

People and Environment: An Eco critical Study of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry, a leading Parsi writer of English novels. *A Fine Balance* vividly presents the immediate need of preserving the environment for the survival of human beings. Mistry describes the heartless destructions programs. In his novel he describes the natural beauty of a hill region with its rich bio-diversity. However, this beautiful mountain region is destroyed by the projects of leading capitalism. The author points out the harmful effects of the destruction of nature and the need to protect and save it.

Keywords: Ecological concern, Destruction of nature, Natural resources.

Among the diverse thematic concerns of contemporary literature, ecological concern is a very dominant one. Down from the initial stages of the evolution of the literary writing, many writers have focused their attention on the beauty, the utility and to other salient features of nature. Writers from all linguistic background have touched upon nature or environment in their writings. Some of the writers even attributed celestial or divine features to natural objects like rivers and mountains.

All religious faiths have designated a high esteem to nature and the environment. Hinduism considered natural elements such as air, water and fire as sources of human existence. Hinduism promotes the harmony among the aspects of nature. The rivers such as Ganges Yamuna, Cauvery and mountains like Himalayas, Vindhya are coincident sacred. Many Gods of Hindu religion are associated with their environmental backdrop. One can find several references to ecological concerns in the Bible also. In the Book of Genesis, one can notice, God entrusting man to preserve and protect nature. Similarly, Islam assigns the role of "Khalifa" to human beings as protector of nature. Islam expects human beings to use their authority as protectors of nature as the servants of God. Any literary treatise on environmental concern will not be perfect without a mentioning of the great romantic poet William Wordsworth who considers himself the high priest of nature. His poem "Table's Turn" reveals the kind of joy and ecstasy he finds in nature. Sweet is the lone which nature brings:

Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things
We murder to dissect
Enough of Science and Art
Close up those barren leaves
Come forth and bring with you a heart (13-20).

Nature watches and receives. Wordsworth's contemporary and close friend Samuel Taylor Coleridge laid stress on the pressing need of balance between nature and human beings in his

poem “Dejection : An Ode”. Like Wordsworth and Coleridge several writers across the globe have written wonderful poems and fictions on nature.

However, the turn of twentieth century nature has been destroyed by the greedy human beings. The damage caused to nature is insurmountable and therefore every sensible person raised alarm to control the destruction of nature. As literature is the faithful reflection of human experience, the environmental concern of human beings found expression in literary writings also. The writings which focus upon the environmental protections have been designated by the terms such as ecocriticism, environmental criticism and Green Literature. M.H. Abrams defines eco-criticism as follows; “Ecocriticism (or by an alternative name environmental criticism) designates the critical writings which explore to relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the devastation being wrought on that environment by human” (11) activities. Glotfetty in “The Eco-criticism Readers” defines eco-criticism as “The study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (XIX). As such, it is very clear that eco-criticism is more concerned with the protection of the environment for the sub survival of human race.

In the present paper an attempt is made to analyze and interpret the voice of protest raised by the popular novelist Rohinton Mistry in his *A Fine Balance* against the destruction of nature. Mistry’s epic like novel *A Fine Balance* is often considered a political novel or a novel about the Parsi community due to the predominant themes of politics and society in it. However, Mistry being a talented artist does not elude from one of the vital problems that pose serious threats to the existence of human race. Though the novel denotes a city near the sea as the locale, one of the four major characters comes from a mountain region to the city of Mumbai for studies. ManekKohlah, a Parsi young boy comes to Mumbai city for his higher studies. His father is involved in a business in the hill region, staying as a paying guest in the house of Dina Manacle dreams of his parental home in the hill region. In his recollections, he finds the dreamy mist that would be hugging the mountains at home now.

Mistry adds beautiful touches of the wonders of the hill side in the novel. The bio-diversity of the region is explained in the following quote in the text. The area beyond the first fifty yards where it began to slope down hills wild with shrubs and trees and thick undergrowth was the most interesting. There, Bhanu taught him the names of strange flowers and herbs, things which did not grow near the front of the house with the roses and lilies and marigolds. He pointed out the deadly datura plant and the one that was its antidote and leaves that mitigated the poison of certain snakes, others which cured stomach ailment and the stem whose pulp healed cuts and wounds. (210)

While recollecting Serin beautiful home town, Maneck says, “how wonderful life used to be, how sweet and healthy the air-any time you felt sick or tired, all you had to do was step outdoors, breathe deeply and you felt better immediately, no need to swallow any medicine or vitamin tablets” (591). Mistry decries the damage and massive destruction caused to this beautiful hill side. It is deplorable that the governments under the guise of development destroyed the natural resources. The Government cares a damn about the need to protect nature and began to construct roads. Mistry blames the business concerns for the havoc caused on nature; “But the giant corporations had targeted the hills, they had Kaycee in their sights. They infiltrated Mr. Kohlah’s territory with their board room arrogance and advertising campaigns and cut-throat techniques” (290). Similarly, the rocks were broken by dynamite, trees were fell down. The landscape lost its beauty. Luxury hotels and business concerns replaced the grandeur of nature. At last the wonders of nature have gone, and the landscape seems to be unfit for habitation.

The sides of the beautiful hills were becoming gashed and scarred from high on the slopes, the advancing tracks looked like rivers of mud defying gravity as though nature had

gone mad. The distant thunder of blasting and the roar of earth-moving machines floated up early in the morning and the dreaminess of the down mist turned to nightmare.

In a novel such as Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, a profoundly different city is to be noted.. In the twenty-first century without centring on the 'city' (in all of its heterogeneity) would be absurd, given the on-going migration to urban areas globally. Mistry reveals the persistence of environmental issues in a very different urban narrative and critiques the viability of cities as sustainable groupings. Yet, in spite of the critiques, in spite of the enormity of suffering and despoliation and loss Mistry paradoxically offer cities as places of hope and suggest that far from necessarily being the site and source of the future ruin, cities potentially offer perhaps the greatest hope for ensuring the final curtain for humanity. In *A Fine Balance*, the hair collector Rajaram notes what all of the other characters in the novel know: "thousands and thousands are coming to the city because of bad times in their native place" (Mistry 171). People go to the city because it is a place of dreams. Ishvar explains to Omprakash that "there is lots of opportunity in the city, you can make your dreams come true" (89). But it is also a place of pressing material realities, and Om's response is that he is "sick of the city. Nothing but misery" there (91).

The influx to cities, moreover, is neither a passing trend nor a geographical peculiarity. All over the world, people are migrating to cities. Cities are here to stay. A higher ratio of people currently live in cities than at any other time in history. They are the new normal, a permanent transformation of landscapes molded as much by capitalist greed as by need. The power of capitalism to transform landscapes is portrayed in *A Fine Balance*.

In the eyes of the developer, the ancestral home of Maneck Kohlah in *A Fine Balance* is a similarly uneventful, materially poor, culturally static corner of the world, one that needs to be developed. For Maneck, it is a mountain paradise, and "the beauty of the place" (205) arouses his longings. He comes to understand that "Daddy was right, . . . the hills were dying, and I was so stupid to believe the hills were eternal" (585). One of the balances Mistry presents in this novel is between Maneck's love of this mountain paradise and the position of the developers -which is one of absolute disrespect, detachment, and objectification. Haseltine argues that the "novel falls well within the parameters of environmental justice criticism" (191) in its subtle critique of the development or destruction of the Kohlah family's mountain habitat, the unbalanced and unsustainability of India's push for growing the economy and "developing," in the fit of violence within the various hierarchies.

As the narrator of *A Fine Balance* explains, On Sundays a gaddi man called Bhanu came to tidy the garden behind the house. Maneck looked forward all week to being outdoors with Bhanu, wandering around the property and doing chores under his direction. The area beyond the first fifty yards, where it began to slope downhill, wild with shrubs and trees and thick undergrowth, was the most interesting. There, Bhanu taught him the names of strange flowers and herbs, things which did not grow near the front of the house with the roses and lilies and marigolds. He pointed out the deadly datura plant and the one that was its antidote, and leaves that mitigated the poison of certain snakes, others which cured stomach ailments, and the stems whose pulp healed cuts and wounds. He showed Maneck how to squeeze a snapdragon to make its jaws open. Late in the year, when the weather turned chilly, they gathered dead "twigs and branches as the afternoon drew to a close, and made a small fire" (208). In the situations narrated in the novel, a foreigner is taking control of the local in the name of developers. A local guide knows everything about the place, more than anyone from the outside. We have here a critique of "the flawed development policy, the short sightedness, the greed that was sacrificing the country's natural beauty to the demon of progress. . . . The sides of their hills were becoming gashed and scarred" (213). This is what it means to be living in an age of global capitalism. Cities are undoubtedly costly, in many ways, but in a world of billions of people, the efficiencies of cities are not to be glossed over. Mistry

describes the city as a predator. He emphasises the deep importance of environment in cities and suggests various visions of development.

Thus, the greed of man destroys the beauty of nature and ultimately the world becomes a wilderness. Mistry's writings will of course create an awareness among the readers of the novel to protect nature.

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