

**Displacement, Social Marginality and Trauma in Rohinton Mistry's
*A Fine Balance***

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Abstract:

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* presents a powerful representation of displacement, social marginality, caste oppression, political violence, and collective trauma in India during the 1970s. Set largely against the background of the Emergency, the novel portrays ordinary individuals whose lives are shaped by poverty, caste discrimination, gender inequality, political repression, and economic insecurity. This article examines how Mistry represents displacement not simply as physical movement but also as psychological, social, cultural, and economic dislocation. Through the experiences of Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah, the novel demonstrates how marginalized individuals struggle to preserve dignity and identity in oppressive circumstances. The article also discusses the relationship between caste and displacement, the marginal position of women, collective trauma, memory, and the importance of interpersonal relationships in developing resilience. Mistry's narrative ultimately suggests that survival depends upon compassion, solidarity, moral courage, and human relationships even when social and political structures deny individuals security and dignity.

Keywords: Displacement; Social Marginality; Trauma

Introduction:

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is one of the significant works of contemporary Indian English fiction that explores the lives of ordinary people within a complex social and political environment. Published in 1995, the novel is set primarily in India during the 1970s and engages with the political atmosphere of the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi between 1975 and 1977. Mistry does not present history merely through political leaders and governmental institutions. Instead, he examines history through the everyday experiences of people who have very little political or economic power. Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah become representatives of different social groups whose lives intersect in Bombay. Their individual experiences reveal larger questions concerning caste, class, gender, poverty, migration, political oppression, and human dignity.

The novel is particularly important for its representation of displacement and social marginality. Displacement in *A Fine Balance* is not restricted to the movement of people from one geographical location to another. It also involves the loss of home, occupation, community, security, identity, belonging, and psychological stability. Ishvar and Om are physically displaced from their village because of caste-based oppression and later experience another form of marginality in Bombay. Dina experiences social and economic displacement as a widow attempting to preserve her independence in a patriarchal society. Maneck experiences cultural and emotional displacement when he leaves his Himalayan home for Bombay. Thus, Mistry constructs a world in which displacement affects individuals differently but connects their experiences through common conditions of vulnerability.

The article emphasizes that Mistry presents trauma as a cumulative rather than isolated experience. Political repression, caste discrimination, economic insecurity, family loss, and social exclusion overlap and intensify one another. The novel therefore invites an examination of trauma as a social and historical phenomenon. It demonstrates that individuals may suffer not because of one particular event but because of continuous exposure to structures that deny them dignity and security.

Displacement as a Multidimensional Experience:

Displacement is one of the central concepts through which *A Fine Balance* can be understood. Ishvar and Om's movement from their village to Bombay is the most obvious example of physical displacement. However, their migration is forced by circumstances rather than freely chosen. Their caste position limits their opportunities in the village, and violence destroys their sense of security. Their

migration therefore represents an attempt to escape one oppressive environment and enter another uncertain social space.

The article describes Ishvar and Om as members of a historically oppressed caste who experience violence, discrimination, social exclusion, and economic insecurity. Their displacement involves the loss of home, traditional occupation, community relationships, and inherited cultural identity. Their experience demonstrates that migration does not automatically produce freedom. The city may offer employment opportunities, but it can also reproduce social hierarchies in new forms.

Mistry therefore presents displacement as both physical and psychological. The characters carry memories of violence and loss with them. Their past continues to influence their understanding of the present. Displacement creates a condition in which the individual must constantly negotiate between the memory of the past and the demands of the present. The migrant does not simply leave one place behind; the emotional consequences of that place remain within the individual.

The novel's opening movement from different geographical locations also establishes this idea. Dina lives in Bombay, Maneck comes from a hill station in North India, and Ishvar and Om arrive from a rural village. Their geographical differences gradually become less important as they share experiences of loneliness, uncertainty, and social vulnerability. The article notes that Mistry consciously expands the narrative from Dina's Parsi middle-class world to include the lives of poor and marginalized characters, thereby giving attention to people who are frequently excluded from dominant historical narratives.

Caste, Poverty and Social Marginality:

The experiences of Ishvar and Om reveal the relationship between caste and economic marginality. Their social position affects not only their dignity but also their access to employment, security, and social acceptance. Caste therefore operates as a structural system rather than merely an individual prejudice.

Their traditional occupation as tailors provides them with a skill, but skill alone cannot eliminate social discrimination. The city offers them employment, yet they remain vulnerable because of their social position. The article emphasizes that caste marginality and economic insecurity interact to produce a multilayered form of oppression. A significant quotation from the chapter illustrates this relationship: "In the city, our hands could make clothes, but society dictated our worth" (Mistry 65).

This statement captures the contradiction between individual ability and social identity. Ishvar and Om possess productive skills, but the value of their labour

is affected by social structures. Their hands can create garments, yet society continues to evaluate them according to caste. The quotation therefore reveals how social marginality can survive even when individuals possess economic skills.

Mistry's treatment of caste also exposes the violence that accompanies social hierarchy. The novel contains descriptions of physical violence against lower-caste individuals and demonstrates how caste oppression can become normalized within village society. Such representations transform caste from an abstract social category into a lived experience of humiliation, fear, and dispossession.

The journey to Bombay does not erase this history. Instead, the city transforms the nature of marginality. Rural discrimination may be direct and personal, whereas urban discrimination often appears through institutions, employment systems, poverty, and bureaucratic structures. The location changes, but inequality continues.

Dina Dalal and Gendered Displacement:

While Ishvar and Om experience geographical displacement, Dina Dalal experiences primarily social, economic, and psychological displacement. As a widow, Dina occupies a vulnerable position within a patriarchal society. Her husband's death changes her social and economic circumstances and forces her to protect her independence.

Dina's struggle is significant because Mistry does not portray marginality exclusively through caste. Gender and class also determine an individual's position within society. Dina belongs to a comparatively privileged social group, but her widowhood exposes her to economic insecurity and patriarchal expectations. Her brother and other social forces attempt to influence her choices, while she tries to preserve control over her life.

The article describes Dina as a woman negotiating "personal dignity, autonomy, and survival" within a patriarchal and politically turbulent society. Her apartment becomes an important symbol of independence. Although small and economically limited, it provides her with a space in which she can exercise control over her decisions.

Her experience demonstrates that displacement does not always require geographical movement. A person may remain in the same physical location and nevertheless become socially displaced. Widowhood, poverty, social expectations, and dependence can produce a sense of alienation from society.

Dina's resilience is particularly important. She does not overcome oppression through dramatic rebellion. Instead, she develops strategies of negotiation. She

manages her household, earns money, interacts with workers and lodgers, and establishes relationships with Ishvar, Om, and Maneck. Her survival therefore depends upon intelligence, adaptability, and moral judgment.

The article emphasizes that the Emergency intensifies the vulnerabilities of already marginalized populations. Poor people, lower-caste communities, workers, and socially vulnerable individuals have fewer resources with which to resist state authority. Consequently, political repression does not affect every individual equally. One of the significant quotations from the novel is: "With the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned in to night. With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy" (A Fine Balance 346).

This quotation illustrates the collapse of ordinary assumptions about justice and legality. The Emergency creates an environment in which power can determine truth. The law becomes an instrument that may be manipulated by those with political influence and money.

For marginalized individuals, such political instability produces psychological displacement. Home no longer necessarily represents safety. Public spaces become threatening, and government institutions become sources of fear rather than protection. The article describes arbitrary arrests, coercive sterilization, bureaucratic corruption, and surveillance as forces that deepen the trauma of vulnerable communities. Political displacement therefore operates alongside caste and economic displacement. The state's actions amplify inequalities that already exist in society.

Collective Trauma and Shared Suffering:

Trauma in *A Fine Balance* is not exclusively individual. Mistry presents suffering as collective and relational. Dina, Ishvar, Om, and Maneck gradually form a temporary household in which people from different backgrounds share food, work, conversation, and emotional support.

The formation of this household is one of the novel's most significant examples of human solidarity. They are not connected initially by family or community. Their relationship develops because of circumstance. Their shared living arrangement becomes an alternative form of family.

The article states that collective trauma emerges through families, communities, and social networks, while survival often depends upon solidarity, compassion, and mutual support. This idea is central to understanding the title *A Fine Balance*. The characters constantly balance suffering and hope, dependence and

independence, fear and courage. A second important quotation is: "In the face of the city's cruelty, we became a family not by blood, but by choice and care" (Mistry 14).

The statement captures the significance of chosen relationships. When traditional social structures fail to provide protection, individuals create alternative networks. Such relationships cannot completely eliminate suffering, but they make survival possible.

The family formed by Dina, Ishvar, and Om also challenges conventional definitions of family. Their relationship is based upon cooperation rather than blood. They work together, share responsibilities, and support one another. In this sense, Mistry suggests that humanity can emerge even within highly unequal social conditions.

Memory, Trauma and Identity:

Memory is another major element in Mistry's representation of trauma. The characters are continually shaped by their past experiences. Ishvar and Om carry memories of caste violence and displacement. Dina remembers her husband and her earlier life. Maneck remains emotionally connected to his homeland.

Memory functions in two contradictory ways. On the one hand, it is painful because it keeps past suffering alive. On the other hand, it helps individuals maintain identity and understand their present circumstances. Without memory, the characters might lose their connection to the experiences that shaped them.

he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord's field, had been forced to eat the landlord's excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged. (A Fine Balance, 122)

The article explicitly identifies memory as a mechanism through which characters negotiate present realities and understand historical injustice. Mistry writes: "Memories were permanent. Sorrowful ones remained sad even with the passing of time; yet happy ones could never be re-created, not with the same joy" (A Fine Balance 389). This quotation demonstrates the painful permanence of memory. Time does not necessarily heal trauma completely. Instead, memories may continue to influence emotional life. Memory also becomes a form of testimony. By allowing

marginalized characters to narrate their experiences, Mistry preserves stories that might otherwise disappear from official historical accounts. The novel therefore transforms personal memory into social memory.

Resilience and Human Relationships:

The article describes resilience as relational rather than individual. The characters depend upon interpersonal bonds, mentorship, mutual protection, and emotional support. A third important quotation expresses this idea: "We survive together, not alone; in each other's care lies strength we cannot muster alone" (Mistry 75).

This statement is particularly relevant to the novel's understanding of survival. Human beings require others when social structures become oppressive. Solidarity becomes a form of resistance because it prevents marginalized individuals from becoming completely isolated. Compassion also becomes an ethical practice. The characters do not possess significant political power, but they can still choose whether to help or ignore others. Such small decisions become morally significant in a world characterized by injustice.

The novel therefore rejects the idea that morality exists outside social circumstances. A person with economic security has choices that a poor person may not possess. Similarly, a politically powerful person can resist authority more easily than someone who depends upon the state for employment or survival.

No, Dinabai, Next time I go searching for accommodation, you should come with me, see how families live eight, nine, or ten people in a small room, sleeping one over the other on big shelves, from floor to ceiling, like third-class railway berths or in cupboards, or in the bathroom, surviving like goods in a warehouse.' (A Fine Balance, 541)

Mistry's characters nevertheless attempt to preserve human dignity. Their ethical choices become small but meaningful forms of resistance. Kindness, honesty, friendship, and compassion acquire significance because they challenge the dehumanizing structures around them.

Conclusion:

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* presents displacement, social marginality, and trauma as interconnected experiences shaped by caste, gender, class, poverty, political repression, and historical circumstances. Through Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah, Mistry reveals the vulnerability of ordinary individuals who live under unequal social and political conditions.

Ishvar and Om's experience demonstrates the relationship between caste oppression and forced migration. Their movement from village to city does not remove marginality but transforms its forms. Dina's story demonstrates that displacement can also be social, psychological, and economic. As a widow, she struggles to preserve independence within a patriarchal environment. Maneck's experiences further broaden the novel's exploration of alienation and belonging.

The novel's central insight is that human survival depends upon relationships. When formal social structures fail, individuals create alternative networks of care. Dina, Ishvar, and Om become a family through shared hardship rather than blood. Their relationships demonstrate that solidarity can preserve dignity even when material security is absent.

Ultimately, *A Fine Balance* presents a complex understanding of human suffering. Trauma is individual but also collective; displacement is geographical but also psychological; marginality is social but also economic and political. Mistry's narrative gives visibility to people who are frequently excluded from dominant historical narratives. By combining personal stories with social criticism, he demonstrates how large political forces enter ordinary lives. At the same time, his characters reveal that compassion, memory, ethical action, and human connection can provide forms of resistance against dehumanization. The "fine balance" of the novel therefore lies in the fragile relationship between suffering and survival, vulnerability and resilience, oppression and human dignity.

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