

Embodied Spatial Violence: Dialectics of Body and Place in a Fine Balance

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ABSTRACT

In *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry explores the authoritarian displacement of residents in physical, social, and cultural space during the Indian Emergency. The novel is set against this backdrop. The system's deliberate use of physical force caused spatial trauma on multiple levels, including the body and the environment. This essay uses *A Fine Balance's* depiction of subaltern bodies and spaces to trace how embodied spatial trauma develops as a result of state-sponsored violence. It bolsters the argument that the places the subalterns inhabit—in this case, the Mumbai slums—and their bodies are entangled in a traumatizing dialectic. Coercive evictions of the subaltern population from the slums caused by violence on the site and in the surrounding area deprived them of agency over their living conditions and contributed to their dual feelings of placelessness (body and place). There seems to be a correlation between the violence against the body and the violence against physical space. The destruction of Om and Ishwar's dwelling areas for the sake of urban beautification led to a disconnection from their surroundings. The characters' identity crisis following sterilization lends credence to Mensch's observation that disorientation feeds disorientation, and this theme runs throughout the novel. This article aims to draw a comparison between the subaltern characters' physical space (body) and the political space (place) they occupy in the book. As part of its textual analysis of *A Fine Balance*, this paper delves into the ways in which embodied spaces are born out of situations of violence.

Keywords: spatial violence, body, place, trauma, subaltern, displacement, *A Fine Balance*.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the discipline of postcolonial studies has increasingly struggled with the negative effects of becoming institutionalized. While it has been able to gain legitimacy and recognition within institutions of learning, this new power threatens to make the field's previously radical understandings into dogmatic, self-congratulatory, and formulaic procedures. This is especially so in the field's approach to literature. Although literary works continue to be at the heart of postcolonial critique, their literary nature is frequently bound by a limited set of normative expectations regarding what constitutes an authentic or representative postcolonial work. These expectations prioritize certain forms, styles, techniques, and modes that are seen as politically subversive or resistant (Sorensen 2008). Consequently, postcolonial texts that deviate from these norms are frequently devalued or stereotyped, and their other literary options are perceived as being devoid of critical or political merit. Throughout history and in the present day, marginalized communities have been hit particularly hard by recurring themes of displacement and violence. Many historical events have been defined by spatial violence and trauma, which has caused widespread displacement and severe psychological harm to the impacted populations. The 1947 Partition of India is a prime example; it resulted in the forced displacement of millions of people over newly drawn borders, which in turn sparked bloody riots, massacres, and renewed communal tensions. The anguish endured by the people of India during the 1975–1977 Indian Emergency, a period of political turmoil precipitated by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, is vividly depicted in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. A massive misuse of power, including forced sterilization, mass evictions, restrictions on civil liberties, and suspensions of democratic freedoms, had begun with the declaration of the Emergency in reaction to purported threats to national security. In order to delve into the plight of India's lower classes—the impoverished and oppressed who are the direct targets of governmental policies—Mistry used this historical period. The bleak reality of the Emergency intersects the lives of the book's four protagonists—Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah (Moorey 2001). Mistry deftly portrays the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of repressive government policies, including as slum clearance and sterilization campaigns, on these characters. Through their experiences, the narrative explores themes of political oppression, exploitation, and resilience. The selected book captures the era's

erratic nature through its depiction of the average man's struggles and its exploration of the paradox of the government doing harm on the very people it claims to be protecting them.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology for the selected research paper combines qualitative analysis with a critical theoretical framework. The primary method is textual analysis of selected novel to portray how the novel exposes the interaction between bodies and spaces under state-induced violence during the Indian Emergency. The analysis centers on the embodied experiences of the characters, specifically their emotional and physical traumas, displacement, and the violence endorsed on both their bodies and the spaces they inhabit. The study draws from critical theories of embodiment and spatial violence, particularly Michel Foucault's concept of 'docile bodies' and the exploration of caste-based violence by James Mills and Satadru Sen. These theories help frame the characters' bodily experiences as reflective of broader socio-political dynamics. Secondary sources, including historical records of the Indian Emergency, complement the textual analysis to contextualize the violence and displacement described in the selected novel *A Fine Balance*.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

James W. Johnson in his article entitled "Beggaring the Nation": Bodily Inscription and the Body Politic in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* states that in India, there exists an implicit challenge in representing the Indian body from within the culture itself—particularly due to the internal differences that disrupt any unified national identity Rohinton Mistry meets this challenge by presenting an alternate conception of place, one that is resistant to uniformity and fixed signification. In *A Fine Balance*, when Ishvar and Om first arrive at Dina's flat, she responds with suspicion, observing their bodily features—such as Ishvar's scarred face, Om's gaunt body, and their dirty nails—which become signs of tension. But as the narrative unfolds and their pasts emerge, Dina's initial anxiety over their ability to meet sewing orders gives way to a deeper empathy for their declining health and suffering. The body bears its own signs from the past that contribute to recognition, Mistry introduces these body marks as portals of entry into personal histories. Though the disastrous consequences of the characters undermine Valmik's argument that the teller redeems all, Mistry continues to insist on the redemptive power of telling in bridging social and cultural divides. Through this, he presents a multifaceted view of India—not as a homogenous whole, but as a rich tapestry of interconnected stories and lives. Sanghamitra De, in her paper, contends that *A Fine Balance* presents death and deviance as a pervasive pair of forces, climaxing in the suicide of Maneck—a potent symbol for the failure of the national ideal during the Emergency period. The return of Ishvar and Om to the city in a disabled condition serves to reinforce this symbol of failure.

Ishvar's body, poisoned by a forced vasectomy, undergoes amputation, reducing him to the symbolic figure of 'Shankar', the crippled beggar. Om, on the other hand, becomes a eunuch as a result of Thakur Dharamsi's brutal revenge. These transformations underline the inhumanity of the political system and demonstrate that oppositional binaries are deeply etched into lived experience. De uses this to emphasize that such binaries are not abstract ideas but real, embodied truths. Quoting Judith Butler, she affirms that discourses are not merely external—they inhabit the body itself. Bodies, therefore, become vessels carrying the disillusionment and ideological breakdown of the Emergency, turning the physical form into a stark reminder of political and moral decay.

N. Kavitha in her research article, highlights how Rohinton Mistry portrays the harassment faced by women in both religious and legal spaces. Mistry shows that even priests in temples and churches, as well as educated but unemployed youth and lawyers in Bombay's courts, subject women to sexual harassment. For instance, when Dina visits the court, a group of lawyers surrounds her, flashing their degrees and offering unsolicited advice—some even making inappropriate advances. Through such scenes, Mistry conveys his liberal values and moral stance, clearly expressing empathy for the oppressed and condemning the injustices of the Emergency period. The novel begins with a train journey and ends in the 'Epilogue' of 1984, symbolizing Dina's path toward emancipation and self-realization. Selvam notes that Mistry's characters, though from the lower middle class, possess an inner goodness reminiscent of epic heroes. Despite harsh circumstances, they demonstrate resilience and moral strength. Mistry thus celebrates the quiet heroism of ordinary people, suggesting that they embody the true human spirit in a world no longer ruled by monarchs.

DISCUSSION

The use of the body as a tool for analysis in Western discourse has faced criticism when applied to countries outside of the West, such as South Asian societies. A number of people think that this kind of application just brings the Western fixation on the body into non-Western settings, which is a product of Western capitalism (Turner 2001). The assertion that the body has always played a significant role in South Asian societies as a symbol of social hierarchy and individuality predates both European dominance and Western academic theory. This is challenged by James Mills and Satadru Sen in their book *Confronting the Body: The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Despite differences between Western and non-Western understandings of the body, they argue that studying South Asian corporeality through the lens of Western philosophy is nevertheless fruitful. There are enough similarities between South Asian and other societies' uses of the body to denote gender, status, and distinction to warrant further study.

Such an investigation would find fertile ground in Mistry's writing, and in *A Fine Balance* in particular. To better understand how the body is inscribed into narrative, it is helpful to refer to Peter Brooks' idea of bodily inscription. Signing or inscribing a body brings it into the realm of writing and transforms it into a narrative body, according to Brooks. The physical wounds suffered by Mistry's characters in *A Fine Balance* reveal much about their pasts and the ways in which their narratives are interwoven with societal and historical currents. The novel's structure and evolution are influenced by this physical inscription, as the four main characters' fates are molded by the socio-political milieu of the time. The book starts off with some physical action, as Ishvar, Om, and Maneck are thrown off each other by an unexpected train shock, and it builds up to them telling each other their stories, which are interwoven in some way.

The body plays a key role in the story's meaning and continuity. The characters' physical depictions, including the gradual decay of Dina's mother, Vasantro Valmik's body, and Ibrahim's, highlight the novel's emphasis on the decay and devastation of bodies (Johnson 2015). Mistry uses this deterioration motif to highlight the physical harm inflicted on the characters by the sociopolitical context, which reflects the harsh realities of living under oppressive conditions. By bringing together personal, political, and historical factors, the body in *A Fine Balance* becomes a criticism site, demonstrating once again the interplay between location and body.

The tale begins with the terrible description of the death of Dina's husband Rustom Dalal, whose head was "completely crushed" by a "bastard lorry driver (43)" and this motif of traffic accidents is present throughout the book. Both Om's bicycle mishap and the horrific death of handicapped beggar Shankar—who rolls into a busy junction and is killed—repeat this motif. Dying or damaged bodies aren't the only tangible manifestation of physical decline; non-living things likewise deteriorate over time. The violin represents Rustom's body after he dies, and its advanced stage of decay when Dina takes it out of its case conjures the same sensation of the body's decomposition, lending credence to the novel's focus on material and biological decay.

The f-holes were covered by a soundboard that had completely collapsed. There were four strings hanging loosely from the tailpiece and tuning pegs, and the case's felt inside was shredded to bits by ravenous insects. She had an overwhelming sense of nausea. The bow was extracted from its hiding place inside the lid by her trembling fingers. Like a long, thin ponytail, the horsehair dangled from its tip. (*A Delicate Balance*, 1980)

Restoring Rustom's rusted and damaged bicycle to Dina emphasizes the connection between material decline and human decay. The rusting of the Beggarmaster's briefcase chain and the degeneration of rent collector Ibrahim's folder both hint to impending key events in the story, like Dina's eviction, Ibrahim's dismissal, and the Beggarmaster's downfall. The narrative flows better because of these instances of material degradation and Mistry's detailed descriptions of the body. Initially, the narrative contrasts the chubbiness of Ishvar with the slenderness of Omkaprash; nevertheless, by the novel's conclusion, the tables have turned. Along Bombay's railway lines, you may see two bodies: one anonymous one at the start of the book and Maneck's own at the finish.

The novel's depiction of physical decay serves to highlight the brutality inscribed on bodies along class and caste boundaries. Violence against Dalit bodies is more common outside of major cities. Everyone in Ishvar's family—his dad, Dukhi Mochi, his brother Narayan, and mom, Roopa—belongs to the untouchable Chaamar caste, which includes tanners and shoemakers. As physical manifestations of the trauma they endured at the hands of higher-caste villagers, Dalits' bodies serve as symbols of caste distinction in their community. According to Mills and Sen, the purity and untouchability of an

individual's body has long been a central tenet of India's caste system. Nevertheless, Mistry casts doubt on this idea by linking the caste system to uncleanness and impurity, as exemplified by the tattered and smelly skin of Dukhi and his sons who worked as leatherworkers.

This inconsistency shows how Gandhi's hope that eliminating untouchability would cleanse the caste structure was flawed. The Dalit characters in the book are born into their caste and are unable to achieve the level of physical cleanliness that Gandhi believed was necessary for spiritual purity. Whipping, dismemberment, and other physical punishments meted out by members of higher castes for violating caste codes leave permanent scars on the bodies of Dalits, reinforcing their subordination and securing their 'impurity.' These scars are proof of the harsh regulatory measures taken by the upper castes to control the Dalits' bodies (Gandhi 1977).

Rohinton Mistry integrates Michel Foucault's notion of submissive bodies with her account of the regulatory practice on lower-caste bodies in *A Fine Balance*. that informs us that everywhere in the world, people's bodies are subject to rules and regulations that make them workable, adaptable, and submissive (Foucault 1991). Submissive bodies are amenable to analysis and manipulation for practical purposes. The physical labor and upper-caste violence that Dukhi Mochi and other lower-caste characters endure in the novel shape their obedient bodies, which are then subjected to the laws and punishments imposed by the upper castes. Indicators of their servitude, these marks transform Dalits into submissive and useful members of the caste system.

More extreme forms of body control, like as sterilization programs sanctioned by the state, are an extension of this control over lower-caste bodies. The consequences of Ishvar's vasectomy, an infection that ultimately leads to the amputation of his legs, serve as a stark reminder of the brutality and injustice that his body has endured. Om goes from being a skinny, wiry young man to a fat, ungainly guy after his castration, which also removes his ability to procreate. The impoverished in India are the exclusive targets of the government's push to promote family planning, which has long-lasting effects on their bodies.

In the book, the most extreme case of physical submissiveness is shown by the Beggarmaster's manipulation of physical deformities. By playing on people's compassion for their infirmities, he turns them into commodities, and by mutilating otherwise healthy bodies, he produces even more deformities. 'Professional alteration,' which includes horrific deformities, is performed on infants and young children, including the niece and nephew of the Monkeyman. The Beggarmaster's severely mutilated beggar Shankar gives a dramatic illustration when he explains how the mutilations, which include things like cutting off babies' noses and blinding them, make them more valuable as beggars. The novel's depiction of mutilation as a commodity demonstrates the extent to which the body may be exploited and controlled through manipulation.

Killing a baby will bring in cash without any effort on your part. They are numerous: blind beggars. However, now people are willing to pay a premium for the option to be rendered blind, have their eyes removed, and have their noses amputated (*A Fine Balance* 323).

Mistry uses the Beggarmaster's detailed account of how the beggars' disfigured bodies contributed to his financial success as a model of artificial submissiveness. Even if begging was around before the State of Emergency, the current government's focus on trade and discipline has made it possible to institutionalize the practice. Reiterating the subservience of India's lower classes through mutilation and dominance, the state's disciplinary systems mirror the Beggarmaster's methods of creating subservient bodies.

According to Mistry, the economic elite, like Nusswan, gain from the social, economic, and political dynamics that support these repressive institutions. According to Michel Foucault, the state's broader attempts during the Emergency sought to maintain control by "disciplines" of rigorous bodily regulation, echoing the exploitation of lower-class bodies within the begging trade. Such methods ensure the hegemony of the ruling class over the bodies of the working class, which in turn commands their submission and serves their interests (Foucault 262).

The enslavement of slum dwellers in Bombay and their forced attendance at a rural gathering to demonstrate public support for the prime minister is a powerful illustration of this point. Even when people go there uninvited, the circumstance shows how their bodies may be used for political purposes. Business magnates like Nusswan and Dina's boss, Mrs. Gupta, wholeheartedly supported Indira Gandhi's appeal for "discipline in every aspect of life," which mirrored the larger government initiatives to make the public submissive. They are directly involved in the exploitation of India's lower class since they back these punitive measures, which include forced labor and state-sponsored sterilization. The irony is that the state's stated goal of maintaining stability is undermined by the physical wounds inflicted on the lower

classes by methods of control like sterilization and deformity (Moorey 2000). Despite its authoritarian intentions, the subjugation of individual bodies leads to the creation of despicable bodies that are perceived as dangers to the established social order. A paradox emerges from this: the state wants to clean up the political body by controlling its citizens' bodies, but those very bodies, which are violent, end up symbolizing chaos.

Mistry highlights how the Indian government, especially during Indira Gandhi's rule, used physical metaphors of purity and attractiveness to rationalize brutal acts against oppressed populations. The poor's scarred and disfigured bodies are portrayed by the state as a threat to the 'purity' of the country in official discourse. Politicians begin to build this framework even before the Emergency by likening societal problems to infectious diseases that must be eradicated in order to fortify the nation. Captioned "FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY! HOUSING FOR THE HOMELESS!" (255), the 'beautification' programs implemented during the Emergency that targeted slum dwellers and beggars solidified this vision, concealing the violent eviction of the most defenseless individuals from the streets.

Mistry is criticizing the ways in which economic and state elites use bodies to maintain dominance and the ways in which they use an appeal to national purity to rationalize their tyranny in these pictures. Criticizing a governmental system that seeks to improve the society by destroying its faceless defective bodies, Morey argues that Mistry's portrayal of slum clearances and mass sterilization is a dehumanizing strategy akin to pest management. This point is further driven home by Mistry's frequent use of parasites, infections, and infestations in his images. In the same way that the government views minority groups as nuisances to be exterminated, the worms Maneck finds in Dina's bathroom, along with the bedbugs, cockroaches, and lice that afflict other characters, reflect this attitude. These pictures are a reflection of the official line of thinking, which portrays homeless people, slum dwellers, and beggars as parasites on the political system (Mistry, 2018). The eviction of crippled beggars is just one example of how the state uses demeaning language. At one instance, a foreman refers to a beggar as a "worm" and asks the Beggarmaster to get rid of "bugs or centipedes," illustrating how the government views these homeless individuals—not as humans but as nuisances.

The government's "beautification" project, which includes evicting the homeless and demolishing slums in an effort to "cleans" the city, culminates in this dispute (Morey 2000). Forced sterilization and other government programs to limit the population are also framed in the same way, as a national epidemic that has to be cured. Authorities justify the sterilization drive by claiming it is necessary to combat the country's growing population, likening the impoverished to a disease that could "choke" the nation. According to this line of thinking, India's oppressed people are both a part of and a threat to the country's political system.

Resonating with colonial psychiatric doctrines that legitimized violence towards bodies as treatment, the state defines its violence as a form of national purification, which gives it legitimacy. In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry depicts postcolonial governmental brutality, and Mills criticizes colonial psychiatry regimes. Both regimes justify their actions by claiming that subaltern bodies must be controlled or eliminated in order for the majority of the population to live in peace and prosperity. However, Mistry stresses that the sterilizations go beyond reform and seek to wipe out future generations of India's most marginalized minority. It is clear from Nusswan's direct statement that millions are surplus to necessities that the impoverished are disposable. In line with Julia Kristeva's thesis of "abject bodies," which pose a threat to social order and identity, Mistry's portrayal of these bodies is disturbing. At Shankar's funeral procession, we witness the government's failed attempt to manage these repulsive bodies in *A Fine Balance*. Disabled beggars are beyond the control of the police, who are frustrated by their helplessness in dealing with bodies that defy normal disciplinary measures.

This is an illustration of the resistance displayed by such entities when they reject attempts by the government to eradicate and govern them. Because they wreak havoc on the political borders of India, the subjugated bodies in *A Fine Balance* pose a threat to the state. In Julia Kristeva's idea of abjection, these groups are characterized as being 'outside' of the existing order, which means they are always challenging it from a distance. Even if these vile things are right in the middle of Bombay, the sheer number of them poses a danger of overwhelming the well delineated boundaries of the country. Thus, the fear of internal invasion and the deterioration of national borders takes the place of the fear of overpopulation. The narrative prominently features Indira Gandhi's face, who represents the state's discourse of purity, which is used to rationalize the exhumation of these decaying corpses.

Regime inconsistencies taint even her visage; the blemishes on her photograph represent more systemic flaws in the political body (Ghose 2010). As he is led in funeral rites, Shankar's deformed corpse serves as a potent symbol of the state's failure. Beggars, sometimes mistaken for political protesters, are actually a subtle attack on the government's crooked policies and practices. Bringing to light the bodies that society has suppressed in its pursuit of self-sufficiency, the circumstance brings to mind Kristeva's view of literature as a tool to expose evil. Because of their revolutionary capacity to undermine official discourses, Mistry's depiction of vile corpses elicits feelings of empathy and fear. By bearing political and historical markers, the oppressed bodies in *A Fine Balance* challenge the power structures that want to keep them out. The state's decline is exposed in Shankar's funeral procession, in which the line between the normal and the detestable blurs. Dina and others like her show how the inscriptions on bodies can lead to meaningful connections between people, even though they look at the depraved bodies with distrust at first.

Instead of a divided country or one imposed by government ideology, Mistry argues that we might imagine a more diverse and heterogeneous nation by recognizing the many links between individuals.

CONCLUSION

By drawing attention to the fact that state-sanctioned violence during the Indian Emergency is both bodily and geographically-based trauma, Rohinton Mistry resolutely proves in *A Fine Balance* the inseparability of body and place. Ishvar and Om, two of the novel's oppressed characters, endure forced sterilization in addition to being forcibly removed from their homes, a process that mutilates their bodies. According to Mistry, the Mumbai slums are aggressive places where the destruction of physical areas mirrors the disintegration of corporeal spaces. The story highlights the interplay between physical suffering and political oppression from this vantage point. Mistry highlights the ways in which the subaltern situation is defined by a lack of agency in both body and place by depicting characters who exhibit evidence of social and political violence. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the oppressed's bodies carry the trauma of systematic exploitation and the reverberations of violence against corporeal spaces. In this manner, Mistry stresses the interconnectedness of location, physique, and identity within the framework of tyrannical aggression.

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