

HUMAN COMMUNICATION AND THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S „A FINE BALANCE” (1995)

Adina Campu

PhD. student, „Transilvania” University of Braşov

Abstract: “A Fine Balance” (1995) is a neo-realist novel set in an unnamed city that readers can easily assume is Bombay, the author’s native city. It focuses on the terror experienced by people during the Emergency, underlining the most grisly and hideous aspects of life such as poverty, despair and violence. This paper aims to demonstrate that the novel transcends the traditional preoccupation of postcolonial discourse with Otherness and focuses on universal, humanistic themes as well. I investigate in the following sections the importance placed by Mistry on intercultural communication and its potential to bring out the best in humans as well as the complex role of storytelling as a means of finding and discovering one’s genuine identity. The conclusion is that Mistry promotes an exchange between human beings that focuses not only on cultural difference but also on intercultural Sameness.

Keywords: universal, humanity, storytelling, identity, blend.

1. Introduction

“*A Fine Balance*” is a neo-realist novel set in an unnamed city that readers can easily assume is Bombay, the author’s native city. Neo realism is perceived as “*The privileged medium for the conveyance of that new way of thinking and seeing reality ... that need to analyze ourselves, that necessity to follow man and his vital problems...* ”¹ It is the year 1975 when Mistry emigrated to Canada and Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister at the time, declared a State of Emergency setting herself up as India’s virtual dictator. The novel was short listed for the prestigious Booker Prize and has gathered numerous awards among which the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Fiction and the Commonwealth Writers Prize can be mentioned. It focuses on the terror experienced by people during the Emergency, underlining the most grisly and hideous aspects of life such as poverty, despair and violence. The most horrific facets of the Emergency and the consequences felt by its protagonists are exposed. It is the first novel in which Mistry has expanded his area of interest moving beyond Parsi life and embracing the fate of the wider Indian nation at the time of the infamous Emergency. As certain critics have pointed out: “*in its careful exploration of diverse gender, class and religious subject positions, it is a much more inclusive work than its predecessor*”² Mistry concerns himself here not only with members of the Parsi community but also with lower caste Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs. It is mainly a list of characters from the margins who find themselves at the mercy of the Brahminical and pseudo-secular elites shaping India in the 1970s.

This paper aims to demonstrate that the novel transcends the traditional preoccupation of postcolonial discourse with Otherness and focuses on universal, humanistic themes as well. I investigate in the following sections the importance placed by Mistry on intercultural

¹ Takhar, Jennifer. “Rohinton Mistry’s Indian Neorealism: The Voice of the People”. *Postcolonial Literature and Culture Web*. 14 March 2002. 3 May 2008 <[http:// www.postcolonialweb.org/](http://www.postcolonialweb.org/)>

² Ball, J. “Taking the Measure of India’s Emergency” *Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad* 14:2(1996): 83-84 cited by Peter Morey.

communication and its potential to bring out the best in humans as well as the complex role of storytelling as a means of finding and discovering one's genuine identity.

2. Human Communication

2.1. The humanity within us all

Mistry emphasizes throughout the entire novel the need to reach for the others and communicate, a need which transcends all cultural barriers and is essential in endowing our existence with a purpose, in making it meaningful. Mistry's message that human existence is best lived in harmony and solidarity is obvious in the fact that even some of his most sinister characters, like Rajaram and Beggarmaster, display a slight sense of caring and compassion towards the other human beings. Beggarmaster, a character who, in contrast to others depicted by means of numerous details, is never described from a physical point of view, protects street beggars like Shankar, making *'professional alterations'* where necessary and eventually becomes the protector of Dina's flat against the landlord who tried by all means to evict her. I think Mistry's question is whether it is possible to behave ethically in a world turned upside down. There is even a perverse benevolence in Beggarmaster's horrendous activities. He operates professional changes – mutilates people – because he knows that those worst disfigured earn the highest sums of money in the world of beggary. Yet, apart from being *"a thoroughly modern business man"* (Mistry, *"A Fine Balance"* 446), he does show a certain degree of concern for his beggars, although most of the time this is out of personal interests. Similarly, Rajaram –the hair collector – introduces Ishvar and Om to the cruel realities of the hutment colony giving them useful tips with respect to the wise behavior in that area. Also, he spends part of the very little money that he has on food for the hungry children of the alcoholic living in the shack next to him. *"I had a little extra money today, so I bought more vegetables. For them," he pointed with his elbow at the other shack. "That drunken fellow's little ones are always hungry."* (Mistry, *"A Fine Balance"* 181)

Other characters in the novel prove their solidarity too. Darab Uncle and Shirin Aunt offer their support and unconditional help to Dina after her husband's death teaching her how to support herself by means of sewing, knitting and embroidery. Ashraf Chacha, who takes in Ishvar and Narayan to train them the trade of tailoring, is very kind and treats them better than the Hindu community from which they come, teaching them how to read and write as well. Zenobia is Dina's source of support outside the family. It is through Zenobia that many good things happen to Dina. With her, Dina could laugh at Nusswan in their adolescence. She is a hairdresser, one of Dina's close school friends. She tries to teach Dina hairdressing, but most importantly she is the one through whom Dina finds a way to gain her fragile financial independence. She provides the link between Dina and Mrs. Gupta who gives her assignments of dresses for Au Revoir Exports. Also, she has kept in touch with an old school friend, Maneck's mother, and thus finds a paying guest for Dina. All these boost Dina's income and enable her to live independently. Dina herself brings herself to forgive Ibrahim, the rent collector who had harassed her for so many years, and gives him money to get by. In the Prologue, Maneck shares his watermelon sherbet with Ishvar and Om as he notices *"how starved they looked for ordinary kindness"* (Mistry, *"A Fine Balance"* 8)

2.2. A family of four

Apart from these examples, the unconventional developing family from Dina's apartment made out of the four protagonists of the novel is to be noted for the outstanding example of genuine intercultural communication. The chapter *"Sailing Under One Flag"* uncovers the writer's best skills. Dina ultimately gives in to Maneck's insistent requirements and allows the tailors to stay in her flat. Initially, there is a practical thing behind all this as she might be deprived of their labor if they were to decide to return to their village because of

the lack of housing. This results in an uneasy co-existence which ultimately ends in true friendship and understanding that crosses gender, class, religious and ethnic boundaries – hence, one of the meanings of the title of the chapter. Though in the very beginning the four are reserved in their relationship towards one another, gradually they start to care and a sincere friendship develops among them. Apart from love, friendship is the one feeling that makes our life meaningful. In one way or the other all four characters have lost their families –either due to death or estrangement. Therefore, the developing friendship between them seems to be, in all cases, a replacement for the family that they long for. At one point Ishvar thinks to himself that he must be truly blessed to experience such warm human solidarity.

“Ishvar watched contentedly, smiling with happiness. In spite of everything, life was good, he thought. How could he complain when Om and he were blessed with the friendship of people like Ashraf Chacha, and Dinabai and Maneck.” (Mistry, *“A Fine Balance”* 528)

An analogy could be made between the developing friendship between the four protagonists and the structure of the quilt. *“...our lives have been joined together.’ ‘Like these patches,’ said Om”* (Mistry, *“A Fine Balance”* 491)

Following the advice of Mrs. Gupta and her friend Zenobia, Dina is initially very reserved in her attitude towards the tailors. If we think of postcolonial studies the irony here is that a formerly colonized person – Dina - treats the two fellow colonized individuals – Ishvar and Om - in a manner which reminds us of colonial attitudes towards indigenous populations. Control is what Dina tries to exert over the tailors. First, she looks down upon them considering that they do not work very hard, they hide the truth from her, they are dirty and lack discipline. *“No discipline at all, no sense of responsibility.”* (Mistry, *“A Fine Balance”* 272) Control over the tailors seems to be a necessary ingredient for her economic success and lack of dependence. One could also dwell here on her relationship with Nusswan which turned her into a woman obsessed with independence and control but the situation could also be explained by paralleling it with the segregation existing in Indian society based on religious and ethnic differences. She warns Maneck to adopt the same attitude himself explaining that: *“There is a difference, and you cannot pretend there isn’t – their community, their background.”* (Mistry, *“A Fine Balance”* 293) She is actually afraid of the new, of the Other. Eventually she learns to open up and give more credit to them and the human need for communication prevails leading to Dina expressing thoughts which would have seemed completely unconceivable in the beginning of her relationship with the tailors:

Could she describe to Zenobia the extent to which Maneck and Om had become inseparable, and how Ishvar regarded both boys like his own sons? That the four of them cooked together and ate together, shared the cleaning and washing and shopping and laughing and worrying? That they cared about her, and gave her more respect that she had received from some of her own relatives? That she had, during these last few months, known what was a family? (Mistry, *“A Fine Balance”* 550)

The close friendship that develops between them is best highlighted by the many things that they share together. The sharing goes beyond all barriers, be they ethnic, religious or educational. *“A Fine Balance”* is a plea for intercultural communication and human solidarity. In the context of the relationship between Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om cultural difference is subverted and proved to be an artificial construct rather than a relevant barrier with respect to social contacts. The Other is only the one who is perceived to be an Other. However, these cultural differences become totally blurred in Dina’s apartment and the family developing there becomes a real one not just mimicry or a substitute. The four of them become so closely knit together because each of them is so open to embracing new

experiences and learning from the Other who naturally is no longer an Other. Maneck and Om exchange opinions with respect to appearance and dressing code. Maneck learns from Om that in Bombay it is much better to wear 'chappals', that is sandals, due to the very warm weather while Om's entire appearance changes and becomes more stylish as a result of his friendship with Maneck.

Slowly but surely, Om had reinvented himself in Maneck's image, from hairstyle to spars moustache to clothes. Most recently, he had made flared trousers for himself, borrowing Maneck's to trace the pattern. He even smelled like Maneck thanks to Cinthol Soap and Lakme Talcum Powder. And Maneck had learned from Om as well – instead of always wearing shoes and socks in the heat, which made his feet smell by the end of the day, he now wore chappals. (Mistry, "A Fine Balance" 474)

Through tailor Jeevan they both have their first opportunity to spy on female customers through a peeing hole. Om discovers the city with Maneck during the latter's holiday and learns to be less impulsive and irritated under his friend's influence. The metamorphosis of Om shows that the oppressed rural youth is potentially a normal and sensitive young man. All hierarchies as well as religious and ethnic prejudices are abandoned in Dina's flat. A significant example could be provided by food. Anthropologists have demonstrated that food is an important constituent of people's identity in that it offers a system of representations which allow people to realize how they really are. Food is strongly embedded in social relationships as it brings people together either on important occasions or on a daily basis. Socializing and food are interconnected because it is often while eating that people share emotions and experiences. The sharing of food between Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om is an important factor as it deepens the relationship between them, makes them know and understand each other much better. For example, when Dina realizes that the tailors do not know how to use cutlery she uses her fingers in order not to embarrass them and make them feel inferior. Similarly, in an earlier episode, when Maneck tells her that they always use cutlery at home she brings it out and starts eating in the same manner as her guest. Though very reluctant in the beginning, Dina ends up sharing her porcelain cups with the tailors – pointing thus to the fact that she considers them her equals. Moreover, they are allowed to use the crockery by themselves and help with the cooking. They either take turns cooking or they cook together, which is an indicator of the closeness and harmony that have developed between them. Actually, it is not the food itself but the cooking and sharing of it – food as a social event – that enhance togetherness and human communication. Life becomes meaningful for Dina as she no longer spends long hours thinking about her husband and feeling lonely.

Dina stood savoring the fragrance of the wadas that were slowly turning mouth watering, brown in bubbling oil. She watched as the clean-up commenced with laughter and teasing.....What a change, she thought – from the saddest, dingiest room in the flat, the kitchen was transformed into a bright place of mirth and energy. (Mistry, "A Fine Balance" 400)

Significant in this respect is also the title of the chapter which presents much of the period during which the four characters live together – "Sailing Under One Flag". It obviously makes us think about ships and one of the traditional symbols attributed to them. Ships stand for protection and that is what Dina's flat has come to represent for the protagonists - a family, a shelter, a friendship, a new feeling that life is worth living.

3. The Role of Storytelling

3.1. Quilt. Identity. Storytelling

Even though most critics seem tempted to consider "*A Fine Balance*" a pessimistic novel I believe that Mistry's message is that there is hope out there even for the most unfortunate of us.

Dina saves every piece of leftover cloth and finds a new use for these shreds by sewing them into a quilt which holds all their memories and experiences. Technically speaking a quilt is a piece of cloth that is made up by combining different pieces of fabric of various textures and colors. Dina's decision to gather all the extra material from the tailoring business and give it a new use is part of the novel's preoccupation with recycling. What cannot be changed, shifted or balanced can be reused. Everything in the novel is recycled and nothing goes to waste. Because the people are too poor to throw anything away, they make the best of anything they can find.

In this novel the quilt could be considered an allegory. We should mention in this respect the vests that Ishvar and Narayan sew for their parents as well as the image of the hutment colony where Ishvar and Om are forced to live in Bombay – they make us think of a whole made of various parts. However, the most relevant thing is that the many different colors and textures of the quilt come to represent the experiences which the little 'family' in her flat share during their time together, and quilting spirals away to take on a series of metaphorical connotations. The quilt becomes an allegory for human existence. Omprakash wistfully imagines time as a piece of cloth and wishes he could stitch together the good parts and take out the bad ones. "*If time were a bolt of cloth, said Om, I would cut out all the bad parts. Snip out the scary nights and stitch together the good parts, to make time bearable. Then I could wear it like a coat, always live happily.*" (Mistry, "*A Fine Balance*" 310) Despite the fact that Om dreams of a life full of happiness he has to understand that essentially life is ambivalent and that the good and the bad are inseparable, as Maneck says: "*Some things are very complicated to separate with scissors, said Maneck. Good and bad are joined like that. He laced his fingers tight together.*" (Mistry, "*A Fine Balance*" 311) Maneck imagines that God is a giant quilt maker whose handiwork has grown so expensive that the pattern is impossible to see.

It is not by chance that Mistry has made three of his characters engage in tailoring. By definition the tailors' job is the creation of shape and order by following a pattern. However, sewing and quilting are connected to other kinds of creative acts by which the randomness of life can be redeemed such as the sharing of memories and stories. As Dina gets to know her employees she enters their life story too: "*For now, she added the pieces to what Maneck had already revealed about their life in the village. Like her quilt, the tailors' chronicle was gradually gathering shape.*" (Mistry, "*A Fine Balance*" 385)

Dina realizes that there is a connection between tailoring and storytelling. In both activities a certain pattern has to be observed. Within the structure of the quilt one patch adjoins another just like in the structure of a text one sentence follows another. The quilt could be considered a metaphor for the construction of identity by means of story-telling. The different patches that it is made of illustrate the individual identity which is made out of various elements. It is to be noted that these various elements are not disparate but united into a whole. This is the way the process of identity construction is understood in most cases – a homogenous whole made of heterogeneous parts. Mistry suggests that one of the best ways of creating a strong identity is by storytelling. Storytelling becomes very important to her as it helps her explain who she is. Just like the patches of clothes are gathered together to make the quilt the disparate bits of her chaotic life can be gathered, remembered and made sense of. The quilt enables Dina, the tailors and Maneck to recall their lives together. Each piece has its own particular memory attached to it. Each different square, triangle and polygon when sewn together makes a connection with the other pieces to provide a new meaning of its own. Like

the bits and rags in Dina's quilt, Mistry's stories are also separated but when connected they become one. When she finds herself evicted and forced to move back with Nusswan she decides that there is nothing more to add to the quilt as the time of the unconventional 'family' formed in her apartment seems to have ended and each have taken different roads. The quilt however remains to tell the story of their moments together.

At night in bed, she covered herself with the quilt and took to recounting the abundance of events in the tightly knit family of patches, the fragments that she had fashioned with the needle, thread and affection. If she stumbled along the way, the quilt nudged her forward. The street-light through the open window was just bright enough to identify the motley of its making. Her bedtime story. (Mistry, "A Fine Balance" 573)

3.2. The philosophical voice of the novel

There is another character in the novel who stresses the importance of storytelling. This is Vasantrao Valmik who appears for the first time in the train compartment traveling with Maneck to Bombay when the latter comes to college. He resurfaces then in two completely different situations. One could deem him the philosopher of the novel and also, perhaps, the writer's voice. A lawyer by training but one who had practised his profession for a limited period of time and had turned to proofreading for twenty years until his eyes became allergic to ink, he is a slogan writer suffering from throat problems when the reader first meets him. He is a very interesting character whom we find him working for Rajaram, turned Bal Baba in his last appearance before the end of the novel. He is in charge of the latter's mail correspondence –prophecies by mail- and considers this activity a very satisfying one.

"The scope is unlimited. I can use all kinds of devices in my replies – essay form, prose poem, poetic prose, aphorism." He patted the pen pocket and added, 'My little darlings are at full flow, creating fiction after fiction, which will become more real in the recipients' lives than all their sad realities.'" (Mistry, "A Fine Balance" 604)

He firmly believes that his skills in writing are put to rightful use. They offer some consolation to those who have lost the purpose of their existence since they seek the help of a 'prophet'.

The past is important for Valmik and remembering it relevant too, because if one forgets the past, then one forgets who one really is and this obviously means a meaningless life. The story of one's life is an essential aspect of one's identity. He tells the depressed Maneck that *"There is no such thing as an uninteresting life."* (Mistry, "A Fine Balance" 603) and sincerely manifests his interest in listening to the latter's unabridged life story. As he explains this is extremely important because: *"... it helps to remind yourself of who you are. Then you can go forward, without fear of losing yourself in this ever-changing world."* (Mistry, "A Fine Balance" 604) He understands the true importance of storytelling and real power of stories which have a twofold purpose: they help us remember facts but also change facts, present our own version of things. Even official history can be subverted by the little stories of apparently insignificant individuals. Valmik's reasoning is much like that of the post colonial writer's history written from the margins telling the stories of the colonized people in order to give them an identity of their own. Valmik is eager to tell the story of his life for the third time because *"to share the story redeems everything."* (Mistry, "A Fine Balance" 604) He stresses the importance of communicating the story of one's life to others. This is exactly what Ishvar and Dina did when they shared their past with the younger generation represented by Maneck and Om. Valmik understands that identity is a combination between the way you perceive yourself and the way the others perceive you. Thus, the idea of storytelling is a useful tool for

living. By telling stories both the teller and the listener can face emotionally difficult situations and can, perhaps, learn something in the process.

4. Conclusions

The entire novel is proof that Mistry's fiction offers the satisfactions of recognition to both those familiar with the machinations and realities of postcolonial Indian politics and the position of the Parsis as a vulnerable minority and, to general readers who may know little about the background but who can identify with the characters, their experiences and life choices. He partakes of what Homi Bhabha argues that "*Every nation defines itself by simultaneously gazing inward and outward*"³ The sections above highlight the fact that there is a blend of universality and cultural and contextual specificity that gives this novel its uniqueness.

The reader must understand that, apart from the cultural exchange, Mistry promotes an exchange between human beings that focuses not only on cultural difference but also on intercultural Sameness. This paper is proof that references to humanist values abound in the novel and in the context of a quest for identity Mistry manages to combine universalist values with ethnic ones. This novel explores the possibilities of blending the two. How people treat one another as individuals is more significant than whether they adhere to any political ideology.

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