

# A Study of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*: Environmental And Human Relationships

**Dr. Kambhampati Rajesh**

Associate Professor, Department of English, Central University of Jammu, [cclrajesh@gmail.com](mailto:cclrajesh@gmail.com)

---

Received on 07th April-2023

Revised on 12th May-2023

Accepted on 27th May-2023

Published on 18th June 2023

---

## **Abstract:**

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is an in-depth analysis of the human soul under a socio-political instability in the 1970s Indian society. The novel combines the theme of social, political and economic hardship, with the background of economic and political struggles. But in addition to these apparent conflicts, Mistry also touches upon the problems of environmental destruction and the effect of this process on human life implicitly. By showing the process of rapid urbanization, corruption, and the political instability of the era, Mistry is criticizing the effects of unchecked development. The urban setting of the novel is used as a metaphor of the declining situation of human life and the surroundings. Destruction of nature symbolizes loss of human dignity when the characters of the novel struggle against the personal, social, and political struggles. When human beings interact with nature, they establish an inseparable union but the relation is unbalanced especially to the marginalized classes. In the current urban centers, disconnection of the human race to the natural environment is symbolic in the absence of green field and the growing pollution. Thus, the novel is not only a commentary on human suffering but is also a critique of the destruction of the environment in a subtle and powerful one. The present study brings out the interaction between the socio-political dynamics and the environmental degradation where human survival and environmental sustainability is well balanced. Through this book, Mistry encourages the readers to look at the environmental impact of development, and how there is the need to restore balance with nature.

**Keywords:** Ecology, environmental destruction, human life, economic hardship, political instability, etc.

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

*A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, with the story line set in the backdrop of 1970s India is regarded as an excellent work of study of the human morale in the wake of political and social upheaval. Even at the first sight, one could think that the novel is simply about social, political, and economic struggle of its characters. Nonetheless, giving it a deeper examination, Mistry skillfully incorporates the theme of environmental and ecology in his story and he makes the urban landscape and the problems linked to it to metaphorically represent the state of the human condition. Mistry indirectly criticizes the environmental degradation that was part of the economic growth of the country during the time of the story through the rapid urbanization, corruption and political upheavals that characterized this era. *A Fine Balance* is not merely a commentary on human suffering but also a subtle examination of the ecological implications of development that brings out the interaction between the socio-political processes and environmental destruction.

Human beings are social creatures and the human beings are highly attached to the social environment, natural surroundings, culture and traditions. Human beings and natural environment are connected in a way that cannot be separated. Although the contemporary society seems to be increasingly far away, with its growing interest in different spheres and the growing complexity of life nowadays, still, humanity depends on the environment to survive. This dependence between human and nature tends to be unbalanced particularly to the vulnerable classes of the society. The modern world is full of cities with an insufficient amount of green areas and air pollution. Environmentalism emphasizes the importance of human-nature interaction with particular attention paid to such activities as the exploitation of natural resources and the resulting environmental dangers.

Maneck Kohlah in *A Fine Balance* is presented as a young man who has moved out of his family home in a village in the mountain to learn about refrigeration and air-conditioning. His father Farokh Kohlah owns a general grocery and sells soft drinks including Kohlah Cola. Maneck does not want to leave the village to have his studies. They have been blessed with a love-land of beautiful place in their locality. The character Farokh Kohlah has been strongly attached to the beautiful, misty covered, natural setting of the

mountains. The beautiful scenes of the place always haunt his mind. So, he is satisfied with his living in the nature. He and his natural environment are united. He is in oneness with everything in nature. Nature offers him solace whenever he is walking around with an agitated mind. The nature gives him tranquillity and satisfies his needs. But just in time this quietness is broken by the demolition of the mountains.

Farokh is much attached to the mountains, and is fond of walking along the hillside:

It must have taken him three miles to walk when the day had turned on the prospects of the sun going down. Colours of pink and orange were warping their temporary threads across the sky. He paused to look westward, and enjoy the passage of time. In such a situation he would have had two eyes, to see a better portion of the landscape. (Mistry 216)

One of the strongest aspects of *A Fine Balance* is the way here that Mistry has depicted Bombay. The city which is fast industrializing and growing during the 1970s also becomes a significant visual representation of the development and corruption. As Dinesh Mohan (1995) explains,

The fast development of Bombay has been symbolic of the rising hopes of the country but it has left a trail of pollution, environmental degradation and social exclusion. (77).

Mistry portrays this city contradiction where the slums are so congested, the streets are littered and the green areas are virtually non-existent as a physical and emotional weight to the characters. The slums setting in the novel symbolize how urban planning has failed to work and the lack of consideration of environmental sustainability in the Indian cities that are rapidly developing. The intrusion of politicians trying to expand industries, trade and commerce has rendered the place to lose its original identity. With time, it has been bland and lifeless, most so due to the destruction of its natural beauty, and the intrusion of modernization in the vicinity. Rohinton Mistry excellently captures such a change of that idyllic setting as the artificial structures are plotted on it.

The time was soon coming when the mountains had to part with them. It started with roads. Solo tops engineers came with their evil tools and traced their designs on sheets of paper. They would be modern roads, they assured, such as would vibrate to the rush of modern traffic. Highway, broad and durable enough to substitute the picturesque mountain drives that world-builders and World Bank officials can never see through the eye of the telescope (Mistry 213).

This shows the devastating nature of development to the natural landscape; this is an embodiment of the tension between development and conservation of nature. It is a transition to modernization, which has been caused by both political and economic factors, which has eventually resulted in the disappearance of the original charm and character of the area. According to Manju Bapat (2009),

In India, and more so in cities such as Bombay, the urban poor not only live in unsanitary environments that are congested but they are also prone to pollution and ecological degradation. (125).

The same concept is reflected in the description of the slum inhabitants by Mistry whose lives are characterized by social and environmental poverty. The inadequate sanitation, water shortage, and unhygienic environment point to poor consideration of the ecological needs of the urban poor in the quest to develop industrially. Moreover, the problem of pollution of the city that Mistry concentrates on, both as a literal and metaphorical image, helps to emphasize the relationship between the deterioration of the environment and the misery of humans. Ramachandra Guha (1997), as an environmental historian, writes,

The high pace of industrialization in post-independent India has usually been in conflict with the conservation of the environment, which has caused degradation in nature and the quality of life of the people. (132).

The environmental decay in *A Fine Balance* is thus a reflection of the societal decay brought about by unchecked industrialization.

### **The Environmental Consequences of Political and Social Unrest**

*A Fine Balance*, which takes place in the Emergency period (1975-77) examines the extent to which political unrest goes hand in hand with environmental neglect. The Indian government had taken up massive infrastructural initiatives during this time and little care was given to environmental impacts. This is criticized in the novel by Mistry who depicted the eviction of slum residents by force and demolition of rural land to build cities. Such political moves are usually viewed as a way of environmental exploitation whereby the government ignores the ecological implications of the long-term to the short-term economic and political benefits.

In his article "The Unquiet Woods", Madhav Gadgil (1991) points to the fact that government policies in the 1970s frequently put a higher value on economic expansion than on environmental conservation. He states,

The huge infrastructural works of the Emergency period including the building of dams and the industrial development impetus tended to ignore the long-term effects on the local ecosystems and rural populations. (67).

Mistry is rather critical of such political shortsightedness and he demonstrates how the people in the villages are deprived of their land and how such land grabbing leads to the extinction of natural resources. The authoritarian actions described by Mistry including sterilizations and demolitions of slums can be regarded as the wider government approach to exploitation of the human and non-human environment. These urban policies which are aimed at cleaning up the urban setting do not always take into account the environmental cost of the actions. As Guha (1997) points out,

The state environmental policies at this time were very much connected with social and political interests where development took precedence over the ecological preservation. (148).

Such disregard is evident in the efforts of the characters as they are not only denied their homes but are also disconnected with the land and resources which had earlier nourished them.

The novel brings out land loss, which is a strong allegory of the environmental concerns of the destruction of the vast areas of India countryside. The novel consists of several characters who are displaced owing to political choices through which land is a commodity to be utilized in the economic growth. Such neglect of the ecological importance of land reflects the greater trend of deforestation and environmental deterioration that afflicted India in the era of the high industrial rates. Vandana Shiva (2008) criticises how land is treated as a commodity which is not connected to the ecological and cultural aspect of land in her work, *Soil Not oil*. She writes,

The commodification of the land in the name of development causes destruction of ecosystem, displacement of villages and exhaustion of resources that sustain life. (93).

The novel recounts this story of land dispossession whereby the rural communities are deprived of not only their homes but also access to other important resources such as water and fertile soils. The expropriation of land to the characters in the novel is a reflection of the loss of the agricultural India landscape at this time. As Gadgil (1991) argues,

Land grabbing, displacement, and environmental destruction were not single occurrences but a bigger trend of ecological destruction due to the necessity of industrial development (82).

This movement resembles the larger environmental crisis experienced in India throughout the 1970s in which the economic growth of the nation typically resulted in the destruction of important ecosystems. One of the elements that contribute to this crisis is the exhaustion of natural resources, especially water. Of the water usage in *A Fine Balance*, it was both essential to survival, as water was needed literally, but it was also used as a symbol of the struggles of the environment that existed during the period when it was written. The fact that the characters cannot always access clean water is a way of showing the deplorable state of many Indians in the 1970s since urban pollution, poor urban planning and over exploitation of the natural resources exacerbated the water crisis. The pollution of rivers and lack of clean water are the reflections of the overall environmental degradation through the uncontrolled spread of industries and gaining of resources, which only enhances the misery of the vulnerable populations. This description by Mistry of this water scarcity brings out the inter-relationship between the environment and social problems so that the reader can focus on how previous industrialization-focused behaviour is impacting the environment in the long run. As Madhav Gadgil points out (1991),

The problem of the disappearance of water resources in India is closely connected with political choices as well as with the mismanagement of the environment. Bombay cities are stricken with major water scarcity that is worsened by the pollution and inadequate infrastructure (99).

Mistry does not only call upon water scarcity in the novel as a material issue to the characters, but also as a metaphor as to how human dignity and hope is being sucked out of the environment that slowly becomes inhabitable. Water symbolizes the delicate balance between life and hopelessness. The contaminated rivers and the desiccated and overcrowded lands are the metaphors of the greater ecological disaster, which supports the inter-relationship of human misery and ecological devastation. *A Fine Balance* is far more than a tale of human survival in political and social turmoil. It is also an effective criticism of the environmental effects of uncontrolled development, urbanization and political hypocrisy. Mistry brings out a great argument concerning the expenditures of development that do not take care of

the environment through his writing of the pollution in Bombay, the displacement of rural people, and the depletion of natural resources. As Vandana Shiva (2008) aptly notes, The real development should make sure to cater both human and ecological needs, and not to prioritize one above the other (112).

The novel is a very dramatic wake-up-call that the fine balance which we are walking upon is not only between human beings, but also between humanity and with nature. Even today when India is struggling with such processes like urbanization, deforestation and water shortage, the novel remains a powerful message about the price of neglecting the environment.

#### **India Urbanization: Unspoken Eco-Personality.**

The transition of Bombay as a colonial port city to a modern metropolis is reflected on the lives of the characters since they are entangled in the nicks and cracks of the city. The theme of migration of the rural people into the urban world in search of a job, better life, and better opportunities is echoed throughout the novel. Nevertheless, this change is not only social: it is also highly ecological. With the entry of characters into the city setups such as the beggar and the seamstress, we see the ugly aspects of urbanization, which is congested slums, poisonous air and littered water. These realities are simply not physical ways but they are symbolic of the bigger environmental impacts of the hurly-burly industrialization and urbanization. The story of the novel is in 1970s when India was rapidly urbanizing and industrializing. Over the top of the growing population and unchecked growth, Bombay is symbolic of the shifts of social, political, ecological processes occurring within the country at large. Mysteriously through the descriptions of the city by Mistry the city is presented as a living and suffocating place of a city of progress though also a victim of environmental degradation.

In the process of urbanization, the natural environment and green areas are destroyed, which also leads to the destruction of the physical environment of the characters and their mental and emotional well-being. The way that Mistry presents the overcrowded slums, where human and environmental suffering co-exist, is a statement about the fact that urbanization not managed with the sustainability factor will result in the deterioration of human and environmental well-being. The absence of green areas and the pollution of the city area are not only practical issues, but this symbolizes the oppression of the life of the characters. This is depicted in the hopelessness and misery that attaches itself in the lives of people who are in the cycle of poverty and urbanization.

The Bombay city, described by Mistry is a land of extremities, extreme poverty, extreme congestion and extreme pollution. Environmental historian Ramachandra Guha makes the argument in *The Death of the Nation: Urbanization and Environmental Crisis in India* (2004) that the rapid urbanization of such cities as Bombay in the mid-20th century had its environmental costs, the main one being water and air pollution, loss of green space (to be replaced by growing human population), and overloading already-limited municipal infrastructure (109). The picture of Bombay in the book of Mistry can be therefore regarded as the one who reflects these environmental realities in this period. The shortage of such fundamental resources as clean water and sanitation is frequently presented as a natural result of unchecked urbanization in the novel.

Additionally, Mistry relates the destruction of the environment in the city with that of the characters introduced indirectly. The rising pollution, the congested environment in which the characters are supposed to stay, and the lack of green spaces are metaphors of the emotional and psychological struggle of the characters. Their mental health is suffocating as the feeling of claustrophobia of the slums. This is no coincidence that the process of environmental degradation correlates with the decline of human well-being but, in fact, is the main focus of the criticism of urbanization expressed by Mistry. According to Ashok K. Dutt, in *Urban India: A Geography of Political Economy* (2010), the emergence of industrial cities in post-independent India tended to result in environmental neglect, and rapid urban growth was frequently taking place in ways that were not concerned with sustainable city planning or environmental protection (156). The characters Mistry introduces, who have to deal with poverty and being disenfranchised, are the reflections of the harm inflicted on the environment - both of them are the victims of the urban system that values growth and progress over sustainability and human life.

The city of Mumbai, that is, the metaphor, does not confine itself to the physical space, but the social and emotional space of the novel. The process of urbanization in *A Fine Balance* is not merely related to Bombay as a city developing, but also to the disintegration of communal bond as well as the loss of human bond. The nature of the seamstress, say, comes into the city to get a better life but only to realise that she is caught in poverty in the city slums. She is losing her mental and physical state, which also reflects the

degradation of the urban space surrounding her. By this means, Mistry treats the city as not only a setting but rather symbolically as a force which has a shaping and defining effect on the destiny of people living in it. One of the main components of this environmental narrative is the fact that there was insufficient housing, garbage disposal, and pollution control in Bombay at the time. In *Urban Sanitation in India: The Case of Mumbai*, Manju Bapat (2009) presents the how the slums of Bombay, where a large percentage of the population resides, are exposed to extreme environmental dangers because of the insufficient infrastructure that comes along with the rapid urban development.

Physical and psychological burden on the residents of the location is the result of constant exposure to pollution and the lack of necessities such as clean water or sanitation (183).

The description of this environment, including the smog-covered clouds, its excessive garbage collections, and decaying sewage, which are provided by Mistry, is not only an urban reality but also the commentary on the tight bond between social inequalities and environmental negligence. In most of this, the depiction of Bombay by Mistry is more of a criticism of the wider patterns in the urbanization of India in the post-independence period which was mainly focused on industrial and economic development at the cost of environmental wellbeing. Urbanization is an issue of growth as Mistry explains, but it is also an issue of environmental and social degradation. The growing pollution, deficit of infrastructure and disappearance of the natural spaces are not independent matters but are closely related and quantified by the social and economic state of affairs at the time. According to Dinesh Mohan (1995) in his argument *Bombay: Metaphor for a Modern City*, the high rate of industrialization in the city led to an environment where the need to preserve the environment was put at the backburner to the immediate economic benefits (98).

Being placed as the Emergency of India (1975-77), the novel captures an era of extreme political upheaval in the administration of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In this time, the political repression, forceful sterilization, and the effort to control the population using the contemporary authoritarian methods were prevalent in India. This highly political climate did not pass without serious environmental effects as well. Mistry refers to this dark chapter in the Indian history to ponder on the role of the Emergency in the degradation of natural resources that were already widespread in the country, and helped in aggravating the ecological crisis.

The Emergency, which contributed to the suspension of the civil liberties and a crackdown on the dissent, was accompanied by the change in the environmental policies that favoured the idea of industrialization and development without consideration to the environment. The state initiated mass expenditure of infrastructural projects such as dams, roads and urban sprawl with little regard to the environmental ecological consequences. Environmental historian Ramachandra Guha (1997) writes that as he observes, The Emergency period was also characterized by the boom of state-led projects, which were less concerned with conservation and protection of the delicate natural resources of the nation and more with political domination and economic development (178).

The experience of this rule in the stories of Mistry is very much conditioned by the time when development was frequently claimed to go the way of panacea, but was very costly in terms of ecology. He emphasizes on how the life of the people of the rural setting, especially farmers, whose sole means of subsistence is closely connected to the soil, was ravaged in the process. In the novel, the state and strong industries/industrialists seek to take over the rural farmers causing them to be displaced. Commodity of land and natural resources in this period is representative of a larger negligence to the well-being of the environment over the long-term. This is indicative of the politics of the Emergency in which the idea of development was equated with runaway industrialization resulting in the destruction of ecologies and farmland. In the Emergency period, the theme of land exploitation is of crucial importance in the novel by Mistry. Due to the loss of their farms due to the development by the industry the rural families are exposed to the loss of their means of livelihood besides the loss of their attachment or relationship with land. The agrarian land is represented as shifting to the industrial use with little respect to its ecological sustainability and is one of the most prominent results of the political decisions made during this period. Guha (1997) claims, in *The Environmentalism of the Poor*,

One of the major elements in the history of development in India is about land grabbing especially in the period of the Emergency when the state was keen on advancing industrialization at the expense of rural living and environmental well-being (152).

This land exploitation theme in *A Fine Balance* is not merely a direct political reality in the Emergency but a global phenomenon in the 20th century in general, where economic development tended to cause

the degradation of natural resources. Mistry takes this setting to show how such political moves are devastating to the lives of the rural poor whose survival relies on access to fertile and unpolluted land. Mistry writes,

Yet there came the time when the mountains started abandoning them. It started with the roads. The solar tops engineers came with their ominous tools and started drawing their plans on pieces of paper. These, they assured, would be modernized roads, the roads which would become clogged with modern traffic. Large and massive roads to substitute the picturesque mountain roads which were considered too narrow to view the big picture of nation-builders and World Bank people. (213)

He further added,

Our life was to be here on land now we have nothing. A formerly fertile and promising land is now a dead zone, a poisoned zone" (244).

This feeling has a reflection in the displacement of the rural inhabitants that took place in the real life as India ventured into industrialization. Mistry, also, represents the general effects of industrialization in the Emergency, especially, the increase of deforestation and the loss of agricultural land to facilitate major infrastructure development. In *The Unquiet Woods*, Madhav Gadgil (1991), explains how the government stimulated large scale deforestation in this time through its desire to develop the country at an enormous rate. He notes,

State-based projects of the 1970s were the cause of deforestation without considering the ecological price of the forests being cleared to build dams and factories. These policies were made without paying attention to the environmental impacts on the environment in the long run (63).

The novel is a replica of this blind development rush the natural environment is treated as a resource which is exploited instead of conserved. Moreover, the dispossession of land to farmers is depicted as a larger theme of injustice of the environment. Due to the growth of industries and urban centers in the Emergency, the initially affected of these impacts were the rural poor. When industrial facilities and big-scale constructions started being built, the government could easily defend the process of destroying forests and agricultural land by referring to the bigger picture of economic development of the country. Nevertheless, Mistry criticizes this perspective, depicting that as a result of the deterioration of the environment the people of the villages lose economic injustice in addition to cultural and social identity. This is a similar sentiment to authors such as Vandana Shiva (2008), in *Soil Not Oil*, who holds the view that commodification of land to conduct industrial activities leads to the destruction of ecosystem and the disenfranchisement of the rural poor:

Once land is commodified, ecological and social worth of the land is eliminated, and the sustainability of the environment in the long run is ignored (85).

The impact of such non-respect to the environment can be seen in the way the lives of the characters are portrayed by Mistry. Displacement of the rural farmers means having to face the reality that their agricultural culture, which had been able to sustain the farmers through the ages is no longer practicable in light of the urban and industrial growth. Their lives and future get ruined as the land is destroyed symbolically, as they lose not only the land, but the sense of nature and tradition.

#### **Deforestation and the Struggle of Land A Metaphor of Ecological Collapse**

The conflict over land is another most repeated and heart-rending study in *A Fine Balance*, which is brought out in the sharp contrast between the urban poor struggling to survive in slums of Bombay and the rural farmers who lose out on their land to the industrial and urban growth. Not only the description of landlessness by Mistry is a direct consequence of socio-economic hardships but also a symbolism of the overall ecological destruction that occurs in India in the period of the industrialization and the industrial development booms. Throughout the novel, Mistry shows that land is not only a material possession rather it is a part of people identity, culture and survival. The land is not merely a source of income but a lifeline to the rural farmers as well as a direct link to their past and their community. But as the wave of industrialization continues, land which supports these rural people, is slowly being cleared. This loss is literal and symbolic and signifies the exploitation of the natural resources, which are being offered by the land, i.e. water, soil and biodiversity. The human face of environmental collapse as seen by Mistry's characters is in the situations of these characters who are displaced as a result of land grabbing and forced development.

The land struggle is used by Mistry as a metaphor of the ecological degradation, which highlights that the novel criticizes the ecological crisis at large which India was going through during the era of the high industrialization in the 1970s. The extensive deforestation, exhaustion of natural resources, and

destruction of agricultural lands, all this is related to the expansion of urban areas and the need of resources by industries, most of which were being built without thinking about long-term sustainability. This can also be compared to the story of Mistry whereby the destruction of the ecosystems which were once sustainable is confirmed by the loss of farmland as a result of industrial expansion and the displacement of farmers. The breakdown of the rural communities in *A Fine Balance* is a microcosm of the ecological collapse that was being experienced in the country as a whole.

The fact that deforestation in the novel by Mistry is also used to criticize the unstoppable advance towards progress without regard to the future of the natural resources. Coupled with the seizure of rural lands to industries, the land in itself is deprived of its life-sustaining ability, which makes it sterile and unproductive. This corresponds to the real-life outcomes of unregulated development whereby land is used with short term economic benefits without considering its sustainability in the long term. Vandana Shiva (2008) in *Soil Not Oil* criticizes this strategy and says,

The ecological balance of the environment and social displacement both occur due to commodification of land and resources without taking into account the ecological balance of these components (87).

The novel portrays this degradation of the environment, as the land, with its deforestation and industrialization, is destroyed not only to the detriment of the environment but also to the dismantling of the social structure of the rural populations. Deforestation that Mistry refers to does not only encompass the literal process of destroying forests but also includes the destruction of agricultural land. With industrialization, farmland is temples will be erected, roads built, suburbs developed and the beginning will be soil erosion, disappearance of biodiversity and the decrease of agricultural yield. This is an indication of the historical trend in India where economic growth demanded has contributed to excessive exploitation of natural resources without much concern on how to regenerate them. According to Guha (1997), in *The Environmentalism of the Poor*, it is true that

The political economy of development and the industrial needs have caused ecosystem destruction and displacement of the indigenous populations through the use of land (Guha 140).

The farmers that are forced out of business in the rural areas by such development projects are symbolic of the greater environmental injustice that is happening in India at this period. The concept of development is also criticized in the novel where development at the expense of nature occurs. Mistry employs the landlessness of his characters to highlight the devastating effects of the unrestrained quest to embrace economic growth and urbanization, not only to people, but also to the planet. When land is commodified and exploited, it will no longer be a viable means of living and will instead start eroding both literally and figuratively. The characters of Mistry especially the rural farmers are trapped in this exploitative cycle. They not only lose their means of livelihoods but also their attachment to the land, which had given them generations to live in. This loss of their land is a metaphor of their loss of their lives because they are not only losing a means of production, but also a part of themselves.

According to Dinesh Mohan (1995), urbanization and industrialization is usually discussed as a promise of a better thing, yet these processes are costly in terms of environment:

Industrial development has also contributed to the displacement of the rural as well as the ecological wisdom since modern agricultural practices are being supplanted with unsustainable industrial methods of land and resource utilization (122).

Mistry is an excellent illustrator of the destructive nature of uncontrolled industrialization, in which advancement or growth of the economy ends up to annihilate not only the environment but the human spirit as well. This novel highlights the loss of the rurality as a strong metaphor that depicts the environmental degradation that comes with development at the cost of nature. The fertile habitats are deprived of their resources and the once fertile lands are turned into barren wastelands, just as the characters whose lives have been trampled in the insatiable industrialization feel hopeless and without any purpose. By this, Mistry critiques the entire concept of progress by ignoring the balances of the environment and demonstrates how development, which is achieved by any means necessary, will lead to the destruction of the natural environment as well as the human beings that are reliant on it.

The novel brings the concept of 'water' being used as a literal and metaphorical symbol to enhance the survival and desperation in a rotting world. In this case, water is an essential need to life and so very important to the life of the characters. Nevertheless, it is also a metaphor about their struggles, dreams and the unyielding battles that they have to fight a world that is getting more and more violent through industrial growth. In this instance, specifically the river, is synonymous with the repetitive process of hope and abandonment of the characters. It is also an expression of the general ecological devastation that

arises through the mindless pursuit of industrialization where the reliance of life on water is contrasted by the damage that development has on the environment. In this symbolism Mistry emphasizes on the vulnerability of human dreams and survival within the environment that has been deprived of its life force.

Farokh, father of Maneck Kohlah looks back and sees how beautiful his surroundings are of his mountain village. Farokh, a blinded man through an accident, misses his vision and most of all when he sees the beauty of nature surrounding him. The river and natural environment at this point also represent the symbol of force of life which Farokh admires greatly, but ironically, cannot witness completely anymore. The image of water and river in the whole novel is connected with the themes of hope, hopelessness, and tragic outcomes of industrialization. The desire of Farokh towards his sight and relationship with nature are important elements of the overall theme within the novel of human existence and destruction of the environment. He says,

"He must have walked about three miles when the light of day turned towards the promise of sunset. Strains of pink and orange were weaving their ephemeral threads through the sky. He stopped to gaze westwards, eager to savour the moment. At times like these he wished for two eyes again, to get a wider sweep of the landscape." (216)

Water is a primary need in human life and it has become a part of the day-to-day life of the characters in the novel. It can be drinking, irrigation or sanitation, access to water is always an issue to the poor characters inhabiting the slums of Bombay. To give an example, the beggar character, who is compelled to survive in the squalor of the city, is often confronted with the issue of getting access to enough clean water to survive. This is not a fight alone but a psychological one too since water turns into a symbol of fundamental human dignity, something that is necessary to survive but unattainable to the marginalized. In this context, Mistry symbolically employs the element of water by the fact that the deprivation and suffering that comes as a result of social-economic inequality is literally illustrated with reference to water, whereby the poor lack the accessibility to the basic amenities such as clean water.

On a symbolic level, Mistry employs water to refer to the larger environmental crisis that was experienced in India in the 1970s. The destruction of the river systems, the water pollution and water deficiency are the main environmental issues in the novel. This is more so in how Mistry criticizes the inability of the government and industry to conserve important environmental resources such as water. According to the arguments of environmental historian Ramachandra Guha (1997),

Industrial wastes that have not been controlled and excessive exploitation of water resources in India have contributed to the hopeless depletion of clean water, which in turn increases social and environmental inequalities (120).

The lack of water and pollution as portrayed by Mistry resembles the political and industrial ineffectiveness of the time, and it brings out the crisis of the environment, which is a continued outcome of uncontrolled industrialization.

In the novel, the river pollution is a great symbol of the ethical and moral degradation of the characters. Mistry makes an implicit criticism against the inability of the authorities to preserve the essential natural resources, and such negligence is personified in the form of the slowly decaying river. The river, which is a source of life in the novel turns out to be polluted and limited. The river pollution resembles the loss of hope in the characters, whose life is more preoccupied with the hardships of survival. When the river which used to be the image of plenty is exhausted and polluted, the opportunities of the characters to have a more promising future are also exhausted. In this respect, Mistry makes a comparison between the river being dried up and the human being spirit being dried up.

Such a motif of slow demise of water and the consequent human hopelessness can be linked to the concept of ecological and social inequity. When water becomes a scarce resource, the marginalized communities are the most affected since they are already undervalued in terms of their need to access basic resources. The poor have to stay in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, whereby there is limited access to clean water. This comes out in the picture of the slums in Bombay as described by Mistry, where lack of clean water and sanitation makes the situation worse to the characters. According to Manju Bapat (2009),

In urbanizing as well as fast urbanizing cities such as Bombay, water scarcity is a big concern to the urban poor who are at the end of the queue of enjoying the municipal resources (92).

This disparity is criticized in this novel by Mistry as the most vulnerable are left to suffer both social and environmental decline as the river is polluted and the environmental degradation is enhanced to an even

worse level. The fall of the river is also symbolic of the greater environmental dilemma in India especially as it relates to the industrial waste and unregulated development. With the increasing industrialization and urbanization, there is increased demand of water yet the supply is dwindling because of pollution and overuse. In the *Environmentalism of the Poor*, Guha (1997) explains how the overuse of water resources in the world, especially in the industrializing countries such as India, has given rise to the depletion of freshwater resources with dire environmental and social consequences (141). This process is reflected in the novel written by Mistry as it is through the pollution of the river that he symbolizes the practice of unsustainable development that was popular in the 1970s. The river, formerly a source of life and sustenance, is polluted and closed, which reflects the destruction of not only the environment, but the people who are dependent on the river.

The more the river is being polluted, the more the characters become desperate. The river that in most cultures represents life and renewal turns into the symbol of death and despair in the story by Mistry. The slow erosion of the river, as well as the hopes of the characters, are related to the extermination of natural resources in the reality where the uncontrolled industrialization process caused the destruction of the ecosystems and the loss of the important resources. Vandana Shiva (2008) warns in *Soil Not Oil*,

The issue of water depletion, rivers and lakes being polluted is the symptom of some greater systemic crisis, whereby economic growth is valued over the sustainability of the ecological state (103).

Mistry criticizes such practice and demonstrates how the spirit of economic growth and industrial advancement has led to the devastation of the environment and human health. He writes:

"The river, once so full of life, was now a place where the smell of the chemicals and the sludge and the refuse of the factory made it a wasteland. What had been clean and sparkling, a river that brought life and fertility to the land, was now a poisoned stream that reflected only the agony of the people who lived beside it." (Mistry 271)

The river therefore, turns out to be a two-fold symbol of hope and despair. It reflects the possibility of life and reincarnation, but it is also the immense effects of environmental negligence. The inability of the characters to reach water and the fall of the river represent symbols of a bigger story of ecological degradation, in which human and environmental degradation are closely connected. Mistry relies upon the slow loss of the river to show that the overexploitation of natural resources especially water does not only result in ecological disaster but also in the loss of social and human equity.

#### **Role of the Nature in personal lives: A subtle Call to Eco Consciousness.**

Mistry has employed nature as the momentary panacea to comfort his characters, who require some relief amidst the insensitivity of their man-made worlds. These transient meetings with nature, be they in the countryside scenes of the countryside, in the green patches occasionally met with in the tumultuous Bombay of the city, are important not only as escapes, but as heartening statements of the healing influence of an undisturbed nature. Nature offers the characters some peace, albeit temporarily, in the middle of personal and socio-political turmoil, which is in contrast to the unstoppable fight they have to endure in their day-to-day life.

The nature in the novel is rather subtle, but it conveys a lot about the necessity of the ecological balance in life of the individual. Writing about the example of the beggar, who has lived a life of suffering and isolation, the moments of peace are brief, only achieved by the individual as he interacts with the natural world. Even these few moments of relief point at the idea that nature can heal and provide a certain sense of balance and rightfulness the much-needed sense of balance that is lacking in the cruel urban environment that they live in. These examples help the reader to remember that in a world where industrialization and urban sprawl predominantly prevail, nature is not merely a luxury but a resource that is essential towards the emotional and physical well-being. Mistry writes:

"The beggar closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the fresh air. The green of the trees, the flowers that bloomed around him, the birds that fluttered from branch to branch – they all seemed to promise him peace. It was a fleeting peace, like everything else in his life, but it was enough to make him believe that the world was not entirely filled with suffering." (188)

Mistry indirectly urges the ecological awareness in the entire book, inviting the reader to guide the readers to think about the fragile balance between the human development and the nature conservation. Having his characters live in spaces where nature is shown in the fleeting and fragmented forms, having their forms depicted in regard to the small green spaces or the rural setting, Mistry criticizes the effects of the fast urbanization and the environmental destruction. The relationship of the characters to nature, even when their lives are chaotic, is a reminder of the healing ability of the natural world to restore a person

as well as the society at large, the injury of which exploitation inflicts upon the individual is a possible way to heal the wound of exploitation.

Nature is not only a romanticized, idyllic place; it is a component of the human experience that is becoming so endangered by human progress. The presentation of nature as an emotional reliever by Mistry is subtle promotion of the argument against the loss of natural space through depleting natural spaces which needs to be mined by the reader to realize the significance of maintaining natural spaces in the well-being of the community and the individual. This commentary on the rehabilitative powers of nature highlights the more general environmental concerns of the novel, which say that a balance needs to be drawn between the advancement of civilization and preservation of the natural environment.

Ecological consciousness is not only called forth by Mistry, but it is the spirit of human beings that suffers when nature is disregarded. Representing nature as an escape, but one, which is short-lived and at all times threatened, Mistry provokes the reader to see the interdependence between the health of the environment and human health. He calls to acknowledge the healing quality of nature and calls on the necessity to conserve the nature under the forces of industrialization and urbanization.

## CONCLUSION

Rohinton Mistry has woven together in *A Fine Balance* not just a touching account of human fortitude, but also a lamenting investigation into the environmental powers active in 20<sup>th</sup> century India. Mistry portrays the social, economic and political struggles that shape the lives of his characters in such a way through his nuanced portrayal of urbanization, political oppression and environmental destruction that the author has created a highly interconnected portrayal of environmental concerns that permeate the lives of his characters. The environmental destruction ravages revealed in the novel, including the contamination of the river, to the loss of natural resource, are a precursor of the human struggles that the characters undergo, highlighting the fact that the health of the environment and the social justice of humans go hand-in-hand.

The ecological themes of the novel are incorporated in the broader context of survival whereby people, especially those belonging to the marginalized groups are disproportionately impacted by the destruction of the environment as well as socio-economic oppression. Pollution of the environment is not only a certain abstract problem, but it is very individual to the characters and they feel it in their daily life. The novel hence raises the issue of the immediate necessity of ecological awareness especially in an era where industrialization and urbanization have become very fast and have exerted enormous strain on natural resources. *A Fine Balance* is a warning and a wake-up call. The thin line that is described by Mistry between human advancement and environmental conservation challenges the readers into considering the effects of unregulated development both on human soul and on the planet. The novel reminds us that the fine balance that we are walking on is not only among human beings but also among humanity and the environment. With the world still struggling with the ecological crises, such as the global warming and the loss of biodiversity, the work by Mistry is still an important and timely force to remind us of the interdependence of the human health as well as the environmental health. *A Fine Balance* suggests that we should remember the importance of our relationship with nature in a world where industrialization, urbanization, and the political force often assume the upper hand over the ecological issues. It is also an effective reminder of how genuine development should consider both the well-being of people and the conservation of the natural environment and encourages the readers to become more ecologically conscious in order to face the future.

## WORKS CITED

1. Bapat, Manju. *Urban Sanitation in India: A Study of the Slums of Mumbai*. Oxford UP, 2009.
2. Dutt, Ashok K. *Urban India: A Geography of Political Economy*. Routledge, 2010.
3. Gadgil, Madhav. *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya*. Oxford UP, 1991.
4. Guha, Ramachandra. *The Death of the Nation: Urbanization and Environmental Crisis in India*. Oxford University Press, 2004.
5. Guha, Ramachandra. *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
6. Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. Vintage International, 1995.
7. Mohan, Dinesh. *Bombay: Metaphor for a Modern City*. Oxford University Press, 1995.
8. Shiva, Vandana. *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis*. South End Press, 2008.