

Representation of the Untouchable/subalterns in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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This paper intends to study the representation of untouchables in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995). In Modern India, the concept of untouchability draws an enormous attention from the civilized society for cruel, inhuman and violent physical and psychological treatment of the lower class/caste people. Although this concept is fully man made from ancient time, the society as well as upper class (which possess power and position), have absorbed it as a stereo typed ideology to subjugate the untouchables in economy, politics and society until the present time. My wish is to highlight the harsh reality of the suppression; struggle and torture dalits face every day of their miserable lives. This paper systematically set out to destabilize hegemonies based on cast, gender and class. I am particularly interested in the use of the idea of tragedy on Mistry's novel. The present paper explores the humiliation, torture and problems of residence faced by untouchables. Mistry provides adequate number of incidents which throw light on the overflowing stream of humanity, existing in these human beings, whom society treats worse than animals.

The novel records the heinous system of caste dissimulation practiced in Indian society. For several millennia caste constituted the core of social life in India. It dictated the occupation and

the social interaction of a person. Nicholas Direks in his introduction to *Colonialism and Culture* remarks, "...Culture in India seems to have been principally defined by caste. Caste has always been seen as central in Indian history and as one of the major reasons why India has no history, no sense of history. Caste defines the core of Indian tradition, and caste is today- as it was throughout the colonial era- the major threat to Indian Modernity." (8)

Ishvar and Om belong to the lowest caste in Hindu Verna System- the Chamaars (cobblers) in this novel. Their shift in trade from animal skin cleaner to tailoring changes their identity. They were known as Ishvar Darji and Om Darji instead of Ishvar Mochi and Om Mochi. But the route through which they reached this new identity passed through the humiliation of their ancestors. Dukhi, Ishvar, Narayan and Om all belong to the cobbler community. Dukhi is the father of Ishvar and Narayan. Om is the son of Narayan. Ishvar prefers to remain a bachelor. All belong to the untouchable caste and the brutality and arbitrariness that characterizes their treatment is depicted in the following quotation.

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. Dayaram, 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 the 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. (108-9)

Similarly Munshi Prem Chand, Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy also depicted the condition of untouchable in Indian social system through their characters in novels. Dukhi in *Sadgati*, Bakha in *Untouchable* and Velutha in *The God of Small Things* - all belong to the lowest section of Indian society - are exploited, ostracized and socially excluded. Dukhi in Prem Chand's *Sadgati* belongs to the untouchable chamar (cobbler) caste. His meager life is made difficult by social forces he does not understand. Bakha is an untouchable, a scavenger, the son of the jemadar, the sweeper of the town. His job is to clean three rows of latrines several times in the whole course of the day single-handedly and he is subjected to the most inhuman treatment and called with derogatory terms like "Dirty dog! Son of bitch! Offspring of pig!" (*Untouchable* 18).

Velutha, a 'paravan' in *The God of Small Things* is also an embodiment of extreme social discrimination, humiliation and poverty. "The treatment meted out to Velutha reflects the curse of untouchability ingrained not only in the Hindu society but also in the Christian society" (Jha 52). As Arundhati Roy herself describes Velutha in the novel *The God of Small Things*:

As a young boy, Velutha would come with Vellya Peppen to the back entrance of the Ayemenem House to deliver the coconuts they had plucked from the trees in the compound. Pappachi would not allow paravans into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. (73)

These novelists - Munshi Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand and Arundhati Roy - also expose the curse of untouchability prevailing in Indian Society.

Low-caste and poverty forms a deadly combination in the novel. Dukhi's wife, to satiate the hunger of the children was trying to steal mangoes from a garden belonging to an upper caste feudal landlord. She was caught and raped. Dukhi silently suffers humiliation. Thus in the night, when Dukhi's wife was raped, he "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...He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night" (99). This incident in the novel reveals that the untouchable subaltern can't raise their voice; they can only surrender and bear everything in silent agony.

As the saying goes, the 'sins' of the parents visited on their children. Dukhi's sons Ishvar and Narayan are beaten up for entering the village school because both were very curious to get the knowledge which was distributed without any restriction to the upper caste children. The route highlighted in the narrative towards a betterment of the Dalits traces its roots back to the previous century when Jotirao Phule, in his seminal work *Shetkaryacha Asud* (1881), exemplified education as the recourse to

overpower and overthrow the Brahminical framework in life and culture. In Prologue he says:

Without education wisdom was lost; without wisdom morals were lost; without morals development was lost; without development wealth was lost; without wealth, the sudras were ruined; so much has happened through lack of education. (117)

Similarly, another Dalit- writer, Om Prakash Valmiki, stresses that- education alone can save one from going astray and that it alone can bring about a 'fine balance' in society, especially Indian society. However, it is skeptical that only education of Dalits can prove to be a decisive instrument to freedom and space. Valmiki also throws light on what education alone tends to do when he says, "The dalits who have become educated face a terrible crisis—the crisis of identity—and they are trying to find an easy and instantaneous way to get out of the crisis. They have started to use their family gotra as their surname after just a lit the bit of fine tuning" (126) fearing that the savarnas will still reject them if they know of their caste. Education, alone, becomes a tool that subdues further because the basti then becomes unlivable for them and they try to escape their identity in favor of a better financial and social status by hiding their caste. "Not only publishers, my family had begun to be bothered by my surname" (125) to the extent that it became a vicious secret to be guarded with zealously lest the evil lurks out.

Dukhi's sons, Ishvar and Narayan are very eager to learn like the upper caste children, but because of their caste, beaten up by the teacher:

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, and then delivered the same number to his brother's face. (109-10)

Such callousness on the part of upper caste people is responsible for the mental aggression of the Dalits against them. Dukhi approaches Pandit Lalluram for justice about whom it is said that, "even an untouchable could receive justice at his hands" (112). However, Pandit Lalluram turns out to be an extension of the teacher.

He makes Dukhi to realize that justice is a concept which he as an untouchable does not have a claim to. Being outside society, Dukhi is also considered outside the scope of justice. Mistry's portrayal satirises Pandit Lalluram as an unmannered, voracious reactionary who is not interested in justice for all:

Relying on this legendary reputation for justice, Dukhi sat at Pandit Lalluram's feet and told him about the beating of Ishvar and Narayan. The learned man was resting in an armchair, having just finished his dinner, and belched loudly several times during his visitor's narration. Dukhi paused politely at each eructation, while Pandit Lalluram murmured 'Hai Ram' in thanks for an alimentary tract blessed with such energetic powers of digestion. (112)

The injustice done to Ishvar and Narayan and their futile efforts to get it, deprive Dukhi of meaning and fulfillment with the life he leads as an untouchable. Because the system disregards his hope of transcending himself in his children, Dukhi, for the first time in his life, questions his classification with the order of caste.

He revolts, and ultimately transgresses the boundaries of caste, a reaction that becomes clear in the decision to remove his sons from the direct impact of discrimination. He has taken the first step towards realizing his 'self', and the quest for 'self-realization' is marked by the urge to be free. So to him 'Freedom' means "the individual coming to terms with his own past and with himself, accepting his limitations and going on from there, however terrified he may be" (Harishankar, 10).

As a result of this awakened sense of the 'self', he decided to send his children Ishvar and Naryan to learn tailoring. Dukhi Mochi by circumstances was forced to take his decision when he saw fate of his community getting from bad to worse. His decision did not gather much support among his people for they feared that it would bring the wrath of the upper castes not only on the family but on the community as well:

'Dukhi Mochi has gone mad, ' they lamented. 'With wide open eyes he is bringing destruction upon his household.' And consternation was general throughout the village: someone had dared to break the timeless chain of caste; retribution was bound to be swift. (95)

A heavy price he had to pay for the blasphemed and society did not forgive such breaches of conduct: "There was a proper place for everyone in the world, and as long as each one minded his place, they would endure and emerge unharmed through the Darkness of Kaliyug. But if

there were transgressions- if the order was polluted, - there was no telling what calamities might befall the Universe" (100-101).

The notion which is ingrained in the psychology of the untouchables is that due to karma in previous life they took birth in this world, in this particular caste. In order to keep the subjugated it is propagated by the upper caste people that the existing state of affairs is 'divinely ordained' rather than man-made and that are not allowed to break free of the chains and, finally, that the onus of keeping the society in order lies on the Thakurs and the Pundits. Here in contrast the idea of Foucault:

"challenges the idea that power is wielded by people or groups by way of 'episodic' or 'sovereign' acts of domination or coercion, seeing it instead as dispersed and pervasive. 'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure" (63).

The Indian society that boasts of a democratic order where each individual is supposed to be enjoying an equal status- socially if not economically- is actually two-faced one. Mistry reflects upon the dynamics of caste as it prevails in the Indian society. Social hierarchies in terms of gender and caste are debated in this novel. Only an eyewitness could have given these details of the Indian society. Mistry here not only takes the face off the Indian democratic society, but also raises the question of how unconscious we are to the practices carried out in the social system. Through his stark and pithy narrative, he brings to the fore the miserable condition of these people living on the margins, leading a life dictated by the upper castes- a life devoid of any hope for change. This hopelessness makes Dukhi decide in favor of a

different life for his sons Ishvar and Narayan. He sends them to a nearby town to apprentice as tailors with his friend Ashraf. While handing over his son to Ashraf, Dukhi tends to change the identity of his sons too. He says: 'Ashraf chacha is going to turn you into tailors like him. From now on, you are not cobblers – if someone asks your name, don't say Ishwar Mochi and Narayan Mochi. From now on you are Ishvar Darji and Narayan Darji' (115).

Mistry criticizes in the novel the leaders in our political system. Politicians pretend to be the guardians of democracy and every time they speak, they vouchsafe for changing the world-selling a utopian dream to the native commoner. These self-styled harbingers of a new world order are people far removed from the harsh ground realities that the common person lives every day.

The dimension that Mistry delineates is the political and social interface, where the seasoned politician beguiles the common people. Mistry gives one such incident where a leader tries to rekindle the spirit of the people reviving in them the freedom struggle moments and telling them how his party was with the people in their fight for justice: "First we must rid of this disease that plagues the body of our motherland... 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...They would clap, and go on in the same old way"(107-108).

No change occurs. Life goes on moving as it is. Self-made revolutionaries like Dukhi seem to have brought not a speck of change in social system. Atrocity works as it is and 'all is well with

the world'. Caste discrimination in Hindu society is similar to the racial discrimination practiced in the West. The episodes of violence against humanity leave the marginalized with no choice but to switch off trade and shift ground. Mistry not only portrays life as a constant struggle to keep head above water but also depicts desperate attempts to hold on to even a single straw that gives the marginalized some hope. Through this novel Mistry becomes the voice of the less fortunate ones. Somewhere in the narrative, we hear echoes of restraint, which was a part of all marginalized existence: "They knew exactly what their caste permitted or prohibited, instinct and eavesdropping on the conversation of elders had demarcated the borders in their consciousness as clearly as stone walls..." (108).

Ishwar Darji and Narayan Darji enjoyed good time with Ashraf in town. After learning the trade of tailoring, Narayan, the elder son of Dukhi, decides to go back to his village to practice the trade. And soon becomes a figure among the ciphers. He flourishes in his trade as a tailor and as a family man. The upper castes are not able to digest the transgression made by Narayan. During the elections, Narayan makes another deviation from the accepted norms of social propriety when - he declared- "Next time there is an election, I want to mark my own ballot" (144). Mistry gives graphic details of ruthless exploitation, tortures, booth rigging, and sufferings of the poor and the downtrodden. Even after twenty years of independence nothing has changed. Narayan says:

Government passes new laws, says 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. (142)

This constituted an open challenge to the upper caste people. The elders of the village tried to knock sense into him by discouraging him from making such utterances: “they won’t let you’, said Dukhi, ‘and why bother? You think it will change anything. Your gesture will be a bucket falling in a well deeper than centuries, the splash won’t be seen or heard” (144). So deeply ingrained in caste consciousness in Dukhi that he, ironically give the same advice to his son as was done by his community members when he had sent his own sons to learn the new trade of tailoring in the town.

Narayan’s father tells his son, “you changed from chamaar to tailor. Be satisfied with that” (143). Narayan is educated and he wants to exercise his rights. Actually he wants to participate in the election as a voter but his name does not figure in the list. His protests fall on deaf ears. When he along with two other persons insists on casting the vote, all hell breaks loose. They are beaten up, tortured and finally killed by Thakur Dharmshi’s henchmen. The way they are killed is nothing short of savagery:

Thakur Dharamsi whispered to his assistant to take the three to his farm... 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. (145-46)

Other untouchables who had come to cast their vote are beaten up at random, their women are raped and their huts are burnt down. Thakur believes that Dukhi, Narayan’s father, is the root cause of the problem because he has violated and dared to subvert the age old practice/custom by training son as tailors. He therefore, decides that Dukhi deserves special punishment. He says: “His arrogance went against everything we hold sacred. What the ages had put together, Dukhi had dared to break asunder; he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society’s timeless balance by crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity” (147). Dukhi, Roopa, Radha, and the daughters along with Narayan’s dead body are burnt alive.

In spite of all the laws and the political propaganda, caste hierarchies are very much a reality and are still operative in the villages, which are evident from Narayans’s fatal rebellion and the repercussions thereof – his family is burnt alive and no case reported against anyone. Ishvar Darji and his nephew started a new life in town. They left their uncle Ashraf’s home and wanted to live an independent life. In search of job they reach the home of another Subaltern Dina Dalal.

Mistry’s characters are solo crusaders and warriors in their own right and Mistry tries and succeeds to a great extent to strike a fine balance between hope and despair. Ishwar and Om struggle by crossing the caste barriers and trying to make a good living out of their new found social status as tailors. All characters of this novel suffer from a sense of rootlessness. The ‘Emergency’ intrudes into the lives of all these characters leading them to near destruction. Wadhawan in *Parsi Community and the Challenges of Modernity: A Reading of Rohinton Mistry’s Fiction* remarks:

A Fine Balance gives hideous particulars of the iniquitous Emergency imposed by the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi in 1975 and especially it projects the lives of the four unfortunate people namely Dina Dalal, Omprakash, Ishvar Darji and Maneck Kohlah connected by the same thread of overpowering fate. The lives of these characters from different social categories are 'adversely affected by the political juggernaut of Emergency. (79)

As warriors they carry on fighting even in the time of emergency. Oppressive caste violence drives Ishvar and Om from their traditional occupation to learn the skills of tailoring. They are driven from the rural background to the overcrowded Bombay. The struggle for survival as far as the two characters are concerned does not have a political angle to it. They both believe that the word 'Emergency' is a sort of game played by the power center, and it would not really affect the ordinary people like them. Hence each in his/her own way tries to connect the surrounding discomfort and insecurity to their problems. Ishvar Darji, a chamaar by caste and a tailor by profession, and his youthful rebellious nephew, Om, come to the city of Mumbai with the hope of making money and returning to their village to start afresh. The Subalterns are bothered primarily about their own survival on the day to day basis. Financially weak people cannot be expected to think about the community or the nation. The masses worrying about their survival cannot be expected to fight for their constitutional rights. The need for survival makes the children of the downtrodden work as laborers. The fault lies with the system where there is a disparity between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots.

Government declaration of Emergency was misjudged by everyone, whether rich or poor. The beginning of this most horrifying and shameful period in modern Indian history was so sudden that the people cannot quite comprehend what it really means. This is what could have happened during the Emergency. The cancer of corruption and criminalization of politics, which had already been eating into the vitals of the nation, flares up during the Emergency and spreads its tentacles far and wide, often with a nod of official approval. In fact, a character observes, "The Indian society is decaying from top downwards" (561). The root of the Emergency lay in the effort to subvert the law and to retain power through wrong and illegal means. Emergency period was a show of democratic imperialism, was more vigorous than even patriarchal system, caste system and racial discrimination. Joan Kaey in *India: A History* says:

The strong-arm methods" were used "in the promotion of slum clearance and birth control." Thousands of innocent people were "gaoled without trial". The press was subjected to censorship and "the courts silenced. (528)

It is the dark picture of 'Emergency' that is revealed in this novel, When the tailor's shack is bulldozed to the ground as part of the slum evacuation programme. The hutment dwellers were gathered on the road fighting to return to their shacks, their cries mingling with the sirens of ambulances that couldn't get through. The police had lost control for a moment. The residents surged forward, gaining the advantage. Then the police rallied and beat them back. People fell, were trampled, and the ambulances supplemented their siren skirls with blaring horns while children screamed, terrified at being separated from their

parents. Ishtar's comment is telling: "Heartless animals! For the poor there is no justice, ever! We had next to nothing, now it's less than nothing! What is our crime, where are we to go"? (295).

It is thus clear that the poor have been condemned to suffering eternally. Emergency had created terror among them. They seemed to have lost the spirit to fight for the restoration of the civil rights. Instead of bringing the promised paradise, Emergency has proved to be a nightmare.

A large population part of the country was dissatisfied with the tyrannical laws in the name of beatification of the country by destroying the poor's dwelling places and sterilization on the poor people in the name of population control campaign. Ishvar and Om for example are picked up by the police from their rented footpath dwelling to work as construction workers as part of the city beautification project. Ishvar's protests that they are not street urchins or beggars fall on deaf ears. They are forced into a truck wherein "underfoot, stray gravel stabbed the human cargo" (326). In the name of city beatification they were turned into baggers and imprisoned. Tailors were not managing to come back on work for a long time.

Similarly, under the population control programme by government run sterilization camps the final and fatal blow to their lives is an unwarranted police raid on the market place. Ishvar and Omprakash are forcibly taken to a sterilization camp at the village. The ultimate indictment of the Internal Emergency comes in the description of the Nussbandhi Mela in the closing chapter of the novel. Not far from the birth-control booth was a man selling potions for the treatment of impotency and infertility. "The quack is getting a bigger crowd than the government people, "

(524). People like Thakur Dharmasi thrive there auctioning patients who come to the clinic, for unless a Government employee produces two or three cases of sterilization, his salary for the month is held back. The Thakur, the villain of his family's ruin, orders another operation on the already sterilized Om. Thakur has a special interest in the boy who is suffering from testicular tumor. "What kind of life, what kind of country is this, where we cannot come and go as we please' wails Ishvar" (540). Everyone was frightened during the time of Emergency: "Even during emergency time the doctors are frightened that "they would be reported to higher authorities for lack of co-operation, promotions would be denied, salaries frozen" (533).

Ishvar's feet, wounded at the beautification project develop gangrene and his legs are amputated. The group returns to Bombay with a little trolley fitted with small wheels for Ishvar and a rope for Omprakash to pull it. For Ishvar and Omprakash, urban renewal or beautification means that their slum shanty, their only shelters, is razed. Political rallies mean being pushed into a bus by the strong armed and driven into the countryside to witness politicians congratulating themselves. And population control means the threat of forced sterilization. The declaration of Emergency came to be seen as a wake-up call for the Indian masses. This taught the nation to be vigilant against the threats within the country to democratic institutions. The positive fallout was that it created the spirit of struggle among Indians as they came together to fight against the despotic rule.

Although Emergency was lifted after two years of its promulgation, it continues forever for the poor as is evident from the Epilogue which is

set in 1984, another benchmark in the history of India.

Of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed. Government still keeps breaking poor people's homes and jhopadpatties. In villages, they say they will dig wells only if so many sterilizations are made. They tell farmers they will get fertilizer only after nussbandi is performed. Living each day is to face one Emergency. (581)

It may be said that the characters of *A Fine Balance* inhabiting the periphery of the society evolve their own strategies of survival. People like Narayan, Ishvar and Om are rebels in the sense that they do not succumb to the pressures that they face from the society and they pay a heavy price for standing up against the political and social hegemony. Ishvar and Om - the names themselves comment on the perversion prevalent in the society - rebel against the rigid caste system though their success is minimal. The two Dalit have been given names that are representative of the Lord worshipped so diligently by the upper castes, yet when it comes to the treatment of these low castes, that very lord becomes an untouchable. Giving these names to the cobblers can be seen as a subversive mode of resistance on the part of the writer where he pulls off a satire on the so-called clean society of the upper castes. The novel can also be seen as a constant conflict between hope and despair for the lower order of the society, who uprooted from their village due to socio-economic constraints seem to tread a thin line like a ropewalker trying to maintain the balance and reach the other end. However, not all succeed. Om and Ishvar come out winners, though their victory is only symbolic. Om

and Ishvar are forcibly sterilized. Ishvar loses his legs due to infection. Both are reduced to a life of beggary. Nevertheless, there is a positive aspect to the looming negativity. Mistry in this novel gives the subaltern, the lower caste subjectivities a voice and visibility.

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