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Lives on the Edge: Navigating Subaltern Existence in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract
Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* presents the struggles of marginalized individuals living under the intersecting forces of caste, class, gender, poverty, and political oppression. This chapter examines the novel through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, focusing on how marginalized voices are silenced or denied recognition within dominant social structures. Ishvar and Omprakash, born into the Chamaar caste, experience caste discrimination, labour exploitation, forced sterilization, displacement, and violence, while Dina's struggles reveal the gendered dimensions of marginality. The novel's depiction of slums, labour camps, and broken bodies exposes the structural nature of subaltern suffering. At the same time, the shared household briefly creates a space of dignity and solidarity. Through a Spivakian reading, *A Fine Balance* emerges as a counter-history that preserves the experiences of those erased from dominant narratives, while revealing the continuing limits of subaltern speech.

Keywords: Subaltern, Marginalized, Caste, Patriarchal, Displacement, Domination, Oppressed

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* tells the story of the ordinary peoples who are striving to survive in a world controlled by caste, class, and political power. The lower class, the poor, the marginalized are the victims of the ill treatment by the upper class. The voice of the subaltern people becomes powerless and silenced. "Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity" (Mistry 147). The story is set during one of the darkest political periods in Indian history, the

Emergency of 1977. With this as the background of the story, the work presents four different men, Ishvar Darji, his nephew Omprakash, Dina Dalal, and Maneck Kohlah who have come from different locations and have joined together for their survival. Even though they come from different castes, religions and histories the novel tries to assemble the emotions, struggles and identity crisis faced by them as a subaltern being.

During the Emergency period the lower class people were forced and pushed towards poverty, displacement and silence. It became a mechanism through which the government controlled the lives, bodies and voices of the subaltern people in the community. "These Emergency times are terrible, sister. Money can buy the necessary police orders. Justice is sold to the highest bidder" (432). This shows the pathetic and miserable conditions of the subaltern people as they are controlled under the system which does not hear them, see them. Ishvar and Om return to their village only to be forcibly sterilised under a government population control scheme. Their bodies are treated as public property. The doctor does not see individuals, he sees them just as numbers. The authorities do not cut flesh but it cuts dignity. The state bulldozes homes without warning, leaving people homeless as if they were garbage. "A bulldozer does not stop for human cries" (224). The most horrifying moment comes when Thakur Dharamsi recognizes Om and orders him to be castrated, a private caste revenge executed through government machinery.

Ishvar and Om are born into the chamaar caste which is considered as impure and stationed at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Dina Dalal, a widow from a decent family background, struggles against patriarchal control, showing another dimension of subalternity which is the so-called gendered marginality. Maneck, the student, carries privilege but is emotionally helpless, witnessing injustice without the power to resist. Even labour is marked by caste. The two men, Ishvar and Om work as tailors, but are underpaid, cheated, and constantly at risk of eviction. The system keeps them alive, but never comfortable. They are allowed to work, but not to grow.

The house in which Dina lives becomes a temporary refuge, it is considered as a space where boundaries blur and equality briefly becomes possible. They all work together, cook together, and share meals in what resembles a small family which is free of caste and hierarchy. They are fragile, constantly threatened by landlords, police, poverty, and political violence. *A Fine Balance* becomes more than a story, it becomes testimony. It tells the history of the people whose histories are erased and those who cannot write history. It gives language to those denied the right to speak or the so called voice to the voiceless. Another victim of domination is Narayan, Om's father, who brings a turning point to the story. When he decides to cast a vote which is considered as a simple democratic action Thakur Dharamsi sees it as a threat. A subaltern can work, serve, and obey but raising their voice is considered as something that challenges power. Narayan who tried to raise his voice from silence was captured and killed. And his family was burnt alive. Only Ishvar and Om survive. This is not simply violence but it is what is called the caste discipline. It is history punishing those who try to rise.

Maneck contrasts Ishvar and Om, he is not oppressed by caste, but he lives within the same country. Through him, Mistry shows how privilege creates distance. Maneck likes Ishvar and Om, but he can leave the discomfort. He has the option of escape, education, or abroad. But through the character of Maneck the writer conveys that even the privileged feel powerless in the face of injustice. He cannot fix caste; he can only suffer from its consequences. The world's cruelty becomes too heavy, and he chooses death. This shows that caste destroys not only the oppressed but also the sensitive

privileged who witness it.

Migration is commonly seen as an escape from the brutal rule of the upper class, but in the city Ishvar and Om remain subaltern and powerless. They live in slums and also their labour is exploited. Their caste follows them like a 'shadow'. Police brutality, forced sterilisation, and displacement continuously remind them that poverty and caste causes vulnerability. Spivak's famous argument "'the subaltern cannot speak' does not imply that subalterns are physically mute. Rather, it suggests that their speech is not recognized as meaningful within hegemonic structures" (Spivak 263). When the subaltern attempts to speak, their voice is either ignored, appropriated, translated into elite discourse, or violently suppressed. Even the subaltern body was treated like a battleground especially the doctors even treated them like animals. Om is sterilized out of caste revenge. Ishvar loses his legs because he cannot afford medical treatment. Their bodies became history with pain. The slum demolition scenes reflect how a nation cleans its cities by removing people, not garbage. Lower caste migrants become invisible except when needed for cheap labour. Ishvar and Om are the heart of the subaltern narrative in *A Fine Balance*. Their lives show how the lower caste poor are denied not only opportunity but dignity. Their struggle is not personal but it is structural. Their journey in their life represents many. They leave the village hoping to work as tailors. They dream of simple things like income, food, shelter, respect. But the city treats them like disposable labour. They are evicted from the slum by the rich people. And they are even captured like animals and forced into labour camps. They represent everyone who is victimised under the male upper class domination. They are the voices unheard.

'Subalternity is not theoretical', it is lived, felt, and endured. The characters do not only suffer economic poverty, but they suffer a poverty of being, meaning, and recognition. They are visible but unseen, alive yet unheard. The broken bodies as social text, Ishvar's amputated legs, Om's castration, Maneck's suicide all these are not just personal tragedies. But they are also the political commentary, the state which cuts Ishvar's legs represents the mobility denied to lower castes. The state castrates Om, it represents the future generations of the chamars being erased. Maneck jumps in front of the train showing the escape which finally becomes death. The body becomes history. Their wounds speak where the oppressed cannot. These incidents show memory as resistance. History forgets the poor. Governments forget to sterilize. Society forgets the legless beggar outside a shop. But literature remembers. Mistry's novel functions as counter history, documenting the lives of those texts which omits and erases. It becomes a monument, not to their victory, but to their existence.

In Subaltern Studies, 'to remember is a political act'. The novel teaches that testimony itself is a form of defiance bearing witness when the world looks away. One of the most enduring images in the novel is Ishvar and Om dressed as clowns, begging in the street. Their bodies have become spectacle and also as an entertainment, a visual metaphor for what dominated class demands of the poor like to smile through pain, to perform suffering, to make their misery palatable for those with power. This is not a subaltern's tragedy or exploitation, but the expectation of gratitude for survival itself. The reduction of Om and Ishvar into beggars shows that "when institutions fail, individuals fall into caricature, stripped of labour, dignity, and voice" (Martin). The tragedy is not in the begging but in a society that walks past them.

The silence at the end is brutal, yet meaningful. It is the silence of Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?". It seems to be complex. The subaltern speaks, but the world edits, reframes, erases. Their bodies turn into labour units, their deaths into policy afterthoughts. *A Fine Balance* refuses that

erasure. The novel itself becomes the speech the subaltern cannot deliver, the archive they were denied, the history that dominant records dissolve. Towards the end of the novel, the subaltern finally speaks not through power, but through witness.

It asserts that inequality is not accidental but structural, it is embedded in the fabric of society. The balance is fine not because life is fragile, but because justice is. Dignity exists in small, transient spaces but it is constantly threatened by larger forces. It is not that resistance fails, but that resistance must continue even when outcomes seem predetermined. The subaltern does not need victory to be political. Existence itself is rebellion. Mistry not only presents the pathetic conditions of the subaltern people but also shows the characters having awareness about the upper class domination against them. There is the lack of justice for subaltern people but the characters are equally conscious and aware about such things and resistance. The narrator asserts: "The hutment dwellers straggled back from the pulse of the assault, spent, venting their anguish in helpless outrage. ''Heartless animals! For the poor people there is no justice, ever! We had next to nothing! What is our crime, where are we going to go?'' (295). The government in the name of beautification of the city destroys the illegal huts where the subaltern people live.

Though the people are paying rent every month, without any information and alternative solutions, the government machines destroy the houses. When the government needs subaltern people they come to them and ask for their help but now the government is destroying their house. This reflects the governmental acts against the subalterns. The subalterns are conscious though they are helpless to resist. *A Fine Balance* stands as an indispensable subaltern narrative, a literary platform where voices historically muted are finally amplified. It compels us to confront the violence normalized around them and re-examine the ease with which societies dismiss the suffering of others. It reminds that progress without equity is not development but displacement , democracy without inclusion is not governance but control. Mistry leaves us not with closure, but with responsibility to remember, to acknowledge, to question.

A Spivakian reading of *A Fine Balance* reveals the novel as a profound exploration of silence, suffering, and failed representation. While Mistry vividly portrays subaltern lives, he does not resolve their silencing. Instead, the novel confirms Spivak's central argument: the subaltern may attempt to speak, but their voices do not enter structures of power, justice, or history. Spivak emphasizes that subalternity is not a fixed identity but a position created by intersecting structures of power (Spivak 284). In *A Fine Balance*, the Emergency intensifies existing social inequalities, pushing already marginalized individuals further into invisibility. The state does not merely ignore the poor; it actively reorganizes their lives through violence, reinforcing their lack of political voice.

Urban space, often imagined as a site of anonymity and liberation, offers no real escape from caste oppression in *A Fine Balance*. Although caste is less visibly marked in the city, it continues to operate through homelessness, police harassment, and economic precarity. Ishvar and Om remain vulnerable to exploitation and exclusion, revealing how caste adapts to modern conditions rather than disappearing. Spivak's notion of epistemic violence is particularly relevant, as the Dalit subject becomes invisible within bureaucratic and urban systems that reduce individuals to disposable labour or statistical data. Their suffering is managed, not heard. The statement "Upper caste, lower caste, bottom caste one day we will have no caste, they all will be treated equally" (143). The phrase "one day" defers equality to an indefinite future, reinforcing the sense that justice for the subaltern is always

promised but never realized.

Through a Spivakian reading, *A Fine Balance* reveals that while the subaltern may articulate visions of equality, such speech remains structurally silenced and politically ineffective. The novel exposes the illusion of castelessness and critiques the failures of postcolonial nationalism, state power, and social reform. Ultimately, Mistry's work affirms Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak not because the subaltern lacks voice, but because the structures of power refuse to listen. The tragic dismantling of the character's fragile coexistence underscores the devastating consequences of a society that refuses to listen to its most marginalized citizens. *A Fine Balance* thus stands as both a literary and theoretical text that exposes the limits of subaltern speech in the postcolonial era.

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