

# EMBODIED SPATIAL VIOLENCE: DIALECTICS OF BODY AND PLACE IN A FINE BALANCE

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**ABSTRACT:** *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, set in the context of the Indian Emergency, puts forth the displacement that it brought among citizens in physical, social and cultural spaces in a totalitarian way. At the levels of place and body, the system's deliberate physical force introduced spatial trauma. This paper juxtaposes the subaltern bodies and spaces in *A Fine Balance* to delineate how state-induced violence leads to embodied spatial trauma. It puts forth the argument that there is a dialectics of shared trauma between the body politic of the subaltern and the spaces they occupy, namely the Mumbai slums as portrayed in the novel. The violence that happened in and on the place led to forceful evictions of the subaltern public from the slums, thereby ripping them of their agency in their own space of dwelling and creating a feeling of placelessness at the two-fold levels; body and place. It can be observed that the violence in place or physical space is in tandem with the violence on the body. The destruction of the living spaces in the name of city beautification led to the loss of sense of surroundings in Om and Ishvar. As Mensch observed, the loss of sense of surroundings feeds the loss of sense of self, which can be deduced from how the characters lose their sense of identity when they are made to undergo forced sterilisation. This article aims to draw an analogous connection between the corporeal space (body) and the geopolitical space (place) the subaltern characters in the novel occupy. Through a textual analysis of *A Fine Balance*, this article elucidates how violence in a place results in the formation of embodied spaces.

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

## INTRODUCTION

Violence and displacement are recurring themes in historical and modern contexts that have a significant impact on marginalised communities. Spatial violence and trauma have marked multiple historical occurrences, leading to massive displacement along with severe psychological wounds on affected populations. One such instance is the Partition of India in 1947, which resulted in the forced migration of millions across newly formed borders, sparking violent riots, massacres, and long-standing communal tensions. *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry vividly captures this kind of suffering that occurred during the Indian Emergency (1975–1977), a time of political unrest led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Declared in reaction to purported threats to national security, the Emergency brought about widespread abuses of power, including forced sterilizations, evictions of large numbers of people, and restrictions on civil liberties, as well as the suspension of democratic rights. Mistry used this historical epoch to investigate the travails of India's underprivileged strata, specifically the destitute and marginalised individuals who endure the brunt of governmental policies. Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Omprakash Darji, and Maneck Kohlah are the four main characters in the book, whose lives collide in the harsh reality of the Emergency [1]. Mistry skilfully illustrates how these characters suffer from repressive governmental policies such as sterilization drives and the elimination of slums—on a physical, emotional, and psychological level. The book explores issues of exploitation, survival, and fortitude in the face of political oppression via their narratives. The selected novel encapsulates the volatile nature of the time by emphasizing the struggles faced by the average person and draws attention to the paradox of a government that injures people it is supposed to save.

## DISCUSSION

The use of the body as an analytical tool in Western discourse has been met with criticism when applied to non-Western societies, particularly in South Asia. Some critics argue that such usage merely exports a Western obsession with the body to non-Western contexts, driven by Western capitalism [2]. However, James Mills and Satadru Sen, in *Confronting the Body: The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Postcolonial India* counter this argument by asserting that the body has long held central significance in South Asian societies, as a key aspect of social structure, metaphor, and identity, well before European influence or Western academic theories. They argue that while there are differences between Western and non-Western views of the body, these differences do not negate the value of applying Western theories to analyze corporeality in South Asia. Indeed, South Asian uses of the body to define rank, difference, and gender offer parallels to practices in other societies, making comparative analysis beneficial [3].

Mistry's work, particularly *A Fine Balance*, provides a fertile ground for such an exploration. Peter Brooks' concept of bodily inscription helps us understand how the body becomes embedded in the narrative. According to Brooks, when the body is signed or marked, it enters the realm of writing, becoming a narrative body. In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry's characters bear physical marks that reveal their lived experiences, connecting their personal stories with broader historical and social forces. This bodily inscription anchors the novel's narrative structure and progression, as the fates of the four protagonists are shaped by the socio-political landscape of the time [4]. The novel begins with a bodily encounter — the sudden lurch of a train, causing Ishvar, Om, and Maneck to collide with one another — which sets the stage for their intertwined stories.

As the narrative unfolds, the body becomes central to its meaning and coherence. The physical descriptions of the characters, including the gradual deterioration of bodies such as Dina's mother, Vasantro Valmik, and Ibrahim, highlight the novel's preoccupation with bodily decline and destruction [5]. This motif of bodily deterioration reflects the harsh realities of life under oppressive conditions, and Mistry uses it to underscore the violence enacted upon the characters' bodies by the socio-political environment. Thus, the body in *A Fine Balance* serves as a critical site where personal, historical, and political forces converge, reinforcing the dialectic between body and place.

The gruesome description of Dina's husband Rustom Dalal's death, his head "completely crushed" by a "bastard lorry driver [6, p, 43]" initiates a recurring theme of traffic accidents throughout the novel. This motif is later echoed in Om's bicycle accident and the horrific death of the crippled beggar Shankar, who is killed after rolling into a busy intersection. Alongside the depiction of deteriorating or destroyed bodies, the theme of physical decline is also mirrored by the material decay of inanimate objects. After Rustom's death, his violin becomes symbolically linked to the body, and when Dina retrieves it from its case, its advanced state of disrepair evokes the same sense of bodily decomposition, reinforcing the novel's focus on both corporeal and material decline.

The soundboard had collapsed completely around the f-holes. The four strings flopped limply between the tailpiece and the tuning pegs, while the felt lining of the case was in shreds, chewed to tatters by marauding insects. Her stomach felt queasy. With a trembling hand, she drew the bow from its compartment within the lid. The horsehair hung from one end of it like a thin long ponytail. [6, p. 80].

The link between material decay and bodily decomposition is reinforced when the police return Rustom's damaged and rusted bicycle to Dina. In a similar vein, the deterioration of the Beggarmaster's briefcase chain and the collapse of rent collector Ibrahim's folders portend major plot points, such as Dina's eviction, Ibrahim's firing, and the Beggarmaster's demise. Along with Mistry's meticulous descriptions of bodies, these examples of material decay contribute to the cohesiveness of the tale. The narrative starts with Omkaprash being skinny and Ishvar being overweight; but, by the end of the book, the tables are turned. Also, at the beginning of the story, there is a body on the Bombay train tracks; in the end, it is Maneck's body.

As the body deteriorates throughout the book, it brings to light the violence that is written on bodies according to class and caste. Outside of major cities, Dalit people's bodies are more often than not the targets of violence. All four of Ishvar's parents—Roopa, his brother Narayan, and his father Dukhi Mochi—are members of the untouchable Chaamar caste, who work as leather workers. Symbols of caste identification in their community, the signs of brutality inflicted on their Dalit bodies by members of the upper caste. According to Mills and Sen, the Indian caste system has long used physical appearance as a means of determining who is considered pure and who is considered untouchable. Nevertheless, Mistry casts doubt on this idea by linking the caste system to uncleanliness and impurity, as exemplified by

the tattered and smelly skin of Dukhi and his sons who worked as leatherworkers.

This contradiction exposes the limitations of Gandhi's belief that the caste system could be purified once untouchability was abolished. Gandhi viewed bodily cleanliness as essential for spiritual purity, but the Dalit characters in the novel, shackled to their caste by birth, cannot achieve this standard of cleanliness. The physical violence inflicted by upper-caste members—whipping, dismemberment, and other punishments for breaking caste rules—leaves permanent marks on Dalit bodies, further reinforcing their subjugation and ensuring their 'impurity.' These marks serve as evidence of the violent regulatory practices used by the upper castes to control Dalit bodies [7].

In *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry's depiction of the regulatory practices imposed on lower-caste bodies aligns with Michel Foucault's concept of docile bodies that explains in every society, bodies are subject to strict controls—constraints, prohibitions, or obligations that make them useful, malleable, and submissive [8]. These docile bodies are both analyzable or intelligible and manipulable for practical purposes. In the novel, the punishments and rules imposed on the lower castes by the upper castes, such as those inflicted on *Dukhi Mochi*, produce docile bodies shaped by both physical labour and the disfigurements caused by upper-caste violence. The scars left on Dalit bodies serve as visible markers of this subjugation, rendering them obedient and useful within the caste system.

This control over lower-caste bodies extends beyond the physical marks of caste-based violence to more extreme examples of bodily manipulation, such as government sterilization programs. The vasectomy forced upon Ishvar leads to an infection that results in the amputation of his legs, marking his body once again with the violence and oppression he endures. Om's castration not only robs him of the ability to have children but also drastically alters his body, transforming him from a lean, agile young man into an overweight, lumbering figure. These bodily alterations, inflicted in the name of family planning, leave permanent traces on India's lower classes, as the government's initiative primarily targets the indigent and marginalized.

The Beggarmaster's manipulation of physical deformity exemplifies the novel's most pronounced instance of somatic submissiveness. He not only converts disfigured bodies into instruments of profit by enhancing their capacity to elicit sympathy but also inflicts new disfigurements by mutilating healthy bodies. Infants and young children, like the Monkeyman's niece and nephew, experience 'professional alteration,' entailing gruesome acts of mutilation. In a notable instance, Shankar, the beggar's grotesquely disfigured beggar, elucidates how such mutilations, such as blinding children and severing their noses, enhance their profitability as beggars. The monetisation of ugliness exemplifies how bodily manipulation serves as a mechanism for exploitation and control within the novel.

"Putting a baby's eyes out will automatically earn money. Blind beggars are everywhere. But blind with eyeballs missing, face showing empty sockets, plus nose chopped off — now anyone will give money for that" [6, p. 323].

Mistry illustrates the Beggarmaster's professional terminology and meticulous records of the correlation between the beggars' deformed physiques and their economic viability as a compelling instance of contrived submissiveness. While the begging business existed before the State of Emergency, the government's emphasis on discipline and commerce during this time facilitates the institutionalisation of these practices. The state's disciplinary programs reflect the Beggarmaster's techniques for cultivating subservient bodies, so perpetuating the subservience of India's lower classes through mutilation and control.

Mistry's narrative emphasizes how these oppressive systems are supported by a network of social, economic, and political forces, benefiting individuals like Nusswan and others in the economic elite. The manipulation of lower-class bodies in the begging industry parallels the broader initiatives undertaken by the state during the Emergency, to maintain control through 'disciplined' methods of meticulous bodily regulation, as described by Michel Foucault. These methods ensure the constant subjugation of lower-class bodies, forcing compliance and rendering them useful to the ruling powers [8].

One powerful example is when Bombay's slum dwellers are forcibly taken to a rural rally, their bodies used merely to create the illusion of support for the Prime Minister. The event underscores how bodily presence is exploited for political purposes, even when the people are there against their will. Indira Gandhi's call for 'discipline in every aspect of life' reflects the broader governmental efforts to instill docility within the populace, a message enthusiastically endorsed by business leaders like Nusswan and Dina's employer, Mrs Gupta. Their support for these disciplinary practices, including state-sponsored sterilization and forced labor, reveals their complicity in the exploitation of India's underclass. Ironically, the marks left on the bodies of the lower classes by these methods of control such as disfigurement and sterilization undermine the very stability that the state seeks to maintain [1]. The subjugation of individual bodies, while aimed at reinforcing authoritarian systems, creates abject bodies that are perceived as threats to the social order. This reveals a paradox: the state seeks to purify the body politic by controlling the bodies of its subjects, yet these same bodies, marked by violence, become symbols of disorder.

Mistry draws attention to the way the Indian government, particularly under Indira Gandhi's regime, uses corporeal metaphors of cleanliness and beauty to justify violent actions against marginalized communities. The state's rhetoric portrays the disfigured and marked bodies of the poor as polluting the 'purity' of the nation. This framing begins even before the Emergency, with politicians likening social problems to diseases that must be eradicated to strengthen the body of the nation. The 'beautification' programs that target slum dwellers and beggars during the Emergency reinforce this notion, with slogans like "FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY! HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS! [6, p. 255]" masking the violent removal of the most vulnerable from public spaces. Through these depictions, Mistry critiques the ways in which both state and economic elites manipulate bodies to maintain

control, while simultaneously justifying oppression with an appeal to national purity.

Morey argues that Mistry's portrayal of slum clearances and mass sterilization criticizes a political system that seeks to perfect the nation by eliminating its anonymous imperfect bodies a dehumanizing approach likened to pest control. Mistry's recurring imagery of infestation, parasitism, and infection underscores this notion. For example, the worms Maneck encounters in Dina's bathroom, along with the bedbugs, cockroaches, and lice that plague other characters, mirror the government's treatment of marginalized populations as pests to be eradicated. Mistry uses these images to parallel the government's discourse, which frames beggars, slum dwellers, and other disenfranchised groups as infestations threatening the body politic. The state's actions, such as the forced removal of disabled beggars, mirror this dehumanizing language. At one point, a foreman refers to a beggar as 'Worm' and offers the Beggarmaster 'bugs or centipedes' for removal—underscoring how the government views these vulnerable individuals as pests rather than people. This discourse culminates in the government's 'beautification' project, a euphemism for displacing the homeless and destroying slums to 'cleanse' the city [1].

The government's population control measures, such as forced sterilization, are similarly framed as curing a disease afflicting the nation. Officials refer to the sterilization project as a war against overpopulation, equating the poor with a menace that threatens to 'choke' the country. This language positions the disenfranchised as both inside and outside the body politic—present within India but portrayed as parasitic and harmful to its health [9]. The state justifies its violence by framing it as a form of national purification, echoing colonial psychiatric practices where violence against bodies was justified as therapeutic.

Mills' analysis of colonial psychiatric regimes aligns with Mistry's depiction of postcolonial state violence in *A Fine Balance*. Both regimes target subaltern bodies, presenting their control or eradication as necessary for the well-being of the larger population. However, Mistry emphasizes that the sterilization efforts go beyond reform, aiming instead to eliminate the future offspring of India's most vulnerable citizens. Nusswan's blunt statement that millions are surplus to requirements illustrates the belief that the poor are disposable. Mistry's depiction of these marginalized bodies aligns with Julia Kristeva's concept of 'abject bodies,' which disturb social order and threaten identity. In *A Fine Balance*, the government's attempts to regulate these abject bodies ultimately fail, as seen during Shankar's funeral procession. The police, unable to control the disabled beggars, are powerless against bodies that do not respond to conventional disciplinary measures. This moment highlights the resistance inherent in these bodies, which defy the state's efforts to erase or control them.

In *A Fine Balance*, the abject bodies symbolize a challenge to state control, as their presence disrupts the boundaries of the Indian body politic. Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection describes these bodies as lying 'outside' the established order, continuously resisting it from the margins. Although these abject bodies exist in the heart of Bombay, their sheer number threatens to overwhelm the carefully defined borders

of the nation-state. The fear of overpopulation thus morphs into a fear of internal infestation and the breakdown of national boundaries. To justify the removal of these abject bodies, the government promotes a narrative of purity, embodied by Indira Gandhi, whose image is omnipresent in the novel. However, even this image reveals the regime's contradictions, with imperfections in her portrait symbolizing deeper issues within the body politic [10].

Shankar's mutilated body, exposed during his funeral procession, becomes a powerful symbol of the state's failure. Although mistaken for political protestors, the beggars' presence serves as an unintentional critique of the government's corrupt practices. The scene evokes Kristeva's notion of literature's power to expose abjection, revealing the bodies that society has suppressed to define itself. Mistry's depiction of abject bodies evokes pity and fear, underscoring their subversive potential to resist state narratives. In *A Fine Balance*, these abject bodies are inscribed with historical and political significance, threatening to destabilize the power structures that seek to marginalize them [11]. Shankar's funeral procession, with its mingling of the abject and the normative, exposes the corruption of the state. Characters like Dina, who initially view the abject bodies with suspicion, come to sympathize with them, revealing how personal histories inscribed on bodies can lead to meaningful human connections. Mistry suggests that it is through acknowledging the complex interrelationships between individuals that we can envision a more inclusive and heterogeneous nation, rather than one fractured by internal divisions or homogenized by state propaganda.

## CONCLUSION

In *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry powerfully illustrates the inextricable link between body and place, emphasizing how state-induced violence during the Indian Emergency manifests as both physical and spatial trauma. The novel's depiction of marginalized characters, particularly Ishvar and Om, accentuates the dual displacement they endure in evictions from their homes and the bodily mutilations inflicted upon them through forced sterilization. Mistry portrays the slums of Mumbai as spaces marked by violence, where the destruction of physical spaces mirrors the disintegration of individual bodies. Through this lens, the novel highlights the dialectic between corporeal suffering and geopolitical oppression. By depicting characters who bear the marks of both social and political violence, Mistry emphasizes how the subaltern experience is defined by a loss of agency in both body and place. The novel proposes that violence enacted in physical spaces resonates within the bodies of the oppressed, contributing to a larger narrative of systemic exploitation and embodied trauma. Through this, Mistry emphasizes the inseparable relationship between place, body, and identity in the face of authoritarian violence.

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