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Interrogating the Caste System of India in the Work of Rohinton Mistry

Asma Siddiqui

*Is currently pursuing Masters in English Literature from Jamia
Millia Islamia, Delhi.*

Abstract

This study includes textual analysis and interpretation of the work of Rohinton Mistry. The writing of Mistry in this paper is seen through the lens where one critic the idea of "Unity in Diversity", majorly focuses on the idea of caste differentiation prevailing in India. Although A Fine Balance came out in 1995, the background story is of India's Emergency in 1975-1977. Choosing this dark period of India's history, Mistry makes one doubt if all the oppression was always brought to the country from outside? as the major minorities felt like strangers in the dominant narrative of nationalism. This paper is an attempt to understand the dystopic world where the unequal network of power relations gives no hope even to dream of justice or the poetic of utopia.

Keywords: Gandhi, Caste System, Marginalisation, Indian English literature.

Introduction

History stands as a testimony to recall people among us, who were children of India's sod, stood on and for their consciousness, their lives becoming a shining light to guide the ever groping and faltering mankind. Rohinton Mistry who was born in Bombay in 1952 became one such shining beacon who moved to Canada in the year 1975. Apparently, 1975 was also the year of Emergency and Mistry focusses on the same year in his second book *A Fine Balance* (1995).

Background

The Congress reign under Indira Gandhi was a dark period of India's history when Mistry was himself present in India and witnessed the brutality faced by the citizens which eventually affected his writing in the later years. A war with Pakistan in 1971, additional challenges of drought and the 1973 oil crisis led to the poor condition of the economy in India. Briefly, the Congress worked in such a way that it forced movements like Navnirman Andolan(Re-invention or Re-construction Movement) in 1974 Gujarat by students and middle-class people against the economic crisis and corruption of political life. There was student unrest against the state's education minister. All of this indicated the growing chaos in law and order of the entire country. Taking this India in his memory baggage, Mistry moved to Canada in 1975 and hence it does

not surprise one when he delineates the ugly aspects of life in his work and tries to emphasize reality where one knows "This tragedy is not a fiction. All is true" (Balzac). Yet it becomes difficult to digest as a reader of how easy it is to romanticize the harsh discourse via memory in the 603 pages of the book.

Mistry who in his work talks of India under Emergency during the time of Indira Gandhi (1917-1984) a leader who was an active politician in the Independence Movement during the 1930s and 1940s, was a member of Indian Congress in 1950, party President in 1959, and Prime Minister in 1964. The state of emergency was declared when she was found guilty of electoral corruption in June of 1957. She enforced censorship, limited civil liberties and targeted the poor wherein the novel it is shown how "Police had orders to remove all jhopadpattis(slum)" to clean the society as "the new law says the city must be made beautiful", which included the removal of poverty i.e. garibi hatao' which eventually became 'gareeb ko hatao' (remove the poor). Hence, the Mother Indira of Mother India for whom most of her vast brood of children had become utterly dispensable had no option but to say "Stories of suffering are no fun when we are the main characters". The Emergency was removed in the year 1977 when the Congress party lost the elections. She returned to politics as head of the Indian National Congress in 1978 and Prime Minister in 1980. Events took place and she was assassinated in 1984, by her Sikh bodyguard which led to the death of around three thousand Sikhs, as in the novel where Maneck returns and witnesses the deteriorated condition of the place he left behind, realizing "Ingratitude is not uncommon in the world" making one believe that the world that Mistry presents is one

where the God is dead, where humanity does not sustain, where poverty becomes the most unfair way to punish one, where justice has no way. And with this irony the one member of the foursome, best equipped to succeed economically killed himself at the end of the novel. With the harsh ending, "A Fine Balance" spans the whole of Gandhi's first term as the Prime Minister as it depicts India in the late 70s, struggling to cope with the demise of the Nehruvian dream of Socialism in the regime of Indira Gandhi. The text hence engages with the increasing politics of India and how the lower caste was/are doubly marginalized as being poor and born in the lowest section of the caste system in the hierarchal society. In his work Mistry very clearly shows the reader how systematically the hegemony of caste, class, gender and creed works, leaving the characters and readers helpless with no hope but to maintain "A fine balance between hope and despair".

Literary Analysis through the lens of Caste System

A Fine Balance shows the working of a structured, hierarchized society where the marginalized are as important to the dominant class as is soul to the body where they (bourgeoisie) need to build a superior relationship with the lower class to keep themselves in power where "The real murderers will never be punished for votes and power they play with human lives. Today it is Sikhs. Last year it was Muslims before that Harijans" says the driver in the novel. In between the dominant and the marginalized, we as readers stand with Mistry as the "sentimental spectators" (Barthas) watching the downtrodden characters being played like cards in the powerful (hierarchal order) hands of the few. Mistry starting

with work like *A Fine Balance* must be having complete faith in the idea of " Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts more absolutely " clearly showing not one character in power to be generous enough to help the downtrodden.

The paper focusses on the caste system as presented by Mistry in his novel *A Fine Balance*. Mistry shows how the most daring act done by Dukhi of the lower caste was to sent off his sons to Ashraf Chacha after they were beaten up for polluting the village school by their presence, hence showing that in the caste system the idea of "diagnostic of power" (Foucault) does not function well as we come across characters who are in no way able to change the power balance even after knowing how unfair they are being treated in the world. On the stairs of hierarchy, the only upward step the chamars took was to move from the village by the river to becoming the darjis (tailor) in the city by the sea. Nothing much or at all changed when Omprakash went back to his village to get married, more so the condition got worse as he was sterilized to be impotent. Mistry brings back the horrific time when compulsory sterilization programme was initiated by Sanjay Gandhi in September 1976 when men were picked up and sterilized forcefully which led to the death of many as also shown in the novel. When living in the city the darjis(tailors) lived the most pathetic life, most of the time not having a roof over their head and food to eat. Turning the pages we are forced to ask, does the destiny of the lower caste ever change? Eventually one lives as a burden when nobody cares. Gramsci spoke the rightful words of how hegemony forces one to accept their situation as downtrodden blaming fate, making order moral and natural. Somewhere in the text we as

readers to forget that history and society are responsible for laying out the design of the downtrodden's life. Ethics, tradition and culture play an important in the forming of the rules of society and making of identities. But to change society one needs to turn a critical eye on the practices in which they participate, hence as Heidegger talks of "becoming " where oneself is not decided by "some already determined fixed viewpoint", and the "repetition" as said by Deleuze did not mean to "repeat" but to "begin again, to renew, to question, and to refuse" and surely no religion teaches marginalization or degradation of its people which is a manmade concept as rightly said by S.Radhakrishnan "The fundamental truths of a spiritual religion are that our self is the supreme being which is our business to discover and consciously become".When talking of becoming or having an identity we cannot forget to mention Marx giving hope to the marginalized to unite and fight for their right and such are the only ways that show light in the darkness of hopeless situation, as said by Mr.Valmik "There is always hope, hope enough to balance despair or we would be lost".

Yet coming back to the real, brutal world which is very much reflected in the novel we get a very clear idea that corruption like parasite makes society hollow from inside. Power makes one loose one moral consciousness of humanity and makes one irrational enough as avoiding to be touched by the shadow of an outcast. Surely it was not the era of Gandhi that Mistry picked up else Ishvar would have turned out to be the Ambedkar who though belonged to Mahar caste yet was helped and encouraged by Gandhi Ji to get justice as a human, breathing the same air as another human. Gandhi was

a literate man who acted in the most educated way and though was criticized by even Nehru in his essay "What is Religion ?" for supporting the untouchability and moving away from the focus of the main fight of India's independence yet Gandhi was determined that justice prevails for one and for all where he believed "the four divisions of society, each complementary of the other and none inferior or superior to any other, each is necessary for the whole body of Hinduism as any other". With the ending of Gandhi's era, human emotions did not end but we humans became too scared to stand with/for the right. We turned blind to the wrong that happened in front of us. Curse of mind is also one of the major self-destruction where mind when it becomes the master, does not allow to look inside for moral construction and hence, becomes an enemy of the person. As Milton in Paradise Lost writes "The mind is its own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell a hell of heaven", and leads to the situation where upper caste people cannot even eat with the lower caste thinking it will make them one of them. The problem gets bigger when the lower caste person wants to possess the material, social and cultural goods that the high caste controls, even when resenting the gap between them. This leads to the desire which eventually helps in maintaining the hegemony intact. Hence, even if "More than twenty years have passed since Independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink water from the village well, workship in the temple, walk where I like" desires from Dukhi Mochi is far from attainable rather helping the powerful to keep the weak grounded. It's more of giving power to the upper hand when having desire in your eyes to be like them, they (upper caste)

automatically gets a validation to treat the lower caste as someone below them. We see its history which records discriminatory practices, unfair laws and animosities and surely identity is made via the history, as in "The Wretched of the Earth" Fanon talks of how "Colonisation by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys its...."The inter-dependence needed on each other cannot be avoided, even to maintain power we need people of different caste, class or gender but this fact is kept as argument ad hominem where the relation of dependency on each other is rather avoided to be discussed, the fact that "they treat us like animals always have from the days of forefathers" is something that hasn't changed and the novel along with the hierarchal society gives no hope of changing too.

Conclusion

Mistry in his novel kept the "bourgeoisie elitism" aside and let the lowest socio-economic caste strata articulate their conditions, where the voice of the chamar Dukhi "the upper caste bastards treats us worse than animals " is more effective because it's the marginal characters that get a voice and comes to play. Surely Mistry has been criticized for being a Canadian and writing of India also he did not belong to the untouchable caste yet picturing something from the outside. We along with Anita Desai we defend Mistry for understanding the pain which is noticed by many but ignored by most. When reading the minds of the lowest strata, we as humans feel and start noticing who among the beggar's around us must be playing the role of beggar-master. And

Mistry succeeds in opening in front of us the lives of the people that most of us neglect, by giving them "the permission to narrate" as termed by Edward Said. The Indian Constitution adopted in 1950 had declared that all Indians would be equal under the law and that no discrimination would be made on grounds of caste, creed and gender. A Constitution that was drafted under the leadership of an Untouchable- Dr Ambedkar who was a Mahar and thus belonged to even a lower caste than the chamar Tailors in Mistry's novel. Hence, Mistry strived to portray the alienation of the "yet colonized" in the decolonized state of India and the continued existence of oppressive structure of caste, class, race and gender domination within the boundaries of the secular Indian democracy. The realism of the novel made Winfrey Oprah chose "A Fine Balance "1996 for her television book club in 2001; with whom Mistry discussed "the villain is injustice. And that's the villain anywhere in the world where there is discontent and suffering". Mistry very clearly shows the suffering of the downtrodden in the Indian society added to which it is well said that "In History, nothing is true except names and in Literature everything is true except names." Mistry also very clearly shows that in a world where discontent inspire moral fantasy where the notion of "I am a person and you are a person too" (Newar) is the utopia on which the society works, there are dreams of justice where fantasy stands in counterpoint to an actual world where some might fear even to whisper their discontent but such was not the India that Gandhi in his "Harijans" dreamt of. "Independence must mean that of the people of India, not of those who are today ruling over them". A reality check we might call it, an

eye-opener “A Fine Balance” surely is, after reading such a piece we won’t turn blind to someone begging and possibly “see” through the suffering one goes for being born in a section that according to custom has been looked down upon.

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Asma Siddiqui

Asma Siddiqui is currently pursuing her Masters in English Literature from Jamia Millia Islamia. She has been a student of literature since the last six years. She has presented her research papers across several universities during her graduation and post-graduation years. An enthusiast to know more about her belonging, she has developed an interest in Muslim Women Writers. The debater has been tagged a great public orator and won many prizes in the respective field.

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