



Research Paper

## The Politics of Space and Identity in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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### ABSTRACT

Space and identity are inextricably bound to each other and exploring their relationship deepens the understanding of the spatial marginalisation the characters of a novel experience. The theorisation of space concerning the characters' identity in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* explains the physical and psychological dispossession that they encounter, exposing the social, political, and economical forces rallied against them. The deromanticised presentation of the urban-rural dichotomy as well as the segregated spaces in the novel shatters the dominant idealised versions and realistically, exemplifies the difficulties of the marginalised in the country.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Place: A Short Introduction*, Tim Cresswell states that space is a realm bereft of meaning and it becomes a place once humans invest meaning in it by getting attached. The relationship between an individual and space/place can be understood through the classificatory system of identity which locates the parameters of difference and sameness concerning class, caste, gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, religion, and disability. Rohinton Mistry in his fiction, *A Fine Balance*, designs a world filled with spaces where the social, political, and economic forces are arrayed against the four characters—Dina Shroff, Maneck Kohlah, Ishvar Darji, and Om Darji. Set in India during Indira Gandhi's infamous State of Emergency (1975-77), the novel focuses on this varied "cast list of marginalised and dispossessed" in the wider Indian community trying to make their place in the urban space (Morey 95).

Through the application of theories centred on conceptions of space/place along with identity, the paper explores the notion of home and homelessness and its impact on their personal identity. Though the majority of the novel takes place in an unnamed urban location, the modernisation, as well as the country-town nexus of the rural space, is studied through the caste, class, and gender identity of its inhabitants. Analysing the relation between space and the State, as a political body, exposes the brutality unleashed upon the underprivileged class in the urban location. Spatial theories such as heterotopia and non-places are employed for better insight into the temporary spaces occupied by the marginalised urban poor.

### II. DISCUSSION

The definition of home has found little unanimity among scholars. For Cresswell, home is where the individual can be themselves, feeling attached and rooted in a field of meaning and care (Cresswell 24). (Gilman 3) suggests that home is a "human institution" which allows the individual personal expression and offers rest, peace, quiet, comfort, and health. According to Sara Upstone, home as a physical location, is a domestic space that evokes an "intimate experience of space" (Upstone 115). But, being homeless would not simply mean 'people without place'. More than a lack of the physical structure of a home, homelessness could even mean a lack of identity. In *A Fine Balance*, the four protagonists undergo displacement and experience homelessness multiple times in their lives but, for a brief moment in time, Dina's flat serves as a space of sanctuary, assurance, and security—a home.

Home not only means the brick and mortar, cement and timber of the house but it also means everything in and around it that gives it a sense of satisfaction and contentment (Rybczynski 153). When Dina

entered Rustom Dalal's flat as his wife, it added a fresh meaning to it as Rustom started noticing "new deficiencies" around him (Mistry 40). Within the limited space of the home, the individual has certain control over its functioning. 'Mr and Mrs Dalal' engraved on the nameplate of Rustom's flat reflects the power-based equality as Dina gets equal control over the flat which she did not experience at her brother, Nusswan's house. The idea of home as an intimate place (Tuan 144) is contested with Nusswan's house, disclosing the possibility of imbalance of power relations yielding the home as oppressive, restricting and even terrifying, especially for women (Cresswell 109).

Adhering to the term 'homemaker', Dina makes Rustom's flat a home by taking control to ameliorate the leaking vessels, sharpening the knives, bringing in furniture and kitchen utensils. Emphasising self-identity and home improvement, it is through these activities that Dina makes the new space a place of her own (Pink 53). At Nusswan's house, Dina was forced to do household chores but here, she takes up the work on her own accord to put her own stamp on the house. Dina's relationship with Rustom, based on mutual dependence, reflects her autonomy and control at Rustom's flat, Di bna's "heaven" (Mistry 41).

Widowed Dina leaves Nusswan's house and returns to her flat to mould her own version of her identity. The absence of Rustom in the flat changed its meaning as the same furniture-filled rooms now seemed "remote" to her (Mistry 48). Her liaison with Ferdoon is short-lived because her possessions in the flat still reminded her of Rustom. There is a deeper meaning in the possessions than the possessions themselves, as they preserve memories. She defies societal norms of being dependent on a man while doing only household chores and strives to be self-sufficient despite her identity as a widow. Donning the hats of breadwinner and homemaker, she employs Ishvar and Om as her tailors and Maneck as her paying guest. The presence of these people made a difference in the flat "like magic" (Mistry 274). According to Moore, as referred to by Pink, by utilising the space in her own way, Dina goes against the hegemonic discourse to reflect her identity (Pink 53). A woman's mobility, let alone a widow, beyond the domestic sphere is a threat posed to the settled patriarchal order (Massey 11). Thus, the flat becomes a place for coping and stabilising: it becomes a site of resistance (hooks 82). The same flat becomes the place where Maneck Kohlah can exercise freedom of speech.

Maneck Kohlah's home is in the north, wherein he cherishes his parents, their shop and the snow-filled mountains. Despite his wishes, he is sent to boarding school and later, college, in faraway cities with presumably better opportunities. Still occupied with "home thoughts" (Mistry 7), he finds it hard to adjust to the "big-city life" (Mistry 240). Maneck relies on amicable relationships with people in the urban jungle to draw any semblance of his home. Unlike true friendship which requires like-mindedness and homogeneousness, Maneck's relationship with Avinash in the hostel is more about what they do together than who they are, emphasising activity over identity (Duyvendak and Wekker, 27). Despite not having the same cultural background or socio-economic position, they relish one other's company over chess lessons.

After extricating himself from the abominable college hostel, Dina's flat allows him to exercise his freedom of speech, where his opinion is not only acknowledged but also implemented. At his home, decisions concerning his life were taken by his parents. Moreover, his suggestions for renovating their shop or advertising their soda is "received like blasphemy" by his father, Farokh Kohlah, who is unable to relinquish his authority over the shop, making Maneck resent the dictatorial power Farokh yields (Mistry 219). Contrasting this authoritative locus of control at his home requiring obedience and conformity to Farokh, the collaborative locus of control at Dina's flat resulted in instances where Maneck's suggestions are executed bringing forth approving outcomes (Jory 496). This demonstrates the sense of freedom and agency that a 'family of choice' brings.

Though Dina's intention for accepting them is dubious, after the arrival of the tailors, the flat had a "happy family atmosphere", representing the functioning of an ideal family (Mistry 426). Dina as an independent woman earned her livelihood while the men in the house voluntarily contributed to the household chores by cleaning and cooking, tasks conventionally considered as a woman's responsibility, shaping the flat as a haven of mutual interdependence. The earlier discrimination regarding the rose-coloured cups that Dina had reserved for the tailors was discarded soon. "Sailing under one flag", they ate the same food and the same water, becoming an image of trust, mutuality, shared responsibilities, and resilience (Mistry 399). Resembling the kittens and their abandonment of the flat, this brief hunky-dory period is followed by Dina's flat being lost, rendering all of them homeless, in one way or the other.

According to the Census of India (2011), homeless or houseless people are those who live under flyovers and staircases, in the open or roadside, pavements, railway platforms, etc. Adhered to on a national compass, this definition reduces the meaning of home to a conventional residence. Dina Dalal and Maneck Kohlah, belonging to a privileged class, always have a physical house as an alternative, suggesting an abstract type of homelessness. On the other hand, for Om and Ishvar, homelessness is the most tangible and affecting as they undergo displacement multiple times throughout the narrative, because of their caste and class identity.

In the city, after leaving Asraf Chacha's home, Om and Ishvar are forced to stay in the awning of Nawaz's house, a railway platform, slums, tin huts and other inadequate spaces. Marred with unpredictability and bereft of any economic, social and political security, they do not have access to basic human rights such as

sanitation, health, drinking water, etc. Without adequate housing, they struggle for activities that most people take for granted such as being able to shower, making a bathroom “an unimaginable luxury” (Mistry 387). The stigma attached to being homeless also affects getting or keeping a job because “people are scared of the homeless” (Mistry 301). Importantly, the absence of a shelter according to the prevailing standards of housing snatches away identity from the homeless. This is most evident in the interaction the tailors have with the Rations Officer to issue a ration card - a form of identification that also enables access to purchase food grain at a subsidised rate. Though they were living in a *jhopadpatti* at that time, the lack of a building name, flat number, and street number, denied them personhood while deeming them undeserving of security and nutrition. Thus, in the urban space's politics of citizenship, housing is the single most critical site, setting the stage for the most public drama of disenfranchisement (Appadurai 28).

The urban-rural dichotomy depicted in the novel is reflective of the hostile associations of the binary expounded by Raymond Williams. The unnamed rural locations such as the ‘Village by a River’ or the ‘Mountains’ can aptly be considered as a space of “backwardness, ignorance, and limitation” (Williams 9). The generalised urban space known as the ‘City by the Sea’, resembling the Indian city Bombay, is a space of “noise, worldliness, and ambition” (Williams 9). The identity of the characters is established in the spaces they live in and transgressions lead to castigation imposed by the society or the State. The tailor's village, the antithesis of the idyllic locale, operates on the *jajmani* system where the Dalit identity of the villagers leads to exclusion, humiliation-subordination and exploitation (Shah 21). In the urban space, the class identity of the tailors denies them a permanent residence and resultantly, the lawful recognition of citizenship. In the mountainous town, the local identity and lifestyle of Maneck and his family are in peril because of rapid modernisation.

When “the demon of progress” reached the mountainous town, it threatened the local identity of the townspeople, especially Farokh Kohlah (Mistry 215). Local identity is the residents' relation to small-scale places providing features different from other places and special feelings through physical, social, sensory, and memory perspective (Shao 14). The growth of development affected all these perspectives of the hills which particularly irked Farokh. The physical perspective of the town transformed as narrow mountain paths were replaced by wide roads and asphaltting changed the brown rivers into black. The social aspect focuses on the way the people contribute to the local environment to preserve it (Shao 11). This perspective changed as crowds of people drawn by modernisation settled on the slopes and used the forests for firewood, resulting in bald patches on the hills. The landscape lost its capacity of providing psychological relief to Farokh as his “senses were being destroyed by the invasion” of the exhaust of the lorries and the throbbing of their engines (Mistry 217). Modernisation also resulted in decreased demands for Kohlah's Cola, a soft drink with a secret formula handed down in the Kohlah family for four generations. Farokh's personal memory associated with the landscape is also affected as he witnesses the “transmogrification of his beloved birthplace where his forefathers had lived as in paradise” (Mistry 216). Modernity is depicted as a form of brutalism mastering nature to meet human needs with disregard for the geographical, historical or social context of the town.

The tailor's village is not the generalised Indian village. The portrayal of the rural space as ‘idyllic’ and reflecting the idea of “peace, innocence, and simple virtue” is turned on its head by Mistry (Williams 9). With almost no description of scenic beauty, Mistry emphasises the caste-based brutality, superstition, violence, and gender discrimination in the ‘Village by the River’ rather than presenting it as an aestheticised space. The upper-caste villagers unleash brutality onto the Dalit villagers maintaining strict separation and hierarchy - fundamentals of the caste system. Despite being a socio-religious system, caste stratification affects the Dalit villagers economically as the *Jajmani* system - an institutionalised system of domination/subordination - results in their economic exploitation (Sharma 68). Gender discrimination runs deep as both upper-caste and Dalit women face subjugation by the men in the village. Like Dalit men, Dalit women face the brunt of poverty and caste, but the patriarchal power makes them vulnerable not only to domination by upper castes but also by Dalit men.

The dominant ideas of the ‘unchanging countryside’ and ‘little community’, associated with the village, are also disrupted with the country-town nexus in the novel. The ties between the village and the town are bound with the employment Dukhi and his family finds at Ashraf Chacha's shop. After being ill-treated by an upper-caste person in his village, Dukhi turns to the town for livelihood, conveying the idea that the Indian village is not a closed social system. The interplay between the village and town assists in meeting the needs of the people. Moreover, the town ceases to be the antithesis of the village. While inter-caste conflicts exist in the village, the town is not the “epicenter of social transformation”, as sporadic religious conflicts lead to murder, discrimination, and exploitation of Muslims (Sharma 24). The novel also portrays how modernisation with better means of transport reshapes the nexus and shrinks “the gap between village and town” but it also shrunk

Ashraf Chacha's list of clients as customers fled to the new ready-made clothing store. Thus, envisioning social and economic development, Ishvar and Om leave the town for the city of promise.

The urban space in the novel is an unspecified 'City by the Sea' but its topography and the places such as Victoria Garden and Hanging Gardens that Maneck and Om visit mirror Bombay. The unnamed locations in the novel display a "palimpsest-like 'everyspace'" and the urban space is "Bombay and not-Bombay at the same time" (Morey 122). The Emergency declared by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi which lasted from 1975 to 1977 forms the centre of the plot. Indira's slogan "Garibi Hatao", a retaliation to the opposition's slogan "Indira Hatao", was ridiculed as it seemed that instead of removing poverty, she was removing the poor. Under the Emergency, the poor because of their lower-class identity suffered "most grievously" owing to mainly two programmes - slum clearance and sterilisation programmes, both of which affected Om and Ishvar (Frank 401).

Om and Ishvar, like the bulk of the urban poor, face the lack of housing and shelter, water, sanitation, health, education, social security, and livelihood. The everyday existence of these "citizens without a city" is marked with insecurity as they become victims of spatial purification and gentrification drives (Appadurai 27). Without providing alternate accommodation, the beautification programme results in the demolition of their shack and they are forced to sleep on a railway platform as well as the entranceway of a chemist store. The State fails the urban poor, but it still defines and dictates their private lives through the means of technical means of governance including the construction of the notion of 'population', as a totality of subjugated voices (Curtis 506). The politics of the State in the urban space plays out in totalising techniques in which the states group subjects together to rule them as well as individualising techniques in which the subjects are separated as the objects of pastoral power (Curtis 527). In the novel, the totalising techniques are carried out in the urban location through the demolition of the slum and collective eviction of the residents. The State entwines with the private lives of the characters through individualising techniques such as individualised documentary proofs like the ration card to decide their 'eligibility' for citizenship and nutrition.

Under the pretext of urban renewal, such demolition excludes the urban poor from the ambit of dialogue on issues that affect their everyday existence. Furthermore, this leaves them with no other choice but to depend on illegal, informal, non-institutional strategies like Mr Facilitator outside the Rations Office providing addresses in lieu of money. His statement – "While there is government, there will be work for me" – states that as long as the 'legality' of the State exists, the urban poor will have to depend on these illegal arrangements in situations of survival and urgency (Mistry 17).

According to Massey and Denton, as cited by Rasse, spatial segregation is "the degree to which two or more groups live separately from one another, in different parts of the urban environment" (Rasse 1). The advent of capitalist urbanisation in the urban space leads to socio-spatial segregation between the lower classes and the upper classes. Om and Ishvar, because of their lower-class identity, encounter segregation and displacement multiple times, living in the most unhygienic and filthy conditions. Theories of heterotopia and non-places can be utilized to understand the temporary spaces of marginalised urban poverty that they occupy, namely the jhopadpatti and the tin huts. While several studies have debunked the myth of cities as caste-free spaces, the novel focuses on the residential segregation of Dalits in the rural space, "the most visible and long-standing form of caste discrimination" (Shah 73).

When the presence, touch or even shadow of a Dalit is considered as pollution by privileged-caste Hindus, it is unsurprising that caste-segregated neighbourhoods are the rule rather than the exception in Indian villages (Shah 73). In the novel, the Dalits are "permitted" to live in the downstream section of a small river. The use of the word 'permitted' hints at the power the privileged-caste Hindus yield over the Dalits, leading to social banishment in spatial terms. Such segregation also denies Dalits access to basic public services such as drinking water and education. Since the polluting effect of Dalits is strong in the case of drinking water, the village well in the novel is perceived as upper-caste property. Narayan and Ishvar are beaten for entering a school and defiling slates and chalks, but according to Pandit Lalluram, if they had touched the Bhagavad Gita, "the punishment would have been more final" (Mistry 114).

After this incident, Ishvar and Narayan learnt tailoring under the apprenticeship of Ashraf Chacha, resisting social degradation and the stigma of pollution attached to them. When Narayan settled in the village, he grew more prosperous than many upper-caste villagers. He built a new well in the untouchable section of the village as well as a pukka house for his parents and business. Dalit neighbourhoods are unlike the residential segregation in the urban location as they are subjected to specific and very severe sanctions because of their caste identity. The prosperity of Narayan caused "anger and resentment" among the upper castes, perceived by the latter as an act of defiance that deserves retribution (Mistry 135). The economic improvement and residential advancement of a Dalit are considered as a transgression of the dharmic order. Along with setting fire to the

house, the murder of the family represents the brutality the privileged-caste Hindus resort to, to ensure the economic and spatial subordination of Dalits. The urban location is no different with class-based segregation.

The urban poor in the novel are dispossessed, placed at the bottom of the hierarchy of human society. They rely on the *jhopadpatti*, a marginalised space of urban poverty providing refuge to the numerous unofficial people of the city. These slums are characterised by unsafe housing conditions, and the absence or shortage of basic civic amenities such as water, sanitation, and electricity. These marginalised urban spaces, like heterotopian spaces identified by Foucault, stand as representatives of contradictions between the intersections of economy, society, and politics.

According to Foucault, heterotopias lie “outside of all places” (Foucault 3). Though the *jhopadpatti* is in the city, it is physically disconnected from its amenities. The urban poor hang onto an idea of urbanism cut off from what Lefebvre states as the “urban fabric” (Lefebvre 3). The *jhopadpatti* represents crisis heterotopias but even more so of heterotopias of deviation as they are spaces of confinement where the displaced people whose deviance caused by economic, political, and social forces is tamed and contained. As time progresses, Om and Ishvar buy household commodities for their shack with their meagre salaries. While maintaining the temporality, the upgrading of the shack to make it “more comfortable” represents the growing permanence of the space (Mistry 183). Thus, the purpose of the shack changes from a temporary arrangement to a permanent residence.

The time aspect of heterotopian spaces is significant as there is no foreseeable endpoint. The spaces acquire the passing of time, while the life of the residents in the *jhopadpatti* is marred with insecurity: their shacks may be demolished, the slum lord may evict them, or the monsoon will destroy the shelter and their belongings. These are spaces “outside of the time of a common, ordinary, predictable world” (Agier 323). The social exclusion of the urban poor results in a placeless, timeless existence where the people’s lives are reduced to an incessant act of waiting: the tailors have to wait for water in the *jhopadpatti* which is available for only a short while in the mornings; they have to wait for the trains to pass to excrete on the railway line; they are forever waiting for a better job with better income so that they can evacuate the slum and return home.

Foucault observes that the “heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (Foucault 6). Though anyone can enter the heterotopic space, it is an illusion. The entrance into a heterotopic site marks the exclusion from society, thus “by the sole fact of entering, one is excluded” (Foucault 6). The tailors’ *jhopadpatti* as well as their food is considered unhygienic by Dina emphasising that because of their lower-class identity “a distance has to be maintained” (Mistry 293). Lastly, the *jhopadpatti* as a heterotopian space serves a function for ‘the other’ to be used for the political and economic advancement of the privileged. Dina is a part of the “exploiting capitalist network” using the tailors’ work for their financial gain while the residents of the slums are forcefully taken by political parties as audiences for their rallies (Morey 112).

As *jhopadpattis* are considered as an illegal part of the city, with their demolition, the State violates the urban poor’s right to the city as well as basic amenities. Living in conditions of poor hygiene, unreliable infrastructure, and overcrowding, along with being isolated from the city, the urban poor are denied not just the right to the city but also the right to humanity.

In the book *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995), Marc Augé examines the characteristics of space, place, and identity in a world of supermodernity. The third section of the book talks about non-places: places solely designed to be passed through and reach other places of importance. In the novel, the tailors, along with several homeless people, are brought to an irrigation site where they will get “food, shelter, and clothing” for their labour, instead of salary. The tin huts in which they reside meanwhile mirror several characteristics of a non-place (Mistry 332).

According to Augé, a non-place is “a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (Augé 77). Like the tin huts, a non-place is a space that houses things and individuals tentatively. In the novel, the homeless individuals live in tin huts stacked in a row, with twelve of them in each hut. Several characteristics of non-places such as the lack of belonging to a space, prevailing anonymity, homogenised entity, strict discipline, and identification mainly on the points of entering and departing the place relate to the lived space at the irrigation site. Resembling the procedure of entering in a space of transit, when the group arrives at the irrigation site, their meagre belongings are thoroughly checked by the security captain. Non-places function under panoptic control and surveillance similar to the constant surveillance the foreman and the overseers exercise over the individuals.

The people in the tin huts have “a shared identity” unlike the anthropological place (Augé 101). Bereft of any personal identity, they are referred to as ‘group’ or ‘army’. Om and Ishvar’s countless attempts to disaffiliate themselves from the homeless beggars are futile once they enter the non-place. They are similar to the beggars in their wish to leave the “narok of heartless devils” (Mistry 366). The diverse group of people is homogenised to an extent wherein the caste identity in the rural location or the class identity in the urban

location is of no significance. Like non-places, the tin huts create “neither singular identity or relations; only solitude and similitude” (Augé 103).

### III. CONCLUSION

In the novel, space and identity are inextricably bound to each other and exploring their relationship deepens the understanding of the spatial marginalisation the characters experience. The theorisation of space concerning the characters' identity explains the physical and psychological dispossession that they encounter and holds the social, political, and economical forces accountable. The deromanticised presentation of the urban-rural dichotomy as well as the segregated spaces in the novel shatters the dominant idealised versions and realistically, exemplifies the difficulties of the marginalised in the country.

The paper has examined the incessant quest of the marginalised for identity through their constant displacement. As the home becomes the pre-condition for social and political identity, homelessness becomes illegal. To better understand the resultant marginalised urban spaces and their inhabitants, spatial theories are applied to adapt to these socio-economic contexts. Further research can be conducted in areas of bodily mutation of the subjects characterised by spatial marginalisation operating along the lines of caste, class, and gender.

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