



## Marginalised Voices in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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**Abstract:** *Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance is an orchestration of marginal voices that populate the novel. Very few novels in Indian English have given so much of narrative space to the poor and the underprivileged. Mistry takes us onto a journey of alternative India which is populated a continuum of marginalised voices– ranging from Dina, a Parsi widow who struggles to maintain her independence, self-respect and freedom from her brother's domination, to Maneck, a young student who feels ill at ease with the unequal society he lives in, and, at the farthest end of the continuum are the two Dalit tailors, Om and Ishwar, who are struggling to survive and eke out a living in the cruel city which offers them refuge from the atrocities their family had faced in the village.*

*Mistry not only delineates their stories – he also takes us to the physical spaces where they live – the foot path, the basti, the camp, the village and Hotel Vishram, which is a public place where all the characters come together to exchange their stories. Contrasted with these spaces is Dina's flat, the last bastion of genteel middle class existence that she valiantly strives to protect. The novel becomes a microcosmic representation of nation with its little stories of the marginalised which are contrasted with the grand narrative of the nation – which is shown to us through Nusswan's discourse on the poor and the overarching presence of the State through Prime Minister's photograph at Hotel Vishram.*

*I show in this paper that Mistry's sympathetic representation of the poor and the underprivileged is situated in the discourse of pity and serves to confirm to the negative western view of the country.*

**Key words:** *marginal voices, public and private spaces, discourse of pity.*

*A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry is written on an epic scale and has a vast sweep, covering a large time period. It also traverses across different geographical regions within the country. The history of the nation is traced from the precolonial times till the anti-Sikh riots in 1984. Though the novel covers a large chunk of time of the nation's history while narrating the back stories of the characters, the main events of the story are based around the period of Emergency in the country from 1975 to 1977.

There is an orchestration of marginal voices in the novel. Mistry takes us onto a journey of alternative India which is populated with a continuum of marginalised voices– ranging from Dina, a Parsi widow who struggles to maintain her independence, self-respect and freedom from her brother's domination, to Maneck, a young student who feels ill at ease with the unequal society he lives in, and, at the farthest end of the continuum are the two Dalit tailors, Om and Ishwar, who are struggling to survive and eke out a living in the cruel city which offers them refuge from the atrocities their family had faced in the village. The story is told from the point of view of all the protagonists. These narratives contrast with the mainstream narratives of the elite class represented by Dina's brother Nusswan and Mrs. Gupta, the owner of Au Revoir Exports, to whom Dina supplies garments. Narratives of many other characters intersect with the three main stories.

The story of the nation is a composite of these narratives of little people which Mistry has inserted into the main story in order to counter the unified, homogenous grand narrative of the nation. The novel has diverse characters like the Beggarmaster, the modern day businessman who runs a protection racket and manages a team of beggars, Shanker, the disabled beggar who is known as the worm, Vasantrao Valmik, the lawyer, Rajaram, the hair collector, the Monkey man and Ibrahim the rent collector.

Mistry has shown not only diverse characters, but has also taken the reader on a journey to the vast geographic regions of the country in the course of the narrative. It takes us to Maneck's home in the mountains, to Om and Ishwar's home in the village by the river and the main drama takes place in the city by the sea where Dina lives. Nusswan's elite home and Dina's flat are the private spaces in the novel where most of the human drama, interactions between the characters take place. We are also introduced to the alternative 'Other' spaces in novel - the slum where Om and Ishwar stay at the beginning of the story, the footpath where they take refuge when they are thrown out of the slum, the camp where they are transported to under the aegis of the



Beautification Programme of the government, and the footpath outside hotel Vishram where Shanker is positioned for his begging assignment. Hotel Vishram is one of the most visited public places in the novel. A lot of conversation at Hotel Vishram by this motley crowd veers around their experiences about the Emergency. When Ishvar and Om come back from the Camp, they go to Hotel Vishram and narrate their story. Mistry brings a host of characters from the underbelly of the society to these public spaces, where they meet and exchange stories. These *Other* spaces and diverse characters serve to acquaint the reader with the alternative realities within the nation, where hierarchies are turned on their heads.

Paromita Chakrabarti and Swati Ganguly say that Mistry's novels *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* present a carnivalesque view of the society, which is not a temporary period of release from existing hierarchies, but a permanent state of topsy-turvy created by the forces of modernization. In Mistry's novels, this community, though usually located in pre-industrialized idyllic villages, is located in the slums of Bombay. They name these slums, as the grotesque 'Other' of the main city. They show how the inhabitants of these slums provide cheap labour for the elite of the city (59).

It is through the mosaic of stories of these 'Other' people from diverse backgrounds and our journey to the 'Other' spaces in the country, we learn about the ruthlessness of the State machinery which seeks to eliminate any person or clear any space that is not in sync with its ideology. As we follow the lives of Om and Ishvar from the village to the slum in the city, from the footpath to the verandah in Dina's flat, from the horrifying events in their village to their final place as beggars on a footpath, we learn that the State does not consider the poor as citizens. The poor ceased to be regarded as human and were treated as expendable items to be put to use or destroyed at the will of the State. During the Emergency there was a collusion between the government and the bourgeois class who supported the decision of the government to impose Emergency as it was beneficial for their business. Just like the State, the elite too sees the poor as people who can be disposed of by killing them or by having their population controlled by means of sterilization drive. We can see this in Nusswan's statements in favour of the Beautification Programme and the sterilization drive of the ruling government during Emergency.

"People sleeping on pavements gives industry a bad name . . . at least two hundred million people are surplus to requirements, they should be eliminated. . . . What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be a mercy." (*A Fine Balance* 366).

Om and Ishvar become victims to both these schemes. They are driven out of the slum when it is destroyed by the State under the aegis of the beautification programme of the government which "wants to create a totalizing map of a pure city without beggars and the homeless" (Damai 92). They begin to live on the footpath, carrying all their belongings with them when they go to Dina's flat for work. They are picked up from the foot path and sent to a camp where they are asked to labour without compensation and were given bare minimum means of subsistence. The work camp presents to us a picture of totalitarian regime where the poor are put to work to meet the goals of the state without any compensation and substandard and subhuman living conditions. The poor people who are picked up from the streets and sent to the camp are treated as non-persons and they do not have even the basic rights that every citizen in the country should have. They are living what Giorgio Agamben has defined as "bare life, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed" (12 emphasis in the original).

The final blow comes when Om and Ishvar go to their village to get Om married. Om, who has his father Narayan's rebellious spirit, gets noticed by the villainous Thakur who had killed and burnt his entire family. They get rounded up by the police who were randomly collecting people from the streets to fulfill the targets for the vasectomy camp. Ishvar's operation is done using unsterilized equipment and as a result his legs get infected and have to be cut off. He is reduced to moving about on a cart like the beggar Shanker. Ishvar was lamenting about Om's vasectomy operation, which was done in spite of his repeated pleading that Om was yet to get married. Someone informed him that the operation could be reversed by doctors from the city. He feels hopeful, and thinks that they will come back next year to get Om married. Just then, the Thakur comes on a round, recognizes Om, and calls the doctor and whispers instructions which makes the doctor turn pale. The officials at the vasectomy camp take Om away for another operation without any explanation and when he returns, Ishvar finds that his testicles have been removed making him into a eunuch. The Thakur ensures that the family line of Dukhi Mochi ends with Om. The poor are not only disabled, but also emasculated by the totalitarian regime. This mutilation of the bodies of the tailors is, as Chakrabarti and Ganguly state, "the final scathing indictment of the ruthless annihilating nation that devises measures to literally render its citizens impotent and crippled" (72). They point out that the "grotesque carnival of the Nussbandhi Mela set up by the Family Planning Centre" has the "look of a village fair with its paraphernalia of balloons, flowers, soap bubbles, coloured lights, snacks" (72).

In the novel we have the intermingling of the various marginalised narrative voices. On one hand there is a coming together of motley voices at Vishram Hotel where the underprivileged people come together to share their stories. On the other hand, there is the private space of Dina's flat where a tenuous relationship has been built among the main protagonists. In chapter ten of the book, titled 'Sailing Under One Flag' all the characters come under one roof and we see a beginning of a relationship that started in order to fulfill mutual needs, but ends up as a relationship that is based on respect and affection for each other. This newly created motley family takes to cooking and eating together and being each other's support systems. K.C. Belliappa says that the "transformation of such a relationship, as the one between Parsis and Chamars is an exceptional event in Indian English Fiction (207).



Dina gradually noticed that the smell of the tailors' urine in the WC had grown unnoticeable. That is when she realizes the oneness of their routine: "Then it struck her: the scent was unobtrusive now because it was the same for everyone. They were all eating the same food, drinking the same water. Sailing under one flag" (*A Fine Balance* 392-93). They stay together in this way for a year. These episodes of idyllic togetherness shine through the otherwise dark universe that Mistry has constructed in the novel. The feeling of friendship and fraternity, the sense of togetherness, the slow and gradual building up of trust and support. This idyllic family, complemented by the motley community at Hotel Vishram, is the microcosmic unit of the nation. It falls apart because of the forces of the nation-state and Emergency working upon them.

Thus we see that in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry has given a great amount of narrative space for delineating the lives of two of the four central protagonists in the novel, Om and Ishvar, the two Chamar tailors who have transcended their caste across a generation to become tailors. Mistry goes back into the past of all the characters and traces their story to the present moment when they come together in Dina's flat in the novel. We learn about the caste atrocities in the village that inspired Dukhi Mochi to send his children to a neighboring village to be apprenticed under his friend Ashraf to learn tailoring. His children Ishvar and Narayan become financially independent and outgrow the constraint of poverty through their skills. Narayan, who is rebellious by nature, aspires for a greater equality, a full citizenship of the nation by desiring to vote in the elections instead of just putting his signature and let the gang of the Thakur castvotes on the behalf of the villagers. This rebellion is severely punished with torture for Narayan and the annihilation of the entire Mochi family by burning them alive with the exception of Ishvar and Om, who were with Ashraf in the neighboring village. They come to the city to escape from the potential threat of an attack by the Thakur and also because of the threat to their livelihood by the invasion of modernity in their village where readymade garments began to be sold. So we see that the desire to overstep the boundaries of the caste is the reason for their exile from the village.

When they come to the city, caste is not presented as a major issue as they are joined to various other individuals in their struggle for survival. Through their association with different people we come to meet people like the Monkeyman, Rajaram the hair collector, Shanker the beggar and learn about their stories. What happens here is a division of narrative sympathy and diffusing of the issue of caste. When the tailors are allowed to live in the flat, we know that it is out of sheer necessity of keeping them out of harm's way and thus ensuring the continuation of the tailoring work that makes Dina take this 'altruistic' decision in the first place. Later, as they stay together and the mistrust and apprehension that Dina has gradually dissipates, leading her to invite them to eat together, sharing teacups with them, breaking a big taboo of untouchability by initiating inter-dining. But even here the issue is not so much that of caste as that of overcoming the fear of the *Other*. Dina, being a Parsi does not carry the Hindu baggage of the taboos regarding untouchability.

Thus, we see that Mistry has very sensitively portrayed the plight of the untouchable tailors in the novel, though issues of caste and untouchability take a back seat against the larger issues of the critique of nation's abdication of responsibility towards its citizens and the impact of Emergency on the lower classes.

Mistry has been critiqued for his portrayal of the untouchable characters by many scholars. It has been said that his portrayal is contained within the discourse of pity and sympathy. The narrative sympathy is diffused amongst a motley of struggling characters from the lower sections of the society that Mistry has sketched in the novel. There is a detailed description of the lives of the poor in the novel – the slum, the foot path, the camp – the poor are spoken about, but they do not become active agents in the story. Even the little resistance to domination that Narayan first puts up, and then Om, who expresses his disgust for Thakur and catches his attention, we see that the poor are always already defeated by the elite and in the end we even see that they have learnt to survive their fate by laughing at their plight.

Nilufer Bharucha has pointed out that "Mistry's text is attempting to articulate the silences of centuries of exploitation, domination and oppression of the poorest of poor in India (143). She critiques Mistry's representation of the poor and dispossessed using arguments put forth by critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said and Ranajit Guha and Foucault about the validity of the writer claiming to speak for the oppressed. They would question the writer speaking for the oppressed and would instead recommend that the subaltern should speak for him/herself.

Bharucha also points out that Mistry has put together different categories of people in one bracket of the marginalised – Dina Dalal, the Parsi widow, Maneck, the alienated young man and his friend Avinash, Om and Ishvar, the tailors who belong to the untouchable community of the Chamars, the Monkeyman, who belongs to the *Madari* caste, Ashraf Chacha, a Muslim who is part of the religious minority, Shanker, the disabled beggar, and the Beggarmaster. She brings up the question whether this heterogeneous group of people that Mistry has presented in the novel can be classified under the rubric of the marginalised (145).

Bharucha says that Mistry seems to be striving after effect in his portrayal of the plight of the poor as it lacks "in authority and authenticity that is immediately evident to Indian readers who are able to see this, though ironically it is these parts of the text that most impressed several Western reviewers and readers" (152).

Chelva Kanaganayakam points out the reason behind Mistry's popularity in the West, in spite of the fact that he does not write about the West. He suggests that it could be so because of Western preoccupation with the East. He points out that



“... a particular version of East has often exerted an appeal to the West, and Mistry might well be providing that dimension in his work. Mistry offers the very opposite of an exotic India and the construction of the ‘Other’ has a particular valency... Mistry’s choice of subject matter can be regarded as an indication of complicity in neocolonial hegemony” (37).

Toral Gajarawala says that the dissection of poverty in Indian English fiction has always been done through the mode of realism. She points out how our transition to the specialized locations of poverty have been eased by “sending us along with an affable, middle-class narrator, or at least, middle-class positionality” (135). This happens in *A Fine Balance* when we see the slums through the eyes of Maneck as he is invited by Om and Ishvar for dinner. The whole enterprise does not meet with Dina’s approval who has serious reservations about Maneck visiting the slums. From her middle class apprehensions about lack of cleanliness and hygiene of the slums we can see that the poor are the *Other* for her. Her views go through serious revisions when she permits them to sleep in the verandah of her flat and starts sharing meals with them. Gajarawala comments on Mistry’s use of an urban backdrop as a location for poverty and on his bringing the Chamar tailors into an urban, middle class apartment. He creates them as a characterological anchor in a larger realist design (135). She says that though the path of realism is best suited to the analyses of poverty in Anglophone fiction, it has been broadly indifferent to the question of caste.

Gajarawala points out that the Anglophone literature has always been disinterested in portraying the question of caste. The caste issue has been elided in Indian English novel in its quest for becoming modern and secular and, as a result, the novel is about the upper castes and their issues like conflict between tradition and modernity and tracing of their origins. Hence there has not been any serious mention of caste in the Indian novel in English (130). According to her, the Anglophone fiction has created “a literary sphere that is putatively secular that is often casteless or caste-constrained” (133).

I would like to suggest that though the two untouchable tailors have a detailed presence in the novel, they are contained within the discourse of pity and sympathy. The narrative attention is also divided by the presence of other poor characters in the book such as the beggar Shanker, his mother Nosy, Rajaram, the Monkey Man. The lame Ishvar takes up Shanker’s place at the end of the novel, turning to begging as a profession as nothing else worked out for him and his nephew. The novel also critiques the nation state as it relates to these characters. It exposes the gaps in the grand narrative of the nation by bringing to light the ‘little stories’ of the forgotten and erased poor. It speaks for the poor, but the poor do not speak for themselves in the novels. Their discourse is contained within the overarching writer’s discourse in the novel. In spite of his concern for the poor and a detailed and sympathetic account of their plight, Mistry’s novel is also situated within the discourse of pity.

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