

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture37

Lecture 37: Diasporic Consciousness in Mistry's A Fine Balance

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. Today, we are going to start our discussion on a new text titled A Fine Balance by author Rohinton Mistry. So, we will discuss the diasporic elements present in Mistry's A Fine Balance. The phenomenon of diaspora is not a very new concept for the world anymore.




We have already looked at the history of the term diaspora. It dates back to the Jewish diaspora and was initially associated with the expression of dispersal—dispersal of a population from their original home due to political unrest in their homeland. Later, we see it could also be driven by economic incentives, a search for a better living that inspires the diasporic population to move their base to another part of the globe. So, this term diaspora, as I mentioned, can be traced back to the dispersal of the Jewish population from their ancestral homeland in Palestine to all over the world. And further, the migration





























of different communities from their native places to different parts of the world for various social, political, and economic reasons. So, technological advancements and the global reach of media in this modern era have given the meaning of diaspora an altogether new

turn. Migrants and diasporic communities are now in continuous contact with their home nations. So, the world has become smaller with technological inventions, faster modes of communication, and social media. So, home does not seem as far away as it used to for earlier diasporic populations.

INTRODUCTION

- The phenomenon of diaspora is not a new concept for the world. It can be traced back to the dispersal of Jews from their ancestral homeland in Palestine to all over the world, and then the migration of communities from their native place to different parts of the world for various social, political, and economic reasons.
- The technological advancement and global reach of media in this modern era have given the meaning of diaspora a new turn – migrants and diasporic communities are now in continuous contact with the home nation.
- Cultural theorists, such as Arjun Appadurai and Antony Smith argue that the large communication networks have eroded the national boundaries, and the diasporic communities remain local and provincial, even as they acquire transnational characteristics.






So we can have, for example, an Indian community celebrating Diwali or Eid while sitting in the U.S. Like we see the Bengali community celebrating Durga Puja in Times Square, New York. So we see that local habits, provincial habits, can still be maintained abroad to an extent, albeit in a diluted manner. And at the same time, these people, these groups, also have transnational, global characteristics where they can identify with the immediate host society. Now, diaspora and diasporic writing, notably the Indian diaspora, has been widely discussed in academics and literary writings.

Indian diaspora writers, including major names like Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, and Kiran Desai, among others, have gained global attention and critical acclaim. Subsequently, we see that they have brought home prestigious international literary awards for their works, which reflect diasporic sentiments and the complexities, layers, and nuances involved in a diasporic existence. So, Indian diaspora authors share a historical, cultural, and spiritual connection, which can be traced through themes in their writings. Most of these writings often discuss issues of identity, problems of traveling back and forth in history through narrative, intergenerational interfaces, misunderstandings, meeting points, conflicts, as well as the difficulties the diaspora faces in building new supportive communities in the host land, the new foreign land. Now, coming to author Rohinton Mistry.

INTRODUCTION

- Diaspora and diasporic writing, notably the Indian diaspora, has been widely discussed in academics and literary writings. The Indian diaspora writers, including Jhumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, and Kiran Desai, have gained global attention and critical acclamation and, subsequently, won international literary awards for their works reflecting diasporic sentiments.
- This category of writers shares a historical, cultural and spiritual connection that can be traced in the themes of their writings, which often discuss the issues of identity, problems of history, intergenerational conflicts, and difficulties in building new supportive communities in a foreign land.



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Rohinton Mistry is one of the most acclaimed writers of the Indian diaspora, born in Bombay. Bombay, now called Mumbai, and he was born in 1952 to a Zoroastrian Parsi family. Later, in 1975, Mistry moved to Canada and started working in a bank before beginning a career as a full-time writer. Rohinton Mistry has penned remarkable short stories and novels, including *Tales from Feroz Shah Bagh* (1987), *Such a Long Journey*

(1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002). All of his first novels have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize and have won numerous awards and recognitions.

His works are primarily written from the perspective of the middle class or lower-middle-class segment of the Parsi community living in Mumbai. So he—I mean, Mistry—gives us a very vivid and detailed portrayal of the middle-class and lower-middle-class Parsi families in Mumbai. We get an inner picture of the community, their lifestyle, their beliefs, their affiliations, their values, and even the interpersonal relationships are delved into through these works of fiction. Even though Mistry has been settled in Canada for a long time now, his fiction deals with the lives of Indians from different backgrounds. They reflect upon various sociocultural and political issues.

He touches on very sensitive issues, including discrimination, inequalities, displacement, as well as cultural and national identity. Here, it is very important to observe one thing. In several—in fact, in many writers from the Indian diaspora—we see a tendency of the immediate host land, whether it be America or Canada, which is missing in their writing. So,

It makes us question: what is Mistry's Canadian experience like? So there is a void in terms of his current interactions or experiences while living in the land from which he is writing. Canada does not appear much in his writing. It does, but hardly. Compared to India, Canada—or Canadian society—does not feature much in Rohinton Mistry's writing.

Another thing that is very important and which also holds true in the case of many playwrights, you know, South Asian Canadian playwrights were sitting in Canada writing very powerful play scripts. So we see that a lot of these South Asian Canadian or rather Canadian South Asian playwrights writing about burning issues back from their own homeland. And we feel that the foreign stage is giving them, you know, some further mobility, some further freedom to talk about things that they might have to consider censoring if they were living in India or in some part of South Asia. Similarly, we see that Mistry's writing is

very unplugged when it comes to topics such as discrimination, inequality, cultural and even national identity. The fact that Mistry is very curiously and very remarkably, he is also from a very minority group even in India. The cultural habits or the inner life of the Parsis is not very well known even within India. They seem to be an invisibilized community.

So, based on that fact, we see that his experience of marginality is not only owing to his belonging in a foreign land. Even in India, what he calls his homeland, the Parsi community has always remained a very low profile or let's say a very kind of under-discussed group. So, belonging to the Parsi community of India whose ancestors were exiled owing to the Islamic conquest of Iran and later we know the Parsis migrated to India looking for safety. In the case of mystery seen in that way, it is, you know, a further migration to Canada.

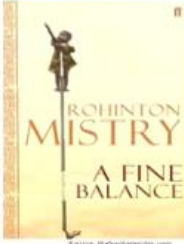

So a community that settled in India in the first place having been exiled from Iran and then further in the case of Mistry traveling to Canada, this kind of an existence justifies his understanding, his tryst with the experience of double displacement and this sense of double displacement being, you know, under-noticed, under-discussed in India in the first place and then becoming further, you know, racially, ethnically marginalized once he settles in Canada. This kind of marginal experience, marginal existence and position is reflected again and again through Mistry's fiction. So, Mistry's characters are drawn from vast social and cultural backgrounds and they represent power as well as powerlessness and they express the constant needs of the society, where an individual's voice will not be suppressed. So, his writing advocates for equal visibility and equal treatment to all.

Now, coming to *A Fine Balance*, Mistry's second novel. We see that this work is set in an unidentified city. However, this unidentified city resembles the metropolitan Bombay and the plot of the story spans between the year 1975 and 1984 and it depicts the after effects of two very important events in Indian politics. One is the repercussions of the internal emergency that was imposed by the Indian government under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and it criticizes policies such as slum clearance drive in the name of beautification of post-colonial India and also forced sterilization.

And then further, *Fine Balance* also focuses on and discusses Indira Gandhi's assassination by her guards. The story revolves around the four major characters, Ishwar, Om, Manik and Dina Dalal. And all of these characters belong to different strata of Indian society, representing an array of characters, you know, And they have been shown, they have been reflected in their quiet dignity, along with their subtle individuality, you know, in terms of their features, their, you know, the persons they are. So the plot of the novel highlights a wide variety of themes which are based on systematic controls.

A Fine Balance

- Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance*, is set in an unidentified city, resembling metropolitan Bombay, spanning between 1975 and 1984 and depicting the aftermath of the two important events of Indian politics – repercussions of the Internal Emergency imposed by the Indian government under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, including slum clearance drive in the name of 'beautification' and forced sterilization; and her assassination by her guards.
- The story revolves around the four major characters: **Ishvar, Om, Maneek and Dina Dalal** – all belonging to different strata of Indian society – representing an array of characters in their quiet dignity or subtle individuality. The plots highlight a wide variety of themes based on systematic controls, such as parental authority, caste hierarchies, personal betrayal, political power and corruption.

And these themes include parental authority, caste hierarchies, personal betrayal, political power, and the misuse or abuse of such political power, which directly leads to corruption. The plot of *A Fine Balance* begins when, while traveling on a train to an unnamed city, the two characters, Ishwar and Om Prakash, meet a student named Maneek Kohlah. The student also happens to be traveling to the same destination. So they all travel together to this unnamed city. Later, in the course of their conversation, they find out that they are all going to visit a person called Dina Dalal, who is the employer of both Ishwar and Om and who also happens to be an old acquaintance of Maneek's mother.

Now, we see the background of Dina. Dina was born into a wealthy family. However, after her father's death, her brother, whose name is Nusswan, treats her very badly and oppresses her. She then finds a suitor named Rustam Dalal and moves to his apartment after their marriage. However, there is a mishap, and on their third anniversary, Rustam dies in a road accident.

Later, Dina goes back to her brother Nusswan but decides to leave after a year of mourning. She learns sewing, from Rustam's adopted parents, and then she starts living on her own. She starts earning on her own. However, she progressively starts losing her eyesight.

Her eyesight fails her and gets weaker, so she needs to hire two people to work for her. These two people are none other than Ishwar and Om Prakash. So, these two men are basically employed by Dina Dalal to work as tailors under her. Now, we are also introduced to a character called Dukhi Mochi, who was a cobbler belonging to an untouchable family. Mochi had been ostracized and humiliated by the members of upper-caste society on multiple occasions.

So, he decides to send his two sons, Narayan and Ishwar, to learn tailoring from his friend. This friend's name is Ashraf, and then he tells them to change their last name from Mochi to Darji. So, we also see the history of a Dalit family—how oppression, how caste-based humiliation, actually forces a person to change his name, his children's, his next generation's surname.


And it is a way of ensuring that they don't attract the same kind of bad treatment that he himself has incurred, that he himself has endured. So, changing the surname from Mochi to Darji is kind of a social promotion in a way. as the family shifts the profession from cobbler, to tailoring. Now, Dukhi Mochi's two sons, one is Narayan and the other is Ishwar.

Narayan comes back to his village. He takes training and returns to his own village, where he opens a tailoring shop. However, Ishwar stays with the mentor, his father's friend Ashraf, and becomes his business partner. Ishwar becomes Ashraf's business partner. Narayan has a son named Om Prakash, who is sent to learn tailoring from his uncle Ishwar.

So, basically, Ishwar and Om Prakash have a familial relationship. Ishwar is Om Prakash's uncle. Eventually, Narayan wants to see his ballot to vote, but in the process, he is hanged by an upper-caste individual named Thakur Dharmasi, who later also harasses Narayan's whole family and kills them. So we see that Ishwar and Om Prakash feel very helpless due to the police's negligence, even their complicity and connivance with the powerful upper-caste people. And so, Ishwar and Om Prakash decide to leave their village to find work in the city.

Oppression of Isvar and Om

- Dukhi Mochi was a cobbler belonging to an untouchable family. He had been ostracized and humiliated by the members of upper-caste society on multiple occasions. He decides to send his two sons, Narayan and Ishvar, to learn tailoring from his friend, Ashraf, and tells them to change their last name from Mochi to Darji.
- Narayan comes back to his village to open a tailoring shop, but Ishvar stays with Ashraf and becomes his business partner. Narayan has a son, Omprakash, who has been sent to learn tailoring from his uncle, Ishvar. Eventually, Narayan wants to see his ballot to vote but is hanged by an upper caste individual, Thakur Dharmasi, who later harasses the former's whole family and kills them.
- Ishvar and Omprakash find themselves helpless after the police's negligence, eventually leaves the village to find work in the city.



So this theme is a very powerful theme—a powerful discussion or question that keeps recurring in several Bollywood movies. We have an important film called Gaman, which

examines the issue of a taxi driver who leaves his rural home to drive a taxi in Bombay. And the city life kind of consumes him.

There is an eternal wait to go back and meet the family. But that seems to become like a mirage, and it is never met. There is an everlasting period of waiting, you know, from both sides—from the taxi driver's end and also from his family's side. There is an everlasting wait, and meeting almost seems to be forever postponed.

Right. So the rural population moves to find work in urban spaces and gets sucked into that urban life, becoming isolated. Completely a no one, a non-entity within the larger scheme, where their emotions and aspirations disappear in the grander narrative, is a discussion that finds its place again and again in different artworks by different authors. So, in another context—coming back to Mistry's novel, *A Fine Balance*—we see that in a different setting, Maneek Kohlah was born into a well-to-do family in Kashmir, where his father owned a lot of land and a popular shop that served a special kind of soft drink called Kohlah's Kola. Right.

So Kohlah's Kola is something his father would sell, and they had a very prosperous life back in Kashmir. Maneek Kohlah had been forcibly sent to a boarding school, where he often lived, missing his home. After finishing school, Maneek plans to go away to attend college. However, in his college hostel, he befriends a boy named Avinash, who teaches him new things, including chess. Avinash begins to get involved in political activities at the college, and with time, Maneek and Avinash grow apart.

They part ways because their callings, their nature, and their interests become increasingly different. So, Maneek becomes the target of ragging in the hostel, and he no longer wants to stay there. So, Maneek's mother helps him connect with Dina. She puts him up with Dina. He becomes friendly with Om Prakash while they are living at Dina's apartment and later moves to Dubai, where his father has made some arrangements for him.

However, he returns from Dubai after eight years to attend his father's funeral. So, the plot is, in a way, very well connected. We see these different characters, and then the story, the narrative, takes us back to each one's background, where they are coming from, till before the time when they meet. where they are all going to Dina's house. They are all different people with different baggage of history, with different burdens from the past, burdens of experience that they carry with them.

Maneck's Displacement

- In a different context, Maneek Kohlah was born into a well-to-do family in Kashmir Valley, where his father owned a lot of land and a popular shop that served a special kind of soft drink, Kohlah's Cola. He has been forcibly sent to a boarding school, where he often misses his home.
- After finishing school, Maneek plans to go away to attend college. In his college hostel, he befriends Avinash, who teaches him new things, including playing chess. Avinash begins to get involved in political activities at the college, and eventually, they both grow apart.
- Maneek becomes the target of ragging in the hostel, and no longer wants to stay there. His mother helps put him up with Dina. He becomes friendly with Omprakash while they are living at Dina's apartment. He later moves to Dubai, where his father has made some arrangements for him, only to return after eight years to attend his father's funeral.



So, the narrative is very rich in terms of interspersing all these different backgrounds and experiences and the social consciousness that develops as a result. So, Salman Rushdie states the following in his work *Imaginary Homelands*, which came out in 1991. It is a seminal work on diaspora and criticism. I quote Rushdie: 'It may be that writers in my position, exiles or immigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt.' So, Rohinton Mistry reflects a similar consciousness, and his writings somewhat betray a parallel position to Rushdie's.

So, he is also like Rushdie; Mistry is also discussing themes of loss, dislocation, exclusion, and marginalization, all of which have also been observed and discussed by Rushdie. It is significant to bring to discussion 'Imaginary Homelands' by Rushdie. It is a collection of essays and criticism on diasporic writings. To quote Rushdie from 'Imaginary Homelands': 'The past is a country from which we have all emigrated.' 'Its loss is part of our common humanity,' unquote.

And again, to quote the author: 'There are times when the movement' —referring to this decision of migration to a new land— 'The move seems wrong to us all when we seem to ourselves post-lapsarian men and women.' 'We are Hindus who have crossed the black water.' 'We are Muslims who eat pork.'

So, the prelapsarian innocence, the pristine purity—the purported purity—is gone once we migrate to a foreign land for good. That is how it has been perceived in terms of the traditional values, the traditional Indian values that we cultivate and foster. Apart from exploring the evident themes of systematic oppression, political corruption, and cultural fragmentation, Rohinton Mistry's fiction also subtly highlights various diasporic elements through themes including the issue of identity and individuality, the question of trauma,

forced displacement, and double displacement. Diasporic writers recurrently write about historical events from their native country in order to find a sense of belonging and as a means of portraying a nostalgic perspective of the socio-political situation back in their home nation. So, it's a way of virtually connecting with a home that they believe is somewhere out there.

It may not really correspond with how the home currently is, how the homeland currently is. It is also kind of a piece or an extension of one's wishful thinking, how they would like the home to be. So, Shashi Tharoor proposes that the Indian migrant remains committed to Indian politics and, as a way of remaining true-blue Indians who talk about Indian politics and current affairs, they avoid what Tharoor calls 'dislocated detachment.' This is also visible in Mistry's writing. As I said earlier, Canada is consistently absent in Mistry's narrative.

Mistry is talking about India while sitting in Canada, which is noticeable, remarkable, and striking. So, Mistry sets his novel around an important political event that took place at a critical juncture in Indian history. He is talking about the Emergency, which deeply affected the lives of his two characters. The two characters in his novel find balance. Ishwar and Om Prakash both belong to the most deprived and marginalized sections of society.

As Shashi Tharoor rightly points out, to quote Tharoor: 'Most of the real victims of the Emergency were among the poorest classes of Indians, the ones who needed the protection of democracy.' So, this unnamed city in Mistry's novel resembles the socio-political landscape of Bombay, thereby creating a nostalgic connection for Mistry with his own past. This is evident through the description of the character Rajaram, who explains that the city is a place where, I quote, 'Thousands and thousands are coming because of bad times in their native place; I came for the same reason.' We see Bombay, later renamed Mumbai, becoming a land of aspiration, a land of high hopes.

So, metropolitan places where internal migration is happening—people come there to work as laborers. A large population, you know, rural Indian population, moves to Bombay to work as taxi drivers. There is a significant population from rural areas who work there as taxi drivers, doing odd jobs. Then, the middle-class and upper-middle-class population also goes there with the aspiration of being absorbed into the film industry—to work somewhere in the film industry. And there are so many failing hopes; people come back with failed hopes and aspirations. So, Mistry himself belongs to the Parsi community, and we see that the history of the Parsi community tells us that these people were dislocated after the

Islamic conquest of Iran. So, while forwarding the case of diasporic writers, Salman Rushdie has also written in his work *Imaginary Homelands* about this choice of Bombay, which serves as the setting for his magic realist novel *The Midnight's Children*.

So, why did Rushdie choose Bombay as the setting of *Midnight's Children*? He would explain—I quote Rushdie here—'Our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost.' 'That we will, in short, create fictions—not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.' So, there is no way of reproducing one singular, you know, India that everyone agrees to. There would be Indias—different Indias for different perceptions, different ways of reproducing the imaginary homeland.

And that's where the question of magical realism comes in. It's a reproduced reality, a reinvented reality, a revisited reality—you know, coming straight from nostalgia. It's not reality in itself. It cannot be a semblance of reality. It's a magical reality.

Fine balance explains the diasporic community's constant struggle to maintain a balance between their hope and despair, both working hand in hand, both working in tandem through the movement and dislocation of these major characters. So, Dina's choice of leaving her home in the hope of asserting her individuality and sense of self and then after her husband's death, she finds it hard to make a living but she still chooses to live in her husband's apartment rather than go back to her brother, go back to her natal space. Then we have the character of Maneek, who also becomes a victim of displacement from the safe and protected haven back in his Kashmir, back in his home. As he leaves for Dubai to work and then he comes back to suffer despair and commits suicide.

So, Maneek's end is suiciding on the railway track. So, through these characters, Mistry is depicting the vicissitudes, the checkered nature of each one's fate. Ishwar and Om Prakash who leave their village home to work in the city also find it very difficult to adjust to the metropolitan culture, the metropolitan society's expectations and they become the victim of the forced sterilization drive run by the government. They cannot escape the horrors of discrimination and hate, which is owing to their social position. And this kind of discrimination kind of chases them even after moving to the city.

So this is a common theme of diasporic writings where hope for finding a new identity and a sense of belonging eventually ends up meeting despair. So, to quote Rushdie, it reminds that it's my present and that is foreign and that the past is home albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time, unquote. So all the characters in Mistry's novel are shown as


going back to their native places for a time, but ultimately they end up leaving their so-called much coveted home space in search of a new home because they are unable to make a connection anymore and their sense of belonging is not homogeneously, not very simply associated with the native place.


Their identity has become more complex. Despite their desire to return and live in the homeland, their identity has changed forever. To conclude, Mistry's novel not only demonstrates national politics but also reflects upon the politics of migration through the continuous act of migration of these different characters. And this migration could be either voluntary or forced. The analysis in Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* therefore aids in pointing out the subtle aspects of diasporic writings, which are presented through the narrative, and it can also be considered a representational text.

So, *A Fine Balance* can be considered a representational text, which draws upon the feeling of nostalgia among diasporic writers. What is more, *A Fine Balance* delineates the different kinds of migrations that we have mentioned in our other lectures: regional migration and migration across national boundaries. And all these movements have been mainly, and majorly, propelled by social and economic movements, forces.

Conclusion

- Mistry's novel not only demonstrates national politics, but also reflects upon **the politics of migration** through the continuous act of migration of the characters, whether voluntary or forced.
- The analyses in Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* aids in pointing out the subtle aspects of the diasporic writings presented in the novel, and it can also be considered as a representational text that draws upon the feeling of nostalgia of the diasporic writers.
- Furthermore, it also delineates the different kinds of migrations - regional and across national boundaries – due to the social and economic forces.





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With this, we come to the end of our lecture today. Let's meet with a new topic in our next lecture. Thank you.