CHAPTER V

ROHINTON MISTRY’S *A FINE BALANCE*: BALANCE BETWEEN HOPE AND DESPAIR
ROHINTON MISTRY’S *A FINE BALANCE*: BALANCE BETWEEN HOPE AND DESPAIR

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

These words by Honore’ de Balzac used as an epigraph in the novel appears absolutely agreeable once we go through the novel. Rohinton Mistry’s expressive techniques alter our understanding of life. *A Fine Balance* is a blend of humour, compassion and tragedy. It provides an insight into the life of its four main characters: Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, his nephew Om Prakash Darji and Maneck Kohlah. The fierce flames of the emergency era engulf all of them in some way or the other as if their destinies are sewn together. Though belonging to divergent backgrounds their lives seem quite unlike to each other but they met and all the mishappenings in the life of one character leave an impression in the life of the other three. They meet, share the same apartment, participate in each other’s joys and sorrows and also share their fortune. Although in the first meeting the tailors takes Maneck as their competitor. “And you thought I was running to steal your job” *(FB.6)* says Maneck.
Mistry sticks to the political scenario of emergency while narrating the story. He submerges the plot of the novel in an entirely political theme with politics being the main cause of all the sufferings and mishappenings. The emergency invades all the happiness from their lives leaving a room only for memories of their past lives. The novelist unfolds the hypocrisy of the wealthy as shown through Thakur Dharmasi, issues of Untouchability and poverty as depicted in the lives of Dukhi’s family, oppression of the poor as delineated in Om’s and Ishvar’s lives, problems of survival in case of Dina Dalal, Nuswaan’s male dominance, the unsatisfied life and sensitiveness of Maneck. It is through Dina Dalal that we are introduced with different political movements disturbing the country. The civil disobedience movement, communal riots, partition etc. The focus of the novelist is basically in the portrayal of the wretched lives, struggling for survival, their rescue from the brutal ones and above all finding new ways to restart their life with the same zeal and optimistic approach for a better future. The opinion of the observer is quite befitting “…if anything, his success is to make life seem so much larger than the characters- a far tougher task for the novelist…Enthralling.” (Review published on the jacket of the book).

The prologue of the novel introduces us to the main characters. Om, Ishvar and Maneck are travelling in the same compartment of the morning express, unknown of the fact that
they have to reach the same destination. At the end of the journey they come to know that all the three of them are going to Dina Dalal. Om and Ishvar to seek a job while Maneck to stay as a paying guest. The novelist drafts the picture of the distinct parts of India and successfully places all the four together in Dina Dalal’s small apartment in the ‘city by the sea.’ While Dina a young and independent widow belongs to a metropolis. Ishvar and Om, tailors by profession who escape the caste violence of their village and Maneck from the serene and solitary hills. Each of them need the other to solve their own purpose. Apart from this the sense of rootlessness, superstitions prevailing in society, balance and imbalance in the inter-relationships and the age-old traditions are placed in front of the readers to speculate the lives of the characters and the background from which they come. A Fine Balance shows the development of the relationships leading from dislike to friendship, mistrust to trust and to another level from friendship to love, compassion and intimacy. As the title suggests, the novel is a balance between happiness and sorrow, hope and despair.

*A Fine Balance* is a story about the main protagonist Dina Dalal and her life long struggle to achieve equilibrium in her life. In her battle of life she succeeds to a great extent. In a flashback she seldom recollects the bitter experiences of her life, sometimes with dejection or hatred. Quickly she regains her inner strength and asks herself- “it always ended the same way;
whichever corridor she took, she wound up in the same room” (FB.15). Her dreams dissipate after the death of her father Dr. Shroff. Five years old Dina desires to become a doctor like her father unfortunately she hadn’t even matriculated. After Dr. Shroff’s death Nusswan becomes the head of the family and therefore the responsibility of family moves on to him. He accepts the responsibility but leaves no chance to dominate Dina, his younger sister. He modifies entire system of the household. The very first decision is to dismiss the maid servant. The reason for this is saving the wages of the workers. “Dina is a young girl, full of energy. It will be good for her, teach her how to look after a home” (FB.18) says Nusswan.

As time passes his attitude becomes worse than before. He confines her within the boundaries of home and school. Her maiden demands were restricted. Dina yells for liberty but always gets scolding and beating from him “… and without warning he began slapping her. He stopped when a cut opened her lower lip” (FB.21).

Dina is a person in the novel who is always seen escaping from the troubles of her life. In her maidenhood she tries to escape the beatings of her brother, while her adulthood or widowhood passes by finding solutions to earn her livelihood. Sometimes it is Nusswan’s ruler while at other times it is landlord’s threat of vacating the apartment. Nusswan often complains when Dina disobeys him: “Look at your vindictive
daughter! My hard-earned money I spend on her and this is the thanks” (*FB.22*). She has to beg before him for some privilege. Once she gets her cut in spite of his rejection. She got severe punishment “with lashes of the ruler across her calves and arms, he drove her to the bathroom, where he began tearing of her clothes” (*FB.24*).

He is so shameless to stare at her sister while she takes bath. He is a beast under the hide of a human. In spite of several praising of Nusswan by her relatives she never considered him a caring brother or herself a fortunate sister. Her status in the house diminishes after Nusswan got married and Mrs. Shroff dies. Now the task of quarrelling and humiliating Dina is delegated to Ruby, Nusswan’s wife. Nusswan as a considerate brother started searching a suitable match for his sister, Dina when she turns eighteen. Her marriage is a prestige issue for Nusswan, as he is a glorious businessman. But when Dina selected Rustom Dalal as her life partner, initially he rejected the proposal because this fellow stands nowhere among the several reputed businessmen, chartered Accountants, lawyers etc selected by him for Dina. “Medicine- mixing fool” (*FB.36*) he calls Rustom. In spite of several disapprovals, she got married to Rustom. Unfortunate as she was, Rustom died after three years of marriage in this way the spring of happiness dries up leaving behind utter misery and solitude. Once again, she has to take refuge in Nusswan’s house. Now the question of existence and livelihood arises before her.
She learns tailoring with the assistance of her relatives, Shirin aunty and Darab uncle. Dina, a self-reliant woman with a strong will power decides to work for Au Revoir Exports, an export company. Zenobia, her school friend introduces Mrs. Gupta, the manager of the export company to Dina. They decide to stitch the dresses from Dina’s home and deliver it to Mrs. Gupta. “It’s more economical for me. Better than having one big factory which could be crippled by a strike...especially these days, with so much trouble in the country. And leaders like that Jay Prakash Narayan encouraging civil disobedience. Simply at all creating problem FB.65). This statement of Mrs. Gupta put into light the social unrest after the declaration of emergency. Another challenge before Dina is to appoint two tailors. She leaves no stone unturned in order to find tailors. Search begins in every nook and corner of the city. She leaves her address in every tailoring shop. Very often the protests against the government machinery, demonstrations and strikes held up her quest for the tailors. Dina says:

Sometimes, from the upper deck of the bus, she had a good view of the tumultuous crowds. The banners and slogans accused the Prime Minister of misrule and corruption, calling on her to keeping with the court judgment finding her guilty of election malpractice (FB.67).

At times she loses hope and gets frustrated with her unending struggle. “She felt like the lost children in that fairy
tale…leaving a trail of bread, hoping to be rescued… would she ever be saved, she wondered…” (FB.68). Her quest for the tailors ultimately comes to an end. Next morning, “Dina welcomed her change of fortune with open arms” (FB.69). Along with the tailors the paying guest, son of Aban Kohlah, her school friend arrived at her flat. The state of emergency ruins her struggle for leading an independent life in a patriarchal society where she has to face her authoritative brother and leads her to become a housemaid in the house.

Mrs. Gupta’s acceptance of the internal emergency proves it to be an influential tool incorporating discipline in the country. She feels satisfied by the fact that all the trouble makers are in jail. There will be no strike, procession or disturbances in the city. The time is quite suitable for business to flourish. “I thought the court found her guilty of cheating in the election” (FB.73). says Dina. Mrs. Gupta disagrees calling it to be a rumor. The emergency is of concern basically to the rich and elite class whereas the common people are ignorant about it. They feel they will remain unaffected by it. “Government problems- games played by people in power. It doesn’t affect ordinary people like us” (FB.75). replies Dina to Ishvar. Emergency brings havoc in the lives of these innocent people who are completely blind towards its consequences. Ishvar and Om becomes the victim of this situation. Though they seem ignorant regarding this crucial matter. Contrary to it this political condition brings desolation in
their happy lives. They left their native place in order to escape the caste violence but their ill fate chases them to the verge of beggary. *A Fine Balance* brings forth the hardships faced by common people during the emergency era. Their lives come in a perfect balance after they met each other. The disequilibrium turns into equilibrium. Soon after the state of emergency this balance got demolished leading to an unexpected tempest in their lives. Whether it is the case of Dina, whose unending struggle ultimately takes her to Nusswan’s home which is not less than a prison to her where she is always oppressed. On the other hand Ishvar and Om are the real victims and sufferers shown in the novel. Rescued from the clutches of casteism and untouchability they got trapped in the snare of emergency. The fourth one in the group is Maneck who acts as a bridge between the tailors and Dina. He can’t bear the misery of the tailors who appear before him as beggars after eight years. The sudden affliction of the father’s death and the suicidal attempt by his friend Avinash are all heavy damages in his life.

Rohinton Mistry’s creative genius has skillfully portrayed the hardships in the lives of the untouchables. The differentiation in the society on the basis of caste and creed is worth noticing “the chamars were permitted to live in a section downstream from the Brahmins and landowners” (*FB.96*).

Through the depiction of Dukhi’s family the novelist emphasizes the heartwarming portraiture of the chamaar caste, basically
tanners and leather-workers. The state of absolute poverty, helplessness, anguish and adversity has been given much concernment. “Dukhi learned what it was to be a chamaar, an untouchable in village society...like the filth of a dead animal...the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere” (FB.96).

Sometimes they were given inhuman treatment by the upper caste peoples. “…they accused him of stealing...they chopped off his left hand fingers today” (FB.96). Mistry has very efficiently highlighted every minute detail related to the life style of Indian villages, the customs and traditions of the upper as well as lower class, limitations set for lower caste, envy between the two, exploitation and suppression etc. The social conditions thus depicted resembles the era of 1970s. Desire for the male child and envy from those lower caste families who has been blessed with a son is shown by the novelist. At the birth of Dukhi’s moochi and Roopa’s son, Narayan, the upper class becomes resentful towards his family. “Why two sons in an untouchable house, and not even one in our’s? What could a chamaar pass on to his sons...the law of Manu has been subverted” (FB.100).

The novel also contains the narration of women’s exploitation and molestation. The untouchable women like Roopa are molested by the upper class landlords. For a handful of fruits and vegetables Roopa is seduced. The upper class womens are not exempted from the oppression of their husbands...
and their families. “…the birth of daughters often brought them beatings from their husband’s families” (FB.100). A fine sketch of the subjugation of the lower class has been pointed out in the novel. They are not allowed to pass through any such place or touch things confined to the upper caste. Fetching water from the village well means polluting it, walking in the vicinity of the temple means defiling its sanctity. Ishvar and Narayan got severe canning when they entered the village school because they polluted the place and objects of learning. The untouchables are devoid of education. In the same way severe punishments are set forth by Thakurs and Pandits “to whip the world into shape” (FB.101).

Dukhi’s family remains the prime subject to the exploitation and torture of the upper caste. “Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals” (FB.142) says Narayan. The incidents given in the novel are heartrending. To get rid of this exploitation Dukhi decides to train his sons as tailors instead of their traditional profession of tanning. That family profession out of which “Dukhi’s own skin became impregnated with the odour that was part of his father’s smell…” (FB.95).

The availability of carcass is reduced. Sometimes they have to pay for the dead animal, if given free by the upper caste; whole charges are recovered by occupying them in free labor. Soon
Dukhi has to pay the price of stepping outside his profession. The upper caste unites to teach him a lesson by depriving him of any work. “My life has become a permanent shadow” \( (FB.119) \) grieves Roopa.

Though their living status has changed from a small hut to a house, leather tanning and hiding to tailoring but still the shadow of untouchability persists in. “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” \( (FB.142) \). Rohinton Mistry sketches a heart moving picture of the incident during elections when Narayan and others wish to cast their vote independently not on the gunpoint of Thakur Dharamsi’s men. As a result they were taken away, “burning coals were held to the three men’s genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away…when they began to stir, the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks, and the three were hanged” \( (FB.146) \) several untouchable women are raped and dishonored in this caste violence. Thakur wants to punish Dukhi’s family for his crime. He says: “His arrogance went against everything we hold sacred. What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break as under, he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society’s timeless balance. Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity” \( (FB.147) \).
Dukhi’s entire family except Ishvar and Om are made captive and burnt alive together. “The first flames licked at the bound flesh…The blaze swiftly enfolded all six of them” (FB.147).

Rohinton Mistry’s portrayal of the urban and rural life with its complexities, differentiation in caste and class, problem of livelihood, poverty, ruthlessness is quite appropriate in the representation of hope and despair. In this humane novel Mistry has stated the benevolence of Ashruf (friend to Dukhi) and Dina Dalal, bestial nature of Thakur Dharmasi and other sycophants of the P.M. during emergency, communal harmony as depicted from Dukhi’s and Ashruf’s family, amity and closeness between Om and Maneck, obstinacy and conceit of Nusswan, opportunism of Raja Ram, the hair collector, optimism and vibrancy in Ishvar and Om. Being in Ashruf’s home, Om and Ishvar escapes death. The murder of entire family creates a non fulfilling vacuum in their lives. It is in their destiny to suffer so it brings them to the city to find a job. In disguise their misfortune chases them in the form of the emergency leading to a state of beggary. “We’ll slaughter the Thakurs and their goondas. And those police devils” (FB.149) says Om out of aggression. Ishvar and Ashruf console him, knowing revenge is never a solution in caste issues. Leaving the past behind, they decide to find out a job in Bombay. Through this section, Mistry reveals the reality behind the temptation of the city life.
The evil of caste violence prevalent in the rural society turns into class distinction in the city life style. This has been realized when the tailors reached the city to earn their livelihood. They are hired by Dina Dalal to work for the Au Revoir Export Company. It seems quite challenging for them to find a shelter in the messy slums in the city. After some struggle they were successful to find one. Initially both the tailors and Dina are apprehensive regarding each other. She warns Maneck, her paying guest not to mix up with the tailors as there is a lot of difference in their class. The tailors too tries to spy on her when she locks them inside while going to deliver the dresses and when she tells them not to tell her neighbor that they are working for her. Om decides to talk directly to the manager of the export company for the orders of the dresses. The time progresses changing the circumstances and creating a place in each other’s heart denying them of their individual selves. The changing political conditions give them a pervasive perspective of human life and individual suffering.

By the time Ishvar and Om starts their job in the city emergency has started to spread its wings. Advertisement hoardings are replaced by the pictures of the Prime Minister with quoting: “Iron will! Hard work! These will sustain us!” (FB.180). Journalists, union workers, press, media, teachers, students etc with other enemies of the Prime Minister are imprisoned. Since the emergency begins various conditions stand
before the poor public and government officers. While applying for the ration card Ishvar and Om confronts with the reality of the government offices and working officials. With the promulgation of emergency new rules are implemented for every government department. Under one such statute, each government officer has to fulfill his quota by encouraging people for sterilization. Promotions are based on this scheme. For instant approval of the application, the government officers intone the scheme of vasectomy. Ishvar’s request goes in vain. “All we wanted was a ration card, Mr. Facilitator. And the fellow wanted our manhood in exchange! What kind of choice is that, between food and manhood?” (FB.178) Ishvar and Om abstain from this situation but it is the irony of fate that trapped them later in the course of emergency. Our stars must be in the proper position at last. Everything is going well, Hahn?” (FB.184). This consolation by Ishvar seems to be a satire on their condition.

The era of emergency seems to be a glorious phase for the upper class while it is mere ‘government’s tamasha’ (FB.259) for the slum dwellers. Poor people are threatened to participate in the Prime Minister’s rally. In case of refusal they will be arrested for trespassing the municipal property. Some of them joined the rally out of threat and others for earning five rupees and free tea and snacks. The pomp and show in the P.M’s rally resembles that of a circus. The eighty foot cutout of the Prime Minister with a halo behind her head, people garlanding her, bowing and
touching her feet then jumping off in a way a gymnast completes a somersault. “I told you it’s going to be a day at the circus- we have clowns, monkeys, acrobats, everything” (FB.263) says Rajaram. The Prime Minister’s tossing garland towards the audience is considered to be throwing rubbish. The appearance of the P.M’s son sitting on a hot air balloon and throwing the leaflets containing the picture of the P.M and the briefings of the Twenty –Point programme. All this seems to be theatric.

Mistry has also introduced the elements of humor somewhere in the novel. Showering of the rose petals upon the goatherd instead of the dignitaries on the stage presents humor. People like Rajaram, Ishvar and Om are more interested in playing cards and they waited for the complementary tea and snack than the Prime Minister’s address to the public regarding the declaration of emergency.

The role of the sycophants and their flattering the ladies has been depicted by Rohinton Mistry with a tinge of humor. “Mother India sits on stage with us…” (FB.266). The implication of emergency is considered to be a necessity by P.M. It is reflected in her address to the nation. “There is nothing to worry about just because the Emergency is declared. It is a necessary measure to fight the forces of evil. It will make things better for the ordinary people. Only the crooks, the smugglers, the blackmarketeers need to worry” (FB.265). The twenty point programme is published with a request to trust and support the
government during the Emergency. To live in discipline and to participate in revealing the enemies of the country.

The programme—“Slum Prevention and City Beautification” under the new emergency law is considered to be a jolt to the slum dwellers. After a long quest for shelter the tailors find one but it too gets engulfed in the slum evacuation program. The protesters are crushed under the bulldozers. The slum went smeared with blood everywhere. Outrageous people cries, “Heartless animals! For the poor there is no justice ever! We had next to nothing, now it’s less than nothing! What is our crime, where are we to go?” (FB.295). Such is the predicament of the tailors and others hut men. People quarreled for their belongings which have to be extracted from the debris of plywood, or plastic and hey. “Like trying to recover, grains of sugar out of a cup of tea” (FB.297). Rohinton Mistry skillfully depicts the human catastrophe and at the same time he has provided the readers with comic relief to lighten the effects of tragedy. The vigorous depiction of the scene of lathi charge in the colony which results in the littering of slippers and sandals in the ground seem to be “like the flotsam of a limbless human tide” (FB.296). The next moment Om’s dialogue creates humor. He tells Maneck that the dinner is cancelled due to “the unexpected disappearance of their house” (FB.296).

It is the reversal of circumstances that everything in order turns into disorder whether it is the socio-political setting or the
lives of the characters. The tailors become homeless. For a night’s sleep they wondered in several nook and corner of the city. But without paying money to the policeman they can’t even use the railway platform as their temporary bedroom. Sometimes bucketful of cold water is emptied over them, at other times they have to face the stinking smell of the public toilet. They keep changing their sleeping places all night. Afraid of the policeman, they keep awake. “Shivering, they sat guarding their belongings, swaying with sleep, nodding off occasionally” (FB.301).

The slogans, “Food for the hungry! Homes for the homeless!” (FB.303) sounds a farce in such a situation, “with the Emergency, everything is upside down. Black can be made white, day turned into night” (FB.299). Here we come across several shades in the character of Dina. She is a practical woman, quite stubborn in nature. She doesn’t allow the homeless tailors to sleep in her verandah. While Maneck come up to a sympathetic being who will not forgive Dina until the tailors remain unaccommodated. The tailors keep begging for shelter. Ultimately they got one in front of a chemist’s shop. It is an open space rather than a shelter for which three rupees per night is paid. Mistry introduces the readers with the art of living and the attitude of being happy whatever comes through, the tailors are an example to this. Om introduces Maneck to their new landlord, who is now the night watchman. They even pay gratitude towards him for providing them place to sleep. At times hopelessness subsumes their lives but they always trie to cut it
like a piece of cloth. “If time were a bolt of cloth, I would cut out all the bad parts. Snip out the scary nights and stitch together the good parts…” (FB.310). During such difficult times they even remember to show regret towards Maneck for cancelling the dinner. As time passes the tailors became well acquainted with their roofless shelter. They are no longer disturbed by the nightmares. Now they became friendly with the various types of noises. Their small world rotated around the chemist’s shop, sewing in Dina’s house, the railway station bathroom and Vishram vegetarian hotel. The best part is their adaptation to varied living conditions and remaining content with whatever comes through. They have learned to maintain a fine balance despite of all the havoc life played with them.

This episode ends in a conclusion that it’s better to practice what has been said in the emergency law or in the Twenty Point Program. Those who adorn the Prime Minister as the goddess were safe as the owner of the Vishram vegetarian hotel says about the large poster placed in his hotel. “Her presence keeps my window and from being smashed” (FB.309). Rajaram, formerly a hair-collector gets the job of a motivator, for family planning. This scheme too is a big blot created by the Emergency. Innocent people were befooled under the fascination of this scheme.

Om and Ishvar become the victim of this government strategy too. Tragedy always chases them. They are mistaken to
be beggars and carried away by the police with other beggars and pavement dwellers to the outskirts of the city. Nothing stopped the policeman, nor pleadings, nor cries, nor any threat or anger. A facilitator is appointed for keeping an account of all those loaded in the truck. This attempt is a disgrace for the humanity, selecting people who are efficient to work or beg for. Policemen treat them brutally, beating them with sticks. When it breaks they use their feet to kick them as if they are non-living objects. When their quota of capturing ninety six individuals’ remains unfulfilled they chase for two more and the ill fated tailors get trapped. The charge behind it is sleeping in a non-sleeping place which is illegal. Truckful of people is unloaded in a place where an irrigation project is in progress. There they have to work as labors in return of food and a place to sleep but no wages. The working hours and working conditions seem to be unfavorable for the tailors. They fall ill by working exhaustively for several hours with a watery mixture of vegetables to fill their stomach. Ishvar and Om struggle everyday with tiredness, fatigue and dizziness so that they can escape the scolding and beating of the foreman. The tailors suffer in the camp every passing day. But their commitment towards Dina and dedication towards work reminds them of the unfinished consignment before they were captured. “ By the end of the first week, Ishvar and Om felt they had spent an eternity in the hell…Dizzy spells made the world dance around them when they got out of their bed…They staggered through the day, listening to the bewildering threats
and insults of overseers and paid workers” (*FB.357*). The novelist has presented the innocence and clear heartedness of the tailors. It is their simplicity and virtue that leads them to think of others before themselves even when they are facing such circumstances.

In this novel Mistry presents an exquisite characterization. Each and every character passes some special trait in his/her character portrayal. His minor character like the beggar, Shankar is capable to leave an impression in our hearts. The way he takes care of Ishvar when he falls ill in the camp is appreciating and adhering. Though handless and legless, it is he, who adjusts his bandages to stop the oozing blood. But he dedicates his services to others in the work camp. He is always thankful to his Beggar-master who has been so benevolent. The Beggar-master utilizes him to earn profit by placing him in several different places to beg. Though limbless he is but he earns maximum money for him. The Beggar-master calls him by the name ‘worm’ but Shankar always loves him. “Such a nice man, I cannot praise him enough. On my birthday he brings sweetmeats for me…He has many many beggars in his team but I’m his favorite” (*FB.328*).

In this picture gallery Maneck is another beautiful character who is ready to help others, quite innocent and sympathetic at heart. He is the son of Dina’s friend, but is far off from any class distinction which Dina always reminds him. He lives as a paying guest in Dina’s house and soon befriends with
the tailors. He readily accepts the imitation of the tailors for Dinner in their Joparpatti. Dina argues, “…but they are tailors—my employees. A distance has to be maintained. You are the son of Farokh and Aban Kohlah. There is a difference, and you cannot pretend there isn’t— their community, their background” (FB.293).

Dina Dalal, the female protagonist is shown in various shades in her character. She looks rigid from outside while she is smooth in heart. Several entities of her character are reflected in her conversation with other characters in the novel. Probably this happened due to the several hardships faced by her in life. She seems mean-spirited and self-interested when Maneck tells her about the erratic arrest of the tailors. She finds the story dramatic and hard to believe at. She thinks that the tailors are absconding. She is more worried about her sewing task and the unfinished consignment yet to be delivered to Mrs. Gupta. “Right now I’m more worried about these dresses” (FB.335). She sounds selfish here. On the contrary Maneck wants to search for Ishvar and Om if they are in some serious problem. He agreed with Dina too about it when she says, “if those rascals were trying a new job somewhere, playing for time, this would be the way to do it” (FB.334). He wants to help Dina too in spite of her negligence towards his friends, the tailors. He decides to help her till the tailors are back to work.
Maneck began to weep, his chest heaving as he labored to keep silent. Everything ended badly. And memory only made it worse, tormenting and taunting. Unless you lost your mind. Or committed suicide. The slate wiped clean. No more remembering no more suffering. Poor Dina Aunty, how much of the past she was still carrying around with her, although she deceived herself that these were happy memories she was dwelling upon. And now the problems with the sewing, the rent, the rations… (FB.336).

Maneck is an angelic character in the novel that who always present to provide his services to the needy. When he finds Dina in trouble, surrounded by the shreds of cloths scattered all around, trying to expedite her sewing work, he offers to help. He also tries to create a soft corner in Dina’s heart for the tailors or other people belonging to lower strata like them. She believes the story of tailors when Maneck narrated their family history to her. “I never knew…I never thought…all those newspaper stories about upper and lower –caste madness, suddenly so close to me…It’s the first time I actually know the people. My God- such horrible, horrible suffering” (FB.340).

There are some people like Mrs. Gupta and Nusswan who are in favor of emergency. They appreciate the discipline and the organized system maintained by the Prime Minister. Nusswan supports and agrees with the government’s policy such as the beautification programme, population control etc. While discussing with Maneck, Nusswan appears to be a believer in the
government’s policies. But according to Maneck mutilating the innocent people against their will is quite undemocratic. Contrary to it in the opinion of Nusswan, “…democracy is a seesaw between complete chaos and tolerable confusion. You see, to make a democratic omelette you have to break a few democratic eggs” (FB.372). In order to eliminate the population it is planned to mix arsenic or cyanide in the meals and get it distributed in the places they beg.

Emergency has some positivities too along with the negative aspect. Freedom to speech, punctuality in the railway system, efficiency of the police department, improvement in the industrial sector is the benefits of Emergency. Censorship of press is one of its limitations. Nusswan agrees with all of these.

The interpersonal relationships among the four become intimate after the release of the tailors from the work camp. Dina’s stubbornness is replaced by her humanistic approach towards the tailors. As a result all the four of them share the same flat, they cook together and eat together. “I don’t feel any burden” (FB.410) says the changed Dina. Even when the landlord orders her to vacate the flat she never blames the tailors. Ishvar thanks Dina with a sense of gratitude: “O Dinabai, how to thank you! Such kindness! We are very afraid of the outside…this Emergency, the police…” (FB.412).
“Life does not guarantee happiness” (FB.445). This statement appears befitting when we contemplate on the social and individual human sufferings highlighted by the novelist. The rigidity of the caste system in the village and the exploitation of chamaars by the upper caste landlords expose the social sufferings. Dukhi’s family and rest of the chamaar community are humiliated every day. Individual sufferings of humans are depicted through the four main characters two from the Parsi community, Dina and Maneck and two belonging to the lower caste. These sufferings are associated to the inner self of a person and create a deep psychological wound which causes pain, anguish and depression in an individual. The protagonist in the novel suffers collectively when the sword of emergency injures them. Personally they are tormented by their own destinies and fortune. There are few individuals who cope with system while others end their lives. Poor Dina has to seek help of her obstinate brother, thus she has to face his domination again and again. If anyone of the four suffers it affects the other three too. Such is the harmony among them. It’s their optimism which is worth praising. Ishvar puts it, “Everything will come in time. We must have faith…” (FB. 454).

Their lives have been sewed together just like the patches of clothes which Dina attaches to make a quilt. The quilt which Dina used to make every night symbolizes the various events of their lives which they spent together. The episode of quilt
making is a beautiful creation added by the novelist. She adds a new patch of cloth for each incident; mishappenings or victories. This quilt reminisces their journey during the past one year. It is a companion to their emotions. All the four of them are connected with the quilt for all those happiness and sorrows they faced together. Dina appears serious while she makes the quilt. Her bosom seems to be attached with it, she says to Maneck: “Don’t confuse me with your quilt making God” (FB. 491). After the departure of Ishvar and Om to their native village for finding a bride for Om, Dina is left all alone in the flat. She busied herself with the quilt making; she desires to gift it to Om on his wedding day. While stitching the square patches of cloth together Dina reminds Ishvar: “See, it is connected to a happy piece-sleeping in the verandah. And the next square-chapaties. Then that violet tusser, when we made masala wada and started cooking together” (FB.490).

Om and Ishvar’s problems seem to be unending. One problem is resolved the next one already stands in a queue to come up. Somehow they managed to evade from the work camp. As ill-fated, hardships and miseries are destined to them. After their release from the work camp, they decide to go to their native village to find a bride for Om. There they get trapped in the clutches of their former enemies. Earlier they became the victim of the caste violence but this time it is the emergency law victimizing them.
The novelist has put up light on one of the most crucial and significant matters during the emergency era i.e. family planning scheme, under the Twenty-Point program agenda. Though it seems to be an effective program for the development of the country but the way it is executed in the novel is inhumane. It leaves Om degendered. Om’s castration also symbolizes the suspension of democratic rights and emasculation of general public to express themselves against politics and political leaders. Thus making them politically impotent. As well as depriving them of their right to be called as citizens of the nation. During the emergency period, fundamental rights were ceased so that people cannot speak freely against the government machinery. In his novel, Mistry dedicates an entire chapter on one of the twenty point program introduced during the emergency which is Family Planning. He has shown the lower and middle section of the society getting affected positively or adversely. Here in the novel, the tailors suffer because of these government policies. Rohinton Mistry familiarizes us with the ground realities of the above agenda. After the operation patients are left neglected in the camp. No one takes notice of their pain, miseries and tears rolling down.

In his description, Mistry represents the impact of sterilization on the life of Ishvar and Om when they return to their ancestral place. Thakur Dharamsi has been given the charge of the family planning centre. His powers have become
monstrous since the beginning of the emergency. He is seen misusing his powers and illegally making money. His rowdy gang abducts innocent people for forced vasectomy. He even auctions the patients for the doctors and who ever pay him a handsome amount to bring the patient.

Under the authoritarian regime of Thakur, Om is twice vasectomized. Thakur recognizes Ishvar and whatever happens after it is just because of his former animosity with Ishvar’s family. Om and Ishvar are grabbed with other people from the market place and carried away in the garbage trucks owned by Thakur to the family planning center. They are “less than animals to them” (FB.540). The inadvertency of doctors in order to reach their target of the quota fixed for the sterilization per day is variedly highlighted. They operate the patients with partially sterilized instruments. While some of the patients are twice vasectomized this is “like executing a dead man” (FB.535). Achieving the quota seems to be more important than human life. If they don’t do so they are threatened, “Remember, Thakur Dharamsi will be coming to check the totals. If he is not pleased with you, you may as well send in your resignations” (FB.534).

The political leaders, middleman and flatterers of the Prime Minister and other government servants are seen abusing people, misusing their powers and taking out their frustration on the scary and suppressed people. The dominance and aggression of people like Thakur symbolize their conservative thinking,
hypocrisy and sadistic attitude towards life. They are themselves oppressed and deprived of some necessities in their lives. In order to get the complaisance of the Prime Minister and the co-coordinators of the program, Thakur and his sycophants want to prove their worth by making this scheme a great success. Scolding the doctors, the administrator argues, “If it is left to them to fight the menace of the population explosion, the nation will drown, choked to death, finished- end of our civilization. So it’s up to us to make sure the war is won” (FB.534). In reality, they threaten people for performing sterilization in exchange of their basic necessities. “They tell farmers they will get fertilizer only after nussbandi is performed” (FB. 581).

The emergency has also turned a blind eye to justice. When Ishvar goes to the officer in the Family Planning centre to file complaint against Thakur regarding the castration of his nephew that is performed deceptively, and due to reckless operation procedure, his legs are not functioning properly. They refuse to listen arguing, “If we start believing you, then all the eunuchs in the country will come dancing to us, blaming us for their condition, trying to get money out of us. We know your tricks” (FB.540).

The plot of the novel rotates around Omprakash’s castration. He has been deceived under the guise of the sterilization program, as a result he reaches in a humiliating position. His degendered state and the similar state of other
citizens leave them in an incomplete stage of human beings. The ill-fated tailors are the main subject in the plot. They came to the city of dreams for leading an unbiased and peaceful life and for earning money. Above all they want to escape from the casteism of village life which already engulfs their family. But they were ignorant of the city life and politics prevailing there. Once in the past, an imbalance was created in between the upper and lower caste which results in the immolation of Dukhi’s family. The same has been designed for Dukhi’s next generation, though they escaped from the caste politics of their village. They believe to be fortunate enough, leading a peaceful life in the city, ignorant of the fact that destiny has planned a story for them too, which shall be embodied in the history of Indian politics. As Om feels the city to be a large spinning mill having several stories inside its bosom. But they never want to be a part of this story. For “Stories of suffering are no fun when we are the main characters” (FB.383). Ishvar repents on his visit to the village. “Is it a sin to visit my native place? To get my nephew married?” (FB.541).

Mistry provides an insight into the life history of Dukhi; his sons, Ishvar and Narayan and his grandson, Omprakash. One feels compassionate, going through their life’s journey. The circumstances shown in the novel prove that it’s quite impossible to eradicate the evils of casteism spread in the country. There is always “insufficient evidence to register a case.” (FB.539) No
one dares to speak against those in power. Weather it is Thakur Dharamsi or the people supporting the emergency. The condition of the tailors is harrowing. The carelessly conducted castration of Om and vasectomy of Ishvar leaves them partially handicapped. Ishvar carries Om sometimes on his arms like a baby or pulls him in a hand cart when his wounds bleed while walking. While after the spreading of poison, Ishvar’s legs get amputated. Hopelessness surrounds them for a while, “Just throw me in the river that runs by the village. I don’t want to be a burden to you” (FB.542). Soon when hopelessness subsides, he is seen practicing to propel his trolley to become independent. The money they have collected for Om’s marriage ends in their treatment. Their only hope resides with Dina, who is herself under the threat of her landlord and ultimately submits to her destiny. Her surrendering before life discards all hopes of optimism. Often the circumstances in her life unsettle the balance of her life. Now for Ishvar and Om “living each day is to face one emergency or another” (FB.581).

The poverty of the tailors is the root cause of their sufferings. They migrated to the city, leave their community to earn money but the political chaos leaves them to the verge of beggary. Most of the poor and down-trodden living in the city slums share the same story of the tailors. During the Prime Minister’s rally, the party workers collects crowd from these slums and these people happily participate for a sum of five
rupees, tea and snacks. In their heart they hate the government servants, P.M. too. “If she is our servant, tell her to come here” (FB. 258) replies one of the slum dweller when the party worker orders, “…two people from each jhopdi must get on the bus! In five minutes- no delay. Otherwise, you will be arrested for trespassing on municipal property” (FB. 259).

It is depressing that poverty has been a subject of making fun for the rich ones. Some who are in dire need of money readily accept the offer. While others out of self-respect refuse to go. The tragedy in the novel does not end with the woeful lives of the four protagonists. Rohinton Mistry adds in this tragic mode the incident of the assassination of Prime Minister and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. We get the knowledge of the same through Maneck, who returns from Dubai for attending his father’s funeral ceremony. When he left the place eight years ago the country was in the brutal clutches of the emergency. The time of doubt still persists. “I think clean-shaven would be much safer for you?” (FB.580) says the taxi driver to Maneck.

This time the Sikhs are targeted. The rioters are after the lives of Sikh men, women, children etc. People with beard and turban are eyed with suspicion and put to death. P.M alive plays with several lives so is her death, creating havoc in Sikh community.
Mistry very efficiently unfolds the history of Indian politics during 1984 Sikh riots. It is appreciable for a diasporic writer like Mistry to adopt the serious subject of internal emergency as the main theme in his novel. His efforts are visible with the remarkable success of the novel. Being a writer of the Indian Diaspora, he has to put extra labour to gather the required sources and information regarding the emergency period. The Sikh massacre also highlights the fact that mostly lives of common people that is put on stake and the work of politicians and ministers is to add fuel to this fire creating violence. “Some ministers are even helping the gangs, providing official lists of Sikh homes and businesses. Otherwise, it’s not possible for the killers to work so efficiently, so accurately, in such a big city” (FB. 582). The cases of man slaughtering, caste violence, mass arrest, bulldozing slums are prevalent; the only difference is the change in the community who is being tortured. Sometimes it is Muslims, or Chamaar’s and this time the Sikhs. The narration of Mistry shudder our soul when he gives an account of “…pouring the kerosene on Sikhs and setting them on fire. They catch men, tear the hair from their faces or hack it with swords, then kill them. While families burnt to death in their homes” (FB. 582).

In A Fine Balance Rohinton Mistry has detailed both political as well as sociological scenario. He has also narrated the social sufferings, humiliation and poverty in the village especially among the lower section, which results in the
migration of young generation like that of Dukhi’s sons. Poverty is confined not only to the village but it prevails in cities also. We cannot forget Rajaram, the hair collector who murders two beggars for their hairs. Emergency is the center of focus. As Mistry says in one of his interviews: “In Such a Long Journey, the year is 1971. It seemed to me that 1975, the year of the emergency, would be the next important year, if one were preparing a list of important dates in Indian history, and so 1975 it was” (Mathur: 99).

When one reaches towards the end of this journey in A Fine Balance, one is occupied with varied emotions. There is a kind of anger for the corrupt and brutal political system which played and will be playing with the lives of several innocent people as depicted in the novel. We feel abusing them and repeating the words of Maneck, “The bastards” (FB. 583). “I hope they are all caught and hanged” (FB.583) While the next moment we burst into tears, recollecting the scenes where we find poor Ishvar and Om begging and are seen being deprived of food and shelter. Once they use to sew attire for people, now they are compelled to beg with those hands. The sight of streets piled with debris and ruins is deplorable. “Women and children sat amid the debris dazed or weeping” (FB .582). We even trie to blame the novelist for such an unhappy ending or rather terrible ending of the novel.
Emergency brings the lives of all the four protagonists to a pathetic end. Ishvar’s legs have to get amputated due to the spreading of poison and he is reduced to begging. Dina once again loses her independence which she considers to be her priced possession and seek shelter in her brother’s home. While the way Maneck’s story comes to an end is quite surprising for the readers. He reduces himself to a fallen state by offering himself to the railway tracks probably because he gets perturbed to see his friends, the tailors leading lives as beggars.

Rohinton Mistry has successfully interwoven the overlapping stories within the framework of Indian political history. It drives the conclusion that other than Maneck, rest of the three win the battle of their lives by maintaining a fine balance between hope and despair. Internal emergency eclipsed their long cherished aspirations for a delightful life but their optimistic approach surpasses all the troubles. In spite of several sufferings their ability of endurance and strive to outlive is symbolic to heroism. The characters reconcile with their fate, whether good or bad. Their cheerfulness, optimism and liveliness are unforgettable.
Works Cited

Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006. Print. All references to this edition of the novel will be incorporated parenthetically into the text.

Review published on the jacket of the book.