

Expressing Relationships through Food in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract:

The Indian-born contemporary Canadian writer “weaves” his novel *A Fine Balance*, published in 1995, around four main characters whose stories are presented to us mainly through flashbacks. The strictly observed caste system in the Indian society, education or lack of it, are also transposed in people’s attitudes towards food or table manners. The article focuses on the way in which the invisible lines of prejudice that separate people eventually disappear, and how the author presents it, symbolically.

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That food is no simple matter has been widely recognized – in fields such as anthropology, sociology, food science, semiotics, history, political science, and economics, as well as in literary, film, and cultural studies. Food nourishes and poisons; it soothes and tortures, divides as well as unites individuals and groups of people. Food is essential, but it can also be seen as optional, superfluous, or extravagant. Food plays important roles in various types of rituals. It also serves as a means of communicating and acting out our religious, political, philosophical, and cultural views or of expressing a range of emotions. Food may be an object of intense desire, admiration, addiction, craving, fear, disgust, and loathing, or it may be ignored or rejected either intentionally or unintentionally. Food involves production, distribution, preparation, and consumption, and in each process there are rules, taboos, structures, order, customs, styles, fashions, and conventions to create, to follow, or to break. Food has been discovered, invented, classified, and scrutinized, as well as enjoyed, consumed, and devoured.

The situation becomes more complicated when the subject is not actual food but food within literary texts, and food, like literature, looks like an object but is actually a relationship. (Aoyama, 2008:2)

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Rohinton Mistry's novel cleverly weaves the tales of the four main characters into one story, just as Dina, one of the protagonists, makes a quilt out of patches of surplus fabric. Like Isabel Allende or Salman Rushdie and so many others, Mistry, an Indian-born writer who emigrated to Canada, writes in his novels about the country he has left behind, producing versions of his "imaginary homeland."

In an interview, the author explains the way he chose the background of his characters:

... after writing my first two books, I became aware that they were stories about a very particular and special kind of city and even then I had focused only on a very small part of it – the Parsi community. I made a conscious decision in this book to include more than this, mainly because in India seventy-five percent of Indians live in villages and I wanted to embrace more of the social reality of India. So I made the tailors come from a small village and Maneck come from a hill station in the North. While the city is certainly important, I wanted to give a strong sense of the different locales and I wanted to root the reader in those places so that he or she has a very clear sense of where these people are coming from and what their difficulties are now. (Interview with Robert Mclay, in *Nasta*, 2004:204)

One focus of the novel is on Maneck Kohlah, a Parsi student in "Refrigeration and air-conditioning," who has left his Himalayan home for the squalour of the city. His father manages a shop that belonged to their family for generations and even produces his own soda, a popular beverage among the locals, Kohlah Cola.

Once extremely wealthy, Maneck's family was first affected by the Partition, by the "birth" of the new state of Pakistan, which arbitrarily drew new territorial boundaries. Surrounded by good friends, with the shop going well and his soda well-known even to faraway places thanks to his customers, Maneck's father, Farokh Kohlah leads a happy life until the day "the mountains began to leave them," as the writer puts it.

It started with the roads. Engineers in *sola topis* arrived with their sinister instruments and charted their designs on reams of paper. These would be modern roads, they promised, roads that would hum with the swift passage of modern traffic. Roads, wide and heavy-duty, to replace scenic mountain paths too narrow for the broad vision of nation-builders and World Bank officials. (Mistry, 1996:214)

Invaded by “modernity,” the beautiful scenery turns into an ugly sight, and the progress brought about by the new roads makes Maneck’s father “perpetually irritable.” Faroukh only sees the decay of his former haven: “Wherever he turned, he began to see the spread of shacks and shanties. [...] The destitute encampments scratched away at the hillsides, the people drawn from every direction by stories of construction and wealth and employment. But the ranks of the jobless always exponentially outnumbered the jobs, and a *hungry* army sheltered permanently on the slopes. The forests were being *devoured* for firewood; bald patches materialized upon the body of the hills. Then the seasons revolted.” (Mistry, 1996:217)

The changes also affected his business:

Snuggled amid the goods that the loathsome lorries transported up the mountains was a deadly foe: soft drinks, to stock the new shops and the hotels. In the beginning they dribbled into town in small quantities – a few crates that were easily outnumbered by the ever popular Kaycee. Out of curiosity, people would occasionally sample the newcomers, then shrug and turn their backs; Kohlah’s Cola was still number one. [...] The corporations handed out free samples, engaged in price wars, and erected giant billboards showing happy children with smiling parents, or a man and woman tenderly touching foreheads over a bottle out of which two straws penetrated the lovers’ lips. The dribble of soft drinks turned into deluge. Brands which had been selling for years in the big cities arrived to saturate the town. [...] So Kohlah’s Cola never stood a chance. The General Store’s Backbone was broken, and the secret formula’s journey down the generations was nearing its end. (Mistry, 1996:220-221)

When Maneck becomes a student, an incident in the refectory almost starts a revolution in their university:

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the vegetarian section. Students leapt from their places, tables were overturned, plates and glasses smashed, and chairs flung at the kitchen door. It was not long before the reason for the uproar was learned by the entire dining hall: a vegetarian student had discovered a sliver of meat floating in a supposedly vegetarian gravy of lentils. The news spread, about the bastard caterer who was toying with their religious sentiments, trampling on their beliefs, polluting their beings, all for the sake of fattening his

miserable wallet. Within minutes, every vegetarian living in the hostel had descended on the canteen, raging about the duplicity. [...] The canteen agitation success astonished Avinash and his followers. The Principal dictated a letter of termination addressed to the caterer. The Hostel Committee was authorized to select a replacement. Now the jubilant students held a victory celebration and grew more ambitious. Their President promised that, one by one, they would weed out all the evils of the campus [...]” (Mistry, 1996:243)

Like Swift, whose *Gulliver* describes an egg-related war, Mistry shows us how rebellions can sometimes start from apparently trifling matters such as food preferences. Outrage for mixing meat in vegetarian dishes spreads towards other matters concerning the university and even society in general.

The other two male characters whose story unfolds before our eyes are Ishvar and Omprakash Darji, uncle and nephew, who leave their lower caste of tanners in order to become tailors. Lower caste members were called Untouchables and included people whose occupations or habits were considered polluting, dirty, such as taking lives for a living, as did the fishermen, killing and disposing of dead cattle or working with their hides (tanners), coming into contact with human waste (sweepers), or eating flesh of cattle, pigs or chickens. Ishvar’s and Omprakash’s family belonged to the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers:

The Chamaars skinned the carcass, ate the meat, and tanned the hide, which was turned into sandals, whips, harnesses, and waterskins. Dukhi learned to appreciate how dead animals provided his family’s livelihood. And as he mastered the skills, imperceptibly but relentlessly Dukhi’s own skin became impregnated with the odour that was part of his father’s smell [...] Like the filth of the dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked, the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere. (Mistry, 1996:95-96)

The Indian order of castes is a cultural system with restrictions placed on food, sex, and rituals. Order is maintained through ideas concerning purity of the members of the castes. Fed up with constant humiliations and the difficulties of his own life, Dukhi changes their family tradition and sends his two sons as apprentices to a tailor, shocking the villagers: “consternation was general throughout the village: someone had dared to break the timeless chain of caste, retribution was bound to be swift.” (Mistry, 1996: 95)

The two men become tailors and try their fortune in the capital, looking for work. Ashraf Chacha, whose apprentices they used to be, arranged their stay with a friend of his, who proves to be far from hospitable and friendly. Nawaz accepted to shelter them but he is not happy with the situation, so he lets them sleep in a filthy shed and only behaves like a proper host when he sees some prospects of getting rid of them:

They could smell food cooking, but Nawaz did not invite them to eat. [...] Light from the house spilled out through the kitchen window. They sat below it and finished the chapatis Mumtaz Chachi had packed, listening to noises from the buildings around them. [...] There was no offer of morning tea from inside the house, which Omprakash found quite offensive. 'Customs are different in the city,' said Ishvar. [...] On the last night, Nawaz's relief spurred him to greater generosity. 'Please eat with me,' he invited them in. 'Honour me at last once before you go. Miriam! Three dinners!' [...] Miriam brought the food to the table and left. Even obscured by the burkha, Ishvar and Omprakash had been able to see her eyes cloud with embarrassment at her husband's hypocrisy. (Mistry, 1996: 154; 163)

A horrible fate awaits Dukhi's son and grandson towards the end of the novel is thus anticipated for the reader. An upper caste member who felt they were disrespectful towards him gets his revenge by forcing the doctor who performs the sterilisations to cut off Om's testicles. Castrated by force, according to the Prime Minister's orders, Ishvar's legs get infected after the vasectomy, and they have to be amputated, and Om becomes very fat: "One sat on a low platform that moved on castors. He had no legs. The other pulled the platform with a rope slung over his shoulder. His plumpness sat upon him strangely, like oversized, padded clothes." (Mistry, 1996:608) Unable to do any sewing anymore, they are, once again, reduced to being low caste members, as they become beggars. Their only joyful moments are the lunch-time meals that Dina still manages nearly every day to offer them secretly in her brother's house.

Dina Dalal, the only female character of the main four protagonists, starts her life in a traditional family, who doesn't allow her to study in order to become a doctor like her father, as she would have wanted. After their parents' death, she is left in the care of her elder brother, Nusswan, who treats her as if she were a servant. Rebellious by nature, Dina reflects the changes in the Indian society through her will to live on her own, struggling

against cultural expectations for widows, as Suzanne Keen puts it (Keen, 2007:111), and trying to earn a living without remarrying (after her husband's death), in spite of her brother's repeated attempts of finding her a suitor. In spite of having to ask for her brother's help every now and then, and of returning to live with him and his family towards the end of the novel, for a while she successfully manages to deal with all the problems.

In Paul Brians' opinion, "the novel is in large part the story of the education of her heart, as she learns to overcome her prejudices against these two men who on the one hand give her an income and on the other threaten it, for they are illegal workers (and eventually dwellers) in her rent-controlled apartment. If the landlord can document her employment of them, he can evict her. She is a sophisticated middle-class urban Parsi, and they are ill-educated untouchable Hindu villagers." (Brians, 2003:159)

The empty stomach smell floating out their mouths, like a cocoon containing words, was unpleasant. She was not interested in their excuses. The sooner they were at their sewing-machines the better. (78) [...] She went back into the kitchen to make the tea she had promised. [...] She squinted at the cups and saucers, at their rose borders. Pink or red? Pink ones for the tailors, she decided, to be set aside with the segregated water glass. Red for myself. [...] The kettle blurted its readiness with a healthy spout of steam. She held back for a vigorous boil, enjoying the thickening haze and the water's steady babble: the illusions of chatter, friendship, bustling life. (84)

Maneck's disregard of the social difference between him and the two tailors is shown by his friendly attitude towards them from the beginning, and by his joining them at the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel for meals. When their common afternoon break become regular, Dina's annoyance grows, so the uncle, Ishvar, stays behind, encouraging the two boys to go ahead.

Dina was all praise for him. [...] She poured Maneck's tea into the segregated pink roses cup and brought it to Ishvar. 'You might as well drink it.' [...] From that day, he stayed behind more and more while Dina continued to make tea in Maneck's name but poured it in Ishvar's cup. [...] Ishvar noted that the tea breaks upset Dinabai no more. It confirmed his suspicion, that she was longing for company. (277)

It is during one of their dinners that Maneck tells Dina, his landlady, the tailors' story, thus changing a bit further on her attitude towards them:

Halfway through the meal, she remembered what he had said about the tailors. 'They were cobblers? Why did they change?' [...] So he briefly related the story Ishvar and Om had shared with him in bits and pieces, over weeks, over cups of tea in the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel, about their village, about the landlords who had mistreated the Chamaars all their lives the whippings, the beatings, the rules that the untouchable castes were forced to observe.

She stopped eating, toying with her fork. [...] As he continued, the fork slipped from her fingers, clattering outside the plate. He concluded quickly when he came to the murders of the parents and children and grandparents. [...] She shook her head as though in disbelief. She tried to resume eating, then gave up. 'Compared to theirs, my life is nothing but comfort and happiness. (Mistry, 1996:340)

As we see, mealtimes prove to be a more appropriate occasion to find out or to exchange information which influence the characters' relationships. She allows her workers to sleep on her verandah and to use her bathroom, and she offers them tea, so, at the end of the second week the two tailors decide to share the daily cleaning, in return for her kindness. Dina feels ashamed, as she had done all that in order to keep them from being taken again by the police.

Deeply moved, she poured the tea while they were finishing up. They came into the kitchen to replace the cleaning things, and she handed two cups to Om. Noticing the red rose borders, he started to point out the error, 'The pink ones for us,' then stopped. Her face told him she was aware of it. [...] He turned away, hoping she did not see the film of water glaze his eyes. (Mistry, 1996:389)

One of the most fundamental rules of the caste system is that one should take meals only with one's equals, a rule eventually broken by Dina. The separation, the barriers that she has tried to maintain between her and her employees are impossible to maintain. First she has banished them in the back room, locked in while she delivered the finished products, because she wanted to avoid being followed and cut out as an intermediary in the

transaction. But she has been alone for too long, and having them every day in her small apartment is almost like having a family again, and her attitude towards them changes, she shows more consideration towards them and their feelings.

She set out four plates and called the tailors. Their faces plainly showed what an immense honour they considered it. [...] She started eating, and Maneck picked up his fork, winking at Om. The tailors sat motionless, watching the food. When she looked up, they smiled nervously. Exchanging glances, they touched the cutlery, uncertain, hesitating to pick it up. Dina understood. Abandoning her own knife and fork, she used fingers to convey a piece of potato to her mouth. Maneck caught on as well, and the tailors started their meal. (Mistry, 1996:396)

It is believed that both meals and drinks reflect the quality of social relationships. Drinks are generally available to strangers and acquaintances, whereas meals are usually reserved for family, close friends, and honored guests. In Mistry's novel, following the tea or meal related scenes, the reader notices how Ishvar and Omprakash gradually evolve from strangers, mere employees, to acquaintances served with tea, and to "family members." Sharing food means seeking communion, companionship. The proof that Dina has finally managed to overcome her prejudices and to accept the two strangers for almost family members is shown by the fact that they finish by sitting at the same table and sharing the same meals: "They were all eating the same food, drinking the same water. Sailing under one flag." (Mistry, 1996:399)

Although *A Fine Balance* is a historical novel, the paragraphs that have caught our attention show how changes in society, student rebellions, prejudices and tolerance/intolerance are expressed by Rohinton Mistry through images and scenes revolving around food.

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