**Rohinton Mistrry’s “A Fine Balance” is a document of characters’ struggle for Identity and Survival**

As a social humanist, Rohinton Mistry is provoked by the atrocities continued against the downtrodden and suffered people. Here, in his novel *A fine Balance* Mistry strives hard to reform the society by exposing various problems. Mistry desires peace to prevail in the society by understanding the various problems of individuals. An unchallengeable feature of Mistry’s humanism is the theme of condemnation of struggle for identity and survival. Ambition and dreams of his protagonists are tied with hope and despair about thelife of themodern world. Mistry shows the basic ambivalence of common men, as arealist and humanist through his works. His humanistic convictions and concept of arts show his thoughts of revolutionary. All forms of feudal exploitation, oppression, especially evil social practices of casteism and untouchability uplift to downtrodden and suffered people. Therefore, Mistry has become a spokesman of this revolution. The main focus of this paper is to portray the struggles of the characters face in the contemporary world.

**A STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY AND SURVIVAL:**

The novel progresses through a series of seemingly separate stories of four main characters of this novel who suffer from a sense of footlessness. Oppressive caste violence has driven Ishvar and Omprakash from their traditional occupation to learn the skills of tailoring and from a rural background to overcrowded Bombay. Similarly, Maneck moves from the invigorating atmosphere of his home in the hills to Bombay for higher education. Dina has grown up in Bombay but her sense of independence after her husband’s accidental death keeps her away from her family. So, in a sense all the four main 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 as they struggle to survive. The human spirit displayed by these four characters of different class backgrounds and ages, despite repeated setbacks upholds Mistry’s subtle political theme of how human beings can endure and survive with some dignity despite oppressive circumstances. Ultimately, the four characters are struggling to maintain ‘a fine balance’ in their lives.

The sense of camaraderie that develops as this quartet struggle to meet the export order deadlines gives Maneck a more mature attitude to life. The trials, the tribulations, the shared jokes, intimacies, eating the same food and sense of adventure enables Maneck realize that life is often “a fine balance” between happiness and despair. The author implies that at various levels of existence, there is a see-saw struggle between happiness and despair. Life never seems to follow a placid course in Mistry’s novel *A Fine Balance.*Mistry’s novel is set in India of mid-seventies and focuses especially on the period during Emergency and afterwards i.e. posts Emergency.

As a political and historical novel, Mistry juxtaposes the lives of its four main protagonists with the historic moment of modern India to focus on the mechanism of political governance that constituted modern India. The India that Mistry projects in *A Fine Balance* is filled with despair, brutality, discrimination, injustice and lack of opportunity for its people.

As a novel focusing on the socio**-**cultural aspects of India *A Fine Balance*looks at contemporary India in which caste, class, ignorance, poverty, discrimination and exploitation of the common manner by a cruel system, being manned by self**-**serving people whose only objective is to enhance their own power and wealth with total insensitivity to those around them, is the only reality. Over population, man’s greed, man’s inhumanity to other men is one of the basic concerns of *A Fine Balance*. Corruption, a modern day phenomenon, is eating into the social fabric of India and the ordinary man remains caught between an unsympathetic and hostile system and his own individual aspirations. Therefore the struggle for survival and empowerment on one hand and poverty and exploitation on the other is another basic concern of Mistry in*A Fine Balance.*

Each of these four protagonists is a victim of his social conditioning, aspires to improve and change his lot and finds himself stuck in the quagmire of his circumstances. Destiny brings these people together and ridden with mutual suspicion, hostility and undercurrents of caste and class consciousness, the four protagonists view others and life according to the treatment their own life has melted out to them. Their need keeps them together and step**-**by**-**step they learn to help each other, hesitatingly at first and with more confidence later till each one of them are able to overcome the personal and the circumstantial barriers amongst them in order to forge a meaningful relationship.

Thus, one of the major concerns of *A Fine Balance*is the exploration of the Indian experience through the eyes of a diaspora writer. Nostalgia for the Homeland makes Mistry take a deeply intuitive and an insightful look at the Indian reality and he translated the urban, the rural, and the political experience for the reader through the novel.

Dina Dalal, has her own share of journeying to accomplish in the text. She moves from protected girlhood under the indulgent care of her doctor father, to the harsh reality of reductive femaleness under the ‘protection’ of her brother Nusswan. Her awareness of her autonomous existence does not allow her to bow down to patriarchy that Nusswan seeks to impose on her. She moves away from the economic well**-**being and social security that a marriage to one of Nusswan’s friends would have offered her.

She chooses to marry an economically unsuccessful Rustom Shroff, whom she had met at a music concert organized by a local music society. Dina’s happiness is short lived as Rustom is killed in an accident. The shock numbs Dina and lets her accept Nusswan’s offer to go back to live with him and his family. Dina does so, but with the wisdom of the Bombay**-**born, where real**-**estate prices are one of the highest in the world, retains Rustom’s flat. Very soon, her numbness and Nusswan’s sympathy wear off and the brother and sister indulge in a typical Parsi exchange of invectives and insults:

Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to a good little sati and leap into your husband’s funeral pyre, be roasted with him.” I can always go to the Towers of Silence and let the vultures eat me up, if that will make you happy. (*A Fine Balance* 52)

Nusswan’s words reflect the deep-rooted Parsi feeling of the superiority of their ‘enlightened’ religion versus what they consider the superstitious, exploitative nature of the Hindu religion and its treatment of its widows. However, his words are ironical since Dina considers Nusswan to be the oppressor and the ‘unenlightened’ one and offers to take herself off to the Towers of Silence. This being a reference to the Zoroastrian mode of disposal of dead bodies in Iran**-**a mode which has been retained by Indian Parsi Zoroastrians in India:

Such a mode of disposal of the dead was also called a ‘sky burial’ and enabled the social and eco**-**conscious Parsi to make their final charitable offering (their bodies to birds) and do so without polluting he earth, water or fire. (Nilufer 149)

The tailors receive another blow when they are picked up by the police from the footpath where they were sleeping to work as construction workers as part of the city beautification project. When they do not turn up for work for a number of days, Maneck tries to pacify the disturbed Dina Aunty. However, in spite of the suspicion and convenience the prolonged absents of the tailors causes, make Dina yearning for them:

She did not notice that already, in here memory, those months with Ishvar and Om of fretting and tardiness, quarrels and crooked seems, had been transmuted into something precious, to be remembered with yearning. (355)

It is during period that Dina comes to know through Maneck long drawn suffering of Ishvar and Om as victims of caste oppression and thinks “compared to the, my life is nothing but comfort and happiness People keep saying nothing but comfort and happiness People keep saying God is great, God is just, but I’ am not sure” (340). Dina is relived when the tailors eventually return in a state of shock and moved by the bight, she offers them a verandah to lively. The moral dilemma of the situation continuous story here though, and is articulated thus.

Morning light did not bring answers to the questions Dina had wrestled with all night she could not risk the losing the tailors again but firm to stand, how much to bend? Where was the line between compassion and foolishness, kindness and weakness? And that was from here position. From theirs, it might to be a line between mercy and crudely, consideration and callousness. When could draw it on this side, but they might see it on that side. (382)

All the four major characters strive hard for their identities. The major protagonist Dina Dalal, who wants to lead an independent life, struggles most of the time to achieve it first great loss for here is the death of her parents is succession. Later, she is caught in the paternal protection of a brother. There she loses her identity as a humorous girl. Later she is forced to marry a rich gentleman. But Dina independently married Rustom Dalal. Here, she proves her identity as a self-crusader but it does not last long as her husband dies on the third anniversary in an accident. Dina, along with Om and Ishvar, becomes a successful businesswoman in a short period. But her identity as a respectable businesswoman shatters when the Emergency is exploited well by the capitalists like Mrs. Gupta, the proprietor of Au Revior Export House. They suck more labour from the workers and as a result the poor have no rest from their laboring time. So, Dina has to complete the huge assignment with only two tailors who are underpaid.

Dina and her team hires, sewing machines and worked hard to meet the deadlines of the orders. As their business goes on nicely the landlord agent Ibrahim tries to uproot, their business place by forcing them to vacate the house. But Dina is helped by Beggar Master who has some influence over the landlord. Besides the troubles that are pressing Dina from outside she has to face the protest of Om that he is underpaid, but Ishvar says:

Listen my nephew; this is the way the world works. Some people are in the middle, some are on the board patience is needed for dreams to grow and give fruit. (101)

Even though Dina seems to succeed towards the end, she loses her independence and has to depend on her elder brother Nusswan again for her shelter. Thus, identity crisis is a continuing process in *A Fine Balance*. Both Om and Ishvar lose their identity that they had in their village. It takes months for them to adjust themselves to urban circumstances. They join Dina Dalal but do not coincide with her thoughts. Dina does not approve the friendship of Maneck with the tailors. This further operates them to feel that they are again treated with class consciousness. Om and Ishvar feel that they have no potential to exist in such a metropolitan city. Om and Ishvar are further shuffled by the city beautification program of the government. The slum area in which they inhabit is completely powdered. They are left homeless. And when they are not allowed to stay in Dina’s flat they feel much isolated from the society.

To a greater extent, during emergency, Om is sterilized forcibly and is made impotent by the officials. Ishvar, who stands against this, loses his both legs and left as beggar on the streets of Mumbai. So, the tailors completely lose their identity in the society.

When the four protagonists come together in the house of Dina Dalal, who takes Om, Ishvar and Maneck as her paying guests to augment her meager earning, each one of them carries the burden of past on his psyche. Each one of them has bitter sweet memories of the treatment life has meted out to him and each, in his own manner, confronts the contradictions and complexities of day life. Coming from diverse social and cultural backgrounds the four characters are suspicious and apprehensive of each other. Caught in the web of the traumatic past, each individual lives in a state of spiritual isolation in spite of sharing a common roof and the bonds of suffering. It is with the passage of time that the initial distrust starts lessening and mutual suspicion starts giving way to a deeper understanding of the other’s situation.

Maneck is the first one to forge a bond of friendship with Om and Ishvar while Dina takes a long time to get over his apprehension about Om and Ishwar’s antecedents and intentions. It is only when he learns about the personal tragedies of their lives and sees hisown misery reflected in their stories that he opens up to them and takes initiative to establish communion with them. Dina and Maneck the structure around whom the whole narrative of the novel is built and both being Parsis, the experience of being marginalized is understandable for them. Dina begins to empathize with the two tailors once she is able to understand their rootlessness and the full import of emergency in the lives of the common people. As each of these four protagonists moves towards a greater understanding of the other, Maneck comes closer to a better understanding of the self. The day**-**to**-**day struggle of these protagonists for survival in a hostile milieu makes them think about their place in society and the universe and explore the possibility of an answer to the dilemma of their existence and the movement of the self from the cosmic to the cosmos.

The four individuals in the apartment ultimately become a family unit. The sharing of a home means the sharing of meals and kitchenware. They begin to converse about the system, politics, and political news and through dialogue begin to derive solace and strength from each other. The sharing of cutlery and their conversations assume symbolic dimensions in the novel. The shared experience of partaking meals together provides to each of the four protagonist’s sense of community and security. The frequent conversations occur like a refrain in the novel and become a source of providing human solidarity and harmony to each of the four protagonist’s sense of community and security.

Another thing that is discussed in this novel is the ecological concern. Mistry cares for the loss of man**-**nature relationship. Farokh Kohlah, the father of Maneck Kohlah becomes the victim of the partition of India in 1947. He lives in the northern hill are and his emotions are expressed as:

As foreigner drew a magic line on map and called it the new border; it becomes a river of blood upon the earth. And the orchards fields, factories, business, all on the wrong side of that line, vanished with a wave of the pale conjuror’s wand. (205)

Though Farokh loses his family fortune he continues to live in the mountain area with his wife Aban and son Maneck Kohlah. They meet their livelihood with a small general store and besides a soft drink namely Kaycey formulated by Farokh’s father. He prepares the soft drink which has more demand among the villagers. Farokh’s wife and her family stress him to migrate to city but he continues to stay in the hillside. His son Maneck cannot part with nature not less than his father. Maneck cannot part with nature even during a temporary stay in Bombay for his education.

Farokh has lost one of his eyes while bottling the soft drink. It is covered by an eye path. When he visits the hillside forest in the evening he removes the eye path and shows his true color to nature. The mountain is a part of their life and it is like a member among the Farokh family and other residents of the hillside. The identity of the hillside people with nature is soon disturbed by the Government’s plan to connect the hillside to the cities.

Farokh and his friend Major Grewal organize meetings to condemn the government plan. They get sign from common people in petitions and protest against the modernization. But the government turns deaf ear to the appeals of the hillside residents and they continue to destruct the mountain area. Farokh Kohlah, than any other else, to the inner core of his heart feels that he is thrown away from his motherland.

The Government promises the hillside people including Farokh to offer better business offers in the city area. But Farokh cannot accept the atmosphere of city and he complains that the passing of huge vehicles causes air and noise pollution. Farokh cannot enjoy anymore the sight of the mountains as they are devoid of trees and rocks. They seem to him like a funeral watch. Farokh often speaks in the empty mountain areas lonely and this is commented by the people that Farokh has become lunatic. This shows how Farokh’s mind is fixed with nature and cannot lose its identity with nature.

The sufferings of the tailors give Maneck a wider perspective of life and human suffering. He also understands the price Dina has to pay to retain her sense of independence. The travails of Om, Ishvar and Dinabai make Maneck realize that his own problems of alienation from his father and lack of adjustment with his college mates are trivial in comparison. At the same time, being young, and idealistic, Maneck is relatively free from the pretensions and prejudices of class and caste in the society. Frequently he is the cause for Dina’s erasing of the fine lines she has drawn for herself, mostly because of her inbuilt sense of survival. In a sense, all the four main characters are lonely and struggling for identity and survival.

Social circumstances bring them together and in time they forge a bond of understanding as they struggle to survive. ‘Sailing under one flag’, each is influenced by the other; whereby this new and moderately happy ‘family’ of a sort conforms to the idea and meaning of a family. This is easily evident in matters trivial and significant.

Seeing Maneck’s resolve to attend Shankar to crippled beggar’s funeral, Dina relents and she accompanies him too. Thus, as Ansari put it, Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om Prakash emerge as conscience keepers as revealed in their thought processes and actions (184). In fact, as George Elliott says, everyone concerned with a novel-reader, writer and character has a set of attitudes, preferences, judgments, or values about human conduct. Further, whether these values are conscious or unconscious, articulated with logical coherence or only manifest in sometimes contradictory acts, they must finally be considered if the word moral is to mean anything, moral values (343). At this juncture it would be useful to recall Raymond William’s fine statement on the realist tradition in fiction.

**CONCLUSION:**

As Indian novel in English *A Fine Balance* is able to achieve this kind of balance between the general and the personal. In this novel, the reader cannot say who suffers more among the major characters, because each character is presented with its own suffering and reasons to suffer. Each character amazes value before others.So, the identity crisis that the major characters are relieved from their sufferings but it is not so. Their search foridentity is forever and ever.