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STUDY OF CASTE DYNAMICS' IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S "A FINE BALANCE"

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ABSTRACT

Caste as a factor has shaped, controlled and given identity and directions to Indians since Vedic times. But time to time we see many religious reformers and writers as social activists through their writings have tried to break free of these constraints. Dialectics of caste in modern India has out reached utilitarian division and has become more of discrimination. The same dialectics is evident in literature now and then. The paper studies on how caste politics of the upper caste subjugate and exploit the outcastes not only socially and economically but also politically in Rohinton Mistry's - a South Asian Diasporic writer's novel *A Fine Balance*. The novel is about the human endeavor for dignity and the endless struggle to strike a balance between their own desire for a dignified and meaningful existence by combating the pressures, deprivation, injustices and indignities.

Key Words: Caste politics, Class, deprivation, discrimination, injustice

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Caste and class have been a determining factor of a person's status, place and position in the social hierarchy from the ancient Vedic times, to the modern era. The caste system, which was said to be introduced in ancient period to regulate and discipline the society and its smooth functioning, has paved way to discrimination and degradation. The four Varnas: Brahmin, Kshtriya, Vaishya and Shudra not only provided social stratification in a hierarchical manner but also assigned people an identity by their work and limited their social mobility. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar said that "caste system is not merely division of labourers- which is quite different from division of labour – it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers' are graded one above the other."

Hindu society is said to have a human rights tradition as it has always had a way of incorporating the poor and socially ostracized into the social whole. In fact, the whole caste system can be viewed as a dharma, in other words a moral order in Hindu society, where a reciprocal relationship of mutual economic and social benefit existed. In this social order every group respects the rights and dignity of the others.

The caste system which has existed in India for 3000 years has been developed by the Brahmins (priests) in order to maintain their superiority. Eventually the caste system became formalized into four classes (*varnas*). Beneath the four main castes is a fifth group, the Scheduled Caste, who literally have no caste. They are considered untouchable which means an oppressed, downtrodden and exploited social group. They are not considered to be part of the human society. If a higher caste Hindu is touched even by the shadow of an untouchable, he is considered polluted and will have to go through a rigorous series of cleansing rituals. The

out castes have been stripped of their dignity and been denied basic human rights. They are segregated in all spheres of social life: places of worship, education, housing, land ownership, use of common wells, roads, and so on.

The lives of Dukhi Mochi and Narayan forefather's of Om and Ishvar in the narrative reflect the tyranny of caste system in the pre-independent India where unimaginable horrors are perpetrated in the name of caste. One aspect of particular importance in the narrative is, "India's cruellest social constraint," caste (Ross, 243) the Hindu family saga of *A Fine Balance* originates with Dukhi Mochi, Ishvar's father and Om Prakash's grandfather who belong to the chamars cast of tanners and leather workers. V.S. Naipaul points out the workers in leather are among the lowest of the low, the most tainted of the tainted (V.S. Naipaul, 60). Dukhi, whose social status is that of an untouchable along with the other chamars in the village, lives on the carcasses and hides of dead animals, in order to produce sandals and harnesses, is deemed impure. Untouchability is a stigma. (Anthony Giddens, 207).

The Indian Political response to caste oppression has largely predicated upon the secularism of the nation-state, expressed through various constitutional measures directed towards the achievement of "casteless egalitarianism," (Bayly244). Article 17 of Indian Constitution abolishes "untouchability," forbids its practice in any form and makes "the enforcement of any disability arising out of 'untouchability' a punishable offence." Article 15 of the constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of caste. The First Amendment of the constitution permits the state to make special provisions "for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizens or for the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes." But Mistry's narrative shows a world, "where the liabilities of untouchability prevail despite the constitution, and the proclaimed class warfare of Marxist parties and other of political rhetoric, established power entrenches itself by neutering the democratic process." (D'Cruz, 63)

Mistry's portrayal of the Hindu culture is not an impartial ethnographic account of Indian society but suggests the stark injustices inherent in the practice of caste. The inhumanity of untouchability is severely criticized as contributing to an erosion of mining in the lives of Dukhi, Narayan, Ishvar and Om. The cruelty and arbitrariness that characterizes their treatment is better understood from the following quote:

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, ravaging on an agreement to plough a landlord's field, had been forced to eat the land lord's excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of getting 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 hanged. (108-109)

Among the rights of the child, the most important one is the right to education as children are the principal holders of this right. But in the world of Mistry, we see that the children of low caste are denied of the right to education. Ishvar and Narayan are caned severely when they enter the class room:

You Chamaar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school!"(110). Taking the cane "the teacher asked four older students to hold the trespassers to the ground, face down, by their hands and ankles. He commenced the punishment, alternating strokes between the two. The watching children flinched each time the cane landed on the bare bottoms. (111)

After his sons Ishvar and Narayan have been beaten for entering the village school, Dukhi appeals to pandit Lalluram, as he has faith in the Brahmin priest of whom it is said that "even an untouchable could receive justice at his hands,"(112). However, Dukhi realises that justice is a concept which he as an untouchable does not have a claim to being an 'outsider.' Dukhi, the untouchable is excluded from the scope of justice. He then courageously decides to "break the timeless chain of caste," by sending his sons to Ashraf in the nearby town to be apprenticed as tailors.

Narayan returns to the village and gets up his own tailor shop, an event strongly resented by the villagers especially Thakur Dharmasi, the village chieftain. While Dukhi opposed occupational restriction based

on caste, Narayan fights for the constitutionally guaranteed political participation of untouchables in the election process. Narayan laments that "life without dignity is worthless," (144). By taking on the fight against the corruption and the nepotism of the Parliamentary elections, Narayan takes on the fight against an existence deprived of dignity. His attempt of voting to make his mark results in the ruin of his family that is burnt alive by the goondas of Thakur Dharamsi.

The inequalities and injustices faced by the underprivileged in India can be clearly seen in Thakur Dharamsi acts who brutally murders the entire family of Narayan. This gives us instances of real torture, helplessness and suffering of the poor and downtrodden. After the death of Narayan and his two nameless supporters, there is worse to come in the narrative. The landless men rampage the village. They carry Narayan's mutilated body to his house and display it to his wife. They then tie up Narayan's wife, his little daughter and his parents and set fire to the hut. Om and Ishvar, safe in town are the only survivors of their family:

A long howl broke from Radha but the sound of grief soon mingled with the family's death agony; the house was set alight. The first flames licked at the bound flesh. The dry winds, furiously fanning the fire, showed the only spark of mercy during this night. The blaze swiftly enfolded all six of them. (147)

This is one of the instances in the novel of the barbarity of upper caste oppression. Although the constitution of 1949 defines the Indian nation as "secular" untouchability has not been practically abolished country wide. Om and Ishvar flee their home in rural India on account of the oppressive system and seek anonymity and livelihood in the city. They experience the anguish of being torn away from their roots as well as the torment of leading a faceless life in the modern city of Bombay. Having been the victims of the caste system of India, their life in the huge slum (Dharavi) makes them realize the misery, squalor and dirt of modern India. Starving children, half naked people, cruel exploitation, lack of basic amenities and an undignified existence is in store for them during their first encounter with urban India. The nexus between the corrupt politicians and the government machinery takes away even the right to protest from the common people.

All human beings, independent of where they are located in the world or in whatever country or place possess undeniable, un-transferable, indispensable, universal rights from their birth as equal and free individuals without any distinction of sex, race, religion, caste, language, or ethnic status. Human Rights and Democracy have a parallel evolution. One cannot talk about democracy where human rights are not protected and in the same way one cannot think about the presence of human rights where there is no democracy. Even in the 21st century the caste system is not viewed as a relic of the past. Our minds are still handcuffed by the Varna system – can we truly call ourselves a democratic country, if one half of our brethren continue to live in degradation and deprivation?

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