

## THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

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### **Abstract:**

*A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry is a novel which revolves round the slums of the Bombay city and a set of characters who lived in India during the mid-1970's. A tale about man's inhumanity to man, the novel is all about the sense of rootlessness and the subsequent search for identity by a group of four characters from different backgrounds, who coexist at a certain point of time during the Emergency period.*

**Keywords:** *Rohinton mistry, A fine balance identity, question of identity.*

A narrative about the invincibility of human spirit and the sufferings and pain of the poor and the vulnerable, the novel tells the story of four innocent persons who struggled to maintain A Fine Balance in their lives. The plot focuses round the lives of four characters: Ishvar Darji, his nephew Omprakash, Dina Dalal, their employer, and Maneck Kohlah, Dina's paying guest. Mapping out how Dina Dalal, the central character of the novel, and the three characters, Ishvar, Omprakash, and Maneck, suffer from a sense of rootlessness, the author brings to light the dilemmas of inter-relationship and the broken values and customs of an extremist society. Dina Dalal lives in Bombay; Ishvar and Omprakash are village people, while Maneck is from the mountains. Dina Dalal chose a life of independence after her husband's death away from her family as she did not want to be under the oppressive rule of her brother Nuswaan. Ishvar and Om deviated from their traditional occupation of cobblery and chose to earn their livelihood by means of tailoring owing to the oppressive caste violence meted out to them by the notorious Thakur. Similarly, Maneck leaves his home in the mountains to pursue his higher studies in the city. In this sense, all the major characters of the novel face a question of identity throughout the novel. The indomitable human spirit exhibited by these four characters who are from different class and caste background projects Mistry's notion of how human beings can try to cope under oppressive circumstances.

In the novel, Dina experiences continuous threats from the society when all she does is stand for her independence. Despite her pleadings, her family doesn't even allow her to matriculate. Her brother, Nuswan is adamant that she marry a person of his finding, but Dina vehemently opposes the idea and marries Rustom Dalal. She symbolizes the woman who has the capability to rise above the oppressive forces which weigh her down. She refuses to be subservient and accept the set role of a submissive Indian woman. Even on the night on which Rustom died, she acts in a perfectly composed manner. "No wailing, no beating the chest or tearing the hair like you might expect from a woman who had suffered such a shock, such a loss". (*AFM, 46*) Though she tries her level best to stand erect and maintain her individuality, atlast she loses her flat and is forced to take refuge in her brother's home, where she is considered more as a maid.

Dina is a character who refuses to yield to the circumstances that are hindrances for her to stand upright on her feet. She makes up her mind to earn her living without relying on anyone for which she starts a small tailoring business where she employs Isvar and Om as tailors. However her road towards establishing an identity of her own is full of obstacles that she finds it difficult to regain her foothold on life. Both Isvar and Om had been from the lower caste of cobblers, who had also experienced the brunt of caste system, due to which they were forced to turn into tailors. In their native place, though the untouchable children wanted to be educated like other children, they were humiliated and punished brutally by their

teacher, which shows the arrogant attitude of the upper caste people towards the poor and the downtrodden untouchables. The teacher says:

Shameless little donkeys! Off with you or I'll break your bones!... 'You Chamaar rascals? Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school! Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of learning and knowledge?... 'Wanted to look! Well, I will show you now! I will show you the back of my hand! (*AFB, 109*)

In the beginning, Om and Isvar despised Dina since they always got a feeling that they are controlled by her. Gradually, they became friends and found shelter in her house, though illegally, as they were driven from the slum in which they lived owing to the city beautification project. Finding it very tough to adjust themselves to the ways of Bombay, they find themselves buckling under the demands of the city. However as the novel progresses, they face the real wrath of the Emergency period. Om is sterilized and castrated and Isvar loses both his legs. With no stable identity of their own, they both live the rest of their lives in the street as beggars. If Om and Isvar strived for the upliftment of their deplorable conditions as untouchables, Maneck, the boy from the mountains was in for his journey of self discovery. On becoming aware of what had happened to his friends, Om and Isvar, he finds himself shattered that he ends up throwing himself under a moving train.

Dina left her home for good as she wanted to live her life on her own without anyone curtailing her freedom. Her sense of self and individuality prevented her from living under the curtailing chains of her brother. However the Emergency of 1975 annihilates all her hopes and shatters her dreams and she is forced to seek shelter in his house, diminishing her status as an independent woman. She experiences a multitude of emotional relocations and mental torments throughout the novel.

A tale about the pathetic predicament of the homeless and outcasts, the narrative faces the question of how to face life when tormented with despair and hopelessness. Uprooted from the places where they belong, the characters in the novel find it difficult to adjust themselves to the fraudulent and the malicious system. Thus, *A Fine Balance* is a novel which revolves round the rootlessness faced by poor and vulnerable people who fell a prey to the oppressive and the unscrupulous forces which were in full swing during the Emergency period.

### **Bibliography**

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