

Research Article

Subaltern Voices and Social Realism in the Works of Rohinton Mistry

Dr. Ramesha S. M

Associate Professor, Department of English, GFGC, Harohalli

Corresponding Author: Dr. Ramesha S. M

Abstract

Rohinton Mistry, one of the most significant Indian diasporic writers, is widely acclaimed for his portrayal of marginalized communities and the stark realities of Indian society. His fiction articulates the voices of the subaltern—those marginalized by caste, class, gender, and political power structures—through a narrative mode grounded in social realism. This paper explores how Mistry's works, particularly *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*, foreground subaltern voices and depict socio-political realities in postcolonial India. By examining themes of oppression, resistance, identity, and survival, this study situates Mistry within the tradition of social realism and postcolonial subaltern studies. The paper argues that Mistry's literary realism not only documents.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Social Realism, Postcolonial Literature, Marginalization, Diaspora, Political Oppression.

1. Introduction

The concept of the subaltern has gained significant prominence in postcolonial studies, largely through the works of scholars such as Antonio Gramsci, Ranajit Guha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The subaltern refers to those groups and individuals who are socially, politically, and economically marginalized and excluded from dominant power structures. Literature has often served as a crucial medium through which subaltern voices are articulated, documented, and humanized. Rohinton Mistry, a prominent Indian-born Canadian writer, occupies a distinctive position in contemporary Indian English literature. His novels and short stories provide a penetrating portrayal of Indian society, particularly focusing on the marginalized and oppressed. Mistry's works are characterized by social realism, a literary mode that seeks to represent everyday social realities, often highlighting social injustice, poverty, and political oppression.

This paper examines how Mistry's fiction gives voice to the subaltern and how social realism functions as a narrative strategy in his works. By analyzing *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002), the study explores Mistry's depiction of marginalized communities, the socio-political context of his narratives, and his critique of hegemonic structures. The paper also situates Mistry within the broader tradition of postcolonial realism and subaltern discourse.

The term "subaltern" was first used by Antonio Gramsci to refer to subordinate social groups excluded from hegemonic power. The Subaltern Studies Group in India, led by Ranajit Guha, expanded the concept to analyze marginalized groups in colonial and postcolonial

contexts. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" questions whether the subaltern can truly be represented within dominant discourses.

In literary studies, subaltern representation involves examining how marginalized voices are portrayed, whether they are allowed agency, and how narratives challenge or reinforce power structures. Mistry's fiction can be read as an attempt to recuperate subaltern voices by centering marginalized characters and narrating their lived experiences.

Social realism is a literary movement that emphasizes realistic depiction of social conditions, often focusing on working-class life, poverty, and social injustice. Unlike romantic or idealized representations, social realism seeks to expose harsh realities and critique societal structures. In postcolonial contexts, social realism often intersects with political critique, historical documentation, and ethical humanism.

Mistry's narrative style is grounded in social realism, characterized by detailed descriptions of everyday life, socio-political contexts, and psychological depth. His works depict the complexities of Indian society, particularly during periods of political upheaval such as the Emergency (1975–77).

Rohinton Mistry was born in Mumbai in 1952 and emigrated to Canada in 1975. Although he lives in Canada, his fiction is deeply rooted in Indian socio-cultural contexts, particularly the Parsi community and urban Mumbai. Mistry's diasporic position allows him both distance and intimacy, enabling a critical yet empathetic portrayal of Indian society.

His works often reflect nostalgia, memory, and displacement, but they also engage deeply with issues of social justice and marginalization. Mistry's diasporic realism challenges romanticized visions of India by presenting a nuanced and often bleak portrayal of social realities.

Mistry's social realism is deeply intertwined with historical documentation, particularly in his representation of the Emergency period in *A Fine Balance*. By embedding real historical events—such as forced sterilization campaigns, slum clearances, and political censorship—within fictional narratives, Mistry transforms his novels into socio-historical documents. His meticulous attention to detail reflects a documentary impulse, where literature becomes a site for recording suppressed histories and marginalized experiences. This historical grounding reinforces the authenticity of subaltern suffering and situates personal narratives within broader political structures. Mistry's narrative thus bridges the gap between fiction and history, enabling readers to perceive the lived realities of marginalized groups often erased from official historiography.

Another significant aspect of Mistry's engagement with subalternity is his ethical narrative stance. Rather than romanticizing poverty or oppression, Mistry adopts a compassionate yet critical perspective that foregrounds human dignity amidst suffering. His use of multiple perspectives and interior monologues allows readers to access the emotional and psychological worlds of marginalized characters. This narrative empathy challenges dominant power structures by asserting the humanity of those relegated to the margins. While critics debate the politics of representation in diasporic writing, Mistry's fiction demonstrates a sustained ethical commitment to social justice. His realist narrative becomes a form of moral witnessing, compelling readers to confront systemic inequalities and reconsider their own positionality within structures of power.

Such a Long Journey is set in Bombay during the 1971 Indo-Pak war and focuses on the Parsi community, a minority group in India. While Parsis are economically privileged compared to many groups, they occupy a marginal position as a minority. Mistry portrays their anxieties about cultural survival and identity. The protagonist, Gustad Noble, represents the middle-class Parsi struggling with political corruption, family tensions, and national turmoil. Although not

subaltern in the strictest sense, Gustad's experiences reveal the vulnerability of minority communities within dominant national narratives.

The novel also highlights political subalternity through the depiction of government corruption and manipulation. The common citizens become subaltern subjects subjected to state power. Mistry critiques political elites who exploit ordinary people, thus exposing the subaltern position of the masses within authoritarian structures. *A Fine Balance* is Mistry's most powerful and widely studied novel in terms of subaltern representation. Set during the Emergency, the novel portrays the lives of four main characters: Dina Dalal, Ishvar and Omprakash (Dalit tailors), and Maneck Kohlah (a student from a hill town).

Ishvar and Omprakash embody Dalit subalternity. Born into a lower caste of tanners, they face brutal discrimination, violence, and social exclusion. Mistry's depiction of their experiences exposes the systemic nature of caste oppression. Their attempts to escape caste through migration and skill acquisition are thwarted by entrenched social hierarchies. Mistry's narrative humanizes Dalit characters, giving them voice, agency, and emotional depth. Their suffering is not abstract but deeply personal, making the reader confront the cruelty of caste society.

Dina Dalal represents a widow struggling for economic independence in a patriarchal society. Maneck represents alienation and dislocation. Together, these characters represent different forms of subalternity—gender, class, and existential marginalization. The novel's depiction of urban poverty, forced sterilization, slum demolitions, and political repression exemplifies social realism. Mistry documents historical realities while focusing on individual lives, thereby merging social critique with humanist empathy. Despite oppression, Mistry's subaltern characters exhibit resilience and agency. Their friendships, solidarity, and small acts of resistance challenge the notion of passive subalternity. Mistry suggests that subaltern voices, though suppressed, persist through lived experience and narrative representation.

Family Matters explores aging, disability, and family conflict within the Parsi community. The protagonist Nariman Vakeel becomes physically disabled and dependent on his family, highlighting another form of subalternity—age and bodily vulnerability. The novel portrays the marginalization of the elderly within modern society, economic pressures, and generational conflicts. Mistry's social realism exposes how family structures, often idealized, can become sites of oppression and neglect.

Mistry employs a realist narrative style characterized by omniscient narration, detailed descriptions, and psychological insight. His narratives blend humor and tragedy, creating a complex representation of life. His ethical humanism is evident in his compassionate portrayal of marginalized characters. By focusing on everyday lives, Mistry democratizes narrative space, allowing subaltern characters to occupy the center of the narrative rather than the margins. This narrative strategy challenges elitist literary traditions and aligns with the goals of subaltern studies. While Mistry gives voice to subaltern characters, critics argue that as an upper-caste, diasporic writer, he may not fully escape the problem of representation highlighted by Spivak. The subaltern, mediated through elite narrative discourse, may still be partially silenced.

However, Mistry's empathetic realism and ethical commitment distinguish his work. His fiction does not claim to speak for the subaltern but rather attempts to create a narrative space for marginalized experiences.

Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry's fiction stands as a significant contribution to postcolonial literature, subaltern studies, and social realism. His works foreground marginalized voices and depict the harsh realities of Indian society with compassion and critical insight. Through *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, and *Family Matters*, Mistry exposes caste oppression, political corruption, poverty, gender inequality, and aging-related marginalization.

Mistry's social realism functions both as documentation and critique, while his narrative humanism restores dignity to marginalized lives. Although the question of whether the subaltern can truly speak remains complex, Mistry's fiction represents a powerful attempt to listen to and represent subaltern voices. His works thus remain essential for understanding the intersections of literature, society, and power in postcolonial India.

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