

# Portrayal of Migration in the Novel ‘A Fine Balance’ and Migration in COVID-19: A Comparative Study

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## Abstract

Objective of this paper is to study the effects of migration in and outside the country. Migration has been in trend from a very old time. People have been migrating from one place to another place or across the border. A number of books have also been authored in literature with focus upon internal and external migration. To understand the reason and impact of migration I have taken Rohinton Mistry's famous novel 'A Fine Balance' which is based on the theme of migration due to social and economic issues. This novel depicts social and economic issues of migration with keeping eyes upon the pitiful situation of lower and labour class. Portrayal of displacement from one place to another has been done realistically. It seems that all the events are happening in front of reader's eyes. Whether it's the plight of main characters in the novel or pain of the migrant labourers, we discovered that behind the migration of common people social and economic issues are more in force than other issues. In social issues, casteism, pressure of landlords, difficulty of switching the profession, lack of security, feud, marriage, drought, etc. Are the key reasons of migration. In economic issues, better education, poverty, lack of variety of occupation, allurements of city life or life abroad, desire to earn handsome money are some of the reasons.

Reverse migration too is one big issue. When people come to the cities in search of a better life, what forces them to return. If we observe the situation during Covid -19 in India, people, especially the labour class return to their villages owing to many reasons. Lack of food and unemployment are the main reasons among them. Finally, the focus of this paper is, whether it is the story of the labour class in the novel or during the crisis of Covid-19, they are the ones who have always borne the brunt of circumstances and lockdown.

**Keywords:** Pull and Push Factors, Social and Economic Issues of Migration, Reverse Migration, Money.

Man has been a curious creature from the time immemorial. Neither borders nor circumstances could prevent his movement. Sometimes, he moved only for fun, sometimes for business, sometimes to explore the world, sometimes due to his greed and sometimes he was driven away. But the movement has been keep going. He migrated from one place to another via road, sky and water. If we read the travel books, they are full of with adventurous journey of men from place to place. Sometimes, his movement was shown geographically, historically, politically and in literature there are numerous aspect of his journey. He does not move only physically but mentally, in dream and by magic too. Not only that, in science fiction like Journey to Centre of the Earth by Jules Verne and The Centre of the Universe by Axwell and Magnus he goes from earth to space and to the centre of earth. List is too long. But in literature, migration

of people has been described very realistically and frequently. It is rightly said that literature is the mirror of society. Whatever happens in society, literature has picturise that very efficiently and beautifully. Whether it is the calamity of first World War, Second World War, partition of India, pandemics of different times and places, literature has given a huge place to all. But at present, when everyone is going through the real calamity of Covid-19 irrespective of class, caste or religion and all are facing numerous types of problems, there is one class that is hit by it the most. And that class is the labour class. Their reverse migration from big cities to their small places is a very grave issue of discussion. But before discussing reverse migration, we should know the reason for their migration from their place of birth.

According to categorization, there are two factors behind migration of people- push and pull factors. Some reasons of push factors are unemployment, drought or flood, enmity with someone, bad relation and poverty, while better work opportunity, education, an aspiration for better life standard, attraction of big cities, high wages, stay of relatives or friends in cities are some of the pull factors. Marriage also a reason of migration that may be count in both categories. Number of books have been written in literature about migration, about reason and result of migration. This research paper focuses upon migration both in reality and through the novel A Fine Balance.

Before coming to the main topic, here is a short summary of the novel. Rohinton Mistry, an Indian-born Canadian writer penned down the novel A Fine Balance in 1995, is the story of four characters from diverse backgrounds who meet each other in The City by the Sea (Bombay). But the focus of this story is two main characters Ishvar and Omprakash who are from Chamar caste and their traditional vocation is to skin the dead animals and they work as mochi. Ishvar and Narayan were two sons of Dukhi Mochi. Due to his own unhappy experience, Dukhi did not want that his sons adopt this profession of tanner. But being a person from low caste, switch their profession was almost impossible. Upper caste people have their influence and anyone who tried to change their vocation, he faced dire consequence or penalty was death. Especially, Thakur Dharamsai, an influential person from high caste oppressed all people from lower caste. But Dukhi took a courageous decision to not hand over this work of tanner to his children and he sent both his sons to Ashraff, a friend of Dukhi, who lives in city. Ashraff is a tailor and a very gentle person. He took the responsibility and good care of the children and both become very close to him. After finish the apprentice of tailoring work, both returned to the village. Narayan commenced his work as a tailor back in the village and he sewed the clothes of his own caste and Balmikis. He got married to a girl named Radha and a son born to him, named, Omprakash. Later, Narayan sends his son Om with his uncle Ishvar to city. Although Narayan became popular among his own people, but he became a thorn too in high caste people's side, who could not tolerate a lower caste man thrive at all, especially Thakur Dharamsi. Later on, Narayan decided to contest the election against Thakur Dharamsi, as people from lower caste were not able to cast their vote due to his fear. But things take very ugly turn and Thakur Dharamsai and his people first killed Narayan very gruesomely and then burn his all family members. Ishvar and Om survive this tragedy as they were in city. They discovered about the whole incident only when they return to village after a month or so. Police could not help them in the case as one month was already passed. Heartbroken, they returned to Ashraff Chacha. This tragedy leaves very deep mark upon Om's tender mind, he was not able to sleep for several nights afterwards. Gradually, Ishvar and Ashraff Chacha try to bring Om to come to terms with the situation. They resume their tailoring work and life returns to normalcy. But luck was not on their side. A readymade garment shop has been opened opposite on the

road. Their earning by sewing clothes badly affected. Now one shop could not be sufficient to earn the bread for three people. Chacha suggested them to go to Bombay and look for some work of tailoring to earn money. Finally they decided to go and Ashraff gave them a letter addressing to an acquaintance, named Nawaz so that he could help them to search the work of sewing. Just before their arrival to the city emergency was imposed. They planned that after saving enough money they will return and start their own work. Having faced many hardships, they got work as hired tailors with one Dina Dalal. They meet Maneck Koala too in Bombay. All the four people live together. But no any dream come true neither they could return to Ashraff nor Om could be able to get married. Circumstances take so bitter and unexpected turn that at the end of the novel, they reduced to beggars only.

Although there is no similarity of events between the novel and the plight of labours. But it is well understood whether there are characters of novel or poor migrants during this crisis they are the ones who always bear the brunt of all problems. And only the person can feel that agony, who himself would have gone through this pain. As there is a real example of Amrit and Yaqoob, who were childhood friends. Amrit and Yaqoob were returning to their village in Banpati, Bihar, due to corona crisis, on the top of the truck. Amrit started to feeling unwell. Yaqoob pleaded with the driver to stop the truck and see a doctor. But the driver and fellow travellers refused and asked Amrit to rather get off. Reluctant to leave him alone Yaqoob got off as well. Now they were alone and deserted on the highway, far away from help. Amrit's condition deteriorated. I realised," Amrit might not survive," Yaqoob later recalled. His fears proved correct. Though a passing ambulance took him to hospital, but Amrit died that night. Yaqoob ended up in an isolation facility, where waits to find out if he is coronavirus positive. Questioned by journalists why he had risked his life and Yaqoob answered simply "Just as my parents are waiting to see me, uske bhi mummy papa ruke the." Similarly, in the novel, Ishvar and Om are alone. They lost all their blood relations back in village and only one Ashraff Chacha, who trend them in tailoring, was whole world for them.

Poor people migrate from their native places with very small dreams in their eyes. Some people come only due to scarcity of work in rural areas. They have no choice except leaving their family behind in search of work to earn livelihood. They don't arrive to big cities to raise their living standard but rather to earn two square meal and send some hard earned money to take care of their children. Apart from this, they have some more reasons to head towards urban areas. In villages, people are familiar to each other and take up any kind of work is not easy for them. Consequently, number of people move from their home places with family. Big cities are the mix pot of different people. Either people don't know each other or the work they perform is common among them. Women also can give a hand in earning something. For instance, the work of domestic help or work in some factories. Some people have the aspiration that their children can take good education and lead a better life ahead. To fulfill those dreams they settle down in cities. Although, it may sound odd but true that sometimes, physically impaired people who are not able to earn anything or driven out from houses for some reasons, turn their face towards city. They bag alms to make the ends meet. To earn two square meal is a different case. But to fulfill their dream entirely different. Main reason behind it, they are innocent people for these cities. To handle the hustle bustle of daily life is not easy for them.

In big cities everything costs money. House rent, electricity, water, fare in buses, high school fees and everything they buy demand money. And once they trap in this net it is almost impossible to come out of

it. Despite of all this, they try to live happily. Because, at least they have some achievements to flaunt in front of their village counterparts.

Ishvar and Om also go to the big city by sea. Ishvar has only one dream in his eyes and he takes it as his moral duty that he can search a good bride for Omprakash and marry him. Therefore, he wants to do hard work and save some money. Omprakash wants to return to his hometown once he earned enough money. With these dreams they both go to Mumbai and started to work as hired tailors. Both of them are talented tailors but due to lack of money they become ready to work as hired tailors under Dina Dalal. On their arrival in Mumbai, they face a lot of difficulties. Even when they come from such far place, Nawas does not ask him even for a square meal. You can understand their financial condition by this instance that when they get off on their arrival from train, Om Prakash sees a watermelon juice wala. Ishvar and Om Prakash were famished with hunger but when Maneck asked them whether they would like to drink, they refused by saying that they are not hungry and avert their face lest Maneck read their faces, how much they feel like to drink. But Maneck knows and when half juice left in glass, he offered them. They relish the juice very much. After that when they start work at Dina's apartment, initially due to lack of money they eat only once in a day in order to save some money. There was a sequence of mis happenings with them. Luck always tested them very hard.

If migration for lower class people from their own place a hard thing, reverse migration is even harder. People leave their roots to grow at other places. Gradually they get used to it and try to settle down. But sometimes circumstances change drastically and some most appalling events take place. None of us ever imagine that one day we will become witness of such an unprecedented time. We are witnessing a historical but unfortunate time that no one would wish that any generation face this music. People are going in depression, there is a sudden spike in domestic violence, numerous people ruined financially, people who are already ill are more frightened. But we have a section that suffered most. They are in the air. When we talk about their migration. But we need to mull over why they want to go back? For instance when many migrants returning to their hometown, one of them said, "We have run out of money and other resources. We work hard on daily basis to feed our families. But for 50 days, we have not had any work. That is why we want to return to our place...". This the reality or reality is something different. In fact most of them want to return their places out of compalness. They were deprived of their rented house in this time of crisis. People who went back their places, did so due to compaleness. If they had to go back, they could go earlier. In the same way for Ishvar and Om had nothing left back in the village. Om always wished to return to take revenge upon Thakur Dharamsi. But luck was never on their side. Thakur Dharamsi was an influential person. Family drive during emergency which was run by the then government became a curse for Ishvar and Om. Thakur Dharamsi, got the charge of surgery. He picked up the people randomly through his men. Most of them were poverty ridden people, whom they allure by giving the greed of a radio and blanket. And in the name of vasectomy or nasbandi, he brought Ishvar and Om forcefully through some other people. A surgery was conducted upon them for vasectomy. But Thakur Dharamsai had to take his revenge of spitting upon him by Om. So his men bring Om again in surgery room on the pretext of some check ups. This time doctors conduct one more surgery upon him and he was castrated. This was the end of every road for them. For Ishvar, he was deeply distraught. As an uncle, he took Om's marriage as his religious duty and it was his only dream in life. Om was an orphan Ishvar

But most unfortunate thing for labourers is that system also make fun of their sorrow. A new labour law has been ruled by some states like UP, MP and Gujarat which is like a fly in the ointment. These moves

are very unfortunate. To give the more benefits to business and rich class, all old laws put on stake. These changes give industries more flexibility in hiring and firing, determining their wages and reduce their liabilities in terms of providing employee benefits. Diluting labour laws will lead to exploitation of labourers, many of whom have already lost their livelihood due to the nationwide lockdown.

Be it life or literature, people from lower class are the always ones who suffered the most. Many unfortunate incidents happen. Some imaginable and many were beyond imagination. None could imagine that a pregnant woman would deliver her child on the road and walk for 140 km by taking that child in her lap, no one imagined that a daughter would ride her bicycle for 2000 km and for 1200 km with her father was at rear seat. It was unimaginable that a person whose one leg was amputated would ride the bicycle along with his wife and children. It was too beyond imagination and a heartbreaking picture when sixteen labourers cut by train when they were sleeping on the track on their way back home. The image of blood stained rotis on the rail tracks will stay with us for a long time. One of the migrant worker began walking back along with his pregnant wife, children and parents from Rajasthan's Ajmer to Uttar Pradesh's Farrukhabad, around 600 km away, as neither bus nor train was available. He said, "it is better better move than die hungry." It really makes one compel to think since they were so innocent that is why they were labourer or because they were labourer that is why they were so innocent. This crisis open a new and unfamiliar face of life in front of everyone. But the face was more horrible, more cruel for all those people who were poor and from labour class felt that life suddenly removed its veil and showed all over a new but dark side of it. Problem is this that when destiny turned cruel to labour class, many people also turned their faces upon them. Many people did not pay even the dues of domestic help, let alone to pay them money for the work they could not do. Several people asked to pay the rent to their tenant. They had no choice except to return their villages. Although, one cannot deny the other face of the crisis. Landlord of these labour class are not very rich either. They were also out of job, but what about the people who are rich and could afford to pay the money. If people would have tried, to adjust, many accidents might be averted. Whether it was the life of labourers or Ishvar and Om, life played a very dirty game with them. No reader could imagine that people like Ishvar and Om who were so good and gentle, one day face the such a cruel reality of life. Since his childhood days Om wanted to take the revenge of his family members who were killed in a gruesome way by Thakur Dharamsi. Dharamsi was always an eyesore for Om. Whenever he looked at him, his all wounds got fresh all over again. But what happened, he himself became a scapegoat of Thakur. Neither he could go back to his village nor he could take his revenge. It was only Dharamsi that he became an orphan and they had to leave their village behind. On the other hand, it was Ishvar who always has dreamt that he takes as his duty to taking care of Om and marry him with a good girl. But all his dreams also dashed. Now, nothing was left. It was like an end of the road. Om could not marry. Having done that vasectomy surgery Ishvar caught an infection in his leg and due to the lack of money they could not afford the treatment and infection spread through the leg. Finally, doctor had to amputated his leg. Now they were jobless, stranded and reduced to be beggars. Ishvar sat on a moving wooden platform and Om pulled that. Dina Dalal also had no work. She had to return to her brother's house. At the end of the novel she was the only pillar of support for them. When her brother and her sister in law were out of door for their office work she would give them food from back door so that no one could see them. Although they were beggars now but at a time they were her hired tailors.

Although schemes are launched by government for welfare of poor people. As government initiated bank transfer of ₹500 rupees for 200 million poor women as part of a \$23 billion relief package. But going out to withdraw this cash from their bank accounts is fraught with risk for many beneficiaries. "I happened to be in the market when the police beat up a bunch of people going to the bank to take out ₹500 from their accounts. I ran for my own life," Sayeed said. Apart from this this amount is only like a drop in the bucket. But this pandemic and all incidents of the novel leave a giant question for everyone of us why destiny is so cruel for poverty ridden people? First the poor people leave their home, their village with a ray of a better life. And unfortunately when they have to return many of them lose their life. This calamity leaves many more question for everyone of us. Was there no other way to solve the problem of poor? Could this fate not be averted? Could the system not give more help to them? Do we need to be more human? According to me answer is yes. But finally, we have only one bitter truth that life of labourers and Ishvar and Om is not less than a hell on earth. What a Fine Balance!

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