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## The Politics of Space in *A Fine Balance*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper is an attempt to analyze Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* as a novel that problematizes social issues beyond any spatiotemporal limitations. The oppression faced by the major characters in the wake of the emergency rule in India, on the basis of gender, caste and class will be dealt by scrutinizing the lived environment and domestic space occupied by them. The impact of capitalism on the lives of these characters and space they occupy will also be analyzed in the paper.

**Keywords:** Home/homelessness, rural-urban binary, Dalit space, Non-spaces

“Spatial images are the dreams of society. Wherever the hieroglyphics of any spatial image are deciphered, there the basis of social reality presents itself.” (Kracauer, 2005, p. 57).

### **Introduction**

Set mainly against the backdrop of the Emergency Rule in India during the reign of Indira Gandhi, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* tells us about the life of a bunch of 'othered' people and the oppression they face and the life of resistance they lead. Although the city mentioned in the novel alludes to Bombay<sup>1</sup>, there is no mention of any city/town/village in the novel. Instead, the narrative is more of a microscopic description of the lives of the characters leaving out the cartographic possibilities. Caroline Herbert's observation that the entry of Maneck and the tailors into the city is almost “coterminous with the declaration of the Emergency itself.” (p. 12), and an epilogue that mentions the assassination of Indira Gandhi, gives the novel has a historiographic facet to it. However, this is limited only to the time frame, and a specific spatial dimension is absent in the narrative. I would like to postulate this as an attempt to problematize issues that are existing in the society beyond any specific spatiotemporal scenario.

Mistry is careful enough to ensure that the political events do not dominate his narrative. On the other hand, he dwells more on the development and transformation of characters through which he addresses social issues that have a kind of a universal appeal. One may safely say that

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<sup>1</sup>Baghirathi, K., and K. Rajamanickam. "Social and Political Issues in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*." *International Journal of English and Literature* 4.1 (2014): 27-30. Print.

this might be one of the reasons why Mistry has abstained himself from utilizing historical facts, dates or events in his narrative. Instead, he opts to problematize issues related to gender, caste, and class that reverberates across the country with more or less same frequency.

I would be addressing these issues through the analysis of the lived space occupied by the major characters. I will start my analysis by scrutinizing the role of home in the lives of these characters and how the presence or absence of a home and the notion of displacement affect their lives in the course of the narrative. The capitalist motto and the spread of consumerist culture will be examined by looking at the rural-urban binary present in the narrative. Finally, an attempt will be made to analyze the concepts in the spatial theories to examine the necessity of making them more accommodative to suit the varying socio-cultural contexts.

### **Home/Homelessness**

When we say home, it obviously goes beyond the physical structure of a dwelling place. As Joseph Rykwert says, home need not be anything built at all but can even be a fire on the ground with humans around (p. 51). Therefore, the reference would be made to the lived environment occupied by the characters whose interaction with those spaces define and redefine the meaning of those places within the time, space, and socio-political paradigms. In the analysis of Mistry's novel, 'home' will be dealt as a place where these characters find shelter, stability, and hope. In terms of both physical and psychological aspects as the major characters are all living a vulnerable and insecure life.

Having said that, the 'home' vs. 'house' dialectic is not completely ruled out of this study. Gaston Bachelard notes that "the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind... Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another." (p. 6). Dina Dalai's flat is a space shared by all the four main characters of the novel, Maneck Kohlah, Ishwar Darji, his nephew, Omprakash Darji and Dina herself. The life of the people residing there is reflected in the description of the domestic space; Dina's past, the present of all four of them and the hopes of a better future too were all built around that house.

The ownership of the flat came to Dina after her husband Rustom Dalai's death. She moves into that flat twice, first as a wife and then as a widow. The first occasion was a natural act of moving in with her husband after marriage but the freedom it had offered Dina from the ever-dominating chauvinist brother of hers, Nusswan, is not negligible. Rustom's flat gave her the recognition of an equal for the first time, and we find the place becoming a metaphor for her independence and freedom. The very first morning in the flat, Rustom shows her "the new brass nameplate gleaming in sunlight, engraved Mr. & Mrs. Rustom K. Dalai." (Mistry, 2010, p. 47).

Pauline Hunt<sup>2</sup> is quoted by Munro and Madigan to elucidate two significant struggles of a woman in her domestic space: “to find the space to exist as independent adults while at the same time taking on the major responsibility for sustaining the family as a collectivity.” (p. 106). Dina’s entry to the flat becomes a major step for her in her development as an independent individual and simultaneously, it brings the idea of family to that building that was long lost to it with the death of Rustom’s parents. Rustom suddenly becomes aware of the deficiencies in his flat even though he had painted it before the marriage. He says he was planning to live like a ‘sadhu’ (Mistry, 2010, p. 46), which meant that his house meant nothing more than a shelter to him and any other place on this earth would have been the same to him. It was Dina’s entry that added a new meaning, a new dimension to that building.

The novel reminds us of the fact that nothing is free in human society; everything has a price, be it a ration card, sterilization, or even hair! And in that list ‘freedom’ is definitely not the cheapest. Dina’s decision to live by herself as a widow rather than depending on her brother brings the other three characters in the novel to the flat. Her childhood friend Zenobia arranges Maneck Kohlah, son of both her and Dina’s classmate during schooldays as a paying guest and also manages to get her the pattern stitching job at Au Revoir exports. For the stitching job, she hires the two tailors- Ishwar and Omprakash Darji. Thus, the house becomes a metaphor for Dina’s independent existence, something that had turned into a source of income for her in addition to being a shelter.

The concept of ‘home’ comes bundled with the ideas of ‘homelessness’ and ‘displacement’. Lance Freeman refers to the inferences made by Grier and Grier<sup>3</sup> and outlines that displacement occurs:

when a household is compelled to leave its residence because of conditions that affect the dwelling or its immediate surroundings and (1) are beyond the household’s control, (2) occur despite the household’s adherence to previously imposed conditions of occupancy, and (3) cause continued occupancy to be impossible, hazardous, or unaffordable. (p. 224)

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<sup>2</sup>Hunt, Pauline. "Gender and the Construction of Home Life." *Home and Family: Creating the Domestic Sphere*. Ed. Graham Allan and Graham Crow. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989. 66-81. Print.

<sup>3</sup>Grier, George, and Eunice Grier. "Urban Displacement: A Reconnaissance." *Back to the City* (1980): 252-68. Web.

Studies of Grier and Grier problematizes the sociological and anthropological circumstances, and hence Dina's shifting to Rustom's flat and the displacement occurred to Maneck are more psychological in nature, and their homelessness is more at a metaphorical level. They always had the house where they were born and grew up; they opted to leave it behind with a motive of liberating themselves from a life that was forced upon them by their brother and father respectively. On the other hand, for Ishwar and Om, it was as much physical as it was psychological.

The displacement of Maneck was the aftermath of the ideological conflict he has had with his father, the roots of which I've traced in detail in the section dealing with the rural-urban binary. Maneck's father, Farokh finds himself in a place which was once his home, something for which he left all his wealth and stayed back in this country during partition being taken over by capitalist imperialism and making him a stranger in his own land. On the other hand, Maneck finds himself unwanted in a domestic space where he grew up; even the ideas of renovating the place and making it attractive is rejected let alone the ideas of merchandising. Though higher studies were something that was forced upon Maneck, he soon finds himself at a comfortable place at Dina's flat. His decision to do a degree was neither propelled by a yearning for knowledge nor was a better job opportunity his target. Rather he had a voice in that flat and his opinions regarding the house, or household activities were given due respect by Dina and the two tailors. He could convince Dina to accommodate the tailors in that flat though she was unwilling to entertain the idea of doing so at the beginning.

As for the tailors, we find them undergoing displacement throughout the novel and that too even outside the main timeframe in which the narrative takes place. By birth Ishwar and his brother Narayan were cobblers, people who belonged to the Chamaar caste. They were sent to Ashraf, a tailor by profession and a friend of their father to learn to stitch. This change of home was more or less a welcome one for Ishwar and Narayan as they mastered a job that could provide them with better earnings and also for Ashraf's affectionate nature who had treated them as his own children. Though visionaries like B.R. Ambedkar had argued that "The essence of the Vedic conception of Varna is the pursuit of a calling which is appropriate to one's natural aptitude." (p. 290), this was and is not the case in India before or after independence. Hence taking up the profession of tailoring did not help Narayan or Ishwar caste-wise. In fact, the destruction of Narayan's house and the property was an act that announced the hatred towards a lower caste human who had broken the laws of the caste system to amass wealth. I will come back to the spatial dimension of this act at a later stage.

Having lost her ancestral home, they stay with Ashraf for a while but unable to compete with the readymade shops that came up in the neighborhoods; they were forced to move to the city in search of opportunities for jobs. There they had to stay under an awning of Nawaz's kitchen, in a jhopadpatti, in the entrance of a chemist's shop, in a hut some unknown worksite

and finally at Dina's verandah. While the motives behind Dina's act of offering them a place to stay are questionable, it was a relief for the tailors to have a proper place that they could refer to as home after such long struggles. Although this was supposed to be a temporary arrangement, we find both Ishwar and Om becoming reluctant to find a new house for themselves. Sarah Upstone studies the possibility of the home being a space that can act as a microcosm for colonial expansion and explains: "Acquisition of territory, and its association with violence, is replaced with the establishment of home, and – rather than violence – an association with the natural and timeless processes of settlement. Creation is substituted for destruction." (p. 117). Partly owing to their own helplessness and partly utilizing Dina's weakness Ishwar even plans to get Om married and bring the bride also to Dina's flat. But fortune abandons all of them when Dina is thrown out of her flat by the landlord with the help of Police and the emergency rules.

The loss of the flat meant the end of resistance, to all the characters. Ian Almond traces the change in characters in his study: "There are also cases of "conversion": characters such as Om and Dina, initially determined to fight their respective oppressors, upper-caste tyranny, and a patronizing older brother, ultimately learn the wisdom of compromising and accepting benefits of complicity." (pp. 211-12). Dina lost the only space that she could have claimed as her own; her shelter and source of income. She is dependent on her brother for her survival henceforth. As for the tailors, Dina was the only person who had employed them when they were healthy and hardworking; with the only space that had offered them a proper job, they too accepted their fate and started begging on streets, an act that they had earlier despised.

### **The Rural-urban Binary**

The rural-urban binary is a very powerful tool employed by sociologists and anthropologists to assess the changes that occur in the lives of people in multiple contexts. Raymond Williams, one of the key literary critics of the twentieth century and often regarded as one of the early proponents of cultural studies, had written probably one of the most influential work, *The Country and The City* (1973), that details the dichotomy between the rural and the urban. In a way this work may be looked upon as an elaborate version of *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), where two terms are explored in cultural, historical, political and social paradigms though the latter work came much later after the publication of the former. However, I'll limit my study to the impact of capitalism on the lives of the people in the countryside. Maneck's life will be a case study to comprehend how the lifestyle of people in the rural region gets affected by the inroads of urbanization while Ishwar's and Om's case will be discussed to demonstrate how people look at urban locale as a space that can alter their fortunes.

As mentioned earlier, Mistry establishes two different kinds of homelessness to Farokh and Maneck Kohlah, which faintly echoes the cultural question which is often debated in the postcolonial theory: whether one should hold on to the indigenous traditions to shield their culture from imperial domination or whether one should adapt to the incoming changes for a

sustainable political and cultural future. In the case of Maneck and his father, the clutches of capitalism is making inroads not into any cultural tradition per se, but rather to a particular style of living which the Kohlah family is accustomed to.

Raymond Williams elaborates on how capitalism has brought changes to the countryside and contributed to the birth and prospering of cities over years. Jonah Raskin in his review of the book remarks how Williams “reveals the commercialism, exploitation and ruling class brutality in rural England.” (p. 482), and we find a similar scenario in Mistry as well. Capitalism, as it has done elsewhere, entered that valley with a bunch of promises that colored the dreams of the population there:

Then the promised rewards began rolling up the road into the mountains. Lorries big as houses transported goods from the cities and fouled the air with their exhaust. Service stations and eating places sprouted along the routes to provide for the machines and their men. And developers began to build luxury hotels. (Mistry, 2010, p. 207)

The ideological conflict between the father and the son sprouted from the way they reacted to the new scenario. For Farokh Kohlah “modernization and expansion were foreign ideas, incomprehensible to someone who refused to even advertise.” (Mistry, 2010, p. 198). It was nothing more than an encroachment into their private life. For a man who has lost a great deal of his wealth to a foreigner’s imperial map in the form of partition, the indigenous surveyor’s cartogram occurred as “lines on the paper” that “ruined the life of the Kohlah family.” (Mistry, 2010, p. 206). Thus, his attempts to retain things as it were in the past is the resistance towards capitalism, “the decisive form of the necessary human defense” (p. 302), as Williams would explain it, but inevitably falling short of its purpose in the end.

While Farokh advocated for preserving the life as he had lived till then, Maneck was more of a person who believed in change. He was willing to adapt and wanted to appropriate their life and business with merchandising and marketing but his father would not yield. Mistry foreshadows this later development with a small incident during Maneck’s childhood where he was scolded by Farokh for re-arranging the store (Mistry, 2010, pp. 204-204). Later on, we find the same episode repeating as Maneck’s “Suggestions to improve the lighting in the dingy interior, paint the walls, renovate the shelves and glass cases to make the display more attractive were all received like blasphemy.” (Mistry, 2010, p. 210).

The decision to send Maneck for higher studies owes partly to his father’s stubbornness to adapt to the situation and partly to the belief that higher education can get Maneck a job and eventually he will be able to take over the family responsibilities. In this regard, his journey to the city is quite similar to that of Ishwar and Om. The image of “the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation.” is exploited by the author to elucidate the life of the people in the village and consequently, the migration of Ishwar and Om to the city is essentially a

journey towards a place that has “gathered the idea of an achieved center: of learning, communication, light.” (Williams, 1973, p. 1).

Their journey to the city is propelled by the lack of opportunity to practice and earn through tailoring at Ashraf’s shop as the regions cloth industry got monopolized by readymade shops. Thus, Mistry is employing the dichotomy of country and city to probe into the trouble caused by capitalism. The troubles in Maneck’s and the tailors’ lives were a byproduct of the ever extending clasp of capitalism, and the irony of the entire novel may be perceived from Ishwar’s statement, “There is lots of opportunity in the city, you can make your dreams come true.” (Mistry, 2010, p. 94). To escape the effect of capitalism, they were walking into a space that was the center of capitalism: City.

### **A Thought on Concepts**

Every novel that had problematized Dalit issues in India has elaborated the pathetic living conditions of the lower caste in India, and *A Fine Balance* is no exception. The region occupied by the untouchables, its architecture, limitations, etc. have had enough literary representations, but a proper conceptualization of the same is not done yet. The ‘Dalit Space’, as I would like to term it, is stagnant in terms of spatial dynamics, a case that would hypothetically fall opposite to Frederic Jameson’s concept of ‘hyperspace’. The conceptualization of ‘Dalit Space’ is beyond the scope of this paper since caste issue is only one of the themes highlighted in the novel. Further, my juxtaposition of the Dalit space in the novel with Jameson’s concept is highly restricted to his example of Westin Bonaventure Hotel, though the scope is much beyond that.

John Portman’s postmodern venture, Jameson points out, “the Bonaventure aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city” (p. 229). The violent rupture of the architecture of the hotel from that of the city is not only evident but also accentuated; the case of the lives of the space occupied by Dalits are also same- they are cut out from the mainstream life. While the Bonaventure projects itself as a standout architecture, the Dalit Space is singled out forcefully. Although Mistry makes references to the excruciations of Dalits, he does not elaborate on the conditions of their lived environment but saves such descriptions for the changes that has happened in it via Narayan.

Narayan’s prosperity through tailoring job enabled him to bring so many changes to the area he lived. “Narayan paid to have a new well dug in the untouchable section of the village. He leased the land on which the two huts stood, and replaced them with a pukka house, one of only seven in the village.” (Mistry, 2010, p. 133). Lefebvre’s argument “Turmoil is inevitable once a monument loses its prestige, or can only retain it by means of admitted oppression and repression.” (p. 222), comes in handy to explain this scenario. Narayan’s act of bringing architectural advancements smudged the borderlines that separated the Dalit Space with the rest



of the world. The fact that Narayan's house was destroyed after he was murdered elucidates the concern among the higher caste men about their superiority being questioned.

Yet another situation I would like to discuss under this section would be that of the next oppressed mass we find in the novel- the people residing in the jhopadpattis. We find Ishwar and Om getting a house for rent in a slum beside the railway station after finding the job with Dina. These kind of slums are a usual sight in almost all the major cities in India. The description of the house rented to the tailors goes like this:

As he opened the door of the shack, a pariah dog departed through a hole in the back. The mud floor was partially covered with planks. "You can put more pieces of wood if you like," suggested Navalkar. The walls were a patchwork, part plywood and part sheet metal. The roof was old corrugated iron, waterproofed in corroded areas with transparent plastic. (Mistry, 2010, p. 157).

As the story progress, we get to know that the slumlord erects many such huts, and they are all rented out by the Navalkar in no time. Mistry makes explicit references to the corrupt administrative mechanism when the tailors are told that the place is not an individual's property but that of the city and people "bribe the municipality, police, water inspector, electricity officer. And they rent to people like you." (p. 159). But more than corruption there are far more serious issues raised by this space occupied by people like Ishwar and Om. The overpopulated city is yet another easy call, but I would like to focus on what is the identity of the people in this scenario with relation to the space they occupy.

In his anthropological study about supermodernity, Marc Augé comes up with this interesting characteristic of a 'non-lieux' or 'non-places': "The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude" (p. 103). In Mistry's novel, we find a pre-modern space which is literally a 'non-place' characterized by the same features. It is a place owned by the city but controlled by individuals; the people residing there have no claim over space as per the law of the land, and they are held together by solitude and similitude. The people here are similar in the sense that they are not bound to each other in terms of culture or religion or caste; they are a highly heterogeneous population of multiple ethnicities who migrated into this locality from various parts of the country. Their quest to build a home for themselves is what brings the similitude to their lives.

Unlike the non-place of the postmodern era, people in this space has no identity. The postmodern occupiers of non-places have a social identity number or a credit card number to distinguish one person from another. Here we find Ishwar and Om being denied a ration card because they live in a jhopadpatti. The officer tells them, "The law says ration cards can only be issued to people with real addresses." (Mistry, 2010, p. 169). While an identity loss or a role playing situation triggered in a postmodern non-place is passive, it is far more evident and

violent in the scenarios similar to what we find in the novel. The fact that even the existence of a hut in the region is not accepted by the authorities qualifies it to be 'non-place' in the literal sense of the term more than Augé's supermodernity does.

Initiated by the government policy of city beautification, the entire jhopadpattis were destroyed in a day and Ishwar and Om were left homeless once again. In a city where the architectural aesthetics dominates the existential calls of laymen, people with no home of their own are stigmatized and treated as savages. In one of the initial days of the tailors in the city, they confront a situation where people go insane; they hear about a how one of the pavement dwellers had bashed the head of another who had occupied the former one's place for sleeping. Probably this was the reason why Ishwar did not want to let Dina know about the destruction of jhopadpatti. He says to Om "But we won't say our house is destroyed. People are scared of the homeless." (Mistry, 2010, p. 288).

David Wagner refers to how the law treated the homeless people in post-Civil War America and says "While most victims of these laws were thrown into houses of corrections or workhouses, there were instances of tramps being killed or severely injured by mobs or special police hired by railroads and other companies." (p. 362). We find the events that happened in America in late 1800's getting repeated in Mistry's fiction which has a time frame that is located between 1975 and 1977. Many of the people who had lost their home with the destruction of the jhopadpatti, the tailors included, found nowhere but pavements to sleep on and they were all tagged as 'beggars' and were transported to places unknown to them and were made to work without any salary. As it happened in America, here also these homeless people were brutally injured by the police and the agent who were picking up these people for work had to come in between police and the people questioning them "How will he work if you break his bones?" (Mistry, 2010, p. 307). Further, in a struggle for existence, we find a lot of violence happening among the workers that had cost the lives of many at the place they were made to work.

Once again, the notion of 'non-places' comes back to the narrative at this juncture. Mistry's description of the place they were taken to goes like this:

The group was shown to a row of tin huts, to be occupied twelve to a hut. Everyone rushed in a frenzy to the nearest of the identical shelters and fought to get inside. The guard drove them back, allocating places at random. A stack of rolled-up straw mats stood within each hut. (p. 315)

The people who were dragged into this place were all unknown to one another; some were beggars, some tin collectors, the tailors, etc. In a novel which portrays caste system as so rigid, which renders religious conflicts on two different backdrops we suddenly find that race, religion, ethnicity, caste, etc. becoming a no concern altogether. All of a sudden, it is the binary between the haves and have-nots, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat that takes over the scene. The Dalit

Space does not exist as such when people are allocated places to keep their stuff; they are all equal, beggars, the ones who are without any identity, brought there for work.

### **Conclusion**

The human appropriation of any resource- land, labour, capital or space- is essentially a colonial act; an act in which the power structure existing in the society is vested with decision-making power. The dominance of power can have gender, cultural or economy driven motives and the asymmetry of power between the dominant and the dominated can cause tensions of resistance. The end of Dina's and the tailors' resistance and falling into a life that flows with the existing hegemony shows not only their dependence on their lived space but also the impact of that space in their lives. As much as space is socially produced, if the same space does not fit into the bigger structure of the society, it can bring down the people occupying that space.

In Dina's case, she had violated the rules of the rent acts by accepting a paying guest and converting her house into a factory. As for the tailors the jhopadpatti where they lived was one such space which did not suit the aesthetic sense of a city; 'the representations of space' as Lefebvre would term it, that hamlet could not match with what was conceived by "scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with a scientific bent - all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived." (p. 38), and hence, it was destroyed. In a very contrasting scenario, we find the exercise of tyrannical power by Thakur Dharamsi when he destroys Narayan's house and properties because he breached the codes of the caste system. Though both situations produce the same result of the dominated section of the society losing their property, we find the rural-urban binary employed once again to allude crudeness to former and planning and progress to the latter.

This careful utilization of the rural-urban binary and domestic space in the narrative enables Mistry to bypass the necessity to include much cartographic information in the novel. Though the references towards the caste of the tailors or linguistic references of the term 'jhopadpatti' may be considered as an easy giveaway, that does not affect the effect Mistry has tried to produce. The spatial hieroglyphics of neither the city nor the village can be considered exclusive to any particular location per se which allows Mistry to skip the historical events or facts from entering the texts but produce a narrative that exemplifies the problems of the oppressed people in the country.

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