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***A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry**

Rohinton Mistry was born to a Parsi family in Bombay in 1952 and migrated to Canada in 1975, just after the declaration of the State of Emergency in India. Mistry began writing fiction after a few years in Toronto. *A Fine Balance* (1995), Mistry's second novel, focuses on the marginalised and the dispossessed in India through the lives of four main characters. Two of them are Dalit men, Ishvar and Omprakash Darji, of the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers, who have trained as tailors and leave their hometown to find work in an unnamed city by the sea (Bombay). Omprakash and Ishvar are nephew and uncle, whose family have been killed in an act of caste-motivated violence. Ishvar and Omprakash are hired to sew dresses for an export company by a middle-aged Parsi widow Dina Dalal, who is fighting for her independence by living on her own and trying to make ends meet. The unlikely family is completed by a Parsi student, Maneck Kohlah, who rents a room from Dina. For a while, they offer each other company and consolation, until their family is broken apart by various government policies and initiatives.

A Fine Balance is set during the time of the Emergency (1975-77), an authoritarian period described by Mistry as a "watershed in Indian political history and in the future of Indian democracy," with the ending set in 1984 communal violence brought on by the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. The helplessness of especially the poor people of the city, such as the two tailors, whose slum residence is bulldozed in a "city beautification" effort, against the government's increasingly harsh measures forms the core of the narrative. Indira Gandhi, corruption and the caste system emerge as the biggest villains in the story. Oppression and transgression against one's body by the government is a continuation of the oppression the Dalit characters have had to endure in their home village. Attempts by the marginalised to assert their independence prove futile in the face of the strong tentacles of communities.

As slum and pavement-dwellers, Ishvar and Om are easy prey to the police, who pick them up first for a government rally and then to be sent to an irrigation project as forced labour along with members of the city's beggar community. Some of the beggars act as central characters and their stories add to the many tragedies in the novel. *A Fine Balance* concludes with the forcible sterilisation of the two tailors, who are rounded up when they visit their old hometown. The young and unmarried Om is not only sterilised but also castrated, while poor hygiene at Ishvar's sterilisation leads to infection and the loss of his legs. Back in the city, the tailors have no choice but to join the beggars' community to earn a living. Consequently, Dina has to move to his patronising brother's house, while Maneck, unable to strike the fine balance between hope and despair, eventually commits suicide.

Mistry employs the form of nineteenth-century realist fiction in *A Fine Balance*, and many have detected in it echoes from writers such as Hardy, Dickens and Balzac. Overall, the critical response to *A Fine Balance* has been positive, even if some critics have remarked on the lack of agency and resistance of the main characters. Mistry has been praised for his mixing of universalist themes with particular individual lives. *A Fine Balance* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. The novel has been called a "masterpiece" and was ranked as one of the ten all-time greatest Asian novels in *The Telegraph* in 2014. An acclaimed stage adaptation of the novel was produced in 2006 and a TV series is being planned by HBO.

Further reading

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