



Enduring Inequalities: Caste discrimination and oppression in the fiction of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's fiction offers a poignant and realistic portrayal of Indian society marked by rigid hierarchies and enduring injustices. Through novels such as *A Fine Balance*, *Such a Long Journey*, and *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry exposes the pervasive nature of caste discrimination and the deep-seated social inequalities that continue to shape individual destinies. His characters—drawn from diverse social and economic backgrounds—embody the suffering, resilience, and moral complexity of those caught in oppressive social systems. Mistry's narrative technique combines realism with empathy, transforming ordinary lives into powerful commentaries on caste-based marginalization, class exploitation, and human endurance. The paper explores how Mistry's treatment of caste oppression transcends mere social critique to become a meditation on human dignity and moral courage in the face of systemic injustice. By illuminating the intersection of caste, class, and political power, Mistry redefines the postcolonial novel as a space for ethical reflection and social awareness.

Keywords: Caste discrimination, social oppression, class hierarchy, marginalization, human dignity

Introduction

Caste has been one of the most enduring and oppressive social hierarchies in India. Despite constitutional safeguards, caste continues to dictate people's social mobility, economic prospects, and personal dignity. Indian English fiction has addressed caste through diverse voices—from Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Among contemporary writers, Rohinton Mistry, a Parsi immigrant to Canada, occupies a distinct position. Although not a Dalit himself, Mistry brings an outsider's empathy and moral vision to his representation of caste oppression, exposing both its brutality and its persistence in postcolonial India.

His magnum opus, *A Fine Balance*, set during the political turmoil of the Indian Emergency (1975–77), portrays characters from multiple social strata: Dina Dalal (a middle-class Parsi widow), Maneck Kohlah (a student from the hills), and two tailors, Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash, originally from the Chamaar caste. Through their intersecting lives, Mistry examines how caste identity shapes fate and how any attempt to transcend caste invites punishment. As Singh observes, "Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity" (Singh 6).

Rohinton Mistry, one of the most significant diasporic writers of contemporary Indian literature, has established himself as a master chronicler of social realities, especially those concerning oppression and inequality. Born into a middle-class Parsi family in Bombay and later emigrating to Canada, Mistry's transnational perspective allows him to portray India with both intimacy and distance. His fiction often delves into the harsh realities of caste, class, and political corruption, reflecting the systemic injustices that persist in postcolonial Indian society. Among his works, *A Fine Balance* (1995) stands out as a profound depiction of human suffering and resilience amid the rigid structures of caste discrimination.

This paper examines caste discrimination and oppression in Rohinton Mistry's fiction, focusing primarily on *A Fine Balance* while drawing parallels to *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987). It seeks to

understand how Mistry's narratives foreground the struggles of the marginalized and articulate the enduring inequalities that continue to shape Indian social consciousness.

This paper analyses caste discrimination and oppression in Mistry's writing through four interrelated lenses:

1. The historical and occupational roots of caste;
2. Structural violence and the denial of dignity;
3. Agency and resistance among the oppressed;
4. The intersections of caste with class, politics, and migration.

The study concludes by evaluating Mistry's contribution to postcolonial discourse on social justice and human dignity.

Historical and Occupational Roots of Caste in Mistry's Narrative

In *A Fine Balance*, caste identity is inseparable from occupation. Ishvar and Omprakash belong to the Chamaar community, traditionally engaged in leather-curing and cobbling—occupations marked as "polluting" within Hindu orthodoxy. Their father, Dukhi Mochi, rebels against this inherited servitude by apprenticing his sons to a Muslim tailor. This act of defiance, however, provokes violent retribution from the local landlord, the Thakur. The Thakur's rage encapsulates the logic of caste oppression: "What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder" (Mistry 115).

Mistry uses this transition—from cobbler to tailor—as a symbolic attempt at caste mobility. Yet, as critics note, "Mistry's novel exposes how the social order in rural India enforces purity and pollution through violence" (Koirala 97). Dukhi's dream of liberating his family from caste bondage ends tragically when his family is massacred for challenging the "timeless balance" of society. By grounding the story in generational suffering, Mistry highlights how caste functions not merely as a social label but as an inherited curse—an inescapable determinant of fate.

A Fine Balance remains Mistry's most scathing indictment of caste-based oppression. Set during the Indian Emergency (1975–1977), it juxtaposes individual aspirations with the

machinery of state control. Ishvar and Omprakash Darji's suffering is not an isolated tragedy but a symptom of a wider societal malaise. The novel begins with hope—tailors working under Dina Dalal's supervision—and descends into despair as the Emergency policies destroy their livelihoods and dignity.

The forced sterilization campaign, demolition of slums, and arbitrary arrests illustrate how the poor and the lower castes bear the brunt of political authoritarianism. Mistry's writing captures what Gayatri Spivak terms "the subaltern's silence," for even when his characters speak, their voices rarely reach the corridors of power. The "fine balance" of the title refers to the fragile equilibrium between hope and despair, between endurance and annihilation.

Mistry's realism is deeply humanistic; he neither romanticizes poverty nor demonizes the privileged. Dina Dalal, a middle-class Parsi widow, becomes a conduit through whom caste realities intrude upon urban life. Her gradual understanding of Ishvar and Om's plight transforms her from indifference to empathy—a rare moral awakening that underscores Mistry's belief in individual compassion as a resistance.

Structural Violence and the Denial of Dignity

Mistry extends the scope of caste oppression beyond rural discrimination to systemic, state-sponsored violence. Ishvar and Om's migration to the city initially promises freedom, but urban modernity reproduces caste inequalities through new forms of exploitation. As tailors, they depend on upper-class employers like Dina Dalal and corrupt labor contractors who underpay and abuse them. Their living conditions—cramped, unhygienic, precarious—mirror the slum clearances that accompany the Emergency.

The most harrowing scenes occur when Om and Ishvar are forcibly sterilized during the state's Family Planning campaign. Om is rendered impotent; Ishvar loses his legs to infection. Their bodies bear the scars of both caste and state oppression. "The Emergency's machinery," writes Manwar, "becomes the new Thakur, mutilating the subaltern body under the guise of progress" (Manwar 3). The mutilation of lower-caste bodies becomes an allegory for a nation that dehumanizes its poor while proclaiming modernity.

Even everyday interactions reveal subtle humiliations: upper-caste villagers refuse to share food or water with Chamaar families; tailors are denied fair wages; slum dwellers are treated as disposable. Mistry's realism thus transforms caste from a historical relic into a living, breathing apparatus of exclusion. As Koirala notes, "Mistry makes the reader witness how the lower castes are beaten, tortured, and killed for trivial reasons" (Koirala 100).

Agency, Resistance, and Subaltern Subjectivity

What distinguishes Mistry's approach is his emphasis on the emotional and psychological dimensions of oppression. His characters are not mere victims; they are fully realized individuals with dreams, fears, and inner strength. He humanizes those relegated to the margins, inviting readers to recognize their dignity.

Mistry's empathy aligns with what Mahatma Gandhi termed "Sarvodaya"—the upliftment of all. Yet, unlike Gandhi's idealism, Mistry's vision is tempered by realism. He acknowledges the persistence of cruelty and the fragility of moral order. His depiction of caste is thus both an indictment and an elegy—an indictment of systemic injustice and an elegy for lost humanity.

While Mistry portrays oppression with searing honesty, he also invests his lower-caste characters with dignity and agency. Ishvar and Om choose migration as a form of rebellion—a refusal to remain bound by hereditary servitude. Their act of becoming tailors signifies self-definition. "The new skills were like magic," Mistry writes, "a spell that turned cobblers into tailors" (A Fine Balance 122).

Mistry's humanism lies in granting his characters subjectivity. They dream, laugh, and love despite their suffering. Their friendship with Dina Dalal and Maneck Kohlah creates fragile spaces of solidarity that transcend social barriers. As Singh observes, "For the marginalized, survival itself becomes resistance" (Singh 8).

Yet, Mistry resists romanticizing their struggle. The novel's tragic ending—Om sterilized, Ishvar crippled, and Maneck's suicide—underscores the systemic nature of caste oppression. The personal cannot overcome the structural. Still, the narrative ensures that their voices, silenced in society, are preserved in literature. Their stories become acts of witness, transforming the private pain of subalterns into a collective memory.

Intersections of Caste, Class, Politics, and Migration

Caste in Mistry's fiction intersects with multiple axes of power—class, politics, and urban modernity. Ishvar and Om's caste identity shapes their class position: they remain trapped in low-wage labor markets. Dina's relationship with them reflects both compassion and patronage, revealing how caste hierarchies persist even within acts of charity. Kumari and Sood note that "caste and class operate as strategic tools for sustaining supremacy" (Kumari and Sood 4).

Politically, *A Fine Balance* situates caste within the repressive climate of the Emergency. The government's "beautification drives" demolish slums, displacing thousands of poor families—many from marginalized castes. The sterilization campaign becomes a biopolitical weapon targeting the vulnerable. As Mangailakshmi and Raja argue, "Mistry translates political violence into human tragedy, exposing the complicity of the state in perpetuating caste oppression" (Mangailakshmi and Raja 5).

Migration, too, fails to offer liberation. The city of Bombay promises anonymity but delivers alienation. The caste system adapts to modern capitalism: upper classes exploit lower-caste labor while maintaining social distance. The novel's title, *A Fine Balance*, suggests this precarious equilibrium between hope and despair—a balance maintained through systemic inequality.

Thematic and Literary Significance

Mistry's treatment of caste has several literary implications. First, he debunks the myth that caste discrimination is a rural or pre-modern phenomenon. Even in the urbanized, "modern" space of Bombay, caste persists as an invisible yet pervasive force.

Second, Mistry foregrounds human dignity as the moral core of his narrative. The novel's emotional power arises from the humanity of its victims. The reader empathizes with Ishvar and Om not because they are saints but because they endure degradation with grace.

Third, Mistry situates caste oppression within the larger failures of democracy. The Emergency, a period of political authoritarianism, mirrors the moral Emergency of caste itself. Modern India's democratic façade conceals ancient hierarchies.

Fourth, Mistry's realism—his attention to detail, dialogue, and texture—functions as ethical testimony. His style blends documentary precision with emotional resonance, forcing readers to confront the cruelty of caste without turning away.

Finally, Mistry expands the scope of postcolonial literature by insisting that oppression in India cannot be understood solely through colonial binaries of East and West. Caste is an indigenous hierarchy, older than colonialism, yet intertwined with modernity. By portraying caste through a diasporic lens, Mistry transforms local suffering into a universal meditation on injustice and survival.

Conclusion

Caste discrimination and oppression lie at the heart of Rohinton Mistry's moral imagination. Through the intertwined lives of Ishvar Darji and Omprakash in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry exposes how caste operates as a structure of inherited violence that transcends time and geography. His characters' struggles embody both the tragedy of subjugation and the endurance of hope.

Mistry's vision is neither fatalistic nor sentimental. He acknowledges the crushing weight of social hierarchies while affirming human resilience. His portrayal of caste aligns with the postcolonial imperative to expose internal forms of domination that persist after colonial rule. In giving voice to the voiceless, Mistry enriches Indian English fiction with a profound moral and social consciousness.

Ultimately, *A Fine Balance* reminds readers that equality remains an unfinished project—that freedom, in India and beyond, is still haunted by the ghosts of caste.

Rohinton Mistry's fiction offers a powerful critique of caste and social inequality, exposing the invisible violence that continues to define Indian society. Through detailed realism, complex characterization, and moral sensitivity, he transcends mere social documentation to achieve universal resonance. His exploration of caste oppression becomes a meditation on human endurance, moral courage, and the capacity for compassion in a world divided by hierarchy and prejudice.

By giving voice to the voiceless and dignity to the downtrodden, Mistry's works reaffirm literature's potential as a moral force. *A Fine Balance* and his other narratives remind readers that the struggle for equality is both social and spiritual—a quest to preserve humanity in the face of enduring inequalities.

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