BELONGS TO YOU! KEEP IT BEAUTIFUL!” followed by “THE NATION IS ON THE MOVE!” (303). Mistry deals with millions of Bombay citizens unhomed and homeless during the Emergency. If these incidents be called ‘the nation on the move’ then it is a curse for such a nation and the government. To a modernizing post-independence India, Bombay is what London stands for Raymond Williams; a multiplicities magnet for people from all over the country, a future-oriented place increasingly “producing and reproducing . . .the social reality of the nation as a whole” (Williams 148). The tailors are once again in their state of dispersal, when they are picked from the chemist’s entrance by sergeant Kesar and find themselves in an irrigation project. Dina is least worried about the tailors but Maneck meets the watchman and narrates the whole incident to Dina Aunty. He is annoyed by her behaviour and blames her for the tailors’ downfall. Maneck is a unifying character who belongs to everyone and easily relates himself to old types of odd circumstances. Dina refused the tailors to sleep on the veranda. The sorrows are collective, no matter if felt individually:

Memories were permanent. Sorrowful ones remained sad even with the passing of time; yet happy ones could never be recreated-not with the same joy. Remembering bred its own peculiar sorrow. It seemed so unfair: that time should render both sadness and happiness into a source of pain. . . .Look at Mummy and Daddy, and the General Store; or Dina Aunty’s life; or the hostel and Avinash; and now poor Ishvar
and Om. No amount of remembering happy days, no amount of yearning or nostalgia could change a thing about the misery and suffering—love and concern and caring and sharing come to nothing, nothing, . . . And memory only made it worse, tormenting and taunting. Unless. Unless you lost your mind. Or committed suicide (336).

Maneck acts as a connecting link between Dina and the tailors. Dina is the protagonist around whom the story revolves. She is the only female character, who dominates over Ishvar, Om, Maneck and Ibrahim. Through Dina, Mistry develops an ‘Independent identity’, who changed herself accordingly. She takes her decisions independently. She avoids the ‘power politics’ which she borrowed from Mrs. Gupta. Dina listens to her ‘inner self’ and develops a drastic change in her behaviour. A ‘question of choice’ arises between the ‘power politics’ and her ‘inner self’ and finally she listens to her ‘inner self’. After hearing the story of torment, Dina feels that there is delay in the justice of God. Maneck too feels that “God is dead” but after a few minutes he changes his opinion by saying that “God is a giant quiltmaker. With an infinite variety of designs. And the quilt is grown so big and confusing, the pattern is impossible to see, the squares and diamonds and triangles don’t fit well together anymore, it’s all become meaningless” (340).

The chapters ‘Sailing Under One Flag’, ‘The Bright Future Clouded’, ‘Trace of Destiny’, and ‘Wedding, Worms and Sanyas’ reveal the collective identity and collective goals of four major characters who belong to minority community living in multi-cultural society of India. After the dispersal state of the tailors Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om are reunited. Dina’s hegemony over the tailors has vanished and she treats them as her family members by allowing them to sleep on the Veranada. The deconstruction of culture categorization starts. Though belonging to different castes
and community, they ‘fuse’ and ‘assimilate’ under one roof. Dina is aware of the fact that everything she did was “self-preservation to keep the tailors from being picked up again by the police, and to have them out of sight of nosey neighbours and the rent-collector” (388). To see the collective sharing of these characters, one has to realize that despite belonging to different ethnic, regional and economic background, their group is unified by a common culture. Their common experience in the multicultural society unites them. This particular group constructs a community. They are one in their individuality and self-esteem. The political vision of a community of the oppressed, which the novel seeks primarily through the agency of these four characters, provides the context in which Dina’s struggle against survival can be specified, given historical meaning. The readers are compelled to acknowledge the existence of marginalized group through the passage of past mishappenings. As a true realist, Mistry depicts the true and real image of India during the Emergency. “We call realistic those works which we feel accurately depict life by displaying verisimilitude” (Jakobson 38). Mistry does not visit Bombay frequently and the visits are neither exciting nor shocking. In an interview to Hancock, he says:

Bombay had no magic transformation. Everything continued in the same way. Only slightly more intense. More people live on the streets. More corruption and bribery and red tape. Four or five years ago, we hoped for a lot when Rajiv Gandhi came on the scene. That optimism has evaporated. It all seemed very bleak. Bleak was the picture I created when I was here (Hancock 149).

Mistry believes that unless society is reformed, no man can reform himself except in the most insignificant small ways. His thoughts are original. He writes for the sake of society. He wants people to look at the weakness of the social-customs, conventions,
government policies etc. The survival, struggle, violence, threat, death, loss, revenge, discrimination are revealed in the concluding chapters ‘Return of Solitude’, ‘Family Planning’, and ‘The Circle Is Completed’. The ‘fusion’ and ‘assimilation’ of various minority communities go hand to hand in each other’s progress. Assimilating the scattered swatches and giving it a shape of quilt shows ‘unity’. Every piece of cloth has its own importance. The cambric square indicates the government destroyed the tailor’s house. “Calling one piece sad is meaningless. See, it is connected to a happy piece-sleeping on the veranda. And the next square-chapatis…And don’t forget this georgette patch, where Beggarmaster saved us from the landlord’s goondas” (490).

The lives of Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om are “joined together” (491) like the patches and form a new pattern. Living together and depending upon each other are the source of strength and comfort. Dina makes herself busy with the quilt when the tailors are absent. “Straightening a seam, trimming a patch, adjusting what did not look right to her eye” (519). Dina and Maneck decide to present the quilt to Om on his return with a bride. Maneck is shocked to hear the death of Avinash. His body was found on the railway track. Avinash called the chess “the game of life” (504), as “it’s the law of the universe” (466). A feeling of terror grips an individual when he has to live alone. He finds himself insecure:

The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him, aware of conflict within himself for subtler than the struggle of morality against evil (Frye 226).

Maneck writes a letter to Dina Aunty saying that his marks are not good enough to get admission to the degree programme. He is going to Dubai for job. During his Gulf vacation he would visit her and meet Om’s wife. His sorrows increase:
When I first suggested doing three more years, my parents had been against it. But now they got upset with me for the opposite reason. What are you going to do with your life, Daddy kept repeating, finished, it’s all finished, this boy has no idea what a disaster this is, all my life has been one disaster after another, I thought my son would change the pattern, but I should have known better, the lines on my palm are permanent, no alterations permitted from his family (548).

Maneck is upset at the alienation from his family. The death of Mumtaz, Ashraf, Shankar, and the Beggarmaster cause the ‘crisis of balance’. Dina is back to her brother’s house. Her journey which started from her brother’s house as Dina Shroff ends as a widow Dina. During his final journey, Maneck meets Rajaram who turned up to become a Bal Baba. According to Valmik, the proof reader who is in charge of Bal Baba’s mail-order:

There is always hope—hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost . . . . Loss is essential. Loss is part and parcel of that necessary calamity called life. . . . Thanks to some inexplicable universal guiding force, it is always the worthless thing we lose-slough off, like a moulting snake. Losing, and losing again, is the very basis of the life process, till we are left with the bare essence of human existence. . . . After all, our lives are but a sequence of accidents—a clanking chain of chance events. A string of choices, casual or deliberate, which add up to that one big calamity we call life (563-66).

The epilogue is set in 1984; eight years after the events are narrated in the novel. The riots have broken out after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, by her own security guards, when Maneck’s Gulf flight landed. Maneck living in exile for
eight years resembles Mistry who infrequently visits his native land to feel the pulse of the city and the changes occurring there in. Maneck too becomes nostalgic as “not one day had passed during his long exile that he did not think about his home and his parents” (584). The driver opposed the Prime Minister as “she was not liked by ordinary people, even though she went about like a Devi in a white sari” (582). The taxi driver who is a Sikh had his hair cut. He says “the real murderers will never be punished. For votes and power they play with human lives. Today it is Sikhs. Last year it was Muslims; before that, Harijans. One day, your Sudra and Kusti might not be enough to protect you” (583). Maneck returns to attend the funeral of his father. To him time is the ultimate “grandmaster” that could never be “checkmated” (587). He regrets for not accompanying his father more often on his outings. At the age of twenty-three Mistry immigrated to Canada, leaving his parents in India. It is during his eight years of exile that Maneck lost his father. “You sent me away, you and Daddy. And then I couldn’t come back. You lost me, and I lost-everything” (591). Maneck comes across a photo in a newspaper and is shocked to see three young women dressed in cholis and petticoats, hanging from a ceiling fan as their parent could not afford dowries for their marriages. He visits Dina Aunty’s flat and is surprised to see a huge luxury apartment. During his final journey Maneck meets Rajaram, who turned up to become a Bal Baba. Maneck meets Valmik who tells him how one must recall the past and recite one’s stories as “it helps to remind yourself of who you are. Then you can go forward, without fear of losing yourself in this ever-changing world” (604). Maneck meets Dina at her brother’s residence where he comes to know that the tailors have turned into beggars. He is on his way to the railway station. He realized that he is walking against the flow. Before throwing himself in front of the train, Maneck’s last thought is that he still had Avinash’s
chessman. He is checkmated. The novel begins with Avinash’s death and ends with Maneck’s death.

Ishvar and Om have their lunch at Nusswan’s flat. Against all odds, Dina, Ishvar, and Om make an effort for their survival. The connectivity and understanding of all the main characters do maintain ‘a fine balance’ up to some extent but at the same time fall under crisis. The novel of Mistry belongs entirely to the humanitarian movement of post-independent India. He is a novelist of purpose. In his work he sets out to attack some specific abuse or abuses in the existing system. However, with the help of an alternate reality the writer seems to make his best efforts to balance the critical life of each of his characters. Mistry confronts, interrogates and challenges the authoritative voice of history. The main symbolic significance of the novel is that life is a struggle in which a courageous individual alone may win a moral victory against the difficulties and problems of existence. The novel upholds the integrity, dignity, and invincibility of the human mind.

Mistry confers his views on the postmodern conditions in the decolonized India. In such a period when new capitalism has created a wide gulf between rich and poor and globalization has shrunk the distance but resulted in an alienation amongst individual that was never seen before. He makes a conscious effort to show the marginalization of people deprived on the basis of caste and religion to raise the important issues such as belongingness, identity, ethnicity, diaspora, nation and multiculturalism. Multiculturalism may be the new concept of living in countries like Canada and Australia, but it is one of the prominent features of Indian social life where people are used to live, inspite of their different languages, religions, and cultural backgrounds. It does not mean that Mistry presents the brighter aspect of Indian secularism and multiculturalism. Where one side he projects the humane
attitude of common people at the same time he questions the role of the RSS and Muslim communal forces during the partition. Mistry represents the peculiarities and complexities of Indian multiculturalism from the partition of the country to the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The conversation between Maneck and Sikh Cab driver reflects the feelings of insecurity and the physical and mental atrocities and tortures inflicted by people of dominant Hindu religion as a reaction to Smt. Gandhi’s murder by her own Sikh bodyguards. It seems the novelist feels that selfishness of the political parties is responsible for the scenario and this not only widens the gap between different religions, but also shatters the communal harmony in a country known for its universal communal harmony and which has given the principle of ‘Vashudev Kutumbhkam’. The novel actually is a kind of commentary on how the people of the country that is known for its ancient wisdom are giving up the ethical and moral values. The theorists sometimes make efforts to differentiate exile and voluntary immigration and try to prove that sufferings of voluntary immigration is lesser than diaspora but it could not be overlooked that self chosen punishment harasses more than the imposed one. Maneck seems to agree with the views of German poet Zafer Senocak expressed in his poem “Doppelmann” asserts:

I carry two worlds within me
but neither one whole
they are constantly bleeding
the border runs
right through my tongue (Roy 19).

A Fine Balance is actually a depiction of large scale effort at some how gaining or maintaining ‘a fine balance’ in order to service. The effort canvas extends from individuals to groups – minorities, social and political groups. Each individual and
group seems to be riding a swing eternally being pushed by other individuals or groups - disturbing or obstructing the effort for balance. And this results in turmoil and commotion. Some swings seem to be above the pushing forces from a distance. This promotes the desire for vertical mobility within the country or migration to other countries. The unknown, invisible ‘future’ fascinates and people regroup to work, even make sacrifices in the ‘hope’ or presumption of a future of their dreams. Effort and Result gets upset and they are caught up in the struggle of overcoming disappointments, frustrations and staying balanced.

Mental, physical and spiritual journeys and geographical displacements are another integral constituent of the novels. As an individual or as member of a group each character undertakes a series of journeys sometimes even simultaneously and it becomes a journey within a journey. These individual and collective journeys become the warp and woof and create the pattern of the novel. The novel then is like the quilt in one of his novels all types of patches in different colours intersperse. They co-exist and have diminutive or no value except as rag in isolation. Sense of security and identity in collective existence thus becomes a repetitive theme in Mistry’s novels. This is the way to experience some balance for sometime at least. How long - once again till a new set of social religious or political events shake it, jolt it or shatter it.


Venaina, S. Coomy. “A Conversation with Margaret Atwood”- Sections of the interview were published under the title “I tend to see symbol” *Times of India*. Sunday Review Section. 20 March, 1988.


* [All the references in the parenthesis are from this edition only]