



Unbalancing *A Fine Balance*: Narrating Social Disability and Institutionalized Injustice

Warda-Tun-Naeem¹ & Ayesha Akram²

ABSTRACT

Article History:

Received:

October 23, 2025

Accepted:

December 23, 2025

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest:

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest and falsification/fabrication of data with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

This paper examines the demonstration of institutional inequality and power politics producing conditions of social disablement within the Indian historical context portrayed in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995). Guided by Iris Marion Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" (2008), the research interprets social disability not as an individual anomaly but a social condition caused by institutional laws, societal structures, and uneven power distribution across caste, class, gender, and religion. The study argues that disability is not solely physical or mental, but a metaphoric condition that disables every otherwise able individual due to ingrained prejudices and institutional structures, taking away respect, freedom and agency from those on the margins. Following the path of a qualitative, interpretive method and close textual reading, the study portrays how exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence shape the lives of the underprivileged Dalit, Muslim, Sikh, and female characters amid the 1947 Partition and the 1975 Emergency period. The study calls for critical dialogue in Disability Studies and South Asian literary criticism toward social justice and inclusivity. Thus, by foregrounding voices on the margins, it brings forth the wider perspective of justice that the participation, security, and recognition are the fundamental needs, rather than optional goods.

Keywords: *social disability, oppression, caste, Indian Emergency*

¹ Visiting Lecturer at the Department of English, University of Sargodha, Pakistan. She may be accessed at wardatufail402@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5551-196X>

² Assistant Professor at the Institute of English Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. She may be accessed at ayshaakram.english@pu.edu.pk, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3441-388X>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

(I)

The very existence of human life is deeply woven within the fabric of a ubiquitous form of injustice namely, oppression. Critics refer to it as “the negative and demeaning exercise of power” (Thompson, 2003, p. 22). In practice, it is the inequitable application of power to curb equality and freedom. The weak ones and the ones that have been pushed to the margins have to incur the greatest costs, whether it is the state pressure or the deep-rooted social standards. It is internalized in every aspect of society leading from the unlawful imprisonment of the underprivileged to the adoption of legislation that singles them out for unfair treatment. Left unchecked, this misuse of power breeds a subtle harm, both psychological and emotional, that drains individuals and communities alike. This harm is described here as social disability. This paper employs the term ‘social disability’ as a concept, that extends beyond the Social Model of Disability (Oliver, 1983) which situates disability within societal barriers faced by impaired. In contrast, ‘social disability’ in this study, brings forth the condition of otherwise able individuals who are rendered disabled by institutional hierarchies, cultural biases, and systemic inequalities that limits their participation and agency in the society.

Disability as a discourse has changed considerably in the context of Disability Studies over time. Primarily, the concept of disability was mainly perceived in the prism of medical pathology with a focus on personal impairment and individual limitations. By stigmatizing differences and emphasizing the need for a cure or normalization, this medical paradigm of disability tended to marginalize individuals with disabilities and reinforce social barriers. The fascist glorification of the “perfect” human being resulted, under Hitler, in a deliberate effort to exterminate disabled people as “imperfections which contaminate the genetic stream” (Coleridge, 1993, p. 45). Similarly, under the Nazis, the disabled were perceived as “useless eaters” of resources without capital to contribute to the human lot. The Nazis and Eugenicists may belong to history, but the emergence of newer forms of Social Darwinism continues the assumptions that only the fit and fully functional have a right to real life (Levine, 1985, p. 85). However, a paradigm shift towards a more social model of disability has occurred in recent decades. This model considers that there are societal attitudes, structures, and systems that eliminate and marginalize people with disabilities; and that the cause of their disability is more precisely social, rather than individual impairments. This social paradigm places a strong emphasis on the necessity of dismantling obstacles to equal opportunity and full participation, thus encouraging accessibility and combating stigma and discrimination. This structural form of disability or social disability, as we put it, for a normal, able individual is the focus of this study. The term resists neat definition, but it helps describe forms of disablement that extend beyond the medical frame. We use it to map out how norms, routines, and institutions build environments that disable otherwise able people. It brings the political, social, and economic orders to the surface that are marginalizing, and also the means through which disability relates to gender, race, caste, class, religion and ethnicity. Such exclusionary methods can push people out of the public life. Referring to these conditions as “social disability” adds necessary depth to the discourse in Disability Studies.

Social disability is an aspect that has a special value when read through South Asian literature. These stories, located within the region's rich social and cultural web, show how belonging and access are framed through families, communities, and state practices. From narratives that question domestic and communal expectations to accounts of endurance detailing survival in the face of stigma, Indian writing records this everyday struggle for recognition and rights. On this land, interceptive conflicts—rooted in ethnicity, religious persecution and everyday exploitation—fuel struggles over authority, resistance, and the quest for equity. Rohinton Mistry stands out as one of the compelling voices of the South Asian landscape. His fiction makes an extensive variety of human writing about life in an unadorned realism, involving the readers into family conflicts, political shocks, and fragmented systems of justice. Through *A Fine Balance* (1995), Mistry foregrounds the least represented caste, especially the Dalits. Written against the backdrop of the 1947 Partition of the subcontinent and the state of emergency in India by Indira Gandhi in 1975, this narrative casts a sharp spotlight on three marginalized communities—Dalits, Muslims, and Sikhs. These three communities were subjected to inhuman treatment by those in the majority, the Hindus during 1947 partition, and the privileged—the Parsis and other upper castes during the Emergency period of 1975. Set in a city reminiscent of Bombay's urban landscape, the story depicts everyday people who have to deal with poverty, violence, and loss.

This novel has won universal acclaim for its clear-eyed depiction of the Indian social and political climate after independence. By beautifully knitting deeply-drawn characters and their experiences, Mistry follows the trail of authority, corruption, exploitation, and rebellion, and demonstrates how these factors exert pressure on the common people. He not only depicts the economic inequality due to their identity by placing the emphasis on people who are on the back burner, but also sketches the structural-level disparities that define daily experiences. To decipher this description of social disability, the current study draws on the scholarship on oppression, power, and resistance. Iris Marion Young's (2008) framework in her article, "Five Faces of Oppression." Her idea developed in this 2008 article was originally proposed by her in 1988. Her theorizing helps as a workable map to explain the way how exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence are working in synergy to cause social disability. Her categories are a practical guide to an examination of social disablement and exclusion within the text.

In this paper, we argue that disability transcends the realms of medical conditions and is formed because institutional structures, cultural norms, prejudices and attitudes restrict the mobility and agency of people due to their social, religious, and ethnic belongings. When individuals are confronted with social disability, they find themselves ensnared in a complex web of oppression that destabilizes their lives. The study speaks to a broader debate on social injustice by placing this reading in a literary tradition that deals with justice and liberty. As Simone Weil notes, the task is to build a "social organization absolutely free from oppression" (2013, p. 57). Attending social disability in literature clarifies the textures of human conduct and constraint. Through close reading, we press the case

for a fairer order, trace the link between oppression and resilience, and point towards changes that respect dignity and ensure basic access regardless of background or ability.

As the research is guided by certain objectives, the study turns to three major areas of focus: Firstly, it inquires how “disability” is conceptualized in the text as a socially constructed condition (e.g., exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence) arising from systemic structures rather than bodily limitation. Secondly, it explores the extent to which Iris Marion Young’s “Five Faces of Oppression” can be deployed to elucidate the processes that render people disabled through social hierarchies rather than medical ailment; and how this expands the theoretical implications of Disability Studies in a postcolonial literary context. Lastly, it looks into the ways in which social disability is portrayed as a relational condition in the text that determines an individual’s inclusion or exclusion from the structures of power and privilege stemming from spatial, socioeconomic, and cultural patterns rather than an individual’s inadequacy. By amplifying the voices of people and communities who are socially oppressed and disabled, this study challenges familiar narratives and stereotypes, widens awareness, and argues for empathy and inclusion across public life. It deals with pressing concerns of inequality and discrimination to sustain discussions of social justice and human rights. It also emphasizes literature’s capacity to expose social injustices, dismantle obstacles, and construct new viewpoints. By focusing on the lived experiences of characters, the analysis foregrounds a debate in calling attention to social injuries and proposing potential solutions.

According to the shift in humanist inquiry of the twenty-first century, critics have demanded more non-discriminatory approaches to knowledge. Disability Studies have emerged as a prominent discipline, projecting the voices and experiences of the disabled people. Closely related to this scholarship is the movement of the disabled people that gained momentum in the 1970s. According to Carol Thomas (2004), Disability Studies is a transdisciplinary field that crosses professional and non-professional boundaries, challenges the dichotomy between experts and laypersons, and moves beyond medicalized perceptions of impairment. The field adopts sociocultural accounts of disablism and works to unsettle and decolonize entrenched assumptions about disability. Tracing this transition, Barnes and Mercer (1996) talk about the discourse’s consolidation around social explanations of disablement and a sustained critique of reductionism. Oppression is one of the persistent themes of literature as it reflects the enduring issue present ubiquitously in society. Literature has shown different types of oppression from ancient times. *Beowulf* (c. 700-1000 AD), the oldest existing English text, explores the theme of demons attempting to subjugate humans and an equal struggle that ultimately leads to the well-being of humanity. Several authors have depicted the challenges faced by the marginalized in their literary works. The most fitting characterization of the socioeconomic condition of people with disabilities is that they are “outcasts” (Charlton, 2010, p. 222). But it is not always the disabled, impaired, handicapped individuals who are treated as outcasts. It is every normal individual who is not the part of mainstream, top-order hierarchy, and who is rendered disabled due to this unjust marginalization. The individuals who fall

under the category of normal beings, medically or psychologically, are disabled by society, its people, and its norms. Indian and Pakistani fiction writers have written several such stories under the influence of Partition and post-Partition traumas and researchers have done a lot of work to address how people are being made socially disabled because of their multi-faceted identities.

One study by Morsheda Bari (2014) examines the representation of women in three major South Asian novels: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988). Bari traces how gendered expectations shape women's lives in traditional South Asian settings, noting moments of resistance as well as accommodation. Her work brings forth the shifts in agency and identity and highlights the costs women endure for challenging the accepted roles. She offers a valuable critique of the male-centric institutions for framing women's lives in the region by relating personal choice with social control (Bari, 2014, pp. 9–18). Works on Dalit experience have also gained scholarly attention over time. In "Mulk Raj Anand and Om Prakash Valmiki as representatives of the unheard voices: A study of *Untouchable* and *Joothan*", Rajni Saini points out how Anand stands against the Bhangi community's exclusion by means of Bakha, and how the human status of untouchables is denied by the Hindu community (Saini, 2016, p. 223). Reading Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997), Saini becomes the mouthpiece of untouchables by emphasizing their struggles to get the basic needs such as education and food, and bearing the weight of institutional servitude over decades. *Joothan* expresses a common need of dignity and a right of belonging for Dalit in society (Saini, p. 225).

James W. Johnson's essay, "'Beggaring the nation': Bodily inscription and the body politic in Rohinton Mistry's *a fine balance*," examines how the novel stages encounter between bodies and power in the 1970s. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's idea of abjection and Michel Foucault's account of discipline, Johnson traces scenes of bodily degradation, exploitation, and resistance. He shows how official discourse casts the poor as a sanitary threat, rendering subaltern bodies visible and controllable. He also highlights Beggarmaster's trade as profit built on injury, sharpening the book's critique of capitalist extraction. The essay presents *A Fine Balance* as a stark meditation on marginalization and dehumanization (Johnson, 2015, pp. 150–157). Also, C.V. Padmaja and P. Phani Bhushan Rao's study, "The Marginalized Women in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*", provides extensive examination of how marginalized women in India are presented in the text. The writers address topics of sexism, economic freedom, and the resilience of the human spirit while probing the twofold marginalization experienced by women from marginalized areas through the characters of Dina Dalal, Radha, and Roopa. The paper effectively handles the degradation of basic rights and the abuse of power by setting the story against the backdrop of the 1975 Emergency, showing the structural imbalances that are backed by a casteist and sexist society. In addition, their discussion on violence against women, ranging from rape to dowry-related killings, shows the constraints many poor Indian women live within the society. Padmaja and Rao's study offers a careful account of gender relations and structural imbalance, and it clarifies how these harms are represented in Mistry's narrative,

providing grounded insight into the realities of poor women's lives (Padmaja & Phani Bhushan Rao, 2017, pp. 12–17).

Banu (2021) in his work “Subaltern Consciousness in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*” looks at *A Fine Balance* (1995) from the perspective of subaltern studies, concentrating on the Chamaar community's caste-based marginalization. In order to show how structural authority, economic reliance, and caste hierarchies sustain cycles of violence and humiliation, the study follows the oppression of Dukhi, Narayan, and Roopa. Banu exposes the junction of caste and class as persistent forms of structural exclusion by emphasizing the continuation of colonial structures in postcolonial India. By providing a social and postcolonial framework for comprehending oppression as a paralyzing process that erases dignity and limits agency, this reading enhances the current study. Similarly, Jenifer and Kumar (2025) examine the vulnerability of crippled bodies in their work “Vulnerability of Disabled bodies as Societal Issues in *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry”, emphasizing how economic disparity, caste discrimination, and social hierarchies shape disability as a social rather than a medical condition. The study illustrates how forced sterilization, displacement, and exploitation turn the body into a site of systematic violence through characters like Ishvar, Om, Shankar, and the Beggar Master. The authors contend that by interpreting disability as resistance to dehumanization, Mistry demonstrates resiliency in the face of such injustice. By revealing disability of the disabled characters as a result of institutional and structural marginalization rather than medical impairment, their work is consistent with the social model of disability theorized by Mike Oliver in 1983.

Even though *A Fine Balance* (1995) has received a great deal of scholarly attention, most analyses of these texts have taken a literary approach, ignoring the possibilities provided by alternative theoretical frameworks like Young’s “Five Faces of Oppression” (2008). Moreover, the existing scholarship in Disability Studies is primarily confined to medical or social models of disability but none has extended the concept of disability as a condition to capture broader loss of agency and coercive dependency which is beyond the physical limits. Although the origin of Iris Marion Young’s “Five Faces of Oppression” (2008) is Western and political, its applicability extends beyond that, as it theorizes oppression as a structural and relational phenomenon rather than an identity-based experience that aligns best with the novel’s portrayal of social disability. Though there are many other frameworks that emphasize self-narration and representational agency, Young’s framework particularly focuses on the institutional mechanisms that sustain inequality. Thus, using Young’s paradigm in a postcolonial literary context broadens its analytical scope and emphasizes how her theory may be applied internationally to situations involving systemic injustice. This creates a gap for our investigation to theorize ‘social disability’ as a condition of oppression, making otherwise able people, functionally disabled in their social and political lives. In this way, our study relocates the narrative of the text as a socially constructed disablement in lieu of mere casteism, sexism, sectarianism, elitism, and victimhood

by bridging Disability Studies, postcolonial critique, and Young's framework. Thus, the study aims at providing a fresh point of view that goes beyond conventional literary analysis. The objective of this research is to investigate the notion of social disability which surpasses conventional ideas of physical or mental impairment to include the social, cultural, political, and historical elements that influence people's experiences of disablement.

Drawing on Young's "Five Faces of Oppression" (2008, pp. 55-71), this study uses Young's five faces of oppression in which she defines oppression as "structural phenomena that immobilize or diminish a group" (p. 57). In that chapter, Young identifies five faces: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. This research is based on the analysis of these five faces of oppression that constitute the basis of the analytical part of the research. Thus, the study traces how the condition of social disability is crafted through exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

The first face of oppression i.e. 'Exploitation' as formulated by Young (2008), relies on the Marxist theory of exploitation and capitalism. The main objective of the exploitation theory by Marx is to explain how class structure can even exist in the presence of no legally and conventionally supported class differentiation (p. 60). The exploitation is an unfair phenomenon caused by societal processes leading to the shift of allocated resources across groups and consequently unequal allocations. This injustice is further sustained through social institutions enabling few people to become wealthy and curtailing the possibilities for the majority (p. 63). The second face of oppression that Young (2008) refers to as 'Marginalization' is arguably the most extreme type of oppression. A whole group of people is barred out of meaningful participation in societal work, and they can be exposed to the utmost material deprivation and even extermination (p. 63). According to Young, to imagine a society in which some people will not need to be dependent on others occasionally is hardly possible. This covers children, sick persons, postpartum women, frail elderly people, and those who are dependent emotionally. These individuals possess a moral entitlement to rely on others for their basic needs and assistance (p. 63).

'Powerlessness' is the third face of oppression according to Iris Marion Young (2008). This powerlessness refers to those who lack authority or power, especially in a mediated context. Powerless people are subject to the exercise of power without being able to use it themselves. The powerless are in a position where they are required to follow orders and seldom have the privilege to issue commands. Powerlessness refers to a certain position within the division of labour and the corresponding social status that restricts individuals from having ample opportunities to cultivate and utilize their skills (p. 65). Another face of oppression is termed as 'Cultural Imperialism'. Experiencing cultural imperialism entails observing how the prevailing interpretations of society make the unique viewpoint of one's own group invisible, while simultaneously categorizing and distinguishing it as the *Other* (Young, 2008). Cultural imperialism refers to the process of imposing the experience and culture of a dominating group on others, thus, establishing it as

the standard. The dominating group solidifies its position by subjugating other groups to conform to its prevailing norms (Young, 2008, p. 66).

'Violence', the fifth face of oppression as proposed by Young (2008), is considered systemic when it is specifically targeted towards individuals solely based on their membership in a certain group. Violence against members of oppressed groups is not limited to direct victimization; but due to their group identity, the members of this group suffer from this everyday awareness that they are vulnerable to abuse. The constant presence of a potential assault on oneself, family, or friends robs the oppressed of their independence and dignity, while also needlessly draining their energy (p. 68). Thus, Young's (2008) framework provides a comprehensive lens to highlight varied manifestations of oppression, including those related to class, gender, caste, ethnicity, race, religion and other intersecting identities to thoroughly and effectively understand a certain social landscape depicted in the selected literature.

(II)

In Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), the novel offers readers a dramatic representation of Partition era and the mid-1970s India during the Emergency era imposed by Indira Gandhi. The plot is realistic as it depicts the lives of ordinary people struggling with poverty, violence, and hopelessness in an unnamed city that is depicted in many ways as Mistry's native Bombay. Mistry takes his story to a variety of people from different strata that lived during the 1947 Partition and the 1975 Emergency in India. He introduces people from various religions and castes, including the lives of Muslim, Sikh, and Dalit community, providing space to other persecuted communities in India rather than just Parsi in specific context. This study foregrounds how characters in the novel are made socially disabled by utilizing these various faces of oppression i.e., exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. They, therefore, help signify how these multiple oppressive forces affect the lives of people around us and call for a strong demand for social justice.

Exploitation

Beginning with Exploitation, the first face of oppression proposed by Young, the category of menial labor is what supplies a means to conceptualize the racial form of exploitation, and menial indicates the labor of servants (Young, 2008, p. 62). Om Prakash Valmiki states that "one can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past caste" (Valmiki, 2003, p. 2). In *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997), Valmiki's statement highlights the rigidity of the Indian caste system, resulting in the centuries-long socioeconomic marginalization of thousands of individuals solely due to their caste affiliation i.e., the "lesser caste" (Valmiki, 2003, p. 2). Very skillfully, Mistry demonstrates economic exploitation through all of his characters. The representation of the Dalit community which itself stands as a mouthpiece for them is a stark example of how they are subjected to economic exploitation. First, their fathers and forefathers were bound to live a life of daily drudgery which brought them low wages. At times, they had to depend on the mercy of others to provide them with things. When Dukhi took a step

towards betterment by sending his sons to learn tailoring, they had to face economic exploitation. People from the upper class envied them and believed that they had disturbed the social order of society by switching their profession. When Om and Ishvar went to the city with the prospects of a bright future, they found it nearly impossible to find any work. Working conditions in the city's tailoring market were challenging and oppressive, and wages were low, favoring the upper classes at the expense of the workers. Even when they found a job at Dina Dalal, she had an extremely prejudiced behavior towards Om and Ishvar, which consequently put them under her strict scrutiny. But they had to endure her discriminatory behavior for survival.

The capitalist system transfers and limits the power to a certain few, augmenting their power and establishing unfair dominance over the others. During the transfer of power from workers to capitalists, workers suffer from material deprivation and loss of self-respect (Young, 2008, p. 61). As there started an Emergency within the country, the conditions got worse for the people at the peripheries. Poor people from slums and around who needed something to fill their bellies were exploited economically to attend the forced meeting with the Prime Minister. Those who attended were to be paid five rupees each along with free tea and snacks (Mistry, 1995, p. 447). People were also exploited for serving the government policies and schemes despite being detrimental. On one hand, politicians in their speeches claim that because we are all God's children, no one is sacred. Gandhiji warned that untouchability is like "arsenic" in milk: it "poisons Hinduism" (Mistry, 1995, p. 186). On the other hand, they mistreat people under a program called "Slum Prevention and City Beautification". Under this program, they make people homeless by uprooting all the slums in order to beautify the city. This also involves killing underprivileged people who were sleeping on the roadside and the gutters. The people who work for this program are exploited and given commissions and other perks.

Beggarmaster, the one who runs a whole network of beggars, and the hair collector named Rajaram, symbolize how people can go for immoral acts when their economic limitations intersect with other factors. Rajaram's poor living conditions and desperate need for money forced him to go for inhuman acts. Having no resources, he resorts to unethical actions. For example, under the pretense of unintentional cuts, he makes people bald purposefully to get money. Moreover, he also cuts strips of random people's hair from the bazaar. Contrary to this, Beggarmaster portrays a more systemic kind of exploitation. As he runs the vast business of begging and holds a large network of beggars, he does this by making money out of their misery keeping them in pain. He commits extremely unethical act of making beggars disfigured or handicapped on purpose to increase their effectiveness as beggars so that people can sympathize more and give them more money. The characters are frequently compelled to work under horrible conditions. The exploitation goes so far as to threaten their autonomy, as seen by the government's forced sterilization efforts. Forced sterilization, portrayed as a public health effort, was nothing more than a cover for more control and oppression. People were pushed out of their houses and from public places for this forced act

because the motivators were given economic privileges. As the character recounts, "They give me one meal, a place to sleep, and the cycle. As a Motivator, I have to go around explaining the birth-control procedures. For each man or woman I can persuade to get the operation, I am paid a commission" (Mistry, 1995, p. 546).

Feminist scholars have also examined links between gender-based exploitation in the modern workplace and its perpetuation by state structures (Young, 2008, p. 62). Shifting the focus to another significant character, Dina, who in her struggle for autonomy and to prevent remarriage, encounters economic exploitation based on her gender. She is a single woman, and the gender dynamics in society are shown by the pressures she faces. Her fight against the economic exploitation that aimed to ruin her business and make her dependent is indicative of the larger social abuse women face. Her independence is always brought into question when, after every short while, she has to seek her brother Nuswan's help to uphold her agency. Moreover, being from the Dalit community, Roopa, Dukhi's wife, often feels helpless due to the starving conditions of the family. She does not even hesitate to steal for her children. One day, when she steals from the fields, a man from the upper class, the owner, catches her. He asks her to take how much she wants and when she is leaving, he says: "You haven't given me anything in return" (Mistry, 1995, p. 169) and abuses her. This shows how she becomes subjected to gender exploitation due to her lower class and lower-caste identity. "This twofold oppression indicates how intersectional vulnerabilities and patriarchal dominance operate in tandem to perpetuate gender inequality and limit women's autonomy and agency" (Chaudhri et al., 2025, p. 53), as many critics aver.

Marginalization

Marginalization is typically associated with social classification, with one at the top and the other at the bottom of society. Sociologists commonly refer to this classification as social stratification. It is linked to social inequalities, including race, class, gender, and age discrimination (Asghar, Ahmed, & Fatima, 2020, p. 205). It stands as the second face of oppression according to Young (2008). Mistry's literary work is replete with such instances of stratification where humans are denied access not only to opportunities but also to the places and people. Racial oppression occurs significantly in the form of marginalization compared to exploitation (Young, 2008, p. 63). Being untouchables, Ishvar and Om have to face extreme social marginalization. They are driven into low-paying, menial jobs and systematically left excluded from many facets of society. Their search for jobs and their retention exposes the ingrained caste stereotypes that bind them to the margins. Their journey from the village to the metropolis emphasizes how deeply ingrained this caste-based discrimination is. As Mistry mirrors "Chamars were permitted to live in a section downstream from the Brahmins and landowners" (Mistry, 1995, p. 164). Hindu tailors do not stitch for this community of the society. Mistry writes that "every time he saw high-caste persons on the road, he prostrated abjectly, but at a safe distance – so he couldn't be accused of contaminating them with his shadow" (Mistry, 1995, p. 172). Such marginalization is internalized by these people and their fear of contaminating the upper castes is ingrained in them.

Likewise, there is an increasing group of individuals who are permanently restricted to a life of social marginalization, with the majority of them being racially stigmatized (Young, 2008, p. 63). This marginalization reaches even the prestigious realms of education. Once Narayan and Ishvar enter the school premises due to their fascination with the stuff. The schoolmaster scolds them, beats them, and says to their father that “they polluted the place. They touched the instruments of learning. They defiled slates and chalks, which upper-caste children would touch” (Mistry, 1995, p. 197). This shows how filthy it is for the Dalit community to even touch the instruments of knowledge thus emphasizing how they are denied access to basic needs like education. As Valmiki writes in his autobiography, untouchability was pervasive to the extent that while it was deemed acceptable to touch dogs, cats, cows, or buffaloes, touching a Chuhra was believed to result in contamination or pollution. The Chuhras were regarded as non-human entities (Valmiki, 2003, p. 2). Additionally, Dina's interactions with Om and Ishvar aggravate the caste bias even more. She keeps them at a great distance and also asks Maneck to maintain a distance from them, claiming hygienic issues: “Omprakash has lice” (Mistry, 1995, p. 481). This shows how widespread societal prejudices are, that even the ones who are excluded by gender can propagate oppression against others. Her prejudice is also clear in her talk to Maneck where she says: “From Omprakash, I cannot expect better. But you, from a good Parsi family . . .” (Mistry, 1995, p. 504). Such behavior not only disregards their presence, but also cause their extreme marginalization.

Living in South Asia, marriage appears to be the most important goal of living. It is considered, especially in India and Pakistan, that a woman needs to be married to be respectful and prestigious as living alone is not an option for them. As a widow seeking autonomy, Dina Dalal deals with marginalization in a patriarchal world. As Gupta writes, “Marriage somehow, had begun to seem unimportant now. After our closeness through all those years, what did marriage mean? How would it change our lives?” (Gupta, 2014, p. 187). Dina also agrees with this thought pattern. Her fight to keep her tailoring company afloat in the face of social pressure to remarry exposes the gender-based marginalization limiting her opportunities. To keep herself out of societal pressures and being a trouble for her brother and family, she chooses to isolate herself and live alone. Dina's social seclusion and financial vulnerability draw attention to how gender and economic oppression interact. Her resistance and standing against the set norms of the society to gain her agency marks as a resistance of marginalized women in a male-centered society on a larger scale.

Other note-worthy set of episodes in the novel is the sidelining of Muslims during the 1947 Partition. Muslim families' eye-witness mass communal bloodshed, and the leaving behind of what they and their forefathers had earned for years. Rioters target Muslim shops and houses; at one such incident the crowd cries, “Burn it! We know it's a Muslim shop! Burn it! And those who lie to protect it – burn them, too!” (Mistry, 1995, p. 225). Such horrific circumstances show how a new order is enforced through fear, unlawful acts, and inhuman treatments, and how quickly neighbors for years can become dreadful companions. The Mistry's story highlights

the costs of such horrendous incidents, non-existent security, torturous companionship, and the persistent mark of stigma, thus bringing forth how Partition brought not only physical ruin but ingrained social marginalization. This religious marginalization is not only limited to Hindu-Muslim riots, it also exists between Sikhs and Hindus. When Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is murdered, Sikhs are the targets of violence and get killed openly on the orders of the government. Anyone who knows where any Sikh lives, would go and kill them. Thus, minorities are being marginalized systematically at the State level.

Powerlessness

A powerless person is someone who is positioned to receive instructions but rarely has the authority to deliver those (Young, 2008, p. 65). Within the text under our investigation, the prime example of political tyranny is the 1975 Emergency Era and its harsh policies. As a cruel act that deprives them of both physical ability and agency, Ishvar and Om are forcibly sterilized in the name of family planning. The misuse of power by the government in this case shows how oppressive political systems can make already-vulnerable groups even more vulnerable. After Indira Gandhi declares an emergency, the four primary characters lose any political influence they have. At one instance in the novel, when Narayan stands up for the legal right to vote for his community, he is brutally killed after being abused badly. The police say: "You filthy achhoot castes are always out to make trouble! Get out before we charge you with public mischief!" (Mistry, 1995, p. 259). The characters' political powerlessness is vividly illustrated by the destruction of slums depriving the poor of their homes and forced sterilization campaigns that occur during the Emergency period to highlight the authoritarian regime's actions that deprive the characters of their homes and dignity. These policies also limit their liberties and make them feel even more susceptible. This misuse of authority by the government deprives people of control over their bodies and further disables them.

A lot of people can influence other people even if they can't decide on policies or outcomes on their own. A person is considered powerless if they are not in a position to exert their authority or power, even in this mediated sense (Young, 2008, p. 65). The gendered aspects of powerlessness are mirrored in Dina's experiences as a widow. She reluctantly acknowledges the fantasy of independence in a male-dominant society in the following words: "And, in any case, the idea of independence was a fantasy" (Mistry, 1995, p. 748). Her economic struggles and her unwilling reliance on her brother every once in a while, further illustrate her limited agency. Also, the partition of India and Pakistan results in a situation where Muslims and Hindus feel extremely helpless. Many people are unable to defend their loved ones or support themselves as a result of the arbitrary split of territory and the subsequent communal conflicts. Muslims are butchered inhumanly. Their houses are set on fire. They are forced to leave Indian territory leaving behind all their fortune which they and their forefathers have owned all those years of togetherness. In addition to being physically helpless, communities are also psychologically helpless as they struggle with trauma and the loss of identity and fortune. Same is done to the Sikhs after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's murder.

They were made homeless within their own homes and were killed while unable to do anything about it.

Cultural imperialism

Transforming to the fourth face, Young says that in cultural imperialism, one feels how the dominant meanings of a culture both erase and stereotype one's group, making it seem like the *Other* (Young, 2008, p. 66). Similarly, Mistry shows how cultural imperialism runs in *A Fine Balance* (1995) by showing how the untouchables' cultural identities are devalued institutionally. The caste system sets up strict social ranks that keep Ishvar and Om from having the same opportunities in life. Their cultural and social isolation is further highlighted by their relocation to the metropolis in search of improved leaps of faith. By enforcing upper-caste and middle-class values on characters from lower socio-economic and caste backgrounds, the novel reflects cultural imperialism. Thus, cultural imperialism has sneaky effects, like keeping social structures in place and making inequality rise in the society. Young defines cultural imperialism as a process in which the dominant group's experience is treated as universal while subordinate groups are pushed aside and forgotten (2008, p. 67). In Dina's case this appears as ordinary patriarchal rules that script women's lives and restrict their freedom. Family, her brother, and others press her to remarry on the assumption that a woman needs male support for social standing and economic security. Dina's refusal is a direct challenge to that order. She chooses to remain single and to run a small tailoring business, claiming the right to shape her own identity and future. Her business is not only a livelihood; it marks her independence and persistence. Despite unstable finances and the constant risk of losing her flat, she keeps working and holds her ground, resisting the cultural pressures that would push her to the margins.

Cultural imperialism hurts traditional ways of making a living, as Maneck's father witnesses during modern economic trends. People approach Mr. Kohlah with the proposal that he gives up on Kohla's Cola and becomes their brand agent (Mistry 379). As Sadiq (2004, p.54) claims that audience resists against foreign frameworks because their thoughts and emotions are affected and triggered due to their postcolonial resistive memory in order to acknowledge their indigenous frameworks, cultural connectivity. Mr. Kohlah refuses to give up his family business for corporate interests and fights against cultural imperialism that tries to erase traditional identities and ways of life in favor of modern, standardized values. Mistry's tale shows how new cultural and political orders are forced on people violently and randomly during Partition. Maneck's family suffers from the loss of identity and tradition. The family was very rich in the past. Loss of their land and their social and economic standing changes a lot as a result of the sudden split. As Mistry states: "A foreigner draws a magic line on a map and calls it the new border. It became a river of blood on the earth" (1995, p. 350). This is how cultural imperialism affects individuals and can alter their whole lives in correspondence to Young's ideas (2008, p. 67) that people who are culturally dominated experience a double-edged sword: they are stereotyped and, simultaneously, made invisible.

Violence

Young's theorizing about the fifth face, violence, is a social practice with a systemic character rather than a matter of individual wrongdoing (Young, 2008, p. 68). Violence is a constant and terrible force in *A Fine Balance* (Mistry, 1995) that has a big impact on the characters' lives. Governments employ violence to maintain their authority, a practice that, while morally controversial, serves a valid purpose. Racist, sexist, or homophobic violence is frequently attributed to the desire of a specific group to preserve its advantage or control over others (Young, 2008, p. 68). At one instance, Dina's brother hits her because she speaks out of turn, and he slaps her without warning. When a cut opens her bottom lip, he stops then (Mistry, 1995, p. 41). This violent act shows how patriarchal rules are enforced in the family, which limits women's freedom and reinforces their inferior position. Young (2008, p. 67) defines cultural imperialism as a process in which the dominant group's experience is treated as universal while subordinate groups are pushed aside and forgotten.

Ishvar and Narayan have to deal with terrible violence because of their caste, especially when they try to go to school. The teacher's response to their being at school is both physical and mental abuse: "[H]e slapped Ishvar six times in quick succession across the face" (Mistry, 1995, p. 192). He also makes them lower their pants, makes them lie down, and beats them on the buttocks. Their persistent encounters with violence serve to emphasize the inflexible walls of caste that hinder progression and promote marginalization. India's split and the riots that followed between Hindus and Muslims led to very bad violence between different groups. When people are killed on trains during the partition, "every day trains cross that new border carrying nothing but corpses" (Mistry, 1995, p. 219). The attacks on Muslims during the riots show how terrible it is when deep-seated hatred and animosity between groups explode into widespread violence and damage. Their properties are set on fire along with the people in it. Young (2008) is of the view that it is not horrific acts of violence themselves that make violence a face of oppression, but rather the social context surrounding violence that promotes and accepts it (p. 68). When Ishvar's brother Narayan along with two other men from his community fight for their right to vote, they are severely beaten. They are abused when they ask for ballot papers: "Burning coals were held to the three men's genitalia and then stuffed into their mouths" (Mistry, 1995, p. 255). The screams of the three are heard throughout the village. The ropes are then tied around their necks and they are hanged. Their bodies are put on public display as a warning, and Thakur Dhramsi's statement that he should not be given a proper cremation because he does not deserve it (Mistry, 1995, p. 257) makes them even less than humans. Their house is set on fire with the message that they all should be caught be it parents, wife, and children (Mistry, 1995, p. 258). It is ensured that no one gets away and all are set on fire. This event shows how widespread and normalized violence is against people who fight against oppression and the status quo.

Young contends that group-based violence is systemic and institutionalized. Institutions and social practices that permit or enable violence against specific groups are unfair and should be reformed (2008, p. 69). This same systemic and institutionalized violence was being done during the 1975 Emergency era. This

violence is supported by the government, and people are forcefully sterilized against their will. Om and Ishvar's experiences in the sterilization camp are particularly scary. It is extremely painful for him because he is first sterilized and then castrated. Ishvar, on the other hand, has both legs amputated because half-sterilized instruments are used during the sterilization process, causing poison to spread rapidly in his body and for the sake of his life, he is made physically disabled. This act of State violence not only hurts them physically, but also takes away their dignity, manhood, and freedom, showing how political oppression can make people less human.

(III)

Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) traces a dense interplay of class, caste, gender, and religion, showing characters confronted by injustice at the hands of dominant groups. Dalits and other religious minorities, including Muslims and Sikhs, appear to face sustained economic exploitation and social exclusion during the Partition of 1947 and the Emergency of 1975. The political disillusionment and socioeconomic decline of these moments seem to press heavily on the lives and experiences of characters. Investigated through Young's (2008) framework, the narrative suggests that "social disability" is not a private defect but a relational condition produced by exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. In relation to the first area of inquiry, disability in the text is conceptualized as a socially constructed limitation on agency and access. Addressing the second area of focus, Young's 'Five Faces' help elucidate the processes that render otherwise able people dependent and vulnerable. The analysis indicates that disablement is patterned by space, economy, and culture rather than by individual inadequacy. Thus, by narrating all the above instances, it can be said that "disability is defined as a social creation," as contended by James W. Johnson (2015, p. 126). By thoroughly analyzing the characters of the novel, it is obvious that oppression is bombarded on them in a multifaceted way. They highlight how the roots of these faces of oppression are deeply embedded and have been normalized to such an extent that powerful people and social institutions are completely ignorant of their brutalization of the marginalized and their consequential disablement. People are able humans but they are placed in a condition that leaves them socially incapacitated and their functional agency is eradicated due to pre-established norms, cultural values, ingrained prejudices, and systemic violence both at individual as well as state level. The research addresses the scholars, policymakers, social activists, and the general population, urging a change towards a more equal and non-discriminatory community. These findings point towards a need for systemic remedies: law and administration that reduce coercive dependency, everyday practices that widen participation, and public attitudes that recognize dignity across caste, class, gender, and religion. Given the qualitative scope, the claims are provisional and contextual; further work might test how this framing travels across other South Asian texts. Even so, the reading offers a useful lens for rethinking disability as a social arrangement and envisioning better living conditions and equal prospects for every human.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article, and that the data presented have not been fabricated or falsified.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant or financial support from public, commercial, or not-for profit funding agencies.

Participant Consent: The authors confirm that Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was duly maintained.

Data Fabrication/Falsification Statement: The authors declare that no data have been fabricated, falsified, or manipulated in this study.

Copyright: Copyright (c) 2025 Warda-Tun-Naeem & Ayesha Akram

References

- Asghar, M. A., Ahmed, M., & Fatima, S. (2020). A study of marginalized groups in *our lady of Alice Bhatti and the god of small things*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 5(1), 204–216.
<https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.51.39>
- Banu, C. S. (2025). Subaltern consciousness in Rohinton Mistry's *a fine balance*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 10(3), 6810–6813. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.103.744>
- Bari, M. (2014). *Marginalization of women in South Asia: Women novelists' perspective* [Undergraduate thesis, BRAC University]. BRAC University Institutional Repository.
<https://dspace.bracu.ac.bd/xmlui/handle/10361/3561>
- Barnes, C., & Mercer, G. (Eds.). (1996). *Exploring the divide: Illness and disability*. The Disability Press.
- Charlton, J. I. (2010). The dimensions of disability oppression. In L. J. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (3rd ed., pp. 147–159). Routledge.
- Chaudhri, A. I., Khatoon, S., & Khatoon, A. (2025). Monolithic modes of oppression: An intersectional approach to class and gender in Tendulkar's *Kamala*. *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry*, 23(1).
<https://doi.org/10.52015/numljci.v23i1.293>
- Coleridge, P. (1993). *Disability, liberation and development*. Oxfam.
- Gupta, S. (2014). *No looking back: A true story*. Roopa Publications India.
- Herbert, C. (2008). Dishonorably postnational? The politics of migrancy and cosmopolitanism in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. *The Journal of*

- Commonwealth Literature*, 43(2), 11–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989408090491>
- Jenifer, T., & Kumar, E. (2025). Vulnerability of disabled bodies as societal issues in *a fine balance* by Rohinton Mistry. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 10(3), 7451–7453.
<https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.103.745>
- Johnson, J. W. (2015). “Beggaring the nation”: Bodily inscription and the body politic in Rohinton Mistry’s *a fine balance*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 40(1), 146–165.
<https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/24285>
- Levine, D. N. (1985). *The flight from ambiguity: Essays in social and cultural theory*. University of Chicago Press.
- Mistry, R. (1995). *A fine balance*. McClelland & Stewart.
- Oliver, M. (1983). *Social work with disabled people*. Macmillan Education.
- Padmaja, C. V., & Phani Bhushan Rao, P. (2017). The marginalized women in Rohinton Mistry’s *a fine balance*. *Notions*, 8(3), 10–18.
- Sadiq, N. (2024). Indigeneity and resistance in Zubair Ahmad’s *grieving for pigeons*. *NUML Journal of Critical Inquiry*, 22(2), 49–63.
<https://doi.org/10.52015/numljci.v22i11.294>
- Saini, R. (2016). Mulk Raj Anand and Om Prakash Valmiki as representatives of the unheard voices: A study of *untouchable* and *joothan*. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, 4(3), 222–228.
<https://rjelal.com/4.3.16/222-228%20RAJNI%20SAINI.pdf>
- Thomas, C. (2004). How is disability understood? An examination of sociological approaches. *Disability & Society*, 19(6), 569–583.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0968759042000252506>
- Thompson, N. (2003). *Promoting equality: Challenging discrimination and oppression in the human services* (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tokaryk, T. (2005). Keynes, storytelling, and realism: Literary and economic discourse in Rohinton Mistry’s *a fine balance*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 30(2), 1–31.
<https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/15288>
- Valmiki, O. P. (2003). *Joothan: A dalit’s life* (A. P. Mukherjee, Trans.). Samya. (Original work published 1997).

- Weil, S. (2013). *Oppression and liberty* (A. Wills & J. Petrie, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1958).
- Young, I. M. (2008). Five faces of oppression. In G. L. Henderson & M. Waterstone (Eds.), *Geographic thought: A praxis perspective* (pp. 55-71). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203893074-7>