
A Study of Social Realism and Human Resilience on *A Fine Balance*

Dr. Jyoti Sharma

Associate Professor
Seth R.N.Ruia Govt. College
Ramgarh-Shekhawati (Sikar)

Abstract:

Set during the Indian Emergency (1975–77), the novel *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry presents the interplay of social realism and human resilience in a quiet thought-provoking manner. Mistry's novel gives a vivid portrayal of marginalized lives shaped by caste oppression, poverty, and political violence. Through a close reading of the experiences of Dina Dalal, Ishvar and Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah, this study explores how Mistry constructs a deeply realistic social world while simultaneously foregrounding the resilience of individuals within it. By examining the novel from postcolonial perspectives, the paper argues that resilience in the novel is neither heroic nor absolute, but fragile, contingent, and often collective. The narrative ultimately reveals that survival depends on maintaining a delicate balance between hope and despair.

Keywords: Social realism, resilience, caste system, Emergency, postcolonial literature, marginalization, survival

Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance*, published in 1995, is widely considered a landmark novel of postcolonial literature. The novel deals with a turbulent historical moment, depicting the lives of ordinary individuals during the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. Rather than focusing on political elites, Mistry centres his narrative on marginalized characters whose lives are directly affected by state policies and entrenched social hierarchies. The novel records the life and experiences of four protagonists—Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah—whose lives intersect in a small apartment. Their shared existence becomes a microcosm of Indian society, reflecting broader tensions related to caste, class, and power. Jaydipsinh Dodiya observes:

“The novel is (also) the story of the heroic struggle of Dina Dalal and her two tailors to survive a world of segregation, oppression and corruption in which honest work is denied and punished by a totalitarian system.” (Dodiya 66)

Social Realism and Inequality

Mistry's writing is often linked to realism, but his realism is not merely imitative; it is infused with emotional depth, narrative irony, and implicit critique. According to Peter Morey, “Mistry's realism goes beyond description; it operates as a moral framework through which the postcolonial subject confronts disillusionment” (Morey 89). This dual role of realism in Mistry—as a narrative strategy and an ethical stance—defines much of Mistry's work.

Mistry's novel under study, exemplifies social realism through its straightforward depiction of suffering and inequality. At the same time, it highlights human resilience, suggesting that

even in oppressive conditions, individuals find ways to endure. As the narrator observes, “There is always hope—hope enough to balance our despair” (Mistry 318). This statement explains the central tension of the novel.

Social realism, without romanticising, is a defining feature of Mistry’s narrative technique. The novel portrays the harsh realities of life by emphasizing the struggles of those at the margins of society. Commenting on the fiction of Mistry, Pramod K. Nayar says, “Mistry’s fiction is concerned with the great inequalities of the world: between the classes, genders, castes, and official hierarchies. Tormented souls and human beings with little ‘social capability’ such as Gustad and Dinshaw (*Such a Long Journey*), Om and Ishvar (*A Fine Balance*) and Nariman Vakeel (*Family Matters*) are all victims.” (Nayar ix)

The story of Ishvar and Omprakash reveals the brutality of caste oppression. Born into the Chamaar caste, they are subjected to systemic violence. Their attempt to learn tailoring—a profession outside their traditional occupation—results in severe punishment. The narrator notes: “You see, in our village the caste system is still strong... you cannot change your destiny” (Mistry 142). This reflects the rigidity of caste hierarchies and the limited possibilities for social mobility.

Urban life, often perceived as a space of opportunity, is depicted as equally oppressive. The city is marked by overcrowding, unemployment, and exploitation. Beggars, tailors, and labourers struggle to survive in an environment shaped by inequality. Mistry writes: “The city had its own rules of survival, and those who could not learn them quickly were destroyed” (Mistry 256). Such descriptions reinforce the novel’s commitment to realism by presenting systemic injustice as an everyday reality.

The novel is a stringent indictment of tyranny imposed on people during the Emergency, which serves as a critical backdrop for the novel. It presents the intensified suffering of already vulnerable populations. Government policies, particularly forced sterilization and slum clearance, are depicted as instruments of control. Ishvar and Omprakash become victims of the sterilization campaign, an experience that leaves them physically and emotionally scarred. The narrator describes the event with chilling detachment: “The trucks came without warning... and the men were taken like cattle” (Mistry 534). This imagery underscores the dehumanization inherent in state policies. Similarly, the demolition of slums displaces countless individuals, stripping them of shelter and dignity. The Emergency is thus portrayed not merely as a political event but as a lived experience that aggravates inequality. Mistry’s realism lies in his focus on these personal consequences rather than abstract political discourse.

Mistry’s social realism is reflected in presenting gender inequality as well. Dina wanted to be a doctor just like her father, and was bright and capable enough to materialize her dream. But she is the subject of her brother Nusswan’s dominance, cruelty and oppression at home. K. Ratna Shiela Mani explains Dina’s hard life:

“Dina’s story is one of struggle— struggle to safeguard her fragile independence from her autocratic brother Nusswan; and protect her flat from her rapacious landlord. Her story is symbolic of the rebellion of the young women against their subjection.” (Mani 195)

The novel explores how caste and class intersect to shape social relations. Even among the oppressed, hierarchical distinctions persist. Dina Dalal, though economically precarious,

initially maintains a sense of superiority over her tailors. Her reluctance to share meals with them reflects internalized caste norms. However, as circumstances force them into closer proximity, these barriers begin to wear away. This transformation is significant, as it suggests the possibility of transcending social divisions through shared experience. Yet, Mistry does not present this change as complete or permanent. The persistence of inequality remains a central theme. The narrative, through the actions and thought process of the individuals in the novel, highlights the complexity of social structures, showing that oppression operates both externally and internally.

Individual and Collective Dimensions of Human Resilience

Resilience in *A Fine Balance* is multifaceted, encompassing both individual endurance and collective support. The characters' ability to survive is shaped by their adaptability and relationships. Ishvar's resilience is evident in his determination to rebuild his life despite repeated setbacks. After losing his family and livelihood, he continues to seek stability. His outlook is captured in a moment of reflection: "What to do? We must keep going... that is all we can do" (Mistry 412). This pragmatic acceptance reflects a form of resilience grounded in necessity rather than optimism. Dina's struggle for independence also exemplifies resilience. As a widow, she faces economic insecurity and social pressure. Her decision to run a tailoring business represents an assertion of autonomy. She declares: "I will not become dependent again" (Mistry 78). This statement highlights her determination to maintain control over her life.

At the same time, resilience is shown to be collective. The shared household becomes a site of mutual support, where individuals find strength in companionship. One of the most poignant aspects of the novel is the formation of a surrogate family among the four protagonists. Their relationships provide emotional sustenance in an otherwise hostile environment. Mistry emphasizes the importance of companionship through moments of shared joy. For instance, the characters find comfort in simple routines such as eating together or telling stories. The narrator observes: "In their small world, they created a shelter from the storms outside" (Mistry 289). This metaphor highlights the protective function of human connection.

However, the fragility of these bonds is also evident. External forces—economic hardship, political violence, and social prejudice—eventually disrupt their unity. The dissolution of this makeshift family highlights the limits of resilience in the face of systemic oppression.

Striking a Balance

The concept of balance is central to the novel which is presented by the narrative and structure and symbolism. Life is portrayed as a constant negotiation between opposing forces. Dina's quilt serves as a powerful symbol of this balance. Made from scraps of fabric, it represents the interconnectedness of the characters' lives. Each piece tells a story, and together they form a cohesive whole. The quilt symbolizes resilience, as discarded fragments are transformed into something meaningful.

The narrative itself reflects this balance, alternating between moments of tragedy and instances of humour or tenderness. This duality reinforces the idea that life cannot be reduced to a single emotional register.

Limitations of Resilience

While the novel celebrates resilience, it also acknowledges its limitations. The characters' suffering ultimately leads to devastating outcomes. Maneck's suicide represents the collapse of hope. Unable to reconcile his ideals with reality, he succumbs to despair. His death serves as a stark reminder that resilience is not infinite. Similarly, Ishvar and Omprakash's physical and emotional suffering highlights the long-term impact of systemic violence. Their fate challenges the notion that perseverance alone can overcome structural inequality. The novel's conclusion is thus both tragic and thought-provoking. It suggests that while resilience is essential, it is not always sufficient.

A Fine Balance offers a profound exploration of social realism and human resilience. Through its detailed portrayal of caste oppression, political violence, and economic hardship, the novel exposes the structural forces that shape individual lives. At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of human connection and endurance. The characters' struggles reveal that resilience is not a heroic quality but a fragile, ongoing process. Mistry's work ultimately underscores the necessity of maintaining a balance between hope and despair. In doing so, it provides a deeply human perspective on survival in an unjust world.

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