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Political Representation of Mumbai in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Shaival Thakkar

“For those who are lost, there will always be cities that feel like home.”

- Simon Van Booy, *Everything Beautiful Began After* (2011)

This research paper will examine the representation of the Emergency and casteism in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995). It will also look at the representation of Mumbai that is constructed through cityscapes, characters' perspectives about the city and its comparison with other locales concluding with its research findings.

A Fine Balance (*AFB*) is the story of four characters, Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Omprakash who live through the Emergency (1975-1977) and its effects on their lives. The setting of the novel is the city of Mumbai referred to as 'the city by the sea' throughout the novel and the timeline of the narrative is from 1947 to 1984. *AFB* has been examined from diverse perspectives such as post colonialism (Sørensen), historiography (Schneller), caste (D'cruz), untouchability (Kumari), nationhood and migration (Herbert), and the technique of neorealism (Takhar). In this research paper I will look at the political representation of Mumbai in *AFB* by using the semiotic approach to representation; by studying the major political events, characters, spaces and the city as signs that are encoded by the author in the texts to construct Mumbai.

Critical Framework – Stuart Hall's concept of Representation

Stuart Hall in his essay “The Work of Representation” from the book *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* talks about representation and different approaches to representation. According to Hall, representation is the process by which members of a culture use language to produce meaning. He explains the reflective or mimetic approach, the intentional approach and the constructionist approach to representation. Hall considers the conceptual world, signs, and codes to be essential for the practice of representation from the constructionist perspective. He also explains the two variants or models of the constructionist approach: the semiotic and the discursive approach. Saussure and Barthes were practitioners of the semiotic approach

that concentrated on how language and signification works in producing meanings. Foucault was a practitioner of the discursive approach which concentrated on how discourse and discursive practices produce knowledge (61-63).

Mumbai in Mistry's Fiction and its Political History

The Mumbai of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is not the flashy and glamorous Mumbai of Bollywood, nor is it the fast moving Mumbai of cut-throat trade and commerce; for the most part, Mistry's Mumbai is a Parsi household or a Parsi colony where largely the drama is domestic. The city streets and slums also feature in *AFB* but they usually act as a chaotic foil to the better organization and the greater peacefulness of the Parsi household. Mistry also uses the village, the town, and life in the hill town as foils and in contrast to the city of Mumbai which is shown to be a place of greater goodness, urbanity, opportunity, progress, and hope where overwhelming rural issues like casteism, violence, poverty and unemployment can be contained.

Mumbai consists of seven islands which were at first inhabited by fishing communities. From the second century BCE to ninth century CE, the islands were ruled by many indigenous dynasties. In the mid 16th century, Mumbai was a part of the Mughal Empire but later came under the control of the Portuguese. During the 17th century, the islands came under the possession of the British Empire which in turn leased them to the British East India Company. In the 18th century, the Marathas conquered parts of Mumbai from the Portuguese but were later on defeated by the British who by then had complete control over the entire city.

Mumbai became the capital of the Bombay Presidency area and witnessed the Quit India Movement in 1942 and The Royal Indian Navy Mutiny in 1946 as important events of the Indian Independence Movement. In 1947, when India achieved independence, Bombay Presidency was restructured into Bombay State. In 1960, Bombay State was separated into Gujarat and Maharashtra on linguistic basis whereby Mumbai became the capital of Maharashtra. Politically, Mumbai had been a stronghold of the Congress party which ruled the city from independence to early 1980s. Later on parties like Shiv Sena and the Bharatiya Janta Party contested and won elections and became very influential in the city's political life.

As mentioned above, this paper will examine the representation of the Emergency, casteism and the construction of Mumbai in the novel.

1. The Emergency

Rohinton Mistry depicts the Emergency through humor, seriousness, conversations, posters, slogan-shouting, an Emergency era motto on a stamp, the compulsory singing of the national anthem in cinemas, demolition of slums, forced sterilizations and the enforcement of MISA.

1.1 Demolition hutments and ‘City Beautification’

Mistry represents the episode of demolition and ‘city beautification’ in metropolitan cities by showing tailors’ hutment colony being demolished, their struggle for shelter, and the tailors being hauled to the outskirts of the city along with beggars and by being forced to do labour work at an irrigation project in subhuman conditions. An instance of this from the novel is stated:

One day after coming back from work, Ishvar and Omprakash find that their shack along with other hutments was destroyed by bulldozers as a part of the slum prevention and city beautification program. In between the demolitions, the hutment dwellers were given thirty minutes to collect their belongings (AFB 294-316).

1.2 Forced Sterilizations

Mistry represents the episode of forced sterilisations in metropolitan cities by describing how it had been incentivised by connecting it to the promotions, the payment and non-payment of salaries of government employees. Furthermore, he depicts the way in which sterilizations were also incentivised with the offer of money, transistor radios for the public and family planning volunteers. His humour shows the corruption involved in the practice of forced sterilizations, the State using its power to sterilize people against their will, and the disastrous consequences of deficiently done sterilization operations:

Ashraf Chacha, Ishvar and Om were eating *paans* when Om spots Thakur Dharamsi. He was the upper caste man responsible for his family’s death and was now in charge of Family Planning. Om walks towards him and spits in his direction in spite of Ishvar’s attempts to restrain him. Thakur Dharamsi recognized who Om was and drove off in his car. Ishvar reprimanded Om severely for his action (519-523).

A little later in the novel both Om and Ishvar face the consequences of Om’s rebelliousness:

The tailors were taken to a sterilization camp on the outskirts of town. In spite of Ishvar’s attempted explanations and pleadings both

Ishvar and Om were sterilized against their will. Ishvar despairs that his plans for his nephew's wedding will never come true. While they were resting after their operations, Thakur Dharamsi passed by Om's bed. He gave orders to a doctor for castrating Om which was carried out. Ishvar and Om felt devastated. Complain to the police and Family Planning Centre officials proved unfruitful. A week later Ishvar's legs were swollen. The medicines that were given to him did not work. So his legs had to be amputated (534-543).

1.3 MISA - Maintenance of Internal Security Act

Mistry represents the power of MISA by describing that two professors at Maneck's college who chose to denounce the campus goon squads, were taken away by plainclothesmen for anti-government activities, under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act. No one dared to help the professors as everyone knew that MISA allowed imprisonment without trial and they were afraid of it (247). Another instance of an arbitrary arrest under MISA is the tailors' initial Mumbai contact Nawaz who is imprisoned under MISA but the actual cause was a payment dispute with an influential man. Mistry also represents well the arbitrary nature of arrests under MISA with a humorous instance where two *goondas* are arrested for the murders of two long-haired beggars that they did not commit (558-571).

2. Casteism

Mistry represents the practice of caste discrimination by showing many kinds of brutal punishments meted out by the upper castes to the lower castes. Dukhi Mochi's wife Roopa tries to steal some oranges from the orchard of an upper class man and she is caught and raped by the guard there. Dukhi Mochi is made to work extremely hard in return for a glass of milk but when the mortar breaks, Dukhi gets his leg injured. Moreover, he is blamed for breaking the mortar, is beaten and is not given any remuneration. According to the scholar Dr. Giuseppe Scuto in his study entitled *Caste Violence in Contemporary India* says, "In India every day two dalits are murdered and three dalit women are raped. Yearly, around 27,000 crimes against former untouchables are recorded and discrimination against them is still *very much alive* [sic] (5)". This violence towards the dalits is well represented by Mistry in *AFB*.

Mistry represents violence as intrinsic to the caste system. However, an attempt to break out of the caste system also leads to caste violence in Mistry's novel. Dukhi's move to make his sons tailors is not liked by the upper castes in

his village. Later on, when Narayan is getting married, the upper castes don't allow the village musicians to play at the wedding and the musicians from town had to be hired. Moreover, when Narayan insists on practicing his franchise to vote, he is tortured by the men of Thakur Dharamsi and killed. Thereafter, his house is set on fire and almost his entire family is killed. This kind of caste violence is probably triggered off due to jealousy resulting from the development of the Chamaar community. Mistry reveals the complexities of the caste system by showing that discrimination is not limited to upper castes and Chamaars but there is discrimination amongst sub-castes as well. Mistry represents this by showing that Roopa does not allow a Bhangi to enter the tailoring workshop of her son Narayan. She is against sewing for Bhangis. After Narayan's arguments she finally allows him to sew for Bhangis but none of them are allowed inside; all their dealings have to take place outside Narayan's workshop (AFB 95-148).

3. Representation of the city of Mumbai – constructed through cityscapes, character perspectives and comparisons to other locales

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall says, "Representation itself is a biased activity. However, it is important to study representations as they contain new knowledges, new identities and new meanings" ("Representation and Media"). Hall in his essay "The Work of Representation" uses Roland Barthes' analysis of a pasta advertisement. It is a picture of some packets of pasta, a tin, a sachet, some tomatoes, onions, peppers, a mushroom, all emerging from a half-open string bag. Barthes suggests that we can read the pasta ad as a 'myth' by linking its completed message with the cultural theme or concept of 'Italianness' or 'Italianness'. Then, Hall adds, at the level of the myth or meta-language, the Panzani ad becomes a message about the essential meaning of Italian-ness as a national culture (*The Work of Representation*, 41).

Taking a hint from Hall's analysis of the Barthes' example of the pasta advertisement, my argument is that Mistry constructs a Mumbai in the novel which can be looked at the level of myth or meta-language. As a result we find that the cityscapes, character perspectives and comparisons to other spaces construct the city of Mumbai.

3.1 Cityscapes

3.1.1 The overcrowded Mumbai local train

The novel begins with an overcrowded train which is symbolic of Mumbai. The Bombay Suburban Railway carries more than 7.24 million commuters daily. The Mumbai Suburban Railway suffers from some of the most severe

overcrowding in the world. Over 4,500 passengers are packed into a 9-car rake during peak hours, as against the rated carrying capacity of 1,700. This has resulted in what is known as Super-Dense Crush Load of 14 to 16 standing passengers per square metre of floor space. People are struggling for space in a train compartment and that's how Maneck gets introduced to the tailors Ishvar and Omprakash (*AFB* 3-11).

3.1.2 The Vishram Vegetarian Hotel

The Vishram Vegetarian Hotel is an important place in the novel. This is where Ishvar and Omprakash go for their tea breaks and sometimes for meals. This place is important as a meeting point. The outside of this restaurant is also the place where the beggar Shankar works. Maneck accompanies the tailors often for their tea breaks at the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel. They pass by Shankar, the beggar on castor whom Maneck gives some small change and who later on in the narrative becomes their friend (275-276).

3.1.3 The Indian courthouse

Mistry provides an interesting representation of the crowded, noisy and chaotic Indian courthouse which Dina visits in order to hire a lawyer. She is swarmed by lawyers looking for a client and they take advantage of the crowd and also misbehave with her. She finds one eccentric lawyer Vasant Rao Valmik who is sitting on a broken bench. Instead of helping her straightaway, he tells her about his life story, the state of law in India, the Prime Minister's electoral malpractice and then listens to her case (558-571).

3.1.4 Dina Dalal's flat and the Bombay Rent Act, 1947

Real estate has always been valuable in the island-city of Mumbai whose population is approximately 18.4 million now. A substantial part of the narrative takes place inside Dina Dalal's flat which is protected by the Bombay Rent Act, 1947. Dina becomes the tenant of the flat after her husband passes away and pays a paltry sum as rent as she is protected by the Rent Act. Dina Dalal also conducts sewing business and has sublet a room to a paying guest; these are illegal activities. This also gives the landlord excuses to throw her out of the apartment in which he succeeds towards the end of the novel. Shirish B. Patel in an article called "Life between Buildings: The use and abuse of FSI" in the *Economic and Political Weekly* explains the detrimental effects of The Rent Act to the city:

The main culprit for proliferation of slums is the Rent Control Act in Mumbai which allows nearly two million people to stay in homes almost free of rent. They pay monthly rents as low as Rs 100-500,

while the market rates are 1000 times higher. The Act not only had a negative effect on investment in housing for rental purpose but also withdrew existing housing stock from the rental market. The Rent Control Act completely protected the already housed people in Mumbai and also denied access to rental housing to the migrants. What migrants paid to get a room in slums was many times greater than the old rental house in chawls and even greater than houses in many middle and upper class localities.

3.1. 5 Informal housing and slums in Mumbai

When Ishvar and Omprakash first reach Mumbai they are greeted by the sea of humanity at the railway station. They sleep for six months in the awning behind the kitchen of their miserly host Nawaz's house. The tailors try very hard but they are able to find only odd jobs. Then Nawaz tells them about Dina Dalal's job offer and makes sure that they take it. That same day Nawaz takes them to a slum where he makes sure they rent a room and thus gets rid of them from his own house (*AFB* 153-163).

Over 9 million people, over 60% of the population of Mumbai, live in informal housing or slums, yet they cover only 6–8% of the city's land area. Slum growth rate in Mumbai is greater than the general urban growth rate. Like scores of other people in the city, Ishvar and Omprakash start getting used to the life in the slums. They find out that tap water is available only early in the morning. Their neighbour Rajaram shows them their way around. They also learn to defecate in the open near the railway tracks (167-170). Mistry represents the migration phenomenon in Mumbai through Rajaram when he says, "Yes, thousands and thousands are coming to the city because of bad times in their native place. I came for the same reason" (171-172).

3.2 Characters' Perspectives

3.2.1 Mumbai as a progressive and cosmopolitan city

Mistry represents inter-dining and co-habitation in the flat as a levelling factor in the class and caste distinctions between the tailors vis-à-vis Dina and Maneck and also shows egalitarianism as something joyful. This modern family unit of four cooks, eats, works, sews, lives and travels together in the city. They also take interest in the quilt that Dina Dalal sews from leftover cloth material as it marks the time they started working and living together. Dina even gives the tailors the permission for Om's future wife too to sleep on the verandah of her flat.

3.2.2 Nostalgia for Mumbai of Dina's youth

Dina Dalal in her youth used to save money from the household budget for buying provisions. With those savings she would travel in buses, go to parks, museums, markets, look at posters outside cinemas, and public libraries. She found the libraries to be quiet and comforting places where she could spend hours. Some modern libraries also contained music rooms. There she would spend time looking for and listening to familiar music and was mesmerised by it. She also used to visit free concerts organised in the city which is where she also meets her future husband Rustom (29-30).

The readers get a glimpse of the Mumbai they have “never seen and possibly can't see” (Hall 17) through the eyes of Dina Dalal. Dina reminisces about her youth in this lost city to Maneck and the tailors. She tells them about:

those enchanted evenings of musical recitals, and emerging with Rustom from the concert hall into the fragrant night when the streets were quiet – yes, she said, in those days the city was still beautiful, the footpaths were clean, not yet taken over by pavement-dwellers, and yes, the stars were visible in the sky in those days, when Rustom and she walked along the sea, listening to the endless exchange of the waves, or in the Hanging Gardens, among the whispering trees, planning their wedding and their lives, planning and plotting in full ignorance of destiny's plan for them (336).

3.2.3 Mumbai from the perspective of beggars

The character of Beggarmaster in the novel represents the commercialisation of begging. Many beggars work for him and he makes sketches and strategizes how and where to place the beggars in order to make maximum profits. Mistry shows many creative beggar characters in his novel and makes a sordid practice like begging tolerable for the reader by adding humour and by making use of grotesque images. Mistry also humanizes the Beggarmaster by telling his story.

Mistry represents the dark side of the begging business as well: The Beggarmaster has gouged out the eyes of two children and turned them into beggars. Their uncle Monkey-man is distraught about that fact and as a result murders Beggarmaster for revenge. RTI activist Anil Galgali, who runs an NGO, Athak Seva Sangh, in an article “More you cry, more you earn” said: “I have noticed an increase in the number of children begging in and around Mumbai. These kids are governed by a senior handler, who collects all the cash they make by begging. It is a thriving racket at the expense of children.” Galgali

has also lodged a complaint with the railway police, highlighting the plight of handicapped beggar kids. “Those beggars with an eye gouged out or limbs amputated are victims of a more sinister, cruel mafia. They will do anything to force the public to pity the children and give money,” said Galgali.

3.3 Comparison with other locales

In *AFB*, unlike his other books, Mistry goes beyond Mumbai and describes the Chamaar tailors’ village, the small town near the tailors’ village, the hill town from where the character Maneck comes from, the outskirts of the city where the tailors are forced into a labour camp where they work at an irrigation project, the outskirts of the Chamaar village where forced sterilizations take place and Dubai where Maneck goes and works for many years before returning to India. Mistry explains this creative decision thus: ‘I made a conscious decision in this book to include more ... mainly because in India seventy five per cent of Indians live in villages and I wanted to embrace more of the social reality of India’ (qtd. in Morey, “Thread and Circuses: Performing in the Spaces of City and Nation in *A Fine Balance*” 95).

Conclusion

The political representation of Mumbai is done in *AFB* through three major tracks in the novel. The first track is that of the Emergency which is constructed through its impact on the four major characters. The two tailors suffer due to the demolition of their hutments and later they are rendered handicapped through the forced and malicious sterilizations and its detrimental effects. Mistry depicts MISA through the illegal and arbitrary arrests of five minor characters. He also makes use of humor, seriousness, conversations, posters, slogan-shouting, an Emergency era motto on a stamp and the compulsory singing of the national anthem in cinemas to construct the Emergency environment in the novel. Thus, Mistry constructs Mumbai which is the signifying field on which Emergency politics are played out in the novel. The political semiosis of Mumbai comes across as a city grappling with a draconic state and its life-denying laws.

The second major representational track is that of casteism. He constructs this by showing that the tailors’ family had suffered from caste violence in their village and the two tailors are the lone survivors from that family. He also shows many instances of brutal casteism such as rape, endurance of labour under inhuman conditions, the hindrance of the Chamaar caste’s upward mobility, the forced sterilizations and castration of Omprakash as well as the complex workings of the caste system within the Chamaar caste. However, here Mumbai is constructed as a site for redemption from the rampant casteism in the

Chamaars' village. The city's urbanity protects the two tailor characters from the tribulations of casteism. This further reinforces Mumbai as a sign of an all-embracing and redemptive city.

The third major representation track is that of the construction of Mumbai. The signs and symbols which construct the city of Mumbai in *AFB* are the overcrowded Mumbai local train, the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel, the Indian courthouse, Dina Dalal's flat, the Bombay Rent Act (1947) and informal housing and slums in Mumbai. Mumbai is also constructed through character perspectives such as Mumbai as a progressive and cosmopolitan city, Dina Dalal's nostalgia for the Mumbai of her youth and Mumbai from the beggars' perspective. The inclusion of the other locales gives the novel a pan-India feel. Here Mumbai can be read as a city of opportunities, egalitarianism and emancipation as opposed to the oppressive village. The character perspectives like those of Dina, Ishvar and Omprakash, Maneck and the beggars signify Mumbai as city of struggles, squalor, Emergency politics, tragedies and grotesque poverty yet also a city of opportunities, survival, culture, romance, friendships and nostalgia. Mumbai can also be read as a city of opportunities, egalitarianism and emancipation as opposed to the oppressive village. The political representation of Mumbai comes across as a city great in its magnanimity but also great in its inadequacies.

Mistry in representing Mumbai in his novels is creating a particularised figure of the city. A figure of the city constructed through the language used, cityscapes foregrounded, perspectives of the characters regarding political events and its aftermath, nostalgia opens up a signifying field where the performativity of the language as well as human life is acted out. The Mumbai constructed in *AFB* is suffering from the inside, due to the nation's self-created problems and thus it is a city grappling with draconic state and its life-denying laws. The village comes looking for the city as a site of redemption and thus it can also be an all-embracing and redemptive city in *AFB*. Similar to Charles Dickens' London, Mistry creates the figure of Mumbai in *AFB* as a city great in its magnanimity but also great in its inadequacies. In *AFB*, the myth of Mumbai is larger as the city is not the only centre yet is central to the narrative. It is the picture of a city that is suffering, evolving and struggling to survive.

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