

Postcolonial City & The Failed Narrative of Modernity: A Critical Reading of Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance

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Abstract

In a postcolonial nation, the city becomes the epicenter for developmental programmes, standing as a testimony to the overall progress of the newly established nation-state. The city presents as a pathway to modernity, and hence, is assumed to be rife with opportunities for social mobility. However, the charm of the city is compromised as one seeks to understand who does the city belong to anyway? In this paper, I interrogate postcolonial development and the city as a site of modernity, based on a critical understanding of developmental projects such as the beautification of the city and implementation of family planning, introduced during the politically volatile period of the 1975 Indian Emergency. For the purpose of my study, I will refer to Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* (1995), which is historically situated in the Emergency era and offers a glimpse into the lives of people from different social backdrops – caste marginalized, single woman, and a student. I focus on the lives of Ishvar and Omprakash, Dalit tailors who migrate to the city in search of a livelihood, but remain continually displaced and violated. The paper draws attention to the failed narrative of postcolonial development, as prevalent social orders and hierarchies permeate into everyday life and social structures, and lead to violent consequences, especially in the form of caste atrocities.

Keywords: caste violence, postcolony, development, modernity, street life

Introduction

British anthropologist Mary Douglas' seminal work *Purity & Danger* distinctly describes dirt as "matter out of place" – conceptualising the genesis of social systems of organisation based on ritualistic defilement of waste; henceforth, her reading establishes: "Where there is dirt there is system." (55). Furthering a similar strain of thought, Zygmunt Bauman in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* expands the categories of what or who is designated as waste within the politics of order-building. Separation becomes an integral and incessant activity that excludes what is deemed as redundant, and hence, discarded as disposable waste from the structure of any social design. Within the schema of modernity, this redundancy extends to what Bauman categorizes as "wasted humans" who become the "collateral casualties of progress", as their social as well as biological survival becomes intrinsically dependent on the nation-state machinery (18-20). Therefore, modernity is representative of the archive of social designing, which is in a constant state of renewal, and

simultaneous segregation; in that sense, modernity constitutes as “a state of perpetual emergency” wherein the dominant narrative of nation-state dictates what is retainable and what is expendable within the framework of its social design (Bauman 34) .

The Indian Emergency of 1975, declared by the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, included in its Twenty Point Programme the agenda of “Beautification” of the country/ city, a means of social designing to sanitize the public streets and alleys of “unauthorized” slums, and by extension, its inhabitants. In the context of post-colonialism, Eurocentric modernity per se becomes a guiding principle towards redevelopment, a social design of sorts for the postcolony to restructure and realign nationalistic fervor into discipline and order that is in congruence with the notion of a certain mythical rootedness, which establishes the citizen’s belonging to a nation. Herein, it is crucial to note that the logic of Eurocentric modernity works through a pattern of binaries – public/private, legal/illegal, citizen/refugee – which tends to ignore the social histories that are ever present in the formation of any postcolonial nation-state, or any nation or state for that matter .

Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995) set in the political backdrop of the 1975 Indian Emergency, interweaves the lives of Dina, Ishvar, Omprakash and Maneck – each person representing a distinct social positionality – brought together in an unnamed city, the descriptions of which are corresponding to the city of Bombay. For all the four characters of the novel, the city life presents an opportunity at independence and social mobility, granting them a freedom that only turns out to be a mirage as the novel progresses. Dina, a single Parsi woman, is struggling to maintain her long-fought independence in the face of her brother Nusswan’s control over her life. It is at this point in the novel, when she is struggling with finances that she first encounters the two tailors – Ishvar and Omprakash – uncle and nephew belonging to the Chamar caste, who have fled away from their native village to escape the brutal caste violence endured by their family, and migrated to the city in search of a livelihood that elevates their social position. Dina’s journeying through the comfort of her middle-class house to the congested but lively streets and slums of the city leads her to confront the city’s labouring class and its living conditions, through open sewers, manual scavenging and an overpowering “stench” (Mistry 67-9).

Street Life and The Fiction of Progress

Dipesh Chakrabarty elucidates the interstitial space that Indian streets occupy as they exhibit the duality of both private and public lives; the private self is bound to interact in the vibrant socio-economic exchange that is located in the streets, which becomes an intermittent ground for socio-cultural miscegenation (73-4). Streets embody a possibility of the prohibited, in terms of resistance as well as communion, and hence, become a ground for regulation; previously restrained by the colonial regime, streets are monitored by the

postcolony and hold the proposition for the state's performance of sanitization (Chakrabarty 76-7). In Mistry's novel, Dina's initial search for the tailors, vividly depicts both the public protests as well as the communion establishing aspect of the streets: "Her progress was frequently held up when traffic was blocked by processions and demonstrations against the government" (67). The spatial movement of Dina from the private recluse of her rented house to the streets is marked by a variety of signifiers that are indelibly a part of the street view. She encounters the site of a manual scavenger clearing out the blocked sewage system, without any safety equipment, and later on notices a group of children playing in the "black sewer sludge" overflowing from the blocked drain being repaired (Mistry 68). While these visual interactions throughout the streets utterly disturb Dina, the process also initiates her professional cum personal bonding with the tailors, which is crucial to the sustenance of her own fleeting independence from the abusive and exploitative clutches of her brother, Nusswan. This is reflective of the complex interweaving of people from different spheres of life, brought together into a system of interdependence, which complicates the rigid binary of social systems that govern the principles of modernity. In that sense, the streets occupy a liminal space within the economy of postcolonial modernity, wherein the private self and public performance intersect to reproduce as well as complicate the spatial segregation on the lines of caste, class and gender. These streets also reflect infrastructural dearth, which is both a feature of the postcolonial city, as well as a necessity – the labour class populating the streets is vital to its (re)construction, and simultaneously, a testing populace for the nation's developmental policies.

The city-streets in Mistry's novel reiterate, in a partial manner, V. S. Naipaul's notorious lament from *An Area of Darkness* describing the ubiquitous visibility of excrement in public spaces in India: "Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly beside the railway tracks... They defecate on the streets; they never look for cover. Indians defecate everywhere" (70). Such a description of the Indian landscape evidently points to the failure of the postcolonial developmental initiatives to resurrect the country's socio-economic conditions in order to provide basic amenities to all its citizens, in this case, working toilets. Herein, it is significant to understand the conceptualization of postcolonial development, which is foregrounded upon the discursive field that determines what is relegated as "under-developed" or consigned as the subject matter of development (Escobar 4). Premised on the idea of western modernity, development has "achieved the status of a certainty in the social imaginary" as it reinstates the "regime of order and truth", the aspirational destination to the disorderly state of affairs of the postcolony (Escobar 5-8). Furthermore, Escobar explains how the rhetoric of development is formulated in an "ahistorical fashion" from an alien perspective, which tends to homogenize the complex historicity and socio-political context embedded in the geography and its inhabitants (8). In doing so, a unilateral system of knowledge is perennially reproduced, based

on an inexhaustive framework of false assumptions, and hence, empty solutions. The rhetoric of development becomes an essential means for the nation-state's public performance of authorization/ authority; as the postcolony remains in a constant state of emergency, development acts as the rhetorical tool that reinstates state-power while maintaining the desired status quo.

Diana Coffey and Dean Spears' evaluation of the peculiarly permanent condition of open defecation in India pointedly argues that the dehumanizing caste system lies at the core of the persistence of this issue (19-20). Naipaul's rather ahistorical declaration that Indians defecate anywhere lacks any socio-cultural nuance regarding spatial segregation on the lines of caste, which eventually translates into what kind of access one has to excremental spaces. When Ishavar and Omprakash move into the rented slums, open defecation along the railway path becomes "the communal toilet", the only available resort to the working-class people residing in the unauthorized colony (Mistry 168-9). It is interesting to note here the repudiation that gazing bystanders receive from Rajaram, one of the residents: "Staring at people shitting, as if they themselves are without bowels. As if a turd emerging from an arsehole is a circus performance." (Mistry 169). The gaze of the observers in the novel is reminiscent of Naipaul's gaze on the defecating subaltern body, which can be situated in the middle-class notion of sobriety and hygiene, a reiteration of western modernity and ahistorical development rhetoric; such a privileged gaze on an everyday biological function reduces the working-class people to a caricature, while simultaneously dispossesses them from the context of their everyday life – the lack of private spaces compels the residents to relieve themselves in public – it is not a mark of ignorance, rather a systemic default. Therefore, open defecation disturbs the neat oppositional categories of morality, politics and development rhetoric by giving birth to ambivalence and ambiguity embedded in the nation-state's fiction of progress.

Wasted Humans, Beautification, and Rhetorical Development

Postcolonial obsession with rhetorical development is embodied by the initiative of the beautification of the city that intensified during the period of the Indian Emergency. Ironically, as the scheme of visual beautification of the city commences, Ishvar and Omprakash attain a disposable value, yet not entirely – struggling within the liminal concept of legality and legal subjects, the tailors are thrust into a state of emergency as they are forcefully evicted and later on exploited as wage-less bonded labourers, employed for a state-sponsored irrigation project (Mistry 357-67). This visual performance of sanitization of streets – razing down slums and clearing off beggars and pavement-dwellers – accounts as the postcolonial nation-state's violence via dispossession based on who is considered redundant to the narrative of modernity, while simultaneously

retained as a unit of labour integral to the developmental foundation of beautification projects .

Within the economy of postcolonial development, Ishvar and Omprakash, by the virtue of being Dalits, either migrate from their village to flee caste atrocities or are continually displaced in the city and ultimately dismembered/violated at the hands of the state as well as the civil society. They occupy a peculiar position in the postcolony – they are neither treated as a citizen rightfully nor do they qualify for the status of a refugee – they constantly negotiate between these rigid binaries to sustain their survival. However, their spatial boundaries, whether it is the streets and slums that they mostly inhabit or their own bodies, are constantly violated to denigrate their existence. Their lives are made a matter of public scrutiny and state invasion, which pervades their everyday activities of sustenance – from enduring the trauma of caste atrocity to a never-ending search for shelter in the city that espouses itself as ‘casteless’. As the streets are ‘sterilized’ from its cultural vibrancy and specifically, its working-class citizenry – the street-hawkers, the slum-dwellers and the beggars – Dina observes: “several bleak streets where pavement life had been sucked away by the Emergency” (Mistry 351). From the beginning of the novel, Ishvar and Omprakash are frequently described through references to their bodily functions that is inextricably linked to their caste and class positionality: Dina notices a peculiar stench of their urine that stays in her bathroom after use; the devouring tendency of the expensive city pronounced by Omprakash is deemed as more visceral than cancer; Ishvar’s usual spit consists of blood signalling his deteriorating health; the final removal of the worms that infested Omprakash’s guts as he departs to his village for marriage (Mistry 76, 77, 83, 476). Such descriptions indicate an expendable characteristic that Ishvar and Omprakash procure throughout the course of the narrative; their existence is continually indignified as wasted humans, but they are also simultaneously retained on terms and conditions dictated by the state and its policies. The urban migration did not result in an escape from the bounds of caste as desired, instead it was reproduced in spatial segregations, lack of access to basic amenities and a home, and the perennial lack of dignity. The myth of progress attributed to postcolonial modernity is shattered when one follows the migration of the tailors from the vicinity of their caste-bound villages to the supposedly ‘casteless’ city where they are reduced to labouring bodies, extras on the street in an economy of beautification.

The short-lived temporality of the state’s routine visual performance of sanitization becomes visible as the beggars reemerge swarming the streets proving that “the Beautification Law ran its schizophrenic course and grew moribund” (Mistry 483). The cyclic term of the state’s beautification frenzy is reflective of its incapacity to rehabilitate the street economy – neither through the labour camp nor by providing a social safety net. It rather highlights the state’s intentional acts of restoring as well as expending the marginalized to stage

the ceaseless theatricality of postcolonial developmental initiatives. Such routine performance pertains to a double function: firstly it underlines the myth of the postcolonial nation-state that is intrinsically linked to the psychology of development, which permeates through the middle-class consciousness focusing on progress and hygiene; secondly, it ensures to maintain the status-quo of capitalist exploitation of labour in the name of welfare, not limited to controlling the spatial economy of the oppressed, but also an invasion into the private, biological space of the individual. In that sense, within the postcolony, Ishvar and Omprakash acquire a liminal identity that renders them both, citizen and refugee at the same time. Hence, their constitutional rights remain in a flux because of the rigidity of caste based social structure in both rural and urban spaces.

Caste Violence & The Banality of Power

Achille Mbembe conceptualises the “banality of power” as a precondition to postcolonial governmentality that legitimizes its hegemony by institutionalizing the bureaucratically administered fiction of the nation-state as socio-historical. As the postcolonial state dramatizes its magnificence by performing a ritual spectacle, obscene pomposity and grotesque gestures are employed to reinstate its authority as irrevocable (Mbembe 4). Mbembe borrows from Mikhail Bakhtin’s seminal postulation of the obscene and grotesque as part of the non-official discourses as well as marginalized cultures, but extends it to the strained postcolonial relation between the authorial figures and the citizenry (5). At any given point of time, ridiculing the excessive display of grandeur and prestige can lead to the state’s indulgence in a violent spectacle, wherein it devours on the body of the subject to reauthorize its power (Mbembe 5). An “intimate tyranny” is foregrounded through postcolonial violence as the citizen-subject not only remains complicit in state-sponsored brutality, but also participates in its reproduction (Mbembe 22). Herein, it is crucial to note the social hierarchies pervading the citizenry that play an important role in furthering the violation of the historically marginalised castes and classes, specific to the Indian context. In Mistry’s novel, if the ‘beautification’ of the cities stands for the state’s grand enactment of its obscene power through the harsh removal of street life, then this cyclical performance of development is made possible through the public (as well as private) discourse of the ‘common people’, who are often misleadingly understood as the middle class .

The section “What Law There Is” reveals the outlook of the middle class as rooted in an anti-poor approach towards development, often justifying the brutal ways employed to clear the streets of its “ugly” infrastructure, as Nusswan describes it (Mistry 371). At the beginning of this section, we find Mrs. Gupta (Dina’s employer) stereotyping the working class as an indolent lot, deriding the tailors’ absence to a probable work strike during the Emergency; towards the end of this section, we witness Nusswan’s nostalgic recall to the city as untouched

by migrant life, his unabashed support to technologization as modernization, and lastly his virulent justification, not only for the biological sterilization of the poor, but also for a brutal elimination of the migrant populations who arrive to the city to establish a livelihood (Mistry 351, 371-3). Such instances are emblematic of the middle-class consciousness and its complicity in furthering a fragmented notion of development, which equates the idea of a city as rooted in unceasing modernization, reproduced architecturally through sanitized spaces. The people whose labour goes into the making of the city as modern, are often the first ones to be discarded as wasted humans; the demolition drives, a recurrent feature of the 'sanitized' postcolonial city, strips off the migrant populations of their makeshift homes, and eventually denies them a chance at a livelihood or any social mobility, as in the case of Ishvar and Omprakash.

Mbembe's postulation of power in the postcolony as an "economy of death" reverberates in institutional infrastructures steered by their functionaries, through an economy of ritual violence (21-2). The ultimate violence meted out on the bodies of Ishvar and Omprakash, traverse from spatial eradication to biological sterilization – vasectomy becomes a means of population control for the state, garbed in the liberal language of 'Family Planning'. However, the demography that is implicated into this draconian invasion of the sexual and the biological realm, are yet again the inhabitants of the streets – the daily wage labourers, residents of unauthorized slums/colonies and beggars – people mostly belonging to marginalized caste locations. Family Planning embodies the state's performative development initiative that aims to achieve statistical proof of its proposed policy, rather than actualizing it through education, awareness and a logical understanding of its motive. It is crucial to note here that family planning initiatives were a byproduct of notoriously biased evaluations of "underdeveloped" nations, which linked its economic poverty to overpopulation in the 1950s-60s; what remains remiss during this period is the need for educational and economic changes at a structural level for postcolonial nations, rather than the misjudged policy of family planning as a flimsy band-aid (Mamdani 13-4, 17). The intimate violence etched on the bodies of Ishvar and Omprakash is deeply entrenched in the dehumanizing "caste-culture", which is imbued in the practice of everyday violence and predicated on humiliation of the other, executed by Thakur Dharamsi, who belonged to a privileged caste (Teltumbde 274). Dharamsi is a recurring figure in the novel, introduced as the perpetrator of caste violence at two pivotal points: first, as Narayan (Ishvar's brother and Omprakash's father) exercises his right to vote during an election in independent India; second, as he orders Omprakash's castration at the sterilization camp (144-7, 533-6). These two instances establish the perpetual cycle of caste violence that follows the tailors through their village to the town, violently derailing their generational attempts at social mobility, and ultimately, their resolute attempt at a life free from caste. On the contrary, Dharamsi does not face any legal scrutiny, rather becomes a local bureaucrat with immense

political influence. This reveals the stronghold of caste at a structural level, wherein law enforcers and bureaucrats become active perpetrators or passive enablers of the caste logic that defines our society .

Conclusion

The ‘critical event’ of Indian Emergency transpires at an intersection of several social institutions – family, community, bureaucracy, judiciary, medicine, state and business corporations – that are intrinsically implicated, as the nation-state engraves its developmental narrative (Das 6). The precarious relationship between land and caste marginalized people comes to the forefront, as the ‘dirty’ streets become the epicenter of the postcolony’s enactment of its developmental policy of beautification and family planning (Tarlo 4). Sterilization, both of space and people, becomes the norm as Ishvar and Omprakash struggle to make a living in the city. However, the city, contrary to the promise of modernity, reproduces the caste based social hierarchy in the form of law and order, assumed to be prevalent only in villages. Everyday violence ensues as law becomes porous and ineffective – violence is meted out on individuals and in geographies that acquire a dispensable embodiment to the sanitized conceptualization of a developed society. Within the framework of developed cities and nation, Ishvar and Omprakash’s proximity to violence is heightened due to their caste location; they are perpetually thrust into liminality – migrant, displaced, sterilized. In multiple ways, *A Fine Balance* reveals postcolonial development’s failure to implement structural change based on the principles of social justice.

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