

**RESISTING BIOPOWER: A MARXIST READING OF ROHINTON MISTRY'S A
*FINE BALANCE***

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Abstract

A society operates in accordance with a set of inscrutable forces which willingly infiltrate the mental conditioning of the people in order to bring an ordered stratification. Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance is a novel that speaks about the socially dominating and politically unscrupulous power blocks that exacerbate the life of the unprivileged people in the society. Mistry tries to interrogate the hegemonic discourses, that perpetrate social inequality and justifies political violence, by articulating the helplessness of the marginalised people. The incompatible economic situations become evident through the veritable depiction of the miseries of the struggling working class people like Dina, Omprakash, and Ishvar as against the immunity enjoyed by upper caste thugs, like Thakur Daramsi, and political outcasts. The novel speaks about the ideological apparatuses that consolidate power through the representation of a sordid India during the Emergency period. Through this paper, I attempt to study the way in which ideological manipulation consolidates biopower to objectify and control the people, hence perpetuating inequality.

Keywords: Hegemonic, Ideology, Biopower, Inequality

A society can be differentiated into various strata on the basis of an assessment of who wields power and who yields to power. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* speaks about the social relations that determine the economic structure of the society. The exploitative social stratification that leads to unobtrusive indoctrination of the ideas upheld by the power wielding group, as seen in the novel, can be meticulously delineated by viewing the novel through the lens of biopower. The attempts to justify and normalize the ruling ideology, and the clandestine way in which these discourses are disseminated and made acceptable unveil the indiscriminate power possessed by the ruling block. Through this paper, I attempt to study the way in which ideology is instrumental in exercising biopower to regulate the population and to maintain the hegemonic structure of the society.

Mistry's *A Fine Balance* depicts the strategic use of caste hierarchy and oppressive government policies that perpetuate economic inequality and hegemonic power. The manipulation of facts by the State machinery to conceal injustice through the construction of

a discourse that legitimises government's decision becomes evident through the general consent won among the vast majority of the population regarding the declaration of Emergency. In Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, one observes the way in which the strategic use of "bio power", to regulate and objectify the human body and population, is instrumental in understanding the hegemonic structures that facilitate the usage of ideology to legitimise the unscrupulous power of the Prime Minister (Foucault, History 143). Throughout the novel one finds attempts to contort reality "to naturalize conditions of exploitation" (Nayar 180). Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* observes that ideology is the "product of concrete social relations" (3). Rohinton Mistry with his unique style translates the private life of the characters into a macrocosmic political canvas to depict the turmoils of everyday existence. The novel vividly portrays the relentless power struggles that solidify the unequal economic and social relations through a network of interwoven institutions that delude the unsuspecting common man through various ideological apparatuses.

Foucault's theorization regarding the "relationality" of power is similar to the way in which ideology exerts its influence upon the people (Kelly 37). The attempts to win the appeal and consent of the hegemonic block and the efficacious, yet unobtrusive, way in which this is achieved become evident through the response of Nusswan and Mrs Gupta, the representatives of the ruling class. The ruthless policies of the government, like the imprisonment of the members of parliamentary opposition, trade unions and social workers, win the approbation of the elite class of the society who occupy the higher rungs of an economically stratified and divisive society. While Mrs Gupta and Nusswan hail the Declaration of Emergency as necessary to counter 'evil' and the surplus population, the struggling working class people attempt to emulate the ruling ideology. The Prime Minister's decision to declare Emergency coincides with the corporate ambitions of Mrs Gupta and Nusswan. The consequent attempts by Dina Dalal to monitor Omprakash and Ishwar, the two tailors working for her, and the government representatives who takes away all the able-bodied people who are homeless, show the way in which power infiltrates the myriad rungs of the hierarchically organised society. The assimilation of the ruling ideology by the struggling working class population shows not only the monolithic nature of ideological discourse but also the "multidirectionality" of power (37).

The novel becomes a dystopic tale as the ideologically-driven discourse about the 'diligence' of the Prime Minister is normalised through the conscious attempts to perceive reality using a nexus of knowledge and power. Mrs Gupta greets the Emergency as a necessary action and she negates the allegations of election malpractice charged against the Prime Minister. She then justifies the Prime Minister's decision by saying that "those troublemakers who accused her falsely have been put in jail" (79). Later, Nusswan hails the Prime Minister as "a true spirit of Renaissance" (430). The repressive measures instituted by the government to censure the public and regulate the population are regarded as "pragmatic policies". (430) The misrepresentation of the "Government's tamasha" as mechanisms used to

fight evil forces shows the convergence of the ideological manipulation of facts and the strategic use of power. As observed in *Modern Literary Theory*, these “imaginary versions” that extend support to the Prime Minister’s actions are inevitable for the continuation of capitalism (Philip and Waugh 107).

The capitalist interests are masked in a language of benevolence by masquerading themselves as the crusaders of truth and welfare in order to garner the consent of the public to consolidate the “docility-utility” relationship (Foucault, Disciple and Punish 137). Mrs Gupta’s arduous attempts to reinterpret the “unlawful orders” as lawful by tracing the present-day predicament of the country to laziness and false accusations, suggest the ideological interpretation of law for the convenience of the capitalists (81). Later when Ishwar and Omprakash reason with the Ration Officer to grant them a ration card, he denies them the right to own one saying that their address is not valid as a “jhopdi doesn’t count” (203). The officer substantiates his claim by saying that “the law is what matters” (203). Later, the Prime Minister herself in a speech says that the new measures are introduced for the welfare of the people. Here she defends the Emergency and the newly instituted laws by saying that they are instituted with the aim of fighting evil. She says :

“Only the crooks, the smugglers, the blackmarketeers need to worry, for we will soon put them behind bars. And we will succeed in this despite the despicable conspiracy, which has been brewing since I began introducing programmes of benefit for the common man and woman” (307).

On the other hand, there are intermittent references to the unjust laws instituted during the Emergency period. The injustice unleashed in the guise of propitious activities becomes obvious when the government destroys the slums in order to beautify the city. The unthoughtful decision that renders many working class people, including Omprakash and Ishwar, homeless was justified as a new Emergency law according to which “the city must be made beautiful” (342). The unbridled power vested on the government is hinted by Ishwar as he says that the government can do anything they want using the new laws as he recounts the clearance of the slums to Dina. Later, a stranger explains to Ishwar and Omprakash about the arbitrary actions initiated during the Emergency period as he talks about the MISA law which gives the government the right to arrest anyone. According to Nusswan, the emergency is a constructive move by the government as it enables the people to speak the mind. Even the censoring of the press is embraced as a tactical action to curb lies. Later, Ibrahim speaks about the precariousness associated with the Emergency period as “money can buy the necessary police order” (497). As observed by Sartre in the preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* aptly, the vicious servility of the corporate and ruling class people that prompts them to espouse the Emergency, even when the working class people’s lives are exacerbated due to these unjustifiable laws, suggests that it is an “ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage” (24).

The autocratic policies of the government and the consequent turmoil hints at the effective use of “tactics rather than as laws, and even of using laws themselves as tactics - to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved” (Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* 95). The strategic actions of the government facilitate the exploitation of the working class population without provoking any discontent among them due to the propaganda that these measures are introduced for the “welfare of the population”(100). The laws initiated by the government not only provide the “ideological mystification which functions to legitimate the inequalities” but also reinforce the government intervention in all spheres of human life (Hunt 4). As observed in the novel, “the government preferred intervention that are final and irreversible” as it could enhance the efficiency of the body for the attainment of certain goals (451). Hence, the state partakes in certain deliberate actions for the production of a consciousness that is conducive for “managing individuals” (92). The ideological reinterpretation and distortion of facts in order to use the Emergency as a ploy to cascade the ulterior motives of the State is discernible through the sterilization camps conducted in the guise of efficient family planning. “The Government’s tamasha” which is meant to benefit some classes more than the other is portrayed as the only version of reality available as even the victimized people unwittingly participate in it (300). The people are urged to undergo Vasectomy and various incentives are also offered to entice them. Vasectomy is encouraged as a necessary action for better family planning and the people were offered rewards for undergoing it. Vasectomy is steadfastly advocated by the government and the benefits that could be accrued by yielding to the operation ranges from ration card to radio. The severity of the stringent laws that used to penalise the people for minor deviations were reduced, if the accused would willingly undergo Vasectomy. Thus, the extortionate control exercised over the people was scrupulously concealed in a welter of rewards to extract the acquiescence of the people.

The Facilitator tells Ishwar and Omprakash that the new rules instituted during the Emergency mandates all officers to promote sterilization as promotions are contingent upon the Officer fulfilling a minimum quota. The government’s increasing concern over the uncontrollably escalating population and the obsession to regulate the population become tangible through the presence of mobile Family Planning Clinics that distribute free condoms and leaflets on birth control procedures. The incentives that would be provided to goad the people to yield to the largescale canvassing shows the government’s excessive concern over the optimisation of the body’s forces to maximise the productivity. The Prime Minister, in her speech, says that sterilisation is an affirmative action that is introduced for the “common good” of the population as the “government will no longer tolerate a situation where people increase the population recklessly, draining the resources that belong to all”(308). Later the Prime Minister suggests the importance of practising “discipline- discipline in every aspect of life” to foster life and preserve the population(309). Later, Rajaram takes up a job as a

Monitor whereby he is supposed to persuade people to follow birth control procedures and to undertake vasectomy or tubectomy.

Rajaram brags that this job, apart from it being a lucrative profession that could fetch considerable income, is a service to the nation as “small families are happy families, population control is most important”(366).The attempts to legitimize the overt control over the population through ideological intervention become successful as the government machinery gives the impression that the people are “active subjects” who could negotiate their agency and exercise their choice when they are actually passive objects lacking autonomy (Dreyfus and Rabinow 208).The people are unaware of the well-orchestrated campaigning programme that is cleverly masqueraded by zealous munificence as the impoverished working class people are easily lured by the tempting rewards offered by the government.

The systematic and sustained attention given to the regulation of the population becomes palpable through the free medical checkups. These checkups, where the people are canvassed and convinced about the need to undergo sterilization, suggest one among the many conscious efforts employed by the government to prompt the working class population to conform to the dominant ideology. Nusswan opines that sterilisation is beneficial and that strong actions in this direction should be encouraged. The impunity enjoyed by the elite, upper class impels him to suggest that there is an unprecedented need to eliminate the surplus population as “at least two hundred million people are surplus to requirements”(431).

The novel speaks about the socially dominating and politically unscrupulous power blocks that exacerbate the life of the unprivileged people in the society. Paul Rainbow, the editor of *The Foucault Reader*, in his introductory note remarks that, according to Foucault, the real political task in a society is to inveigh against the institutions which apparently seem to be both neutral and detached, in order to unravel the political viciousness perpetrated by these institutions under the mask of innocence(6).Narayan, a victim of the inequality perpetrated by the hegemonic elite, negates the possibility of a legal reformation that could ameliorate the condition of the social and economic outcasts of the society. The atrocities endured by the lower class people is vociferously articulated in the form of disillusionment as Narayan says that “Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same”(163). The ruling elite consolidates their power by concealing social and economic inequality through the rhetoric of rights. This attempts to give a false impression of future upliftment and equality even when they efficiently manipulate the consciousness of the marginalised class to pledge their unwavering allegiance.The empty promises of new schools, clean water, health care and legal aid do not ameliorate the condition of the marginalised people as it only reinforce their dependency upon the ruling elite. Dukhi says that the candidates contesting in the elections should be reminded to implement the laws as they still speak of passing the laws that were passed many years back. Moreover the institutions

instituted to ensure justice, like the police, collude with the hegemonic block “to maintain the new and sinister brand of law and order”(287).

One of the fields of interest of bio-power is the human body which was seen as an object to be manipulated and controlled. Foucault in his work “Discipline and Punish” suggests a specific mode of control over the body where the body mechanisms like gestures, movements, etc are supervised in order to enhance the “usefulness” and efficiency of the body (137). Mrs Gupta’s advice to Dina regarding the need to control the tailors working for her not only shows the way in which the body is subjected to surveillance but also hints at the way in which the upper class hegemony is maintained. As Paul Rabinow observes, “the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs(137). Ishwar and Omprakash, the two tailors working for Dina are subjected to a rigorous process of “subjectification” as they finally become active subjects who have internalised the behavioural code that is conducive for their social status. Ishwar and Omprakash have to work under a dim forty-watt bulb and are made to work ceaselessly controlling their hunger and thirst. Even when the tailors are subjected to strict surveillance and disciplinary actions, the ingrained hegemonic stratification prompts the tailors to believe that they “were fortunate to be working for Dina Dalal”(87). The complacency of the “score-bottomed and bleary eyed” tailors even when Dina Dalal, their employee, reaps benefits by making them work tirelessly suggest the ideologically driven thought processes (89).

The passive acceptance of exploitation reduces Ishwar and Omprakash to “docile” bodies(Foucault 137). The tailors are made to overwork and the intensive subjection of forces of the body is achieved through ideology as it “reproduces subjects who are willing workers in the capitalist system”(Philip and Waugh 107). The willing subjection of oneself becomes evident when Ishwar tells Omprakash that “this is the way the world works. Some people are in the middle, some are on the border”. Excessive control over the body and the unwarranted obsession to increase the productivity of the body become conspicuous through the compulsions hurled upon the working class people who are forced to attend political meetings, labour camps and sterilization camps. The threat of imprisonment leaves the slum inhabitants choiceless as they are impelled to get on the bus to hear the Prime Minister’s speech. The party workers tell the inhabitants of the slum that the Prime Minister is their servant though the helplessness of the working class people trapped in servitude is revealed when Omprakash wonders “if the Prime Minister knows they are forcing us”(301). Thus, the ideological apparatuses in the hegemonic society that is ruled according to the dictates of the powerful elite coupled with the disciplinary forces, that subject the hapless working class people through covert control over the body mechanisms, make their life an unrelenting tale of suffering.

The ideology-driven nationalistic fervour mandates the citizens to display their patriotism. The chauvinistic Shiv Sainiks aggressively threaten a group of people for

attempting to leave the movie theatre before the National Anthem. Omprakash expresses his disapproval at the forceful indoctrination of patriotism when he wonders if “they need to frighten people to be patriotic?” (328). The excessive control over the people’s movements shows the attempts to cast an overarching influence over their consciousness in order to disseminate the ideology of the ruling elite. The contentment of Shankar, the physically challenged beggar, on having a “reserved place on the pavement” even when he is being exploited by his beggarmaster shows the triumph of the disciplinary forces that have managed to subjugate the beggar to the unquestionable authority of the beggarmaster (377). His grotesque physical appearance that earns him money which is in turn handed over to the beggarmaster, the repulsive wounds and the physical exertion give impeccable authority to the beggarmaster.

The hapless working class people, like Ishwar, Omprakash, Rajaram and Shankar, are locked in a “docility-utility” relationship where the efficient management of the body’s forces is necessary for survival (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 137). The people who are forcefully taken to the labour camps are made to obey the instructions of the supervisors. The labourers are not allowed any leisure time and the surveilling glance of the overseer reduces them into hapless objects who are victimised by the dictates of a hierarchical society. The overt control over the body becomes evident when the beggarmaster says that his “business is looking after human lives” (423). Terry Eagleton in *Why Marx was Right* observes that “human beings are mere mechanical functions of the material worlds” (129). The supervisor, overseer and the beggarmaster represent the institutions that consolidate the class stratification. The disciplinary mechanisms like the constraining glance of the overseer, the meagre quantity of food, rigorous punishment which sought to extract maximum utility out of the labourer’s body do not generate any discontent as people are told that it is a “generous scheme the government had introduced for the uplift of the poor and homeless” (383). This ideological infiltration reduces the labourers into unquestioning subjects.

The urge to control the body, its forces, its docility and utility become noticeable when Nosey is judged as a person with a “perfect body that would have fetched a decent price” (523). Later, one finds that Shankar, Nosey’s son, was taken away from her for certain ‘professional modifications’ though it is revealed that these modifications increase Shanker’s utility as his grotesque figure elicits sympathy from the people. Nevertheless, Shankar who is oblivious of this exploitation regards his beggarmaster as kind and generous. Nosey, who is called so because of her noseless face, admires the beggarmaster’s father as he “could look upon her hideous face and still love her” though the physical relationship that they shared was spurred by the fact that the beggarmaster’s father was too drunk to be repulsed by Nosey’s face. Hence, the disguised exploitation keeps her docile and indebted. The beggarmaster, who is in search of two beggars, asks Ishwar and Omprakash if they have come across any lame or blind beggars. The excessive concern with the body postures shows the beggarmaster’s attempts to increase his profits through the grotesque, yet sympathetic,

appearance of the beggars. Hence, the greed of the beggarmaster, which is augmented by his indisputable authority over the beggars, is masked under a facade of benignity.

Thus, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* speaks about the controlling and manipulation of the body and its consequent shrinking into a docile body through the ideological dissemination of the dictates of the ruling class. Thus, power conflicts and the inter-person rivalry to establish one's dominance over the other shows the hegemonic structure that is sustained through ideological indoctrination.

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