



Negotiating the subaltern Space: Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the Indian Diaspora, which has come into being for political and economic reasons. Diasporic existence forces loneliness and a sense of exile on the individual often leading to severe identity confusion. Rohinton Mistry writes of an India during the times of emergency when the country witnessed lot of political turmoil. Almost all his novels either directly or indirectly interrogate the hegemony of the rulers during the period of emergency. Mistry's protagonist in general is a middle class Parsi caught in the mire of everyday mundane existence who has limited needs and aspirations. The family is at the heart of all action. Every enterprise of the protagonist is towards giving his family a better world to live in. Mistry's fiction is rooted in the streets of Bombay, the city he left behind for Canada at the age of twenty-three. This 'imaginary homeland'¹ - something of a literary capital within South Asian diasporic writing today - has inevitably led to comparisons with Salman Rushdie, another Bombay born author now based abroad. However, the differences between the two men are perhaps as compelling as their similarities.

A Fine Balance (1996)², critically Mistry's most successful work to date, tells the story of four characters Maneck, Dina, Ishvar and Omprakash and the impact of emergency on them in a carefully crafted prose:

“...The morning express bloated with passengers slowed to a crawl, and then lurched forward suddenly, as though to resume full speed. The train’s brief deception jolted its riders. The bulge of humans hanging out of the doorway distended perilously, like a soap bubble at its limit...”

This complex opening paragraph, which is typical of the precise prose of *A Fine Balance*, throughout helps propel the novel forward through what is one of the most memorable portraits of post-Independence India ever written.

My paper focuses on the problematics of identity of subaltern voices which are represented through the various characters portrayed in the novel wherein the characters struggle in whatever way possible to establish an identity of their own. This novel is a fierce polemic against exploitation, discrimination and social inequalities

Reflections on identity are best fashioned in the scholastic world. Identity has become a catchword in academic circles, a trend of erudite quest and an accomplishment of progress in philosophical thought. It is a mixed world and the most elevating aspect of it is that in a changing and challenging world, it is still a formidable concern for the academia. Mistry takes up the question of disillusionment and discord in the hearts of the minorities as against the rights exercised by the dominant natives. He debates the issues of negotiating identities against the high tide of the mainstream identities.

Unequally structured societies have brought forth individuals having differences and suffering depravation-disenchantment; disaffection and despondency become a part of everyday life and grossly affect the social fabric. Mistry’s novels are a protest against social imbalances and behavioral discrepancies that individuals encounter in their everyday social dealings. His characters are real and stark, not hidden under the garb of a romanticized vision. The life that they live and the fears that they experience, are very much a part of their everyday survival. Every character is weighed down by social pressures that demand a tailor cut role from them. Any deviation from the assigned role invites castration.

One of the most common refrain is that identity is not a static idea, but a dynamic one, which constantly shapes and reshapes itself. The question of identity is central to the postcolonial, diasporic, subaltern and feminist discourse. In a world that once echoed with struggles defined over the dimensions of class, race

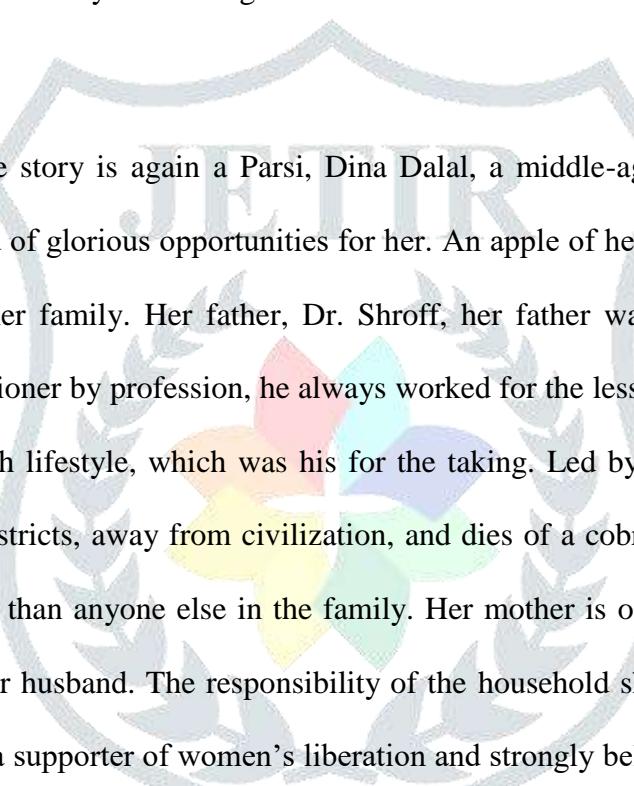
and gender, now rules the identity question. The focus on identity leads to a multidimensional approach that foregrounds identity itself, a fundamental notion of who we are and what we have become. Identity politics is a genuine spread of self-proclaimed positions, statements and standards. In a rapidly emerging field of cultural studies, with its earmarked spaces in universities, scholarly conferences and publications, identity is something substantial to hold on to, while proclaiming that it is a fluid concept, given to the whims of social and cultural factors, which seem to have logic of their own. Mistry deals not only with the question of the immigrants exiled to other countries, but also with that of internal migrations that result out of a need for a better life and fruitful opportunities resulting from modernization and industrialization.

Mistry's '*A Fine Balance*' captures the textures of India as no writer has done before. Filled with a splash of Indian colours wrapping in it moments of pathos and humanity, the novel once again establishes Mistry as a master storyteller. The reader at once establishes a connection with the characters, living and breathing their lives. The novel is a coming together of four lower extremes – the subalterns-- a widow, two tailors living in the slums and a disillusioned student. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* seems more at home among the Parsi community and the poor. The novel is once again set in the India of the 1970s in an unnamed city by the sea. The corrupt and brutal government of the country has declared a state of emergency. In the backdrop of such political turmoil, an unlikely alliance is formed among these four characters. Although each one of them hails from a different social segment, their individual needs bring them together. Dina, a middle aged widow desperately clinging on to her ever fragile independence, two tailors-an uncle and nephew team-fleeing from the cruel caste violence in their village and a young student, scared away by the brutal and humiliating ragging in the hostel, when they come together they form a family of sorts. This assorted family initially starts on a very cautious note, each skeptical of the other's intention, but gradually and surely they form a bond that is hard to break. Through the course of the novel, they face adverse conditions that threaten their very existence, but they survive, though not without scars. The weaker of them all, Maneck succumbs to the pressures and commits suicide. The characters created by Mistry are unforgettable and the canvas that he paints them on is very vast. As Mistry reflects in an interview in a June 2002 issue of *Asia Source*:-

A Fine Balance was going to be a short novel. It started with the image of a woman at a sewing machine. There was this image, and then I decided that my novel was going to be set during the

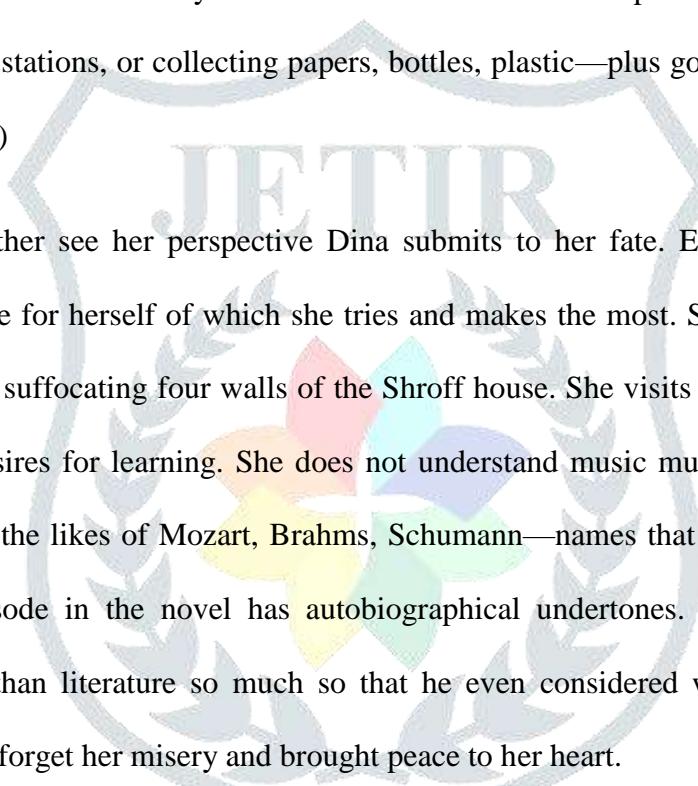
Emergency. Therefore, I had that conscious decision and I had the image of the woman at a sewing machine. Later of course, I brought in more characters: the two tailors she hires and the student.

As I began writing, though, the story grew and I found myself getting interested in other details of the characters' lives: Dina's life and where she had come from, why the tailors were there and where had they come from, and so on... India still lives in its villages (about 70-75 per cent of the population is rural) so this had a particular appeal for me. The novel would give me the chance to write about this student who comes from the North, the foothills of the Himalayas. I had traveled a little bit there, and found myself writing about it. That is how it turned into such a big book.³(Asia Source)



The central character of the story is again a Parsi, Dina Dalal, a middle-aged widow. When she was a young girl, people predicted of glorious opportunities for her. An apple of her father's eye, she enjoyed all the love and attention of her family. Her father, Dr. Shroff, her father was a man of high values and principles. A general practitioner by profession, he always worked for the lesser fortunate – the reason why he never boasted a very rich lifestyle, which was his for the taking. Led by this philanthropic streak, he ventures into the interior districts, away from civilization, and dies of a cobra bite. The loss of her father proves fatal for Dina rather than anyone else in the family. Her mother is of no help as she retreats unto herself after the death of her husband. The responsibility of the household shifts on Nusswan, the man in the family. Nusswan is not a supporter of women's liberation and strongly believes that the duty of a girl is to grow into a respectable woman, find a suitable match and become a dutiful wife to her husband. His ideas spell doom for Dina, for her brother does not approve of her tomboyish lifestyle. He tries to persuade her to mend her ways but Dina rebels accusing Nusswan of trying to impose his will upon her. All her accusations fall on deaf ears and Nusswan takes a firm stand by laying down guidelines by which the entire household would function. Dina defies orders and is punished. The domestic helps are dismissed and Dina made to do all the household chores. Nusswan tries to force her into submission by insulting and humiliating her in many different ways. He refuses her to get a haircut going by the trends, but these measures turn her even more rebellious. She gets her hair cut all the same

Dina continues her defiance of Nusswan's autocratic attitude, though never being able to score over him. Nusswan gathers all the sympathy of the community by projecting her as a difficult girl who was required to be checked by the most severe of punishments. She is made to paste her severed plaits to her short hair and go to school. That not being enough, Dina is made to give up school when she fails to score well. Her plea that all the housework made it difficult for her to devote time to studies is seen nothing more than a lame excuse:-

“Don't make excuses. A strong young girl doing a little housework – what does that have to do with studying? Do you know how fortunate you are? There are thousands of poor children in the city, doing boot polishing at railway stations, or collecting papers, bottles, plastic—plus going to school at night. And you are complaining? (27)

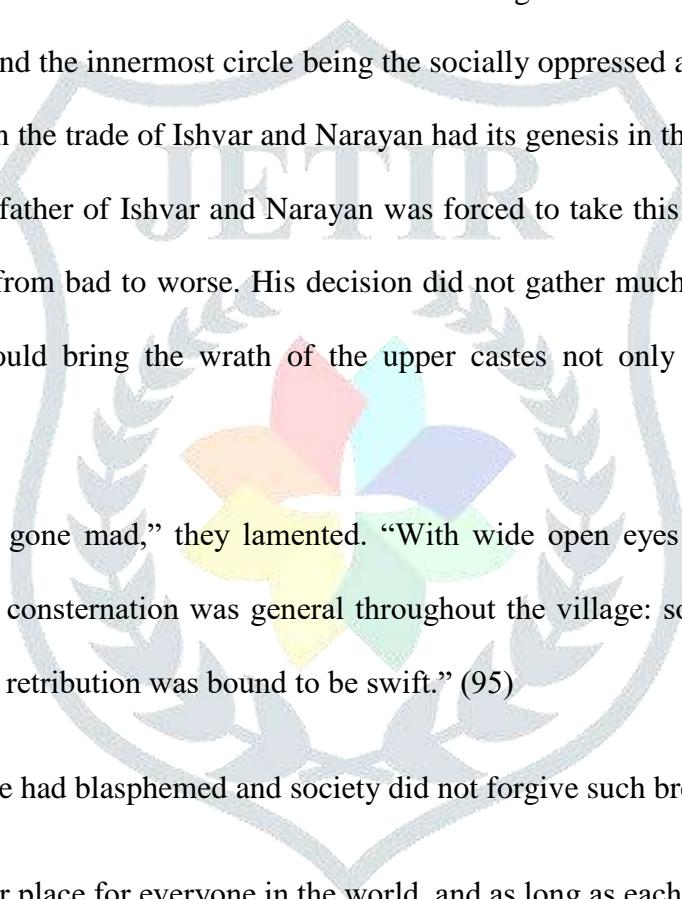
Unable to make her brother see her perspective Dina submits to her fate. Entrusted with all the daily chores, she gets little time for herself of which she tries and makes the most. She spends all the time that she can spare outside the suffocating four walls of the Shroff house. She visits libraries, music libraries to satiate her unfulfilled desires for learning. She does not understand music much nevertheless she enjoys being in the company of the likes of Mozart, Brahms, Schumann—names that brought back memories of her childhood. This episode in the novel has autobiographical undertones. Mistry initially was more inclined towards music than literature so much so that he even considered writing songs and creating music. Music made Dina forget her misery and brought peace to her heart.

“If she was lucky, she found something with a name that resonated richly in her memory; and when familiar music filled her head, the past was conquered for a brief while, and she felt herself ache with the ecstasy of completion, as though a missing limb had been recovered.”(30)

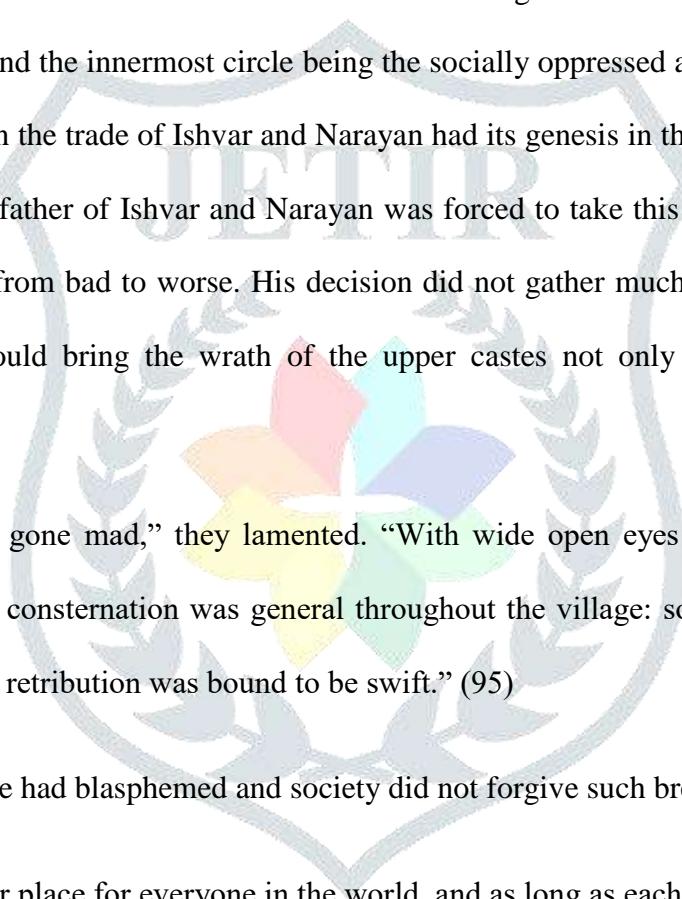
Her blighted life sees light again when she finds love in Rustom Dalal. Despite all the pressure from her brother trying to persuade her against marrying Rustom, Dina takes the plunge and finds happiness in matrimony. Her happiness though is short lived. Rustom dies in an accident on the day of their first wedding anniversary. Dina is devastated. Left alone and vulnerable she is forced to turn to her brother and live on charity. Nevertheless, before long she decides to take charge of her life and embarks on a journey towards self-reliance and independence. She takes up sewing as a fulltime occupation and a means of

earning a living wherein Zenobia helps her. Dina receives orders from one Mrs. Gupta who deals in the supply of ready-made garments. In order to complete, the orders taken, Dina decides to employ two tailors. After looking everywhere for tailors, one fine day she finds Ishvar and Om standing on her doorstep. Thus begins an association between the three which beginning with lot of caution initially and easing out with the passage of time.

The novel after introducing the tailors gives the details of their past. Ishvar and Om belong to the lowest caste in the hierarchy of the Hindu Varna system—the Chamaars (cobblers). The caste system in India has been like a series of concentric circles: the outmost circle being the most dominant class that enjoys unequivocal prerogatives and the innermost circle being the socially oppressed and untouchables that enjoy almost nothing. The shift in the trade of Ishvar and Narayan had its genesis in the practices observed by the society. Dukhi mochi, the father of Ishvar and Narayan was forced to take this decision when he saw fate of his community getting from bad to worse. His decision did not gather much support among his people for they feared that it would bring the wrath of the upper castes not only on the family but on the community as well:-

“Dukhi Mochi has gone mad,” they lamented. “With wide open eyes he is bringing destruction upon his household.” And consternation was general throughout the village: someone had dared to break the timeless chain of caste; retribution was bound to be swift.” (95)

Moreover, pay he did for he had blasphemed and society did not forgive such breaches of conduct:-

“There was a proper place for everyone in the world, and as long as each one minded his place, they would endure and emerge unharmed through the Darkness of Kaliyug. But if there were transgressions- if the order was polluted- then there was no telling what calamities might befall the Universe.” (100-101)

The lower castes that are born shackled are not allowed to break free of the chains and the onus of keeping the society in order lies on the Thakurs and Pundits. The Indian society that boasts of a democratic front where each individual is supposed to be enjoying an equal status—socially if not economically—is actually a two-faced one. Whenever there were transgressions on the part of the lower castes, retribution was quick.

"The crimes were varied and imaginative: a Bhungi had dared to let his unclean eyes meet Brahmin eyes; a Chamaar had walked on the wrong side of the temple road and defiled it; another had strayed near a puja that was in progress and allowed his undeserving ears to overhear the sacred shlokas; a Bhungi child had not erased her footprints cleanly from the dust in a Thakur's courtyard after finishing her duties there..." (101)

Through these detailed accounts of the Scheduled and the upper castes, Mistry reflects upon the dynamics of caste as it prevails in the Indian society. Social hierarchies in terms of gender and caste are debated in this novel. Only an eyewitness could have given these details of our society. Mistry here not only takes the face off the Indian democratic society, but also raises the question of how unconscious we are to the practices carried out in the social system. Through his stark and pithy narrative, he brings to the fore the miserable condition of these people living on the margins, leading a life dictated by the upper castes—a life devoid of any hope for change. This hopelessness makes Dukhi decide in favour of a different life for his sons Ishvar and Narayan. He sends them to a nearby town to apprentice as tailors with his friend Ashraf.

Another important dimension that Mistry critiques in the novel is the mushrooming of leaders who pretend to be the guardians of democracy and every time they speak, they vouchsafe of changing the world—selling a utopian dream to the naïve commoner. These self-styled harbingers of a new world order are people far removed from the harsh ground realities that the common person lives everyday. The dimension that Mistry delineates is the political and social interface, where the seasoned politician beguiles the naïve commoner. Mistry gives one such incident where a leader tries to rekindle the spirit of the people reviving in them the freedom struggle moments and telling them how his party was with the people in their fight for justice "...first we must be rid of this disease that plagues the body of our motherland...This disease, brothers and sisters is the notion of untouchability, ravaging us for centuries, denying dignity to our fellow human beings. This disease must be purged from our society, from our hearts, and from our minds...They would clap, and go on in the same old way."(107)

Life continues. The so-called revolutionaries are not able to create even a ripple in the still waters of the social mire. The atrocities continue unabated and 'all is well with the world'. The caste violence is very pronounced in the Indian (Hindu) society and is no less than racism practiced in the West. These episodes

of violence against humanity leave the marginalized with no choice but to switch trade and shift grounds. This dilemma of negotiating a respectable life out of grossly adverse circumstances is the bane of Mistry's fiction. He not only portrays life as a constant struggle to keep head above water but also desperate attempts to hold on to even a single straw that gives him some hope. Being a Parsi and having lived a marginalized existence Mistry somehow becomes the voice of all the less fortunate. Somewhere in the narrative, we hear echoes of restraint, which was a part of all marginalized existence:

‘they knew exactly what their caste permitted or prohibited, instinct and eavesdropping on the conversation of elders had demarcated the borders in their consciousness as clearly as stone walls,...’(108)

After learning the trade of tailoring, Narayan, the elder son of Dukhi mocha, decides to go back to his village to practice the trade .Here Mistry shows a quiet revolution building up. The upper castes were scoffed at when at Narayan’s wedding arrangements were made to bring musicians from the town. Narayan flourishes in his trade as a tailor and as a family man. The upper castes are not able to digest the transgression made by Narayan. During the elections, Narayan makes another deviation from the accepted norms of social propriety when he declared-

‘Next time there is an election, I want to mark my own ballot’ (144)

This was blasphemous .The elders of the village tried to knock sense into him by discouraging him to make such utterances-

““They won’t let you”, said Dukhi, “and why bother? You think it will change anything. Your gesture will be a bucket falling in a well deeper than centuries. The splash won’t be seen or heard” ‘(144)

The economic strength that Narayan comes by, triggers a spark in him to assert for his rights. The caste configurations that changed after independence especially after the parliament sanctioned equal rights and reservations in certain areas as to provide opportunities for growth to the marginalized and the minority communities saw a new breed of subalterns or *dalits* surfacing—a breed that was more aware of their rights and quite aggressive in terms of realizing them. However, in spite of all the laws and the political propaganda, caste hierarchies are very much a reality and still operative in the villages is evident from

Narayan's fatal rebellion and the repercussions thereof—his family is burnt alive and no case reported against anyone.

From the marginalized castes and the flight thereof with no outcome at all, Mistry moves on to the issue of haphazard modernization because of independence. It brings to fore the trauma of the partition days when people were forced to leave homes. Borders were drawn not only on the land, but also in the hearts of the people. People like Ashraf have to renegotiate spaces in the wake of borders being divided into two. In the changed conditions, Mistry brings one subaltern to the rescue of the other. Ashraf helps train Ishvar and Narayan into the trade of becoming tailors. They become skilled tailors, but their heart and soul are anointed with the indelible ashes of their lugubrious past, making them flustered and tentative. The timeless memories of their lost family who were burnt alive by the diabolic upper-caste, is now the only green patch in their dry lives.

The political manipulations at the level of the leaders of a nation never realize the damage that it inflicts on the commoners. Drawing borders and dividing a people results in sabotaging the interests of those who are never given any choices. Maneck's family survives the initial setbacks when they lose everything due to a fire, which passed through everything they had once owned. The rich legacy inherited by his father goes to the 'other side', but he survives

‘An air of contentment surrounded his life, a quiet pride at having survived the ordeal by fire...a lesson in living life on the borderline. Modern maps could ruin him, but they could not displace his dreams for his family’ (206)

Mistry here celebrates the indomitable spirit of man that bounces back despite all adversity. Also in the mannerisms of the neighborhood in this small hill town, echo the nostalgia for life enjoyed by the Parsis during colonization. The small community that gathers every evening to tea at the Kohlah's came ‘suited and booted’.

These sentiments can be traced back to the days of imperialistic rule during which the Parsis enjoyed a privileged status and the end of colonization marked the end of that special status. The Parsis who were

close to the power circles suddenly found themselves abandoned by their patrons thus reducing their status from privileged segment of the society to the marginalized one.

Dina struggles to assert her identity as an independent woman capable of making it good in the society dominated by people who feel that the place of woman lies in the custody of a man. Ishwar and Om struggle by crossing the caste barriers and trying to make a good living out of their new found social status as tailors, Maneck struggles against the nostalgia that he feels for the hills and tries to reconcile with the life that the big city has to offer. All four of these characters become a family of sorts where they somewhat grow onto and grow with each other. The efforts made by all four to keep the family going are sometimes rewarded and at other thwarted. The novel is a constant pursuit by the downtrodden and the marginalized of the society to try to build a good life for them.

These characters inhabiting the peripherals evolve their own strategies of survival. People like Narayan, Dina, Ishvar, and Om are rebels in the sense that they do not succumb to the pressures that they face from the society and they pay heavy prices for standing up against the political and social hegemony. Narayan is killed, Dina is made to live on charity, and Om and Ishvar are castrated and reduced to becoming beggars. The different modes of resistance adopted by all these characters are very representative of their class. Dina, who hails from a middle class family rebels by asserting her individuality in a patriarchal set up. She negotiates her space by working very hard, but fails and is forced into passive acceptance of her situation that leads her back to her brother Nusswan and his charity. Ishvar and Om—the names themselves comment at the perversion prevalent in the society. The two Dalits have been given names that are representative of the Lord worshipped so diligently by the upper castes, yet when it comes to the treatment of these down castes, that very lord becomes an untouchable. Giving these names to the cobblers can be seen as a subversive mode of resistance on the part of the writer where he pulls a satire on the so-called clean society of the upper castes

A Fine balance can also be seen, as a constant conflict between hope and despair for the low order of the society, who are uprooted from their villages due to socio-economic constraints and form the internal diaspora, seem to tread this thin line like a ropewalker trying to maintain the balance and reach the other end. However, not all succeed. We see Maneck losing this fight and committing suicide by throwing

himself in front of a moving truck. Dina, Om and Ishwar came out winners. Dina loses her accommodation, her business. Om and Ishwar are forcibly sterilized and Ishwar pays an even higher price for transgressing caste lines. He is castrated as a final revenge inflicted by the Thakur. Ishwar loses his legs due to infection. Both are reduced to a life of beggary. Nevertheless, there is a positive aspect to the looming negativity. All three of them are fighters. They find peace and solace in their relationships. This interdependence is reminiscent of the concept of ghettoization, one of the strategic diasporic features. The diasporic ethnic communities constitute their own groups and are confined to their own localities. This system of forming close ethnic connections away from their homelands becomes the bane of diasporic existence. The clusters that they create are representative of their ethnic bonding and an assertion of their identity in an alien land. The novel ends with Dina Dalal feeding Ishwar and Om, without the knowledge of her brother Nusswan and his wife with whom she now stays. As Vasant Rao Valmik puts it-

‘...there is always hope- hope enough to balance our despair, or we would be lost.’ (563)

Mistry in this novel gives the subaltern-the Parsi women and the lower caste subjectivities a voice and visibility. Sensitive to the threats to his society, he records the ethnic atrophy that has set in his community. The fate of his characters is interwoven with the fate of his community. As Wallace Stevens in his ‘Collected Letters’ says that ‘we live in the description of a place and not in the place itself.’(Holly Stevens)

Rohinton Mistry is one such writer of the diaspora who makes the subaltern speak. He brings to the fore the predicaments of not only the parsi, but also the other socially marginalized subjects. He infuses his characters with lot of courage and hope. Although Mistry is concerned about the fate of his community and the future worries him, yet his vision is not myopic and he extends the domain of his narrative to the other children of a lesser god.

While Om, Ishvar and Maneck in *A Fine Balance* reminisce about home, Dina endeavours to preserve her fragile independence, which she does manage to do with the coming of these three characters in her life. These foursomes embark on a journey exploring and devising ways of asserting their individualities and identities. Ishvar and Om, cobblers by birth, are forced to flee their village to escape victimization of their lot by the upper classes. They are strained to take on the identities of tailors. Maneck a young boy from an

idyllic hill station is forced to severe roots because of industrialization. Faith is one predominant characteristic of Mistry's characters. The tailors leave village in search of a better life just as the Diasporas venture out of their homelands in search of greener pastures, where they believe they can make their dreams come true. They negotiate an impossible dream of things getting better in future. A gloomy present, nostalgic about the past, an insight that maybe life was better off in a village than in the big 'City by the Sea' adds to their dilemma. *A Fine Balance* offers a panoramic view of commonplace people in a state ruled by a hegemonic govt. Nevertheless, the hardship faced prepares them to fight and struggle. Even if life knocks it around, the human spirit is not cowed down.

The names given to Om and Ishvar are somewhat ironical as they are names that are otherwise worshipped by the 'Chittapavan' Brahmins, but made outcastes, in the wake of their social stratification emphasizing the hollowness of such a society, which is guided by absolute blindness. These iconic spiritual names serve as metaphors that highlight the irony that prevails in the society. They are people who are always expected to follow the rules laid down by the upper class. The class conflict that Mistry brings out in the novel echoes the conflicting undercurrents felt by the Parsi minorities in a Hindu state.

The indomitable and unperturbed spirit of the marginalized is the positive aspect to an otherwise dreary situation. There is a hope of the cerulean sky emerging out of the darkness. The human concern remains the focus in Mistry's fiction. The backdrop though political, the pattern on it is a splash of vibrant pulsating social tapestry. There are visible undercurrents of hatred between the upper and the lower classes and castes so much so that sometimes the big divide seems to devour almost all the other social concerns. However, Mistry manages to strike a balance and restore the uneven swing of the faltering pendulum. His novels are a critique of the socio-political discrimination and victimization of his community and all the other subalterns in the wake of Emergency declared by the then autocratic governing head. These questions raised by Mistry through the narrative are questions, which trouble the minds of those times. The protagonist becomes the voice of the writer. He becomes the one who stands for the marginalized, challenging the hegemony of the state. Mistry's narratives flow like a stream blending and taking into its fold all the characters and situations. Constantly dealing with and braving adversity, the protagonist can be seen as a reflection of the sensibilities of a person who has had a first-hand experience

of the situations that the protagonist is made to deal with. Mistry records the ethnic atrophy that has set in his community.

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