International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-10, Issue-5; Sep-Oct, 2025

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

Symbolism and the Politics of Survival in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Received: 23 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 21 Sep 2025; Accepted: 25 Sep 2025; Available online: 29 Sep 2025

Abstract— *This paper examines the intricate role of symbolism in Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance, situating the novel within the broader context of postcolonial Indian literature. Mistry employs recurring symbols—threads, the sewing machine, trains, chess, hair, and bodily scars—to illuminate the precarious balance between survival and despair during India's Emergency period (1975–77). These symbols are not mere aesthetic devices but function as cultural signifiers that articulate the violence of caste, class oppression, and state authoritarianism while also gesturing toward resilience and dignity. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Barthes's semiotics, Frye's archetypal criticism, Jungian psychology, and postcolonial thinkers such as Said, Bhabha, and Spivak, this study interprets Mistry's symbolism as a narrative strategy that bridges personal trauma with historical reality. The analysis reveals how Mistry transforms objects and motifs into vehicles of social critique, demonstrating literature's capacity to embody resistance and humanism. Ultimately, the novel's symbolic architecture underscores its central concern: the fragile equilibrium between suffering and endurance in the face of systemic injustice.*

Keywords— ***Rohinton Mistry; A Fine Balance; Symbolism; Postcolonial Literature; Emergency; Oppression; Resilience; Trauma; Humanism***

Rohinton Mistry is a famous writer. He was born in 1952 in Bombay (now called Mumbai), India. In 1975, he moved to Canada. He is an acclaimed Indian-born Canadian author known for his poignant and deeply human portrayals of Indian society. His books are based on various themes like socio-political injustice, communal tensions, economic hardships, and the struggles of marginalized communities, often set against the backdrop of post-independence India. His books talk about life in India. He writes about poor people, the problems they face, and how society treats them. His stories are full of emotion and truth. Mistry's writing is often praised for its lyrical style, emotional depth, and realistic depiction of urban India. His works have been shortlisted for prestigious awards like the Booker Prize and have won numerous accolades, including the Governor General's award and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a deeply evocative narrative of postcolonial India that explores the intersections of caste, class, politics, and human resilience. It was published in 1995. The story is set in India during the 1970s, which was the time of Emergency. It was a period when the government took away many rights of the people. The novel is not just a story about pain and survival, but also a powerful example of using symbols in storytelling. Mistry' characters live in a world where the suffering they face is not only caused by politics and the system but also affects them on a personal level. By using metaphors and symbols, Mistry takes the story beyond simple reality. He helps readers feel the deep emotional, mental, and moral effects of government cruelty, poverty, and the struggle to live with dignity. This paper looks at the many symbols used in *A Fine Balance* and shows how Mistry's writing goes beyond the surface to give a thoughtful view of India's political and social situation during the Emergency.

To understand the symbolic structure of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, it is important to begin with a

discussion of symbolism in literature. Symbolism is not just decoration. It is a way of giving a text more meaning than what appears on the surface. Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* explains that "the symbol is the only possible expression of the object of art, which cannot be expressed in any other way" (Frye 71). Through symbols, writers connect personal experience to collective history. In Mistry's novel, small details like the tailor's thread, the sewing machine, or even hair take on deeper meaning. They link the suffering of individuals with the wider political violence of the Emergency.

C. G. Jung describes symbols as expressions of the collective unconscious: "The symbol is the best possible formulation of a relatively unknown thing" (*Man and His Symbols* 20). Mistry often works with this archetypal dimension. Journeys, mutilation, and balance move beyond their immediate story and become symbols of larger truths. Maneck's constant thoughts of snow, for example, suggest purity and innocence. At the same time, snow also reflects loneliness and loss. It becomes a symbol of the human wish for stability in a world that is unstable.

In postcolonial writing, symbols are not only psychological or archetypal. They also carry political meaning. Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* says that "myth is a type of speech" which makes history appear natural (Barthes 129). In the novel, beggary and forced mutilation become recurring images. They turn acts of state cruelty into powerful symbols of dehumanization. When the narrator describes the beggar-master's "collection of broken bodies" as a business (Mistry 219), these bodies stand for more than private pain. They represent a society broken by systematic violence.

Terry Eagleton stresses that symbols are shaped by ideology and history: "the symbolic…is never free from the determinations of ideology and history" (*Literary Theory* 67). This idea fits Mistry's images of cloth, thread, and tailoring. They are not only metaphors but also signs of survival under harsh political and economic conditions. Ishvar and Omprakash depend on their sewing, but their machines are taken away and their shops destroyed. Stitching fragments together becomes a symbol of fragile resistance against authority and caste oppression. Dina tells them, "Hold it together, my dears, this world is full of broken things. Make it your job to put it all back together" (Mistry 231). Sewing, here, becomes a symbolic act of repair in a world determined to tear lives apart.

A framework for understanding symbolism in *A Fine Balance* must look at both universal and historical meanings. Archetypal images like snow, balance, or thread express human desires for harmony, stability, and connection. Historical symbols like mutilated beggars, sterilization camps, and lost sewing machines show the reality of India under the Emergency. Together these two levels create what Homi Bhabha calls the "in-between" space of postcolonial literature, where the personal is political and the symbolic is tied to violence and history (*The Location of Culture* 37). In this way, *A Fine Balance* is both a story of human endurance and a critique of oppressive systems. Its symbolic world carries the burden of myth and history at the same time.

One of the most important features of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is its rich use of symbols. These symbols work at different levels in the story. They add emotional depth and also act as tools for Mistry to criticize the social, political, and economic conditions of India during the Emergency.

The title *A Fine Balance* itself is the central symbol. It points to the fragile balance of human life, caught between hope and despair. Early in the novel, the narrator says, "You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair" (Mistry 231). This balance is never steady but shifts constantly, showing the struggle of ordinary people against powerful forces. Northrop Frye notes that literature often creates "a balance between opposing tendencies—chaos and order, freedom and constraint" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 121). This idea explains the tension in the novel, where survival always depends on a balance that can break at any time.

The tailor's thread and the sewing machine form another key symbol. Sewing represents survival, dignity, and the effort to hold together broken lives. For Ishvar and Omprakash, tailoring is also resistance against caste oppression and poverty. Yet their work remains insecure machines are seized, and workshops destroyed. Dina remarks, "Clothes are the only things that hold us together. Everything else is falling apart" (Mistry 292). Sewing, then, is more than labour. It becomes a metaphor for repairing the torn fabric of society. Roland Barthes's idea of the symbolic as "second-order signification" (*Mythologies* 113) explains how these objects go beyond their use and come to embody both resistance and fragility.

Hair and shaving also carry symbolic weight. They stand for dignity, identity, and its violation. During the forced sterilization, Ishvar and Om are not only operated upon but also shaved, which intensifies their humiliation. The barber's razor becomes a weapon of power. Mistry writes, "They sheared the hair as though erasing the past, as though nothing had ever existed before" (Mistry 438). Here, shaving symbolizes the erasure of memory and history, turning human beings into nameless victims.

The city itself becomes a symbol. Its trains, markets, and crowded streets show both possibility and

alienation. Maneck's train journeys mark change and transition, but they also bring feelings of distance and instability. The chaos of the city reflects both new connections and broken relationships. Jung sees journeys as archetypes of transformation (*Man and His Symbols* 147). But Mistry complicates this by placing such journeys in harsh social and political realities.

The monkey-man and his animals form another disturbing symbol. On the surface, the performance may appear comic, but at a deeper level it reflects exploitation. The monkey, forced to perform, mirrors the lives of the poor who must submit to power to survive. Mistry writes, "The monkey's misery was hidden behind the mask of its tricks, its subservience no different from their own" (Mistry 354). The monkey thus becomes a symbol of subjugation and suffering.

The sea is also important in Maneck's memories. It stands for vastness, continuity, and the ideal of freedom. It contrasts with the disorder of the city. Yet the sea also reminds him of loss and the impossibility of returning to innocence. Like other symbols, it carries both hope and irony.

Beggary and mutilation are the most unsettling symbols in the novel. The beggar-master deliberately cripples children, turning their suffering into profit. The narrator says, "The stumps and scars were the raw materials of his trade" (Mistry 220). These mutilated bodies become symbols of a broken nation, scarred by caste, poverty, and political cruelty. Terry Eagleton reminds us that "The symbolic is always historical, always bound up with structures of power" (*Literary Theory* 68). In this way, the beggars show how systemic violence shapes society.

Through all these symbols—the title, the thread, the sewing machine, hair, the city, the monkey-man, the sea, and beggary—Mistry creates a world where personal lives and political realities intersect. Each symbol carries more than one meaning, moving between universal human experiences and India's specific historical context during the Emergency. *A Fine Balance* shows that symbolism in postcolonial writing is not just decoration. It is a way of remembering, resisting, and critiquing. The symbolic richness of *A Fine Balance* does not only reside in objects or events but is also embodied in the novel's characters. Each of Mistry's protagonists carries symbolic weight, functioning simultaneously as an individual with unique struggles and as a representation of broader social, cultural, and political realities in India during the Emergency. The characters' lives become vessels through which Mistry dramatizes the fragility of survival, the persistence of caste and class oppression, and the resilience of human dignity.

Dina Dalal, the widowed seamstress who struggles to maintain her independence, functions as a powerful symbol of fragile resistance in a patriarchal and authoritarian society. Her rented flat is a space where multiple lives converge, a small domestic arena that symbolizes both protection and precarity. Dina insists on self-reliance—"I don't want to be a burden to anyone" (Mistry 72)—yet her independence is constantly threatened by economic insecurity, gendered vulnerability, and political instability. She symbolizes the tenuous autonomy available to women in a society that continually seeks to subsume them under familial or patriarchal authority. As critics such as Chandra Mohanty argue, postcolonial women often become symbolic figures representing both resistance and victimization within larger social structures (*Feminism Without Borders* 46). Dina embodies this duality: she is resilient in maintaining her independence, yet ultimately her autonomy collapses under the combined weight of economic exploitation and patriarchal intrusion. Her blindness at the novel's conclusion becomes an especially poignant symbol of vulnerability, evoking both the physical fragility of the body and the metaphorical blindness imposed on those whose struggles remain invisible to society.

Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash represent the persistence of caste oppression, functioning as living symbols of marginalized communities struggling against entrenched hierarchies. Their migration from a village to the city in search of livelihood is symbolic of the broader movement of the oppressed toward spaces of supposed modernity and opportunity, only to discover that caste-based discrimination persists in new forms. The sterilization and mutilation inflicted upon them are not isolated cruelties but symbolic acts of state-sanctioned violence against the poor and lower castes. When Omprakash bitterly reflects, "They wanted to cut my manhood, like my uncle's legs were cut" (Mistry 436), his words bind together personal mutilation and systemic oppression, suggesting that their individual suffering symbolizes the condition of millions crushed under caste and class inequality. Terry Eagleton's reminder that "the symbolic is always bound to ideology and history" (*Literary Theory* 68) resonates here, as Ishvar and Omprakash symbolize the historical persistence of caste violence within a supposedly modern nation.

Maneck Kohlah, the student boarder who rents a room in Dina's flat, serves as a symbol of alienation and disillusionment, particularly for India's educated middle class. His nostalgia for the mountains and snow of his childhood represents a longing for purity, stability, and continuity in a world that increasingly feels fragmented and uncertain. His repeated observation that "the balance is so difficult to maintain" (Mistry 231) makes him the character

most explicitly tied to the symbolic motif of balance. Yet his suicide at the end of the novel is not only a personal tragedy but a symbolic gesture of despair in the face of a world where balance is no longer possible. Maneck symbolizes the loss of innocence and the impossibility of reconciling humanist ideals with a corrupt and violent social order. Northrop Frye's notion that tragic characters often symbolize "the failure of reconciliation between the individual and society" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 215) aptly describes Maneck's role in the novel. His death is not merely individual but emblematic of the disillusionment of an entire generation unable to withstand the fractures of modern Indian society.

Even minor characters in the novel embody symbolic dimensions. The Beggarmaster, for example, is a chilling symbol of how systemic exploitation can be masked under personal codes of loyalty and paternalism. He claims to protect "his" beggars, insisting, "I look after my people" (Mistry 223), yet he is the orchestrator of their mutilation. As a character, he symbolizes the paradox of exploitation under the guise of benevolence, reflecting what Roland Barthes describes as the mythologizing function of ideology that "transforms history into nature" (*Mythologies* 128). In Beggarmaster's world, exploitation is naturalized as care, revealing how systems of oppression perpetuate themselves through symbolic inversion.

Similarly, characters such as the Monkey-man, who entertains crowds with his performing animals, symbolize the precariousness of survival for the urban poor. His performances are ephemeral, yet they mirror the lives of the novel's protagonists who must "perform" resilience in order to survive. The Monkey-man's struggles symbolize the dehumanization of labor under conditions of poverty, where dignity is sacrificed for the sake of subsistence.

Taken together, the characters in *A Fine Balance* represent more than themselves. Dina symbolizes fragile female autonomy, Ishvar and Omprakash symbolize caste oppression and resilience, Maneck symbolizes alienation and despair, and Beggarmaster symbolizes exploitation masked as paternalism. Each character functions as an individual with personal struggles while also serving as a symbolic representation of broader historical, social, and ideological realities. In this way, Mistry's characters embody what Homi Bhabha terms the "double inscription" of postcolonial figures, where the personal narrative always simultaneously reflects the collective condition (*The Location of Culture* 38). By embedding symbolism within his characters, Mistry ensures that their fates are not isolated tragedies but emblems of a fractured society struggling to hold together a "fine balance."

The symbolic depth of *A Fine Balance* has drawn wide critical attention because it connects private pain with larger historical and political realities. In this novel, symbols are not decorative. They are essential to its humanist and political vision. Scholars have read Mistry's work through postcolonial, Marxist, and humanist approaches. Each lens shows a different layer of meaning in the novel's symbols.

From a postcolonial view, Mistry's symbols reveal the scars of colonial history and the contradictions of modern India. The Emergency appears as a symbolic return of colonial-style authoritarianism, with the state controlling bodies, identities, and work. Dina's fragile independence, Ishvar and Om's mutilation, and Maneck's alienation all stand for a broken postcolonial condition. Freedom exists in name, but oppression continues in new forms. Homi Bhabha's idea of the "ambivalence of the nation" (*The Location of Culture* 145) helps explain this. The nation claims progress yet repeats violence and exclusion. In this light, the sterilization camps, shaved heads, and repossessed sewing machines are symbols of both state cruelty and the incomplete project of postcolonial nationhood.

A Marxist reading focuses on how symbols in the novel highlight class struggle and material poverty. The sewing machine, for example, is a symbol of survival but also of exploitation. It allows Ishvar and Om to work, yet its loss shows their dependence on systems that keep them powerless. "Without the machine, we are nothing" (Mistry 298) makes clear that survival depends on tools owned and controlled within an unjust economy. Terry Eagleton reminds us that "literature, like any ideology, reflects the material struggles of its time" (*Marxism and Literary Criticism* 56). This helps us see that the novel's symbolic world is tied to class struggle. The mutilated beggars' bodies become commodities in a cruel market, symbols of how suffering itself is turned into profit.

Humanist interpretations stress the universal meaning of Mistry's symbols. Sewing, for Dina, Ishvar, and Om, is more than labor. It is an act of repair, of piecing together damaged lives. Dina's words, "this world is full of broken things. Make it your job to put it all back together" (Mistry 231), move beyond the story to affirm human resilience. Even Maneck's suicide, though tragic, can be read symbolically as a universal cry of despair in the face of chaos. Northrop Frye's idea that tragedy shows "the vision of life as defeat, yet a defeat charged with the dignity of resistance" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 212) captures this point. Mistry's symbols affirm dignity even when survival seems impossible.

Some critics, however, question whether Mistry's symbolism goes too far. Graham Huggan, in *The*

Postcolonial Exotic, argues that postcolonial texts sometimes turn suffering into a spectacle for Western readers (22). The mutilated beggars may risk becoming overly symbolic, reducing pain to neat emblems. Yet Mistry avoids this by giving these figures names, histories, and relationships. They are never just symbols but people whose lives resist abstraction. By grounding symbols in lived detail, Mistry prevents them from becoming empty signs.

In the end, the variety of critical readings shows the richness of Mistry's symbolism. Postcolonial critics see symbols of fractured nationhood. Marxist critics highlight class struggle and exploitation. Humanist critics find universal themes of endurance and dignity. Taken together, these perspectives show that the symbols of *A Fine Balance* cannot be reduced to a single meaning. They work on many levels—historical and universal, ideological and human, political and personal. It is this complexity that makes the novel one of the most powerful symbolic works of postcolonial literature.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* shows how symbolism shapes both the story's style and its deeper meaning. The title itself suggests a fragile balance, while images such as the mutilated beggars, the sewing machine, the tailor's thread, and even the performing monkey carry meanings that go far beyond their literal presence. These symbols are not decorations; they are central to how Mistry explores the uncertainty of human life under harsh political and social conditions. The novel uses symbols in two ways at once. On one hand, images like balance, journeys, snow, or the sea point to universal experiences of stability, change, loss, and renewal. On the other, concrete symbols such as sterilization camps, shaved heads, and repossessed sewing machines tie the story to India's Emergency and its historical violence. This combination allows the novel to move beyond plain realism. It takes the immediate pain of the characters and turns it into lasting symbols of human weakness and perseverance. The characters themselves take on symbolic meaning. Dina Dalal's effort to live independently reflects the difficult position of women in a patriarchal society. The mutilation of Ishvar and Omprakash reflects both caste violence and the cruelty of systemic inequality. Maneck's suicide represents the collapse of meaning and balance in a world where dignity has been stripped away by politics and poverty. Even figures such as Beggar master or the Monkey-man symbolize larger realities of control, exploitation, and the risks of survival. The novel's symbolic world turns private pain into public history and connects personal lives with universal truths. What makes the symbols powerful is that they hold the weight of suffering without erasing the individuality of the characters. Despite all the tragedy, the story affirms a deeply humanist vision. Acts of sewing, repairing, and holding fragments together become gestures of hope as well as survival. Dina's words— "This world is full of broken things. Make it your job to put it all back together" (Mistry 231)—capture this vision. They remind us that even in times of destruction, the effort to restore balance, however fragile, is itself a way of affirming life.

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