



Caste Consciousness in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Vimhalie Kense

Mphil Scholar

English Department

ICFAI University Dimapur

Abstract:

Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* has been remarkable for its stark representation of the common people in a caste-ridden society. The novel also entails the afflictions undergone by the marginalized section of society during the time of the National Emergency implemented by the government for a period of 21 months during the year 1975 to 1977. Mistry's characters consist of the common people whose lives were crippled with rigid social and political norms. Incidences in the novel reflect the anguish and resentments of the common people who suffer because of caste violence and political injustice. The paper intends to bring out the growing awareness of the Dalits about their status and identity in a rigid caste society which is reflected from Mistry's characters in the novel.

Keywords: Consciousness, marginalized, untouchability, caste system, rigidity, awareness, identity.

Mistry's *A Fine Balance* dwells on the wretched living condition of the commoners and emphasizes the misery of the marginalized through the art of characterization. The novel is set in the city of Bombay but through the story of the two tailors Om and Ishvar, it takes us to a village by the river where the rigid caste system of rural India is exposed. The chapter "In a Village by a River" deals with the story of the outcastes and the everyday sufferings of the untouchables at the hands of the upper castes who endure and comply with the rigid caste norms in their struggle for survival. This chapter revolves around the adversities and struggles faced by Dukhi Mochi and his Chamaar friends living in a hegemonic society controlled by the upper castes. And as the story progresses, the readers are immersed into a cruel and hostile world of the

untouchables who undergo constant violence which is portrayed in a detailed and vivid manner by Mistry. For instance, caste violence can be observed from the following lines:

For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death-the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dharayam, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord's field, had been forced to eat the landlord's excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows and had him hanged. (Mistry, *A Fine Balance*, p.108-109)

However, the main objective of this paper is on the issue of caste consciousness constructed through Mistry's characters. In the caste hierarchy, a person's identity is determined by birth because of the hereditary system they follow. The belief in reincarnation is justified by a person's deeds in the previous life. In *A Fine Balance*, the bold decision of Dukhi Mochi, a cobbler who attempts to change his sons' profession to that of a tailor in the hope of upgrading in order to escape the ferocious treatments of the upper castes can be observed from the perspective of caste consciousness. This is because Dukhi had spent his whole life living in compliance with the tradition of the caste system whose occupation as a cobbler was already preordained by birth in a caste hierarchy. Dukhi's awareness and experiences about the humiliations and subjugations for being an untouchable had prompted him to break the timeless chain of caste by apprenticing his sons Ishvar and Narayan to a tailor friend named Ashraf Chacha. Regardless of the consequences that he has to go through for changing the status quo of his sons, Dukhi did it with courage and determination knowing that his children will not undergo the same kind of sufferings that he endured at the hands of the upper castes throughout his life. The following passage reflects Dukhi's struggle for changing his son's profession:

It soon became known in Dukhi's village that his children were learning a trade other than leather-working. In the old 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. (*A Fine Balance*, p-118)

The growing awareness about the inhumane practice of untouchability in a caste system can also be observed in the novel through a speech made by the leaders of the Indian National Congress about the disease of untouchability. For instance,

But how can we even start to be strong when there is a disease in our midst?... What is this disease? you may ask. This disease, brothers and sisters, is the notion of untouchability, ravaging us for centuries, denying dignity to our fellow human beings. This disease must be purged from our society, from our hearts, and from our minds. (*A Fine Balance*, p-107)

The Election rallies campaigned for this cause, reaching out to the rural areas to spread awareness about the fallacious practice of untouchability that had been persistent in the rural parts of Indian society despite its abolishment. The campaign can be observed as a realization about the hegemonic culture of the caste system that disintegrates society. The lines, “We are taking this message across the nation, and asking people everywhere to unite and fight this ungodly system of bigotry and evil” (108) exemplifies the efforts being made to create awareness in society so as to create consciousness among the people about their identity and individualism.

The same awareness can also be perceived as an influence on Dukhi Mochi in his decision to change his sons’ profession from a lowly cobbler to a remotely elevated tailor. After their apprenticeship to become a tailor, his son, Narayan returns home and is able to be self-reliant from his earnings. This experience makes him realize the oppressions that the upper caste practices over the downtrodden. No longer dependent on the mercy of the upper castes, Narayan attempts to take a step towards asserting his identity in society. Eventually, his individualism made him conscious of his identity and his rights as a fellow human being. This consciousness made him resolve to cast his own vote in the election:

Next time there is an election, I want to mark my own ballot . . . it is still my right. And I will exercise it in the next election, I promise you. (*A Fine Balance*, p-144)

In the novel, Mistry weaves the character of Roopa around the enviroing inexorability of the caste system. Roopa’s character entails the age-old tradition of embracing the iniquities being meted by the victims of the social system while still continuing to victimize those underprivileged almost unintentionally mimicking the unfavorable etiquettes of the upper castes wherein the oppressed become the oppressors. Although the Dalits themselves experience manipulation and dominance, they follow the traits of the upper castes, considering it as village ways. For instance, Roopa upholds a strong sense of caste tradition and is displeased if not followed which is seen in her treatment of a Bhunghi in the novel:

We are not going to deal with such low-caste people! How can you even think of measuring someone who carts the shit from people’s houses? (*A Fine Balance*, p-132)

On the other hand, Narayan's response to sew for anybody serves as an epitome of egalitarianism. His perception about equality is perceived from the following comment, “I think I should sew for anybody who comes to me, Brahmin or Bhunghi”(134) and it shows his growing consciousness about the tyranny of the conventional tradition.

The character of Narayan might as well be adjudged as a contemporary figure representing the voice of the Dalits. “It is our right as voters” (145) marks his momentous defiance to cast his own vote undeterred by the dangers and the consequences of going against the upper castes which reveal to the readers the growing understanding of the lower castes about their own rights as a fellow citizen living in a society. Though his attempt to assert his right led to the consequence of his death along with his entire family except Om and Ishvar, Narayan embodies characteristics crucial to the making of a modern hero who understands his rights and is unwilling to compromise it for anything.

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