
Suffering and Survival: Power, Caste and Poverty in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

¹Ms. Lydia Bennett P. U, ²Dr. Sathyakala T

¹Part – Time Research Scholar (Ph.D), PG & Research Department of English, Arulmigu Palaniandavar College of Arts and Culture, (Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu),

²Associate Professor of English & Research Supervisor, PG & Research Department of English, Arulmigu Palaniandavar College of Arts and Culture, (Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu),

Abstract: Rohinton Mistry plays a significant role in the postcolonial era, dealing with the cocoon of social norms. He brings out an impactful representation of the intersecting structures where the novels deal with a central stigma. In his novel *A Fine Balance*, he depicts the social and political oppression that happened in Bombay around 1970-80's. He mainly speaks about the sufferings of the marginalised, representing his community on the verge of extinction. The novel revolves around various characters who tried to survive their daily lives. He represented how minorities struggle to face their basic needs in a financially oppressed state. The major characters depict different struggles that brought them together in unity. Here we see Maneck, who comes in search of a place to stay, while Om and Ishvar, as tailors, struggle financially. It brings out multiple problems such as poverty, suffering for survival, power, age, gender, caste and religion. There is a problem of uncertainty about survival that permeates the novel. Dina, a widower faces gender bias and unequivocally shows how a woman suffers during the period of the Emergency Act. This research paper clearly gives a narrative of economic exploitation, gender inequality, displacement, disability, and the importance of friendship. It argues that disquiet is not about torment but about social and political erections. I feel that disquiet is the core issue. He also speaks about women's restrictions in the form of culture and predominantly widows who act as a relic. The attachment among Dina, Om, Ishvar and Maneck highlights the nature within this merciless society. Emergency played a role in transforming poverty into political crime mainly through slum clearance, family planning and arbitrary policing.

Keywords: Disquiet, displacement, minorities, marginalised, postcolonial era and oppression all echo throughout this narrative.

1. Introduction

Rohinton Mistry plays a role in Indian contemporary fiction. Rohinton Mistry associates the lives of ordinary people with the supreme disquieting social and political certainties. Rohinton Mistry sets this novel in the context of the Emergency Act; the plot begins in 1975, and the key characters become unexpectedly interlocked in their lives. The storyline revolves around four characters, each with different individuality, yet these four characters are united by the bond of friendship. Rohinton Mistry's triumph lies in the path of sidestepping history, a path distant from customary life. We see through the eyes of the tailors Ishvar and Om tailors who lost their livelihood because of slum clearance. Dina, a widow, struggles because of patriarchy in society. Because two other men became victims of the sterilisation program. Here we notice that the major problem is about the political verdicts that affected poignant experiences.

Dina, a widow who struggles financially for her living, meanwhile Maneck, a student who left his hometown to pursue technical education. On the other side, we could see the life of Om and Ishvar, who were tailors by profession, getaway from their village because of the firm caste system. A small living space turned into a place for survival, which pulled everyone away from political rules. These four different people began to rely on one another by sharing their home. This sharing is a success even though these people are so different from each other.



Life always needs a balance. That balance is in danger here. The title *A Fine Balance* shows the pain of living a life. The title *A Fine Balance* also suggests that being united through friendship can beat systems. The main problem is the suffering caused by structures and this suffering is shown through small acts of resistance.

2. Objectives of the Study

The work by Mistry looks closely at how books show unfairness and political pressure during 1975 (The Emergency Act). The novel breaks down ideas about caste, gender, social class, poverty and other backgrounds.

The main objectives of the study are:

1. To find out how caste, class and power all connect.
2. To explain the title *A Fine Balance* and how oppressed people survive trauma to find strength.
3. To look at how Mistry mixes stories with political issues to show what postcolonial writing is about.
4. To show how marginalised people challenge the people in power regarding equality and development.
5. To observe the importance of friendship, which unites them together for their survival and to beat their seclusion.
6. To examine the concept of marginalisation impacts on migration and displacement, particularly how to enjoy freedom when shifting from rural to urban areas.
7. To interpret how domestic violence, patriarchy, and forced sterilisation have an impact on the basic survival of the oppressed.
8. To critically interpret the control of the Emergency Act of 1975, which changed the status of the oppressed through slum clearance, forced sterilisation and displacement.
10. To logically analyse the women's struggle faced by the dominant powers – by turning their shame and guilt into personal dignity and liberation.
11. To examine the economic stature of the oppressed and the struggles faced by being marginalised in society.

3. Scope of the Study

1. The study mainly focuses on caste, class, poverty, gender, patriarchy, political oppression, and displacement.
2. These issues are interlocked and shape the lives of the characters.
3. The shift – a transfer from village to city is an attempt to escape from casteism and establish economic independence.
4. It highlights a gendered perspective on social unfairness that causes economic freedom and independence.
5. The Emergency Act era led to much cultural and social disquiet.
6. It also constructs how these human bodies undergo disability, labour, illness, and sterilisation after the independence trauma. It made them remain in struggle consistently.
7. The anxiety of survival hits harder in these characters with sociological and gender perspectives.

4. Research Methodology

The research paper espouses a qualitative textual-analysis methodology by keeping Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), which particularly deals with caste, poverty, displacement, human relationships and gender discrimination.



Another major methodology is an interpretative and analytical approach, which demonstrates the representation of social injustice prevailing in the society.

4. 1. Postcolonial Approach

The keynote of the postcolonial approach is to examine marginalisation, quest for identity and the unequal distribution of power. Power politics plays a pivotal role in this novel, where his characters occupy different positions and face challenges.

4. 2. New Historicist Approach

The study also deals with another impactful theory of New Historicism, which deals with literary representation and historical reality. The novel revolves around the political atmosphere with much detailing about the Emergency without direct mention.

4. 3. Feministic Approach

The novel employs the life experience through the life of Dina Dalal, who suffers from patriarchy, economic insecurity and widowhood. The study further shifts into class, age and marital status, which justifies the women in the society.

5. Review of Literature

In 2020, Laxmi Neupane's *Critique of Post – Emergency Indian Official in Mistry's A Fine Balance*, the novelist uses New Historicism. The novel makes us visualise the struggles of the culture faced in India during the Emergency. It furthermore deals with the agony and sufferings felt by the people on the edges of the minorities.

Neupane's study reads *A Fine Balance* from a new historical point of view by interpreting the novel, which gives a different insight into post-Emergency history, which is seen through the lens of marginalised communities.

Peter Morey's observation of Mistry is all about political history, where we could see Parsis move from one place to another, leaving their homeland, which is said to be displacement is the discussion about the minority group. So, the postcolonial aspect is mandatory for the research.

In 2023, Kiran Das investigates the work, *Constitutional Autocracy and Eugenic Sterilisation of Dalits: The Biopolitics of Emergency in Mistry's A Fine Balance*, which contracts with the Emergency from a perspective of Biopolitics. Further, it centres on violence, sterilisation and jurisdiction over the marginalised.

In 2025, Tyler Tokary's article, *Keynes, Storytelling and Realism: Economic Discourse in Mistry's A Fine Balance*, talks about how a book can talk about growth and money. Further, he says how India has changed a lot throughout the period of the Emergency and interprets how it affected the survivors of India.

James W. Johnson's 2015 article titled *Beggaring the Notion: Bodily Inscription and the Body Politic in Mistry's A Fine Balance* offers an analytical study about historical and political events which impacts into the individuals. He connects the breakdown and damage to the body with the rules of the caste system. Johnson says that body politics becomes oppression. Shankar's disability, where the wounds that are promoted from conflicts based on caste and the effects of sterilisation all show the connection between power and the living.

6. Caste and the Diligence of Untouchability

Casteism structures discrimination, which does not show caste as a single prejudice. Caste is presented as a system that shapes occupation, social identity, mobility and dignity. The conversation between Dukhi and Ashraf after the meeting is especially important because it shows the gap between public declarations of equality and the ongoing reality of caste discrimination. At the meeting, political leaders ask the crowd to reject caste prejudice.



The speech first creates an atmosphere of hope. Dukhi immediately asks whether such political promises can truly change village society. Mistry writes:

related to the freedom struggle, about those who were spending time honourably in jail for civil disobedience, for refusing to observe unjust laws. Dukhi and Ashraf stayed till the very end, when the leaders requested the crowd to pledge that they would expunge all caste prejudice from their thoughts, words, and deeds. We are taking this message across the nation, and asking people everywhere to unite and fight this ungodly system of bigotry and evil. The crowd took the oath that had been enjoined on them by the Mahatma, echoing the words with enthusiasm. The rally was over. I wonder, said Dukhi to Ashraf, if the zamindars in our villages would ever clap for a speech about getting rid of the caste system. They would clap, and go on in the same old way, said Ashraf. The devil has stolen their sense of justice; nah they cannot see or feel. But you should leave your village, bring your family here.” (Mistry, 2004, pp. 121–122)

7. Family Planning and Body Mobility Taken in Control

The Emergency Act (1975) took control over the lives of ordinary people who were below the economic line, when the government started family planning as a means of coercion. As an attempt to get a ration card, Ishvar is in direct contact with bureaucratic pressure.

“But there is another way to get the ration card, if you are interested. Yes, please—whatever is necessary. If you let me arrange for your vasectomy, your application can be approved instantly. “Vasectomy?” You know, for Family Planning. The nussbandhi procedure. Oh, but I already did that, lied Ishvar. Show me your F.P.C. F.P.C.?-Family Planning Certificate. Oh, but I don’t have that.” Thinking quickly, he said, “In our native place there was a fire in the hut. Everything was destroyed. That’s not a problem. The doctor I send you to will do it again as a special favour, and give you a new certificate.” (Mistry, 2004, pp. 203–204)

The above-quoted line reveals how poverty acts as a tool through which states exercise authority over the body. Ishvar needs a ration card, which is considered a basic requirement, but the government approach for a medical procedure, they linked him to forced sterilisation.

“Lots of people do it twice. Brings more benefits. Two transistor radios.” “Why would I need two radios?” smiled Ishvar. “Do I listen to two different stations, one with each ear?” “Look, if the harmless little operation frightens you, send this young fellow. All I need is one sterilisation certificate.” “But he is only seventeen! He has to marry, have some children, before his nuss is disconnected!” “It’s up to you.” (Mistry, 2004, pp. 204–205)

Mistry uses his sense of dark humour here, but it doesn’t reduce any sort of tension in the novel. Ishvar’s attempt at his great skill is a joke of listening to two radios with two ears, a momentary defence against the terrifying reality. The government has decided without any consent, and it resulted in forced sterilisation, which became an administrative requirement. It reveals the vulnerability of Om, who is still very young, and his body becomes something offered to the state in exchange for a certificate. This marks a suitable example of how political authority takes control of body mobility.

8. Widowhood and Independence: Dina Dalal

The treatment of gender plays a vital role which emotes in gender control. The society recognises Dina as a widow not by her name. Henceforth, it was considered an act of vulnerability. The central tension becomes more tragic when Nusswan attempts to intervene in her personal situation. Dina’s response finally reveals that widowhood gives others the right to others to judge their personal life. People jump to assumptions and conclusions under societal pressure rapidly.



Dina's anxiety and anger play a pivotal role because she refuses to accept the identity that society has constructed for her. The phrase "Poor Defenceless Widow" puts forth the question of whether the male person in the family was not there to control her. Therefore, her economic independence becomes an important form of resistance. She might be single without any dependence, but she wants to earn on her own by creating an identity for herself.

"How dare you! How dare you suggest I keep young men in my flat! Is that the kind of woman you think I am? Just because—" "Please, no, that's not—" "Don't you dare insult me, and then interrupt me! Just because I am a poor defenceless widow, people think they can get away with saying filthy things! Such courage you have, such bravery, when it comes to abusing a weak and lonely woman!" (Mistry, 2004, p. 415)

9. Class Cleaning and Anticivilisation: The Erasure of the Poor

The concept of class cleaning deserves separate attention because it represents one of the novel's strongest criticisms. The government has no concern in eradicating the poverty issues faced by the public, whereas it removes poverty from the visibility of the public. The poor are not treated as citizens whose living conditions need improvement, and they are treated as an unwanted visual presence. Therefore, Maneck learns that paupers and vagabonds have been taken by the police force. Later, it was explained in the language of government policy.

"It's not just them—everyone from the street, all the beggars and pavement-dwellers were taken away by the police." "Don't make me laugh, there's no law for doing that." "It's a new policy—city beautification plan or something, under the Emergency." "What Emergency? I am sick and tired of that stupid word." (Mistry, 2004, p. 392)

Here, Mistry's political criticism becomes very effective. He doesn't want to delve into a long political or contradictory argument. Therefore, the conversation between these personalities brings out how the government policies affected the ordinary lives of the people. The Emergency becomes particularly significant because it transforms the inequalities into new forms of state control. The poor are treated as an obstacle to the government's mission to maintain the city beautifully.

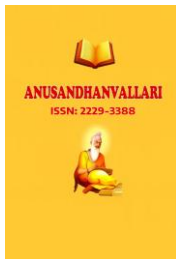
The treatment of Om and Ishvar brings out that social status requires proper shelter to fit in the urbanised world. A house without secure and proper shelter will be resulted or sentenced with imprisonment. The ironic statement of beautification, by cleaning the place, made the people lose the right to construct even temporary shelters. There were public statements of government slogans displayed on public platforms.

They pasted the Prime Minister's face over the boards, then debated about the accompanying message. There was a variety to choose from. They unrolled the banners and spread them out over the pavement for consideration, using stones to hold down the corners. The workers were unanimous concerning the first slogan: THE CITY BELONGS TO YOU! KEEP IT BEAUTIFUL! The second was posing some difficulty. The supervisor wanted to use FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY! HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS! His subordinates advised him that something else would be more appropriate; they recommended THE NATION IS ON THE MOVE! (Mistry, 2004, pp. 357–358)

Mistry therefore uses political slogans against themselves. The language of official propaganda exposes the distance between government promises and ordinary living practices.

10. Major Findings

1. Caste discrimination and poverty remain in society.
2. Social freedom cannot be obtained through urban migration.
3. Poverty threatens social life and dignity, which further brings insecurity.
4. Patriarchy suppresses women's struggle, which reflects on Dina's life.



5. Marginalised / minorities were controlled by the political powers.
6. Friendship as a hope and trust to rebuild the lost happiness.
7. Therefore, *A Fine Balance* represents the fragility of despair and hope.

11. Limitations of the Study

1. The historical discussion is limited to the Emergency context.
2. Only selected theoretical perspectives are employed, and it mainly focuses on four central characters.
3. The research is only based on textual analysis.

12. Research Gap

The major findings in the research gap are:

12. 1. Analysis of Oppression

The findings clarify how political oppression such as caste, gender, and poverty prevails in society.

12. 2. Caste and Class: Subdivision of Society

Caste oppression has received less attention; it has been placed on how caste and economic poverty work together.

12. 3. Gender and Economic Uncertainty

The perspective of patriarchy and female ageing needs further attention in the combined effects of widowhood, economic dependence, gender discrimination and social expectations.

12. 4. Urban migration and Social Inequality

The research recognises that migration is an attempt to escape caste-based oppression, resulting in social liberation.

13. Conclusion

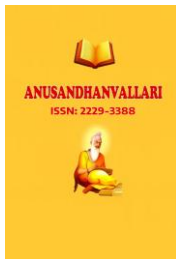
Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is considered deeply as a human novel because it refuses to separate personal suffering from socio-political structures. The four central characters Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om were different individuals who experienced caste, class, gender, poverty, discrimination, displacement and power. Therefore, social transformation is much needed rather than geographical movement.

Ishvar and Om escape from the limitations of the caste system in the village, where they consider the city as hope. But the city cannot be completely free from structural inequality. Dina's life gives another perspective on life. An independent survivor is questioned by society for being independent; her struggle for economic stature challenges the patriarchal societal assumption that a widow must rely on any male family members. Her tailoring business for her survival becomes a modest and meaningful form of resistance.

Humans live between hope and despair, freedom and dependence, dignity and humiliation, belonging and displacement. Whereas the balance is never secure, and it can be destroyed by poverty, caste, politics or accident. Mistry therefore allows the readers to think about the social injustices that prevail in the society. The characters struggle to maintain a balance that history continually threatens to destroy.

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