



## CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY: EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION OF ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

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### ABSTRACT

*The primary responsibility of a person, according to existentialists, is to define life from his choice of decisions. All the human beings have freedom to choose decisions from the unlimited choices. Choices have the ability to change the course of life. Existentialists believe that in the world of meaninglessness only the choices we make define the purpose of our existence. Novels of Rohinton Mistry consciously drive the characters to make certain decisions in their novels. The kind of choices they make actually fails to lead them to a state of happiness. Instead of that, they are forced to lead pitiable conditions but they never allow someone to define their life. In Such a Long Journey, Gustad is given a chance to accept the request of Bilimoria. After a long oscillation, Gustad finally succumbs to the snare of friendship. The decision changes the entire course of his life. Such a long Journey captures the life of Gustad and how his decision is directly connected to the fate of other characters. Unlike the first novel, the second novel of Mistry, A Fine Balance, aims to capture the fate of the four main characters and the way their life changes upside down because of their decisions in the crucial time of India. Besides, all of his characters in the novels can be treated with existentialistic dimensions.*

**KEYWORDS:** Existentialism, choice, decision, Emergency, Untouchability.

### INTRODUCTION

Existentialism is a philosophical movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which aims to capture the inner meaning of life. The essential purpose of this movement is to make the people realize the strength of their decision. The movement is largely viewed as a result of Second World War and its terrible consequences. The proponents of the philosophy propose the idea that the life itself meaningless and the human beings are given freedom to define life in the way they like to from their choices. As the world is moving towards incoherence of meaning, one has to attempt to find out the meaning from the choices made over the period of life time. The movement also urges not only to urges to define the life from choice but instruct to be responsible for the actions. The Routledge dictionary of Literary Terms defines the existentialism as follows: Literary and philosophical responses to the experience of nothingness, anomie and absurdity which attempt to discover meaning in and through this experience. All existentialist writers begin from a sense that an ontological dimension (Being; the encompassing; Transcendence; the thou) has been forced out of consciousness by the institutions and systems of a society which overvalues rationality, will-power, acquisitiveness, productivity and technological skill. (78)

. Rohinton Mistry is undoubtedly one of the important Diaspora writers in English literature. As he is belonging to Zoroastrianism, his novels represent the sentiments, vulnerability and existential condition of the Parsi people. Apart from the Parsi sentiments, the pain of the ordinary people is highlighted with wit and humor. He started his literary journey with *The Tales of Firozha Baag* and continues to enthrall the literary world with novels. Mistry is consciously criticizing the domination of one religion over another and the atrocities of the governments in policy making decisions. *A Fine Balance* in particular ruthlessly attacks the function of government which annihilates the life of innocent citizen in the cruelest way possible.

Rohinton Mistry intentionally portrays the real face of India as he sets the dark periods of India as the background of his novels. In *Such a Long Journey* the war between India and China, the partition between Pakistan and Bangladesh are used effectively to delineate the condition of *Gustad*. In his Second novel, *A Fine Balance*, Mistry Choose the state of Internal Emergency to portray the inexplicable condition of the people. The novel exposes the changes in Indian society from Independence to the Emergency imposed by then Prime Minister India Gandhi. Mistry ruthlessly attacks Mrs. Gandhi in this novel. However, her name is not mentioned anywhere in the novel. In the name of her place, the characters simply call her as the Prime Minister. Mistry brings together the characters from the diverse backgrounds in the darkest period of Indian history. The novel starts with the declaration of internal emergency in 1975 and ends with the death of Mrs. Gandhi in 1984. Lisa Moody analyses the combination of historical study and characterization as follows: The idea of historicity suggests that only by understanding the relationship between the political and personal realms can a universal lesson be learned. Mistry's point is that the political and personal cannot be viewed separately, and he subjectifies history, through the use of fictional characters, in order to demonstrate the larger moral lesson; in this case the Indian emergency of 1975 has had irrevocably damaging consequences on the lives of every member of the nation and by extension for every member of a democracy. (35)

Besides declaring Emergency, Indira Gandhi announced Twenty Point Schemes for the welfare of the country. The points targeted mostly at the marginalized people. The twenty Point scheme fails to protect the livelihood of the people. In the name of development, people were evicted from their slums forcibly. Poor people struggled hard to get the place to stay for the rest of their lives. Rohinton Mistry openly criticizes the attitude of government in the novel. *Ishvar* and *Om* represent the victims of the Emergency. They come to the city for reasonable livelihood but the cruelty of emergency drive them pillar to pillar. They expect mercy from the people. Instead of that, they are cruelly treated by the system. The slum in which they find asylum is evacuated in the name of beautification of the city. Morey describes the situation as follows: *Ishvar* and *Omprakash* have what is perhaps their first experience of the unrestrained severity of the new order at the beginning of the novel, when their train journey to the city is interrupted by the discovery of a dead body on the line ahead. Disturbing but seemingly innocuous at this stage – the passengers merely lament this passing inconvenience. (94)

Within the limited freedom in the turbulent period of India, the characters consciously make decisions hoping that it will help them to survive in this cruel situation. First of all, *Om* and *Ishvar* decide to search jobs in the city. Having known that the city has only the educated and sophisticated people, still they decide to search jobs in the city because, the city is the place of jobs to them. As they have faced discrimination in the name of caste, they are confident that only the city will treat them equally. At the same time, the city is only to search jobs for them. Once they have earned enough money, they have decided that they will return to their native village.

Secondly, they have decided to survive in the city at any cost. Even at the beginning of the novel, their level of patience is tested with the suicide of a young man. They arrive to the city during the early days of internal emergency. The unexpected encounter with death during the train journey fails to create panic in them. Instead of that, they are determined to face the challenges of the city. The reason of their confidence is that they have nothing to lose in the city. Even if they return to the village, they have nothing to look for there. Their family has been burnt alive and there is anything left to lead a meaningful life. So, they are

determined to face the reality of the city boldly. Mistry describes the reaction of passengers in the train as follows:

Why does everybody have to choose the railway tracks only for dying? Grumbled another. 'no consideration for people like us. Murder, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police-custody death – everything ends up delaying the trains. What is wrong with poison or tall buildings or knives? (AFB 6)

The life of Dukhi is changed completely when he decides to break away from the customs of his village. Being born in a caste which is considered to be untouchable, Dukhi faces inexplicable problems. There comes a point in his life when he cannot tolerate injustice any more. The effect of Dukhi's decision to stand against evil forces of the society makes great impact in the lives of Ishvar and Omprakash. They are forced to think that the life is going to be tougher for them. There is no other way for them except to search a job which will make them to provide economic security. They wander around the streets of the city, almost for six months, in search of a job. No one believes in the honesty of the tailors. Mistry situates the plot in such a way that the emergency really makes the tailors difficult time for searching a job. They come to the city in a turbulent time. Even though the existence of their life is tougher for them, they somehow manage to keep with the time. The city haunts the livelihood of the tailors till the end of the novel. It makes them beggar cruelly.

They choose to lead a life which is unworthy to lead after the disaster in their life. The plan of Ishvar and Om is to somehow manage to survive in the city. Even in the beginning of the novel, they come across a suicide which foreshadows the destiny to them. Mistry is clear in the mind that the future of the tailors should also be dismal. Having known the consequences of the city, the two tailors start exploring the nature of the city. The city is not like the village in which the people live together and anything happen to anyone in the village everyone tries to solve it together. This kind of unity is lacking in the city. They face continuous disapproval from everyone and it fails to revoke any kind of hatred on others. The fate of the tailors is intertwined with the decision of Dina Shroff whose decision to stand alone in her life drive the narration in a consistent pace. Prabha Nagal portrays the theme of *A Fine Balance* as follows:

The novel's four protagonists represent the commonest of the common in India and exist on its periphery by either belonging to minority community or by being the outcasts. Against the backdrop of the novel is primarily a study about human endeavour for dignity and the endless struggle of human beings to strike a fine balance between their own desire for a dignified and meaningful existence by combating the pressures, deprivations, injustices and indignities of hostile milieu. (46-47)

Dina, another important character in novel, also takes brave decisions in her life. Her brother Nusswan is well settled. When he decides to marry off his sister with any of his friends who are as equal as him, his sister come up with a proposal to marry someone who is below his status. Dina falls in love with Rustom Dalal, a medical representative. Nusswan does not like him but only after Dina informs him that she does not need any of his properties and only like to marry Rustom Dalal, he is convinced. Even though Nusswan is not happy about the choice of her sister, he lavishly spends for the marriage. All of his relatives praise Nusswan as a good brother who fulfills the place of his father. Immediately after the marriage, Dina decides to leave the house with Rustom. She happily leaves the house to live in a small flat of Rustom Dalal. They spend their life happily for two years. Dina finds that she is entirely free to live and feel with Rustom. On the third anniversary, Rustom decides to celebrate the occasion with Nusswan and his family.

Mistry portrays the character of Dina from the existential point of view of women in India. They choose to live a life which is complete in itself and they do not like to dream of happy life. Whatever life which falls in their way in the name of marriage, they are prepared to accept it without any regret. Indian women choose to live a contented life after marriage. Their world ends with family and revolves around the expectations of the family members. The society expects them to lead a life which is only for the purpose of satisfying the need of her relatives. Through her life, she is expected to be meek and obedient to the elders. If an Indian family consists of father, mother and children, the preference is given only to a male child. The reason for this is that a male heir is expected to carry forward the legacy of their family. Likewise, In *A Fine Balance*, Dina is expected to obey the orders of Nusswan. As he is the legal heir of the family properties,

he denies respecting the rights of his sister, He strongly believes in the idea that the primary responsibility of father is to marry off his sister to a rich person. He even likes to choose a bridegroom from his friend circles. Dina, unlike India women whose choice of life is to a contended life with her society, she decides to break away from the rules of Nusswan. She selects a person who is completely contrasted to the character of Nusswan.

The reason for her boldness can be attributed to the kind of atmosphere in which she has been brought up by her father. Shroff decides to bring up all his children independently. He allows them to choose their career. Enforcement of his dreams is not his cup of tea and he rejects the idea of his relatives that Nusswan should be made to pursue medicine. Till the death of her father, Dina enjoys abundant freedom. The uncontrolled freedom fosters her individual aspect and nourishes the identity. When she has to face the consequences of her father's death, she is determined to face the impact of her dependence upon her brother. Dina understands the real face of her brother only after the death of her father. What shocks her most is the attitude of Nusswan. The freedom she enjoyed while her father was alive is completely lost after her brother takes in charge of the family.

Dina single handedly faces the hardships in her life. She is determined that her brother should not interfere in the affairs of her financial instability. Even though she is hesitating to receive the help of her Nusswan when her tailors have turned up for the job, she makes a bold attempt to meet her brother only by the compulsion of Maneck. Nusswan fails to understand the condition of Dina as he thinks that the present scenario helps the rich people to conduct their work properly. Dina returns home without any help received from her brother. This incident also strengthens her determination to move in the direction she has headed before. Her strong will suggests her to keep up with the present determination and realizes that the tailors are far better than Nusswan. They stand with her during her difficult time and they are honest too. M.L. Pandit captures the boldness of Dina as follows:

Dina's rebellion against the tyranny of her autocratic brother and the traditionally accepted norms of her orthodox parsi community reflects the change from the old to the new ways of thinking in Bombay and India...At the same time, the tragedy of life that pursues Dina from childhood through school days, to adulthood...are a lesson in the divergence between one's ambitious dreams and their elusive fruition. (21)

Another character who experiences disorder in all walks of his time is Maneck Kohla. His father loses wealth due to Partition. During his stay at Dina flat for more than a year, he has witnessed the brutality of the emergency and how the tailors have been affected by the internal emergency. He returns to India after eight years. The series of incidents including the death of Avinash makes him frustrated and feel helpless. He also faces similar situation in Dubai also. Therefore, the weight of inexplicable anguish is unbearable to him. Martin Genetsch describes the life of Maneck in Dubai as follows:

Maneck's overall pessimism is conveyed metaphorically by the refrigeration of that desert air, a task which does not offer a perspective of prevailing over the loss of meaning in life. His lot suggests that in the end an erosion of meaning cannot ultimately be done away with but all will always make its impact on man. Implicitly, Maneck imagines himself as a modern Sisyphus concerned with a chore which cannot be completed. ( 166-167)

The decision of Maneck's parents that he has to study in the city starts from the modernization of his town taken place at his hometown. Modernization blows over quiet, placid mountainside paths of the town. Wide roads are developed to replace the scenic mountain paths and all the benefits of modern civilization are made available to the people of the small town. The happenings around the mountains make his father angry and he called it malevolent growth. Unemployment grows as forests are devoured for fireweed and bald patches appear permanently on the slopes. Mr. Kohla dislikes his evening walks now as he sees devastation all around. Charu C. Mishra captures the mood of Farok as follows:

Unable to make out the myriads of confusing emotions, Farokh feels tightness in his chest, then his throat constricts as if he were choking. He weeps helplessly, silently venting his emotions. The meaning that this vision gives him is too new and terrifying for him to explore. There is no place for escape (80)

The loss also plays a key role in the novel. Dina's life is intertwined with the death of her father. Om and Ishvar's fate is linked with the death of Narayan. Maneck's present condition has a direct connection with the consequence of his father's loss of wealth due to partition. The loss makes them suffer in the hands of other people. They have been made to look up to others for any financial or emotional needs. Dina is compelled to live under the torture of her brother, Nusswan. He denies all kinds of basic expectations of her sister. She is allowed to complete her metric. The household duties are thrust upon her under the name of womanly responsibilities. The tragic death of her husband also causes a tremendous effect on her life. Fortunately, the relatives of Dina help her to acquire the skill of tailoring that encourages her to move forward in her life. In the life of tailors, their whole family is burned due to caste discrimination. They cannot live under these circumstances in the village. Moreover, as the entire family is lost, Ishvar thinks that the family line will be enlarged only if they earn some money in the city where they find the caste discrimination is minimal. Maneck, on the other hand, suffers due to the loss of his family wealth in partition. His father sends him to study the diploma course as he finds that there is no scope if he chooses to study another course other than a skill-based course. Pradeep Trikha captures the essence of *A Fine Balance* as follows:

The novel opens with a train journey and concludes with Epilogue: 1984 with Mrs. Dalal closing doors after completing her journey of woman of emancipation and self-realisation. Ishvar and Om, now beggars in a way, sacrificed at the altar of their dreams, are still in a journey. *A Fine Balance* reveals betrayal and suppressed womanhood of Mrs. Dalal on one hand and on the other it reveals lost opportunities of the oppressed like Ishvar, Om, the monkey man, the Beggermaster, Rajaram and many others. (223)

Therefore, all the characters in the novel realize that life has to be dealt with responsibility. They also accept that the wretched condition is the result of their decisions taken in the critical moments of their life. Om and Shankar continue to work in the city. They do not like to go back to their life and find retribution for their sins of doing tailoring other than the work of Chammars which they have been destined to do in the present birth. Dina is ready to accept the fortune wheel of her life and decides to live with Nusswan. The only character which represents the condition of young people is Maneck. He is the kind of person who cannot digest the happenings of India. He finds it hard to accept the injustice done to his friends and the disrespect Dina has to face every day in her life. The cycle of incidents leads him to frustration. Finally, he finds there is nothing to carry forward his life in the future. As a result of which he commits suicide. Martin Genetsch describes the condition of Maneck as follows:

It is not only displacement that leads to Maneck's problematic "In-der-Welt-Sein" (Heidegger). Maneck Kohlah's life is emptied of meaning to the degree by which his social relationships are affected by death or estrangement. Such an argument can help to explain why Maneck's suicide is not cryptic but simply a reflection of his dissatisfaction with human existence and, as such, logically follows from his bleak outlook on life. Of prime importance in this context is Maneck's problematic relationship to his father. (169)

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