



Margins in Motion: Rural to Urban Transition in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Tanmoy Ruidas

Assistant Professor, Jangipur College
tanmoyruidas2007@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 14-04-2025

Published: 10-05-2025

Keywords:

marginality, exclusion, caste, political, resistance, violence.

ABSTRACT

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a novel of epical stature that graphically documents marginality, resistance and violence. The novel is set in post-Independence India and it unveils various forms of marginality — social, cultural, political, economic and even religious. Throughout the novel, Mistry pinpoints all these forms of marginality both in rural and urban India, focusing largely on the marginality of the downtrodden and dispossessed populace of rural India. Mistry shows how in their village these downtrodden people have been the passive victims of marginalization for ages, and how they now venture to migrate to a metropolis to get rid of marginality. Mistry also shows how the Indian metropolis that shelters these marginalized rural people ultimately dislodges them and reduces them to the wretched beings by forcing political and economic marginality upon them. In this paper, attempt has been made to trace and explore the plight of these downtrodden, disempowered and dispossessed people who suffered all forms of marginalization and exclusion both in the country and the city.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15382062>

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is an expatriate author of international repute, and is now settled in Canada. He is an author of Indian Parsi descent, whose chief concern is the Parsi diaspora in India and Canada. But in his second novel *A Fine Balance*, which secured a prestigious place in the 1996 Booker Prize shortlist,



Mistry comes out from the cocoon of Parsi world of Bombay and embraces the people from the periphery or margin of Indian society. The marginalised men Mistry represents in this novel are the men belonging to the suppressed social class, a class which has been the victim of all forms of exclusion or marginality — social, economic, political or cultural — since the antiquity. Mistry's sole endeavour here is to give voice to these marginalized people as well as to address the socio-political issues concerning their exclusion or marginality. While addressing these social, political and economic issues ensued from marginality, Mistry probes deep into the Indian socio-political structure, its traditional customs and cultural practices, and raises pertinent questions about the socio-cultural hegemony of the so-called upper class Hindu society, and their political dominance over the marginalised populace.

Unlike his other two novels, which are confined in the metropolis of Bombay, *A Fine Balance* is not wholly metropolitan in the sense that the novel has rural as well as mountainous settings. In other words, Mistry in this novel is not solely concerned with the marginality of the minority Parsees living in Bombay, but he also ventures out to the world of the downtrodden and the dispossessed social classes of the countryside only to register their precarious lives arising out of marginality. The setting of the novel is 1970s India when the Internal Emergency engulfed the country. Mistry's narration of the plight of disempowered working-class community of rural India faithfully mirrors the condition of the community in the post-Independence era. Mistry shows that as the marginal populace do not have a political representation for the elimination of their problematic condition even after Independence, they have no other choice but to accept marginality as the prevailing norm. However, Mistry's narration of marginality does not stall in the countryside. Rather, he shifts these marginal men to the busy Indian metropolis of Bombay only to scan their precarious urban lives in the light of political and economic marginality that was forced upon them by the Emergency government. Mistry in this book is overtly critical of the Emergency regime, because he recounts that this despotic rule only added misery and suffering to the already existing plight of the marginal people.

Marginality, Resistance and Violence in the village

A Fine Balance is not merely a narrative of marginality of the disempowered lower caste, but it is also a story about their resistance and the consequent violence. The novel represents the story of a downtrodden Indian family belonging to the *chamar* caste, a caste of dalit community which was associated with the profession of leather tanning and shoe-making. The *chamar*-caste people were demoted to the lowest stratum of Indian caste hierarchy by the Brahminical tradition, and they had to



live on the fringe of the society, a society which was ruled by the caste Hindus, mostly Brahmins — in this story the village Thakurs and Pandits. Because of their profession and caste identity, the *chamar*-caste people were considered untouchable by the dominant upper caste Hindu population, and therefore they were excluded from the mainstream Hindu society. People of this caste had to live in complete social isolation, effected by socio-political and economic marginality. Mistry gives a graphic description of their marginal habitation: “The village was by a small river, and the Chamaars were permitted to live in a section downstream from the Brahmins and landowners...Beyond the bank, cooking smoke signalled hungry messages while upper-caste waste floated past on the sluggish river” (96).

Apart from the social custom of untouchability, which contributed to their social marginality to the utmost, they had other socio-economic factors to add to their misery. These rural people were a kind of sub-proletarian, landless populace with no right to the agricultural product. Add to this, they were deprived of their minimum wages when they worked as labourers for their upper caste affluent villagers. They almost robbed the *chamar* labourers of their wages, and very often they did not pay them on some excuse or other. To exemplify this exploitation, Dukhi’s harassment can be a proper excerpt here. Dukhi, one of the major characters of the *chamar* community was summoned by a village herdsman to graze a herd of goats. Dukhi’s wage was a glass of goat’s milk for the job. But, as Mistry narrates, “When the owner returned in the evening, instead of a glass of goat’s milk, Dukhi got a thrashing” (101).

Although they belonged to the Hindu community, they were downgraded to the lowest stratum of that community by the religious commandment. Hence their social status was far inferior, and culturally they were isolated from the mainstream Hindu society. This gave rise to the social practice of untouchability and simultaneously widened the cultural gap. The upper caste Hindu society exploited this cultural difference, and untouchability was one of the means of exploitation. They treated these lower caste people as subhuman creatures; examples of such treatment include social exclusion, physical torture, financial deception, sexual harassment, rape, killing etc. This is how the dalit community of India suffered oppression and persecution for ages. A number of dalit movements took place against such social malpractice both before and after Independence, but the social condition of rural India remained unchanged. Mistry exploits this social condition in his work and bases his story upon it. He unfolds in his story the level to which the oppression and violence reached: “He had worked hard all day, yet he had been thrashed and cheated of his payment. ‘on top of that my foot is crushed,’ he said...’They treat us like animals. Always have, from the days of our forefathers.’” (105).



Dukhi Mochi, an adult male belonging to the marginal *chamar* caste, put up a resistance to this form of social exclusion and exploitation, because he refused "to survive in the village like his ancestors, with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companion" (Mistry 97). He resolved to desist from the traditional occupation of the *chamar* caste which involves skinning carcasses and leather-tanning, as this profession shoved them to a marginal social position. As Mistry narrates "someone had dared to break the timeless chain of caste" (95), it is obvious what a daring act it was on Dukhi's part to throw a covert challenge to the age-old marginality. So, Dukhi decided not to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors, and wanted to switch his profession from leather tanning to the respectable profession of tailoring. Dukhi's decision of changing profession was indeed courageous because it incurred the wrath of the upper caste villagers who had been enjoying social superiority over the untouchables for ages with their profession and property. When Dukhi sent his sons to a Muslim tailor called Ashraf Chacha for their apprenticeship in tailoring, "consternation was general throughout the village" (Mistry 95) and especially among the lower caste people, because they were apprehensive of some imminent disaster to happen to Dukhi's family for his subversive resistance to marginality. Their apprehension came true as the upper caste village headman Thakur Dharamsi looked upon it as a serious breach of casteist tradition, and he sought excuse to punish Dukhi for his 'arrogance' in "crossing the line of caste" (Mistry 147). Thakur Dharamsi soon got the opportunity to punish them, when Narayan, Dukhi's eldest son, being a full-fledged tailor in his native village, desired to cast his own vote in the election. Mistry highlights the reality of the electoral procedure in post-Independence India by exposing its fraudulent and farcical processes. Mistry narrates in this work that the suppressed classes such as these were not allowed to vote in elections and that the upper-class village zamindars successfully rigged the total election procedure for years. He also narrates how the election officer was bribed with gifts, food and drink only to remain away from the polling booth and how the entire voting procedure was deceitfully rigged by the landlord's men. (143-146).

By trying to cast his own vote in the election, Narayan put up a resistance to this electoral malpractice and their consequent political marginality. But Narayan's bold resistance to this disenfranchisement was meted out 'with the utmost severity' (Mistry 147) by the goondas of the village landlord Thakur Dharamsi. The punishment was that the goondas mercilessly flogged him to death and burnt the rest of his family members to death except Om and Ishvar. Om, the son of Narayan and Ishvar, his brother survived this brutal murder because they were out in the town for their job in Ashraf's tailoring shop. (146-147)



Sexual violence upon the women of this Indian marginal class was rampant. Mistry shows how every now and then these marginal women fell a prey to the lust of the upper-class rapacious males. When the women refused to succumb to the sexual desire of the upper-class men, they received all sorts of physical and mental atrocities from them. Mistry narrates the predicament of Buddhu's wife whose head was shaved and who was forced to walk naked because of her rejection to the proposal of zamindar's son to accompany him to the field. Mistry also describes the predicament of Roopa whose condition was no better than that of Buddhu's wife. Roopa, Dukhi's wife, had stealthily entered a rich caste-Hindu's orchard in the dead of night only to collect some oranges for her baby's food – but she was caught red-handed by the night watchman and was raped by him as a punishment for her act of “stealing”. Being economically marginal, Roopa had no other option left but to steal some fruits from some rich man's orchard. But this act to meet the fundamental necessity of life was met with the robbing a woman of her fundamental dignity. Mistry's point here is that economic exploitation engenders sexual exploitation for the women of the suppressed class, and both these forms of exploitation aggravates their plight. (98-99)

Mistry, in this novel, narrates an event in a school where children of this community received atrocious treatment from a caste-Hindu teacher. Mistry shows in this incident how social marginality did not even spare innocent children and how they were victimised. The incident was like this: Dukhi's sons Ishvar and Narayan stealthily stepped into a children's schoolhouse not for learning but merely out of curiosity. But they were caught by the teacher who asked them their whereabouts. On learning their ‘untouchable’ identity, the village schoolmaster mercilessly flogged them for making unholy the materials of knowledge and learning by touching them with their unholy hands. (109-111)

This is how these marginal people had been the passive victims of exclusion, exploitation and violence – be it social, cultural, political, or economic. Under these grievous circumstances, Om and Ishvar, the only survivors of Dukhi's family, chose migration as their sole means of existence and livelihood. On consultation with Ashraf Chacha, their trainer, Om and Ishvar migrated to the busy metropolis of Bombay, leaving behind their marginal existence in the village. They never dared to think about returning to their native place because of caste oppression and their insecure lives at the hands of village landlords. They migrated to the city because the city was supposedly casteless and they thought that the city was going to offer them humanistic treatment as well as a bright prospect of their profession.



Political and Economic Marginality in the Metropolis

Although Om and Ishvar migrated to a big metropolis like Bombay with much hope and dream, the city very soon appeared to them to be a giant embodiment of oppressive forces, forces which were in the same way hostile to them but very different in character from those of the village. The city offered shelter to these homeless rural folks, but the shelter was worse than their village home — a rented sordid shack in the slum area. Their expectation of getting tailoring job with high wage soon got frustrated, as the city offered them their expected jobs on temporary basis, which almost reduced them to penury. So, living under ghastly condition and almost being penniless, the uncle-nephew duo was soon disillusioned with the metropolis. People in the city were callous to their needs and desires. Thus, their migration to the city for a humanistic treatment and for a dignified job met with frustration in the beginning. The marginal rural poor remained marginal in urban society too. So here in the metropolis, they started their fresh struggle against marginality.

Marginality in the metropolis approached them in multilayered forms. Although they were not considered 'filthy *achoot* caste' (Mistry 148) or untouchable in the city, they experienced new forms of exclusion, exploitation and violence. As it was the rule of Internal Emergency, all the civil liberties were suspended by the government, and hence, their suffering reached a new dimension. They suffered political and economic marginality which almost engulfed them in their crudest forms. When Ishvar went to a government office for issuing new ration cards for them, he was summarily dismissed by the ration officer on the excuse that they had no address. Thus, they were denied access to the government provisions and were also deprived from their civic rights. However, Ishvar and Om found job in the tailoring business of Dina Dalai, a Parsee widow, and hence their monetary stability was secured for the time being. But here they again faced deprivation — they were paid less wages and more works were extorted from them. This exploitation was imposed by Dina Dalai in consultation with her clothes merchant Mrs. Gupta who taught Dina how to boss over her poor employees and pay them less in order to subdue them. This sort of exploitation led to their economic marginality which they had to suffer for the rest of their life.

A lot of programmes like forced sterilization for birth-control, MISA, twenty-point programmes, city beautification etc were undertaken by the Emergency Government for the so-called development of the county. Mistry, in this novel, points out in detail how these programmes were forcefully implemented on the poorest of the poor. Through the predicament of this urban working-class community, Mistry voices



his concern for them who were at the receiving end of this political agenda. City beautification, which was a part of this agenda, started with the demolition of the slum dwellings in which Isvar and Om lived as tenants. After eviction, all the slum dwellers along with Om and Ishvar were forcefully carried away to an irrigation camp as labourers. Although they managed to return to the city by offering a huge sum of bribe to a certain Beggarmaster in the irrigation camp, they were not offered a home in the city. So, they now had to stay at Dina's rented flat, a temporary accommodation which Dina however conceded. From now on they became homeless labourers. However, their political exploitation did not come to an end here. The horror of their story is yet to unfold. The final tragedy came upon their life when they were forcefully carried by the government police to a surgical camp, and vasectomy was forcefully carried out on both the uncle and the nephew. As the operation was done in the most unhygienic condition, the uncle developed gangrene in his leg, and subsequently his legs had to be amputated to save his life. The condition of his nephew Om was even worse, as he had to give up all hope of marriage and engendering next progeny due to his vasectomy. This is how the political violence as well as economic exploitation brought about the misery of the rural poor, and ultimately left them as crippled street beggars in the metropolis.

Thus, Mistry showcases in this novel how this dictatorial rule of the Emergency Government contributed to the political marginality of the poor and the downtrodden both in the rural and urban areas. Mistry also stresses the fact that the de-marginalization of the disempowered and the downtrodden classes remained a far dream in a corrupt and intriguing socio-political situation.

Conclusion

Thus, *A Fine Balance* establishes itself as a great document on marginality. As Leela Gandhi quotes Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's noted remark, "Can the subaltern speak?" (Gandhi 6), suggesting at the silencing of voices of the depressed and the subaltern classes throughout history, *A Fine Balance* seems to seek answer to Spivak's oft-quoted question. This is because Mistry, in this novel, ventures to re-write the history of the marginalized, the downtrodden and the disempowered Indians in the decades immediately after Independence, and he re-narrates this post-Independence history from a dalit perspective. In other words, the novel is a historiography of the marginalized, and it is simultaneously a multilayered narrative as well as a discourse on marginality.



Works Cited

Primary Source:

- Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. Faber and Faber Ltd., 2006.

Secondary Sources:

- Batra, Jagdish. *Rohinton Mistry: Identity, Values and Other Sociological Concerns*. Prestige, 2008.
- Bharucha, Nilufer. *Rohinton Mistry: Ethnic Enclosures and Transcultural Spaces*. Rawat Publications, 2003.
- Bhautoo-Dewnarain, Nandini. *Contemporary Indian Writers in English: Rohinton Mistry: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press India Pvt Ltd, 2007.
- Dodiya, Jaydipsinh. *The Fiction of Rohinton Mistry*. Prestige, 1998.
- Gandhi, Leela. *Post-colonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Columbia University Press, 1998.
- Michael, S.M., editor. *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values* (Second Edition). Sage Publications, 2007.
- O'Hanlon, Rosalind. *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Rao, Anupama. *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*. University of California Press, 2009.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Walther Konig, Verlag, 2021.
- Wadhawan, Vibhuti. *Parsi Community and the Challenges of Modernity: A Reading of Rohinton Mistry's Fiction*. Prestige Books International, 2014.