Chapter 3

ROHINTON MISTRY: CRITIQUE OF POLITICS

“In producing a knowledge of the text, criticism actively transforms what is given. It is not a process of recognition of the truth, but work to produce meaning.... criticism constructs its object, produces the work.”

(Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice 138)

As highlighted in the previous chapter, Rohinton Mistry’s fiction appears to align more easily with the realistic mode of writing. So, an understanding of the literary conventions and underlying theoretical assumptions of ‘realistic’ fiction and ‘common sense’ liberal humanistic approach to criticism would be a proper platform and background against which Mistry’s fiction can be construed and appreciated. In reading Mistry, it is also important to recognize the fact that under the overall impression of realistic mode and of representability of ‘reality’ some seriously unconventional modes of representation are also introduced in the text and these are aspects which receive serious attention by some of the critics.

Arguing that classical realism constructs the “reader as consumer” of the literary text, contemporary British literary critic and theorist, Catherine Besley, known for her study of the influence of post-structuralist theory on cultural history and literary criticism, asserts that despite the ‘recognition Brecht has received’ and the popularity of deconstructive and post-structuralist theories of literary criticism, “the spectator or reader as consumer remains the norm in our society” (Critical Practice 126).

Arguing that in conventional literary criticism, the literary text is seen not as a construct, but “as the natural reflection of the world it delineates or the spontaneous expression of its author’s subjectivity” (127), she suggests that texts are the outcome
of a complex literary productive process on the part of the socially, culturally,
historically and geo-politically located author. The emphasis of the liberal humanist
conventional criticism however, remains on its truth or its expressiveness but not on
the text as “constructed artifact”. This conception of the ‘creative process’ implies an
“illusion of complicity between the author and the reader. The text is an invisible
thread leading from the author’s subjectivity to the reader’s” (Belsey 127-8).

According to Belsey, the strategies of the classical realist texts, to some extent
like the novels of Mistry, divert the reader from what is contradictory within them so
that the reader looks for in the text what he or she already ‘knows’, because the
“myths and signifying systems of the classical realist text re-present experience in the
ways in which it is conventionally articulated in our society” (129). She argues for the
need of a post-Saussurean criticism,

which distancing itself from the imaginary coherence of the text,
analysing the language which is its material and the process of production
which makes it a text, recognizes in the text not ‘knowledge’, but ideology
itself in all its inconsistency and partiality ... A form of criticism which refuses
to reproduce the pseudo-knowledge offered by the text provides a new
knowledge of the work of literature. Such a criticism does not simply reject
the classical realist text as an object of consumption, imposing a form of
censorship on the mode of writing which remains dominant in our society, but
works to foreground its contradictions and so to read it radically. (129-30)

Proceeding with the fundamental assumption that the texts of Mistry at least
have an appearance or succeed in creating an illusion of the realist mode of narration;
the following discussion on the critique of politics in Mistry’s novels attempts to go
beyond the liberal-humanist conceptions of realistic literary text and attempts to deconstruct the processes and ideologies involved in the construction of such literary discourses. The central issue as hinted at by Mistry himself (in the interview cited above) is of the perception of injustice; of power and modes of resistance; of the ambition of being or appearing to be subversive and producing literature which is promptly consumed as an effective critique of the problems of the political system. The theoretical orientation of the present and the following chapter is to study the extent and nature of the subversiveness of Mistry’s writings. And also to fathom the extent to which the subversive intent is wrapped in orthodoxies and written in line with the possibilities to quote Besley again, of what can be “conventionally articulated in our society”.

Mistry’s novels *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* are scathing in their attack on the self-serving politics of the national as well as the regional parties and political classes and the failure of the administrative and justice systems to safeguard the political and civic rights of the poor and the marginalized in the post-Independence India. The representation of the political and social life in postcolonial India is mainly carried out from the Parsi perspective as is visible in the political stance and the narrative perspective in the texts as well as in the implicit views of the writer and the portrayal of the characters. However, Mistry’s fictional world is not limited to a particular community and in these two texts the critique goes well outside the world of Parsi families and enclosures. The reasons for this vituperative disapproval of the postcolonial socio-political society can be traced to several factors like the perception of politically unjust regimes, persecution mania in a climate of religious fundamentalism and communalism, socio-economic changes in Parsi
community, political corruption, political appropriation of the idea of secularism and continuance of chronic forms of class and caste based discrimination.

A notable aspect of Mistry’s fiction, as the work of a diasporic writer critiquing his native country’s politics and nationalist ideologies and practices, is the intriguing relationship of his texts with the newspapers. It is worth noting that the newspaper is not only a resource for obtaining information and ‘factual’ detail for a migrant and diasporic writer but is also integral to his schema of critiquing the categories of nation and nationalism. Newspaper reportage and memory are the two most important resources from which he rebuilds the social and political scene while being at a distance from the actual site of socio-political and cultural space that forms his subject. This chapter, thus, sets out with the intention of forming a better understanding of the problematic of journalistic and fictionalized alternative historiographies and the complex relationship between the two.

Mistry, in all his novels, studies how the personal space inhabited by the Parsis is invaded by socio-political forces inimical to their existence. He records the suffering of Parsis, their claustrophobia and discomfiture at existential and social levels and also makes his texts challenge official, received and journalistic versions on nationalist/national political developments. The charge against Mistry, and other writers like him that their authenticity can be doubted on the grounds that they obtain information from newspapers cannot be taken at face value and has to be subjected to deeper critical scrutiny. Keki N. Daruwalla is almost dismissive of Mistry’s critique of Indian political system. According to him, “Politically, Mistry is a novice” (85). For Daruwalla, the newspaper provides the expatriate novelists the sole means of access to indigenous reality. He writes, “Rohinton Mistry emigrated to Canada in
1975, the year Mrs. Gandhi promulgated the Emergency. His imagination is still arrested in that time zone. He was just twenty three years old, an impressionable age, in 1975 when the double trauma of the Emergency and his emigration took place” (84).

Nilufer E. Bharucha also makes a reference to the heavy dependence of the novelist on the press reports for minor as well major details used for building the city environment in *Family Matters*:

…this is post-Babri Masjid Bombay where the religious chauvinism of the Shiv Sena has been augmented by the pan-Indian militant Hindutva of the BJP. The focus has thus shifted from the 1970s and the years of the Emergency under Mrs. Indira Gandhi, to more recent times. Hence the diasporic time-warp has been minimized here to a considerable extent. However, the ‘reality’ captured here of Bombay, re-named Mumbai …is largely based on hearsay and there is still a heavy dependence on newspaper reports of these years. (168)

Daruwalla, in his dismissal of the authenticity of such writings, seems to harbour a rather rigid belief in spatially enclosed mimetic representation. Rushdie, on his part, has tried to answer such charges in his novel *Shame* by asserting the diasporic writers’ claim on the world he has left behind. The narrator of *Shame* says, as mentioned above, that he is bound to the East through elastic bands. Elastic bonds, thus, are not bound to space and time and may depend on memory as well as transmission of experience from geographically remote locations and through other means than direct participation and experience.
It will not be true to say that the reliance on newspaper for information is a simple process of transference of information for artistic use. Such an analysis would not only be simplistic but would ignore an important dimension of Mistry’s texts. Newspaper is not only a resource but it is given an important role in his texts. One of the aims of Mistry’s texts is to transcend the newspaper, to study its relation to the postcolonial nation and even to prove it grossly complicit and fallacious. Thus, there is a palpable tension between the newspaper and the fictional narrative as two distinct modes of representation and as distinct attitudes to the idea of nation.

Mistry tells Veena Gokhale in an interview that his novels are “not ‘researched’ in the formal sense of the word. Newspapers, magazines, chats with visitors from India, chat with people on my infrequent visits to India – these are the things I rely upon. Having said that, I will add that all these would be worthless without the two main ingredients: memory and imagination” (Qtd. in Dodiya, Parsi English Novel 44).

It will not be wrong to say that the newspaper acquires tremendous importance and a very deep significance in the economy of Mistry’s narratives but certainly not merely in its direct and unproblematic transmission of information about the political developments in the national context. Its importance lies not only in the sense that newspaper is a means of building a discourse on the nation which the author is in critical dialogue with, but also in the sense that, within the text, the newspaper acquires importance in its exceedingly intricate relation with the characters both as the main connection that the shrunken and estranged world of the Parsis has with the mainstream political life and as a discourse which invites their belief and disbelief.
The perfunctory consumption of a national Daily is the first essential of one’s identity as a national subject. The Parsis construct their impressions of the goings on of national politics from the pages of the newspaper and it is as though the nation steps across their threshold through the language of the newspaper. Or, to put it differently, newspaper lends cohesion to the idea of the nation in an individual’s consciousness.

*Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* are replete with instances where reading a newspaper is shown to be an exercise which confirms one’s status as a national subject and as a subject of nationalist historiography. This applies more to the two texts mentioned above than *Family Matters* as with his last novel Mistry shifts his focus to the Parsi family set up. *Family Matters* involves a paradigm shift: rather than focusing on an encounter with national socio-political realities, a major part of the text restricts itself to the representation of a single Parsi family. It is a more poignant novel as although there is a realization that the almost tragic circumstances surrounding this family are not entirely of an endogenous nature but are a result of maladjustment, alienation, paranoia and altered relationship of the Parsi community, as a whole, with their socio-political context; yet these things are more tacitly stated as compared to the first two novels. An almost tragic poignancy arises from its elegiac tenor. His last novel, as if deliberately, avoids framing its characters in the national context at an explicit level by not involving them directly or indirectly with national politics in the post-Babri Masjid India. Instead, issues like old age and isolation in a numerically dwindling community receive greater emphasis.

However, in both *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, the national context is very strongly built. Sohrab’s result for the entrance exam for Indian
Institute of Technology in *Such a Long Journey* appears in a newspaper which also contains headlines about Pakistan’s suppression of popular separatist movement in Bangladesh: “half-naked mother weeping with a dead child in her arms. The photo caption … was about soldiers using Bengali babies for bayonet practice” (7). The projection of Pakistan’s atrocities in Bangladesh complies with nationalist interests of a sustained patriotic diatribe against the national enemy.

As discussed in the first chapter, the print media as an important manifestation of capital/capitalism is generally coterminous with the category of nation and almost characteristically rouses the nationalist sentiment at the time of war with an ‘enemy’ country. There is obviously an element of the melodramatic in all reporting about the developments in the Bangladesh war with Pakistan and the role of Indira Gandhi as a national leader who led the country to victory. In this intricate sense the newspaper itself acquires the status of a discourse which is supportive of the nation. It appears to be a part of the objective of Mistry’s fictional narratives to get engaged with this discourse and to understand and deconstruct it. At a theoretical level, particularly in Benedict Anderson’s thesis about the rise of the concept of nation as an imagined community, the newspaper has been understood to be an integral part of print capitalism which contributes in giving form and justification to the amorphous territorial, social and historical mass that assumes the status of a culturally, economically and politically bound nation. The newspaper builds the national context and becomes the forum for debate on national politics. The newspaper cannot be expected to be historicist in its narration. It is more like a custodian of nationalist/regional historiographies. At a more critical level the relationship between language and nation can also be explored through an exploration of the idea of the newspaper in the postcolonial novel.
Particularly in *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, newspapers act, at one and the same time, as resource of information, as myth generating stereoscopic material which provides viability to the idea of nation by building and sustaining a discourse around it and also as public forums of discussions on the subject of nation without being seriously subversive. Neither Mistry nor Rushdie, as diasporic writers, conceal their reliance on the newspaper and print media for information but this reliance is not a simplistic and credulous one. The narratives are finally poised to transcend nationalistic underpinnings and historiography of journalistic writings as counter/alternative narratives of nation and nationalism. There is greater scope for subversiveness in such narratives.

The problematic of the complex relationship of representation of the postcolonial history/historiography with the colonial past, as Gyan Prakash looks at it, needs to be studied in terms of some epistemological shifts taking place during the colonial past: “History and colonialism arose together in India. As India was introduced to history, it was also stripped of a meaningful past; it became a history-less society brought into the age of history” (17). Apparently, the official histories as well as the fictional histories are rooted in new contests of power and resistance in the colonial past and postcolonial present. The issue being taken up here, however, reveals yet another dimension where two forms of history – both of which have come into existence post-British colonialism and both of which are a part of what is generally understood as print capitalism – enter into a contest with each other.

The literary artist, particularly conscious of the crises in the semantics of democratic and secular histories (both in the sense of their disjunctive origin in the
colonial times and their appropriative use in the postcolonial times) is bound to display a sense of scepticism about the complicity of journalistic reportage with major national/nationalist discourses making the dependence of the migrant writer on the newspaper a deeply problematic one. One instance from *Such a Long Journey* can be cited as example here. The same newspaper that gives uninhibited expression to patriotic fervour and nationalist triumphalism after the victory over Pakistan, in the war for the liberation of Bangladesh, carries an unassuming piece of report about Major Bilimoria’s death as a result of a heart attack. It is ironical that Gustad’s own participation in the shared feeling of national pride after the momentous victory over Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh is truncated as a result of his glancing at the utterly false news item. He had been savouring every little bit of the information in the newspaper about the details of Indian victory when he comes across the news of Bilimoria’s death. His reluctant patriotism gets, as if in a trice, soured and converted into disgust. The news falsifies his feeling of national pride.

Gustad’s and his friend Dinshawji’s robust sense of patriotism which is understandable as a consequence of their regular consumption of newspaper reports is at least partially responsible for their participation in the money laundering scandal involving Major Billimoria. In a heightened sense of patriotism, Dinshawji readily agrees to help his colleague in clandestinely depositing the ten lakh rupees sent by the Major in a piece meal manner as he believes it will help the war effort of the Mukti Bahini in Bangladesh. It is apparent from their averments that patriotism even that of Gustad, although he does not give a highfalutin expression to it, is manufactured through writings compliant with nationalism.
Mistry’s strategic inclusion of the newspaper in the problematic of the relationship of the Parsi characters with the idea of nation clearly establishes the role of the newspaper in sustaining and promoting the idea of nation, nationalism and patriotism even for estranged communities. The nationalistic fervour of newspaper reports particularly during the war is certainly not faithful to factual detail because the times of war are seen as a national crisis and require a heavy dependence on whole-hearted public support as a collective. Often, the politically manipulated coverage of the war is used for artificially generating feelings of patriotism and nationalism. The press becomes a part of the political programme and instrument of propaganda. Mistry, as a critical observer, unmasks the underlying complexity of motives and conduct at such a moment:

Stories about the demoniacal occupation of Bangladesh were balanced by the accounts of the Indian Army’s gallantry. On the radio and in cinema newsreels, the Jawans liberated towns and villages, routed the enemy, and took prisoners by the thousands. There was report after report of the citizenry’s generous support for the fighting men: about an eighty-year-old peasant who travelled to New Delhi, clutching her two gold wedding bangles, which she presented to Mother India for the war effort (some newspapers reported it as Mother Indira, which did not really matter – the line between the two was fast being blurred by the Prime Minister’s far-sighted propagandists who saw its value for future election campaigns)... Of course, in the newsreels, no mention was ever made of dutiful Shiv Sena patrols and motley fascists who roamed city streets with stones ready, patriotically shattering
windows that they deemed inadequately blacked-out. Or the unlucky
individuals mistaken for enemy agents and beaten up with great relish by
personal enemies. Or the number of homes burgled by men posing as air-raid
wardens come to inspect the premises. In short, no effort was spared to inform
the country of its invincibility, unity and high morale.” (Such a Long Journey
297-8)

Mistry appears to be portraying, but only in line with his needs, what Edward
S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, in their well-known work Manufacturing Consent:
the Political Economy of the Mass Media, discuss theoretically. Chomsky and
Herman provide a detailed exposition of the way media is controlled and manipulated
by the political and economic powers.

It is our view that, among their other functions, the media serve, and
propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and
finance them. The representatives of these interests have important agendas
and principles that they want to advance, and they are well positioned to shape
and constrain media policy.... In our view, the same underlying power sources
that own the media and fund them as advertisers, that serve as primary
definers of the news, and that produce flak and proper-thinking experts, also,
play a key role in fixing basic principles and the dominant ideologies. (xi)

As one form of history challenging the assumptions of the other, Mistry’s fiction
– as will be discussed at a greater length in chapter 5 and the conclusion of the present
study –particularly through its use of realist mode of narration attempts to underplay
its location in the West; its relationship with the global audience and also its own
position as a part of transnational print capitalism. In *A Fine Balance*, while going through the newspapers of the past several years about the fall and rise of Indira Gandhi after the Emergency, Maneck, chances to stumble upon a report accompanied by a picture dealing with the suicide of Avinash’s sisters. Maneck’s final disillusionment which also drives him to suicide is linked to his reading of this piece of news and a sense of its untruthful and false representativeness as also to his feeling of futility and hopelessness. When Maneck returns from Dubai after a gap of eight years and in a period of personal crisis due to the death of his father and his own existential dilemma about remaining in India with his mother or going back to Dubai – he begins to scan the newspapers of past years stacked up in the cellar. The scanning of the newspapers brings his crisis to a kind of a climax further reinforcing the inescapable gridlock in which personal existence is determined by larger political developments and making human tragedy more a consequence of political realities than personal choices.

The old newspapers become Maneck’s window to the history and politics of India during the period of his absence. By reading the reports, he gets a peep into the experiences of the nation - excesses and human rights violations during the Emergency; the post emergency electoral loss of Indira Gandhi and her party; the unsuccessful and brief tenure of the coalition government which fell due to internal contradictions and conflicts of individual egos and aspirations; the return of Indira Gandhi to power and finally the picture of Avinash’s three sisters hanging from the ceiling fan. The juxtaposition of major national events with the news of the mysterious deaths which, the reader knows, have a direct/indirect relation to political
persecution also acts as an indictment of the limitedness of newspaper as an informant and links the poignancy of personal anguish to the national history. The suicide of Avinash’s sisters is actually not a suicide as it can be logically linked to the problems that the family must have faced after Avinash’s political murder but this can at best be a conjecture. The newspaper report leaves a strong suspicion in the mind of the reader because he knows that Major Billimoria’s heart attack in Such a Long Journey was not a heart attack. The Major, as is revealed through Gustad’s visit to the hospital, was subjected to prolonged torture in the name of treatment. Significantly, the tragic suicide of the three girls is a grim reminder of the victimisation of the innocent individuals caught in the web of state policies and practices. While the newspaper provides a neat closure to the problematic of the individual’s fight with the political system (Avinash’s and Major Billimoria’s challenges to political authority) by resolving them in sanitized and bowdlerized reports, fiction tries to expose the fallacies of these resolutions. The newspaper attempts to show the political as apolitical and historical as incidental and individual.

Mistry’s narratives highlight the fact that the political discourses are in an intimate and intricate relationship with the media and it is the former that set the agenda for the latter. The journalistic rendering of the national history and politics remains biased, superficial and sensationalistic, incapable of reading the invasions of the private lives by invasive political forces. By this logic, it is only the literary text that is capable of exploring these personal spaces, devastated by the political state machinery. In this way, the reality of life as shown in the text is, in a way, negated on the pages of the newspaper. Mistry, by projecting the newspaper as inaccurate is also claiming truthfulness in his works.
The mention of Valmik a minor character in *A Fine Balance* who has an extensive experience of political life after having worked as a proof reader of The Times of India for a period of twenty four years can be made here as concluding evidence of the complicity of the newspaper with the nationalist *status-quoism*. Valmik’s character becomes a metaphor for the attitude of resignation and cynicism which is facilitated by interventions of the kind made by the various components of media. Unlike other characters in the novel Valmik is an insider from the world of newspapers and during his years as a proof reader he had become familiar with the turpitude of the political leaders. He spent his professional days going through stories of “corruption, the natural calamities and economic crises…of misery, caste violence, government callousness, official arrogance, police brutality” (*A Fine Balance* 229).

After retiring from the job of the proof-reader due to an ailment of the eyes, Vasantrao Valmik used his experience to establish himself as a freelance “morcha” producer (*A Fine Balance* 231). This included working for political parties and leaders of all kinds – designing banners, writing speeches and shouting slogans. He admits that he often felt disgusted with the state of affairs but when Maneck broaches the idea of collective resistance he shows his distrust of such measures by saying that it could lead to complete chaos. His philosophy is expressed in these words, “What can anyone do in such circumstances? Accept it, and go on. Please always remember, the secret of survival is to embrace change, and to adapt” (*A Fine Balance* 230). He concludes his social philosophy in a personal precept, “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” (231). Valmik’s identity as a former proof reader of newspapers and his apathy about reality form a conjuncture on expected lines – one with which Mistry’s text has an open disagreement. His attitude is one of indifference and lack of belief in any possibility of change.

The incidents in the first part of Such a Long Journey set the tone for the narrative which sets out to trace the imbrications of the political into the personal in more ways than one. Although, the text acquires shape as a critique of the social and political life in postcolonial India written broadly from the Parsi perspective, yet the incursions of the emerging socio-political reality into the personal space are not a simple one directional phenomenon. It should rather be understood as a complex and multidimensional process. It is shown to affect the economic, inter-personal, cultural, domestic and social existence of almost all the Parsi characters in the novel across different generations, classes and genders. Theoretically speaking, the postcolonial novel through its interrogation of political structures like the postcolonial nation-state and through its avowed interest in social and political configurations of class, caste and religion and their role in the formation of larger social reality has shown a tendency to become less personal; or, to put it in different words to establish the impossibility of an essentialized and insulated personal space.

Even Family Matters with its minimal incorporation of national political developments links the problems faced by characters like NarimanVakeel, Yezad and Vikram Kapur to the society in which they live. As far as Mistry is concerned, the personal, it seems, is inescapably and irrevocably bound to the political. It is important to ask at this point what kind of political/cultural difference Parsi literature can give voice to. Eminent Parsi poet and writer, Keki N. Daruwalla, in the essay “Of
Parsis and the Novel” questions the cultural and political viability of the term Parsi literature. The questions he asks lead to some seminal issues related to the identification of Parsis as a minority. He asks if the nomenclature ‘Parsi Writings’ can be upheld as theoretically valid, “Is this label of Parsi writing necessary? … Isn’t there around us an efflorescence of fiction writing in India in the English language? Aren’t Parsis merely a part of this and should their writing be nailed to a sub-nationalistically oriented canon?” (83). A little later, in the same essay, he offers an answer in the following words:

Literature, produced by minorities, shares its frustrations and aspirations with the rest of the Indian community. Yet it is conceded that each community can have its literary space, its own claustrophobias, and its own mental ghettos. If you are writing fiction you will write about your people, your milieu. Shashi Deshapande will write of Konkan, Allan Sealey of Christians, Anantha Murthy about his own particular Brahmin community. Each one burrows into his own cultural ghetto. (84)

In a similar way, Mistry’s fiction remains a part of the large body of work called Indian writing in the English language. Or it could be said that Indian literature and Parsi literature at least in one sense are overlapping terms. The question that remains to be answered is in what sense are Mistry’s works a minority discourse. Parsis are numerically speaking a minority. As a community with distinct cultural practices they may again be included in the minorities of India. But they certainly are not a minority in the sense of Brahmin-Dalit binary as Keki N. Daruwalla points out when he says that it will be improper to foist artificial divisions between Indian literature in general and Parsi literature. He goes on to say that, “Brahmin and Dalit
binarism one can understand, both as metaphor and as a sociological outcrop” (84). Parsis have historically never been an oppressed community. In Farukh Dhondy’s *Bombay Duck* there is a conversation between two Parsi characters – Xerxes Xavaxa and Lyla:

‘What do you feel, Mr. Xavaxa, or Xerxes? As a Parsee.’

‘Parsees. We don’t feel threatened, I don’t …. Sikhs do and Muslims do and there’s been slaughter these last forty years.’ (199)

Mistry’s novels, as the title of this chapter suggests and as is apparent from the preceding discussion, critiques the politics of postcolonial Indian nation-state. But, like the other Parsi novels, Mistry’s work has strong elements of his community’s shared cultural and historical consciousness. Daruwalla identifies these as three strands emanating from sociological, nostalgic and historical antecedents: “there are three facets to the Parsi novel as sociological tract, as a memory bank and as a look back on the city or the country one has left behind” (84). Whereas there is a visible cultural basis of the Parsi novel especially so in the case of Mistry, his critique of the social and political space cannot be linked to any form of victimization that they may have faced. There is a visible paranoia and a perception of increased vulnerability in the novels of Mistry which can be traced back to multiple reasons. The most important factor is what may be described as loss of privilege. Daruwalla observes that Parsi novel is built around a sociological tract which deals with the readjustments of the Parsi community with the Indian society after Independence and the memory of a past which is in itself a narrative of multiple displacements and fluctuating fortunes.
The backdrop of the texts under study, against which the personal life of the protagonists unfolds, is the nation-state and the new socio-political reality that comes into existence after the end of colonial rule. The scope of the texts extends from the immediate socio-political world of Bombay/Mumbai to the political apparatus that has come to replace the colonial political apparatus in India by which is meant the long and extended rule of the Congress Party and its leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi. In this way, the novels of Rohinton Mistry are an exploration of a decolonized society through the genre of fiction. Because of the requirements of the subject which is overtly political and also because of the new trends in fiction writing which allow greater freedom to break away from established conventions, the stories are narrated through an overlap of the fictional and the ‘real’. Important political and historical developments that took place in postcolonial India, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s form the back drop of the narratives in Mistry’s first two texts and the Bombay of post-Babri Majid riots that of his last novel Family Matters.

Juxtaposing the historical and the fictional is an important characteristic of postcolonial fiction. It can be said that by doing so possibilities of fictionalizing the real and creating new and alternative ways of narrating history are opened up. Postcolonial literature has consistently attempted to make the lines demarcating fiction and reality blurred, in the process, creating interesting overlaps between the two. Experimentation with narrative modes and, “mixing genres and exhibiting a dazzling (occasionally confusing) ‘play’ of form, meaning, politics, and ideology” has been one of its characteristic features (Nayar 14). It can be understood as a way in which received ideas of reality and history can be most profitably questioned.
Such a Long Journey, is an overtly political novel, set against the period of Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s tenure as the Prime Minister and Mistry’s second novel A Fine Balance, an equally political work, is about the period of Emergency and after in India. These were years of both internal and external instability. There had been wars with Pakistan and China in the past and the story of Gustad Noble in Such a Long Journey unfolds amidst an atmosphere of escalation of tensions between India and Pakistan. Pakistan is facing a separatist movement in its East wing which will end with another war and the creation of a new nation – Bangladesh, through India’s intervention. The country is also faced with the other internal problem of widespread poverty.

The texts of Mistry attempt to study how decolonized societies easily swerve away from the idealistic underpinnings of the goals and dreams that accompany the desire for freedom and reveal their incompatibilities with social and democratic ideals which often precede freedom and which are commonly attached to the idea of nation or nation-state both in its nativist predisposition and its western associations. The texts are discourses about the problems of postcolonial nation-state; a critique which understands the state as politically unjust and unstable and as a socially uncivilized administrative structure. The political track of national politics forms the larger background whereas the sociological track of Bombay dominated by Shiv Sena is the immediate one. The narratives attempt to say that the formation of the nation-states in the aftermath of colonial rule may not be the fulfilment of the dream of an equitable and egalitarian society working on democratic principles.
Decolonization, according to one of the meanings implicit in the narratives, is not a simple process of the ouster of the imperial rulers and resumption of self rule on democratic and egalitarian principles but it also involves the complexities of transfer and distribution of power; reconfiguration of social and political relations on the axis of power and the re-writing of history in accordance with the new foci of nationalist historiography. It is also the beginning of new contests between the majorities and minorities that will come to people the national space. These contests become all the more complex in places possessing religious, ethnic and cultural diversity like India. In such places the composite nature of the social reality can alternatively assume multicultural, pluralist, secular or secularist forms. Political restructuring is carried out, particularly, in societies like India through an ambivalent process of an appropriation of the native past and assimilation of colonial experience.

Mistry tries to show how restructuring of the economy, history and society is done in line with the interests of the majorities and how the possibilities of pluralism and eclecticism are foreclosed in the emerging political culture. Retrieval of indigenous histories is done selectively in order to create new constructs of religion and caste-based identities to coincide with the interests of the new regional and national elite. The whole process leads to a new socio-political dynamics with new configurations segregating majorities from minorities. Homogenizing and prejudiced hegemonic social attitudes lead to a political culture that draws its sustenance from intolerant, chauvinistic and fascist beliefs in caste and religion based identities. Vicious forms of social and political injustice like victimization, dispossession and extermination for political power and economic control are shown to be integral to
political reality. Ruthless exercise of political power drawing its legitimacy from discourses of nationalist and regionalist ‘history/ies’ in postcolonial times is endemic. However, the absoluteness and excoriating criticism visible in Mistry’s fiction is an outcome of a desire for a more just, liberal and democratic political and social order and not an expression of Naipaul-like radical skepticism about all socio-political constructs including the nation/nation-state. In addition to reading in the works, the writer’s objections to undemocratic and unjust political set-ups it is important to read in his critique the imperatives dictated by his own location.

The overlap between the personal and the political becomes the site of troubled negotiations between an alienated community and an alienating socio-political context as Gustad Noble’s life in Such a Long Journey gets repeatedly entangled with the immediate world of Maratha dominated postcolonial Bombay/Mumbai and the larger socio-political background of the Indian nation-state/society. As suggested above, all the works by Mistry are built upon a confluence of three social layers – the personal world, the immediate social world aligning itself more and more with the notion of Maratha identity and the larger national context of a formally/officially multi-religious and secular but actually an upper-caste Hindu dominated feudal-masquerading as nationalist India. The novel, Such a Long Journey, brings out how the Parsi community consisting of Gustad Noble and his family and minor and peripheral characters like Dinshawji suffer from a feeling of claustrophobia and maladjustment in the new set of political and social conditions which in turn have a bearing on their personal existence. These characters belong to the middle and lower middle class sections of the society and their existence is characterized by a strange feeling of insecurity, fear and unease.
One of the biggest reasons for a strong perception of threat in these characters results from the evidence around them of a gradually developing chauvinistic political culture which derives its strength from the valorizing of Maratha identity in social/cultural and political contexts. This threat gets concretized in the discriminatory and intimidating politics of the Shiv Sena and it is felt to be present at general social level in the attitude of common people also. Maratha language, territory and history within/without the larger Hindu dominated nation is the dual socio-political context in which the Parsis assume their new role as a religious and ethnic minority and are shown to live their lives. As justifications for the new regional as well as national entities are sought in dominant religious, linguistic and cultural discourses, the threat to alternative ways of life is felt to increase. The Parsis thus end up feeling doubly marginalized.

Almost all the Parsi characters in the novels of Mistry are those members of the Parsi community who have lost their privileged economic positions and are in the process of getting reconciled with their new identity as social and cultural minorities. In the emergent conditions they are compelled to occupy the position of an ethnic and religious minority as well as that of an economically underprivileged class. As the role of the Shiv Sena in all the three texts under study will reveal, the idea of a regional identity is an exclusivist one. The Shiv Sena is represented as intolerant of alternative ways of life and follows hawkish methods of social and cultural policing to establish control and neutralize all forms of difference.

Though, Gustad Noble and Dinshawji do not come in direct confrontation with the Shiv Sena nor are they ever threatened or victimized by the Shiv Sena activists their sense of insecurity is that of common citizenry when besieged with a threat to
personal freedom and safety and the right to one’s way of life. The novels are, in this sense, a disapproval of undemocratic ways of life. Major Bilimoria is one Parsi character who is shown to become a victim of the political system, as after retiring from the Army and in his contribution as an officer in the RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) – the intelligence agency places him under the direct control of Mrs. Indira Gandhi – he gets trapped in a nefarious corruption scandal. In parlous political circumstances when there is an ongoing war being waged by Pakistan against its own Eastern wing and India is preparing to capitalize from the crisis, Bilimoria an agent of RAW, is trapped in a plot to siphon off money from the aid meant for the separatists in Bangladesh. The involvement of a Parsi in a case of corruption in the national government and his being related to Gustad as a neighbour achieves several objectives at the same time but most importantly it becomes a way of critiquing the autocratic and corrupt political class.

This emerging relationship of the Parsis to their socio-political context can be conceptualized as one of estrangement, distance, alienation, withdrawal and at some level even rejection. The possibility of apolitical and secluded enclosures is foreclosed in the beginning. There is a tense counterbalance of a desire to withdraw and the need to psychologically cope with perceived social adversities. Palpable frustration with the socio-political reality of postcolonial India forms an important dimension of Such a Long Journey.

One of the first things that makes itself apparent in the context is that the new nation-states of India and Pakistan have continued to remain politically unstable. The two countries have fought several wars and when the novel opens the possibility of the third war breaking out is very strong. India is supporting the Mukti Bahini in East
Pakistan which is fighting a political battle for the creation of the separate state of Bangladesh. After the horrendous wave of violence that attended the partition of India and Pakistan, the subcontinent is once again in the throes of political instability. A dark shadow of this political instability falls on the small world of Gustad Noble also as is brought out in a subtle fact that Mr. Noble refuses to remove the black paper from his window panes even when the war has come to an end. This can be understood both as lack of hope in any possibility of an abiding peace as well as a desire for withdrawal.

A major concern of Mistry’s fiction is a critique of the political classes and the political system. In *Such a Long Journey* Gustad, Dinshawji and Gustad’s son, Sohrab, betray a consciousness of living in a society which is ruled by a highly corrupt political class. They repeatedly show their disgust towards political corruption. As an educated and informed individual and as a member of the younger Parsi generation, Sohrab suffers from the deepest sense of disaffection and disillusionment with what he perceives as rampant corruption and misrule of the political classes ruling the country. This generation of Parsis, as these two chapters try to establish, have almost no sense of belonging to the nation and the element of nostalgia which is very strongly present in the older generation of Parsis is also missing in their case. The crisis of cultural and political identity is most pronounced in them. As Parsi experience of Bombay has been long, the projection of the social life of Bombay is carried out at a more intimate level as compared to the larger national context. The personal experiences of social and cultural life of Bombay form a significant part of Mistry’s fiction. But, it is mainly through the medium of the newspaper and the conversations based on newspaper items that the larger
background of a national regime is developed in the initial part of *Such a Long Journey*. It is only through the quasi-historical figure of Major Bilimoria that a direct contact between Gustad Noble and the national government is formed. Some critics like Kanaganayakam have shown dissatisfaction with the way the public sphere has been developed. He writes that in *Such a Long Journey*, “the entire episode involving Major Bilimoria fails to convince the reader despite the fact that the Nagarwala case did take place in the 70s,” Kanaganayakam goes on to say that it will be more appropriate to read Mistry’s works as a, “transposition of certain literary conventions in an Indian setting” (34). At the same time there are others like Kamra who see an important message in the absence/presence of Bilimoria. She writes, “…Bilimoria, who is physically absent for a large part of the text… is an omnipresent reminder of the pervasiveness and seductiveness of the myth of national unity as well as its perniciousness” (137). It seems to be a tenable argument that the mysterious and looming absence/presence of the shadow like figure of Bilimoria can be taken as metonymic/metaphorical rendering of the ubiquitous yet unseen presence and threat of national political power structures in relation to the common man. Gustad, Sohrab and Dinshawji, all three betray strong feelings of resentment against political misrule and corruption.

There is a conflict between the purported intention of Gustad to contribute to a national cause by extending secret support to Major Bilimoria’s mission for the liberation of East Pakistan and Sohrab’s distrust of the state. The difference of opinion in the two generations of the Parsis and the different levels of identification with the nation is sustained in all the texts. The younger generation is shown to lack any sense of identification with the nation and expresses either a desire for migration to other
countries or is otherwise dismissive of the nation. Yezad’s discomfiture with the social life in Bombay/Mumbai, his economic straitjacket and his unfulfilled desire to migrate to Canada are an important theme in *Family Matters*. Sohrab’s rebelliousness is more articulate like that of Maneck in *A Fine Balance* as it can be understood to be an informed and educated disgruntlement – something that comes very close to Mistry’s own position.

It will be like missing a very important feature of Mistry’s portraiture of India if it is not unambiguously stated that it is a selective portraiture of the darker and dismal aspects of the Indian polity and social life. It is this dimension of his fiction that can make him open to the charge of painting a neo-orientalist picture which is ideal for consumption in the West. In order to show the darker evil underbelly of Indian politics in the seventies, Mistry uses Gustad’s meeting with Bilimoria. In it is like a firsthand account of the reality behind the financial scandal that resulted in Bilimoria’s victimisation and suffering, Bilimoria, who is in hospital and is being apparently treated for an infection, is used to ‘expose’ the callous selfishness of political leaders, particularly the Prime Minister. Gustad is appalled to see his friend’s condition. Bilimoria is so emaciated that he looks like a pale reflection of his earlier redoubtable self. He gives Gustad an account of the way the Indira Gandhi regime functioned. In a surprising revelation he tells Gustad that RAW was being used as a private detective agency as had been suspected by Sohrab. His duties as in charge of the RAW included “Spying on opposition parties, ministers… anyone. For blackmail….Even spying on her own cabinet” (269). He further tells Gustad that the Prime Minister used blackmail as her preferred instrument of control, “Blackmail was the only way she can keep control… keep them all in line” (270).
The text intends to show that Bilimoria is disposed off when he is no longer required and his condition is evidence of the fact that there is a conspiracy to eliminate him. Mistry uses a first person victim’s version to bring home his point to the readers. Bilimoria is being given injections for what he says was first diagnosed as yellow fever, then successively as typhus, malaria and typhoid. The injections they are administering him send him into spells of unconsciousness and even when he regains consciousness there is prolonged slurring in his speech. Moreover, he sporadically slips into a delirious state and what he says in this condition of insensibility is made testimony to the fact that he has been badly tortured during his interrogation. In between periods of full consciousness, he narrates his experiences with Mukti Bahini. He tells Gustad about the Indian activities in Bangladesh. Trouble in Bangladesh reached a crisis when even after winning a clear majority Sheikh Mujibur Rehman was not allowed to form the government by Bhutto and the Pakistani Generals which led to civil disobedience. However, India’s intervention in the political crisis in Bangladesh is far from being a simple attempt at restoring peace and ensuring justice. The Major is cured of all such illusions when in the course of helping the guerrilla movement in Bangladesh he approached the Prime Minister for more funds. She made a telephone call and told Bilimoria to go to the State Bank and collect sixty lakh rupees without revealing his identity.

The entire episode of drawing money from the bank turns out to be an act of embezzlement by the Prime Minister. Bilimoria later tells Gustad that he was summoned to the Prime Minister’s office once again to be told that he must take the responsibility of drawing out the money fraudulently and write a confession so that the Prime Minister’s integrity should not be doubted by the opposition or her enemies.
The major subsequently discovers that as assured by the Prime Minister, the money was not reaching the guerrillas in Bangladesh, but was being intercepted and redirected to a private account. Bilimoria cannot make sense of this betrayal. He is left to vaguely conjecture the motive behind this act of cheating. He says, “That I am not sure of. One possibility – to finance her son’s car factory. Or could be for election fund, or may be…” (278). Bilimoria is so disgusted that out of reckless desperation he sends ten lakh rupees to Bombay so as to end up in the custody of Gustad. This defiance brings him into an open confrontation with the people at the top who finally get him arrested. Bilimoria ends on a note of disillusionment

‘What hope for the country? With such crooked leader?... I sat thinking or all the people I had come across in my life…men in the army, good men. And my Ghulam Mohammed. Khodadad Building…the families living there. You and Dilnavaz, the children, the ambitions you have for them. And those bastards, those ministers and politicians, those ugly buffaloes and pigs… getting fatter and fatter, sucking our blood…’ Jimmy trembled, choking with vehemence.’ (279)

The diatribe in Such a Long Journey and A Fine Balance is so unrelenting and bitter that the two texts could easily be explained away as invectives against Indira Gandhi. It is however due to more sensitively and seriously drawn portions dealing with Parsi consciousness, the systemic problems of a feudal, patriarchal and orthodox society seen as a nation, the emerging politics of chauvinism and intolerance on lines of caste and religion and rampant corruption and poverty that make these novels serious works dealing with postcolonial India. Apparently, the ideological underpinning of such a narration is a feeling of complete disillusionment and
frustration with the functioning of the nation-state and its political classes. The ideological implications of this discourse, however, need to be unravelled in relation to the various overlapping contexts in which the text is produced. The location of the author as a migrant writer settled in the West, the altered socio-economic circumstances of the Parsi community in postcolonial India, the imperatives of writing Indian English novel in the era of neo-imperial globalisation as well as the socio-economic and political failures and problems of the postcolonial nation-state are all important for a consideration of this mode of writing. The rage and bitterness swell in the reader at the depiction of an almost inhuman and sordid lust of the political classes for power and money which thrives at the cost of common man and his life. The drama and suspense make a poignant narrative. Yet, interpretation, it has to be conceded, has the responsibility of going deeper than the affective function of fiction and locating the text in the socio-economic and cultural contexts which determine its nature.

The text is replete with episodes which sustain the criticism of the injustice and corruption of the political rulers. The larger socio-political backdrop begins to impinge upon the ensconced privacy of the personal world and acquires more concrete dimensions through pointed references to political developments taking place in it. There is a prolonged critique of the politics of Nehru, his ineptitude in handling the Chinese aggression and his resorting to ‘political intrigues and internal squabbles’ to promote his daughter Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister of the country. The disillusionment with postcolonial India arising from chauvinistic and undemocratic political practices indulged in by corrupt political classes develops into one of the major concerns of Such a Long Journey. Another paragraph from the text
containing a conversation between Gustad and his fellow banker Dinshawji will reveal an uninhibited interplay of fiction and reality in drawing the picture of the nation. In order to celebrate his daughter Roshan’s birthday and Sohrab’s success in the entrance exam for IIT, Gustad invites Dinshawji for dinner. Mistry uses the conversation of Gustad and Dinshawji to offer the perspective of two politically conscious Parsis critically commenting on the political developments in the country. Referring to Indira Gandhi and her policy of nationalization of banks Dinshawji says:

‘Believe me,’ said Dinshawji, ‘she is a shrewd woman, these are vote-getting tactics. Showing the poor she is on their side. Saali always up to some mischief. Remember when her pappy was Prime Minister and he made her president of Congress Party? At once she began encouraging the demands for a separate Maharashtra. How much bloodshed, how much rioting she caused. And today we have the bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens. Don’t forget, she started it all by supporting the racist buggers.”’ (38-9)

Mistry’s use of political gossip although not as copious as in Such a Long Journey, is nevertheless not entirely absent in Family Matters. In this novel, the author exposes the political environment of Mumbai through presentation of familial meetings and discussions. At the time when the two families get together for Nariman’s seventy ninth birthday, they talk at length about the corrupt politics of the Shiv Sena. In the hospital where Nariman is taken after his fall, the technician and Nariman talk about Shiv Sena’s interference in day to day life. There is a mention of Shiv Sena’s cultural policing as they ensure that the letters addressed to Bombay
instead of Mumbai are not delivered. Dr. Tarapore, the Parsi doctor and Nariman discuss how there is a systematic displacement of English by Marathi from college curriculum.

Mistry’s narratives, in this way, try to understand the nature of their nationalism and the alienation of the Parsis. Their patriotism, in the face of their discomfort with the social and political structure, is presented as an inherent Parsi trait. It is an assertion of a deep sense of commitment which goes deeper than minor and incidental reasons for censure as also a testimony of their sense of belonging with India. The patriotism of Gustad and Bilimoria finds an echo in Dinshawji.

The immanent objective of the text is the vindication of Major Nagarwala, the Parsi officer of the Indian army who became implicated in the financial scam during Mrs Indira Gandhi’s government. Major Bilimoria can be seen as a fictional incarnation of Major Nagarwala and is brought into the text as a means of offering a defence of Nagarwala, showing him as an innocent victim of a political conspiracy and in this way salvaging the reputation of the Parsis’ collective uprightness. The almost personal elements in the attacks on Indira Gandhi can also be linked to this. Bilimoria in his triple significance as a representative of the reclusive Parsis in the government machinery, as a pillar of support for Gustad in his personal life and as a target of sinister political machinations serves several important thematic and artistic needs. Mistry, achieves many artistic objectives through the induction of a historical figure without any apologetic strategy of making the fictional masquerade by means of metaphorical transmutations or fictional impersonation. This interlacing of the real and the fictional develops into a sustained postmodernist technique in the text. The
entry of historical figures in fictional narratives coincides with fictions’ attempt to interrogate socio-political reality and by doing so assume a political role. The historical and the fictional, look at each other, through a transparent piece of glass.

As pointed out above, Mistry’s narrative method and overall conception of fiction is very close to 19th century realist fiction with the claim to represent ‘outside reality’ through ‘transparent’ language and invisible authorial agendas. However, writing in the last decades of the twentieth century, the author displays some of the characteristics that are typical of the ‘postmodern’ age. There is no radical interrogation and reformulation of literary genres through a “playful mixing of fiction and history in clear contravention of the realist forms of literary practice” (Abrams 121). However, Mistry’s narratives have the ideological aim of subverting the received ideas of history, social and human reality as is the case with most postmodern writers like Rushdie and Arundhati Roy.

*A Fine Balance* is the most explicitly political of all the novels of Mistry. The story of Ishwar Darji, Omprakash Darji and Maneck Kohlah opens in a more menacing backdrop of the Emergency imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975 as a response to what was described as internal threat. The mention of Emergency in the country in the early pages of the text establishes an atmosphere of acute political instability. The novel opens in an overcrowded local train of Bombay. The motif of journey, although in a slightly altered manner, is sustained in this text also. The journey is the medium through which the lives of the three characters converge. It is one of the objectives of the text to question the outcome of these journeys and to study the course of their intersecting trajectories. The most momentous journey into nationhood after colonial times has also been a journey into
altered social and political conditions and it forms the backdrop against which the other journeys take place. The arduous and seemingly endless journey of the Parsi community too forms the backdrop against which textual material is given shape but its thematic importance is reduced because of a different set of foci that the text embraces. There appears to be a greater uninhibitedness with which probing of the political reality in the society is carried out in the text. It is not through the reluctant sorties by paranoid Parsis into Indian Bazaars that the Indian society is delineated. For the central Parsi character, Dina Dalal, a forty two year old widow, the security of home and economy is slender. It is described as “her fragile independence” (11). Dina Dalal can be described as the most vulnerable Parsi character as she does not even have the minimum comfort of living in a Parsi enclosure or building. She enjoys very little social security as she is more or less an alienated member of her own community. Her rejection of the security of her orthodox and patriarchal brother’s house is understood as a rebellion and makes her a kind a pariah in relation to the Parsi community. Maneck Kohlah, the other Parsi character in the novel and an old friend’s son who has arrived as her paying guest is also placed right in the middle of the unfriendly world of Bombay. The inclusion of the two tailors in their house who have come in response to her requirement for their services, leads to a new and meaningful juxtaposition. The immediate reason for their entry is that Dina procures orders from an export house and needs two tailors to do the job.

As a postcolonial critique of the Indian nation-state, the novel opens with a reference to political unrest. Jayprakash Narayan is leading a movement of civil disobedience and there are demonstrations against the Prime Minister demanding her exit as she has been found guilty of electoral malpractices. Mrs Gupta of Au Revoir Exports, a minor character, who places orders for stitching with Dina Dalal and her
Verma 165
tailors, gives liberal expression to her political opinions. Her satisfaction at the
declaration of internal emergency can be taken as the other/other’s perspective – one
with which the text is in dialogue with. Mrs Gupta’s almost inconspicuous remarks
bear this out in the context of general and popular opinion. As a small time
entrepreneur and a member of the middle class she shows appreciation for
authoritative politics. Any form of unionism or resistance is a threat to the cherished
stability. She shows contentment at the fact that the entire political opposition that
was demanding the Prime Minister’s ouster along with social workers, unionists and
students have been sent to jail. In her unproblematic acceptance of political corruption
as an integral part of business world, she displays the seeds of the malaise of
administrative and political corruption that has been growing in magnitude and range
in post-Independence India since 1947. She also exemplifies the middle class
propensity for amateurish responses on political matters whenever she meets Dina.
However, most importantly, the attitude of smugness displayed by her almost
immediately separates her from the three protagonists in whom vulnerability breeds
tremendous fear. There is also till now in the mind of Dina a mistaken sense of
insulation as she believes that the political developments do not have a bearing on
personal lives of people like her. That is why she assures the two tailors when they
give expression to their unease about the Emergency: “Government problems – games
played by people in power. It doesn’t affect ordinary people like us” (75). What
transpires in the text is exactly the opposite and the insouciance of this remark in
blown up in smithereens.

One of the important respects in which A Fine Balance is different from his
other novels is that in this novel Mistry’s narrative discourse on political corruption
and administrative apathy with regard to ordinary citizens tries to account for the
effect of these on rural India also. Through a narrative which depicts the nature, reasons and effects of the migration of Ishwar and Omprakash to Bombay from a village, Mistry broadens his critique of politics and governance in post-Independence India. In the complex network of journeys, both metaphorical and literal, that are undertaken in the text, Ishwar and Omprakash’s journey is the story of the migration of rural population to the urban centres and the futility and tragedy of such journeys. An equally important journey is that of Thakur Daramsi their traditional prosecutor to the city equipped with more pernicious methods and means. This aspect of *A Fine Balance* has been a subject of critical opinion.

Mistry’s venturing out of Parsi enclosures opens up several new dimensions of critical debate related with the questions of verisimilitude and the use of realism. The main reason for the migration of Ishwar and Omprakash to the city lies in the humiliating and hopeless socio-economic conditions of their families in the village and the urge to escape from the ignominy attached with lower castes in rural India. In a still dominant feudal set-up, the high caste land owners enjoy positions of power which have been passed on to them in a rigidly structured system. The discourse of caste is shown to permeate all aspects of rural life and is the basis of social organisation. As Mistry inscribes it, it enjoys a religion like sanctity as its logic is traced to the very nature of cosmic order in the belief system of the Hindus. The suffering that people of the lower castes undergo is naturalized through prolonged compliance and social re-iteration. It is an age old system of caste which derives its justifications from what Pandit Lalluram describes to Dukhi as a belief in four varnas: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The people of the Chamaar caste who perform the work of tanners and leather-workers are expected to slip into their social
roles rehearsed for centuries and accept extreme forms of discrimination and exploitation. The evidence of victimhood which spans generations is visible in the life of Dukhi and his family. Dukhi begins to acquire the consciousness of his inferiority right from his childhood and “no special instruction was necessary for this part of his education” (96).

Through the depiction of Dukhi’s life, the novel tries to expose the brutality and injustice of feudal, caste-based social set-up and also goes on to study the prospects of resistance and escape. As a member of the lower-caste, Dukhi, learns all the social codes to be followed by the untouchables by observing his father and other outcastes like him. They are predestined to be economically deprived. The socially despised trade of tanning and leather-work does not have an organized character. Chamaars are forbidden from affecting any deliberate or accidental proximity with the Brahmans and the Thakurs. There is an elaborate code of conduct which helps to preserve the rigid demarcations of the inferior and superior castes. The lower castes are not allowed to come anywhere close to the well from which upper castes draw water. Any breach of these codes is meted out the severest punishment. Dukhi, as a child, hears accounts of fingers and hands getting chopped off for minor thefts. The land owners have the right to sexually exploit lower caste women. Dukhi once hears his father tell his mother how one Buddhu’s wife is in hiding, “She refused to go to the field with the zamindar’s son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square” (96). The depiction of historical and chronic forms of subjugation and oppression in an orthodox feudal society before independence makes greater sense in the context of their continuation in post-independence India through strategic shifts as is evidenced in the transformation of Thakur Dharamsi from an arch
persecutor in the rural life to a political leader wielding considerable power. There is also evidence of an unrefined symbolism in the characters – an attempt to make them representative figures. It is only later in the character of Om that an attempt is make to go beyond stereotypes.

The presentation of rural life in *A Fine Balance* has been a subject of much critical scrutiny and critics have approached this problematic from different perspectives. K.C. Belliappa describes the novel as a prototypical realistic novel. Belliappa alludes to Mistry’s use of the third person narrative in the manner of the nineteenth century English novel that does not strain the credibility of the reader (211). Discussing the value of ‘realistic novel’ Raymond Williams in his essay “Realism and the Contemporary Novel” has remarked:

> There is a kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons…The distinction of this tradition is that it offers a valuing creation of a whole way of life, a society, that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, at the same time valuing creations of human beings who, while belonging to and affected by and helping to define this way of life, are also, in their own terms, absolute ends in themselves. (22)

With characteristic clarity Williams brings out two very important qualities of realist fiction’s social realism – the centring of human beings and the commensal relationship between them and the society in which they live. The representation of rural characters and rural life in *A Fine Balance*, it can be said, is done along some of the basic assumptions of realism and imposes closures suggested by Williams. There is a shift in narrative strategies when Ishwar and Om shift to the city and when the narrative is dealing with life in urban centres.
The part of the narrative dealing with rural life is an endless chain of events dealing with the atrocities and violence perpetrated against the Dukhi family in a caste-based socially upheld system of discrimination. Dukhi’s wife, Roopa, in conditions of grinding poverty, is forced to steal milk and fruit from the premises of the landowners. She is raped by the land owner’s man on watch duty when she is caught by him stealing oranges from an orchard. The chronic nature of their subjugation finds yet another expression in the unquestioning submission. Both husband and wife quietly acquiesce in this loss of honour. Dukhi “heard her muffled sobs several times during the night, and knew from her smell, what had happened to her while she was gone. He felt the urge to go to her, speak to her, comfort her…He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night” (99). Another corollary of dealing with life outside Parsi enclosures is that the text enters into a critique of patriarchal values of the society and the widespread abuse and exploitation on the basis of gender. *A Fine Balance* is the only one of the three texts that raises feminist issues at an overt level. The rape of Dukhi’s wife as an example of sexual exploitation and abuse of the poor in a feudal society can be seen in conjunction with Dina Dalal’s repression in orthodox Parsi family structure as forming an important thematic issue. In a move away from a sustained critique of socio-political reality towards a feminist view of the society, Dina Dalal’s comments on the mixed prospects of the marriage of Om come out as a generalization on the condition of women:

In these arranged marriages, astrologers and families decide everything. The woman becomes the property of the husband’s family, to be abused and bullied. It’s a terrible system, turns the nicest girls into witches.

(492)
The subject of oppression of women in traditional Indian patriarchal family is brought up through this casual remark made by Dina. In Mistry’s fictional world, the brahminical-feudal, patriarchal, class/caste based social structure works through a highly sophisticated system of denial of life, dignity and possession in abidance to the rules governing the incidence of birth. The fact that Roopa gives birth to two sons is seen as an unnatural subversion of the Law of Manu. The caste-ridden patriarchal society ruled by land owning classes under the aegis of brahminical belief system involving physical abuse, economic deprivation and social stigmatization gets even more ruthless as Dukhi shows signs of aspirations of transgression. After a particularly devastating experience at a Thakur household where he is bestially beaten up and denied his wages for accidentally breaking a mortar, Dukhi has a change of heart. In his search for a place which is less tormenting and humiliating, Dukhi decides to work as a cobbler in the city. It is an attempt to escape an orthodox and oppressive system in which it is normal to punish people in inhuman ways for crimes such as walking in the upper-caste lane or going within hearing range of the temple where prayers are being performed. However, as he and his later generation, find out, “there was no difference between village grime and town grime” (106). Although, the spark of rebelliousness which gets ignited in Dukhi does turn into a prolonged fight for rights and justice yet finally the entire Dukhi family, except Dukhi’s son Ishwar and Ishwar’s nephew Om, is burnt alive when Dukhi’s son Narayan insists on casting his own vote.

Such episodes have come in for criticism on various grounds from critics with different orientations. A common charge against them is that they are crude representations from an ignorant migrant which lack refinement. Tabish Khair calls A
*Fine Balance*, “a sort of eternal ‘epic of the victim’” and “a Babu-socialist valorization of ‘the poetry of poverty and suffering’” (144-145). Khair’s views act as a corroboration of the argument made above that Mistry selects only the dark side of the Indian society. Whereas there is greater maturity, refinement and more liberal use of different artistic devices in his depiction of the city life, probably owing to what Khair calls “Babu-socialist”, the portraiture of rural life is arguably painted in very thick strokes of the brush. Moreover, Mistry as a city-bred Parsi clearly misses out on the poetic and humourous aspects of Indian rural life which probably a writer like R.K, Narayan or Kamla Markandaya or even Arundhati Roy would not. Khair observes that the, “stories of (Coolies) Ishwar and Omprakash borrow heavily from different genres: the fantastic, the fairy tale, newspaper reportage etc” (141). More serious criticism, however, has strong objection against the text’s excessive preoccupation with the darker and dismal realities of the Indian society. Paranjpe believes that Mistry through novels like *A Fine Balance* represents India “as not only an area of darkness, confusion, violence, but as a hopeless doomed country which must be rejected” (11). What Khair describes as Babus’ socialism would probably be similarly dismissed by critics like Aijaz Ahmad as a liberal bourgeois attitude towards oppression and inequality. Khair however, also objects to such portrayals as for him they appear to be neo-orientalist. Khair understands them to be

one-sided …concentration on India as a space of unchanging, repetitive oppression, poverty and suffering that …completely dismisses the considerable gains made in alleviating poverty, coping with food shortages, obtaining political rights among lower castes and
raising life expectancy in India over the fifty years of independence.

(325)

Khair’s and Paranjpe’s are valid arguments which highlight a very important aspect of the novels of Mistry. It is also true that this becomes most conspicuous in the depiction of rural Indian life and is to be contrasted with Mistry’s very sensitive portrayal of the issues related to the problems of the Parsis.

The rest of life of Dukhi and his sons covers the process of their transposition from the feudal/local system of caste/class based oppression to a larger and more complex system. Dukhi seeks freedom from the deprivation and exploitation of caste system by making an important choice. In an attempt at resisting social discrimination he attempts to move out of the feudal space to the city which offers the prospect of greater freedom as a result of the absence of caste system. It is an attempt at acquiring a new identity which makes an almost natural conjunction with the hope of freedom in an independent India. One of the ways of achieving his goal is by sending his two sons Ishwar and Narayan as apprentices to his friend Ashraf who works as a tailor in the city. It is integral to the logic of the texts that this journey of the post-independence lower caste citizens coincides with the progress of India towards independence and a promise of freedom accompanying it.

The charge, made by Kanaganayakam, that there is political correctness of a highly palpable quality in Mistry’s texts, becomes particularly conspicuous at this stage in the narrative. Ishwar and Om’s attempt at escape from resilient caste-structure must be through the agency of a Muslim character Ashraf. Such instances of political correctness clearly reveal contrivance in his realism. Kanaganayakam levels
more but related charges by saying that Mistry’s characters are social types that lack the capacity to evolve and that his interlacing of the political and the personal appears to be openly manipulated. Comparing Mistry with Rushdie she says, “While Rushdie flaunts that juxtaposition as artifice, Mistry requires from the reader a suspension of disbelief” (34). Kanaganayakam concludes by saying that while defamiliarization is an important aspect of Rushdie’s fiction, it is used by Mistry to uphold the illusion of the real. Such instances of criticism clearly help in establishing the importance of the narrative choices of Mistry in any evaluation of his art. The limited access his novels provide to the real is apparent, among other things, in the use of the English language in the context of those characters who can be expected to know very little of the language. Indigenization of English is one way of naturalizing English to the requirements of English fiction and Mistry also uses the device liberally.

Mistry’s condemnation of the postcolonial state is further amplified in the character of Thakur Dharamsi, a new incarnation of the older feudal system. He does not let Narayan forget his caste, background and profession even after he succeeds as a tailor, making him pay for his transgression of the caste boundaries. Thakur Dharmsi attempts to assert the caste protocol by sending Narayan, now an established tailor, a message every time an animal dies on his premises. Narayan also makes it a point to initiate his son into the work of treating skins of dead animals by taking him along with him for once-a-week leather work sessions.

The city, as a civic space, initially offers a more democratic alternative to the socially discriminated and economically exploited sections. Narayan slowly becomes an expert tailor, his financial position improves and he begins to display a heightened
sense of justice and a will to resist. On the eve of his wedding, when Thakur Dharamsi coerces the village musicians preventing their rendering their services for the wedding, Narayan orders a band from the city. Narayan decides to send his son Omprakash to the city to receive education when he is eight years old as the city schools accept students from all castes. Having broken free from the traditional feudal caste-ridden rural set-up because of his exposure to a relatively wider urban world, Narayan gains consciousness of his rights as a human being and starts questioning the chronic inhumaneness of caste discrimination and the ability of a democratic system to root it out.

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. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like. (A Fine Balance 142)

That is in the late nineteen sixties. Narayan, as a representative voice of the marginalised communities, expresses his desire for his civic and democratic rights by telling his father: “Next time there is an election, I want to mark my own ballot…It is my right. And I will exercise it in the next election, I promise you” (144). Narayan is presented as the rebellious voice against traditional unjust practices. The questions raised by him are some basic questions about the promise of freedom in postcolonial societies. Economic, social and political freedoms are the formative themes of political intervention in struggles for independence from colonial rule. These themes get re-iterated in political discourses even after independence in the political choices
and social behaviour of the subalterns. The leaders who visit the villages during parliamentary elections declare their commitment to “new schools, clean water, and health care”; land for the landless through “redistribution and stricter enforcement of Land Ceiling Act” and eradication of discrimination on the basis of caste. Dukhi and Narayan already begin to show signs of disillusionment with the political classes which became very prominent in late sixties and early seventies in India. Narayan’s responses to such speeches are characterized by tangible loss of hope, “For politicians, passing laws is like passing water…it all ends down the drain” (143).

The feudal lords and land owners, assuming a new role as the representatives of the political parties, begin to have a bigger national role than was afforded to them in the colonial times. Thakur Dharamsi and his goons oversee the process of elections in the village and usurp the villagers’ right to vote by confining the voters to filing past the man who marks their fingers with indelible ink and the register on which they put their thumb impression. The actual voting is done by Thakur’s men. Narayan’s act of defiance in his demand to cast his own vote brings heavy reprisals for the whole chamaar community. After Narayan has been badly tortured and killed his whole family is burnt alive. There is a full scale riot in which the families of the lower castes are selectively targeted. Mistry here shows the darker side of Indian democracy, particularly in far-flung rural areas where such incidents were normally reported at the times of elections up to the end of the twentieth century. In this sense, this critique of Indian political system may present a very pessimistic view of democracy but is based on actual incidents.
The only two surviving members of the Dukhi family, Ishwar and Omprakash, have to undergo further displacement as a result of the arrival of a readymade garments store in the vicinity where they work as tailors. They decide to migrate to an even bigger and more inhospitable city in search of occupation. The economic restructuring in the early stages of consumerist culture necessitates the relocation of small scale and traditional forms of trade and business. Ashraf expresses bewilderment at being uprooted because of factors outside his control, “Strange isn’t it …Something I’ve never even seen is ruining the business I have owned for forty years” (150).

Ishwar and Omprakash enter the new world of the slumlord Thokray - a slightly distorted and very thinly veiled version of Thackrey, a famous political leader and founder of the Shiv Sena in Bombay a slumlord who rents out huts on government land through his man Navalkar and “controls everything …country liquor, hashish, bhung. And when there are riots, he decides who gets burned or who survives” (163).

A Fine Balance is set against the Emergency regime and portrays in detail the effects of the Emergency on the social order as a whole. The imposition of the Emergency coincides with the arrival of Ishwar, Om and Maneck to the city. This facilitates an analysis of the effect of emergency on the various sections of the society. The first part of the novel, dealing with Maneck’s entry into the college as a student shows the impact of the emergency on the educational system. In Misry’s discourse, the Emergency manifests itself, most importantly, as the forfeiture of the democratic and basic human rights. Dina’s earlier comment cited above that such political developments do not affect the common people is proved wrong as the novel
begins to chart the course of the suffering undergone by Maneck and Dina, the two Parsi characters, and that of Om and Ishar, two lower caste migrants from the village who seek sanctuary in the house of Dina as a result of the complete absence of democratic norms and human rights. Their victimization is in direct proportion to their vulnerability on the social scale.

In the college where Maneck goes to study squads of outsiders take control of the campus and employ coercive tactics to make the students and faculty compliant. In a move to enforce silence, the offices of the campus newspapers are ransacked and the editors assaulted. Later they organize a ceremony in which everyone is made to sign statements of allegiance to the national cause being espoused by the Prime Minister of the country against anti-democratic forces. The discourse of nationalism is used to justify violence and encroachment of personal freedom. In this general atmosphere of repression and fear Maneck has to submit to a particularly humiliating session of ragging. He is made to remove his clothes and suffer the most disgraceful insults. This is the first major setback to his sense of personal dignity and self-respect inflicted by his new social context. It is an initiation into the rites of suffering violence and indignity and the only responses – fear and shame. Escape is the only option in a situation where there is no possibility of resistance. All forms of resistance are silenced as Maneck finds out when he returns to the hostel after several months of his stay at Dina Dalal’s house.

Maneck meets Avinash’s parents who tell him that Avinash died under mysterious circumstances. Avinash was his only friend and sympathizer on the campus. But more importantly Avinash is representative of politically unaffiliated student leadership. He raised his voice against the administrative problems like
unhygienic conditions and poor quality food. He even tried to organise students in order to lead them to constructive intervention in the administration of the college. After several months of disappearance his body was found in a city morgue with signs of brutal torture. However, the official version forwarded is that he died as a result of a fall from a train. His parents cannot reconcile to the absurdity of the official conclusion about the cause of the death. Avinash’s father tells Maneck, “…we saw burns on many shameful parts of his body, and when his mother picked up his hand to press it to her forehead, we could see that his fingernails were gone. So we asked them in the morgue, how can this happen in falling from a train? They said anything can happen…” (499).

The political rally of Indira Gandhi to which Om and Ishwar are forcibly pitchforked is also an exhibition of the coercive character of the political dispensation. The state machinery is employed to collect people for the rally with the use of force. The unwilling slum dwellers are forcibly loaded in buses by the police as they are unreceptive to the suggestions of the government officials. When the officials communicate the advantages of attending the political rally by saying that it is a rare opportunity for them to apprise the Prime Minister of their problems, the slum dwellers respond with such sardonic rejoinders, “Tell her yourself…You can see in what prosperity we live”; “Yes, tell her how happy we are”; “If she is our servant, tell her to come here” (258). The cynicism of these remarks is a proof of the disdain and disillusionment of the common people and an absence of any expectations from the political leadership. The rally itself is a mixture of farcical gimmicks, abject show of sycophancy and platitudinous speeches. The audience shows utter disinterest in the
speeches and their presence is on account of the police cordon which prevents them from leaving. The little consolation, they look forward to, also remains unfulfilled as the snacks do not last long, the five rupees promised to them are reduced to four and they are dumped from the buses somewhere in the middle of the way.

There are views that Mistry’s fictional representation of Indian history during the mid-seventies reads like a typical West-focused postcolonial narrative, highlighting the denial of democratic rights to the citizens and blatant use of administrative machinery for personal political purposes. Chapter two of the present study, referring to Jani, stresses the need to read writers like Mistry as writers whose writings have to be subsumed under the broader shifts in the aftermath of the Emergency. Emergency marks an apotheosis of disillusionment with the nation-state as well as a crisis in the general faith in the notions of freedom and democracy after the end of colonial rule. The shifts in the literary mood which generate a feeling of cynicism, pessimism and interrogation may be as big in magnitude as in the post-war European novel. For Mistry, the Emergency creates the possibility for unlimited political control and gives the state the freedom to exercise repression in extreme forms. Democratic and human rights are blatantly violated. Politically powerful people have unprecedented control over the state machinery. The police play an active role in safeguarding the interests of those who are in positions of power and in mediating on their behalf. The people living in the hutments have the status of victims in this socio-political order. The leader of the land mafia, Thokray, builds an illegal colony on government land through his man Navalkar and rents out the shacks to the homeless and later with the help of the police renders the same people homeless by
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supervising the demolition of the hutments in line with the government’s city beautification drive in an instance of economic exploitation and abuse.

The exploitative and repressive function of the police is again brought out in the disappearance of Ashraf’s friend Nawaz. After being rendered homeless when Ishwar and Om return to Nawaz’s house they are informed that he has been implicated in a false case of smuggling gold from the Middle East. It is a case of vendetta as he insisted on being paid by an influential client for whose daughter’s wedding he had stitched clothes. This customer got so annoyed at his asking for his money that he had a false case made against him to get him arrested. The whereabouts of Nawaz have been unknown after that.

The new identity of Om and Ishwar in the city is connected with their economic status. The fact of being poor renders them more defenceless against victimization for economic and political gains carried under the patronage of the ruling classes and justified through the means of nationalistic discourses. Ishwar and Om along with all the other pavement dwellers are forcibly transported to a distant place where an irrigation project is going on. All the pavement dwellers are taken into police custody to be handed over to a contractor to perform compulsory labour in the irrigation project.

This is presented as another instance where the Emergency regime legitimizes exploitation and oppression. The detention of Ishwar, Om and homeless beggars as free labour in the irrigation project, the dictatorial means employed to deal with social problems like poverty and over-population, the blatant use of mafias under official protection for political purposes are dramatised in *A Fine Balance* to critique Indian political system.
There are many of them like Shankar, the beggar with amputated legs, who have merely experienced a simple transfer from the control of one mafia to another. Shankar before being removed from his pavement by the police was one of the hundreds of beggars working for the Beggarmaster. Through an ironical twist the beggars are returned to the fold of the Beggarmaster after they become useless for construction work. They are bought back by the Beggarmaster in return for a payment of two thousand rupees. Ishwar and Om being able bodied have to purchase their freedom by promising to pay the Beggarmaster rupees fifty per week for full one year.

The return of Thakur Dharamsi, in his new avatar as a member of the Congress Party wielding great influence in the city, is an ironic reflection of the status quo of the political structure. The political leadership in post-Independence politics is retained by the erstwhile feudal lords. However, the relocation of rural lords in national politics ushers in a paradigmatic shift and greater refinement in their methods of control and oppression. After becoming a part of the political system people like Dharamsi enjoy the privilege of acting through the mechanisms and institutions of the state. Describing these new methods, Ashraf tells Om and Ishwar that Dharamsi, “is a big man now in the Congress Party, they say he will become a minister in the next elections…When he wants to threaten someone, he doesn’t send his own men, he just tells the police. They pick up the poor fellow, give him a beating, then release him” (A Fine Balance 520).

Dharamsi is in-charge of the Family Planning Centre of his city, procuring villagers through his goons for forcible vasectomy. He not only pockets the operation
bonus but also makes money by auctioning the villagers to government employees for whom it is mandatory to get a fixed number of people sterilized. The last encounter of Ishwar and Om with Thakur Dharamsi brings to an end the illusion of empowerment and independence from caste hierarchies that they had come to believe in as a result of their long residence in the city and which gets expressed in Om’s little defiance of spitting in the direction of Dharamsi to which Dharamsi issues a restrained warning, “I know who you are” (520). The act of recognition of the old antagonists of the caste system, in the new context of this small city, where Ashraf lives, and where Ishwar has brought Om to meet prospective wife and the reprisals that follow are an evidence of the continuance of caste hierarchies and the impossibility of overcoming them even in the polity of an independent postcolonial India. Dharamsi, further empowered by the control he exercises over the institutions of the state, now functions through the system. The violence of open and crude forms of oppression resorted to in the caste based societies and which Ishwar and his family had faced for generations has now been replaced by more systematic and sophisticated instruments of subjugation, control and annihilation. While Ashraf dies after being hit on the head by the police who are forcibly rounding up common people in order to herd them to Dharamsi’s sterilization camp; Ishwar and Om are subjected to worse inhuman atrocities. Dharamsi on seeing Om in the sterilization camp issues tacit instructions to the doctors to castrate him whereas Ishwar’s legs have to be amputated to save him from a severe infection that he has contracted after sterilization. The last that is seen of them is as beggars on the streets of the big city with Ishwar, just like Shankar, lodged on a platform with wheels and Ishwar pulling him.
It is noticeable that in Mistry’s world, there is very little possibility for any ordinary exploited, marginalised person to escape the noose of caste, class or religion. The implicit authorial perspective is indicative of the impossibility of a Dukhi (taken as a representative figure) getting around the social or class boundaries though his individual choices or efforts or through the agency of the state institutions. He has to pay a huge personal cost as his attempts at breaching the centuries old caste system become known and he is further ostracized in the village society. The illusion of better and liberal society is soon shattered as the communal and sectarian violence attending the partition of India just before Independence create new divisions on religious lines. The emerging discourse of Hindu nationalism attempts to bind people in a new identity. The incongruity of this new cohesiveness of Hindu identity cannot escape people like Dukhi. The more hawkish face of Hindu nationalism is evidenced in the influx of khaki pants that carry the message of threat from Muslims to smaller urban and rural centres.

This section of the story dealing with the time of Indian Independence highlights the communalist aspect implicit in the nationalist sentiment during the years immediately after the momentous event. It becomes clear that the nascent nation will create its own conflictual categories deriving its energy from religious differences. The infiltration of the couriers of terror to unassuming backwaters is also a sign that now the beneficiaries of feudal politics will have to adopt strategic shifts in order to retain power in the emerging national set up. These new social propensities are exemplified in the attitude of the landlords as also of the members of the lower castes. The landlords see an opportunity in this, “In Dukhi’s village, the Muslims
were too few to pose a threat to anyone, but the landlords saw opportunity… ‘better to drive out the Mussulman menace before we are burnt alive in our huts. For centuries they have invaded us, destroyed our temples, stolen our wealth’” (123).

Mistry’s fiction highlights how history is used for partisan political ends. The sudden consciousness of the historical role of Muslims as invaders appears to be a subterfuge for further consolidating the high caste Hindu feudal lords’ control over the material resources and to occupy the place of national/nationalist elite. The fact that Ashraf, who, in a way, becomes a surrogate father to Ishwar and Narayan and for several years keeps them in his small shop-cum-house in order to train them as tailors and in the process assisting them in the arduous process of gaining greater social and economic status; is a Muslim at once raises questions about the Hindu-Muslim antagonism that has accompanied the formation of the nation.

In a politically very significant positioning, Mistry’s narrative discourse attempts to expose the idea of Hindu national solidarity as a majoritarian discourse conceived to establish greater control in the new national structure. This dialogue also exposes the almost direct association of communalism with the emergence of the nation. Threatened by the rising communal sentiments, Ashraf too decides to become a part of the mass migration to the other side of the border. His decision is apparently fuelled by his fear of safety and news of riots and violence everywhere around. *A Fine Balance* successfully juxtaposes the communal divide created by the political leadership and some fanatical groups and the human inter-personal relations of mutual dependence and camaraderie between Ashraf and his neighbours who try to dissuade him from leaving and promise to stand by his side if Hindu arsonists attacked. True to
their word, Ishwar and Narayan heroically try to protect Ashraf and his family. The plight of Ashraf’s family when faced with the prospect of getting butchered in a communal massacre has great appeal as an episode with existential weight. The suffering of simple human beings and the fear of losing life are given substantial space in the narrative.

The coming together of Ishwar, Om, Maneck and Dina Dalal, belonging to several different social minorities gives occasion to several alternative interpretations. In the interview given to Oprah Winfrey, Rohinton Mistry, has gone on record to say that In *A Fine Balance*, he intended to take a bottom up look at the city. One obvious and commonly expressed interpretation is that Mistry in doing so, “rejects exclusive definitions of identity and substitutes them with inclusive ones forged through the coming together of the marginalized” (Roy 21). This observation raises a very important issue which leads to a significant distinction between *A Fine Balance* and the other two texts. The component of Parsi cultural assertion is negligible in *A Fine Balance*, whereas it is strongly present in the other two texts. Ishwar and Om have already abjured their caste in their evolutionary desire for freedom from caste based social hierarchy. It will not be wrong to say that all these characters put together become a class.

Yet, their lower class status, in the unique Indian reality, continues to have its genesis in religion, gender and caste. Writing about these intersections of class, caste and gender Anjali Gera Roy writes, “The inequalities of caste in rural India are merely substituted through those of class in the city as the tailors struggle to make a living in the slums. The twin margins of caste and class intersect with those of gender when Dina... a middle class Parsi widow, subcontracts work to the tailors to make
ends meet” (21). The fact that the lower and lower-middle classes stand to lose the little semblance of security and respectability that they possess is brought out by the fact that Dina and the other inhabitants of her flat also have to live under the condition of having to buy protection from the Beggarmaster. The words of the Beggarmaster are strongly suggestive of this fact, “People forget how vulnerable they are despite their shirts and shoes and briefcases, how this hungry and cruel world could strip them, put them in the same position as beggars” (501).

The words spell out the truth about the complete absence of any assurance of security in the society. They contain a prophetic note as well. Om and Ishwar will actually replace Shankar the amputee beggar on the pavement.

Laura Moss in a significant defence of Mistry’s use of realism sees it as a political and strategic choice on the part of the writer rather than a belief in referentiality of literature. Postcolonial criticism by making experimentation with subversion of the Western hegemonic canon almost makes narrative experimentation synonymous with postcolonial fiction. Moss writes:

The concept of ‘resistance’ has been fetishized to the point where it is even often presented without an object. At the same time, there has been a critical elevation of writing perceived to be experimental or writing that plays with non-realist form. Within postcolonial criticism, these simultaneous developments have converged in the production of a profusion of studies linking, and sometimes suggesting the interdependence of, political or social resistance and non-realist fiction. (158)
As trends in postcolonial writings have partly been set by Latin American and early Nigerian writers as well as by the idea of ‘writing back’ to the empire proposed by Bill Ashcroft et al, the idea of resistance is privileged in them; therefore it is not only unfashionable to write in traditional narrative modes but involves a risk of being ousted from the canon. Mistry does see value in the realist mode for interrogating social cultural and political forms of oppression and keeps experimentation at a minimum level as it would erode the seriousness of the issues he attempts to raise. Use of realism is often linked to reactionary thinking, lack of progressiveness and “complicity with conservative ideology that fostered this form” (Kanaganayakam 32).

Moss also works against depoliticized realism and towards delinking it from universalism. At the same time she rejects as oversimplification, the argument that Mistry’s universalism and humanism which have traditionally been linked with realist modes of writing are a manoeuvre to attract Western audiences.

Mistry’s connection with the West could be more deeply layered than suggested by such an implication. Moss understands the success of Mistry’s fiction in the West as rooted in nostalgia for the 19th century fiction as Mistry’s works are inheritors of that tradition. Thus, it is not possible to place Mistry in absolute opposition to or otherwise outside Western epistemology.

Kanaganayakam sees Mistry’s realism less in terms of referentiality and more in terms of convention. He believes that referentiality of the texts is always flawed. Yet, he feels that, “Mistry is capable of exploiting the full resources of realism” (35). The ability of Mistry to transform reality through the creation of an image in language is in line with an optimum exploitation of realism as a convention. Or, something that
he describes as the “self-consciousness with which the language is used [to] affirm the disjunction between life and art, between literature as social document and literature as artifice” (35).

Paromita Chakrabarti and Swati Ganguly, in their essay “‘Unreal City’: Mistry’s Grotesque Imagination,” try to resolve the question of Mistry’s use of a kind of hyper realist technique of narration bordering on the bizarre, particularly in A Fine Balance, which among other things has also been described as a ‘worm’s eye view’(59). The stark and sometimes scatological descriptions of a gruesomely ugly world inhabited by people like Ishwar, Om, beggars like Shankar or even that of Tehmul in Such a Long Journey is depicted in graphic and sometimes unpalatable detail. These grotesque images and tropes employed by Mistry place him in the tradition of writers like Rabelais, Dickens, Joyce and Kafka who used similar techniques for critiquing the social and political conditions of their times. Chakrabarti and Ganguly observe in Mistry a representational mode that depends for its effect on exaggerations, caricatures and linguistic excesses. Their formalist analysis of Mistry’s narrative strategies reveals that there is, in his novels, an element of “grotesque realism” – a term furnished by Bakhtin in his work Rabelais and his World originating from the use of this method in the carnivals in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

According to Chakrabarti and Ganguly, this form of narrative technique has a subversive function and works through the use of corporeality centring round food, drinks, defecation and sexual activity (57). Following Bakhtin, they believe that the “collective corporeality” stands in opposition to the “private egotistic form” which is constituted by “bourgeois ego”. Other peculiarities of grotesque realism include focus
on the “lower body stratum” (qtd. in Chakrabarti, and Ganguli, 57). According to this view, the use of the grotesque “to degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, pregnancy and birth; it has not only destructive, negative aspect but also regenerating one” (qtd. in Chakrabarti and Ganguly 57). While Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque relates to the carnival; it later came to be associated with the satirical and even seriously critical and debunking. Commenting of Mistry’s novels Chakrabarti and Ganguli write:

…the narrative style of Rohinton Mistry’s novels straddles both these notions of the grotesque. At one level the bizarre social and political conditions of the seventies provide an impetus for a subversive and debunking satirical critique; a ‘worm’s eye view’ of the nation that is governed by ruthless autocratic authority in tandem with a corrupt bureaucracy. On the other level Mistry employs a Bakhtinian grotesque realism of collective corporeality, of the lower middle class and working class who live in Bombay, the locus of this nightmare universe, the unreal city (59).

In Mistry’s denunciative narrative the use of grotesque which is “associated with dark subterranean spaces and comprises images that are bizarre, freakish, absurd and monstrous” (Chakrabarti and Ganguli 56), complements his excoriating critique of pervading injustice in an inequitable social and political order. A Fine Balance and to a lesser extent even Such a Long Journey abound in instances of the grotesque. A major part of A Fine Balance is set in the underbelly of the society which is located in the slums of Bombay. Ashis Nandy in his At the Edge of Psychology has described slums as a surrogate village recreated in metropolitan. He writes:
…the slum recreates the remembered village in a new guise and resurrects the old community ties in new forms. Even traditional faiths, piety and kinship ties survive in slums, wearing disguises paradoxically supplied by their own massified versions. (6)

So in Bakhtinian terms, the slum and the slum dwellers constitute, in *A Fine Balance*, the unacknowledged mass or a grotesque unclaimed space which is, nevertheless, indispensible as it encloses the working class or the obscured and occluded corporeality excluded from the bourgeois consciousness of a sacred and closed body/nation-state. Perceived in the sense of collective corporeality the opposition here is between the self-consciousness of bourgeois nation-state - a progressive, democratic and equitable social and political order - and the unhygienic but biologically important organs, the open mouth, the belly, the genitals etc. (Chakrabarti and Ganguly 68-9).

This representation of the corporeal mass is meant to be seen as a discourse from the alternative perspective as Mistry tells Oprah in his interview about *A Fine Balance*: “Perhaps my main intention in writing this novel was to look at history from the bottom up, from the point of view of people like Ishvar and Om. The dispossessed. The hungry. The homeless. [I wanted to] see what it meant to them to live during this time of The Emergency” (Oprah 3).
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