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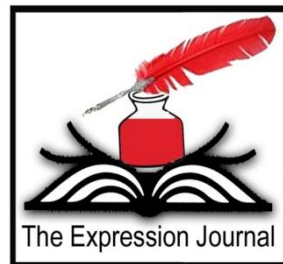
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TRAPPED IN THE QUANDARY: NAVIGATING TRAUMA, DALIT ATROCITIES AND VIOLENCE IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

DR. ARCHANA M. SARDANA

Associate Professor and Head

PG Department of English

Anna Adarsh College for Women, Chennai

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* deftly encapsulates the tumultuous narrative of characters ensnared within the intricate web of trauma, Dalit atrocities, and violence. This paper critically delves into the multifaceted dimensions of identity struggles amid a backdrop of societal discord and oppression. Through an incisive analysis, the study illuminates the dissonance between identity aspirations and the grim reality of Dalit lives, spotlighting the precarious tightrope walk these characters undertake. In the context of this intricate narrative tapestry, the research unearths the nuanced portrayal of the traumatic experiences faced by the characters, vividly reflecting their emotional scars and shattered dreams. Moreover, it rigorously examines the patterns of violence and oppression imposed upon the Dalit community, acting as a pivotal catalyst in shaping their narratives. The paper delves into Mistry's narrative craftsmanship in unveiling the profound trauma etched upon the characters' psyches, and how this trauma intertwines with larger societal forces. This study employs a comprehensive theoretical framework that interlaces literary analysis with socio-political perspectives. By interweaving characters' trajectories with historical realities, the paper unveils the harsh dichotomy between aspirations for identity and the suffocating weight of Dalit atrocities. It examines how violence becomes a haunting spectre, indelibly staining the fabric of their lives. This paper attempts to critically analyze the intricate interplay between trauma, Dalit atrocities, and violence as depicted in Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance*, unveiling how these elements shape the characters' struggles for identity and resilience.

Keywords

Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance*, Trauma, Dalit Atrocities, Violence, Identity Struggles, Societal Discord, Oppression, Narrative Tapestry, Emotional Scars, Socio-political Perspectives.

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Rohinton Mistry, a literary luminary of Indian origin, has not merely carved out a niche for himself within the realm of writers from the Indian diaspora. Jaydipsinh Dodiya also writes about Mistry: "Rohinton Mistry being a Parsi writer in India experienced cultural diaspora in India. Now he lives in Canada and writes about Indian life and culture, this leads to a double diasporic experience" (65). Mistry's literary works embody a distinctive style and calibre that position him among the foremost novelists on the global stage. Often likened to the likes of Charles Dickens for his empathetic portrayal of marginalized individuals, Mistry possesses a remarkable command of language coupled with evocative imagery, solidifying his stature as an erudite writer. Mistry is called a "realist writer" (Morey 161) who stands out as the singular Indian writer in English who boasts the extraordinary achievement of having all his novels shortlisted for the prestigious 'Man Booker Prize.' Born and raised in Bombay within the Parsi community, Mistry's personal background has greatly influenced his literary endeavours. Narendra Kumar remarks about Parsee community: "The Parsees are attempting to assert their ethnic identity in diverse ways. Parsee novel in English reflects this assertion of Parsee identity" (17-18). Born on July 3, 1952, in the cosmopolitan city of Bombay, he found himself straddling the intricate intersection of diverse cultures and communities. Simultaneously, he was tethered to the Parsi community's cultural and religious tapestry, an emotional and psychological bond that remained unbreakable. Sylvia Albertazzi comments about Mistry:

First of all, he tries to show the uniqueness of the Parsi Community by focusing on their way of living and their Cultural heritage. Then, he stresses the diasporic nature of Parsi social and historic experience, seeking the justification and the sense of his own story of migration in the perspective of the Parsi 'double displacement'. (276-277)

Growing up in an average middle-class Parsi household, Mistry's parents, while fostering an environment of relative prosperity, encouraged his educational pursuits. Attending reputable institutions such as Theresa Primary and St. Xavier's College in Bombay, Mistry's formative years unfolded against the backdrop of the city's melting pot of cultures. Graduating in Science in 1974, his initial inclination was towards a musical career, even

recording his own compositions and folk songs. Mistry's trajectory shifted when he moved to Canada in 1975, following his wife Freny Elavia. There, he embarked on a professional path as a clerk and accountant at the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, fostering financial stability. Concurrently, he pursued academic enrichment, obtaining a second bachelor's degree in English Literature and Philosophy from the University of Toronto. Nilufer Bharucha writes about this writer:

As an Indian who now lives and writes from Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the Indian Diaspora. However, Mistry is also a Parsi Zoroastrian and as a person whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in a diaspora even in India. This informs his writing with the experience of multiple displacements. (74)

The pivotal year of 1983 marked Mistry's entry into the world of literature with his first short story, "One Sunday," which clinched the Hart House prize. This achievement was followed by more accolades for subsequent stories, including "Lend Me Your Light" and "Auspicious Occasion." Penguin Canada published his collection of short stories, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, in 1987, which delved into life within a Parsi housing estate in Bombay. This work, reissued as *Swimming Lessons and Other Stories from Firozsha Baag*, garnered further attention, eventually being shortlisted for the Canadian Governor General's Award.

Subsequently, Mistry's literary journey included titles like *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and "Family Matters," all marked by themes of the common person's struggles, societal uncertainties, and corruption. His works transcend barriers of caste, class, and nationality, addressing the shared human experience at crossroads. Mistry's writing offers a relatable perspective, drawing readers into a world where everyday realities merge with profound insights. Reflecting upon the Parsi community's identity struggles, Mistry's writing resonates with a sense of displacement and a quest for preservation. It has been aptly stated that "an identity ... cannot be denied, rejected or taken away by others." (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 80). The narrative arc of his works echoes the dilemmas faced by minority communities in India, grappling with identity, survival, and cultural uniqueness. Mistry's literary prowess lies not merely in his storytelling ability but also in his poignant exploration of complex societal issues and the human spirit's resilience. Mistry said in an interview with Stacy Gabson, "I am interested in what makes a human being, and I don't have my agenda that I start out with" (25).

Mistry's remarkable accomplishments span an impressive array of awards, including being nominated for and winning prestigious literary prizes such as the Booker Prize, the Governor General's Award, the Griller Prize, and the Royal Society of Literature's Winfried Holtby Prize. Despite his international recognition, Mistry remains a private and reserved individual, characteristically appreciating the solitude that fuels his creative process.

Thus, Rohinton Mistry's trajectory from a musical aspirant to a literary luminary paints a portrait of a writer who captures the nuanced intricacies of life, particularly within the Parsi community and the Indian diaspora. His literary offerings stand as a testament to his profound understanding of human experiences, as well as his commitment to preserving the cultural narratives that define his heritage. Mistry's ability to fuse realism with sensitivity creates a literary tapestry that resonates not only with Indian readers but also with global audiences seeking a genuine connection to the human condition.

In the narrative tapestry of *A Fine Balance*, the relentless intrusion of the Emergency resonates deeply, unequivocally impacting the lives of the characters and inexorably leading them toward loss and ruin. As aptly stated by Bhatnagar (1998), "the Emergency intrudes

obtrusively into the lives of all characters leading to their eventual loss and destruction” (105). This tumultuous period brazenly severs the bonds of friendships. Ashraf’s tragic demise amidst a police action results in the heart-wrenching separation of Om and Ishvar, who lose a dear friend. Similarly, Maneck experiences the wrenching loss of Avinash, a fearless student leader, whose critical stance against official policies ultimately leads to his torment and disappearance. The aftermath of Ashraf’s demise and the denunciation of Nawaz, coupled with Dina’s initial reluctance to extend shelter, paints a bleak picture for Om and Ishvar in the labyrinthine streets of Bombay. Their plight is exacerbated by the government’s rigorous sterilization program, which bars them from finding rest on the pavements and culminates in the demolition of their humble hut within a jhopadpatti (slum). Such a dismal trajectory stands in stark contrast to the government’s rhetoric of progress, encapsulated in the hollow proclamation “The Nation is on the move” (302). In the stark reality of the novel, this slogan metamorphoses into a sardonic reflection of mass-scale homelessness, rendering it a cruel mockery of the vulnerable populace. The memory of home makes a person listless. Romila Thappar writes about memory:

Memory need not be what experience, refined or retained is personally. It also draws on notions that we inherit from preceding generations and pass on to the next. The assumption here is that it is inherited, but it is equally likely that it is invented. (Thapar 214)

The Emergency, in its relentless grip, annihilates individual autonomy and freedom, an affliction that resonates in the characters’ voices: “what kind of life, what kind of country is this, where we cannot come and go as we please” (541). This autocratic force develops an autonomy of its own, an overwhelming presence that remains insurmountable. Ashraf’s poignant description of it as an “evil cloud” (521) encapsulates its ominous potency and the bewildering turmoil it wreaks upon ordinary lives. Om’s perspective amplifies the severity of this ordeal, as he laments that he and his uncle, the downtrodden, are considered “less than animals” (540) in the eyes of the government. They are subjected to this dehumanizing view not only by the ruling power but also by the affluent elite who associate themselves with the government’s agenda.

A poignant embodiment of this perspective is Nusswan Shroff, who unabashedly supports the beautification scheme with a callous disregard for the homeless. He devalues their lives, observing, “Counting them [i.e., the homeless] as unemployment statistics year after year gets us nowhere; it just makes the numbers look bad. What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be a mercy” (373). In his disdainful stance, Shroff encapsulates the confluence of power, privilege, and indifference, epitomizing the systemic cruelty imposed upon the marginalized.

In *A Fine Balance*, Omprakash and Ishvar Darji, two pivotal characters, epitomize the central concern of navigating life’s challenges. Amid the dire consequences of the Emergency era, one salient feature commands attention: the insidious influence of India’s “cruellest social constraint,” caste. The profound impacts of caste on Ishvar and Om necessitate a delve into their familial origins. The Hindu lineage unfolds with Dukhi Mochi, Ishvar’s father and Omprakash’s grandfather, emblematic of the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers. This status, as V.S. Naipaul notes, places Dukhi in the caste of the most marginalized and debased (60). Engaged in crafting sandals and harnesses from animal hides, Dukhi is shunned, relegated to the strata of untouchability. Excluded from the four main Hindu castes, he is seen as impure and beyond the pale of interaction. This is in accordance with Hinduism’s concept of

karman, where one's caste status is determined by past actions, not unlike the Brahmin being reincarnated due to a life aligned with their caste duties. While class is meritocratic, caste entraps a person in their assigned role, hindering social mobility except through future incarnations.

Mistry's portrayal is no detached observation; it resounds with the injustices inherent in caste practice. The dehumanizing nature of untouchability is brutally indicted for corroding meaning in the lives of Dukhi, Narayan, Ishvar, and Om. A stark example surfaces in the chilling accounts of atrocities: "Sita was stoned for walking on the upper-caste side of the street... Gambhir had molten lead poured into his ears... Dayaram forced to eat the landlord's excrement... Dhiraj hanged after a dispute over wages with Pandit Ghanshyam..." (108-9).

Dukhi, after Ishvar and Narayan's assault for attending school, beseeches Pandit Lalluram, known for "justice even for untouchables" (112). Yet, justice eludes Dukhi; as an untouchable, he stands outside the realm of fairness. Mistry satirically portrays Pandit Lalluram's insensitivity and gluttony, casting doubt on justice's universality.

The callous treatment of his sons intensifies Dukhi's frustration with his caste-bound existence. Hope in his children's transcendence becomes a mirage, pushing him to question caste classification for the first time. Dukhi rebels against caste boundaries, as evidenced by removing his sons from direct discrimination.

Similar to Maneck, Narayan, Ishvar, and Om confront displacement. While Maneck moves for education, Ishvar and Narayan become tailors in the city. Narayan returns as an activist, challenging caste-based limitations and advocating for untouchable political inclusion. His statement, "life without dignity is worthless" (144), encapsulates his fight against a degrading existence. Narayan's demise, futilely battling the caste system and its political manifestations, is foreshadowed by a moth's struggle against a lamp's glass (143).

The moth's futile attempt to reach the light serves as a poignant metaphor for Narayan's courageous endeavor to shatter the chains of traditional caste norms. Much like the moth's inability to perceive the barrier between itself and the light, Narayan remains indifferent to the unspoken divisions of caste. For Ishvar, the aftermath of Narayan's demise and the subsequent disintegration of his family thrust him into the role of a guardian for his nephew, Omprakash. However, when Om falls victim to Thakur Dharamsi's castration, all while ascending the ranks of the Congress Party hierarchy, Ishvar's role as a surrogate father is compromised, as the lineage cannot be perpetuated any longer. "I have let down your dead father! Our family name will die without children, it's the end of everything-- everything is lost" (535). Ishvar's inability to fulfill his culturally prescribed duty leaves his existence bereft of significance, paralleling the plight of the moth.

A Fine Balance elucidates several aspects of the caste system. Primarily, it lays bare the individual repercussions of untouchability. For Dukhi and his progeny, this engenders a despondency that corrodes their sense of purpose, a corrosion only momentarily delayed by the blurring of caste delineations. Moreover, the novel unmasks the injustices embedded in caste hierarchies and examines the implications of challenging them. While Narayan opts for political resistance, Om and Ishvar grapple with evasion and exile. Secondly, the work underscores that while faith in the socio-cultural fabric of Hinduism wanes, the religion itself remains resilient. Although caste's ability to bestow meaning to life erodes, Hinduism persists as a vital reference point for select characters, with Ishvar exemplifying this reality.

Thirdly, the harrowing practice of caste as a cultural construct finds more fertile ground in rural settings than in urban environments. Despite the foundational principles of secularism

laid out in 1949, untouchability persists on a national scale. Even the stalwart Mahatma Gandhi acknowledged that 'untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk' (107), yet this message failed to gain complete traction. The Congress Party, in his wake, was unable to effectively dismantle untouchability at a national level. As one moves further from urban centers, the spectre of untouchability continues to haunt the landscape. *A Fine Balance* underscores that the farther one ventures from the locus of power, the weaker that power's influence becomes.

The lower caste endures unimaginable horrors. These distressing and inhumane acts of violence against those from higher castes are exemplified in the following lines:

The Thakur's wife was watching from the kitchen window, 'Oiee, my husband! Come quick!' she screamed. 'The chamaar donkey has destroyed our mortar'... 'What have you done, you witless animal! Is this what I hired you for?'... 'I swear on the heads of my children', begged Dukhi, 'I was only pounding chillies, as I have done all day. Look Thakurji, the sack is almost empty, the work_'... 'Get up! Leave my hand at once! I never want to see you again!' ... 'But Thakurji, the work_' He hit Dukhi across the back with his stick. 'Get up, I said! And get out!... Thakurji, have pity, there has been no work for days, I don't_'... 'Listen you stinking dog! You have destroyed my property, yet I am letting you off! If I wasn't such a soft-hearted fool, I would hand you over to the police for your crime. Now get out!' (2)

Dalit discrimination and tyranny is the main theme of this novel. Narayan's poignant reflection resounds: "Government passes new laws, say no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals" (142). Dukhi, driven by a quest for personal revolution, attempts to assert his right to vote but is met with barbaric torture followed by a public execution: "Burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, then stuffed into their mouths... the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks and the three were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square" (146).

The virulent disdain of the upper caste is palpable as Dukhi's family faces a cruel fate: "What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder, and he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society's timeless balance. Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity" (147). Tragically, Dukhi, Roopa, Radha, and their daughters, along with Narayan's remains, are consumed by flames. This horrifying massacre underscores the somber reality that the marginalized are perpetually vulnerable to the merciless upper caste. Misguided beliefs have erased the untouchables' identities. Corrupt leaders, for power and influence, play with lives, accepting bribes from businesses seeking preferential treatment.

Omprakash nurtures thoughts of vengeance, yet Ashraf and Ishwar comprehend the futility of such aspirations and opt to send Om to Bombay. Ishwar and Om find refuge with Dina temporarily, only to return to their village and face devastation. An unwarranted police raid at the market spells their doom. Ishwar and Om are forced into a sterilization camp, the hub for exploitative practices. Thakur Dharamsi thrives by auctioning patients to meet Government quotas. Thakur's vengeance is vindictive, subjecting Om to further torment, even though he suffers from a testicular tumor. Thakur's abuse symbolizes the vindictive suppression of lower castes seeking education and mobility. Ishwar's hope for a reversal operation is crushed, leading to Ishwar's anguished lament: "What kind of life? What kind of country is this. Where we cannot come and go as we please" (540). The horror deepens as

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Ishwar's feet, maimed during a beautification project, succumb to gangrene, resulting in their surgical removal.

Returning to 'our city,' they navigate life with a makeshift trolley, a grim testament to the tyranny of Thakur's authority. This chilling misuse of power signifies the dark nexus between criminalized politics and the politicization of crime, a theme that mirrors the tumultuous era of the late twentieth century. In a cruel irony, untouchable children yearn for education like their upper-caste peers, only to be met with savage punishment. Their torment is epitomized in the words and blows of a teacher in *A Fine Balance*:

You Chamaar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school! He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry . . . Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of learning and knowledge? . . . 'Wanted to look! I will show you now! Well, I will show you the back of my hand!' Holding on to Narayan, he slapped six times in quick succession 142 across the face, then delivered the same number to his brother's face. (110-11)

A Fine Balance not only unearths the intricate layers of trauma, violence, and the inhumane conditions that the Dalits had to endure but also holds a mirror to a society grappling with the complexities of caste and power dynamics. Mistry's novel encapsulates the grim realities of a society in turmoil, where marginalized communities bear the brunt of systemic violence. The narrative, replete with harrowing episodes and poignant moments, serves as a potent reminder of the perils of turning a blind eye to social injustices. By presenting a finely balanced tapestry of characters, each caught in the inescapable web of socio-political upheavals, Mistry compels readers to introspect about their roles and responsibilities in a world rife with inequalities. The novel stands not merely as a work of fiction, but as an imperative call for empathy, understanding, and transformative change. Jaydipsinh Dodiya also remarks that *A Fine Balance* "is considered a landmark in the history of Indian English fiction" (42).

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