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Narrative Collage: Metafiction And Fragmentation In Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the intricate interplay of postmodernist themes in Rohinton Mistry's acclaimed novel, *A Fine Balance*. It is set against the backdrop of 1970s India, the novel skillfully weaves together the lives of diverse characters, offering a nuanced perspective on societal complexities, power structures, and the human condition. Through a postmodern lens, we explore how Mistry employs narrative techniques, blurs traditional boundaries, and engages with metafiction to create a multifaceted narrative that challenges conventional storytelling norms.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Metafiction, Fragmentation, Non-linear story, Political and social crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* stands as a captivating testament to the complexity of human existence, intricately weaving a narrative that transcends traditional storytelling boundaries. Published in 1995, the novel is set against the socio-political backdrop of 1970s India, a period marked by political unrest, economic disparities, and social upheaval. Against this tumultuous canvas, Mistry crafts a tale that defies easy classification, incorporating elements of historical fiction, social realism, and, notably, postmodernist narrative techniques.

The backdrop of postcolonial India serves as a rich and challenging terrain for Mistry to explore the multifaceted nature of reality, truth, and human experience. As postmodernism emerged as a literary and cultural movement in the mid-20th century, it sought to deconstruct established norms, question absolute truths, and embrace the fragmented, the ambiguous, and the diverse. This paper aims to dissect the postmodernist elements within *A Fine Balance*, analyzing how Mistry employs unconventional narrative strategies to convey a nuanced portrayal of the characters and their interconnected lives.

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In the subsequent sections, we will delve into specific postmodernist themes present in the novel, such as fragmentation and nonlinear narratives and metafiction. By examining these elements, researcher hope to shed light on the ways in which Mistry's narrative choices contribute to the postmodern tapestry of *A Fine Balance*.

OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to analyze the manifestation of postmodernist themes in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, exploring how the author's narrative choices and stylistic techniques align with the principles of postmodern literature. As postmodernism emerged as a response to the rigidity of modernist structures and the certainties of traditional narratives, our purpose is to unravel the layers of complexity within the novel. By closely examining the unconventional elements present in *A Fine Balance*, researcher seek to:

1. Explore the novel's deviation from linear storytelling.
2. Examine the metafictional elements.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* artfully incorporates various postmodernist themes that challenge traditional storytelling conventions and offer readers a narrative rich in complexity and ambiguity. The following sections dissect key postmodernist themes present in the novel:

Fragmentation and Nonlinear Narratives

Mistry's narrative structure in *A Fine Balance* deliberately defies linearity. The novel unfolds through a fragmented timeline, utilizing flashbacks and multiple perspectives. This fragmentation mirrors the unpredictability of life for the characters and captures the socio-political turbulence of 1970s India. The non-linear narrative allows readers to piece together the characters' stories like a mosaic, emphasizing the interconnectedness of their experiences. The work covers a period of post-independence socio-political history, with a particular emphasis on the emergency, from independence to Mrs. Indira Gandhi's assassination.

The artistic presentation of these socio-political events from 1975 to 1984 takes place in a realistic setting. The book keeps its integrity as fiction while striving to rebuild the political and historical discourses surrounding the crisis. As Kambourelli correctly points out:

[The text is a] fragment collection of memories, . . . [which] work to reconstruct a more immediate and personal history-the writer's own. What we end up with is a new, curiously paradoxical form that we might call historiography metafiction rather than historical fiction (Kambourelli 80).

The characters, such as Dina's past juxtaposed with her current struggles. This narrative strategy reflects the chaotic nature of life, where past and present are interwoven, and events unfold in a manner that defies traditional chronology.

Metafiction and Self-Reflexivity

A Fine Balance novel is called "A masterpiece of illumination and grace" by the British national newspaper, *The Guardian*. It alters our perception of life, just like any outstanding work of fiction. The book chronicles a section of the post-independence socio-political history that encompasses with particular emphasis on the emergency, from independence to Mrs. Indira Gandhi's murder. The socio-political events of this era, which spanned from 1975 to 1984, are artistically conveyed in a realistic manner.

The novel engages in metafictional elements, where characters reflect on the act of storytelling within the narrative itself. Through moments of self-reflexivity, Mistry blurs the lines between fiction and reality, prompting readers to question the reliability of the narrative. The characters' awareness of their roles as fictional constructs challenges traditional notions of authorship and encourages a more active engagement with the text. It is a historiographic metafiction suits itself with the historiographic, and socio-political discourse to bring out the nuances of human experience to critically interpret the emergency period. In *A Fine Balance* epigraph the

warning from Balzac's classic, *Le Pere Goriot* is as follows:

“Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair, you will say to yourself, perhaps it will amuse me. And after you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured, this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true.”(AFB)

Going through the atrocities, social injustices and misfortunes during the emergency, Mistry as a chronicler of post-colonial period of India presents the adverse impact of this politically manipulated development on the lives of the common people in the country. After his novel *Such a Long Journey* which discusses the political crises of the 1971, he chooses the year 1975 for his novel *A Fine Balance*. As he says:

In *Such a Long Journey*, the year is 1971. It seemed to me that 1975, the year of the Emergency, would be the next important year, if one were preparing a list of important dates in Indian history (Gokhale 6).

Balzac's warning comes to pass as the narrative of four characters develops in a masterfully written during the emergency period in *A Fine Balance*. The first of the four tragic characters to emerge is Dina, a Parsi woman who lost both her parents and was raised by her overbearing elder brother, Nusswan. After marrying against her brother's wishes, she at last gets away from their constant conflicts, but three years into their happy marriage, her spouse Rustom Dalal is murdered in a car accident. She chooses to live alone in her apartment rather than go back to her brother's house because she is incompatible with him.

For a young Parsi widow, this appears to be an act of defiance and independence, distinct from that of a typical one. Soon after, she recruits Ishvar and Omprakash, two low caste Hindus from the area, to help her sew clothes for Au Revoir Exports,

an export business. Similar to Dina, the tailors have defied societal norms by daring to become tailors and leave their caste as Chammars, or leather workers. They relocate to a city slum that is governed by an emergency. In a short amount of time, the government destroys their shanty, leaving them without a place to live. These tailors are able to share Dina Dalal's apartment despite her reservations because of her reliance on them. Soon after, Maneck joins her.

Though Maneck is homesick and feels cut off from his family, who lost their lands in the 1947 Partition and now runs a struggling general shop, he too has imaginary concerns. His parents believe that being an engineer will be his sole means of securing a stable income, so they have sent him to the city to pursue his college education and engineering training. Mistry well packs such a motley group into a small flat and meticulously document every aspect of their daily lives. He demonstrates how each of these four different individuals hopes to rise beyond on temporary, metropolitan environment where everything appears conceivable, he illustrates how each member of this diverse foursome seeks to escape the limitations of birth, caste, or sexual orientation in this rapidly changing culture.

His story shows how these individuals' relationships change from distrust to trust to love for one another. *A Fine Balance*, in contrast to Mistry's other works of fiction, ventures beyond the safe apartment and the seaside city to visit the two tailors' town and the student's picturesque mountain house. Sadly, the world outside the four walls that surround and shield them soon destroys the four unusual friend's harmonious relationship

Balzac accurately noted that the catastrophe depicted in this story is real and not a work of fiction. Ultimately, the tailors make a living as street vendors, with one of them becoming a eunuch as a form of local retaliation for his conceit in defying the caste structure. Dina is forced to work as a domestic worker in her brother's house after losing her residence. The tailors who used to work for her covertly receive a dinner every day from her.

And thus ends the story of the “great misfortunes”. It seems ironic that the one person in the quartet with the greatest chance of financial success should take his own life. Conversely, some who are less fortunate manage to survive by striking what one character refers to as “a fine balance between hope and despair”.

Supporting characters include the Beggar master, who divulges the mysteries of street life, Dina's bigoted brother, who stands in for a specific socio-economic class in India, and the enigmatic proofreader, who acts as the novel's philosopher. Similar to his other works, Mistry dedicates a section in condemning political figures such as Indira Gandhi and those who support her. One paragraph depicts the prime minister brutally speaking at a rally and combines the self-serving, shallow, empty, and delusional

Even the assault on the Golden Temple of the Sikhs under the reign of Mrs. Indira Gandhi is significant. Even if such acts of outright censure are powerful, the story excels when the fictitious accounts of the characters' lives are self-explanatory. With its wide scope, potent execution, and numbing truth, Hilary Mantel refers to *A Fine Balance* as posing “age-old” question

In the face of the world's beauty, in the face of the self-evident fact of altruism, how can atrocious conduct occur, how can hideous beliefs survive? The question is age-old, and Mistry has no answers, but it is evident from the seriousness and weight of the present book that he believes that novelists should go on asking, and asking” (Mantel, 4-6). It is true that Mistry answers this overriding question indirectly.

The design of the story is quite simple. Between its opening chapter, “Prologue: 1975” and the concluding one, “Epilogue: 1995,” its 16 Chapters offer a kaleidoscopic view of the emergency. Thus the novel emerges as a parallel to the history of modern India as it sets out to narrative the Indian political turmoil in the mid-1970s.

The old proofreader says:

Let me tell you a secret: there is no such thing as an uninteresting life, and goes on to tell Maneck that he would like to hear his life story because “It's very important. . . It's 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” (594-95).

There exists a fine balance between the virtue of a historian and of a fictionist. As Joan F. Adkins aptly points out, “Through the transformation of history into art form, the author shapes and orders an event which, in its over-powering reality, is difficult” (Gundur, 94).

In conclusion, *A Fine Balance* emerges as a postmodern masterpiece that challenges conventional storytelling methods. Through its fragmented narrative, metafictional elements, the novel invites readers to question fixed truths. Rohinton Mistry's exploration of postmodernist themes in *A Fine Balance* contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel and the broader implications of postmodern storytelling in literature

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