



THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF EXISTENCE: MUFFLED VOICES AMIDST ATROCIOUS  
FORCES IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary theoretical terms, subaltern refers to someone who is outside the centre, who is pushed away from the mainstream to the periphery and to the margins. The subalterns are deprived of their voice, muted or muffled, are subjugated to the elite and elitist ideology.

Subalternization in terms of caste is still prevalent and very pertinent in the Post-colonial Indian society. As cultural constructs caste, class and gender are products of human categorization and hierarchisation. These structural categories of society involve unequal power relations, social imbalances and gender polarities. Subalterns are marked by a series of subjugations and dominations and have only a subhuman and debased existence. The attempt of the social scientists, creative writers and social reformers to attain equal rights and justice for the caste subalterns is not yet really effective.

It is in this context the writings of Rohinton Mistry, a twice displaced, Indian migrant in Canada, becomes prominent. The poignancy of the marginalized and dispossessed in relation to the role of caste is explored through the experiences of two of the central characters, the tanners-turned-tailors Ishvar and Omprakash Darji in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. They have felt the full force of upper caste disapproval, vented on their family for violating time-honored status by daring to alter their occupation and, hence, their position in the hierarchical social chain. This paper analyses how Mistry provides diverse critical insights into class hierarchies and caste oppression in Post-Independent India by giving a universal dimension to his characters, who, therefore become embodiments of a universal human condition.

Key words: subaltern, muffled voices, precariousness, existence, hope and despair

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In the contemporary theoretical terms, subaltern refers to someone who is outside the centre, who is pushed away from the mainstream to the periphery and to the margins. The mainstream discourse is built upon the knowledge of colonialism and orientalism which refers to a marginalized group who had their voices silenced or who could not articulate for themselves.

In the Post colonial Indian society subalternization in terms of caste is still prevalent and very pertinent. As cultural constructs caste, class and gender are products of human categorization and hierarchisation. These structural categories of society involve unequal power relations, social imbalances and gender polarities. The attempt of the social scientists, creative writers and social reformers to attain equal rights and justice for the caste subalterns is not yet really effective.

However, bell hooks argues that in addressing the subordinated subject, the literary discourse takes the role of the intellectual who feels he is capable of articulating the subaltern, granting literary space but not voice:

No need to hear your voice when I can speak about you better than you speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain.

I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back in such a way that it becomes mine, my own. Rewriting you, I write myself anew. I am still the author, the authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject and you are now at the center of my talk (hooks 243).

Many Indian English writers from R.K.Narayan to Amitav Ghosh have attempted to voice the subalterns subverting the Spivakian ideology that subalterns have no agency to speak for them nor can they do it themselves. It is in this context the writings of Rohinton Mistry, a twice displaced, Indian migrant in Canada, become prominent. As E.M.Foster commented, Mistry possessed the right amount of insight and detachment needed in voicing the marginalized. Living in Bombay for the first 23 years of his life as a parsi minority he had experienced the pains and pangs of being marginalized and after migrating to Canada he was categorized as the Other. It is this double displacement which makes his novels poignant and successful.

In Mistry's *A Fine Balance* the poignancy of the marginalized and dispossessed in relation to the role of caste, class and gender are explored through the experience of the central characters, Dukhi Mochi, a Chamaar, and his wife Roopa, the tanner-turned-tailors Ishvar and Narayan, his son, Omprakash Darji, and the parsi widow Dina Dilal. "Mistry's fictional rendering makes us believe that life consists of such events, even as he highlights the distinct possibilities of the extraordinary happenings in life as brilliantly expounded in the coming together of four protagonists of the novel." (K C Belliappa 208).

Marginalization is not limited to caste discrimination but is apparent in gender discrimination. The sexual exploitation of an untouchable like Roopa by the watchman of the richman's orchard is a harsh comment on the double standards evident even in the practice of untouchability. "She stands for docility and tolerance. Her shameful exploitation by the watchman comments on the double standards prevailing in contemporary Indian society in the form of untouchability" (Dodiya 36). A high caste man considers himself polluted even by the shadow of a low caste, but to fulfill his lust he covets and sleeps with a desirable low caste woman.

The experience of Dukhi Mochi along with his sons allows Mistry to deal with those who are disempowered. Om and Ishvar, the twice disempowered rural inhabitants have only a subhuman and debased existence, undergoes humiliation and loses self-respect as they become victims of class hierarchies and caste oppression. Dukhi remarks that as untouchables in the village community the members of the Chamaar caste are subjected to great ignominy. "By the time he entered his teens he had acquired all the knowledge he would need to perceive that invisible line of caste he would never cross" (*A Fine Balance* 97). Dukhi Mochi learns to survive with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions in the village. The power of the state is also unequally exercised and Mistry narrates the bitter reality of social imbalances encountered by the subaltern:

Besides tanning and leather-working, Dukhi learned what it was to be a Chammar, an untouchable in a village society. No special instruction was necessary for this part of his education. Like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere (*A Fine Balance* 96).

Unimaginable horrors are perpetrated on the lower caste. They are heinously beaten and ill-treated for simple reasons. Dukhi recalls, "They are all like that. They treat us like animals. Always have, from the days of our forefathers" (AFB 105). Violence leaves its imprint and its domination as embedded in the everyday practices of caste, capitalism, and patriarchy. Amita Baviskar comments, "it is everywhere caste, capitalism, ...the scars on the bodies of adivasis and on the face of the land are only one reminder of the sedimented histories of exploitation and struggle" ("Written on body, Written on the Land" 542). Ishvar recalls his childhood, "We used to go the fields after the harvest and search for grain left from threshing and winnowing...in those days it seemed to me that that was all one could expect in life" (AFB 401).

Dukhi becomes more and more aware of this notion of untouchability ravaging them for centuries, denying dignity to exist as human beings. The untouchable children are very eager to educate themselves like the upper caste children but are punished and beaten savagely by the teacher for entering the temple of learning and polluting the reading materials. The teacher yells: "You Chamaar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school! He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry.. Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of learning and knowledge?" (AFB 110). The boys were stripped in front of the whole class and the watching children flinched each time the cane landed on the bare bottoms until the teacher was exhausted. "That should teach you" he panted. "Now get out, and don't let your unclean faces be seen here ever again" (AFB 111).

After the savage beatings and ill treatment by the teacher, Dukhi Mochi decides to call on the so-called Chit-Pavan Brahmin who is considered to be a descendant from the purest among the pure, an accepted man of justice and wisdom. Though Pandit Lalluram sympathized with Dukhi, he was unwilling to punish the teacher as desired by Dukhi. His words were depreciating, "you always tried to do your duty, don't you, according to your caste?... for it is the path to happiness, otherwise, there would be chaos in the universe" (AFB 113). He further elucidates that punishing the children for their misdeeds was part of teachers 'dharmic duty'. This is an ideal illustration of the multiple strategies adopted by the society to suppress people and to maintain them within the structure.

Dukhi works towards an individual revolution as he got enraged by this explanation and justification of Pandi Laluram about the misdemeanor of the school teacher. He teaches the two sons the art of tailoring, a different trade that will free them of the bondage and servility that he and his forefathers had been subjected to in the name of caste. He undergoes the full force of upper caste disapproval, vented on his family for violating time-honored status by daring to alter their occupation and, hence, their position in the existing hierarchical social chain. "Dukhi Mochi's decision to turn his sons into tailors was indeed courageous, considering that the prime of his own life had been spent in obedient compliance with the traditions of the caste system" (AFB 109).

Narayan, now a practicing tailor of the village, expresses his dissatisfaction with the unchanged fate of the lower class people:

'I was just thinking ... thinking how nothing changes. Years pass and nothing changes.' Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. (AFB 142).

Narayan, who longs for freedom and independence attempts to cast his vote in the Parliamentary elections much against the prevailing and accepted practice, is flogged and hung naked by his ankles upside down and displayed in the village square so that others may learn a lesson. Dukhi's entire family is punished for distorting the society's timeless balance with at most severity by burning them alive. "Burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, then stuffed into their mouths ... the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks and the three were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square" (AFB 146). Other untouchables were also not spared. They were all beaten up, their huts burnt and their women were raped. The Thakur decides that Dukhi's family deserves severe punishment as he had dared to distort the society's timeless balance, by crossing the line of caste which needed to be punished with the utmost severity" (AFB 147). As a result, Dukhi, Roopa, Radha and the daughters along with Narayan's corpse are burnt alive. Both Ishwar and Om rush to police station to file an F.I.R. after the cruel massacre of their family. They are

threatened and silenced by the Inspector : "What kind of rascality is this? Trying to fill up the F.I.R. with lies? You filthy achool castes are always out to make troubles! Get out before we charge you with public mischief" (AFB 149). These heinous crimes of gruesome murder corroborate the grim fact that the marginalized are always the helpless victims at the hands of heartless upper caste.

Hearing the concept of a classless society, during India's freedom struggle, Dukhi is motivated. With his weapon of non-violence Gandhi not only struggled for the independence of India, but also attempted to reform the society's hundred-year old notion of untouchability. The appallingly shocking effects of untouchability find expression in a speech of a leader who says:

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 we are all children of the same God. Remember what Ganhiji says, that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk (AFB 107).

However the speeches during the parliamentary elections are crammed with promises of every shape and size. Promises of new schools, clean water, health care, enforcement of Land Ceiling Act, land for landless peasants, powerful laws to punish discrimination, laws abolishing bonded labour, child marriage, dowry system and many more. Even an illiterate like Dukhi, is rational enough to judge the hypocrisy and lack of integrity in these words. He says, "There must be a lot of duplication in our country's laws'. Every time there are elections, they talk of passing the same ones passed twenty years ago" (AFB 143). He believes that someone should remind them they need to apply the laws. Narayan exposes the double standards and despondency practiced by the politicians, "For politicians, passing laws is like passing water,' said Narayan. It all ends down the drain" (AFB 143).

At every stage of their lives, the untouchables encounter oppression. After the death of the whole family, Ishvar and Om go to the city. Even though they get a job in Dina's house as tailors, misfortunes continuously follow them. Their slum house is destroyed by the government and they are forced to live on the pavements. They struggle a lot but cannot have the opportunity to change their fate because of the government policy. The Sikh taxi driver instructs Maneck regarding the unpleasant situations of Emergency : For ordinary people, nothing has changed. Government still keeps breaking poor people's homes. In villages, they say they will dig wells only if so many sterilizations are done. They tell farmers they will get fertilizer only after nussbandhi is performed. Living each day is to face one emergency or another (AFB 581).

Mistry's *A Fine Balance* concentrates on the miserable life of untouchable characters who try to change their living condition by entering the centre from the periphery, but their attempt falls apart when it comes into conflict with reality. Changing their profession and moving into the city for better prospects do not favor them. They are forever victims of oppression, either in the form of caste or class. Their presence within the structure of the novel represents the average subaltern in the context of both urban and rural India. As Nandini Bhautoo observes:

Their trajectory allows them to encounter the dispossessed of both rural and urban areas. ..They are at the receiving end of insane plans of the government ...their suffering from village to town and then city allows Mistry to speak of powerlessness and oppression, in both city and country as a continuum (*Rohinton Mistry* 55).

After experiencing a series of hardships including the demolition of their shanty existence, they are both forcibly grabbed by the police to the nussbandi mela where they were the frightened to silent submission. Omprakash is castrated later as per the instructions of Thakur Dharamsi who was eagerly waiting to take revenge on these tanner turned tailors. They return to the city, Omprakash, unable to marry and Ishvar unable to work as both his legs have been amputated. And in the end, when Maneck discovers it he expresses his surprise:

'There is no wife, no children. They have become beggars.'

'Sorry – what, Auntie?'

'They are both beggars now.'

'That's impossible! Sounds crazy! I mean – aren't they ashamed to beg?'

Couldn't they do some other work, if there's no tailoring? (AFB 606).

In spite of struggling hard, Ishvar and Omprakash cannot escape their predetermined fate. The system and its tyrannical methods take a total control of the lives of these individuals and crush their hopes, leaving them thoroughly disenchanted. Freedom, thus, remains a cherished dream, desirable, of course, but unattainable. As Valmiki philosophises on life: "After all, our lives are but a sequence of accidents - a clanking chain of chance events. A string of choices, casual or deliberate, which add up to that big one calamity we call life" (AFB 564). The precariousness of their social position, indeed of their entire existence, is related to the eponymous theme of maintaining and the loss of balance; "In the end, it's all a question of balance" (AFB 231).

*A Fine Balance* ironically renders how the marginalized and the powerless are forced to maintain a precarious 'fine balance between life and death- in-life existence. Though they strive hard to attempt a change by entering into the center from the periphery they fail so justifying the Foucaultian observation that only those people who can enjoy freedom of a given societal structure, got to be in the centre. Though the end of colonial rule promised a better and flourishing India, it has not improved the status of the subalterns within. By exposing class and caste disparities of Indian society, Rohinton Mistry provides voice to the voiceless untouchables, hoping to elevate their status, assisting them to survive in this world with dignity, so that, all classes of humanity might be guaranteed respect, sympathy, and fundamental rights. "There is always hope – hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost" (AFB 563).

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