

**Research Article**

## **From Silent Longing to Belonging: Representation of Subalternity in Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance**

**Anuradha Matta<sup>1</sup>, Prof. G. Chenna Reddy<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, AP

<sup>2</sup>Research Director, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, AP

**Corresponding Author: Anuradha Matta**

### **Abstract**

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* establishes its narrative during the Indian Emergency (1975–77), a period when the entire system is impaired by violence, caste oppression, and silencing of marginalized communities in Indian outset. Through the lives of Ishvar and Omprakash Darji, tailors struggling for survival against entrenched caste hierarchies, and amidst the precarious existence of urban beggars, Mistry centers the vulnerabilities of those who remain outside the structures of political and social power. Subalternity in the novel emerges not only in terms of caste and class, but also through marginalization of gender and the erosion of bodily autonomy under state oppression. Drawing on the insights of Subaltern Studies, this paper examines how the novel dramatizes the paradox of representation: while Mistry gives narrative visibility to the disenfranchised their voices remain arbitrated through the authoritarian lens of a diasporic writer. The study argues that *A Fine Balance* underscores both the impossibility of the subaltern's direct speech and the necessity of recovering fragments of their lived experience through literature. In doing so, the novel becomes a site where silence and survival, oppression and resistance, coexist in precarious balance.

**Keywords:** Subalternity; Exploitation, Oppression, Marginalized, Arbitrated.

### **Introduction:**

Subaltern is a term derived from military origin. Cambridge Dictionary defines it as an army officer whose rank is lower than captain. Inferior in rank and power and secondary in importance. In literary context, the term subaltern is initially contrived by Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci in his seminal work *Prison Notes*, states Subalterns as social groups who are marginalized and excluded from the dominant power structures and cultural narratives of the society. Its features comprise social marginalization, economic exploitation, political exclusion and cultural erasure. The disciplines in Subaltern studies widely cover themes like oppression, marginalization, gender discrimination, subservience of lower and working classes, disregard for women and neglected sections of society.

Later Ranajit Guha aimed to emphasize the perspectives and challenges in South Asian marginalized communities integrating history, sociology and anthropology as interdisciplinary approach. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's "Can Subaltern Speak?" in her ground-breaking criticism silencing the insights of the subalterns in the guise of the western civilization, which claims to highlight women as Subalterns.

Globalization alleviates the scope of Diaspora uprooting people to proliferate or transfer them, or even allow migration beyond borders, to new homes to preserve the existence of their native culture. This migration of despised or influential people and to host countries can be for

social, economic, psychological or edifying purpose. This hybridity tends to gain significance in perception and purpose for redesigned identity in postcolonial context. As it is related to emigration, expatriation, dislocation, longing, exile and crisis; question arises for discussion and understanding on cross-cultural and transitional settlements. People moving beyond boundaries to quench the thirst for resources, trying to grapple with constraints or to address emotional entanglement or tryst with status and respect, are some strongly instrumental of disseminating between ethnicity of host land and homeland. Through subaltern theory, Mistry consciously decides to engage the intersectionality addressed in rural India to recover from turmoil and elevate its status against existential reality through social transformation.

Forced migration, voluntary displacement or relocation of group of evacuated people who have migrated from their home, challenge the myriad ways by which apartheid use their voice to ground themselves even in exile. Discord to represent the suffering and discrimination, to establish a platform unveiling the mask of uncertainty over their lives, in reframing their lives to regenerate, is the essence of *The Fine Balance*. Rohinton Mistry walks through the lives of Ishwar, and his nephew Om Prakash, the effect of the evil curse rooted deep in the caste system, taking an initiative to expunging (erasing) the pathos of dreary past that eliminated material and family relations. Unfortunately, the final balance is a mismatch with the aspirations, expectations abiding to prolonged symphony of life resulting in total catastrophe. The features of diaspora enter to blend subalternity and marginalization leading to movement. The revolutionary decision to volunteer into another trade ventured into a chamar Dukhi's mind and lead to transformation in lives of his sons.' Destiny mysteriously amended Narayan and Ishwar into Darjis from Chamars. Mistry tries to weave the fabric of subalternity, marginalization, with Diaspora as how the author weaves, lives of Dina, Maneck Om Prakash and Ishwar into a quilt but hope in *A Fine Balance* takes the role of Diaspora misplacing the plethora of cheer from their lives.

Rohinton Mistry is an accomplished contemporary Indo-Canadian writer internationally acclaimed, to depict the havoc and dominant pathos of threatened communities and races entangled in conscious combat against Postcolonial Indian society. The Indian classics like Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie* (1936), *Untouchable* (1935), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) reinforces caste distinction and abolishment of untouchability from transverse social hierarchy, where the persecution of the marginalized communities amidst political upheaval perplexes the framework of undue oppression. Mistry portrays harsh realities of class and caste oppression, where his characters in society structured to marginalize the poor and socially alienated. The portrayal of the socially isolated-Dalits, Muslims and the deprived, are not only constantly subjugated of their rights, but also tolls the clamour to question the hegemony of the elite. But in reality, it doesn't happen, or it is practically dreadful, in social and political structure to challenge the society at large scale. The paper aims to represent evidences of submerged voices, valorizes to encounter the egalitarian struggles of pre and post Indian independence through subaltern prism.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* studies the lives of Ishwar and Om Darji within an intensely class-conscious society from the prism of caste system, where social hierarchies dictate aspects of existence. The experiences of tailors illustrate how historical design compels and reflects the systemic violence and marginalization by ignoring lower caste communities. The catastrophe befallen on the families especially Narayan Darji, Om's father, and the whole family, has been strategically fabricated with evil schemes to exterminate the Dalit family from the cantonment by the Thakurs. It exemplifies the brutality in the usage of the power by the elite for sustaining the authority, which echoes through the mechanism in caste hierarchies, Ranjit Guha 1983.p.4 observes that

“Subaltern groups are those class and communities which have been subjected to dominance of the ruling classes and excluded from the historical and political record. Their actions and resistance are often invisible to the chronicles of power, and their perspectives remain outside the discourse of official history” – Guha, 1988, p.4

Violence contrived in Narayan’s death resonates through the silent memories of Om and Ishwar, testifies the reality that subaltern experiences are passed from generation to the next in the form of parables or folk tales by the witnesses, who meditate upon the unchecked dominance of hierarchy and subjugation for the survival of poor subalternity. This decisive move shapes their choices, survival strategies, destiny of Ishwar and Om. This trauma testifies and exemplifies Spivak’s statement “the Subaltern cannot speak” Spivak, 1988, p. 279 as voices of the tailors need contemplation through social constraints, emphasizing tension between visibility of the truth and the voicelessness.

One of the clearest proofs of subalternity in *A Fine Balance* is silencing voices of the poor. Mochi, as an untouchable is defined to do tanning and making leather goods; any breaches in this system, is intolerable as the community marks ones’ identity and ones’ destiny. The silent and calm going Dukhi Mochi also gets vexed with the brutality in the village by the unauthorized Thakurs. The children Narayan and Ishwar yearned to scribe like other school going wealthy children, draw pictures, make things appear out of nothing like magic on the slate. When once they stole into the school out of curiosity, and defiled the slates of students, the teacher insisted them to remove their pants whipped them harshly on their backs till his hands ached. The thrashing swelled up their buttocks like scars on tigers’ body. The punishments are entitled for the achuth boys trespassing into the school, blasphemy for making white marks on the forehead like Brahmins, defiling the tools of learning. The equation of identity needs to be amended time and again by taking revenge on the whole community. The turmoil in Dukhi’s cognition made him take an extreme step as apprentice, boarding his children at Ashraf, his Muslim friend, unpremeditated last card up his sleeve that hit his children’s suave like blessing from the blue. These bitter realities penned by Mistry edifices cohesion and influence the boys, Ishwar and Narayan encounters generation after generation. Hence, displacement is the only better alternative.

Hence, Dukhi decides a better life for his sons and sends them to city to learn tailoring from his Muslim friend Ashraf. What a transformation, the young boys who were excited happy playing, were willing even to learn anything; design something from nothing. They got refashioned, matured, metamorphized. They became responsible, built pucca house, dug well in their neighbourhood and gave retirement to their parents. This is the bone of contention for the village elite. The feudal lord, Thakur Dharmasi was unable to accept the growing loyalty of the lower caste people towards Dukhis’ sons because their self-esteem, solidarity and popularity, proved a threat for the Thakur. The father tells his son to be cautious “You changed from Chamar to tailor. Be satisfied with that” (143). Poor uneducated peasants and labourers anticipate that their fate will finally change with elections, they left their thumb prints wherever party people have shown to cast as vote. Narayan Darji, Om’s father is brutally punished by the upper caste Thakurs for audaciously resisting their atrocities. He along with a few insisted to sign on the sheet without casting the finger print for vote. Hence, the Chamars are forcibly flogged and tortured, tied to a tree up sided down by stuffing “burning coals were held to the three men’s genitals, then stuffed into their mouth, genitals separated when alive, the ropes were transferred from ankles to their necks and the three were hanged” (146) exhibited for the villagers especially the untouchables so that they would never try to retaliate the Thakurs ever again. His death reflects how subaltern resistance is met with violence and erasure echoing Guha’s for insurgencies and elimination by the elite. Being a feudal lord, he could not digest it, so

wishes to fulfil the oath to exterminate the family out of vengeance. They waited for their turn to take revenge for revolting against their authority. Paradox of justice is full of selfish and worldly unembellished facts as denial of zamindar's orders end up severe and brutal punishments and the judgement and it is final.

Though economically impoverished, struggle against the social dogmas like classified layering of castes and class demonstrate solidarity in exploitation, while insights of Mistry's portrayal, where marginalized are reduced to mere playthings. The pathos of inability to feed his family, at least, one square meal day after days of waiting is voice of unheard symphony. Dukhi accepts the assigned duty to pound few sacks of red dry chilies into powder before sunset and does not share the task with others for the threat of sharing might slim the reward with them, as the demand of money for the household is so threatening. The rapid rhythm of hitting symbolized the hit on his fortune resulted in breaking the mortar stone, directly crushing his destiny of abundance. Screams of Dukhi's agony drew attention of the Thakur's family resulted in loss of remuneration for day's toil, as compensation for destroying the mortar, ending up in whipping and apologies going vain including failing efforts. How pathetic is the life an ordinary man in independent India? Or in subaltern existence?

Mistry's expansive narration of Indian emergency, horrors of partition, communal riots, political milieu noxious miseries of poverty and societal gravity are expected to be waning beneficiary rural responses; apart from urban miseries like mass sterilization and demolition of the slums are some grave perplexities leading to alienation parallel to forced diaspora emerged as themes for postcolonial studies. "A foreigner drew a magic line on the map and called it the new border; it became a river of blood upon the earth. And the orchards, fields, factories, businesses, all on the wrong side of that line, vanished with a wave of the pale conjurer's magic wand". (203)

Mistry's female characters right from Dina Dalal to Roopa, farm labourer in the village, symbolize complex issues of marginalization reminding overtones of subalternity and intersectionality on subaltern existence? Young women like Roopa, who is Ishwar and Narayan's mother, reminds the readers of malignant designs of dominant aristocrats or the feudal guards of society, who insist to appease their masculine greed of pleasure, if the fruits of the orchard were to appease the hunger of children. With the warning to disclose her theft of oranges, gripping a heavy authoritative stick, watching her under the light of the lantern, the guardian of the orchard, ready to violate her chastity. The warning 'I only have to shout once' (99). She shivered out of fear, wept and urged him to let her off, but he threatened to gather every one, as he is hired by the landlord to watch the grove. The untouchables in villages are denied respect from society, neither do they expect sympathy nor do they expect the empathy from sensible human beings, resulting in diaspora.

The paper aims to answer Spivak's question both extending to Subaltern studies and Mistry's novel; 'Can the Subaltern Speak' 1988, insisting on the power predominance and subaltern expression repeatedly silenced by caste violence, social negligence and political oppression. The story affirms Spivak's argument on forced silence. Mistry forces the readers to contemplate on humanitarian stance blending cultural memory with societal pressure. Literature can establish the deleted expressions, edit them and acknowledged imagined subaltern voices. Dina struggles to bring to light the intersectionality of oppression in the metropolitan culture, Narayan's death is the proof in reality of the rural subalternity. Despite this silence, Mistry grants his characters, a degree of flexibility. Ishwar and Om navigate their oppression through skill, solidarity and careful defiance, reflecting subtle resistance that define subaltern existence. The drama in the story illustrates caste-based oppression operated through violence, survival strategies and brutality though social erasure and subaltern concerns that dominate the narrative. Through, such characterization, subaltern voices are acknowledged

bringing new angles of perceiving history from subaltern lens. This evokes empathy of the readers that motivate them to think though, it is practically impossible for survival and recognition for challenges in subaltern theory.

Despite persuasive subjugation, Mistry captures the landscape demonstrating the marginalization through operating power among the hierarchies and government mechanisms. The beggar master is symbolic of such operation controlling the coexistence of labourers within subaltern communities, by helping people like Om and Ishwar, by bringing them out of the clutches of government slum clearance officials, demanding a monthly pay for their freedom. Rescuing Dina, when she is unable to meet the expenses and warnings of the rent collector, additional charges to be born for giving shelter to the tailors, which is against the agreement. The voices of the slum dwellers who are evacuated from their homes and taken to forlorn destinations where food, medication and shelter are overlooked; treated like machines as long as they are useful, and like worms, when their health is damaged, ultimately unheard.

The euphemism of efficiency and sense of duty, is used to ensure that sterilization operations are performed even under unhygienic conditions. The doctors are afraid that “they would be reported to higher authorities for lack of cooperation, promotions, would be denied, salaries frozen. (533).

The vasotomy operations for all men on government orders, unhygienic treatment, causing gangrene, led to amputation of the leg of Ishwar and shattering dreams of marriage of Om, destroying the family legacy. Practically, in India, there is no direct reference or instruction given through any inscriptions by kings, or scriptures authenticating any doctrine but contrived on social segregation as a part of culture from ages.

Om and Ishwar used to see a beggar who is always smiling while begging on his castors, in spite of his deformed physical appearance. By birth crimped and bulged back, Shankar had no regrets or complaint for being abnormal and even being a beggar, he believed that people felt sympathy for him and he could earn more than many other beggars. Shankar and his community also embody silenced voices endurance in disability, forced relocation, resilience amidst paradox of survival and solidarity. Ishwar and Om were perplexed at the idea of innovative tools in the craft of begging for Shankar by Beggar Master. Unfortunately, mysterious living in Bombay for years deteriorated their standard due to lack of education, poverty, threat for life leaving them hopelessly, grapple with constraints of urbane life as refugees at the end like beggars. The saturation in their life prolonged endlessly. Beggar Master and Shankar died in accidents like orphans. Reflecting subaltern condition prolonged violence, isolation and indifference. Dina and Roopa have failed in asserting their independence and identity as Dina is compelled to live with her brother Nuswan, while Roopa and Dhukhi, Radha, Narayan’s wife and three daughters were burnt alive by the Goondas of Thakur Dharmasa, who is manifestation of vicious nature. Hopelessness and despair pervade the subaltern lives and they don’t have any idea where their lives end up.

## **Conclusion**

By evaluating both survival and silencing, Mistry positions literature as an ethical intervention as source to witness subalternity supporting existence. The novel intertwines subalternity, silence and resilience meditating and memorizing profound theme based on class, caste, gender and finance. While aligning Spivak’s disputes that the choice to raise the voice is almost subdued, Guha contradicts the resonance in precarious description of pathos in human lives which becomes a metaphor in delicate interplay between voice and silence, oppression and resistance, despair and endurance. The equilibrium lies in paradox of subalternity and migration seeking to preserve the absurdity against forgetting vengeance and vehemence that yields

nothing, nothing, nothing. Subalternity perpetuated intervention of alienation, dislocation and justifying Mistry's silence to balance amidst imbalance.

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