you only have power over people as long as you don’t take *everything* away from them. But when you’ve robbed a man of *everything* he’s no longer in your power – he’s free again. (Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*, p. 107)

you cannot draw lines and compartments, and refuse to budge beyond them … You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair … In the end, it’s all a question of balance. (*A Fine Balance*, p. 231)

**Mistry’s** interest in the impact of the historical waves that wash over the lives of ordinary people, begun in *Such a Long Journey*, is continued in *A Fine Balance*, published in 1996. Indeed, the tribulations of the Parsi community, along with its distinctive cultural orientations and ethical dilemmas, give his writing some of the qualities of a ‘minor literature’ as diagnosed by Deleuze and Guattari. Describing minor literatures as those ‘which a minority constructs in a major language’ – thereby allowing for the inclusion of both the Indian novel in English and the Parsi contribution to it – Deleuze and Guattari identify two key features: ‘everything in them is political’, and ‘everything takes on a collective value.’ In the ‘cramped spaces’ of the ‘minor’ novel individual intrigues connect directly to politics: ‘The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it. In this way, the family triangle connects to other triangles – commercial, economic, bureaucratic juridical – that...
Certainly true of \textit{Such a Long Journey}, the same can be said of Mistry’s second novel, where a family of a quite unorthodox kind develops out of an initial atmosphere of squabbling and mutual mistrust, before being torn apart by the blind exercise of a capricious brutality.

Yet, \textit{A Fine Balance} also reveals Mistry’s expanding field of vision, now moving beyond Parsi life to embrace the fate of the wider Indian community at the time of Indira Gandhi’s infamous State of Emergency (1975–77). As John Ball has put it: ‘in its careful exploration of diverse gender, class and religious subject positions, it is a much more inclusive work than its predecessor.’ It offers:

\begin{quote}
\hspace{1cm} a superabundant social spectrum of Muslim rent-collectors and tailors, Sikh cabbies, wily beggars, disillusioned lawyers, murderous strongmen, corrupt slumlords, profit-eering police, radical students, and – in a cameo no less unflattering than her appearances in \textit{Midnight’s Children} and \textit{Such a Long Journey} – Indira Gandhi herself.\footnote{Acknowledging that in his first two books he had focused in detail only on the Parsi community, Mistry commented in interview: ‘I made a conscious decision in this book to include more than this, mainly because in India seventy five per cent of Indians live in villages and I wanted to embrace more of the social reality of India.’ This, in turn, leads to more profound reflections on questions of belonging in relation to the body politic, a point reinforced by the novel’s focus on lower caste Hindus, ‘Untouchables’, Muslims and, of course, Parsis: what one might call a cast list of the marginalized and dispossessed who find themselves at the mercy of the Brahminical and pseudo-secular elites shaping India in the 1970s. Such questions arise with particular poignancy in relation to the role of caste, and are explored through the experiences of two of the central characters, the tanners-turned-tailors Ishvar and Omprakash Darji. They have felt the full force of upper caste disapproval, vented on their family for violating time-honoured stasis by daring to alter their occupation and, hence, their position in the}
\end{quote}
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hierarchical social chain. The brutal murder of Ishvar and Om’s relatives sends them scurrying to the city, where they meet a fellow migrant, Maneck Kohlah, who has arrived to complete his education at a technical college, and a lonely Parsi widow, Dina Dalal, in whose flat they find employment and a temporary home.

Mistry’s broader canvas allows for a rhythmical depiction of rural communities, their comforts and their injustices, as well as the more ‘rough and ready’ community of the city, which includes slum dwellers and mutilated beggars, among whom the fleeing Ishvar and Omprakash find themselves. On trial too is the neo-colonial economic system which embroils even well-meaning characters, such as the tailors’ host and employer Dina, in a network of exploitation and debt stretching from the highest offices of government to the lowest reaches of the dispossessed. The forced evictions and sterilisations that take place as the Emergency swings into action are merely the most extreme manifestation of a mania for social control infecting Indira Gandhi, and articulated by numerous corresponding figures who resort to excessive measures in the face of national and personal instability. By a series of tragic twists of fate, Ishvar and Omprakash eventually find themselves at the mercy of one particularly vicious personification of the conjunction of rural and urban, feudal and capitalist modes of oppression.

Yet Mistry is also concerned to show how real communication can develop through physical intimacy. Ishvar, Omprakash and Dina are thrown together somewhat unwillingly in the latter’s flat, along with Dina’s paying guest, Maneck. They achieve fruitful interaction leading to genuine affection by cooperation and the sharing of stories emblematised by the never-ending patchwork quilt Dina makes from the tailors’ surplus material. From Dina’s decaying rented apartment, the novel opens out, creating a whole world – or rather a series of interconnected worlds – for the reader to inhabit: ranging from Maneck’s Himalayan childhood home; the tailors’ village and the slum colony in which they find temporary domicile when they start their employment; Ashraf Chacha’s workshop where
they learn their trade; the Au Revoir export company, making a tidy profit from their relentless labours, and presided over by the viperish Mrs Gupta with her austere, sculpted hairstyles; to the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel, where the tailors fill their well-earned breaks with steaming cups of tea and regale the staff with tales of their adventures. The differing domains of the novel underline its concern with space. At the same time, characters take on roles in relation to one another in these spaces according to the operation of stark inequalities of power: they must perform in the expected and ‘appropriate’ way, or face verbal denunciation, unemployment, imprisonment, physical violence or even death. For the newcomer to the city such codes have to be internalised and the ‘script’ learned, and all at a time when the recognisable lineaments of democracy and accountability have been erased: something which makes the lessons of urban living, of staying one step ahead of the now fitful and despotic mechanisms of the law, every bit as haphazard and mysterious as they are for Kafka’s Joseph K in *The Trial*. Equally, people are defined in relation to their work. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the spatial economy of Bombay’s ‘toilers’, as described by Sandeep Pendse, is reflected in the movements of Mistry’s tailors with their unique and vulnerable relationship to the metropolis. The precariousness of their social position, indeed of their entire existence, is related to the eponymous theme of balance, an imperative articulated by the seemingly allegorical figure of Vasantrao Valmik BA LLB, the Yeats-quoting proof-reader, who surfaces periodically and appears at first glance to be the novel’s valorised voice.

*A Fine Balance* also has a more varied pace and tone than Mistry’s other novels, skipping over swathes of the characters’ early years and slowing to meditate on defining incidents and unfolding relationships, such as the death of Dina’s beloved husband and her battles with her dictatorial brother, Nusswan. Along with the vivid and evocative descriptions of daily life, especially that of the tailors, the text contains elements of the picaresque, as their escapades take them on train journeys, into police vans, and onto buses commandeered by the government...
to ferry a ‘made-to-measure’ audience to a prime-ministerial rally. The novel is tragic, certainly, but it also has moments of broad farce, often used to illustrate the absurdity of power and the Emergency’s random and sometimes contradictory injunctions. Indeed, the surface of the novel, characterised by the fine detail that brings the text to life, is everywhere marked by eruptions of the symbolic, the satirical, the allegorical and the carnivalesque: thereby indicating that Mistry is here developing a more stylised and syncretic way of representing the world than the conventional critical view, which sees him simply as a realist writer, would allow. Moreover, *A Fine Balance* is the richest of Mistry’s texts in terms of intertextual allusions, at times echoing Indian writers such as R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Nayantara Sahgal, and with more nods in the direction of Mistry’s European influences such as W. B. Yeats. Likewise, it can be argued that the novel has a similar scope and ambition to those sweeping chronicles of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian society – by Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev or Solzhenitsyn – with their relentless attention to power, injustice and enforced social orthodoxies, as it narrates the tailors’ encounters with the arbitrary power unleashed in the Emergency.

A full examination of the range of forces which brought Indira Gandhi from the pinnacle of national admiration as victor of the 1971 war with Pakistan, to an isolated and paranoid despotism in three and half short years, are beyond the scope of the present study. However, a broad account of the events shaking India, and Indira – the two became synonymous in the infamous slogan ‘Indira is India and India is Indira’ dreamed up by Congress party sycophants during the Emergency – can be given. Perhaps most important were a series of economic crises in the early 1970s. The rains failed in 1972–3, resulting in disaster for the harvest, and this was immediately followed by the OPEC oil crisis, which affected both economically developed and developing nations. In India’s case the result was rampant inflation, which was running at about thirty per cent by the middle of 1974.
radicalisation of certain sections of the population. The Naxalite peasant insurgency, which had begun in a small village in Bihar, spread to other parts of the country, while the ranks of the disaffected were swelled by the large numbers of unemployed from the educated, professional classes. Forms of direct action included a series of strikes, the most famous of which, the All-India Rail Strike of 1974, Indira saw as a direct, almost personal challenge, and which she crushed in determined manner. As David Selbourne has noted, ‘the conjunction of suffering, inflation and recession, and the cyclical collision of mounting opposition from right, left and centre to the misgovernment of India and the draconian intolerance of such opposition began to deepen and quicken’. The same period saw Indira Gandhi, isolated, uncertain of whom she could trust and coming to rely on an ever-smaller band of close confidantes, centralising more and more power in her own hands. The atmosphere of embattled authoritarianism was ripe for abuses, and the early 1970s were also marked by a rise in instances of peremptory arrests, the fettering of prisoners, torture and ‘disappearances’, experiences mirrored by those of the student politico, Avinash, in A Fine Balance who briefly befriends Maneck in his college hall of residence before being swallowed up by dark inquisitorial forces.

The immediate constitutional precursor to the Emergency was a decision of the Allahabad High Court, early in June 1975, that Indira Gandhi had been guilty of electoral malpractices in relation to the 1971 General Election. Although the offences were relatively trivial, the court decreed that the Prime Minister should be debarred from holding public office for six years. Rather than submit to the judgement, and citing the growing tide of ‘internal disturbances’ threatening India, Mrs Gandhi instructed the President of India to announce a State of Emergency just before midnight on 25 June. Opposition leaders, and even suspect members of Mrs Gandhi’s own Congress Party, were taken from their beds and interned: the right to trial was effectively suspended; public meetings were banned; newspapers were subject to strict controls; and even the writings on freedom of Indira’s father, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mahatma Gandhi were
censored. Indira even demonstrated her mastery over time itself, by introducing constitutional amendments conferring on herself retrospective immunity from prosecution in respect of past or future criminal offences. In Mistry’s novel, Vasantrao Valmik remarks ironically on this development: ‘We poor mortals have to accept that bygone events are beyond our clutch, while the Prime Minister performs juggling acts with time past’ (AFB, 563).

However, perhaps the most sinister elements of the Emergency were initiated by Indira’s son and heir apparent, Sanjay, who, despite having no electoral mandate, used his power base in Youth Congress to add some ideas of his own to his mother’s ‘Twenty Point Programme’ for national rejuvenation. In the guise of ‘beautification’ a process of slum clearance and family planning was instituted. In practice, the former often meant clearing the poor away from areas they had improved and made habitable themselves, so that these juicy slices of real estate could be utilised by Sanjay’s friends, the property developers; while the latter turned into what has been described as ‘a grotesque carnival of abduction, mutilation and disease’, as people were forced and tricked into allowing themselves to be sterilised, in order that ‘motivators’, conscripted to impose the unpopular measure, could meet the targets imposed on them by employers empowered to bestow or withhold financial rewards. Sanjay Gandhi came to exert an enormous amount of power during the Emergency as Indira, seeing him as one of the few people she could trust, and unwilling or unable to restrain him and his acolytes, gave free rein to his schemes and turned a blind eye to their consequences.

Ishvar and Omprakash have what is perhaps their first experience of the unrestrained severity of the new order at the beginning of the novel, when their train journey to the city is interrupted by the discovery of a dead body on the line ahead. Disturbing but seemingly innocuous at this stage – the passengers merely lament this passing inconvenience: ‘Why does everyone always choose the railway tracks only for dying … No consideration for people like us … What is wrong with poison or tall
buildings or knives?’ (AFB, 5–6) – the discovery can only be set in context later in the book, when we learn that bodies are now appearing on railway lines with alarming regularity, and when it is revealed that one such body belongs to the troublesome Avinash. Likewise, it is only after Maneck’s suicide under an oncoming train at the end of the book, that the faint echoes of Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, that other tale of a family torn apart, which also begins and ends with deaths under trains, can be fully appreciated. Rather, at this early stage, the focus is on Ishvar, Om and Maneck who are meeting for the first time in the train carriage, recalling the initial encounter of three of the central characters in another of Mistry’s Russian textual influences, The Idiot. Here, the way the trio are described, with our attention drawn to Ishvar’s disfigured left cheek, and Om’s frail spine as he is bumped and jostled by fellow passengers, indicates that the body and its fragility is again to be at the centre of what follows.

In his oeuvre as a whole, Mistry’s focus on the body, the messiness of its functions and its inevitable corruption, emerges from, but offers a striking contrast to, the traditional Zoroastrian obsession with corporeal purity which is at the heart of several of his characters’ aversions to the outside world. His protagonists learn that the Zoroastrian injunction to engage with the world must take precedence over such doctrinal niceties. In A Fine Balance it is Dina Dalal who must overcome the urge to withdraw and scrape away the suspicion with which her life has become encrusted since the death of her husband. This is not just a suspicion of the other, but specifically of the other body. She is initially discomforted by the physical presence of the tailors when they come to perform their piecemeal work in her home, recoiling at the alien smell of their urine in her toilet, and segregating the mugs in which she serves their break-time tea. But Dina herself has been a victim of bodily discrimination, most noticeably as a teenager when she is physically chastised by her brother and guardian, Nusswan, for ignoring his injunction not to follow fashion and cut her hair, in a disturbing scene where her burgeoning sexual maturity is exposed to his
ambiguous gaze (AFB, 23–4). Such moments prefigure the later forms of national authoritarianism and the abuse of bodies in the Emergency. In this book, violence against the body takes its most drastic form in the enforced sterilisations. The concern with the fragility of bodies, which encompasses the handless and legless beggar, Shankar, and his disfigured mother, known only as ‘Nosey’ because of her empty nasal cavity, reaches its culmination when Ishvar and Om are captured and sterilised by the henchmen of the landowner also responsible for the torture and murder of their family. Om is castrated on a whim of the Thakur, while Ishvar suffers the fate of many victims of the nasabandi process: the paucity of aftercare means that his wounds turn septic, then gangrenous and eventually his legs have to be amputated.

The bodily distress of the characters appears also that of the city they inhabit – and, perhaps, of the body politic more generally – as the tailors realise when, travelling back after a spell in a forced labour camp, they spy one of the remaining slum settlements, with its ‘sordid quiltings of plastic and cardboard and paper and sackcloth, like scabs and blisters creeping in a dermatological nightmare across the rotting body of the metropolis’ (AFB, 379). Mutilation metaphors abound. There is a sense in which the tribulations of this society are historically predicated on physical brutality, its wounds self-inflicted. The novel sweeps backwards in time to fill in the earlier lives of its protagonists and their ancestors, forever mutated by the gory ‘parturition’ of Partition, when markings on the body, specifically those of circumcision, take on a literal life or death significance. Partition has robbed Maneck’s father of his ancestral lands and threatened the peaceful coexistence of Hindu and Muslim in the community from which the tailors will come.

In this way, the line drawn at Partition, portioning out territory between India and Pakistan, is only the most obvious boundary in a text with an obsessive concern for the ways in which individuals and communities seek to demarcate space and seal themselves off from others. Commenting on Dina’s initial attempts to follow the advice of her supplier, Mrs Gupta, and
maintain a line between herself and her new employees, Mistry observes the paradox at the heart of the desire for delineation and order: ‘all such lines are artificial and there are stronger forces at work and if such a line is made to persist it will lead to chaos or lead to even more problems. Partition was just such a line and history has amply shown this.’ To be sure, there are instances where characters reach out across ‘the line’: Ishvar and his brother, Narayan, the father of Omprakash, protect the Muslim tailor to whom they are apprenticed and whom they look on as their uncle, when a Hindu mob descends on his workshop at the time of Partition. And, indeed, Dina eventually learns that the barriers she is seeking to maintain between herself and the tailors are unsustainable. She initially banishes her unauthorised employees and their sewing machines to the back room, out of sight of the prying eyes of the rent collector, and when she delivers the fruits of their labours to Au Revoir exports she locks them in to avoid any possibility that they may follow her, learn her supplier and cut her out of the transaction. However, while she is away, Ishvar and Om take pleasure in transgressing into Dina’s comparatively comfortable living space, lounging in her cushioned chairs and luxuriating in wreaths of cigarette smoke. Eventually, however, with the familiarity borne of intimacy when the tailors become permanent residents and an ad hoc family develops in the cramped apartment, her line begins to waver, and even their scent becomes ‘unobtrusive now because it was the same for everyone. They were all eating the same food, drinking the same water. Sailing under one flag’ (AFB, 399).

In fact, if endeavouring to maintain ‘the line’ in the interest of some notion of self-preservation is damaging, attempting to re-impose it after it has been dismantled is potentially disastrous. At the end of his course, Maneck leaves Dina’s flat for a job in Dubai, working in refrigeration. He returns eight years later to the maelstrom of anti-Sikh violence which has followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi by a Sikh bodyguard, and to the horrific discovery that his erstwhile flatmates, Ishvar and Om, have been mutilated and reduced to beggary. Unable to cope with changes that aggravate his already depressive disposition,
he cannot bring himself to speak to the tailors and pretends not to recognise them. The novel emphasises the need to cut through the formalities and imposed proprieties that keep people apart, even though the connections thereby established can only ever be transitory and preserved in the memory. (Indeed, there is also a danger in trying to hold onto the past, as Dina discovers – like other Mistry characters before her – when she clutches at her late husband through the possessions he has left behind. Mistry comments: ‘there is a great difference between remembering the past which is creative and life enhancing and trying to preserve it which is detrimental and debilitating’.)

Maneck forgets Vasantrao Valmik’s wise counsel: ‘the secret of survival is to embrace change, and to adapt’ (AFB, 230), and allows himself to become disconnected from his past and all the support networks that have sustained him. Disconnection leads to death – for Maneck – or death-like experiences. Ironically, not long before his suicide, Maneck has rediscovered an old friend of the tailors in unexpected surroundings. Rajaram, the hair collector, first appears as a fellow slum dweller when the tailors arrive in the city. He helps them to settle in, teaches them the tricks of a scavenger’s life, and displays his community-mindedness by sharing food with them. When the slum is broken up he disappears, only to resurface soon after as a family planning motivator, trying to cajole all and sundry to surrender their reproductive futures – a job at which this benevolent figure proves spectacularly incompetent. However, some kind of moral corruption attendant on working for the government seems to have entered his soul, and his reversion to hair collecting culminates in the murder of two beggars with particularly luxurious, and therefore valuable locks. Rajaram confesses his crime in his last meeting with the tailors, and states his intention to do penance by renouncing the world and becoming a wandering mendicant. Eight years later, Maneck finds him back in the city, transmogrified into Bal Baba, a miracle-working sanyasi, with a neat line in what Om would describe as ‘fakeology’, and bolstered by an entourage of devotees and a range of holy merchandise. Maneck tries to make Rajaram
confront his past but is rebuffed: “‘Rajaram the hair-collector renounced his life, his joys and sorrows, his vices and virtues. Why? So that Bal Baba could be incarnated and could use his humble gift to assist humanity along the pathway to moksha … That was another life, another person. That’s all finished, don’t you understand’” (AFB, 602–3). Given his guilty past, it seems possible that Rajaram/Bal Baba’s may be an exculpatory fantasy rather than true renunciation, and that he is merely peddling consoling fictions. However, as Maneck leaves Bal Baba’s marquee, the crowds are still queuing for an audience and a benediction, and the life-cycle transformations sanctioned by the Hindu Ashramas maintain the possibility that – like a more sinister version of Raju in R. K. Narayan’s novel of dubious saintliness, The Guide – he may yet achieve redemption in his new incarnation.16

Instead of dividing lines between self and other or past and present lives, the novel endorses balance and pattern. Existence is inherently unsteady, as Ishvar and Om discover when their first tailoring job in the city requires them to perch precariously in a temporary loft made of planks supported by bamboo poles. The theme of balance is articulated most effectively by Vasantrao Valmik in a discussion with Maneck during a train journey. He advises: ‘You cannot draw lines and compartments, and refuse to budge beyond them. Sometimes you have to use your failures as stepping-stones to success. You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair’ (AFB, 231). Valmik reveals himself as, in a sense, the moral conscience of a nation that has now ‘gone off the rails’, so to speak. He seems to take upon himself the sins of the national elite to which he has been a witness during his post as a proof-reader for The Times of India. After an abortive career in law – beginning in the year of India’s independence but symbolically fizzling out soon afterwards – Valmik has spent twenty-four years reading ‘court proceedings, legal texts, stockmarket figures. Politician’s speeches too’ (AFB, 228), as well as ‘stories of misery, caste violence, government callousness, official arrogance, police brutality’ (AFB, 229), until his tear ducts rebel and he becomes virulently
allergic to printing ink. He seems to embody the ills currently besetting India. His latest ‘incarnation’ at this stage is as a morcha man, hiring himself out to different parties and producing slogans to be shouted at political rallies. When Maneck meets him he is hoarse: his throat having been unable to stand the strain of such raucous employment after the hushed pursuits of proof-reading. His enforced silence amid the clamour of the Emergency also seems symbolic. He recognises that in selling out to those forces responsible for the present turmoil: ‘You could say that I have cut my own throat’ (AFB, 233). After a brief return to the law – during which he counsels Dina at her lowest ebb: ‘Loss is essential. Loss is part and parcel of that necessary calamity called life’ (AFB, 565) – Valmik ends up in charge of Bal Baba’s mail-order business, answering the religious enquiries of a different kind of plaintiff, and ‘creating fiction after fiction, which will become more real in the recipients’ lives than all their sad realities’ (AFB, 604); something of an ambivalent fate for a character whose stoicism has earlier made him appear a kind of authorial spokesman. In fact, images of balance are themselves ambiguous in the text. As John Ball has noted, balance ‘becomes something of a mantra in the novel and takes on ever deeper shades of meaning and association.’ While Valmik advocates his ‘fine balance between hope and despair’:

‘Balance’ is not always so benignly commonsensical … For a village thug enforcing caste discipline, an Untouchable’s transgression of his prescribed profession ‘distorts society’s timeless balance’ and must be punished by a hideous death … The street performer Monkey-man [who balances small children on the top of a pole] … enacts a different kind of balance in his retributive tit-for-tat killings. At times, the invocations of balance here are as gruesomely ironic as in Shakespeare’s Measure for Measure.17

The search for pattern in chaos is also preferable to line drawing. By definition, the tailors’ business is the creation of shape and order by following a pattern. Dina takes this a stage further by utilising the scraps of material left over after the day’s work to make a quilt. The many different colours and
textures of the quilt come to represent the experiences which the little ‘family’ in her flat share during their time together, and quilting spirals away to take on a series of metaphorical, and metaphysical, associations: Om wistfully pictures time as a bolt of cloth, and wishes he could stitch together the good parts and take out the bad; while Maneck imagines that God is a giant quilt maker whose handiwork has grown so expansive that the pattern is impossible to see. Sewing and quilting are connected to other kinds of creative act by which the randomness of life can be redeemed, such as the sharing of memories and stories. As Dina gets to know her boarders they slowly unburden themselves of their harrowing life story: ‘she added the pieces to what Maneck had already revealed about their life in the village. Like her quilt the tailors’ chronicle was gradually gathering shape’ (AFB, 385). Just as memory allows one to connect with one’s own past, so too it allows one to reach out and connect with others. The Forsterian valorisation of connection in this text is emphasised by Ishvar, who encourages his fractious nephew to ‘keep connecting’, when confronted with a particularly intricate pattern to follow.

This quest for pattern is likewise written into the book’s very structure. Its shuttling temporality, employing both prolepsis and analepsis, allows us to understand character and motivation as well as filling in the political and historical background. As I have claimed elsewhere, these echoes and prefigurements are ‘a formal corollary of the thematic concern for pattern’. Mention has been made of the mangled bodies that appear from time to time on the railway tracks. Another reverberation begins when Dina’s doomed husband, Rustom, wobbles through the city traffic on his bicycle before a collision claims him: later Omprakash will rent a bicycle and be involved in a less serious accident while trying to follow Dina to her supplier. Likewise, on page 68, Dina puts her foot through a rotten plank of wood while scouring the neighbourhood for available tailors: an incident echoed when (on page 153) we learn that Om has earlier done the same thing on the same spot. The looping narrative ensures that, in ‘real time’, Om has stumbled
over the plank first, but that Dina’s experience is narrated first. The reader is thus equipped to register the textual obsession with pattern, and patterns within patterns. Moreover, for characters too the past is constantly intruding on the present: as it does when memories of her departed husband prevent Dina from enjoying intimate relations with a potential suitor. Thus, memory invests everything with significance for both readers and characters. The cyclical structure of the novel is confirmed when, after their encounter with the steriliser, Ishvar and Om come to replace the now-dead beggar, Shankar, in a chapter significantly entitled ‘The Circle is Completed’. The involutions of India’s political life also appear cyclical in the Epilogue: on his return to India, Maneck finds that Rajiv Gandhi has been sworn in as Prime Minister after his mother’s assassination; while hindsight for the reader includes the ‘foreknowledge’ of Rajiv’s own assassination, seven years after the novel’s action ends.

In terms of symbolism, Mistry’s technique is reminiscent of that ‘repetition plus variation’ recommended by E. M. Forster in his chapter on ‘Pattern and Rhythm’ in *Aspects of the Novel*. Symbols do not atrophy by being made to stand for a single set of correspondences. They shift, evolve, find new combinations, achieve new resonances, sometimes even have their meanings inverted. Just as balance throws up a multivalent set of symbols, so too hair and animals are freighted with different symbolic connotations at different times. Hair is a banner of individuality for the defiant young Dina in her battles with her brother, while Rajaram can initially read the ‘whole life’ of the person whose hair he has collected through their follicular peculiarities. Later, however, when he returns to hair collecting, he develops an unbalanced obsession for his quarry, which leads him eventually to murder. We are also reminded of the well-known divisive incident of the hair of the Prophet’s beard, which led to riots and communal tensions in Kashmir in the 1960s. Similarly, something of Dina’s initial insularity and gradual opening-up is symbolised through the kittens abandoned by their mother in her kitchen. She is initially perturbed by this insalubrious invasion, but she eventually yields to her new guests, as she
does to the tailors. Likewise, the kittens are at first dependent additions to the developing ‘family’: then, as they grow bolder, plucky embodiments of the scavenging principle also necessary in human society as depicted here; and finally – when, to mix a metaphor, they ‘fly the nest’ altogether – anticipatory symbols of the inevitable emptying of Dina’s flat and the scattering of her makeshift brood.

The echoes of Forster and the concern for order through narrative, symbol and repetition gives a modernist flavour to A Fine Balance. The text appears to be saying that the chaos of human life can yield to pattern through the intervention of the creative faculties, whereas the rigidity represented by lines that divide is purely destructive. The modernist inheritance would seem to be underlined by the quotations from Yeats, Valmik’s favourite poet and one with much to say about the kind of ‘blood-dimmed tide’ loosed by the Emergency. Certainly, all the lives on display here appear to be tossed from order to chaos and back again by the myriad upheavals of fate. Yet, in fact, the use of this motif is part of a more complex dialectic played out in the text. Mistry cites the upper caste response to a higher birth rate of male children among its low caste neighbours as an example. To the Brahmins: ‘This is the result of chaos in the universe brought on by some transgression in this world of the natural social order. They then talk of increased vigilance and a more rigorous adherence to the caste system which obviously means more floggings and beatings, which is the real chaos.’

Mistry explores the paradoxes of the terms ‘order’ and ‘chaos’ in this context, transvaluing them in a manner reminiscent of Chinua Achebe’s celebrated inversion of colonial discourse’s claim of bringing order into the chaos of nineteenth-century Nigeria in Things Fall Apart. There may be a different kind of authoritarian impulse at work in 1970s India, but it is an oppressive, all-pervading one nonetheless. The multivalent use of the idea of chaos in A Fine Balance inverts the discourse of power to show that, although Mrs Gandhi’s Emergency claims to be bringing order out of chaos, it does in fact introduce chaos (and fear) into a situation which – while previously characterised by a degree of
social disorder – does have a pattern discernible to the attentive eye: that of the heterogeneity of lived experience. Therefore, order and chaos are not simply inverted, but consciously played off against each other in the shifting symbolic economy of the novel, in search of that elusive balance of the title.

But above all, *A Fine Balance* is a book about space. At first sight the novel’s different locales appear neatly divided. The middle-class characters such as Dina, the doctor’s daughter, and the proud shopkeeper Mr Kohlah enjoy the comparative luxury of independent living spaces, however tarnished they have become, whereas the early life of the tanners-turned-tailors, marked by poverty and discrimination, is nevertheless communal, with burdens and tasks being shared and local news discussed throughout their village. This would seem to be of a piece with the theme of rootedness versus uprootedness, and the deeply-felt danger of forgetting who you are if you leave your own earth, which plays most insistently on the conscience of Maneck. However, these spaces are not discreet, distinct from each other, or immune to the intrusion of other ways of life. Such lines are crossed too: Dukhi and Narayan break the bonds of caste by changing their occupation; Dina’s flat is ‘invaded’ by ‘foreign bodies’; and Mr Kohlah’s visceral identification with the mountains in which he has always lived and worked is eroded by the incursion of developers and ‘nation-builders’ (*AFB*, 215), whose vision of bigger and better roads carries the seeds of destruction for both Mr Kohlah’s home-brewed carbonated drink – squeezed out of business by a multinational latecomer – and for his whole way of life.

Indeed, capitalist and pre-capitalist (or feudal) forces are compared and contrasted too. Capitalism is embodied by Mrs Gupta, doyenne of Au Revoir Exports. Her control-freak tendencies are evinced by regular trips to the hairdresser to tame her unruly locks, and, with her slogan-pocked speech, she is a vocal supporter of the Emergency. Indira’s motto, ‘The Need of the Hour is Discipline’ (*AFB*, 74), holds good for her too. She recommends that Dina preserve the distance between herself and her tailors, and rejoices that Emergency legislation has
meant a curb on the trade unions. (One of Indira’s trusted
advisers, P. N. Dhar, has noted how the middle classes ‘were
impressed by the immediate gains of the Emergency: no strikes
… industrial peace, quiet on the campuses … stable prices, spurt
in economic activity.’) As an exploitative personification of the
entrepreneurial spirit allowed free rein under the Emergency,
Mrs Gupta recalls the callous and arrogant ‘New Entrepreneurs’
Wives’ group in Nayantara Sahgal’s novelistic indictment of the
Emergency, Rich Like Us.23

The tailors’ village is a site where a feudal economy of
power remains in place. It is a space of continuity and communi-
ty in adversity, at least among the lower castes. But it is
certainly not an idealised locale: superstition and violence are
rampant, and gender inequalities are shown in the fact that
sweetmeats are circulated when a male child is born, but no such
celebration attends the birth of a girl. Moreover, it is also a site
of the repetitions of caste-based brutality. The lower castes are
beaten, tortured and killed for a number of trivial offences. The
proximity of a summary ‘justice’ and barbarity feeds into
Mistry’s exploration of the ambiguous coordinates of order and
chaos. Most outrageous of all in this rigidly hierarchical society
is the transgression signified by Dukhi’s decision to better his
family’s prospects by turning from tanning to tailoring. Partha
Chatterjee’s comments on caste may suggest what is at stake in
Dukhi’s refusal to endure hereditary and perpetual servitude:
‘The essence of caste, we may say, requires that the labouring
bodies of the impure castes be reproduced in order that they can
be subordinated to the need to maintain the bodies of the pure
castes in their state of purity. All injunctions of dharma must
work to this end.’24 The unfulfilled promise of uplift offered by
the nationalist campaigners early in the book appears as illusory
for Mistry’s characters, in the face of ingrained prejudice, as it
does for the eponymous hero of Mulk Raj Anand’s pre-
independence classic, Untouchable, whose experiences are replayed
in intensified form.25

A Fine Balance is a novel exploring what Rukmini Bhaya
Nair calls ‘the complex ecology of exploitation. All the Dinas
and the Ishvars and the Manecks and Beggarmasters … and Mrs Guptas form a complex chain of survival in which both mutual need and mutual suspicion exist intertwined. Indeed, it is strongly suggested that everyone, regardless of good intentions, is in some way implicated in, or profiting from, exploitation. Even Dina is part of the exploiting capitalist network. She is economically dependent on her brother and seeks a way out of his clutches by surreptitiously employing her piece-working, non-unionised labour to provide cheap textiles which Mrs Gupta then exports at a profit. The full complexity of inter-dependence is made explicit when the sinister Beggarmaster – a character who, in contrast to others individualised in minute detail, is never physically described, and who has previously protected street beggars like Shankar, making ‘professional modifications’ where necessary – becomes protector of Dina’s vulnerable household against a thuggish landlord keen to evict her. The text asks whether it is possible to behave morally in a world turned upside down. Perhaps there is even a perverse benevolence in Beggarmaster’s horrific activities. He mutilates his charges because he knows that those with the worst disfigurements earn the highest profits in the warped economy of beggary. Yet, as well as being ‘a thoroughly modern businessman’ (AFB, 446), he does demonstrate a concern for his beggars, albeit out of self-interest: so much so that one is led to wonder what use freedom will be to them after his violent death. In this respect, with its attention to the mutual exploitation sanctioned by the Emergency, and examples of human tragedy underpinned by dogged endurance, the ‘City by the Sea’ in A Fine Balance recalls Balzac’s Paris in Père Goriot, where the protagonist Rastignac reaches a conclusion equally applicable to Mistry’s hunted characters: ‘he must, as on the battlefield, kill or be killed, deceive or be deceived; … he must give up conscience and heart at the entrance, put on a mask, mercilessly exploit others and … seize his fortune without being seen in order to earn his laurels.’ Equally, a culture of parasitism is also being fostered, symbolised in the extensive worm imagery. The Emergency breeds enforcers, like the slum landlord who
accepts a job at the head of a government slum clearance programme and bulldozes the ramshackle dwellings of his own tenants; ‘motivators’ who prod, pester and push people into waiting sterilisation vans; ‘facilitators’ who offer to forge ration cards and sterilisation certificates; protection racketeers thriving in the atmosphere of paranoia and banditry; and those using the invasive new laws to settle old scores.

Inevitably, such activities are concentrated in the city. Yet the city still operates as a magnet to Ishvar and Om when they seek a new start after the massacre of their family. It may be a stage on which the starkest social disparities are played out, but the city still fires the imagination of all sections of the populace, and the tailors come to it with naïve optimism and dreams of a better life. Moreover, after their experience of the murderous re-imposition of ‘the line’ in their village, the tailors’ first experience of the city is of the bustle of its railway station, ‘a roiling swirl of humanity’ (AFB, 153), which does not so much allow mixing as enforce it. The unfamiliarity of their surroundings is emphasised during their first night, spent under an awning, when their sleep is disturbed by a woman being beaten, a drunkard shouting abuse and a pavement-dweller shrieking as he is attacked for stealing someone else’s spot. The city is initially depicted as corrupt and corrupting in the eyes of the newcomers. It contains the same ‘thieving-shops, the stews and the rookeries, the fetid cellars and the dangerous tenements’, which Raymond Williams finds in eighteenth-century literary evocations of London.

In fact, the position of Ishvar and Om in relation to their new environment calls to mind Sandeep Pendse’s definition of the ‘toilers’ of contemporary Bombay who perform menial tasks in unstable occupations within the city, ‘are sellers of labour power’ – sometimes in covert and unofficial ways – and who lack control over most aspects of their lives. Toilers thus ‘acquire a sense of impermanence, instability, and insecurity’, a far cry from Valmik’s vaunted balance. Ishvar and Om’s new habitat is one of ad hoc dwellings: street corners, shop doorways, railway stations and temporary shacks on waste ground. Pendse argues...
that the cityscape impacts on three aspects of the toilers’ lives: space, time and the rhythms of existence. For example, they are often relegated to peripheral parts of the city, both figuratively and literally, and form a large proportion of those slum dwellers who haunt the least desirable and developed patches of urban land. Ishvar and Om come to inhabit one such slum, beside the railway line, where a volatile but supportive community develops to complicate the picture of the city as a place of alienation and isolation. Equally, for new arrivals from the country, the city forms a daunting, unknowable space, very different from the manageable dimensions of the rural village:

The occupied space does not form a gentle and negotiable territory under leisurely control of its inhabitants. It cannot be easily traversed. It is, as a whole, beyond the intimate knowledge and comprehension of any of its inhabitants … [while] Movement in the city … similarly involves an effort [and] the use of specialised modes of transport.31

Ishvar and Om experience this when they squeeze onto overcrowded trains, and are corralled into a variety of vehicles by the authorities as their fortunes ebb and flow. Likewise, informal conceptions of time, dependent on natural phenomena like sunrise, sunset or the cycle of the seasons, are superseded in the city by a more disciplined temporal regime organised around carefully controlled schedules and shifts, which also serve to determine the overall rhythm of life.32 (Once again, the novel illustrates this facet of urban experience in the tailors’ constant anxieties about being late for work: something that also emphasises their precarious status as casual labourers.) But above all, the most striking impression of city life for the new arrival is one of sensory overload. As well as the sounds that interrupt their sleep, Ishvar and Om have their noses assaulted by smells such as that which hovers over the railside latrine the slum dwellers use, and their sense of direction is confused at the intersections of streets that all look the same.

Disorientating as all this may be, city space does allow for the possibility of the kinds of creativity elsewhere valorised. As
Michel de Certeau has suggested, stories – such as those the tailors share at their favourite café, the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel – ‘traverse and organise places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.’33 By narrativising their experiences in the spaces of the text – village, town, city, slum, shop doorway, Dina’s flat – they not only contribute patches to the symbolic quilt, they also show how narrative structures ‘regulate changes in space (or moves from one place to another) made by stories in the form of places put in linear or interlaced series,’34 thereby also offering an object lesson in how narrative stitches together different locales to create an image of the nation at this crucial time in its history.

I will have more to say about this imagining of the nation later. The key point here is that, for Michel de Certeau, ‘space is a practiced place’.35 In other words, he distinguishes between mere location, made static by cartography, and the movements between points which are also potential narratives. Even as ‘ordinary practitioners of the city’, who normally fall well below the administrative gaze of those who think they control such space – and who, indeed, strive to eliminate such ‘waste products’ as slums and beggars in the name of ‘beautification’ – Ishvar and Om are part of a host of bodies whose sheer number allows them sometimes to evade the panoptic gaze. This does not mean they escape altogether, as their tragic fate reveals. For them, urban life is often ‘an immense social experience of lacking a place – an experience that is … broken up into countless tiny deportations’:36 quite literally, as they are rounded up and shunted off along with others to (variously) a political rally, a forced labour project, and a sterilisation camp. Yet, in their very travels they probe the points of differentiation, the frontiers – between castes, communities and classes – which have been erected and preserved in fiat and in practice, thus fulfilling what de Certeau sees as the role of stories: ‘to authorize the establishment, displacement or transcendence of limits’.37 A Fine Balance sets up such limits, such dividing lines, only to have characters transgress them.
This is not to say that the various spaces of the novel – the ‘City by the Sea’, the ‘Village by a River’ and the ‘Mountains’ – are not circumscribed and defined by relationships of power. In the village these include the religious nationalism that infects previously placid human beings at partition, as well as the blatant atrocities of caste power. In Maneck’s beloved mountain home, the neo-colonial strength of the multinational cola company prevails over the indigenous product. And, of course, in the city numerous arbitrary impositions have been generated by the Emergency, and are gleefully pursued by those with an eye to the main chance. As Dina has always known since her youthful confrontations with Nusswan, those on the disadvantageous end of such power imbalances must perform the roles expected of them by their tormentors. These roles include obedience, gratitude, deference, hard work and patriotism – the latter being orthographically subverted when Shiv Sena activists besiege a cinema audience, forcing them to stay for the national anthem, while brandishing placards declaring ‘PATRIOTISM IS A SCARED DUTY’ (AFB, 281).

Indeed, the text is full of performers and performances: Monkey-man is an entertainer whose skills include juggling, gymnastics and tightrope walking, but who specialises in acts involving monkeys balancing on the back of a dog and small children perched atop a long pole; street performers are coerced into amusing tired workers in the forced labour camp; Shankar has a repertoire of whimpers and wriggles on his wheeled platform, approximating to Beggarmaster’s ideal ‘dramaturgy of begging’ (AFB, 445); and even the morchas that Valmik co-ordinates are essentially orchestrated performances for political effect. Yet, less sportive characters too are caught up in the logic of performance in their daily dealings with others: the rent collector, Ibrahim is required to look menacing – a task made difficult by his rebellious smiling muscles; and Maneck’s parents feign disappointment at their son’s mediocre college marks. However, there are dangers in fostering relations based on imposed obligations and the denial of basic freedoms. This is symbolically illustrated when Monkey-man’s dog turns on the...
monkeys with whom he has been made to caper: the implication being that if you force relationships into unnatural and abusive channels, sooner or later there will be a price to pay.

Mistry does not show the political opposition with which the Emergency was met. Instead, he exposes the pomposity and absurdity of the governing regime in set piece scenes of exuberant satire. Foremost among these is the scene in which Ishvar, Om and Rajaram are dragooned into attending a rally to be addressed by the Prime Minister, in a chapter tellingly entitled ‘Day at the Circus, Night in the Slum’. The motif of performance shifts up a gear as we are introduced to the extended metaphor of the circus that accompanies the antics of Indira’s placemen and lackeys as they arrive in the slum to round up an audience. Party officials pick their way gingerly across the waterlogged terrain: ‘Their performance on the tightrope of mud soon collected a crowd. A puff of wind caught the umbrellas; the men wobbled. A stronger gust pulled them off balance.’ (AFB, 258) A ‘drumroll’ of water in an empty bucket under a tap accompanies the spokesman’s invitation to the rally, giving him the air of a barker touting at a side-show, and, when the punters prove unwilling, Sergeant Kesar waddles across the mud to direct operations, his flat feet and megaphone held like a trumpet, giving him the demeanour of a clown (AFB, 259). Ironically, Monkey-man is prohibited from bringing his monkeys in case their presence gives the Prime Minister’s address the appearance of a circus. However, the apparatchiks prove more than capable of doing this themselves, as they compete in fawning self-abasement, prostrating themselves like tumblers at the feet of their leader. The stage on which the rally is to take place is bedecked with flowers and illuminated by coloured lights, and there is even an eighty-foot cardboard-and-plywood cutout of the Prime Minister, with arms outstretched, an outline map of India forming a battered halo behind the head. Dwarfed by this paraphernalia, Indira herself, and her speech, are rather less impressive. Her gesture of flinging the garlands with which she has been overwhelmed into the crowd is not well received:
'Her father also used to do that when he was Prime Minister,' said Ishvar.

'Yes,' said Rajaram. 'I saw it once. But when he did it, he looked humble.'

'She looks like she is throwing rubbish at us,' said Om. Rajaram laughed. 'Isn't that the politician’s speciality?'

(AF, 263)

But the rally takes on a farcical air – and the parody is cranked up further – when a helicopter takes to the sky scattering packets of rose petals, one of which fails to open concussing an onlooker, and the event is blessed by a quasi-divine visitation from Sanjay Gandhi, hovering above the field in a hot-air balloon and strewing the fidgety audience with leaflets outlining the Twenty-Point Programme. The master of ceremonies surpasses himself in sycophancy: ‘“Behold! Yonder in the clouds! Oh, we are truly blessed! … Mother India sits on stage with us, and the Son of India shines from the sky upon us! What a blessed nation we are!”’ (AF, 266). The farce reaches a peak when the giant cutout, disturbed by the wind whipped up by the helicopter’s blades, topples onto the crowd below:

The crowd shouted in alarm. The figure with outstretched arms groaned, and the ropes strained at their moorings. Security men waved frantically at the helicopter while struggling to hold onto the ropes and braces. But the whirlwind was much too strong to withstand. The cutout started to topple slowly, face forward. Those in the vicinity of the cardboard-and-plywood giant ran for their lives. (AF, 267)

The rally disintegrates as ambulances arrive ‘to collect the casualties of the eighty-foot Prime Minister’s collapse’. This tour de force scene, reminiscent at times of the uproarious debunking ironies of J. G. Farrell’s The Siege of Krishnapur, can be said to be an example of how ‘national politics as symbolic display … must be fought on the symbolic level’. Thus, while Mistry’s text may not show many instances of direct opposition to the Emergency, it nevertheless participates in an essentially postcolonial subversion of power by pinpointing its excesses and absurdities.
I would argue that this subversion continues on the level of form, and can be seen in the very fabric of the narration. Although he may carefully ground his inventions and surround them with the meticulous detail characteristic of social realism, Mistry’s tone in *A Fine Balance* blends comedy with pathos, rumbustious farce with tragedy, and journalistic matter-of-factness with domestic sentimentality. In fact, his novel could be said to exemplify ‘the deliberate multi-styled and hetero-voiced nature’ Bakhtin cites as characteristic of ‘carnivalised literature’. The world of the Emergency is depicted as a carnivalesque environment where distinctions between performers and spectators have been obliterated and all participate in the carnivalistic life … ‘life turned inside out’. While it may be too much to claim that the Emergency heralds an interruption in the hierarchies normally regulating society – it is, of course, meant to have just the opposite effect – it is the case that all manner of eccentric and bizarre behaviour has been unleashed as opportunists scramble for advantage, while inappropriate speeches and performances abound as ‘the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure of ordinary … life are suspended’.

However, there is one particular scene in which the egalitarian potential of carnival appears temporarily to be realised. This occurs when the local beggars join Shankar’s funeral procession after he has been run over on his wheeled platform and crushed. In the Indian context, Sandeep Pendse has claimed that ‘Occupation of public space, at least periodically [via religious festivals, processions or demonstrations] … acts as a mechanism of assertion and cathartic release.’ Likewise, carnival allows for the reclamation of the street from the oppressors. Shankar’s funeral procession joins the protest march of disaffected citizens in *Such a Long Journey* as a mode of popular expression and an inversion of established precedence. The assembly of crippled and mutilated individuals is compared to a circus and a freak show, while the novelty of the occasion for its participants gives it the air of a festival rather than a funeral. Moving along at a snail’s pace to allow those with the worst
deformities to keep up, the ramshackle procession brings traffic to a standstill. At one point, the line of mourners is charged by a phalanx of riot police and in the mayhem Shankar’s decapitated remains tumble from the bier. Beggarmaster’s influential presence soon convinces the apologetic commanding officer of his mistake:

a report had been received on the wireless that a mock funeral was underway, intended to make some kind of political statement ... Suspicion had been aroused, in particular, by the assembly of so many beggars, he explained. ‘They were mistaken for political activists in fancy dress – troublemakers indulging in street theatre, portraying government figures as crooks and criminals embarked on beggaring the nation. You know the sort of thing.’ (AFB, 506)

The police then provide an official entourage for the remainder of the journey. Shankar’s funeral procession even offers a moment of that ritualised decrowning that Bakhtin identifies as part of carnivalised life and literature, when figures of authority are stripped of their power and ridiculed.45 Dina’s tyrannical brother Nusswan rolls up in his car and is shocked to find his sister participating in a beggar’s funeral. He demands that she get into the car at once, but Dina refuses:

Beggarmaster and the commanding officer approached them. ‘Is this man bothering you?’
‘Not at all,’ said Dina. ‘He’s my brother. He is just offering condolences for Shankar’s death.’
‘Thank you,’ said Beggarmaster. ‘May I invite you to join us?’
Nusswan faltered. ‘Uh ... I’m very busy. Sorry, another time.’ He slipped inside the car, hurriedly pulling the door shut. (AFB, 507–8)

Ultimately, the more power warps relationships the more bizarre behaviour becomes in A Fine Balance. In the Dina–tailors relationship, it is only as the co-ordinates of power begin to blur that real communication can take place and connections start to grow. In the flat that becomes home for the main
characters this thaw occurs as they traverse the increasingly porous boundaries between one another’s spaces. Tabish Khair has objected that caste and class differences mean that ‘Mistry’s main protagonists in the novel would not even be able to hold an extended, “intellectual” conversation with each other in real life – thanks to the widely separate linguistic-discursive and socio-economic spaces that they occupy.’ However, as I have indicated above, the text as a whole is concerned with probing and crossing divides such as that which Dina at first seeks to maintain. Objections such as Khair’s are, of course, predicated on a reading of the novel as simply a realist text, something that I have argued is hard to sustain given its multiform texture. The realist hand is shown again when he complains that whereas ‘Dina’s past is realistic in every classic sense of the term, the stories of … Ishvar and Omprakash borrow heavily from different genres: the fantastic, the fairy tale, newspaper reportage, etc.’ – an objection which answers itself if one accepts the idea of the novel as a generic patchwork, the literary equivalent of Dina’s quilt. *A Fine Balance* is made up of a bricollage of narrative styles at once creating and transcending verisimilitude, as well as describing transgressions across the material dividing lines of caste and class, country and city.

Two final examples should illustrate this point. In an unexpected plot twist, the lowly Shankar and the all-powerful Beggarmaster are discovered to be half brothers. The father who bore Beggarmaster also sired Shankar during a drunken encounter with the beggar’s mother, Nosey. Beggarmaster is thereafter wracked with anxiety about how to ease Shankar’s life and whether to tell him about their kinship. This unlikely turn of events spirals away from all pretence of realism and into the realm of pure symbolism. Even the names of this trio – Shankar is also known as ‘Worm’ – call forth the heightened archetypes of a morality play. If the author had wished to make his point about the moral dilemmas raised by the inevitable interconnectedness of oppressors and oppressed in a realist way he could easily have avoided such contrivances, which suggest another set of narrative priorities at work. Moreover, Mistry has decided in
this text not to specify his locations. Although the City by the Sea has the topography and many of the characteristics of Bombay, it is also allowed to resonate with the unexpected dangers of a Kafkaesque cityscape, and contains obfuscating legal labyrinths reminiscent of Dickens’s Inns of Court. More pertinently for the India of Mrs Gandhi’s time, it allows the author to bring together on one stage, so to speak, regional patterns of oppression – sterilisations and slum clearance were given special emphasis in Delhi, Haryana and U.P. The generalised locations mean that A Fine Balance takes place in a palimpsest-like ‘every space’, and the City by the Sea is Bombay and not-Bombay at the same time. Thus, it might be argued that the novel is consciously symbolic rather than historical. Taken together, the City by the Sea, the Village by a River and the Mountains, constitute an unmarked literary map of the nation as it undergoes its terrible beautification.

The practice of reading postcolonial fictions, especially those of India, as national allegories in which texts provide a focus for the exploration of national experience and characters take on a representative quality is widespread in western academia. Amit Chaudhuri, among others, has criticised this preoccupation which is accompanied by ‘the tautological idea that since India is a huge baggy monster, the novels that accommodate it have to be baggy monsters as well’, and which inscribe ‘a mimesis of form, where the largeness of the book allegorizes the largeness of the country it represents.’ Despite a length that would appear to lend itself to such a construction, A Fine Balance is more fruitfully read as one of those texts about, in Chaudhuri’s words, ‘cultures and localities that are both situated in, and disperse the idea of, the nation’. I would suggest that, pre-eminently among Mistry’s works, A Fine Balance is a narrative about the persistence, against the odds, of that form of collective life – incorporating but transcending the nation – that Michael Sprinker has identified as offering a more profitable way of conceiving the panoramic tendencies of some postcolonial fictions. Moreover, as I have argued in Fictions of India, Mistry’s position as a member of the Parsi minority
within India means that his ‘writing is able to stand as an oblique commentary on the processes of identity formation the Indian nation has undergone pre- and post-1947, based, of course, on selective inclusions and exclusions.’

As Homi Bhabha has taught us, the nation – any nation – is ‘internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference’, which challenge the crafting of legitimised, ‘authentic’ or official versions of national identity. It can be claimed that *A Fine Balance* at once allegorises national experience – in Valmik the proof-reader with his ailments figuratively linked to national decline, and in the toppling cardboard personification of India at the political rally – and reaches beyond these configurations to the daily life in which human beings live, breathe and form new combinations. Ultimately, a statement by Paul Ricoeur might serve best to illustrate the way in which narrative is always and inherently an intersubjective, communicative act:

> Storytelling displays its imaginative skill at the level of a human experience which is already ‘communalised’. Plots, characters, thematic elements, etc. are forms of a life which is really a common life. In this respect, autobiographies, memoirs, … confessions [and novels] are only subsections of a narrative arc which as a whole describes and redescribes human actions in terms of interactions.

On his return to India in the Epilogue to *A Fine Balance*, Maneck finds himself in a city now torn apart by the sectarian violence that is both a consequence of Indira Gandhi’s ill-fated introduction of a communal note into Indian politics, and a foretaste of the even more cataclysmic Bombay riots of 1992. After the Emergency, Indian politics fragmented, with parties such as the *Bahujan Samaj* emerging to articulate the claims of those, like the lower castes, previously excluded from the political scene. Some of these developments may be welcomed as having brought democracy within the reach of those effectively disenfranchised before. However, it also opened what
Rushdie has called the ‘Pandora’s Box’ of corruption and religious majoritarianism that provides the background to Mistry’s next novel, *Family Matters*. 