

“FRAGILE EQUILIBRIA: SOCIAL MARGINALITY AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS IN ROHINTON MISTRY’S *A FINE BALANCE*.”

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Abstract - Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* presents an intense representation of social marginality and the precarious pursuit of sustainable livelihoods in 1970s India, a period marked by the unlawful imposition of the Emergency by Prime Minister Mrs Gandhi (1975), political coercion, caste oppression, and systemic economic vulnerability. The story is set against the backdrop of the National Emergency and centres on four diverse characters who come together and develop a bond while navigating an unforgiving social and political order in their own way. Despite relentless structural inequalities, their lives show persistence of dignity, a “fine balance” between survival and despair. This paper examines the convergence of caste hierarchies, state violence, and urban poverty to create a fragile equilibrium for the marginalised. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates how literature not only reflects but critiques systemic exploitation. By engaging with works on subalternity, trauma and community resilience, this paper argues that *A Fine Balance* offers a humanising lens on survival strategies, fragile solidarities, and acts of quiet resistance. Ultimately, this analysis positions Mistry’s fiction as a work of art and socio-political text that deepens our understanding of marginalised lives and their enduring struggle for a sustainable, dignified existence.

Keywords- marginality, sustainable livelihood, Emergency, marginalised, community.

INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry is a highly acclaimed Indian diasporic postcolonial writer. His second novel, *A Fine Balance*, is a powerful work on human endurance in the face of systemic injustice. Besides being shortlisted for the Booker Prize three times, the novel has won several accolades- Winner of the second annual Giller Prize in 1995, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction in 1996, and the 1996 Commonwealth Writers Prize.

Set in India during the turbulent years of the Emergency (1975–77), the novel focuses on the intertwined lives of four characters from varied backgrounds- Dina Dalal, a widowed seamstress; Ishvar Darji, his nephew Omprakash Darji, two lower-caste Dalit tailors seeking escape from caste-bound servitude, and the young, disillusioned student Maneck Kohlah. The novel captures both the frailty and strength of individuals caught in the turbulence of history and society. Their shared struggles unfold against a backdrop of systemic economic fragility, caste injustice and political pressure. It reveals what Mistry calls “a fine balance” between hope and despair, resilience and ruin. At its core, the novel is a narrative of social marginality. Robert Park (1928:882) and later sociologists have defined marginality as emerging not just from poverty but also from structural exclusion based on caste, class, and political disenfranchisement. Ishvar and Om’s legacy of caste oppression is well portrayed in the schoolmaster’s cruel punishment for defying their untouchable status. “*Get the cane ... and you two remove your pants...After I am through, not one of you achhoot boys will ever dream of fooling with things you are not supposed to touch.*” (Pg- 111) Mistry illustrates the persistence of social boundaries even within the urban economy. Dina is subjected to gender marginality. Her livelihood is precarious: her fragile independence is constantly threatened by landlords, inspectors, and exploitative labour markets. As Subapriya notes, “Dina’s struggle is emblematic of women’s constrained autonomy in a hostile social economy” (379). In this context, the concept of sustainable livelihoods- as outlined by Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway (1992)- provides a useful analytical tool. Sustainable livelihoods encompass not just economic survival but the ability to live with dignity and resist forces that erode human capability. Amartya Sen’s capability approach (1999) further streamlines this perspective, portraying poverty not just as a lack of income but more as a deprivation of substantive freedoms. When seen through this dual lens, the novel emerges as both a literary and socio-political text that illuminates the lived realities of India’s marginalised communities.

The national emergency exacerbates these vulnerabilities, turning survival into a daily negotiation with state power. Forced sterilisations, slum demolitions, and police brutality were vividly captured in scenes such as the demolition of the tailors’ jhopadpatti. “*Bulldozers advanced... the huts crumbled like sandcastles*” (233) reflects a political environment in which the poor are rendered expendable. Yet, within this harsh landscape, Mistry also depicts fragile solidarities: Dina’s hesitant decision to shelter Ishvar and Om, an act of shared humanity, and the mutual support among the characters suggest the emergence of what Peter Morey

(2004) calls “micro-communities of resistance.” These bonds, though insufficient to dismantle systemic oppression, offer a glimmer of humanity within an otherwise dehumanising order.

This paper argues that *A Fine Balance* highlights the tension between **hope and despair**, revealing both the harshness of Indian society and the resilience of ordinary people. By amalgamating literary analysis with socio-economic frameworks, the discussion examines the intersection of caste, class, and political power, and interrogates the fragile equilibria that sustain human dignity at the margins.

The paper focuses on three aspects. The first part focuses on caste, class, and urban displacement in the bigger landscape of marginality. The second explores livelihood insecurity through the lens of systemic political and economic failures. The third considers the fragile equilibria that sustain Mistry’s characters- moments of solidarity, resistance, and quiet dignity that illuminate how literature reframes social reality. Finally, this paper contends that Mistry is a storyteller of humanity and has captured both the frailty and strength of individuals caught in the turbulence of history and society, urging readers to confront the enduring struggle for justice embedded in everyday survival.

DISCUSSION

The Landscape of Marginality

Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* portrays social marginality not only as a result of poverty but as a structural condition produced by caste, class, and political hierarchies. Ishvar and Omprakash Darji’s journey from their rural Chamaar origins to the city reflects the persistence of these forces across both village and urban contexts. Their attempt to escape caste servitude by apprenticing with Ashraf Chacha, a Muslim tailor, provokes violent retaliation. In a particularly brutal scene, the schoolmaster humiliates them publicly: “*Get the cane ...*” “*...the teacher asked four older students to hold the trespassers to the ground, face down, by their hands and ankles. He commenced the punishment, alternating strokes between the two. The watching children flinched each time the cane landed on the bare bottoms.*” (pg 110–12). This act of ritualised punishment illustrates how caste enforcement ensures social immobility. Scholars affirm this dynamic. Dodhiya argues that “Mistry’s text exposes how caste exclusion survives migration, reasserting itself in the city” (15). Even in urban spaces, caste prejudice persists subtly but decisively, with Ishvar and Om reduced to precarious labour in the informal economy. Their forced displacement during the slum demolitions- “*Bulldozers advanced... the huts crumbled like sandcastles. People screamed... police beat them down*” (233)- exemplifies how state policy compounds this vulnerability, weaponising “beautification” to erase the poor.

Dina Dalal’s experiences add a gendered dimension to this landscape of marginality. Though not Dalit, Dina lives under constant threat of economic dependency and social erasure: “*If I cannot keep the tailors, I will be back at my brother’s mercy*” (158). As Subapriya observes, “Dina’s struggle is emblematic of women’s constrained autonomy in a hostile social economy” (379). Her vulnerability illustrates how marginality is layered, with gender intersecting with class to produce unique forms of precarity.

Thus, *A Fine Balance* establishes that marginality is neither accidental nor transitional; it is reproduced by interlocking systems of caste, class, gender, and state violence, forming a precarious social order in which survival itself is an achievement.

Sustainable Livelihoods and Systemic Failures

While social marginality sets the stage, Mistry also interrogates the economic structures that deny his characters sustainable livelihoods. Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway define a sustainable livelihood as one that “can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks” (6). In the novel, however, livelihood is a fragile balancing act. For Ishvar and Om, tailoring represents both escape from hereditary caste labour and an entry into a new cycle of dependency. Their skills are devalued in a market dominated by exploitative middlemen, while Dina’s financial instability perpetuates this chain of exploitation. The Emergency intensifies this vulnerability. Policies such as forced sterilisation and slum demolitions deepen the poor’s dispossession. In the slum clearance episode, Mistry offers a visceral account of how state power dismantles not only homes but also the fragile networks of survival on which the marginalised depend. Amartya Sen’s capability approach helps clarify this depiction. Sen argues that “*development consists of the removal of various types of unfreedoms*” (3). Yet in Mistry’s narrative, the Emergency curtails freedoms, reducing individuals to objects of state discipline. As Morey observes, “*Mistry’s fiction insists that survival is a political achievement rather than a natural condition*” (112). Therefore, livelihoods in *A Fine Balance* are never secure. They exist within a volatile environment shaped by exploitation and political coercion.

Fragile Equilibria: Survival, Agency, and Resilience

Despite its bleak portrayal of systemic exploitation, *A Fine Balance* is not devoid of hope. The novel’s title itself points toward a fragile but persistent equilibrium; moments of human resilience that resist complete erasure. One of the most striking examples of this is the relationship between Dina, Ishvar and Om. Initially marked by suspicion, Dina allows the tailors to live in her house and now, she is letting them bring a wife. Zenobia refers to their potential stay as turning her flat into a “pigsty”. “*The whole jing-bang clan will end up on the verandah... place will turn into a pigsty...*” (Pg 547). Yet, as necessity compels cohabitation, this relationship gradually evolves into a tentative solidarity. By inviting them into her home, Dina not only defies social hierarchies but participates in what Morey (2004) terms “micro-communities of resistance.” These fragile solidarities do not dismantle

structural oppression, but they carve out spaces of dignity and mutual recognition within it. Yet, resilience in the novel is neither triumphant nor absolute. Maneck Kohlah's eventual suicide functions as a counterpoint to Ishvar and Om's endurance. Maneck's despair, triggered by his sense of helplessness against systemic injustice, underscores the psychological cost of living in a society where survival depends on tolerating indignity. As Mistry writes, *"..he stepped off the platform and onto the gleaming silver tracks"* (pg- 612). This haunting moment reflects the tragic limits of endurance, showing that not all can maintain the balance between hope and despair.

However, Ishvar and Om's quiet persistence, even after their forced sterilisation and Ishvar's amputation, embodies a subdued form of resistance. Their survival, though stripped of conventional success, becomes a moral assertion: the refusal to vanish. As Dodhiya (2004) notes, "Mistry's marginalised characters resist through endurance, not revolution; their survival itself is their rebellion."

In this way, *A Fine Balance* reframes resilience not as heroic transformation but as an unglamorous, daily negotiation with injustice. It is this fragile equilibrium- tenuous, painful, but enduring- that gives the novel its ethical weight.

Literature as Socio-Political Critique

Beyond its narrative of individual suffering and resilience, *A Fine Balance* functions as a profound socio-political critique. Through its unflinching realism, the novel exposes the systemic mechanisms - caste hierarchy, political coercion, and economic precarity- that trap marginalised communities in cycles of poverty. The novel's bleak ending, with Ishvar and Om reduced to begging outside Dina's apartment, resists any saving grace in closure. Instead, Mistry insists on historical fidelity: for the marginalised, survival itself is not a narrative triumph but an ongoing confrontation with structural violence. Yet, the novel's critique is not purely despairing. By portraying small solidarities- Dina's sheltering of the tailors, Beggarmaster's unexpected code of loyalty- Mistry offers what Subapriya (2019: 381) calls "a poetics of constrained hope," where even fleeting moments of compassion acquire political significance. Moreover, by embedding his characters' struggles in meticulously researched historical detail, Mistry blurs the line between fiction and social testimony. As such, the novel functions not only as literature but as an alternative account and voice of the marginalised, often excluded from official histories. Therefore, *A Fine Balance* exemplifies how literature can expose the lived realities of social marginality and demand an ethical response from its readers.

CONCLUSION

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* stands as a haunting literary testimony to how caste, class and political oppression converge to shape lives at the margins. Through its vivid portrayal of Ishvar, Omprakash, Dina and Maneck, the novel dismantles romanticised visions of poverty, revealing survival as a "fine balance" between endurance and despair (Mistry 469). By weaving personal narratives into a broader historical context, Mistry reveals how social marginality is not an accidental condition but a structural reality produced and maintained by deeply entrenched hierarchies.

The analysis of marginality through Chambers and Conway's sustainable livelihoods framework and Sen's capability approach underscores the socio-political resonance of the text. Ishvar and Om's lack of assets, freedom, and security reflects systemic failures that reduce the poor to objects of policy rather than agents of change. Yet Mistry also foregrounds small but potent acts of resistance: Dina's decision to shelter the tailors, Beggarmaster's unexpected loyalty, and Ishvar and Om's unyielding will to survive. These "micro-communities of resistance," as Morey calls them, carve out "spaces of humanity within a dehumanising order" (112). These moments do not overturn structural injustice, but they expose the moral resilience that persists even in the most hostile environments. Crucially, the novel's refusal to offer a redemptive ending reinforces its ethical demand. Ishvar and Om's descent into begging is not merely tragic. It compels readers to confront the structural nature of poverty and its persistence across generations. As Subapriya observes, "Mistry withholds consolation, forcing recognition rather than escape" (381). As Morey (2004) contends, Mistry "withholds consolation to sharpen our awareness of how deeply injustice is woven into the fabric of ordinary life."

In contemporary India, where caste violence, urban displacement, and livelihood precarity remain urgent realities, *A Fine Balance* continues to resonate. It functions as both a work of art and a socio-political document, an "alternative archive" of marginalised experience that invites readers not only to witness but also to reimagine systemic injustice. Ultimately, Mistry's novel affirms that survival at the margins, even stripped of triumph, is an act of defiance. In this fragile equilibrium, literature itself becomes a form of resistance, demanding that the silenced be heard and the unseen made visible.

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