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Atrocities against the Underprivileged People in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* : A Study

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Abstract

The paper presents exploitation, oppression, especially evil practices of casteism and untouchability in against the Indian underprivileged people whose life is full of injustices, insecurity, anxiety, atrophy, and threat in a dominated culture represented by Rohinton Mistry in his novel *A Fine Balance*. As a social humanist, Rohinton Mistry is provoked by the atrocities against the underprivileged Indian people. Rohinton Mistry's novels deal with the life of Indian poor minority and untouchables who suffer from communal disharmony, religious Chauvinism, ethnicity and cultural diversities. The novel *A Fine Balance* records the anxieties, uneasiness, problems and the distinct identity of downtrodden people.

Key Words: exploitation, underprivileged, atrocities, casteism, Feudal

Rohinton Mistry, as a social novelist such as Mulkraj Anand, Charles Dickens, Salman Rushdie, Chaman Nahal, Thomas Hardy, etc. is provoked by the atrocities continued against the downtrodden and suffered people in India. He shows the basic ambivalence of common men, as a realist and humanist through his works. His humanistic convictions and concept of arts show his thoughts of revolutionary. There are two types of revolutions against the feudal system with caste structure and socialist revolu-

tion led by the working class against the capitalist system. Therefore, Mistry has become a spokesman of this revolution. His novels deal with major Indian social problems and imbalances of Indian society where the protagonists themselves are the downtrodden and the underdogs. His interest lies with the average people of India struggling to wrest a basic life that is brutal against the poor and downtrodden. Mistry usually speaks of his characters as though they have life of their own.

A Fine Balance, the novel routes through a series of political events on various issues such as corruption in high places, minority complexes and fragmentation of the social order. However, this novel is not merely a political novel. *A Fine Balance* reflects the reality of India's the greedy politics of corruption, oppression, exploitation and violence. The author succeeds interweaving national history with the personal life of the protagonists. Mistry's strong opposition to social and class differences have extended the spectrum of contemporary reality through this novel. The narrative centres within urban setting that is the tiny cramped house of Dina Dalal in Bombay. The novel also offers an insight into rural India that focusing on injustice, cruelty and horror of deprivation.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry portrays atrocities committed on two untouchables from a village and suffering of the poor characters from Parsi community. Mistry uses four main characters a woman and three men, and a handful of extraordinary minor ones. Each of the four protagonists has their own story and the characters begin to live together under one roof in the city. The novel is about sufferings and pains of the poor people and individuals. The novel is wonderful presentation of three major themes. Then, this novel blends political history with the personal life of the individuals. The first is the life of middle class and urban world, Dina Dalal. She is a pretty widow in her forties who is struggling hard to lead an independent life. Second,

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there is another world symbolized by Maneck Kohlah, a sensitive Parsi boy. He feels life a great burden to lead and lift. The last, the novel focuses another sight into rural India provided by Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omprakash, untouchables, who struggle to exist in this world.

The two untouchables have to endure the atrocities of the high class people and political power and their future becomes miserable. Due to economic and social reasons are displaced them from their familiar world. Even after, they become fully qualified tailors and return to their village and they are deeply conscious of their own roots in the society. After their entire family is cruelly murdered by village landlords and they decide to emigrate to Bombay for the survival. One of the Characters, Rajaram who says, "Thousands and thousands are coming to the city because of bad times in their native place. I came for the same reason." (AFB, 171) Their life in Bombay is contrary to their expectations that symbolize the anguish, pain and anxiety of people cut off from their native villages. Like roamers, they move from their slum to the railway platform, then to the entrance of a chemist's shop where they are mistaken for beggars. The police compelled them to slog as labourers and finally released from that hell by the Beggarmaster. They are caught in an unavoidable dilemma between their native village and Bombay. They throw out from their native because it holds no promise or hope to survive. In Bombay, again they have failed and struggled to survive and stay on as trivial men.

Poverty drives the untouchables to depend upon the higher caste people to feed their family. For example, The Thakur obtains cheap labour from the lower caste villagers. When the workers demand their due wages, they are threatened with violence. Dukhi Mochi accepts to pack the Chillies alone for small wage. Though, the Thakur asks him, "Can you finish that by sunset?... 'Or maybe I should call two men" (AFB, 103). There is class and communal

intolerance because of birth and profession. Dukhi is treated slightly better than an animal but not certainly as a human being. So Dukhi Mochi decides to change his profession for these reasons of humiliations. Then he migrates to the nearby city and becomes a cobbler. Fortunately, he meets his Muslim friend named Ashraf, tailor of his family. The lower castes and classes need radical changes and revolutions but there is no compassion and the charity of the upper classes. Dukhi works hard towards an individual revolution and breathing with lifelong traditions. Thus, Dukhi decides to send his sons with Ashraf to apprentice as tailors. Now, Dukhi violates caste rules by making his sons as tailors in which his tendency shows surprising courage of a suffered one. It soon became known in Dukhi's village that his children were learning a trade other than leather-working. In the olden days, punishment for stepping outside one's caste would have been death. Dukhi was spared his life, but it became a very hard life. He was allowed no more carcasses, and had to travel long distances to find work. Sometimes he obtained to hide secretly from fellow chamaars; it would have been difficult for them if they were found out. The items he fashioned from this illicit leather had to be sold in far-off places where they had not heard about him and his sons. (AFB, 118-19)

Dukhi recalls his younger days in which Bhola, Dosu, Gambhir, Dayeram, Sita, Dhiraj, Bhungi, and others are suffered by the hands of zamindars. It is used to know the stories of atrocities committed on the chamaars by the upper class zamindar. It is a feeling or a word of his father to be the truth of his existence.

Religion based sexual exploitation is one of the major perspectives of Rohinton Mistry. In *A Fine Balance*, the Guard in the orchard is so victim of the social exception, a domestic woman is also subjected to: 'One shout from me and they will come running'... 'I only have to shout, and the owner and his sons would be here at

once. They would strip you and whip you for stealing'... They would take turns doing shameful things to your lovely soft body... 'I don't have anything. That's why I came here in the night, for the sake of my child'... 'I only have to shout once', he warned, and slipped his hand inside her blouse... Take off your clothes'... She wept softly while undressing and lay down as he instructed. She continued to weep during the time he moved and patted on top of her. She heard the breeze rustle the leaves in trees that stood like worthless sentinels. Dukhi pretended to be asleep as she entered the hut. He heard her muffled sobs several times during the night, and knew, from her smell, what had happened to her while she was gone... He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night. (AFB, 98-99) Roopa's exploitation by the watchman of the rich man's orchard is Mistry's harsh comment in the manner of untouchability.

Dukhi's wife Roopa is raped by the zamindar's gardener and it does not get justice on her because they are only low-caste people.

Another low caste character Budhu's wife who is naked in the village street by zamindar. Then, Dukhi's father remarks that the punishment granted to Budhu's wife as: She refused to go to the field with the zamindar's son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square. (AFB, 97)

Yet another low caste character Bhola's left hand fingers are cut off because he is accused for stealing. No, it is Bhola's turn. But where he was working, they accused him of stealing...they chopped off his left-hand fingers today'. 'Bhola is Lucky', said Dukhi's mother, 'Last year chhagan lost his hand at the wrist. Same reason'... Dosu got a whipping for getting too close to the well. (AFB, 96)

The upper caste people punish the lower caste people severely which is inhuman for the minor crimes they commit either knowingly or unknowingly. He wants to stop this communal

fault line of humiliation to survive in the village. Particularly, this is a moving section of the novel that brings the dirty life conditions of the lower caste in rural India. Thus, Dukhi decides to send Narayan and Ishvar as apprentices of Ashraf's tailor shop in a nearby town. They live and learn tailoring with Ashraf chacha for years and they turn from cobblers to tailors. Dukhi utters, if someone asks your name, don't say Ishvar Mochi or Narayan Mochi. From now on you are Ishvar Darji and Narayan Darji. (AFB, 115)

Thereafter, Ishvar and Narayan return to their village to set up business and everything appears peaceful. The Chamaars come into conflict with the land lords, Zamindars and the Thakurs during the general elections. Narayan's own tailor shop and his questions against misuse the caste system are not tolerated by the majority community. Here, Mistry gives graphic details of ruthless exploitation, tortures, booth rigging, and sufferings of the poor and the down-trodden. Even after twenty years of independence nothing changes. Narayan says: "Government passes new laws say no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals'... 'More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like...' (AFB, 142-43) Narayan argues with officers that as a chamaar, he cannot still drink water at the village well, worship in the temples of the upper castes, or walk where he likes.

His desire for his rights to vote is taken wrong by the Thakur's men. Narayan and his two companions are cruelly tortured by Thakur and they are hanged in the village square. Other untouchables are beaten up at random, their women are raped and their huts are burnt down. Thakur decides that Dukhi's family deserves special punishment. His arrogance went against everything we hold sacred. What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asun-

der; he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society's timeless balance. Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity, said the Thakur. (AFB, 147) Dukhi, Roopa, Radha, and the daughters along with Narayan's dead body are burnt alive at the command of the Thakur. When he attempts to assert his right to vote, Thumbprint? I will sign my full name. After you give me my ballot'. Two men in the line behind Narayan were inspired by him. 'Yes, give us our ballots, they said. 'We also want to make our mark'. 'We cannot do that, we don't have instructions'. 'You don't need instructions'. It is our right as voters'... 'After we vote'. This time he did not laugh, but raised his hand as though in farewell and left the booth. The men seized Narayan and the other two. They forced their thumbs to the ink pad and completed the registration. Thakur Dharamsi whispered to his assistant to take the three to his form... his men urinated on the three inverted faces... after the ballot boxes were taken away, burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away. The still silent bodies were hanging down from the tree. When they began to stir, the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks, and the three were hanged. (AFB, 145-46)

Shameful and horrible murders of Narayan and his companions are always the hapless victims at the hands of the heartless upper caste. Above this incident is not a socially and morally acceptable one. The untouchables lose their identities as human beings because of mistaken beliefs for them.

The lower castes are beaten, tortured and killed for a number of minor offences. This curse of untouchability is deeply rooted in the Hindu psyche. The untouchable children are very eager to learn like the upper caste children. But they are punished brutally beaten up by the teacher. This kind of bold insults show the sup-

pressed and oppressed people's mental aggression towards the upper caste. Shameless little donkeys! Off with you or I'll break your bones!... 'You Chamaar rascals? Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school!' He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry. The schoolchildren fearfully huddled together. 'Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of learning and knowledge?... 'Wanted to look! Well, I will show you now! I will show you the back of my hand! Holding on to Narayan, he slapped six times in quick succession across the face, then delivered the same number to his brother's face. (AFB, 109-10)

The novel mainly presents realistic picture of the untouchable people who became the victims of the political as well as social uncertainties. In India the Feudal system has been dominating the social structure for centuries. Mistry raises some problems of cultural crisis which are the main issues under the subaltern studies. Imbalances in society often gives rise to unrest in the National life as well as social structure in so called democratic and secular nation, India. It is the need of time to steam out the hatred, religious chauvinism and misconceptions through proper channels and sustain peace and prosperity.

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