



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Anguish of Dalits in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* - A Study

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Abstract

This paper intends to study the anguish of Dalits through the characters portrayed by Rohinton Mistry in *A Fine Balance*. Subalternity has become so prominent that it is regularly used in various disciplines such as history, sociology, psychology anthropology and literature. The word 'subaltern' is German word which means 'inferior rank' or 'secondary importance'. Subaltern literature reflects various themes such as oppression, marginalization, Gender discrimination, subjugation of lower and working classes, disregarded women, neglected sections of society.

Keywords

Anguish; Dalits; Subaltern; Rohinton Mistry; *A Fine Balance*.



Rohinton Mistry was born into a Parsi family in 1952. He grew up in Bombay where he attended university, graduating in 1974 with a degree in Mathematics. He and his wife immigrated to Canada the following year where he began a course in English and Philosophy at the University of Toronto while working as a bank clerk during the day. After winning several awards for his short stories and a Canada Council grant, Mistry began to write full-time in 1985. His first novel, *Such a Long Journey*, won both the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book and the Governor General's Award, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. It was made into a feature film in 1998.

A Fine Balance won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction and the Giller Prize, and was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize, the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Irish Times International Fiction Prize. His writings bear a social purpose. He is one of the prominent writers of the post colonial era. His novels deal with the theme of exploitation based on the political, economic, and social aspects stressing the necessity of social purpose in fiction. Among the very few Indian writers in English, he is one of the novelists who dealt with plight of Dalits in his novel, *A Fine Balance*.

Caste System has been India's most grave societal evil since time immemorial. The caste discrimination and repression is mostly found to be in practice among the Hindus of India. Rohinton Mistry attempted his best to voice the cruelty and oppression experienced by Dalits in his novel *A Fine Balance*. The novel exposes class and caste disparities of Indian society which also mirrors a visual rendering of those who endure its inequities.

Rohinton Mistry depicts Dalits who are born into a leather-making chamir family. The caste-Hindus have treated them brutally in a distressing manner. The inhumanity of upper castes is glaringly evidenced in the novel. One of the examples is as to how Dalits are treated cruelly is illustrated in the following lines by Rohinton Mistry.

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. (*A Fine Balance* 108-9)

The Dalits were cruelly treated by the upper castes which is exhibited clearly in their activities such as- stoning Sita- just for walking in the streets of upper castes till her first blood is seen; into the ears of Gambhir molten lead was poured just for hearing the prayers of temple and Dayaram was force-fed the excrement of the landlord for asking wages and so on. Such inhuman actions by the upper castes have become a routine phenomenon. Caste System is a kind of disease, denigrates not only Hindu culture but it is also a blot on Indian society and it is reflected in the words of Rohinton Mistry:

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. No one is untouchable, for are all children of the same GOD. Remember what Gandhiji says, that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk. (*A Fine Balance* 359)

There are four characters –Dina and Maneck who are Parsees and two tailors Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash. The lives of the tailors' forefathers who were in fact 'Chamars' or 'Mochis' mirror the ruthless cruelty of the caste-system in the rustic India where unbelievable oppressions are carried out on the lower-

castes by the upper-caste Jamindars and Thakurs. Tyrannical caste-violence has compelled Dukhi, a Mochi, and the grandfather of Omprakash and father of Ishvar from their traditional occupation of working with leather to learn the dexterities of tailoring in the town. They migrated to metropolis. The tailors experience the poignant dislocation of following a novel professional uniqueness, struggling to get a safe place in a new city and the physical displacement from their village to the city. Quite often they desire to go back to their village after earning some money. Ishwar's father was doing unclean work, and he wished to see a better life of his sons Ishvar and Narayan so he sent them to a nearby town to learn tailoring. He leaves his sons with his Muslim friend Ashraf in the town who takes them as apprentices in his tailoring business. Dukhi Mochi opines sarcastically that at least his Muslim friend treated him better than his Hindu brothers.

Ishvar and Narayan saves Ashraf's shop by claiming that it belongs to them, when Hindu fundamentalists tries to set it ablaze in a communal riot, leaving Ashraf forever in their debt. Narayan comes back to his village and starts a tailoring business for the people of his village, earns enough money to construct his own house. Narayan's business flourishes till the local elections were declared by a landlord Thakur, who eventually burns down both the parents of Omprakash by tying together.

Atrocities of upper castes on the lower castes are unabated. Dalits are denied education. Ishvar and Narayan are beaten up for entering the village school. Then Dukhi approaches Pandit Lalluram, a Brahmin priest whom he trusts that he can do justice to him: even an untouchable could receive justice in his hands.

Pandit Lalluram is bitterly satirized as an unmannered, greedy intransigent who is not concerned in doing justice for lower castes. Dukhi is frustrated at this attitude of the Lalluram:

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...I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like. (*A Fine Balance* 142)

Thus Dukhi expresses his anguish about the injustice and oppression imposed on the Dalits who are not allowed to drink the water from the village well and forbidden to enter the temple. Even the women of village were exploited due to the caste system. For example, Dukhi's wife, Rupa was victimized and raped by the Zamindar's gardener for stealing fruits and milk from upper-caste houses in order to feed her children. Her disgraceful exploitation by the gardener is Mistry's ruthless observation on the dual standards existing in the contemporary Indian society in the form of caste system.

Dalits are subjected to inhuman treatments at the hands of the upper castes. Even in the local elections, the blank ballots were filled in by the landlord's men. Thus the lower caste people were forbidden to vote freely and use their franchise in a democratic country like India. The family of Prakash's father and his two grandchildren are knifed to death. After knowing this brutal incident Ishwar and Om rush to police station to file an F.I.R. (First Information Report) But the Sub Inspector rudely comments: "What kind of rascality is this? Trying to fill up the F.I.R. with lies? You filthy cahoots castes are always out to make troubles! Get out before we charge you with public mischief" (*A Fine Balance* 148). At every stage of their lives, Dalits encounter oppression. During emergency, chamars-turned –tailors pay a visit to their village in search of bride for Om, they are victimized by their old high-caste enemy, Thakur Dharmasi and are maltreated and crippled under the alleged reason of the 'free vasectomy programme' of the Government.

One of the themes of subaltern literature is oppression besides exploitation of Dalits and it is poignantly depicted in the novel, *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, who gives a heart-rending version of man's barbaric inhumanity to man and also the unimaginable deprivation and inequalities experienced by the downtrodden and oppressed in India.

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MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Navammal, P, and S. M. Rajasangar. "Anguish of Dalits in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* - A Study." *Literary Quest* 1.5 (2014): 29-34. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.