



Hierarchies of Oppression: Examining Class, Caste, and Social Inequality in Rohinton Mistry's 'A Fine Balance'

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to study Rohinton Mistry's novel "A Fine Balance" published in 1995. The novel comments on class, caste, and social inequality that affect people's lives and reflect problems in Indian society. This paper also argues that Mistry uses these characters' struggles to criticize the injustices of the Emergency and show the lasting impact of oppression in India. The novel explores the lives of rich, middle class, and poor people. It shows how class and caste differences impact everyone. Rohinton Mistry's "A Fine Balance" is about four people in India after it became independent. The characters are Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah. The story takes place during the Emergency period (1975-1977). The story shows how gender, caste, and money limit what characters can achieve. "A Fine Balance" comments on the ongoing cycle of oppression and the false sense of progress in a society dealing with post-colonial issues and the search for equality.

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Introduction

"A Fine Balance" is a celebrated novel by Rohinton Mistry, an Indian author who now lives in Canada. The novel was published in 1995. The story sets in India during the mid-1970s, a tumultuous time known as the "Emergency," which was imposed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The narrative revolves around four central characters: Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash (Om), and Maneck Kohlah.



Each belongs to a different background and their paths cross in Mumbai as they navigate the challenges of survival while striving to maintain their dignity amidst political turmoil, financial struggles, and social injustice. Dina employs Ishvar and Om as tailors in her modest sewing business, while Maneck rents a room from her. The novel delves into significant themes such as caste discrimination, urban poverty, corruption, and the remarkable human spirit of resilience and compassion. Mistry's rich prose and detailed character development paint a moving picture of India's socio-political climate during this chaotic era. "A Fine Balance" has earned the Giller Prize and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, gaining acclaim for its raw portrayal of human suffering and its delicate balance of hope and despair in the face of adversity.

In Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, there is a painful scene where Ishvar Darji, a low-caste tailor, is forcibly sterilized during India's emergency period. His cries are ignored by the oppressive system (Mistry, 1995). This scene shows the novel's focus on how people's lives are crushed by deep-rooted inequality. The story of the novel centers on four primary characters and takes place during the Emergency period from 1975 to 1977, a time marked by political and social upheaval in India. *A Fine Balance* reveals the harsh realities of a country struggling with its identity after colonial rule. Mistry, an Indian-born Canadian writer, uses his Parsi background and experience as an immigrant to tell this story (Dodiya, 2006). This paper argues that Mistry uses the lives of Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah to show the strong systems of class, caste, and social inequality. These forces shape their lives and reflect larger societal problems. Through their struggles, Mistry not only criticizes the historical wrongs of the Emergency but also highlights the ongoing impact of social hierarchy in Indian society (Omvedt, 2008).

Historical and Social Context:

India's socioeconomic structure is a complicated network that has been greatly influenced by its current and historical struggles. The nation was still dealing with the fallout from British colonial rule, which ended in 1947, at the time of *A Fine Balance*, which takes place in the middle of the 1970s. A society divided by wealth and power—millions of impoverished farmers and laborers on one side, and large landlords and elites on the other—was the result of the British exploitation of India's resources.

This colonial legacy sharpened class divides, with a small middle class stuck in between, trying to climb up or just hang on. Then there's the caste system, an ancient social ladder that ranks people from birth—Brahmins at the top, Dalits (once called "untouchables") at the bottom, and countless groups in the middle. Even after independence, caste stuck around, deciding who got jobs, land, or respect, and locking the lower castes into poverty and stigma. By the 1970s, India was a young democracy promising equality, but the reality was messier—wealth and caste still ruled, and the Emergency made it worse by hitting the poorest the hardest. This tangled mix of old traditions and new struggles is what Mistry digs into, showing how it crushes or lifts his characters in *A Fine Balance*.

A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry presents a moving story about four people who meet by chance and face tough times in an unnamed Indian city during the 1975-1977 Emergency. Dina Dalal, a widow who sews for a living, tries to stay independent after her husband's death by renting out space and taking sewing jobs. Ishvar and Omprakash Darji, an uncle and nephew duo, are tailors from a rural village, forced



to flee caste violence after their family is brutally killed for defying their low-caste status as Chamars. They come to the city hoping for a fresh start. Maneck Kohlah, a young student from a hill town, moves in with Dina as a boarder, sent by his parents to study while their family business falters. The four of them create an unexpected household, weaving together a delicate existence—Dina employs Ishvar and Om to help with her sewing, while Maneck brings a touch of warmth to their lives. Yet, the chaos of the Emergency casts a long shadow: corrupt officials, forced sterilizations, and slum demolitions threaten their dreams. Ishvar and Om endure the worst of it—abducted and sterilized by government agents—while Dina loses her home to her landlord's greed, and Maneck, overwhelmed by it all, starts to drift away. Fast forward a few years, and after even more heartache (Maneck's parents pass away, and the tailors find themselves begging), the story wraps up on a bittersweet note: Dina and Maneck have a brief reunion, but he ultimately takes his own life, leaving her with the tailors, now broken and impoverished. Through their struggles, Mistry vividly illustrates the harsh realities of survival, love, and despair against the backdrop of India's social and political upheaval.

India's socio-economic landscape is marked by deep-seated inequalities rooted in historical events, including colonial rule and the caste system. The lingering effects of British colonialism are clear in the economic gaps between urban and rural areas, as well as in the ongoing dominance of English as a language of power and privilege. Although the caste system has been officially abolished, it still shapes social hierarchies and economic opportunities. The novel unfolds in a society where class divisions are glaringly apparent. The urban elite, represented by characters like Dina Dalal, enjoy a level of privilege, while the struggling middle class, embodied by Maneck Kohlah, grapples with financial pressures. At the bottom of the social ladder are the urban poor, like Ishvar and Om Darji, who fight for basic survival. The impact of the caste system is especially pronounced in the lives of Ishvar and Om, who come from an "Untouchable" background. Their efforts to escape caste discrimination through urban migration reveal that prejudice persists even in city life. This systemic oppression is further exacerbated by state policies during the Emergency period.

Gender and class: Dina's struggles as a widow:

Dina's journey as a widow in "A Fine Balance" really brings to light the tough realities women face in a patriarchal society, especially those who lack financial stability. After losing her husband, Dina is determined to hold onto her independence in a world that often sees widows as a burden. She's not about to lean on her brother; instead, she dives into her sewing business to make ends meet. Her story reveals how gender and class come together to create distinct challenges. As a woman, she deals with societal pressures and a scarcity of job options. While her middle-class upbringing offers her some perks, the absence of her husband's income makes it hard for her to keep her apartment and business running. Dina's refusal to remarry or depend on male relatives showcases her strong desire for autonomy. Yet, her efforts are constantly challenged by harsh economic realities and societal expectations. She has to find a way to balance her dignity with the need to survive in a society that often overlooks widows. Through Dina's experiences, the novel paints a vivid picture of how gender norms and class status can trap women in cycles of poverty and dependence, even when they are striving for independence. Her story resonates with the broader struggles of women in India during this time, particularly those who suddenly found



themselves without male support in a society that often measured women's worth by their relationships with men.

Generational poverty and caste discrimination:

Rohinton Mistry's novel "A Fine Balance" dives deep into the harsh realities of generational poverty and caste discrimination, weaving together the lives of its richly developed characters. It sheds light on how these systemic issues create unending cycles of inequality and suffering that span generations. Take Ishvar and Om, for instance—an uncle and nephew from the Chamaar caste, often labeled as "untouchables." Their journey illustrates the heavy toll of generational poverty and caste bias. Even as they strive to break free from their grim fate by learning tailoring, they continually face obstacles tied to their caste identity. Their struggles underscore how caste discrimination stifles social mobility and economic chances, keeping families trapped in poverty for years on end. The novel also brings to life the challenges faced by the urban poor through characters like Dina Dalal, a widow fighting to keep her independence. Her attempts to run a small tailoring business highlight the fragile existence of those on society's fringes, where even small setbacks can spiral into financial disaster. The Emergency period in India, as depicted in the book, only intensifies these challenges. Policies like forced sterilization and slum clearances hit the poor and lower castes the hardest, showing how government actions can deepen existing inequalities. Mistry's storytelling reveals the intricate ways caste discrimination intertwines with economic struggles, forming a tangled web of oppression that's tough to escape. Characters like Dina, Ishvar, and Om forge unexpected bonds across caste and class divides, yet their personal battles against poverty and discrimination continue. The title "A Fine Balance" perfectly captures the fragile equilibrium these characters must maintain to navigate a society riddled with entrenched inequalities. Their narratives illustrate that generational poverty and caste discrimination are not merely personal challenges but systemic issues that shape entire communities and endure through time.

Class Hierarchy in "A Fine Balance"

Rohinton Mistry's novel "A Fine Balance" presents a captivating and complex look at the rigid class structure that defined Indian society during the turbulent 1970s. The story weaves together the lives of characters from various social backgrounds, effectively showcasing the stark differences and deep-rooted inequalities that separate them. With a rich array of characters and their intertwined narratives, the book explores how caste, economic status, and social standing significantly shape individuals' opportunities, relationships, and everyday experiences in a society marked by sharp divisions. Each character in the novel represents a unique aspect of Indian society. Dina Dalal, a middle-class Parsi widow striving to maintain her independence, acts as a link between the worlds of wealth and poverty. Ishvar and Om, an uncle and nephew duo from a lower-caste family of leather workers turned tailors, embody the hopes and struggles of those trying to rise above their assigned social roles. Maneck Kohlah, a young student from a middle-class family in the mountains, offers an outsider's view on the urban class dynamics. Through these characters and their relationships, Mistry vividly illustrates how class distinctions infiltrate every part of life in India. The novel examines both the subtle and overt ways social hierarchies reveal themselves in daily interactions, living conditions, job prospects, and even the physical spaces that characters inhabit within the city. The striking contrast between Dina's modest yet respectable apartment



and the dire conditions of the slums where Ishvar and Om initially live serves as a powerful visual metaphor for the class divide.

The story also examines how political and economic forces, especially during the Emergency period under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, deepen the already existing class divides. The government's slum clearance initiatives and forced sterilization efforts hit the poor and lower castes the hardest, making their struggles even more pronounced. The novel illustrates how these policies, which are supposedly designed for progress and development, often end up reinforcing and even widening the gap between different social classes.

The novel also explores the complexities of class differences, offering a thoughtful critique of the rigid class system and its stubbornness to change. The author delves into how people internalize these class distinctions, often holding onto them even when they have chances to break free from societal limitations. Yet, the novel also shines a light on those beautiful moments of human connection and kindness that cross class lines, hinting at the potential for unity in the face of systemic inequality. The harsh realities of class disparities are vividly illustrated through the characters' battles for survival and dignity. Dina's determination to keep her independence by taking in boarders and launching a small sewing business showcases the fragile situation of those living on the fringes of respectability. Meanwhile, Ishvar and Om's journey from their rural village to the city in search of better prospects underscores the economic migration that often comes with class mobility, along with the hurdles and discrimination faced by those striving to elevate their social status.

In the novel, Mistry looks at how class connects with other parts of identity and oppression, like gender, religion, and where people come from. Female characters like Dina and Omprakash's wife Shanti show how class and gender discrimination affect them. The way characters from different religions - Parsi, Hindu, and Muslim - are treated adds more depth to the social issues in the story.

"A Fine Balance" shows a wide view of Indian society. It highlights how strict class systems affect people's lives and social interactions. By comparing characters from different backgrounds and showing their connected lives, Mistry comments on the human cost of social inequality. He also shows the strength of people who try to keep their dignity and build relationships despite big challenges.

Conclusion:

Rohinton Mistry's "A Fine Balance" offers an in-depth exploration of the intricate web of oppression that defines post-independence India. Through the lives of Dina, Ishvar, Om, and Maneck, the novel sheds light on the entrenched systems of class, caste, and social inequality that shape people's lives and mirror the broader failures of society. The portrayal of the Emergency period acts as a snapshot of the larger issues that plague Indian society. It starkly illustrates how state-sanctioned oppression—seen in forced sterilizations and slum clearances—hits the poor and marginalized the hardest.

This critique goes beyond just a specific time in history, revealing the lasting impact of hierarchical oppression in India. Mistry's storytelling brilliantly shows how class distinctions seep into every corner of life, affecting everyone from urban elites to the struggling middle class and the destitute. The characters'



journeys highlight the interconnectedness of oppression, demonstrating how elements like gender, caste, and economic opportunity intertwine to restrict individual chances. Yet, amid the grim realities, the novel also captures moments of resistance and human connection that rise above class and caste barriers. These glimpses of solidarity provide a flicker of hope in the face of overwhelming systemic injustices.

Ultimately, "A Fine Balance" stands as a poignant commentary on the cyclical nature of oppression and the myth of progress in a society wrestling with post-colonial challenges. It urges readers to face the complex truths of social inequality and the ongoing fight for equity in modern India.

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