Rohinton Mistry's latest novel *A Fine Balance* deals with a tale of the turbulent 1970's in India when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of internal emergency and suspended India's Constitution. Mistry does not disguise his anger about the malevolence of the government and the corruption of its agents, powerful and petty alike. But of all the fine things about this novel, perhaps the finest is the way Mistry keeps his storytelling from being submerged by the political theme. *A Fine Balance* tells the tale of four innocent persons snared in the grinding gears of history. And the post-colonial history of India, like Mistry's story, is at once brutally simple and delicately complex, believable and incredible, perverse and humane. The tale is unfolded through the lives of four main characters: Ishvar Darji, his nephew Omprakash, their employer Dina Dalal, and her paying guest Maneck Kohlah. The emergency intrudes into the lives of all these characters leading to their ultimate destruction. The question that arises is whether the novel, as its events unfold, maintains a fine balance between hope and despair or forfeits that balance in the end. Vinetha Bhatnagar contends that "the end of the novel forfeits that balance."1 The novel shows how political changes kindlessly cut
through the psycho-social fabric of the country where justice is in the hands of the rich. In the novel, the picture of India – the secret longings and tensions of the poor and their struggle to construct a new life for themselves – seems unimportant at first sight.

It is fitting that Mistry opens his novel with a citation from Balzac’s *Le Pere Goriot*:

> '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."

But if Mistry’s style derives from the past, his concerns are very much of the immediate present. They are the daily impact of the seething, sprawling, contradictory, and unpredictable politics of the nation which he left in 1975 when he moved to Canada. Again, Mistry’s concerns are not with those at the top of the heap. People of wealth and influence are seen from a distance, and ironically, by a number of astute observers. Instead, his interest is in the average people of India struggling to wrest a basic living and some sort of meaning from a life that is brutish and hard indeed. And once again, Mistry writes with
compassion, humour, and humanity, and in the process, he gives us complex and endearing characters.

The opening scenes of *A Fine Balance* introduce us to the main characters and to three very different parts of Mistry’s native India. The novel revolves round the small apartment of Dina Dalal, the pivotal character in the novel. She does all she can to wipe a tear from the eyes of the poor, the helpless and the innocent tailors and to make a reasonable deal with they which they have been long denied:

“For this job, there will be no customers to measure,” she explained, “the sewing will be straight from paper patterns. Each week you have to make two dozen, three dozen, whatever the company wants, in the same style”… “The more dresses you make, the more you earn.”

We meet Dina Shroff and learn how she became the widow Dina Dalal, living alone in the city stitching scraps of cloth into a quilt at night and trying to keep her dignity and independence from her dominating brother Nuswaan who assumed the role of the head of the family and legal guardian to Dina after the death of her father, Dr. Shroff.

*A Fine Balance* maps out how Dina Dalal, the protagonist of the novel, and the three characters, Ishvar, Omprakash, and Maneck, suffer from a sense of rootlessness. The author brings his readers face to face with the dilemmas of inter-relationship and broken values and
customs of society. He tries to re-discover the Indian identity by setting his novel in three different backgrounds. Dina Dalal lives in the metropolis; Ishvar and Omprakash belong to the village, while Maneck is from high altitude. A composite picture of India with its passions, hopelessness, strength, weakness, and beauty pulsates in the novel on account of the different backgrounds from which the characters come. A spectrum of values and mindscapes is placed before the reader.

Dina Dalal decides to take in a boarder and run a tailoring business. The boarder is Maneck Kohlah, a student from a hillside town in the shadow of the Himalayas. He was sent by his parents to study refrigeration and air conditioning maintenance, the trade of the future in the hot latitudes. And to help her with her fledging business, Dina Dalal takes two woefully unlucky untouchables as tailors. Ishvar Darji uncle and his nephew Omprakash emerge from a community of leather workers that occupies the lowest rung of the ladder in the oppressive caste system in the village by a river.

The second chapter of A Fine Balance returns to the present and introduces us to the manager of Au Revoir Exports, Mrs. Gupta's. Through Mrs.Gupta approval of Mrs.Gandhi’s actions we are confronted with the complicity of the Indian business house with the outrages committed during the period of the 70's. Dina's assumption that the emergency is irrelevant from the point of view of the common
people turns out to be woefully misguided. As she struggles to eke out a living for herself, events conspire to strip each character of dignity and humanity. The acrimony that characterizes the relationship between Dina and the tailors at the beginning of the novel transforms itself during the course of the narrative to mutual respect and compassion.

Dina and Maneck both, like Mistry, are members of the Parsi faith and are ostensibly outside the Hindu caste system. They are confronted by their own prejudices and the capriciousness of the lawless society. But it is the stories of the untouchables, Ishvar and Omprakash, that provides the moral perspective of *A Fine Balance*. Their voyage from a tiny village in a small town to the big city is one which reveals the real price of abstract social policies. Ishvar and Om belong to the chamaar caste. The narration is very clear on chammar's ways of life. Trifling details like how they skin the carcass, eat meat, and tan the hide are dealt with great interest, and with touching subtlety. For example, “And as he mastered the skills ... Dukhi's own skin became impregnated with the odour that was part of his father's smell” (98). The novel highlights specific rural experiences of frustration and exploitation. Besides narrating certain living experiences, the author depicts his concern for the neglected regions of this vast country. It is quite significant that India still lives in its villages. Mistry portrays both the simplicity of rural life and
complexities of city life. The shift is remarkable towards an urban and modern situation. Mistry attempts to understand Indian reality in terms of his past experience and tradition. Ishvar's readymade formula of optimism, "the human face has limited space .... If you fill your face with laughing there will be no room for crying" is very crucial to the theme and the title of the novel itself.

In the third section of the novel we are confronted with the question of caste oppression. In the village, Ishvar's father Dukhi violates caste restrictions in attempting to make his sons into tailors. Narayan and his uncle Ishvar were sent by their father to be apprenticed as tailors with Ashraf. This shows surprising courage to be and to become in a man who has been socialized into accepting his position in the caste hierarchy unquestioningly. This is particularly the most moving section of the novel. A fine sketch of the lives of lower caste – Indians living in rural India – obtains in the novel. Even the upper caste women are not exempted from subjecting people to oppression. We are told that they are indignant at the birth of two sons to Dukhi:

It was hard for them not to be resentful – the birth of daughters often brought them beatings from their husbands and their husbands' families... Then they had no choice but to strangle the infant with her swaddling clothes, poison her, or let her starve to death. (99-100)
A Fine Balance is a humane novel. All events and images, divine and bestial, are brought together skilfully in the depiction of the two tailors and their lives. Twenty years pass after independence and nothing changes, Narayan says:

Government passes new laws says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper caste bastards, still treat us worse than animals.

'Those kinds of things take time to change.'

'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. (142)

Narayan points out the fact that as a chamaar he is not allowed to drink water at the village well, worship in the temple confined to the upper castes, or walk where he likes. When he attempts to assert his right to vote, he is brutally tortured and then hanged in the village, women are raped and their huts burnt down. The Thakur decides that the Dukhi's family deserves special punishment for crossing their limits:

"What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder; he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society's timeless balance. Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity," said the Thakur. (147)
For Ishvar the world is no better, and only occasionally worse than he expects. Young Omprakash is at first outraged by the treatment meted out to untouchables. It is a trait inherited from his father Dukhi, an ambitious and capable businessman. Like Rosa Parks refusing to sit in the back of the bus in the American South in the 1950's, Dukhi demands that his rights be respected, that he be able to vote as he chooses rather than as the local chieftain decrees. For this Dukhi is tortured and put to death and Omprakash orphaned. It is in the face of this seemingly never ending loss and injustice that the tailors must find the 'Fine Balance' between hope and despair.

Dukhi's family, along with Narayan corpse, are brunt alive at the behest of the Thakur. Narayan's son Omprakash dreams of revenge but both Ashraf and Ishvar know the results of such dreams and instead decided to send Om to Bombay along with his uncle Ishvar. With their move, a new phase starts in the live of Om and Ishvar. In the city of Gold (Mumbai), it is class, rather than caste, that oppressed them. They are forced to stay in a Jhopadipattis and are forced to work as unpaid labourers. Though Mistry's style of narration and tone through this section of the novel is slightly jocular, he does manage to let us see the reality behind the glamour of the Dream City, Bombay.

In *A Fine Balance* the satire is often directed at the young Indians who live on Dina's goodwill and generosity. Dina blends
almost imperceptibly with the tone of innocence. At times she makes it clear that it is not sainthood but eroticism that dwells in the beautiful eyes of Maneck Kohlah and the two tailors, Om and Ishvar, who are manifestation of one name, that is, God. All of them have behaved outrageously in order to enrage and distress Dina. Even in the prologue itself we learn that Maneck and the two tailors were sitting in the same compartment of the local train, travelling to the same destination, that is Dina's house. As is typical in Indian trains they start conversing and then realise that they are in search of the same address. Initially both Ishvar and Omprakash are apprehensive that Maneck is a rival for the job. However, they become friendly once they realise that Maneck is not seeking employment with Dina. Ishvar is initially deferential towards Maneck because of the latter's class background. However, Omprakash who is more independent does not suffer from inferiority complex and soon be friends Maneck. The months thus spent in Dina's house helps this friendship bloom and grow. The plight and suffering of Omprakash gives Maneck a wider perspective on life and human suffering. Remaining cheerful and retaining a sense of humour despite adversity are the admirable qualities that both Ishvar and Omprakash possess.

Ishvar, Omprakash, and Maneck head for Dina's house where they will share their lives for a while. Before their lives are irretrievably shattered, the two tailors are hired to enable Dina to
earn a living through selling dresses to the Au Revoir Export Company of Mrs. Gupta. At first Dina and the tailor Om are apprehensive about each others' concern. Om tries to spy on Dina in order to find out about the export company so that he can directly contact them and get orders. As the novel advances, circumstances conspire to deny them their modest aspirations. Thus they discover that there are other forces at play larger than their individual selves. Each faces an irrevocable destiny.

The fifth section of the novel deals with the story of Maneck Kohlah who comes into the household of Dina as a paying guest. His story is the story of the ecological denudation of the Himalayas through the forces of 'development' and the death of the indigenous enterprise through the entry of multinationals:

But the day soon came when the mountains began to leave them. It started with roads. Engineers in sola topis arrived with their sinister instruments and charted their designs on reams of paper. These were to be modern roads, they promised roads that would hum with the swift passage of modern traffic. Roads, wide and heavy-duty, to replace scenic mountain paths too narrow for the broad vision of nation-builders and World Bank officials.

Mr. Kohlah's increasing sense of loss colours his relationship with his son who becomes increasingly alienated from his father. Maneck is
sent to study air conditioning and refrigeration in Bombay and meets
the dynamic student leader, Avinash. Avinash really represents the
voice that is silenced by Mistry's narrative. For every display of force
there is always a resistance. Resistance is not less heroic in the period
of the emergency than during the course of the freedom struggle.
Heroism is not officially documented, but it nevertheless exists. For a
brief while we are given a glimpse of that aspect of the emergency in
the portrayal of Avinash:

The mood was euphoric. The students fervently believed their example would inspire universities across the country to undertake radical reforms which would complement the grassroots movement of Jay Prakash Narayan that was rousing the nation with a call to return to Gandhian principles. The changes would invigorate all of society, transform it from a corrupt, moribund creature into a healthy organism that would with its heritage of a rich and ancient civilization, and the wisdom of the Vedas and Upanishads, awaken the world and lead the way towards enlightenment for all humanity. (243)

Mistry describes a brief spell of optimism. But his emphasis is on the experience of Maneck who refuses to get involved in any of such activities and resents the fact that he has lost the company of his friends because of his involvement with such work. Maneck is the son of Dina's old school friend Mrs.Kohlah. Maneck stays as a boarder in
Dina's small apartment and his attempts to forge a humane relationship with Dina are extremely interesting.

The four main characters in this novel suffer from a sense of rootlessness. Oppressive caste violence drive Ishvar and Om from their traditional occupation to learn the skills of tailoring. They are driven from the rural background to the overcrowded Bombay. Similarly, Maneck moves from the invigorating atmosphere of his home in the hills to Bombay but her sense of independence after her husband's accidental death keeps her away from her family. So in this sense all the characters are lonely and struggling for identity and survival. Social circumstances, loneliness, and a sense of rootlessness bring them together and forge a bond of understanding. The human spirit displayed by these four characters of different class background and ages despite repeated setbacks, upholds Mistry's subtle political theme of how the human being can endure and survive with some dignity despite oppressive circumstances. Ultimately the four main characters struggle to maintain A Fine Balance in their lives.

The struggle for survival as far as the four characters are concerned does not have a political angle to it. They all believe that the word 'emergency' is a sort of game played by the power centre, and it would not really affect the ordinary people like them, Ishvar and Om. Hence each in his way tries to connect the surrounding discomfort and insecurity to their problems. Ishvar Darji, a chamaar by caste and a
tailor by profession, and his youthful rebellious nephew, Om, come to the city of Mumbai with the hope of making money and returning to their village to start afresh. For Dina Dalal, struggling to stand erect against her brother Nuswaan who feels secure in her dependency on him, the tailors are God-sent.

Rohinton Mistry paints India's politics as a surreal menace. In one memorable chapter, the two tailors are forced to join a crowd of 25,000 in a Bombay slum. As the helicopters hover and speeches go on, the tailors and their fellow conscripts pass the time under the gaze of the garish 80 feet cut out of the Prime Minister. Mistry has an ability to make his characters articulate their own thoughts or popular versions of the fact:

"See?" said Rajaram. "I told you it's going to be a day in the circus – we have clowns, monkeys, acrobats, everything." (263)

However, there is no direct reference to any real political figures except the scene of the Prime Minister's speech, after the declaration of the state of emergency: "lots of lies have been spread about the emergency which had been declared specially for the people's benefit... Whenever the Prime Minister goes, thousands gather from nices around to see her and hear her. Surely this is the mark of a truly great leader" (212). For Ishvar and Omprakash the huge cut outs of the Prime Minister with inspiring slogans for hard work and sincerity are
mere markers in the confusing labyrinth of the city streets. However, they realise the implication when they are forcibly bundled away to the Prime Minister's meeting to fill in the number with neither the promised tea nor the free bus ride. Ishvar and Om return thirsty and tired, “We could have stitched six dresses, thirty rupees lost,” (207) worries Ishvar. For Dina Bai their absence is the usual sign of arrogance of the labour class, once their meal is assured.

For the common people the emergency is nothing but "one more government tamasha" (5). "No consideration for people like us, Murders, suicide, Naxalite, terrorist killing, police custody, death-everything ends up delaying the trains" (6). For Dina it is “government problem – games played by people in power. It does not affect ordinary people like us” (75). However she is proved wrong as it did affect the ordinary people in more than one way. The upperclass people are fascinated by the emergency. For them it is a magic wand, capable of curing all diseases and decay. The students were euphoric too for different reasons. They felt that by following Jaya Prakash Narayan, they could bring in change which would “invigorate all society, transform it from a corrupt, moribund creature into a healthy organism” (243). On the stage there is more bowing and scraping when the Prime Minister approached the cluster of microphones. She adjusted the white sari that was slipping off her head and continued:
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 thing better for ordinary peoples. Only the crooks the smugglers, the black-marketers need to worry for we will soon put them behind bars.

Om refused to clap. He said his hands were aching. He played his card and someone near him blurred, mistake, mistake. Om realised his error, took back the card and played another while the features of the new twenty-point programme were outlined:

'What we want to do is provide houses for the people. Enough food, so no one goes hungry. Cloth at controlled prices. We want to build schools for our children and hospitals to look after the sick. Birth control will also available to everyone. And the government will no longer tolerate a situation where people increase the population recklessly, draining the resources that belong to all. We promise that we will eliminate poverty from our cities and towns and villages.'

The second blow is when the tailor's shack is bulldozed to the ground as part of the slum evacuation programme. The hutment dwellers were massed on the road fighting to return to their shacks, their cries mingling with the sirens of ambulances that couldn't get through. The police had lost control for a moment. The residents surged forward,
gaining the advantage. Then the police rallied and beat them back. People fell, were trampled, and the ambulances supplemented their siren skirls with blaring horns while children screamed, terrified at being separated from their parents. Ishvar says:

'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?'

(295)

Ishvar is content that at least their sewing machines are safe at Dina Bai's. They stuff all their belongings in the trunk, and sinking under its weight, go all over the city in search of a place to live in: “Atleast our sewing machines have a safe home with Dina Bai,” he said to Om, “that's our good fortune” (297). Ishvar and Om searched for their shelter. They decided to sleep in the railway station but the platform was thick with beggars and itinerants bedding down for the night. The tailors picked a corner and cleaned it, whisking away the dust with a newspaper. After midnight, they were awakened by a railway policeman ticking at the trunk. The policeman said that sleeping on the platform was prohibited. Later they realised that even to sleep on the platform they must pay the policeman: “'They have special permission' the police man jingled the coins in his pocket” (300). They decided to leave the trunk with Dina just for that night. But Dina refused to accommodate even the tailors' trunks. Maneck is put off by
her refusal. 'Looks terrible.' He was not ready to forgive her while the tailors remained unaccommodated in the night. (305)

The third blow of the emergency in their lives is when Ishvar and Om are picked up by the police from their rented footpath dwelling to work as construction workers as part of the city beautification project. Ishvar's protests that they are not street urchins or beggars fall on deaf ears. They are forced into a truck wherein “underfoot, stray gravel stabbed the human cargo” (326). The tailors are forced to abandon their work for a number of days for reasons beyond their control. Maneck tries to calm down the agitated Dina:

'Ishvar and Om wouldn't stay absent just like that,' said Maneck. 'Something urgent might have come up.' 'Rubbish, what could be so urgent that they cannot take a few minutes to stop by?'
'Maybe they went to see a room for rent or something, don't worry. Aunty, they'll probably be here tomorrow.'
'Probably? Probably is not good enough. I cannot probably deliver the dresses and probably pay the rent. You, without any responsibilities, probably don't understand that.' replied Dina. (333)

That night Dina is too distracted to work on quilt and pieces “sit in a pile on the sofa hiding their design” (334). Maneck ran back from the chemist's shop, frantic. Near the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel he slowed
down for a quick look inside, hoping that Ishvar and Om might be sipping their morning tea. He reached the flat, panting and repeated the night watchman's account for Dina:

'It's terrible! He thinks they were mistaken for beggars – dragged into the police truck – and God knows where they are now!' (334)

Dina and Maneck decides to finish the dresses while both of them are at work. Dina realizes the similarity between Om and Maneck. And through Maneck she comes to know the long-drawn suffering of Ishvar and Omprakash, inheritors of caste victimization. She realizes that

She tried to resume eating and then gave up. 'compared to theirs, my life is nothing but comfort and happiness. And now they are in more trouble. I hope they come back alright. People keep saying God is great, God is just, but I'm not sure. (340)

Dina begins to empathize with the tailors, with Maneck giving voice to her muted sympathy. She offers them her verandah to live in when they returned to her in a state of shock. Very soon she even shares her kitchen with them. Om and Maneck are delighted to be living under the same roof. And Ishvar begins to trust her with bits of their past, more pieces are joined to the growing story of the tailors. Sailing under the one flag and getting busy with the quilt making days pass by "as comforting and liquid as a piece of chiffon" (185) between one finger.
Ishvar's obsession to get his nephew married takes the tailors back to the village. In the absence of Ishvar and Om Dina buries herself with the quilt, "straightening a seam, trimming a patch, adjusting what did not look right to her eye" (509). She hopes to complete the quilt once the tailors came back. She and Maneck decide to gift it to Om on his return with a bride.

The final and fatal blow to their lives is an unwarranted police raid on the market place. Ishvar and Omprakash are forcibly taken to a sterilization camp at the village. The ultimate indictment of the internal emergency comes in the description of the Nussbandhi Mela in the closing chapter of the novel.

Not far from the birth-control booth was a man selling potions for the treatment of impotency and infertility. 'The quack is getting a bigger crowd than the government people,' said Ishvar. (524)

Mistry aptly describes the callous indifference of the authorities who are more keen on the idea that "targets have to be achieved within the budget" (533) rather than human welfare, the uplift of the poor. People like Thakur Dhamsi thrive there auctioning patients who come to the clinic, for unless a Government employee produces two or three cases of sterilization, his salary for the month is held back. The Thakur, the villain of his family's ruin, orders another operation on the already
sterilized Om. Thakur has a special interest in the boy who is suffering from testicular tumour.

"What kind of life, what kind of country is this, where we cannot come and go as we please" wails Ishvar. (540)

The author lucidly shows the involvement of an entrenched insensitivity in the Bureaucracy, in the demolitions of shacks forced labour camps, and sterilisation drives. Senior administrators from the family planning centre warn doctors for not achieving targets. Operations are conducted with partially sterile equipment due to the harsh reprimands of bureaucrats who are only interested in targets and not in human suffering. The euphemism of efficiency and sense of duty is used to ensure that sterilisation operations are performed even under unhygienic conditions. The doctors are frightened that "they would be reported to higher authorities for lack of co-operation, promotions would be denied, salaries frozen" (533).

Ishvar's feet, wounded at the beautification project develop gangrene and his legs get amputated. The group returns to Bombay with a little trolley fitted with small wheels for Ishvar and a rope for Omprakash to pull it. For Ishvar and Omprakash, urban renewal or beautification means that their slum shanty, their only shelters, is razed. Political rallies means being strong armed onto a bus and driven into the countryside to witness politicians congratulating
themselves. And population control means the threat of forced sterilization.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a study of human relationships in a world permeated by and predicated upon cruelty and abused power. The first part of the novel deals with the kind of power locatable. The second half depicts instances of violence.

Power in *A Fine Balance* is mainly of five types: exploitative, manipulative, competitive, nutrient and interactive.5 These powers are clearly distinguishable. More often, they modulate into each other, as we notice in the course of our analysis. Exploitative power is very common in the novel. This form of power is always associated with force in *A Fine Balance*. The sway of the upper caste Thakur in Dukhi's village is a good example. Thakur indulges in a continuous caste war against the ‘untouchables’ of the village. He actively participates in the activities of killing beatings, torture, rape, and so on. The killing of Narayan is notable for the raw savagery with which it was perpetuated.

The Monkey Man tortures his animals, the two Monkeys Laila, Majnoo, and the dog Tikka. The sick animals perform antics to entertain people under the perpetual threat of beatings from their master. After the death of the animals, the monkey man substitutes two children, thus extending cruelty into the human domain. The beggarmaster, a Fagin-like character, leads a team of mutilated
beggars. They have to surrender their earnings to him. In one way he leads the life of a parasite.

The landlord who harasses Dina Dalal never appear in person. His power is embodied in the Thugs and rent collector who terrorise the tenants. This power manifests itself as violence when they beat up Ishvar, Omprakash, Maneck and resort to vandalism. Dina and the tailors make veiled references to their own fate if their 'protector' is not paid on time. The Thakur offers poor wages to the lower caste villagers. When the workers demand their due wages, they are threatened with violence. The landlord of course collects rent from his terrorised tenants. Thus an epistemic power precedes the manifestation of exploitative power.\(^6\) For Thakur's exploitation follows an individual's understanding of the conditions of the lower castes: their poverty, ignorance, and ill health.

If exploitative power depends on violence, manipulative power occurs more covertly. As Rollo May argues,\(^7\) this power is originally invited by the person's own desperation or anxiety. This power is over another person. In *A Fine Balance* a character like Nuswaan assumes this power. Nuswaan runs the Shroff household after his father's death. From then onwards he controls the other members of the family. Dina's young age and their mother's approaching senility makes for their total dependence upon Nuswaan. He therefore regulates Dina's money, dresses, education and even friendship. Later
this power is used to induce Dina into marriage. Nuswaan's monetary assistance helps him retain his hold over her.

Dina herself is not beyond manipulative move when Ishvar and Omprakash are desperate for jobs. Dina hires them to sew for her at a meagre wage. She is careful not to give them undue importance. Even though they sustain her own existence, Dina does not allow the two to know her suppliers and the Au Revoir Export Company.

The third kind of power is competitive power. This power can also produce a healthy rivalry between people, thus improving productivity. Dina Dalal's attempts to squeeze out profits from her small venture are regulated by the constant threat from other similar businessmen. Government officials in *A Fine Balance* compete with each other to perform more family planning operations, for their promotions, salaries, and even jobs are at stake. Hence they vie with each other in the programme.

The fourth category of power Rollo May distinguishes is nutrient power. This power generally manifests itself as paternalism. Nutrient power is also embedded alongside other kinds of power. For instance, Dina's brother Nuswaan, in spite of his bullying and manipulation, obviously cares for her. He frequently helps her out of difficulty. He is concerned for her safety and health, her lonely life and future. In turn Dina's awareness of her brother's sarcastic tongue and inherent selfishness is tempered by her knowledge of his affection.
Dina is not merely an exploitative employer to Ishvar and Omprakash. She is protective and caring on occasions. When Omprakash develops a painful arm, she herself rubs an ointment much to the surprise of the two men. Later she allows them to stay in her tiny flat to protect them from police atrocities. When the novel concludes, Dina even risks Nuswaan’s wrath. Feeding the two, she wonders how long her good deeds can go on.

Integrative power is the final category. Here opposites – thesis and antithesis – may come together in synthesis in May’s terms as “power with the other” (110). In Mistry’s novel, this synthesis occurs among the marginalised and the exploited. This group forges its own power links. For example, Narayan and two other lower caste villagers rebel against the Thakur. They oppose them during election time. Dina and the tailors barely manage to keep poverty away by their unity. The doctors are also an exploited lot, since Government policy forces them into unethical practices.

Rohinton Mistry’s novel is tragic in that this integrative power is never successful in its manifestation. The rebel lower caste villagers are tortured and murdered. The landlord manages to evict Dina. The victims of the forced sterilisation programme do not get justice. Here we reiterate our reading of Mistry that the system prevents and prohibits validation of any integration move by individuals. Mistry
demonstrates this failure of the system in the character of the facilitator.

Violence in *A Fine Balance* also occurs in the form of positive aggression. Positive aggression occurs when individuals act across barriers and form relationships. This is also, as noted before, a manifestation of integrative power. When, for instance, Dina and the tailors forge a common front, they ignore caste, class, employer/employee barriers. This integration occurs in an aggression against the threat to their existence in the form of the landlord. However, these bonds of positive aggression are temporal. They occur at times of crises and seldom last. This is probably the essential tragedy in *A Fine Balance*. Mistry thus depicts courage and simplicity pitted against institutional might.

In Mistry's writings, there is a strong sense of how easy it is to come down in the world. Many of his characters have suffered a dislocation. There is a philosophical proofreader who has become allergic to printer's ink, and a hair collector who believes that his trade is possible because foreign women enjoy wearing other people's hair.

But the book as a whole is less comedy that it is an indictment. The reading is often harrowing. Mistry's strategy of moving back and forth in time and giving his characters a variety of histories permits him to cut a wide swath through the Indian experience. But it is the
callousness and corruption of Indira Gandhi's emergency era that is at the centre of the story. Beggars are swept from the streets in the interest of civic beautification and taken to slave labour camps. In the name of population control, villages are denied their rights, farmers are refused fertilizer, and ration cards are withheld.

While all this goes on, the comfortable in society go around averring that “there is nothing wrong in taking strong measures” and the Prime Minister proclaims that “the need of the hour is discipline” (330).

One of the qualities of A Fine Balance is that there is a dependence upon narrative than dramatic presentation. There is also for the readers a certain frustration in finding the forward motion of the story checked again and again by a pile up of flashbacks.

Towards the end of the novel, Dina Dalal loses her prized independence and has to seek shelter in the patriarchal protection of her brother Nuswaan. Dina, back at her brother’s covers herself with the unfinished quilt, recollects the events and experiences concealed in rightly knit patches. However frightened of thinking aloud of the past, she decides to lock it away.

'I used to. But now I prefer to think that God is a giant quiltmaker. With an infinite variety of designs. And the quilt is grown so big and confusing, the pattern is impossible to see, the
squares and diamonds and triangles don’t fit well together anymore, it’s all become meaningless. So he has abandoned it.’ (340)

There are the remarks of Maneck in one of his conversations with Dina. Dina succumbs to her fate and ends up as an unpaid and glorified servant of the Nuswaan household. Omprakash is castrated in an act symbolic of the impotency of the general populace of India during the authoritarian regime perpetrated during the emergency. Ishvar is crippled by the loss of both his legs and is reduced to begging for a living. And, Maneck, the boy from the Himalayas, throws himself in front of a moving train in irregular parody of the reported death sequence of his friend, Avinash. Avinash mysteriously disappears. Maneck only makes a half-hearted attempt to find him. This mysterious disappearance of Avinash raises the question of the narrative logic of Mistry’s novel: that everything ends badly. Avinash seems to have been introduced only to affirm this philosophy. Ishvar and Omprakash return to their native place only to be further humiliated.

Ishvar and Omprakash and Dina who successfully strike a fine balance both within and without go on to live while Maneck reduces himself to a “fallen corncob across the tracks.” As Ishvar Darjee puts it, “stories of suffering are no fun when we are the main characters” (383). Dina, by living apart, rejects Nuswaan’s hold. Maneck asserts
himself by altering the shop's arrangements. Narayan becomes a tailor and thus occupies a space allocated to another caste.

The novel's title comes from Yeats "You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair". And sometimes we feel this is simply too much. The title of the novel is suggestive in more than one sense. Towards the fag end of the novel, Mr. Valmik exclaims there is always hope – hope enough to balance our despair or we would be lost" (503). If the characters drive a fine balance between "hope and despair" circumstances tilt it in favour of despair alone. In Lawrentian terms, Mistry's novel deals with an "essentially tragic age".

The overlapping stories in this novel are neatly interwoven. Rohinton Mistry uses memory and imagination to depict a turbulent period in Indian history. The author claims that his novels are not 'researched' in the formal sense of the word but that he relies on articles from newspapers, magazines and chats with people from India to collect his material. However, as Mistry admits, all these details get shaped by his memory and imagination. Though Mistry claims that he is a casual researcher, yet his novel *A Fine Balance* is weighed down by gory details of the horrors of internal emergency. Commenting on the themes and issues of this novel, the author says, "the way the main characters, the tailors Ishvar and Omprakash, endure suggest that dignity is inherent in the heroic manner in which they strive to survive and perhaps in their insuppressible sense of
The human endurance of the suffering tailors and others like them who faced the horrors of eviction, sterilization, forced labour, and police brutality is one of the hallmarks of the novel. It shows how the underprivileged survive and also the author's concern at the plight of the poor and the exploited.

The ending of the novel is surprising and unconventional. Maneck, the brooding Parsi young man, is upset at the alienation from his family. His sorrows increase when he visits Bombay and finds that Dina has been evicted from her house, has lost her struggle for independence and stays with her brother. Walking away from Dina's house it is perturbing to see Ishvar and Omprakash handicapped and leading lives as beggars. The culmination of these series of staggering events is that it drives home a lesson of extreme despair and shows how the sensitive Maneck loses in the struggle to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair. Rohinton Mistry emerges as the foremost Parsi political novelist for his consistent depiction of ideology and politics in his novels.

Various episodes in the novel reveal Mistry's sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy to authoritarian, oppressive practices during the two year period of internal emergency. During the course of the narrative, Mistry gives some revealing political insights. The change in the aspirations of the lower castes, the attempts by the upper castes to preserve the old order are all aptly delineated. A major instance is
the violence perpetuated by Thakur Dharmsi and his action against Narayan's family during the week of parliamentary elections. The generation gap is shown in the aspirations of the lower castes. Narayan's father tells his son, "you changed from chamaar to tailor, be satisfied with that" (143).

However, Narayan who is educated wants to exercise his rights. He wants to actually vote in the elections and not let the "blank ballots were filled by the landlord's men" (144). Mistry expresses clearly his views on the cynical manipulation of elections in rural India. A shrewdly chosen quotation from Balzac used as the novel's epigraph advises us against assuming that the author has indulged in "wild exaggeration and flights of fancy" offering the cold reassurance that "this tragedy is not a fiction, all is true". But any inclination to turn away from the most repellant truths seems to be shared by the beleaguered Indian citizens who populate Mistry's fiction.
REFERENCES


5. This categorisation has been adopted from Rollo May's exposition in her seminal work Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence (New York: Norton 1972).

6. The term has been used by Peter Morris in Power, A Philosophical Analysis (Mackester: Manchester UP, 1972). Similar arguments regarding the quotation of knowledge and power have been forwarded by Michael Foueault and Edward W. said.
