The Voice and Presence of Subaltern: A Study of Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance

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A R T I C L E  I N F O

Article History:
Received 08 July 2018
Received in revised form 13 July 2018
Accepted 18 July 2018
Available online 31 July 2018

Key words:
Subaltern, Corruption, Humiliation, Suppression and Downtrodden.

A B S T R A C T

More than sixty years have passed since India gained its political autonomy, but the fact remains that women and untouchables living in Indian society are yet to witness freedom in a truer sense. Rohinton Mistry tries to unveil the contemporary society through his Giller prize winning novel A Fine Balance. This novel published in 1995 has universal appeal because it voices the hidden and suppressed emotions of subaltern. Its major themes are corruption of power, imbrications of national politics and the fate, the horrors of caste system and untouchability. The present paper portrays the subaltern voice and visibility for the downtrodden. It also focuses on devastating effects of caste system on the educational, social and economical status of untouchables in Indian society. It also highlights the harsh reality of the humiliation, suppression, struggle and torture downtrodden face every day of their miserable lives. It presents how different discourses on dalits are incorporated in Indian Hindu society.

Introduction

The maltreatment of the subaltern is one of the major issues in the novel. Before we move ahead, it may not be out of place to have a look at the meaning of the term ‘subaltern’. The term was popularized by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist in the 1920s and 1930s as a surrogate for the term ‘proletarian class’ in order to counter Fascism. In India, the term was catapulted by the Subaltern Studies Collective writing in 1982 on Southern Asian history and society from a ‘subaltern perspective’. Ranajit Guha propounded a working definition of subaltern as:

The word subaltern.... stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary that is of inferior rank. It will be used as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way. (43)

Discussion

Rohinton Mistry is one of the internationally acknowledged writers since his works have won international accolades. Canada based, Rohinton Mistry is the author of three novels and a short story collection set amidst the closely knit and isolated Parsi community in Bombay. His writings bear a social purpose. He is one of the prominent writers of the post colonial era. His novels deal with the theme of exploitation basing on the political, economic, and social aspects stressing the necessity of social purpose in fiction. Among the very few Indian writers in English, he is one of the novelists who dealt with plight of untouchables in his novel, A Fine Balance. Untouchability- Dalitism has been India’s most grave societal evil since time immemorial and is still practised in various parts of rural India. The so called, downtrodden- or lower castes are refuted to pursue education because education may enlighten them to their rights as citizens and may claim their rights. The caste discrimination and repression is mostly found to be in practice among the Hindus of our country. Rohinton Mistry attempted his best to voice the cruelty and oppression experienced by these muted untouchables in his novel A Fine Balance. The novel exposes class and caste disparities of Indian society which also mirrors a visual rendering of those who endure its inequities.

Rohinton Mistry depicts about ‘Chamirs’ who are born into a leather-making chamir family. The upper caste people have treated them brutally in a distressing manner. The inhumanity of upper castes is glaringly evidenced in the
novel. One of the examples is as to how untouchables are treated cruelly is illustrated in the following lines by Rohinton Mistry. For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death- the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambir 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, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord’s field, had been forced to eat the landlord’s excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanashyam’ the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling 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 him hanged” (A Fine Balance 122).

The downtrodden were cruelly treated by the upper castes which is exhibited clearly in their activities such as- stoning Sita- just for walking in the streets of upper castes till her first blood is seen; Into the ears of Gambhir molten lead was poured just for hearing the prayers of temple who was nearby and Dayaram was compelled to eat stools of the landlord for asking wages and so on. Such inhuman action by the upper castes has become routine phenomenon. The untouchability is a kind of disease, denigrates not only Hindu culture but it is also a blot on Indian society which is reflected in the words of Rohinton Mistry:

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 are all children of the same GOD. Remember what Gandhi says, that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk. (Habib 78)

It is clear that Rohinton Mistry is in favour of untouchable because he feels that untouchability is not only disease but it is also poisoning the sacred philosophy of Hinduism.

Mistry’s focus is on the characters of Ishvar, Om, Dina and Maneck. The story of the novel begins with the train journey and conversation among the passengers about the emergency. The novel starts with a journey in the emergency and also ends with the departure of Maneck in the emergency. Ishvar and Om are going to Dina’s house by train for getting a job as dress tailors. They meet Maneck in the train. Maneck is a college student going to Dina’s house to live as a paying guest. They listen to the common people’s reaction to the government’s activities and the complex situation in the city.

Maybe it has to do with the Emergency,’ said someone. What emergency? Prime Minister made a speech on the radio early this morning. Something about country being threatened from inside. Sounds like one more government tamasha. Why does everybody have to choose the railway tracks only for dying? grumbled another. No consideration for people like us. Murder, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police-custody death— everything ends up delaying the trains. What is wrong with poison or tall buildings or knives? (A Fine Balance 5-6)

All these characters come together and develop a lifelong and consistent bond. Mistry, as a master storyteller, weaves the three strands into the plot of the novel. Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow who bravely strives for a free and independent existence, young Maneck Kohlah who struggles with problems of existence and the Chamaar-turned-tailors Ishwar and Omprakash, who struggle for survival in a hostile world. They allow them to find refuge in feelings of kinship and togetherness. Meantime, Mistry cleverly brings all the four protagonists into contact with each other and they eventually end living together under the same roof, a miracle given the caste-ridden Indian society and its hierarchical character. Raymond Williams asserts,

When I think of the realist tradition in fiction, I think of the kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons. The balance involved in this achievement in perhaps the most important thing, the sort of the things most novels do…. Yet the distinction of this kind is that it offers a valuing of a whole way of life, a society that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, at the same time valuing creations of human beings who, while belonging to and affected by and helping to define this way of life, are also, in their own terms, absolute ends in themselves. (314)

Although Mistry makes a start giving a picture of turbulent Indian city, he continuously flashes back to the past. Ishvar is the uncle of Omprakash who is his brother’s son. Ishvar and Om’s father, Narayan change their profession and at the same time, they change their identity by altering their surname. Here, we, the readers, also see the curse of untouchability, Ishvar and Narayan’s father, Dukhi, who comes from Chamaar caste, is threatened by the landlord for asking wages and so on. Such inhuman action by the upper castes has become routine phenomenon. The untouchability is a kind of disease, denigrates not only Hindu culture but it is also a blot on Indian society which is reflected in the words of Rohinton Mistry:

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the villagers especially Thakur Dharamsi, the village chieftain. Even though Narayan’s life has changed, he confesses his deep dissatisfaction to his father. Dukhi responds:

How can you say that? So much has changed. Your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth. And look at your house, your-Those things, yes. But what about the more important things? Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals. Those kinds of things take time to change. 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 … Son; those are dangerous things to want. You changed from Chamaar to tailor. Be satisfied with that. Narayan shook his head. That was your victory. (74-75)

When Narayan attempts to cast his vote in the Parliamentary elections much against the prevailing and accepted practice, his entire family is burnt alive by the henchmen of Thakur. Only his brother Ishwar and son Om manage to escape. After an arrival of readymade garments, Ashraf’s business suffers and they are forced to move to the city by the sea looking for better prospects. Their life in the city turns out to be a horrendous experience until they meet Dina Dalal who is on the lookout for tailors. Mistry portrays the effects of Emergency in the form of fusion between the general and the personal realistically in this novel. Ishwar and Om manage to find a shack in the slum area. Their daily life is shown like Dickens. We have a memorable account of the inhabitants of the slum area being taken to a village to form part of the audience where the Prime Minister speaks to them of the numerous benefits of the emergency to the poor. Mistry terms this performance of hers, rather satirically, as a day in the circus. Though Ishwar and Om are not able to intellectually comprehend the factors that lead to the imposition of the emergency, they do feel its repercussions purely at the personnel level when their jhopadi is bulldozed as a part of the city beautification programme. And now homeless, they end up as pavement dwellers, but even here there is no solace available to them. Om and Ishwar are then taken away to a nearby irrigation project site where they go through the hard grind of manual labour, while being provided with a tattered blanket for shelter and offered some food. They are eventually rescued by Beggar master and are back in Dina Dalal’s flat. The intellectual response to the emergency is dramatized in a long conversation between Maneck and Avinash. It is further seen in the manner in which the student’s union are split and in the submissive support of the college teachers for the declaration of emergency. Mrs. Gupta and Nusswan both represent the vested interests hail the emergency as a true spirit of renaissance and regard the Prime Minister as our visionary leader. Mistry deftly handles the growing intimacy between Dina Dalal, Maneck and the Chamaar-turned tailors, Ishwar and Om. When the tailors and Maneck arrive together at Dina Dalal’s gloomy little flat, she is relieved since her fragile independence was preserved. She is initially quite appalled by their sloppy work and tardiness. The various stages in their relationship, from her initial resistance to any kind of intimacy with the tailors to the longing for their company, given her loneliness, and the rapid growth of concern for them once she learns of the enormity of their suffering, are described in painstaking details by the novelist. This transformation of such a relationship, as the one between Parsi’s and Chamaars is an exceptional event in Indian English fiction. It is the mutual dependence between them that finally forces Dina Dalal to agree to let the tailors sleep in her veranda for she could not afford to lose their services. She remarks,

But how firm to stand, how much to bend? Where was the line between compensation and foolishness, kindness and weakness? And that was from her position. From theirs, it might be a line between mercy and cruelty, consideration and callousness. She could draw it on this side, but they might see it on that side. (69)

Up to this, Mistry shows the condition of the untouchables in the colonial era as well as in the time of independence. But as the story progresses, we see that the problems and sufferings of the subalterns do not end; rather multiply. The nation cannot guarantee the protection of the right of the subalterns and the untouchables in the way the rights of elite are guaranteed. The domination over the subalterns remains the same even after Indian independence. The government passes the new laws but in reality the laws do not protect the lower class people; rather the laws go against them, the lower-class people. The government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals. Those kinds of things take time to change. 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. (42)

And the upper class is jealous of Narayan’s prosperity. The elite class gets angry with Dukhi for making his sons tailors instead of initiating them into the inherited profession of a cobbler. Before that, Narayan expresses his dissatisfaction with the unchanged condition of the lower class people’s fate. This portrayal of the lower class people shows the social discrimination which was to be eliminated in postcolonial India but ironically it has not happened. What is it, what’s bothering you? I was just thinking that … thinking how noting changes. Years pass, and nothing changes. Dukhi sighed again but not with pleasure. How can you say that? So much has changed. Your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth. Those things, yes. But what about the more important things? Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals. Those kinds of things take time to change. 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. (42)

After the whole family’s death, Ishwar and Om go to the city. But they cannot change their life in the city. There, they seek for a shelter and a job. 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 live in pavements. They struggle a lot but cannot have the opportunity to change their fate because of the government policy. The reaction to the government activities can be seen in the voice of a Sikh taxi driver when Maneck takes a ride in that taxi:

That’s a very long time, sahib. That means you left before the Emergency ended – before the elections. Of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed. Government still keeps breaking poor people’s homes and jhopadpattis. 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 on emergency
or another. He beeped a warning to someone trudging along the shoulder. You heard about the attack on the Golden Temple, no? (81)

Even the political killings are pointed out in the novel by Mistry referring to Avinash’s death. The cause of the death is mysterious. Police say that he died in a railway accident. On the other hand, Avinash’s parents claim that he was killed for Police torture. At this juncture, government and politics both fail to protect a student leader who shares anti-emergency opinion:

He tore his eyes from the photograph to read the rest of the article. The reporter had met the parents; he wrote … they had, during the Emergency, lost their eldest under circumstances that were never satisfactorily explained. The police claimed it was a railway accident, but the parents spoke of wounds they had seen on their son’s body at the morgue. According to the reporter, the injuries were consistent with other confirmed incidents of torture …. (94)

At the end, it is discovered by Maneck that Ishvar and Om become the beggars. When Maneck expresses his surprise knowing that he is stopped to think or investigate by Dina. This transformation of Ishvar and Om is significant. With this, the destination of the subalterns is revealed. Although it cannot be said in strong voice, what has happened to Ishvar and Om that happens to every subaltern in this world. But this is the outcome that most of the subalterns have to accept as their predetermined fate. The subalterns or peripheral group of people struggle hard for the changes in their life. Ironically, except few, all of them fall apart into disaster where their existence turns into miserable story:

There is no wife, no children. They have become beggars. Sorry – what, Aunty? 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? I mean – Without knowing everything you want to judge them?’ she cut him off. (106)

**Conclusion**

*A Fine Balance* is a brilliant example of a realistic novel which describes the hopes and aspirations, the pain and suffering of the average Indian. The narrative voice in Mistry’s fiction achieves a fine balance, between involvement and detachment. Thus it provides a reliable witness to an eventful era in the nation’s history. Mistry’s humour is gentle and amusing. The novel demonstrates the values of human relationships and fellow feeling among people, despite their distinctions in caste and class. Mistry expects healthy life for downtrodden. He gives the subaltern a voice and visibility in this novel. Faithfulness to the story and the characters is what concerns me most” (Gokhale 6). The representation of the subalterns in this novel is realistic, putting many controversial issues aside. Ironically, the struggle to reduce and erase the caste system along with poverty from the Indian societies has started from the beginning of the 20th century with the fall of British Empire, but till now the division into classes exists with its escalated strength and authority in independent India. The writers, especially Indian English writers utilizing the medium of literature, are continuously trying to give voice to the poor and lower class people for altering the subalterns’ status. This attempt may be evaluated as insignificant, but the representation of the subalterns has created a resonance to shake the foundation of the societal stereo-typed ideology causing the people to rethink the whole problem of the subalterns, so that all classes of humanity might be guaranteed respect, sympathy, and fundamental rights.

**References**


