

PORTRAYAL OF THE UNDERPRIVILEGED IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S A FINE BALANCE

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Abstract:

*In the Indian social structure, caste system, which is the product of Chaturvarna system, has always played a pivotal role in the determination of the role which an individual has to play. It pays no heed to the dignity of an individual as a human being. Consequently, the untouchable suffered untold miseries. Mistry has a psycho-social affinity and enumerates the moral crisis through which these underprivileged go through in **A Fine Balance**. He expresses profound concern for the social evils associated with the caste system and the class system. He exposes the satanic devices of man to subject a part of the community to eternal subjugation and humiliation.*

Keywords: Untouchables, Parsi, upper caste, injustice, humanity, freedom.

The term 'Underprivileged' implies for those who cannot enjoy the same rights or standard of living as the majority of the population. The foremost in this canon are the socially segregated untouchables, who are subjected to utter poverty and inhuman treatment due to their filthy vocation. The minority communities too face the discrimination and identity crisis in every field of life and so are underprivileged. For centuries, women were kept within the four walls and subjected to insults, deprived of their fundamental freedom, dominated and given inferior status in the male-dominated society. Thus, she too belongs to this canon.

Mistry portrays well-rounded portraits of the underprivileged in his novel **A Fine Balance**. His novel embraces the social reality of India, and leads to more profound reflections on questions regarding the role of caste.

Mistry's **A Fine Balance** focuses on lower caste Hindu untouchables, Muslims and Parsis who are the marginalized and dispossessed and who find themselves at the mercy of the Brahminical and pseudo-secular elites. He explores the experiences of two of the central characters, the *chamaar-turned-tailors* *Ishvar* and *Om* and chronicles the

atrocities flung on these untouchables right from *Dukhi*, the father of *Ishvar* and *Narayan* and the grandfather of *Omprakash* alias *Om*.

The novel covers a span of nine years, from 1975 to 1984. It is evident that the novel begins with the imposition of Emergency by Indira Gandhi and ends with her assassination. It reveals Mistry's expanding field of vision, now moving beyond Parsi life to embrace the fate of the wider Indian community during Indira Gandhi's infamous State of Emergency (1975-1977). The novel focuses on the story of horrors and barbarity of sub-continental life, especially, lived by the underprivileged.

The theme is brought forward by expertly interwoven stories of its four protagonists: two Parsis and two *chamaar-turned-tailors*. *Dina Dalal* and her young paying guest, *Maneck Kohlah*, are the Parsi protagonists whereas *Ishvar* and *Om*, the uncle and nephew, are the *chamaar-turned-tailors*. The life of these four protagonists intersects with some minor characters like *Dukhi*, the father of *Ishvar* and *Narayan*; *Vasantrao Valmik*, the proofreader; *Beggarmaster*, the paid caretaker of the army of beggars; the *monkey-man* and the hair-collector *Rajaram*.

Mistry explores the horrors of *Chaturvarna* in the rural milieu of India in the novel **A Fine Balance**, where *Dukhi* is the harbinger of changing the traditional profession of his forefathers. He is docile and tame with inherent characteristic of tolerance, the peculiarity of his fellowmen, inherited from ancestors. Besides tanning and leather working, *Dukhi* learned what it was to be a *chamaar*, an untouchable in village society. Like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked, the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere. Besides, the talk of adults and the conversations between his mother and father filled the gaps in his knowledge. Whatever he learns from others leave a deep impact on his conscience which enables him to survive in a village where the upper castes Hindus are a law unto themselves and they impose any punishment from cutting fingers, hands, and

tongue to hanging to death. It is shocking to learn that the upper-caste under the cover of supremacy, goes to any extreme including stripping of a woman and parading her naked on the street for her refusal to accompany *Zamindar's* son to satisfy his lust. *Dukhi* tells his wife: "She (*Buddhu's* wife) refused to go to the field with the *zamindar's* son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square." (117)

Anticipating the consequences, *Dukhi* resolves to live a 'down to earth' life as he was blessed with two sons becoming the cause of envy for the upper caste. He shaves off his moustache, dresses himself and his sons in the filthiest rags he could afford. Even *Roopa* does not appear in the vicinity of the village well. *Dukhi* subserviently performs his duties, least expecting for wages. Averting from the face of his high caste employers, his eyes are always fixed on their feet. A least annoyance could alter into flames which could engulf his family.

These poor untouchables do not have enough food to eat. For them fruits, milk and butter are beyond imagination. *Roopa*, *Dukhi's* wife, watches her sons with special ardour and devotion which she had learned to reserve for male children. It was usual for her to go hungry herself and feed *Dukhi*. For her children, she does not hesitate even to steal. Her mother instinct makes her dauntless. Nights without food, was routine for *Roopa*, but not for her children. She, anyhow, arranges fruits, milk and butter for them by paying nocturnal visits to the cows of various landlords. She takes just a little from each cow, to obscure the decrease. *Dukhi*, on the contrary, kept shivering for her safety, but could not offer to go himself instead.

One such ill-fated nocturnal venture substantiates the fear of *Dukhi*. This time she undertakes an orchard of oranges. The watchman nets her red-handed, alarms her about the possible dire consequences of the theft, grabs the opportunity and rapes her. *Roopa* returns with sack full of oranges! Her sobs speak about her plight to *Dukhi*. His fear comes true, but he could not dare to ask her. Years of tolerance has made him and his fellow-men meek and docile. Next morning the family devours the oranges!

Hypocrisy of the so-called upper castes is nothing new. This has roots in *Chaturvarna* which made these wretched and underdogs to lose their very identity, tolerating cruelties and injustice for centuries together. Sight of an untouchable early in the morning, is inauspicious, if he lends an ear to holy hymns of temple, the religion gets polluted, a mere touch of an untouchable pollutes their

religion; but their so-called holy existence is not spoiled by molesting a helpless poor untouchable woman. *Roopa* becomes a victim of such diplomatic followers of the *Chaturvarna* system.

Mistry authentically portrays the meek and docile untouchables and downtrodden. The line of demarcation is embedded in the minds of these downtrodden and untouchables from generations to generations. *Ishvar* and *Narayan*, too, are aware of their position in the society. Instinct and eaves dropping the elders have marked the border crystal clear in their consciousness.

But childhood curiosity knows no limitations; it does not understand prohibition. Their curiosity brings them to the village school. This school is meant only for the upper caste children. As per *shashtras* untouchables or *shudras* have no right to education. Then to enter a school is a far away possibility. Many a times *Ishvar* and *Narayan* listen to the upper-caste children reciting the alphabets, songs about colours, numbers, and the monsoon. Their curiosity one day makes them enter the school. Although they were aware of the fact that it is a 'crime' for untouchables to enter a school, they dare. Mistry beautifully depicts the curiosity of these untouchable children. The boys hold slate and chalk and are utterly surprised by the mark drawn by the chalk on the slate. But this joy is momentary. The teacher tracks them and punishes them brutally. Mistry gives a very heart-rending description of the wrath of the teacher. This depiction sorts out Mistry's concern for those untouchable children. Why should an untouchable be deprived of education? Aren't they human beings? Don't they have right to live a blessed life? To deprive the untouchable from education is, in fact, a part of a well-planned strategy of the upper castes. They prefer the underdogs to remain in the darkness of ignorance, so that they dare not rise against the injustice done to them.

Dukhi, who has the inborn instinct of leading 'knee-bended' life, tolerating the atrocities done to him and his wife for years, could not bear the plight of his innocent children. Now, the father instinct in him decides to seek justice and he approaches the village *Pandit*. However, the verdict given by *Pandit Lalluram* is much against his wishes: "Punishing your sons for their misdeeds was part of the teacher's duty. He had no choice. Do you understand?" (138) The verdict that it was the *dharmic* duty of the teacher to punish the children is nothing less than a resounding slap on *Dukhi's* face.

Here, Mistry deftly brings forward the selfish, cruel and opportunist qualities of the village upper-

castes. A terrible beating by a teacher, to innocent children, just because they touch the slates and chalks, is proved to be a *dharmic* duty! *Pandit Lalluram*, is a mirror of the shrewd mentality of the village upper castes. Instead of pacifying *Dukhi*, he convinces him that his children have been spared with a small punishment; they could have suffered serious punishments.

Dukhi tolerates the injustice done to his children. The punishment inflicted on his children makes him aware of the very fact that like his ancestors and himself, his children too have to lead a 'bended-knee' life, if they have to survive in the village. They will have to follow the callous village caste-system leading a shameful life. He wants his children to acquire dignity in their life and here he takes an important decision of changing the profession of his children. He decides to change their occupation, and hence their position in the hierarchical social chain.

This decision of *Dukhi* is the beginning of revolt against the ages old tradition of *Chaturvarna*, where no one is allowed to change his ancestral calling called *Varna* and a *Bhungi* must remain *Bhungi* and should not dare to upraise his status in any way. Not to abide by one's *Varna* is to disregard the law of Manu. But *Dukhi* dares to break this 'timeless chain'. Though this is the only act, throughout his life, which goes against the village caste system, it brings radical change in their life.

Mistry portrays *Dukhi's* younger son *Narayan* as a very robust and pertinacious character. Though *Narayan* and *Ishvar* are raised to the position of tailors from *chamaars*, *Narayan* was not at all satisfied by this mere change. He takes this change as his father's victory and wants to establish his own identity. *Narayan* is illiterate, but well aware of the government policies after independence. He regrets that even after twenty years of independence, the fettle of an untouchable has not changed at all. He says: "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." (174) *Dukhi* remembers his own defiance of the caste system. He feels proud at *Narayan's* words, but also fears his flame of defiance. The defiance of *Narayan* is striking. For generations, the untouchables could not dare to stand straight in front of the upper caste *Thakurs* of the village but now *Narayan* wants to cast vote in the election! He rose to the position of a successful tailor and pays to dig a separate well for the untouchables. There was anger and resentment among the upper castes

in the village for his progress and could not bear the progress of a *chamaar* to a tailor, from a hut to a pukka house and finally his marriage ceremony. *Dukhi* anyhow survives after breaking the shackles of caste system by turning his children from *chamaars* to tailors. The fury, which *Dukhi* feared his whole life, at last comes most unexpectedly in the form of brutal murder of his brave and ambitious son *Narayan*. This fury is so intense that it engulfs the whole family, except *Ishvar* and his nephew *Omprakash*, the son of *Narayan*. *Thakur Dharamsi* orders to set ablaze their hut along with the family members and the corpse of *Narayan*.

This tragic event speaks volumes about the pathetic condition of the underprivileged in our country. Such Machiavellian incidents occur even today in India. Even today the underdogs are shot dead by the upper castes to avenge their flight of freedom. Savita Goel, rightly says, "The writer, here, focuses on man's inhumanity to man and on the deprivation, inequities and injustice faced by the underprivileged in India" (Goel)

This vicious state of affairs is not confined only to the village; instead, it prevails in the urban areas too. Mistry unmasks this stark reality in some of the chapters in the novel. He delineates the horrors of the urban life faced by the poor. The novel brilliantly presents the struggle of these underprivileged in the metropolitan city where 'a roof to cover head' is only a dream.

The questions of power-structure, caste and class hierarchy and the hegemony of self-serving individuals, like *Thakur Dharamsi*, and man's inhumanity to man are some of the unanswered issues of Mistry's India.

Ishvar and *Omprakash*, after *Thakur* inspired heinous murder of their family turn towards the city by the sea only to bear the anguish of being torn away from their roots, from their village and suffer misery and squalor of the slum life. As Zai Whitaker observes: "Escaping the caste system, they fall into the nightmare anonymity of the city: this is the world of sudden police swoops, forced labour, *goonda* gangs, protection money, casual street murders." (Whitaker)

Now, *Ishvar* and *Om* are poor, jobless and anonymous in the huge existence of the city. They shoulder the main burden of misery in the novel *A Fine Balance*. The struggle for shelter and survival frustrates *Om* but *Ishvar* is always optimistic. *Ishvar* and *Om* find their employment as tailors for one *Mrs. Dina Dalal*; again, an underprivileged; since she belongs to the minority community of Parsis.

Mistry has expertly interwoven the Emergency imposed by the government with the life of his characters. The nexus between the corrupt politicians and government machinery wrenches away from the common man even the right to protest. The various episodes related by Mistry in the novel reveal his sympathy for the poor and the middle-class. Ironically these are the people who are most affected by the Emergency.

The sufferings of *Ishvar* and *Om*, give a wider perspective of life and sufferings of the underprivileged in the metropolitans and towns. City beautification is not merely beautification but it is a holocaust, it demolishes not only the dwellings of the poor but also their finely built-up dream house.

So, Mistry has very realistically portrayed the predicament of the underprivileged, it may be *chamaar-turned-tailors* or a Parsi widow *Dina* or docile *Gauri*, or Parsis and Muslims as minority,

expansively in his novel *A Fine Balance*. He has all the sympathy for these underprivileged and want to awake the society from its slumber of selfishness and eradicate the existing stumbling blocks in the path of peaceful society.

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