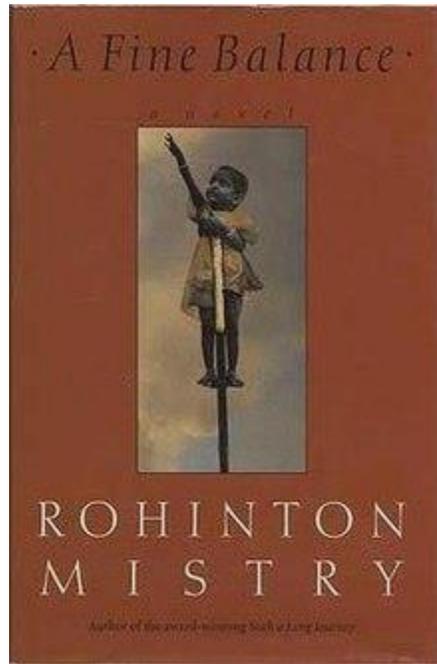


The Concept of Untouchability in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*
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Abstract

The concept of untouchability is a practice in which some lower caste people are kept at a distance being ignored by higher caste people. It also refers to a group of people who are marginalized, oppressed, and exploited by these social structures. Some of the writers in Indian literature are giving voice for untouchability through their writing. Like Bama, Spivak, Raja Roa, Kamala Markandaya, Rohinton Mistry, and so on. Rohinton Mistry is a writer of Indian Diaspora and his writings reflect the crisis of self-identity and aspects of immigration. He belongs to Parsi community of Indian origin who migrated to Canada in his early twenties. This Paper intends to study the social status of subalterns during the emergency period that is represented in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. It represents a clear picture of Indian Political and historical facts about the life of subaltern people. This paper shows how the common people of India are changed as subalterns and the paper further intends to explore the tragic life of four major different characters who belong to different social classes. Mistry brings out the oppressed condition of the common people in India.

Kew words: Untouchability, caste, marginalized, oppressed, exploited, Subalter, Diaspora

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry, born in Bombay and now resident in Canada. He was born into the Parsi community of Bombay on 3 July 1952. He was the second of four children, three boys and a girl. Rohinton's father was an advertising account executive, and he recalls his mother, happy in the role of nurturer 'doing the miracle that all mothers perform of making what was barely enough seem like abundance. Mistry draws his inspiration both from sharply recalled childhood experiences and from the upheavals of migration. His writings always with such intense and apparently personal narratives, the relationship between fiction and autobiography is hard to determine. Mistry can offer a unique perspective on the multiple accommodations involved in the construction of identities. Search for identity as a key theme in his works and is seen in both personal and national terms. His writing provides a wry, but occasionally tragic perspective on the postcolonial nation of India: a perspective from the margins, so to speak. Mistry interest in his writings lies with the average people of India struggling to wrest a basic life that is brutal against the poor and downtrodden. He usually speaks of his characters as though they have life of their own. His characters actions are very clear, but their motives are always disputable. Mistry's strong opposition to social and class differences have extended the spectrum of contemporary reality through this novel.

Triumph of Fictional Art

Mistry writings accomplishes the most convincing manner without straining the credibility of the reader, a real triumph of his fictional art. Raymond William in his book *Realism and Contemporary Novel* comments on Mistry's novels deals about the realist tradition of India. He remarks:

When I think of the realist tradition I fiction, I think of the kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons. The balance involved in this achievement in perhaps the most important thing, the sort of the things most novels do.... Yet the distinction of this kind is that it offers a valuing of a whole way of life, a society that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, at the same time valuing creations of human beings who, while belonging to and affected by and helping to define this way of life, are also, in their own terms, absolute ends in themselves. (314).

A Fine Balance

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry has made a conscious effort to embrace more of the social reality of India, so although the novels open with a Parsi woman Dina Dalal's story in Bombay, it soon enlarges its scope to include her lodger Maneck Kholah from a Hill station in North India and her tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, who are come from a village. The narrative also encompasses what Walter Benjamin has called the city poet's special concern with rag pickers, beggars, and suicide victims/heroes. As their tragic tales unfold, one gets the impression that Mistry's novel is attempting to articulate the silence of centuries of exploitation, domination, and oppression of the poorest of the poor of India. This novel was published in the year 1995 and has won the prestigious Giller Prize.

Three Aspects

A Fine Balance demonstrates three things with respect to caste. First of all, the novel explores the effects of untouchability on individuals. It explores the injustice of caste and probes the implications of defying it. While Narayan opts for political resistance, Om and Ishvar suffer from escape and exile. Secondly, *A Fine Balance* makes clear that while loyalty and trust in the socio-cultural system of religion are undermined, Hinduism is not necessarily affected by this. Thirdly, the gruesome practice of caste as a cultural system is more prevalent in a rural context than in an urban one. Williams Raymond portrays the Diasporic elements of common people to survive that, Mistry being a Diaspora writer and Parsis sensitive to the conditions of those who do not belong to the marginalized people have to struggle twice as hard for what come with lesser effort to those belonging to the mainstream because 65 strength with them and also because unable to fully comprehend and appreciate the socio-cultural context of the situation in which they are placed, these people constantly experience fear, alienation, rejection and insecurity. (Raymond, 301)

Representation of Dalits

The present paper focusses on how Mistry portrays the representations of Dalits in *A Fine Balance* brings a sensible and sensitive understanding of social exploitation inherent in the class structure of India and points out how a marginalized person loses his individual identity. As a humanist and social novelist, it becomes easier for Mistry to describe the dignity, value, freedom of the individual human being with their identity. The reason being the search for the individual and social identities, is palpable in Mistry's works. As Narayan states: "Life without dignity is worthless" (144). The characters face the consequences of their beliefs in the end which is brutal and tragic.

The novel also illustrates the deeper insight of political activity, and struggle of suffering people. It focuses on the deep structure of the individual's existences of human life. *A Fine Balance* is taken up for analyzing the human suffering in which Mistry ultimately gives a space of endless suffering of the individuals. Mistry's novels mostly depicts with all the problems which a normal person faces in his or her life and also voice the lower class people are being oppressed by upper class people not only in their personal life and also socially, politically and economically. Mistry characters are fight against an aggressive social environment to create a new world and freedom. In his novels the characters are very young and middle/low class people. His novels deal; with major Indian social problems and imbalances of Indian society where the protagonists themselves are the downtrodden and the underdogs.

Prominent Characters

The Hindus, Omprakash and Ishvar Darji occupy prominent positions in *A Fine Balance* in so far as both are crucial in illustrating the novel's central concern of how to make life livable under unfavourable conditions and adverse circumstances. One aspects is of particular importance in this context: India's cruelest social constraint- caste. Any discussion of the effects of caste on Ishvar and Om must necessarily include their family background. It starts from Dukhi Mochi, Ishvar's father and Omprakash's grandfather. Dukhi Mochi belongs to the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather workers. Together with the other Chammars in the village, Dukhi lives on the carcasses of dead animals. Untouchability is a stigma; other castes avoid contact with Dukhi

because he is deemed impure. The caste divisions in the village strifle Dukhi, but he remains patient and cautions and not enrage the upper class villagers so that he can live safely. Simple incidents like Dukhi a Chammar having two sons and the upper class producing none becomes an issue and they connive to disrupt it. Those in the highest social hierarchy in the social order seriously ruminates and decide to whip the world into shape by enforcing a stricter “Dharmic Order” (101), which means more flogging and pain for the Chammar.

The abandoning of “the leather for choli “(113), brings prosperity for Iswar and Narayan. After the required apprenticeship Narayan decides to stay in the village and Iswar decides to stay with Asharaf. The Chammar who are used to wear the tatters thrown away the upper caste people are now eager to have dress tailored for them. Soon Narayan becomes a representative figure of the community. Narayan’s success is similar to that of Omprakash Valmiki’s autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* expresses that: “the personal success is interpreted as a success for the community” (36).

As Narayan astutely develops the skills of tailoring, he secures comfortable living for Om, his son. Following his father’s footsteps, he goes to Asharaf’s shop to be trained as a tailor. Dukhi’s status in the Chammar community rises but nothing else changes. Things like caste discrimination remain strong as Narayan laments: “But what about the more important things? Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything the same in the upper class... they still treat us worse than animals “(112). Anger bubbles up within him and frustration leads him to become defiant. He voices his deep-seated desire thus: “I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like” (142).

Though Narayan was killed because of his involvement in anti-Emergency activities, the officials projected his death as an accident. Mistry raises doubts regarding such political murders: “The police claimed it was a railway accident, but the parents spoke of wounds they had seen on their son’s body at the morgue. According to the reporter, the injuries were the injuries were consistent with other confirmed incidents of torture” (584). Through this passage, the novelist records that such political murders were very common during Emergency and people like Narayan is not able to do anything to protect their lives. The lives of individuals were affected relentlessly due to Emergency though they were not related to politics even indirectly. For example, Omprakash and Ishwar, the tailors were forcefully taken to the Prime Minister’s against their wish.

Conclusion

The Dalits life highlighted in *A Fine Balance* reveals the growing voice of the Untouchable people in India. Through Mistry’s vivid and picturesque descriptions of the conditions of the untouchables, he illustrates how mainstream literature has gone to merge untouchability in the content. *A Fine Balance* between hope and despair; the novel ends certainly on an optimistic and hopeful note. By analyzing the characters, the concept of untouchability is well demonstrated. *A Fine Balance*’s broader scope shifts the focus away from a single community to a variety of communities within multicultural India. The sociological interest in how people construct meaning in world otherwise impossible to bear remains constant throughout Mistry’s narratives. The mentality of the people has to change in respect to caste discrimination to abolish untouchability completely.

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