

Research Article

Subaltern Consciousness In Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance

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Abstract

Post colonialism deals with the cultural heritage of colonialism and imperialism which mainly exposes the exploitation of colonized people and their lands and brings out the upshots of the unfair treatment under the control of the colonisers. The post colonial theory analyses the culture, history, literature and discourse. The postmodern novelists deal with a variety of themes by blending history, fancy and reality. The unexplored world of the a subaltern is presented realistically by writers like Mahasweta Devi, Bama, Aravind Adiga and Rohinton Mistry. Internationally acknowledged Post Colonial writer, Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born Canadian. His writings deal with the downtrodden exploitation by the political injustices, economic imbalances and societal stereotypes. Though he belongs to a Parsi community, he focuses mainly on the plight of the untouchables who are treated inhumanely by the dominant class in this novel, A Fine Balance (1995). The novel deals with several issues like the quest for identity, conflict between the oppressed and the oppressor, political injustices, economic imbalances and loneliness. The most striking and prominent theme is exploitation of the lower caste people by the upper caste. The aim of this paper is to bring out the subaltern consciousness in Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance and thereby make the society to realise, empathise and live in harmony with one another.

Keywords: Subaltern, Colonialism, Exploitation, Identity, Conflict.

A group of South-Asian scholars who were attracted by the post colonial and post imperial societies form a subaltern group studies. The prominent subaltern writers are Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranjit Guha. The term subaltern was coined by Antonio Gramsci to identify the cultural hegemony. Subaltern studies occupy a noticeable place in postcolonial literature. In order to deny the voices in colonial politics, specific people and particular social group are displaced from socio-economic institutions of society by cultural hegemony. Gayatri Spivak brings the attention of the lives of subaltern groups who are dominated and exploited by economical and political reasons. Gayathri Chakravoty Spivak, says in an interview with Stefan Jonsson, "the idea of subalternity, as it has been reinscribed by Third World historians taking the ingredients from Gramsci"(9).Ranjit Guha in his first volume "Subaltern Studies" defines the term elitism and the primary focus of this elitism is to recover the privilege of lower class people in the field of capitalism, colonialism and nationalism.

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Marcuse says, "Gramsci's subalternity is constituted through exclusion, domination, and marginality in their various forms" (2).

Subaltern group is established by the landless peasants, untouchables, labourers, craftsmen, and other under privileged people. Post colonial writers argue for the changes of inherited colonial systems of hierarchy, generating new codes of oppression, exploitation and economic deprivation. The industrialists, the landlords, and the upper classes have always exercised power over downtrodden peasants, labours and the working classes. According to Aroop Saha, "The image of the untouchables is hegemonized with such biasness that it limits the possibility to treat those untouchables as human beings"(19).

The novel A Fine Balance deals with several issues like the quest for identity, conflict between the oppressed and the oppressor, political injustices, economic imbalances and loneliness. The most striking and prominent theme is exploitation of the low caste people by the upper caste.

The unheard voices are voiced out through Mistry's characters which persuade the readers to empathize. The story takes place in 1995 when the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's policy of emergency is at its peak. Mistry deals with Chamaar (leather-workers) - the Dalit caste and the sufferings of them in the hands of the cruel landlords. The people of the village accept their fate and never try to move out of their village in search of better prosperity. The novelist portrays the quest for identity of Chamaars who are untouchables and their ambition to obtain social status and to acquire their individuality. Mistry begins with a depiction of a chaotic Indian city where Ishvar and Om are fervent to get their place to live in. His characters Ishvar Darji, and Om Prakash Darji, are tailors belonging to the Chamaar caste, and they do not have financial stability which can add value to their existence. Mistry extends sympathy towards his tailors and their other friends who belong to the subaltern sections of Indian society.

The novel is a fine record of the human dimensions of the emergency. Mistry's picturisation of the poor inhabitants of the city, who meet a new area of the varied sub-continental social problems like poverty, prejudice and caste oppression in the village, is so authentic in its portrayal. In ancient India, the caste system was on the basis of one's occupation, traditional status, and social interaction and elimination based on cultural concept of purity and pollution.

In Hindu society, there are four main castes, which are Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (traders and peasants) and Shudras (craftsmen and servants). Dukhi Mochi is the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers and his social status is that of an untouchable or Dalit who is not in any of the four main castes of Hindu society. This division of society into so many religions and castes and sub-castes come in the way of the unity and integrity of the Indian nation.

The lower caste people like Dukhi, depend on the land lords in the village. The story of Dukhi Mochi and his wife Rupa gives a detailed picture of the life of Chamaars who are the dependents of the landlords, the upper caste Thakars in Indian villages. Dukhi Mochi, the father of Narayan and Ishvar, is enforced to do work for the upper caste people. Dukhi attends the Thakar's multitude household tasks and should accept whatever is given to him. When Dukhi is crushing dried chillies on the orders of Thakar Premji, he injures himself while breaking the mortar into two with one part landed on his foot. Thakar beats him up with a stick severely without minding Dukhi's injury. The event exposes the shameful, terrible beatings and ill treatment given to the lower caste people. Dukhi Mochi does not get angry but feels humiliated. On another incident, Dukhi admits that it is his mistake which shows the depth of humiliation that they are undergoing. Dr. Evelin Linder, delineates humiliation as "the enforced

lowering of a person or group, a process of subjugation that damages or strips away their pride, honor or dignity” (2). Dukhi feels shameful when he gets beatings for the straying goats. He is cheated of his payment by the landlord though has worked all day. This incident irritates him and increases his anger against the higher-class people. His anger increases into murderous intention as he said, “I could kill that Thakur. Nothing, but a lowly thief. And they are all like that. They treat us like animals. Always have, from the days of our forefathers” (AFB 105). Dukhi decides to change the profession of his sons and reaches the nearby city where he meets a Muslim tailor Ashraf and apprentices his children to him, so they become tailors in future not being involved in the cobbler profession of Chamars. In ancient days, “punishment for stepping outside one’s caste would have been death” (11 FB). Dukhi takes a bold decision and thinks that his first step will make downtrodden people independent. The two tailors represent common humanity as they endure the consequences of all the political measures by the Indian Government.

Horrible punishments are given to Chamaar or untouchable people who violate the caste rules which have been set up by the society since ages ago. The peaceful life of people is destroyed by these punishments. The Chamaars are often punished inhumanely for walking on the wrong side of the temple, stamping their footprints on the courtyard, drinking water from wells and looking at the Brahmin’s eyes. For these acts they get the brutal punishments such as stoning, beating, thrashing, hanging, social banishment etc. Sita, a Chamaar caste girl is stoned, “For walking on the upper – caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death – the stones had ceased at first blood”. (AFB 108) Though India got its independence from colonialism these untouchables or Chamars do not get their freedom from the oppression of high caste Hindus. These downtrodden people are treated as the mere servants and submissive by the upper caste men.

Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* creates a panoramic view of the life of the individuals struggling to find meaning in life. The character Rupa, seeing the starved sons, visits the landlord’s farm to get something to feed her children. She is raped in the orchard by the landlord’s chowkidar (a watchman) as she is caught stealing some fruits for her children. Molten lead is poured into Gambhir ears because he attempts within the investigating range of the temple while the upper caste people are in prayers. Dayaram is forced to eat the landlord’s excrement as he breaks a promise on a concurrence to plough a landlord’s field. As Dhiraj tries to negotiate the wages for chopping wood with Pandit Ghanshyam, he accuses Dhiraj that he poisoned his cows, and for this reason Dhiraj is hanged. These brutal incidents expose the injustice done to the lower caste people. Illiteracy is used as a weapon to suppress the lower caste people. The children of low caste are denied the right for education. Ishvar and Narayan are beaten severely by a teacher when they enter the class room. Teacher scolds them, “You Chamaar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school!” (AFB 111)

Dukhi has no heart to give this kind of life to his sons. Dukhi and his wife Rupa think that it is not necessary to their children to follow their life of exploitation, embarrassment and oppression. They desire to get their dreams of freedom and get their place as human beings in the existing world through their children. The landlords of Indian society have created fear in their minds of the downtrodden people by their tyranny. But Dukhi sends his two sons Narayan at the age of ten and Ishvar at the age of twelve to learn tailoring from his intimate Muslim friend named Ashraf Chacha in Bombay city. Bharucha says, “Dukhi and Narayan break the bonds of caste by changing their occupation” (110).

Mistry emphasises on the reality that how convoluted it is to fight against the deep-rooted social oppression in India. The decision of Dukhi which he has taken about his children is feared by the whole community, “‘Dukhi Mochi has gone mad’, they expressed grief. ‘With wide open he is bringing

destruction upon his household” (AFB 95) and they think that Dukhi's act of imprudence, brave to break the sequence of caste system which has been entwined from a long past, will not be appreciated by the high caste people.

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the Father of the Indian Constitution belonged to one of Dalit(untouchables) castes in India. He advocated for eradicated the caste system in India and he supported Dalit people struggles in Indian society. His writings show the inequality of caste system in India. He took effort to abolish this caste system. According to B. R. Ambedkar, “Justice has always evoked ideas of equality, of proportion of compensation. Equity signifies equality. Rules and regulations, right and righteousness are concerned with equality in value. ...In short justice is another name of liberty, equality and fraternity”.(43-44).

Mistry shows the detailed portrait of corruption in India during Elections. People cast their vote on the basis of social group and religion and do not take the merits of the candidate into consideration Mistry portrays that the downtrodden are forced to live in the socio-political conditions through the character Narayan and his questioning of the obsolete caste system is not endured by the majority community in the village. His desire for his right to vote is seen as inappropriate wish by the Takur's men. Narayan fights for the untouchables in the election process, while his father is not allowed occupation restrictions based on caste. Narayan is ready to face the problems even though his father warns him that he will risk his life. He feels that life without dignity is worthless. He struggles against an existence destitute of dignity, and dishonesty in the parliamentary election. This novel spans the events of election in 1970s along with the personal lives of the protagonists.

The eligible voters in the village stand in a line, outside the polling station on Election Day. Thakur Dharamsi is in-charge of the voting procedure as usual. He has been working without a flaw for years with the support of the landlords. The election officer is offered with offerings and is lead away to enjoy the day with special food and drink. Thakur takes the power in the election office, and he compels everyone to vote for his favourite party. Narayan rebels and claims “It is our right as voters” (AFB 145).

Thakur Dharamsi denies giving the ballots to him. He and his companions are taken by Thakur's men to his farm. They are suspended upside down and flogged through the length of the day and “burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the villages until their lips and tongues melted away” (146 AFB). In the evening, Narayan and his supporters are hanged nude by their ankles in the banyan tree branches by Thakur's men. Mistry exposes the suffering undergone by the lower class men through the gruesome murder. The heartless upper class people set fire on the huts of Narayan, his friend, and the mass execution of their family members. Mistry gives the clear picture about the malpractices and injustices at the election booth that has been taking place in the remote area villages in India, where democracy is considered to be the largest and the most successful in the world.

Mistry's writings evoke the works of Charles Dickens, a Victorian novelist in English, and Social critic. His works reveal the corruption of politics and injustice in the society. His writings show unfathomable oppression and poverty. His works made changes in social reconstruction and morality. Nagesh Rao says “respective representations of resistance” in this novel and it “reifies oppression has achieved greater visibility and recognition than one that resists such reification”(1).

The exploitation and deprivation, the acceptance and silence, the elasticity and abandonment, mark the lives of downtrodden. Even when they struggle and rise up, they feel restricted and overpowered by their subject positions. These downtrodden people are actually oppressed and their suffering is even legitimized by the democratic system. The two tailors reach the city expecting a new and dignified life but they continue to confront the same sort of marginalization in the city. De, Aparajita, Amrita Ghosh, and Ujjwal Jana explores that this novel “deals with disparities in Indian society”(ix).

Thus, Mistry attempts to explore the condition of downtrodden, and their struggle for freedom, identity/individuality, and insecurities, ways of suppression and exploitation, and reactions against the structure of the society during the emergency period in India.

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