

Narratives of Marginalization and Social Invisibility in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) is not merely a novel about 1970s India; it is a profound act of witnessing. set during the authoritarian clampdown of the Emergency (1975–1977), the story brings together four lives that society has pushed to the edges: Dina Dalal, a fiercely independent Parsi widow; Maneck Kohlah, a young student from the hills; and Ishvar and Omprakash Darji, two Dalit tailors whose very existence defies centuries of caste-based dehumanization. Rather than offering a detached sociological survey, Mistry immerses us in their daily struggles, the hunger they suppress, the dignity they cling to, the small joys they steal from a world determined to deny them. In doing so, he transforms abstract concepts like “socioeconomic inequality” and “caste oppression” into innate human experiences marked by sweat, silence, and resilience. At its core, *A Fine Balance* issues an ethical call for visibility not as spectacle, but as recognition of full humanity. Mistry's narrative technique embodies this imperative: he lingers on details others might overlook the texture of worn clothing, the rhythm of labour, the weight of unspoken grief thereby insisting that these lives matter not because they symbolize suffering, but because they are lived with complexity, humour, and moral agency. In the tradition of subaltern studies, which seeks to recover the voices silenced by

official history, Mistry crafts a literary space where the marginalized speak, not through grand declarations, but through the quiet persistence of their being. The novel thus becomes both a historical document and moral reckoning, urging readers to see not just the structures that marginalize, but the irreplaceable individuals who endure within.

Keywords: *A Fine Balance*, marginalization, social invisibility, caste, subaltern narratives, Emergency India, inequality

I. INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a deeply moving and poignant exploration of the complex layers of social injustice in modern India, and it stands as a cornerstone of postcolonial literature. Set against the backdrop of the Emergency period (1975–1977), a time when civil liberties were suspended and state power reached its zenith, the novel presents an intense portrayal of the vulnerable lives affected by these political upheavals. Mistry intricately weaves together the intersecting stories of four protagonists Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohlah, Ishvar Darji, and Omprakash Darji each representing different facets of India's marginalized communities. Through their lives, the novel exposes the harsh realities of caste oppression, class exploitation, and the cruel machinations of political power, which not only strip individuals of their agency but also render them invisible within the larger societal framework.

The novel's title itself *A Fine Balance* suggests the precarious equilibrium between hope and despair faced by those at the peripheries of society. This paper investigates the narrative strategies through which Mistry gives voice to characters commonly relegated to the margins of Indian society and how these narratives speak to broader issues of marginalization and social invisibility.

This paper seeks to examine how Mistry's narrative strategies give voice to these often silenced characters, drawing attention to the experiences of those who are relegated to the margins of Indian society. By focusing on the lives of his protagonists, Mistry offers an insightful commentary on the broader issues of marginalization and social invisibility. Through their struggles, the novel not only highlights the enduring impact of caste and class divisions but also underscores the resilience of those who resist erasure. It is through these intricate and heart-wrenching narratives that *A Fine Balance* challenges us to confront the realities of power, inequality, and the human cost of social injustice.

Literary Contributions: Narratives of Marginalization and Social Invisibility

1. Caste and Class as Mechanisms of Exclusion

At the core of *A Fine Balance* is a critique of the deep-rooted social systems of caste and class. Ishvar and Omprakash, who are from a lower caste (Chamaar), represent the harsh reality of being excluded from society. Even though there are laws against caste discrimination, their experiences in both rural and urban areas show that prejudice and social invisibility still exist. This suggests that legal equality alone is not enough to break down these long-standing social divisions. The novel also highlights how class discrimination adds to the challenges faced by people from marginalized castes. For example, the forced sterilization campaign during the Emergency shows how state policies harm those who are already powerless, demonstrating how poverty and caste combine to create extreme vulnerability.

2. Subaltern Voices and Social Silence

In *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry focuses on the lives of ordinary people whose voices are usually missing from official history and public discussions. Through characters like Ishvar and Om, and even Dina who is not from a lower caste but still struggles as a widow, the novel shows how many people live on the margins of society. These characters represent individuals who are often ignored, silenced, or treated as if their lives do not matter. By telling their personal stories, Mistry allows readers to understand their daily struggles, fears, hopes, and small moments of happiness.

The novel challenges popular ideas that describe India only in terms of progress, development, or national unity. Instead of focusing on big political achievements, Mistry highlights the suffering of those who are most affected by social inequality. Events such as the destruction of slums and forced medical procedures during the Emergency reveal how government actions can deeply harm poor and powerless communities. By describing these painful realities in detail, Mistry makes sure that the experiences of marginalized people are seen and remembered. He reminds readers that behind every political decision or social policy, there are real human lives that are often forgotten.

3. Political Oppression and Human Vulnerability

The story takes place during the time of the Emergency in India, a period when the government held extraordinary power and limited many basic rights of citizens. This political background strengthens the novel's theme of marginalization. During the Emergency, civil liberties were restricted, and strict policies were forced upon people without giving them a real choice. Those who were poor, uneducated, or socially powerless suffered the most. The government's actions show how political systems can control, exploit, and silence vulnerable groups instead of protecting them.

In the novel, Dina's eviction from her home shows how quickly a person can lose independence and security when faced with powerful authorities. Even though she works hard to remain self-reliant, she is ultimately unable to resist larger political and economic forces. Similarly, Ishvar and Om suffer extreme physical harm during the forced sterilization campaign, which permanently changes their lives. These painful experiences show how state power can damage both the bodies and futures of marginalized people.

4. Intersectional Marginalization: Gender and Identity

In the novel, caste and class are very important reasons why people face discrimination, but gender also plays a major role in shaping their lives. Dina Dalal's struggle to earn her own income and live independently shows how difficult it is for a woman to survive in a male-volent society. As a widow, she does not receive much respect or support, and she constantly has to defend her right to make her own decisions. Her brother tries to control her life, and society expects her to depend on male relatives instead of standing on her own. Through Dina's character, the novel shows the many limits placed on women's freedom, movement, and social position.

At the same time, Dina is not shown as completely helpless. She works hard, starts her own small business, and tries to create a space where she can live with dignity. However, her independence is always under threat from social and economic pressures. This reflects how women in such systems often have to carefully balance obedience and resistance. They may not openly fight against society, but they find small ways to survive and protect their self-respect within difficult conditions.

The novel makes it clear that marginalization is not caused by just one factor. Gender, caste, and class are all connected, and they influence each other. A poor woman from a lower caste may face even greater challenges than someone who experiences only one form of discrimination. By showing these overlapping struggles, the story explains that social invisibility is complex. Different systems of power work together, creating different but related forms of inequality in people's lives.

II. CONCLUSION

A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry remains a powerful and meaningful novel because it brings attention to people who are often ignored by society and history. Through the lives of Dina, Maneck, Ishvar, and Om, the novel shows how caste, class, gender, and political power shapes everyday experiences in painful and lasting ways. Set during the Emergency in India, the story reveals how government authority and social systems can work together to silence and harm the most vulnerable people.

This research has shown that marginalization in the novel is not just a background theme, but a lived reality. The characters do not simply represent ideas of inequality — they experience hunger, fear, loss, and humiliation in very real ways. At the same time, they also show courage, friendship, and small acts of resistance. Even when their lives are controlled by larger forces, they try to hold on to dignity and self-respect. In this way, the novel makes social injustice personal and emotional rather than distant or abstract.

The paper has also highlighted how Mistry gives space to subaltern voices — voices that are usually absent from official records and dominant narratives. Instead of focusing only on political leaders or national progress, the novel centres on ordinary individuals whose struggles are often overlooked. By telling their stories with care and detail, Mistry ensures that they are seen and remembered.

In conclusion, *A Fine Balance* is not only a story about suffering, but also a reminder of shared humanity. It asks readers to look beyond statistics and social categories and to recognize the real people behind them. The novel encourages us to think about justice, compassion, and responsibility in our own societies. By bringing marginalized lives into the centre of the narrative, Mistry leaves readers with an important message: every life has value, and ignoring injustice only allows it to continue.

III. REFERENCES

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