



Violence and the Fragmentation of the Self: An Existential Reading of Maneck Kohlah in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract: *Existentialism explores the individual's search for meaning, identity and purpose amid suffering and alienation. Rohinton Mistry's novel A Fine Balance presents this existential crisis through Maneck Kohlah, whose life unfolds against the socio-political backdrop of the Indian Emergency. While the novel has largely been examined through the lenses of politics, caste and marginalization, Maneck's psychological and existential predicament has received comparatively less attention. This paper examines how state violence, displacement, the collapse of traditional values and the erosion of human relationships together fragment Maneck's sense of self. Unlike Ishvar, Om and Dina Dalal, who continue to negotiate oppressive circumstances, Maneck gradually loses the capacity to confront a hostile world. His search for education and personal fulfilment ultimately becomes a search for meaning in a society marked by political oppression and moral decay. The paper argues that Maneck's suicide is not merely an act of personal despair but the culmination of an existential crisis produced by violence, social disintegration and the loss of hope.*

Keywords: *Existentialism, Violence, Fragmentation, Self, Alienation, Maneck Kohlah, Identity.*

Introduction: Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is generally read as a political novel documenting the atrocities perpetrated during the Internal Emergency in India between 1975 and 1977. While the novel undoubtedly foregrounds the sufferings of the marginalized, the dispossessed and the politically powerless, it simultaneously explores another profound dimension of human existence, namely the existential predicament of the individual in an absurd and morally disintegrating world. Among all the major characters in the novel, it is Manek Kohlah who most intensely embodies this existential crisis. Unlike Ishvar and Omprakash, whose struggle is primarily for physical survival, or Dina Dalal, whose resistance is directed against patriarchal domination, Manek's struggle is inward and philosophical. His life gradually develops into a relentless search for meaning in a world where each and every human value appears to collapse under the pressure of political violence, social injustice and personal bereavement. Mistry thus transforms Manek's personal story into an exploration of modern existential anxiety.

Manek's predicament becomes more significant because he belongs neither to the economically oppressed classes nor to the politically influential sections of society. Born into a comparatively secure Parsi family in the Himalayan foothills, he initially enjoys emotional warmth, educational opportunities and economic stability. His journey to Bombay is therefore not prompted by poverty or social persecution but by the hope of acquiring professional education and securing a respectable future. Yet the city gradually dismantles his innocence. Every stage of his experience exposes him to fresh manifestations of suffering which steadily erode his confidence in the meaningfulness of existence. The political violence of the Emergency, the

degradation of human dignity, the destruction of friendships and finally the deaths and ruin of those whom he loves combine to produce an overwhelming sense of futility. Through Manek, Mistry demonstrates that suffering is not merely a material condition but also a profound psychological and philosophical experience capable of destroying the very desire to live.

This paper therefore seeks to examine Manek Kohlah as the existential centre of *A Fine Balance*. It argues that his life represents the gradual collapse of human aspiration in a socio-political order governed by violence, corruption and injustice. The paper further attempts to demonstrate that Mistry does not isolate Manek's existential crisis from history. Rather, he presents it as the inevitable consequence of national politics, social disintegration and the repeated betrayal of ordinary human expectations. Thus, the novel ultimately suggests that political oppression extends beyond the destruction of bodies; it invades the inner consciousness of individuals and leaves them incapable of sustaining faith either in society or in existence itself. Through the tragic destiny of Manek Kohlah, Mistry exposes the intimate relationship between external historical catastrophe and internal existential despair, thereby transforming an individual tragedy into a powerful commentary on the human condition in post-Independence India.

Theoretical Perspective: Existentialism is one of the major philosophical movements that explores the individual's search for meaning, identity and purpose in an uncertain and often indifferent world. Although the philosophy developed through the writings of thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, its central concern remains the predicament of the individual who must confront anxiety, loneliness, freedom and the burden of choice. Existentialist thought maintains that life does not possess an inherent meaning; rather, meaning has to be created through individual experience, action and responsibility. At the same time, it recognizes that human beings frequently encounter alienation, despair and the absurdity of existence when they fail to establish a meaningful relationship with the world around them. Read from this perspective, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* emerges not merely as a socio-political novel documenting the Emergency and the sufferings of the marginalized, but also as a profound exploration of the existential condition of the individual. Among all the major characters in the novel, Manek Kohlah most vividly embodies this existential predicament.

Manek's life is marked by a continuous search for belonging, stability and meaning in a rapidly changing world. His departure from the security of his mountain home, his experiences in the city, his growing awareness of social injustice and political violence, and finally his inability to reconcile himself with the tragic transformation of the people he once knew gradually deepen his sense of alienation and despair. Mistry presents Manek not as a passive observer of events but as a sensitive individual whose faith in human values is repeatedly challenged by the harsh realities of post-Independence India. His personal crisis therefore develops alongside the political and social crisis of the nation, suggesting that the disintegration of the external world inevitably affects the inner life of the individual. Manek's tragic end consequently should not be understood merely as an act of personal weakness or emotional collapse; rather, it represents the culmination of an existential struggle in which the individual finds himself unable to discover meaning and hope in a world overwhelmed by violence, injustice and human suffering.

Manek Kohlah's Educational Journey and the Beginning of Existential Alienation: Unlike the journeys undertaken by Ishvar and Omprakash which originate in economic deprivation and caste oppression, Manek Kohlah's movement from the Himalayan foothills to Bombay begins with hope and expectation. His parents arrange his education in refrigeration and air-conditioning so that he may secure a respectable profession and inherit a stable future. His journey is therefore fundamentally different from those of the other protagonists. It is neither a forced migration nor an escape from immediate persecution. Rather, it is a carefully planned transition from adolescence to adulthood. Nevertheless, Mistry gradually transforms this apparently ordinary educational journey into the beginning of an intense existential crisis. The city which promises opportunity simultaneously becomes the site where Manek begins to lose emotional certainty, familial intimacy and faith

in the permanence of human relationships. Thus what initially appears to be a journey towards professional success gradually develops into a journey towards alienation and despair.

Mistry indicates this impending alienation even before Manek leaves home. While his father looks upon education as the means of ensuring economic stability, his mother instinctively perceives the emotional consequences of separation. The narrative records her anxiety in remarkably simple yet profound words: “Distance was a dangerous thing, she knew. Distance changed people” (Mistry 223). Soon afterwards she silently wonders, “Was she losing him now forever?” (223). These observations are not merely expressions of maternal affection; they anticipate the emotional disintegration that follows throughout the novel. Physical distance here gradually becomes symbolic of psychological distance. As Manek travels farther from home, he also moves farther away from the certainties that had shaped his childhood. The journey therefore initiates not simply geographical displacement but the erosion of identity itself. Mistry subtly suggests that modern education and urban mobility, though associated with progress, may simultaneously produce loneliness, detachment and existential uncertainty.

The symbolic significance of Manek’s departure becomes more apparent when the narrative describes his train journey to Bombay. The novel records that his father arranged “tickets were booked for the various legs of the journey” (Mistry 222), presenting the movement as part of a carefully organized future. Yet the journey itself immediately acquires darker overtones. As the train proceeds southward, Manek imagines it as a lifeless creature, thereby unconsciously associating movement with decay rather than vitality. The narrative further observes that “It was thirty-six hours after leaving home that Maneck arrived in the city, clothes covered in dust and eyes smarting. His nose ached, and his throat felt raw” (Mistry 234). The physical exhaustion accompanying his arrival reflects more than the discomfort of travel. It symbolizes the gradual wearing away of innocence before he has even entered the social world that will ultimately destroy his faith in humanity. Mistry thus prepares the ground for Manek’s existential development by linking the beginning of his educational career with images of fatigue, vulnerability and disorientation.

Bombay soon intensifies this sense of estrangement. The hostel environment, instead of facilitating intellectual growth, exposes Manek to ragging, humiliation and emotional isolation. Consequently, he leaves the hostel and takes shelter in Dina Dalal’s flat. Although this relocation introduces him to Dina, Ishvar and Omprakash and briefly provides a substitute family, it also initiates his deeper engagement with the harsh realities of contemporary India. Living among people whose lives are governed by poverty, political oppression and social violence, Manek gradually realizes that education alone cannot guarantee either security or fulfilment. The optimistic vision with which he had arrived in the city steadily gives way to doubt and introspection. His educational journey thus ceases to be merely vocational and becomes philosophical, compelling him to confront questions regarding justice, suffering and the purpose of human existence. In this manner, Mistry transforms an ordinary student’s migration into the first stage of an existential awakening that ultimately culminates in tragic self-annihilation.

The Collapse of Human Relationships and the Intensification of Existential Crisis: If Manek’s educational journey initiates his existential alienation, his encounters with the lives of Dina Dalal, Ishvar and Omprakash deepen that alienation into a profound crisis of human existence. During his stay at Dina’s flat, Manek gradually develops emotional bonds with people who are themselves struggling against different forms of oppression. Dina resists patriarchal domination, while Ishvar and Om survive the brutal consequences of caste discrimination and state violence. Their shared meals, conversations and everyday companionship create a temporary domestic harmony in the midst of a chaotic political atmosphere. Mistry thus constructs an alternative family founded not upon blood relationship but upon sympathy, mutual dependence and shared suffering. For Manek, who has left behind the security of his parental home, this small domestic world restores a sense of emotional belonging. Yet the irony of the novel lies in the fact that this fragile human fellowship cannot withstand the destructive forces operating outside it. As political events

gradually invade their private lives, the very relationships that sustain Manek emotionally begin to disintegrate before his eyes.

The disintegration of this domestic harmony is neither accidental nor purely personal. It is directly connected with the larger political structure governing the nation during the Emergency. Ishvar and Om are repeatedly displaced through demolition drives, forced labour, police brutality and compulsory sterilization, while Dina's economic independence collapses after losing her tailors and eventually her rented apartment. Manek becomes the silent witness to these successive tragedies. Unlike the other protagonists, he possesses neither the strength to resist nor the practical necessity to struggle for survival. Instead, he internalizes every catastrophe and gradually loses his faith in the moral order of the world. Mistry therefore presents Manek not merely as an observer but as one who suffers psychologically through the suffering of others. Their defeats become his own existential burden. Political oppression thus extends beyond its immediate victims and penetrates the consciousness of those who merely witness its consequences.

After completing his studies, Manek returns to his native hills and later leaves India for employment abroad. His departure appears to promise escape from the disturbing realities of the country. Yet Mistry makes it clear that geographical distance cannot erase psychological memory. The experiences accumulated in Bombay continue to shape Manek's consciousness. The city, the friendships and the injustices remain inseparable parts of his inner life. Consequently, when he returns to India after several years to attend his father's funeral, he no longer comes back as the optimistic young student who had once arrived with dreams of professional success. He returns burdened with loss, memory and uncertainty. Even before reaching Bombay, he encounters another manifestation of political violence. The taxi driver informs him that "Sikhs are the ones being massacred in the riots" (Mistry 580), referring to the anti-Sikh violence following Indira Gandhi's assassination. Thus Manek's return journey immediately confronts him with yet another spectacle of organized brutality. The nation that he revisits appears unchanged in its capacity for violence, and his hope of rediscovering familiarity is shattered at the very outset.

The cumulative effect of these experiences is the gradual collapse of Manek's confidence in the permanence of human relationships and in the possibility of meaningful existence. Every place associated with affection has undergone irreversible transformation; every relationship has been scarred by history. Mistry therefore portrays Manek's existential crisis not as an abstract philosophical problem but as the psychological consequence of repeated encounters with suffering, loss and historical violence. His consciousness increasingly recognizes that neither education, nor migration, nor economic success can ultimately protect the individual from the destructive forces unleashed by society and the state. It is this realization that prepares the ground for the tragic conclusion of his life, where existential despair finally overwhelms the instinct for survival.

Political Violence, Existential Despair and Manek's Tragic End: The final phase of Manek Kohlah's life demonstrates how political violence ultimately invades the inner consciousness of the individual and destroys the very desire to live. Mistry carefully prepares this tragic conclusion by presenting Manek's return to Bombay after nearly eight years abroad. His journey back is prompted not by ambition or expectation but by bereavement following his father's death. Yet the city that once provided him with companionship has undergone irreversible transformation. The people with whom he had shared moments of affection have either been defeated by socio-political forces or reduced to lives of unbearable misery. Manek's return therefore becomes an emotional confrontation with the devastating consequences of history. It is no longer a homecoming but a painful realization that time, politics and violence have together dismantled every source of hope that had once sustained him.

Throughout this return journey Mistry repeatedly emphasizes movement through images of roads, railway stations and streets, yet these movements no longer signify progress. Rather, every step leads Manek towards greater psychological collapse. After meeting Dina Dalal, he learns about the horrifying fate of Ishvar and

Omprakash and immediately sets out to find them. The narrative records: "In the quiet street outside the house, he began strolling along the footpath... After several turns, he saw two beggars rounding the corner from the main road" (Mistry 607). The sight that confronts him is the complete destruction of human dignity. The once industrious tailors have become professional beggars, while Ishvar, physically crippled by state brutality, sits on a wheeled platform pulled by Om. Their transformation is not merely an individual tragedy but a visible representation of the violence inflicted by the State Emergency upon ordinary citizens. Manek silently witnesses the collapse of two men whose only aspiration had been to earn an honest livelihood. At this moment, political history assumes a deeply personal form, for the suffering of his friends destroys the last remnants of his faith in justice and humanity.

Mistry does not allow Manek any possibility of emotional recovery after this encounter. Instead, the narrative steadily intensifies his psychological isolation. Unable either to speak to Ishvar and Om or to reconcile himself to their tragic condition, Manek walks away towards the railway station. The narration observes: "Gradually, it became difficult for Maneck to make his way along the pavement. He realized he was walking against the flow" (Mistry 611). This apparently ordinary description possesses immense symbolic significance. Manek's movement "against the flow" suggests his inability to accommodate himself to a society that has normalized injustice, violence and human degradation. He can neither accept the world as it exists nor imagine any possibility of changing it. Consequently, he finds himself completely isolated from the social order around him. The metaphor of walking against the flow thus becomes the final expression of his existential alienation.

The novel closes this existential trajectory with devastating inevitability. The train journey that had begun the novel with hope now returns as an instrument of death. Manek throws himself before an approaching train, bringing his search for meaning to an abrupt and tragic conclusion. His suicide is not simply an act of personal weakness or emotional instability. Rather, it constitutes Mistry's most severe indictment of a political and social order that systematically destroys the individual's faith in life. The same historical forces that cripple Ishvar, mutilate Om's future, and reduce Dina to economic dependence also extinguish Manek's psychological capacity to endure existence. Through his death Mistry demonstrates that political oppression is not confined to prisons, demolition drives or sterilization camps; it penetrates the deepest recesses of human consciousness where hope itself is annihilated. Manek's tragedy therefore becomes the ultimate symbol of existential despair produced by a world in which human compassion repeatedly succumbs to violence, corruption and historical injustice. His death transforms an individual story into a universal commentary on the fragility of human aspirations in the face of relentless socio-political catastrophe.

Conclusion: Through the character of Manek Kohlah, Rohinton Mistry transforms *A Fine Balance* into much more than a political novel documenting the Indian Emergency. While the novel undoubtedly exposes the brutality of state power, caste oppression and social inequality, it simultaneously investigates the devastating psychological consequences of these historical forces upon the individual consciousness. Manek's life illustrates that political violence does not merely produce physical suffering; it gradually destroys the individual's capacity to believe in justice, hope and the continuity of human relationships. His educational journey, which begins with the promise of professional success and personal fulfilment, ultimately culminates in complete existential despair. Mistry thus presents Manek as the moral and philosophical centre of the novel through whom the larger historical tragedy acquires its deepest human significance.

Unlike Ishvar, Omprakash or Dina Dalal, whose struggles are directed towards survival and independence, Manek's struggle remains essentially inward. He continuously attempts to reconcile the ideals of humanity with the brutal realities unfolding around him, but every experience only widens the gulf between aspiration and reality. The destruction of his substitute family, the degradation of human dignity during the Emergency, the recurrence of communal violence and the irreversible transformation of the people whom he loved

convince him that suffering has become the defining condition of modern existence. His final act of suicide therefore should not be interpreted merely as an individual failure but as the culmination of an accumulated historical, political and emotional crisis. Through Manek's tragic destiny, Mistry demonstrates how organized systems of oppression ultimately invade the inner world of the individual and extinguish the desire to continue living.

It may therefore be concluded that Mistry employs Manek Kohlah not simply as one of the four principal protagonists but as the novel's existential conscience. His life provides the philosophical framework through which the political events of post-Independence India are interpreted at the level of individual experience. By tracing Manek's gradual movement from innocence to alienation and finally to self-annihilation, Mistry reveals the intimate relationship between national history and personal destiny. *A Fine Balance* thus suggests that the greatest violence committed by an unjust political order lies not merely in the destruction of bodies but in its ability to rob individuals of meaning, hope and the will to live. Manek Kohlah's tragedy consequently stands as one of the most poignant representations of existential disillusionment in contemporary Indian English fiction, affirming Mistry's profound concern with the fragile condition of humanity in a world overwhelmed by political oppression and moral disintegration.

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