



Mapping Displacement and The Ethics of Belonging in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Bhabesh Sharmah

Assistant Professor, Kaliabor College (Autonomous), Nagaon, Assam, sbhabesh11@gmail.com

Akangsha Sarkar

Guest Lecturer, Kaliabor College (Autonomous), Nagaon, Assam, rs4244390@gmail.com

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20094090>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 19-04-2026

Published: 10-05-2026

Keywords:

belonging, diaspora, governance, migration, memory, postcolonial identity.

ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century, the idea of home and nationhood is increasingly defined by geographical entities and the experience brought by the immigrants. Crossing geographical borders whether compelled by authority or voluntary entails both physical and psychological dislocation. This paper examines Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) as a novel of displacement that operates on both external and internal state of exile. Diasporic Literature has the power to reflect a plausible representation of fractured memory. On the backdrop of India's Emergency period, Mistry's novel reveals the fractured governance and policies through forceful sterilizations, slum demolitions, and migrations. The novel sheds penetrating insights on personal lives, plights and experiences of its four protagonists Dina, Ishvar, Om, and Maneck. Through the close reading of the text, the study exposes how modernization and political transition reproduce instability, fragmented memory, alienation, and the fragile search for belongingness. Mistry's novel does redefine this displacement as an ethical belonging, inquiring meaning in the fractured world of memory and exile. Drawing upon the postcolonial theory of Homi K. Bhabha, this paper argues that displacement extends beyond physical dislocation. It signifies the formation of hybrid identity, state of ambivalence and ethics of belongingness. Thus the paper highlights literature as a pivotal tool for



examining how individuals reconstruct belonging against the rupture of displacement.

Introduction

The word *Diaspora* is derived from the Greek word ‘*diaspeirein*’, which means dispersal or scattered. The term *diaspora* carries a sense of displacement. The Third World diasporic writings have their roots in the postcolonial state. The present meaning of the word diaspora is the dispersal of intellectuals, particularly the authors who came abroad in order to search for new themes regarding their works. Migration Literature has the power to reflect a plausible representation of fractured memory, a state of ambivalence and formation of hybrid identities. Nowadays we live in a world of rigid borders and constant changes. The term *migration literature* implies that subject matter will be about immigration, state of alienation and ethics of belongingness. People in search of security, new identity and opportunities have been dragged into the state of alienation and ethical belongingness. In this context, postcolonial literature becomes a crucial site for examining individuals’ reconstruction of belongingness against the rupture of displacement and memory. Moslund (2010) justifies this state of exile through his observation “*Postcolonialism* is, admittedly, an important element of the overall image of the twentieth century as the age of wandering” (p. 11). Writers from this literature crafting human tendency to go back to the glorious past through their words. 20th-century writing, particularly after the Second World War, is primarily associated with diaspora. As diasporic writers, their concerns have remained constant and the main subjects are homelessness, migration, dependency, creation of fantasy, mythology and past history, travel and nostalgia. Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, and Meera Syal are the prominent diasporic writers who represented India in their works in the most powerful way.

Rohinton Mistry, the Indo-Canadian diasporic writer, has painted the picture of Post-Independence India in his own colour combinations, that is realistic, diasporic and postcolonial are few of them. His novels and short stories preserved the culture and people of India in general and of the Parsi community in particular. As a diasporic writer, Mistry also focuses on the native community in Canada where he has been living for a long time. Mistry’s major works highlight the political scenario of India in different periods. His first novel, *Such a Long Journey* is against the backdrop of India’s war with Pakistan in 1971. His second novel *A Fine Balance* attacks the period of Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in 1975 and his third novel, *Family Matters* specifically talks about the role played by the Babri Mosque–Ram Mandir issue. In this way Mistry through his novels projected the current issues related to Indian



politics and social life and that elevated him to the position of one of the greatest modern writers of the diasporic genre.

Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) is a remarkable novel of postcolonial literature that explores human displacement both physical and psychological. The word migration has a wide range of coverage, Soren Frank (2008) defines the modern application of this term as "the oscillatory and inconclusive processes that manifest themselves on different levels in the literary work, for example, in relation to personal, national, and cultural identity, language, narrative form, and enunciation" (p. 8). Mistry, a Parsi writer of Indian origin, traces the National Emergency of India declared by the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi in the 1970s as a backbone of his story. Mistry's narrative portrays the physical dislocation of its protagonists Dina, Ishvar, Om and Maneck, which reflects the nation's struggle for both peace and place. The failure of the government is portrayed through the forced sterilizations, demolition of slums, and caste oppressions etc.

This paper follows Bhabha's concepts of *hybridity*, *ambivalence*, and the *third space*. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha challenges fixed notions of identity and culture. According to Bhabha (1994), the postcolonial subjects lie "in-between", a space of negotiation in both meaning and belongings. Displacement therefore produces *hybridity*; a state of fusion of homeland and host land. The study aims to examine Mistry's intersection of caste, class and immigration through the lens of Bhabha's postcolonial theory. The protagonists of Mistry's novel live in *third space*, it is a space of negotiation, amalgamation of political turmoil and the life of the oppressed. This space of *ambivalence* is fractured yet transformative.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative literary analysis approach grounded in postcolonial theory to examine *A Fine Balance*. The primary data has been collected from the close textual reading of the novel, focusing on its narration, characters' inner turmoil, political upheavals, and the diasporic experiences. The secondary sources include scholarly articles on Rohinton Mistry's works and the postcolonial studies. The theoretical framework traces Hom.K Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity', 'ambivalence', and the 'third space' to explore the identity formation of migrants. The methodology involves thematic coding identifying passages related to diasporic experience of both physical and psychological and also the cross-referencing with historical contexts like the national Emergency of 1975.



Discussion

The national Emergency in 1975 was the backdrop of Mistry's portrayal of failure of governance and humanity. In order to build a modernized country, the emergency includes forced sterilizations, removal of slums etc. The novel mirrors the irony of the postcolonial world seeking progress at the cost of human welfare. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is not confined to the geographical setting of India but metaphors for a land of broken promises. Therefore, *A Fine Balance* transforms the nation as narration; it highlights Bhabha's (1994) idea of the nation as a *narration*. This narration gives a space of reimagined identities. People in search of security, new identity and opportunities have been dragged into the state of alienation and ethical belongingness. Through the experiences of marginalized sections, *A Fine Balance* presents displacement as an ethical inquiry. The ethical power lies in the novel, where the silenced have been given voice by Mistry. The novel includes themes like political corruption, the overall Indian economic disparity, the alienation of marginalized communities and their culture. This paper explores *A Fine Balance* as a postcolonial narrative that redefines 'displacement' both as a structural and ethical condition.

Displacement in Mistry's narrative intertwines geographical and psychological belonging. Identity and belonging emerge out of colonial historical events and migration. Displacement in this context is not an act of physical dislocation. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* measures the act of living *in-between* worlds, a space of reshaping self. Mistry captures dislocation through the journey of Ishvar Darji and his nephew Om Darji from village to the city. The caste violence and search for new identity led to this displacement. This caste oppression reflects India's struggle to escape this colonial legacy. As Mistry writes:

"I Know", Ishvar smiled embarrassedly. "I just cannot tell what happened. The place was so far, we had never been there before, and we—"

"Never mind," said Nawaz, magnanimous. "A new destination always seems further away than it really is." (Mistry, 1995, p. 185)

Mistry ironically draws the 'city' as a land of new opportunities. Both Om and Ishvar look at the city as the new land of building identity. As Bhabha (1994) argues:

"The 'newness' of migrant or minority discourse has to be discovered *in medias re*: a newness that is not part of the 'progressivist' division between past and present, or the archaic and the modern; nor is it a 'newness' that can be contained in the mimesis of 'original and copy'. In both these cases, the image of the new is iconic rather than enunciatory; in both instances,



temporal difference is represented as epistemological or mimetic distance from an original source.” (p. 227)

Belonging to the Chamar community, both uncle and nephew move toward the Modern World of commitment and opportunity. They are unable to take full citizenship of the urban world. Like the village, the city also treats them as disposable labour. Further, under the supervision of Dina Dalal they have started the tailoring work as a new way of living. Bhabha’s (1994) notion of *hybridity* has been dramatized through their way of living.

Through empathy and shared memory, Mistry constructs an alternative belonging for his characters. Mistry also draws ethical belongingness through the colour of fragile memory and alienation. The bond between Dina and the tailors transforms the exile into ethical companionship. The displacement of Om and Ishvar is not merely a story of displacement, but also a story of moral resilience. Mistry’s portrayal of this resilience is the testimony to what Bhabha refers to as *third space*. It is a space that carries the burden of meaning. (p. 38). The apartment of Dina becomes a place of coexistence. It is a place of negotiating hope and reality; between desire and disparity. Hence, it can be said that displacement is not confined to the act of physical immigration. Its significance emerges through the living *in-between* state of negotiation and reconstruction. Postcolonial thinkers such as Homi K. Bhabha, Edward Said, Benedict Anderson and Stuart Hall have provided significant frameworks to explore this transformative condition. Edward Said (2000) observes that exile is “strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (p. 173). The immigrants are forced to live through memory, imagination and belongingness, what is termed by Benedict Anderson (1983) as an *imagined community*. Mistry portrays fractured India under political authoritarianism. Therefore, the characters are excluded from the collective memory under the burden of caste, class and political turmoil. Through the depiction of Dina, Ishvar, Om, and Maneck, Mistry transforms displacement into modern existence. Exile therefore implies the belonging of individuals and the continuous process of negotiation of identity formation.

Stuart Hall’s remarkable essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* (1990) offers another crucial insight into the diasporic experience. Hall remarks that identity emerges from transformation. Identity is not a stable essence; it is a process. According to Hall (1990), identity emerges from both historical experience and cultural hybridity. Like other postcolonial novels, the characters from Mistry’s novel also portray the shifting identity. The displacement of the identity emerges from class, caste, gender, and political turbulence. Their struggle for survival underlines Hall’s assertion of identity as a shifting process. Identity is recreated through historical and social pressures. The Emergency declaration shatters many



dreams of Indians. Dina's attempt to sustain independence through her clothing company, faces problems of material collection and export of cloth. Rohinton Mistry through the chapter 'City by the Sea' depicts the continuity of identity formation. Dina's attempt to become independent through her work, Om and Ishvar's struggle against caste oppression, and Maneck's arrival in the city—all reveal the continuing process of reshaping identity. Both Edward Said and Stuart Hall emphasize identity as an ongoing process of negotiation, extended by Homi K. Bhabha through his seminal concepts of *hybridity*, *ambivalence*, *mimicry*, and the *third Space* in *The Location of Culture* (1994).

In diasporic literature, memory functions as both inheritance and loss. For a diasporic individual, the act of remembering becomes an act of survival. It creates a space of negotiation where belonging aligns with memory. When geographical return is impossible, this act of reminiscence takes a strong hold on survival. In *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry transforms memory into a moral archive, it records the failure of the nation and government. Mistry collects his characters from different parts of India, with different colours and social backgrounds, placing them all with fractured memories in a 'new nation'. Memory, in this sense, is not nostalgic but ethical, witnesses the loss and creates the rupture of identity. Mistry skilfully presents Ishvar's remediate formula of optimism, as he says, "the human face has limited space, if you fill your face with laughing, there will be no room for crying." (Mistry, 1995, p. 506)

Homi K. Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes the postcolonial subject as one who lives "in-between"—a liminal space where history is constantly reinterpreted, reimagined, and reshaped. This "in-betweenness" is inseparable from memory. Identity itself emerges through the act of remembering and retelling in this third-space. Though set during the Indian Emergency, Mistry's *A Fine Balance* resonates with the diasporic notion. Dina Dalal, Om Darji, Ishvar Darji, and Maneck Kohlah, all four protagonists of different backgrounds, attempt to reconstruct meaning from a fragmented past. Their memories—of childhood, dreams, family, caste, village and lost homes—serve as the only stable foundation to form identity in this social condition. As Maneck's memories reflect on his childhood in the mountains, his longing for the silence contrasts with the noise and corruption of the city. Memory becomes his moral compass, yet it also isolates him, reminding him of an irretrievable innocence. His frustration over God's beautiful creations being seized by the encroachment of modern technology, his move to the city, his meeting with Dina Dalal, his hostel roommate Abinash, and the political turmoils shatters the enthusiasm of a young mind. Maneck leaves for Dubai in search of a better future, fails in his attempts to do something extraordinary, is always in the space of in betweenness.



In diasporic narration, remembering becomes a political act. Against the amnesia of modernization and globalization, memory restores continuity of fractured living. Mistry's novel, set in the India of the Emergency, encapsulates the concerns of the diaspora by portraying the internal and external exiles of individuals. The beggar's remembering of family, the society of untouchables, or Ishvar's recollection of caste violence in the village—these memories are the archive against historical silencing. Through memory, Mistry's characters assert their moral existence in a world where physical existence is denied visibility.

Conclusion

The twentieth and twenty-first century are characterized by a large-scale migration across the world. Migrants, refugees and exiles, these historical and social events have made the migrant the protagonist of the 21st century. *A Fine Balance* is a tragicomedy of four protagonists from different social backgrounds. The paper illustrates Mistry's portrayal of exile as both an internal and external affair. As compared to other novels, Mistry has used much larger literary as well as socio-political canvas in this work. The *prologue* 1975 depicts the journey of the trio Ishvar, Om and Maneck reach the same destination, the house of Dina Dalal to decide their future course. The whole story highlights the thin line of balance between desire and misery. Thus, *A Fine Balance* emerges as a narrative of displacement and belonging, where the boundaries between exile and home are constantly negotiated.

References

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Frank, S. (2008). *Migration and literature*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: community, culture, difference* (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.
- Mistry, R. (1995). *A fine balance*. Faber & Faber.
- Moslund, S. P. (2010). *Migration literature and hybridity: The different speeds of transcultural change*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (8th ed.). (2005). Oxford University Press.
- Rushdie, S. (1979). The Free Radio. In *East, West* (pp. 131–146). Jonathan Cape.
- Said, E. W. (2000). *Reflections on exile and other essays*. Harvard University Press.