



## **THE SUBALTERN VOICE AND VISIBILITY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian writer and belongs to Parasi community. His novel, A Fine Balance (1995), won the second annual Giller Prize in 1995, and in 1996, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction. It was selected for Oprah's Book Club in November 2001. It won the 1996 Commonwealth Writers Prize and was shortlisted for the 1996 Booker prize. The major themes of this novel are corruption of power, imbrications of national politics and the fate, the horrors of caste system and untouchability. The present paper portrays the subaltern voice and visibility for the downtrodden. It also focuses on devastating effects of caste system on the educational, social, and economical status of untouchables in Indian society. The researcher wants to highlight the harsh reality of the humiliation, suppression; struggle and torture downtrodden (dalits) face every day of their miserable lives. It presents how different discourses on dalits are incorporated in Indian Hindu society.*

**Keywords:** *Subaltern voice and visibility, corruption of power, the horrors of caste system, untouchability, humiliation, suppression, struggle and torture of downtrodden.*

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is set in Bombay, India between 1975 and 1984 during the turmoil of The Emergency, a period of expanded government power and crackdowns on civil liberties. In this novel, he basically focuses on the major issue untouchability. In general sense, a term untouchable denotes to a group of people who face economical, social and cultural discrimination in Indian society. Mistry courageously depicts the atrocities faced by downtrodden in this novel. Untouchables are poor, deprived of basic human rights and treated as social inferiors in Indian society. Mistry portrays the predicament of untouchables section during his contemporary Indian society. The reader's are familiarized hierarchies in rural society through the violence that greets the transgression of the city of Bombay. He also

shows the inequalities of caste in rural India. The narrative moves in a non linear mode, between the past and the present. The novel thoroughly explains the four major characters from varied backgrounds – Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, his nephew Omprakash Darji and the young student Maneck Kohlah. All these characters come together and develop a lifelong and consistent bond. Mistry, as a master story- teller, weaves the three strands into the plot of the novel. Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow who bravely strives for a free and independent existence, young Meneck Kohlah who struggles with problems of existence and the Chamaar-turned-tailors Ishwar and Omprakash, who struggle for survival in a hostile world. They allow them to find refuge in feelings of kinship and togetherness. Meantime, Mistry cleverly brings all the four protagonists into contact with each other and they eventually end living together under the same roof, a miracle given the caste-ridden Indian society and its hierarchical character. Raymond William asserts,

*“When I think of the realist tradition in 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 novel *A Fine Balance* achieves the ideal balance between the general and the personal. The life of the chamaars in a villages and their tragic plight in a caste-ridden society is evoked in a realistic manner. Dukhi Mochi learns to survive with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions in the village. The silent suffering of his wife Roopa and the ruthless punishment meted out to his sons Narayan and Ishwar for transgressing the caste code by entering into the school premises makes Dukhi Mochi a much dejected man. When Dukhi unable to bear these humiliations goes to Pandit Lalluram seeking justice, he is told that everyone should act as prescribed by Dharma. He then courageously decides to break the timeless chain of caste by sending his son to Ashraf in the nearby town to be apprenticed as tailors. Narayan returns to the village and sets up his own tailor’s shop, an event strongly resented by the villagers especially Thakur Dharamsi, the village chieftain. Even though Narayan’s life has changed, he confesses his deep dissatisfaction to his father. Dukhi Responds:

*“How can you say that? So much has changed. Your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth. And look at your house, your-Those things, yes. But what about the more important things? Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals. Those kinds of things take time to change. 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 ... Son; those are dangerous things to want. You changed from Chamaar to tailor. Be satisfied with that. Narayan shook his head. „That was your victory.” (174-175).*

When Narayan attempts to cast his vote in the Parliamentary elections much against the prevailing and accepted practice, his entire family is burnt alive by the henchmen of Thakur. Only his brother Ishwar and son Om manage to escape. After an arrival of readymade garments, Ashraf's business suffers and they are forced to move to the city by the sea looking for better prospects. Their life in the city turns out to be a horrendous experience until they meet Dina Dalal who is on the lookout for tailors. Mistry portrays the effects of Emergency in the form of fusion between the general and the personal realistically in this novel. Ishwar and Om manage to find a shack in the slum area. Their daily life is shown like Dickens. We have a memorable account of the inhabitants of the slum area being taken to a village to form part of the audience where the Prime Minister speaks to them of the numerous benefits of the emergency to the poor. Mistry terms this performance of hers, rather satirically, as "a day in the circus." Though Ishwar and Om are not able to intellectually comprehend the factors that lead to the imposition of the emergency, they do feel its repercussions purely at the personnel level when their jhopadi is bulldozed as a part of the city beautification programme. And now homeless, they end up as pavement dwellers, but even here there is no solace available to them. Om and Ishwar are then taken away to a nearby irrigation project site where they go through the hard grind of manual labour, while being provided with semblance of a shelter and offered some food. They are eventually rescued by Beggar master and are back in Dina Dalal's flat. The intellectual response to the emergency is dramatized in a long conversation between Maneck and Avinash. It is further seen in the manner in which the student's union are split and in the submissive support of the college teachers for the declaration of emergency. Mrs. Gupta and Nusswan both represent the vested interests hail the emergency as a true spirit of renaissance and regard the Prime Minister as our visionary leader. Mistry deftly handles the growing intimacy between Dina Dalal, Maneck and the Chamaar-turned tailors, Ishwar and Om. When the tailors and Maneck arrive together at Dina Dalal's gloomy little flat, she is relieved since her fragile independence was preserved. She is initially quite appalled by their sloppy work and tardiness. The various stages in their relationship, from her initial resistance to any kind of intimacy with the tailors to the longing for their company, given her loneliness, and the rapid growth of concern for them once she learns of the enormity of their suffering, are described in painstaking details by the novelist. This transformation of such a relationship, as the one between Parsi's and Chamaars is an exceptional event in Indian English fiction. It is the mutual dependence between them that finally forces Dina Dalal to agree to let the tailors sleep in her veranda for she could not afford to lose their services. She remarks,



*“But how firm to stand, how much to bend? Where was the line between compensation and foolishness, kindness and weakness? And that was from her position. From theirs, it might be a line between mercy and cruelty, consideration and callousness. She could draw it on this side, but they might see it on that side.” (469).*

All the sides of the dining table in her house are fully occupied for the first time after eighteen long years. Once she even tells Ibrahim, the rent-collector that Ishwar is her husband and Maneck and Om are her sons. When Ishwar and Om go to their village to celebrate Om’s marriage, and Maneck returns home to leave for Dubai, solitude returns to the house of Dina Dalal after one year of their living together. And she looks back on the past with nostalgic yearning and wonders how Zenobia, could never realize that the four of them cooked together and ate together, shared the cleaning and washing and shopping and laughing and worrying? That they cared about her and gave her more respect than she had received from some of her own relatives? That she had, during these last few months, known what a family was? (550). A year of togetherness with such disparate experiences to share, acts of kindness to remember, hilarious moments to savour, occasional quarrels to forget- all these contribute to a real bonding between the four of them. Of course, it is Dina Dalal who emerges as the informing centre of their life because it is she who, from her initial reluctance and resistance, gradually gets to know the others and comes to realize the value of friendship and fellow feeling. Maneck rightly believes that God is a giant quilt maker. Mistry reveals unsuspected insight into constitution of the human urine as well. Dina Dalal’s reactions to Ishwar and Om using the water-closet in her flat for the first time,

*“the smell in the WC bothered her. Living along for so long, I’ve grown too fastidious, she thought. Different diets, different habits – it was only natural their urine left a strange colour” (93).*

But the urine smell that used to flutter like a flag in the air gradually grows unnoticeable. She also learns how one gets accustomed to things and then it struck her: the scent was unobtrusive now because it was the same for everyone. They were all eating the same food, drinking the same water. Sailing under one flag. These ages are not meant for readers with finer sensibilities and delicate stomachs! All these are refreshingly new to the world of Indian English fiction, for what we had so far was the representation of a sanitized, sterilized and deodorized world. Such details were dreaded in the past, perhaps, by both the writers and readers and hence they were scrupulously avoided. Khair asserts,

*“Dina Dalal’s story is realistic in every classic sense of the term, the stories of (Coolies) Ishwar and Omprakash borrow heavily from different genres: the fantastic, the fairy tale, newspaper reportage etc.” (Khair, 141).*



A *Fine Balance* is a brilliant example of a realistic novel which describes the hopes and aspirations, the pain and suffering of the average Indian. The average Indian in this novel is shown by the two Parsi's, Dina Dalal and Maneck and the two Chammar's-turned tailors, Ishwar and Om. *A Fine Balance* presents a candid and honest vision of Indian life. Mistry shows the moments of joy, fulfillment, celebration and happiness in the lives of the four persons. The novel emphasizes on the darker side of life. Ishwar and Om are forcibly taken to a family planning clinic and sterilized. Om, in fact, is castrated. Ishwar loses his legs due to infection and they are now back once again in Bombay, but now as beggars. In the meanwhile, Maneck returns from Dubai after eight years to attend his father's funeral sisters (Avinash himself having been earlier killed in police custody). He curses God and the final blow to Maneck's sanity is the news that Ishwar and Om have become beggars. Though he sees them, he refuses to recognize them and kills himself walking into a moving train. The novel ends with the old Dina Dalal feeding Ishwar and Om without the knowledge of her brother Nusswan and his wife with whom she now stay. And we are told that those two made her laugh every day and this extraordinary relationship, it is implied, will continue. As Vasantrya Valmik puts it,

*"there is always hope-hope enough to balance our despair, or we would be lost"* (690).

This is the real secret of survival which Mistry wants to convey to the readers. The narrative voice in Mistry's fiction achieves a fine balance, between involvement and detachment. Thus it provides a reliable witness to an eventful era in the nation's history. Mistry's humour is gentle and amusing. The novel demonstrates the values of human relationships and fellow feeling among people, despite their distinctions in caste and class. Mistry expects healthy life for downtrodden. He gives the subaltern a voice and visibility in this novel. Mistry himself has confessed,

*"Post-modernism is so terribly clever-far too clever for me. Faithfulness to the story and the characters is what concerns me most"* (Gokhale, 6).

Thus the novel gives a wonderful account of the life of the country between 1945 to 1984 with the middle classes, the lower castes and the poor in Indian English fiction. Finally we conclude that Rohinton Mistry has explored the dimensions of human experience in his novels which are deeply rooted in the Indian reality.



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