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## The Impact of Socio-Political Suppression of the Downtrodden in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Social hierarchy is dominated in the novel through a series of issues like the subjection of women and Untouchables through their forced conventionality. In his *A Fine Balance*, Mistry finds the application of caste discrimination and political upheavals in accordance with Manusmriti. There lies an insecure situation for the people due to the Emergency period. The immigrants lack in finding a proper place to satisfy their basic amenities. Mistry depicts the exploitation of the commoners by the government in the name of development and beautification. Each character in the novel is harassed due to 'Power.' Power is the major context which influences all the character throughout the novel. The power play locates and portrays the tension and violence in the society. The attempts made by the marginalized to be self-reliant ends in aggression. The longing for hopefulness is apparent in the characters attitude beyond their conventionality and institutionalized constraints.

Mistry supports untouchables. For him, untouchability is not only disease but it is also poisoning the sacred philosophy of Hinduism. He describes the gender discrimination and the oppression faced by the untouchables in *A Fine Balance* by introducing the four characters – Dina and Mameck who are Parsees and two tailors Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash are humiliated by the upper castes. The lives of the tailors' forefathers who were in fact 'Chamars' or 'Mochis' reflect the ruthless cruelty of the caste-system in the rustic India where unbelievable oppressions are carried out on the lower-castes by the upper-caste Jamindars and Thakurs. Caste discrimination has become violent and forced Dukhi, a Mochi, and the grandfather of Omprakash and father of Ishvar from their traditional occupation of working with leather to learn the dexterities of tailoring in the town. They migrated to cities. The tailors experience the poignant dislocation of following a novel professional uniqueness, struggling to find shelter in a new city and the physical displacement from their village to the city. After earning some money, they decided to return to their village.

The novel presents an authentic portrait of contemporary India during the Emergency era imposed by Indira Gandhi. Zai Whitaker calls it 'wise and wonderful'. It is India with its timeless chain of caste exploitation; male chauvinism, linguistic strives and communal disharmony. In India, power-hungry politicians control the strings of administration like a puppeteer. Mistry has portrayed the humiliating condition of people living in Jhopadpattis, deaths on railway tracks, demolition of shacks on the pretext of beautification, violence on the campuses in the name of ragging, deaths in police custody, lathi charges and murders in the pretext of enforcing Family Planning, which are all part of India's nasty politics.

The novel reflects the reality of India, the politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, suppression, violence and bloodshed. It also provides an intimate insight into rural India focusing on the injustice, the cruelty and the horror of deprivation and exposes the trauma of India's millions along communal, religious and linguistic lines.

The protagonist Dina Shroff, a Parsi widow and her two tailors make their survival in a world of segregation, corruption and oppression in which honest work was denied and punished by a totalitarian system. To beautify the city, the Government deployed officials in the guise of Safety Inspectors to check the colony. The bulldozers went in and the illegal slums were removed making the poor people homeless. During the 'Emergency', the Family Planning Programme was allegedly used to eliminate the enemies of the establishment. This incident had become a nightmare in the life of Om. The new rules of Emergency made it obligatory for every officer to encourage people to get sterilized to complete his quota; otherwise, there would be no promotion for him. The Family Planning Programme was pressed into service allegedly to eliminate one's enemies by confusing sterilization with castration. Deaths during the 'Emergency' were called 'accidental'. The death of Ashraf Chacha at the market square is described as an accident, by the police.

Elections here were under the control of the master-minded landlords like Thakur Dharamsi. Narayan's attempt at voting to make his mark himself results in the ruin of his family by being burnt alive by the goondas of Thakur Dharamsi. Exploitation of the low castes by upper caste continues unabated. But the Parsi widow Dina, is capable of feeling for the untouchables by giving shelter to Ishvar and Om, the two chamaars (sweepers). Freedom remained a cherished yet unattainable goal to Dina because of the social tyranny imposed by her brother and the patriarchal structure of the Parsi society. Under 'Emergency', she does not make any attempt to approach the law courts, because of the powers given to corrupt officials like sergeant Kesar.

The narration and re-narration of Mistry is based on various stories of India's history, culture and caste based society. Mistry has set this novel in three different backgrounds. While Dina Dalal lives in the City by Sea, the tailors, Ishvar and Om, represent rural India and Maneck Kohlah is from north India. The narratives go on shifting from rural life to city life in the case of Ishvar, Om and that of Maneck Kohlah. The 'truth' of India, asserts Vinita D. Bhatnagar, is "incomplete" like the multi-layered and multifarious truth about fiction.

Mistry suggests that the destruction of caste depends upon the rejection of the Hindu scriptures as Ambedkar has advocated. Hinduism may have authorized the social and economic order that followed, but this authority has to be withdrawn, it would not follow that the social and economic order that it has promoted would thereby collapse. In the end, despite its religious roots, the perpetuation of caste is supported by deep-seated economic and social interests, which would rather re-invent the discourse of discrimination to shroud their politics or use the law as their excuse than surrender their advantages.

The Untouchables of the village are the Chamars or leather workers. In the city, the caste affiliation dissolves in urban anonymity; the new "Untouchables" are the beggars or the pavement-dwellers, who dramatize through their situation the evolving dynamics of social ostracism. As Mistry's Untouchable characters turn into beggars at the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the Untouchable and the beggar are different manifestations of the same condition. In each case through the appeal to some ideal principle, which creates also its antithesis, the object of society is identified and exiled. The principle itself may change according to political exigencies and prevailing interests, but the fundamental structure of exclusion is the same. During the Emergency, 'Beautification' of public amenities displaces "purity" as the desired ideal, which operates much as caste purity does in order to identify an expendable class. Mistry installs in his fiction the state of Emergency under whose auspices all kinds of State and bureaucratic power spin into excess. The Emergency also provides the

visible mantle under which traditional forms of power reiterate their hold upon village societies, for instance using its population policies to take away the reproductive capacities of Untouchables.

In the city, under the Emergency, the stigma of defilement gets a new interpretation, as its urban Beautification programmes attempt to eliminate from view beggars and pavement-dwellers. These are the new visual equivalents of the Untouchables, and many of them may indeed, like Mistry's characters, Ishvar and Omprakash, come from the Untouchable castes. In this mutation of the terms of oppression, the only thing that changes is the language of discrimination, not the fact of discrimination, its logic, or its targets. In a powerful retrospective sequence that culminates in 1969, Mistry traces the processes leading up to the eventual displacement of Ishvar and Omprakash from their native village by the river. Narayan, Ishvar's brother and Omprakash's father, has challenged the corrupt electoral practices that effectively disenfranchise the Untouchable caste. For this, he and his friends are tortured to death by the local leader Thakur Dharamsi. Not satisfied with this, the Thakur ordered the torching of Narayan's home and the murder of his family in a bid to root out the aspiration of Untouchables for democratic equality. This event, as well as the decline of the tailoring business in their provincial town, precipitates the migration of the two surviving members of the family, Ishvar and Omprakash, to the city by the sea, which is not identified but which one may deduce to be Bombay. The fictional murder of a Chamar family in 1969 or 1970 has parallels with similar incidents that occurred in 1981 and recorded by M.J. Akbar in his book *Riot after Riot*. Mistry uses 'Thakur' as a title of honour. This title is particularly widespread among petty Rajput chieftains. This meaning of 'Thakur' ought to be distinguished from its use to designate the members of a hill-tribe found in the hinterland of Bombay.

In 1981, Harijans were killed in several villages in Uttar Pradesh. Two of these massacres, one in Delhi, followed by another a few days later in Sarhupur received widespread publicity. The killers, who were Thakur Rajputs, had just one message to send through murder — the untouchable Jatav cobblers had to learn their place in society and the caste hierarchy. This is also the message that Mistry's Thakur Dharamsi wished to send to the Untouchable Chamar families who had sought democratic equality in defiance of caste hierarchy. What is evident here is a conflict between the terms of nationhood and those of caste stratification, which have their roots in Hinduism. The casualty in the conflict is the principle of democracy upon which equality of citizenship depends. Mistry's fictional and Akbar's documentary accounts of caste violence may be usefully situated within the broader context of "caste wars" that have dominated parts of Tamilnadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Bihar. Most of the violence against the Dalits comes from landowning caste Hindus, who are equipped with militias and private armies that have been recruited and trained with government assistance and cooperation, initially for the purpose of combating Maoist-style uprisings from tenants and landless people.

In actual fact, caste affinities and ties with the land became the unifying theme to which the armed groups appealed in order to unite landowners as well as peasants of superior birth against the government's agrarian reforms that were intended to favour Dalits. Their common cause against the Dalits was often expressed through caste warfare. The Emergency is identified as a symbolic vehicle to demonstrate government collusion and participation in the outright confirms the continued disenfranchisement and displacement of depressed groups. His retrospective flashback to Narayan's murder by Thakur Dharamsi locates the excesses of the Emergency within a history in which the actual political process has

continually eroded the constitutional and legal safeguards through which genuine democracy has to work. Whether it is power at the village level or at the national level, in each case the holders of power seek to perpetuate, and succeed in perpetuating, authoritarian forms of governance under the guise of democracy. Under the Emergency, even the pretence of democracy withers to expose the authoritarianism at the heart of Indian politics. In the unequivocal collapse of the government's moderating role is also contained the collapse of the "fine balance" that the title of Mistry's novel advertises, and which alludes to the balance between hope and despair, and presumably also between power and resistance.

The novel drives away from the sphere of public struggle and looks for solutions that operate through domestic and familial metaphors. In diametric contrast to the final solution proposed by his character Nusswan, Mistry puts forward a symbolic project for the accommodation of the displaced. The politics of both caste and the politics of gender converge in the precarious entitlement of both the Untouchable tailors and Dina Dalal to a dwelling place of their own. On their arrival in the city, the tailors are permitted grudgingly to sleep on the back pavement of someone's shop. After finding employment with Dina, they are encouraged by their host to rent a hut in the slums, only to be evicted by the Emergency's slum clearance programme. Being aware of the danger of sleeping in public places, they gladly accept the sanctuary that Dina offers reluctantly in her cramped flat. The picaresque style of the novel, which characterizes its forward trajectory, is largely motivated by the tailors' quest for a home of their own. Dina, on the other hand, lives in fear of eviction on some real or trumped-up excuse, since her rent-controlled flat represents potentially valuable real estate for her landlord. The flat is the symbol of her independence. She is able to retain both only so long as she has the income from her tailoring business. Hence, Dina and the tailors are mutually dependent on each other.

The lifestyle of the four characters Dina and Maneck Kohlah locate their relationship within the paradigm of the reconstructed family. The four followed the inequalities irrespective of both gender and caste. This experimental symbolic family is based upon the erasure of gender inequality as well as caste inequality. Through the projected wedding of Omprakash, this family looks forward to its perpetuation. However, Omprakash's castration and Dina's eventual eviction from her flat indicate the defeat of Mistry's tentative proposal of accommodation for women and Untouchables. In the final analysis, the political force of Mistry's fiction lies not in the survival of his solutions, but upon the epic magnitude he invokes in order to demonstrate the effectively invincible and protean qualities of traditional power, as well as upon the moral indignation that he summons against such power.

Despite the Marxist slogan "Caste is Class, comrades" (281), and despite some overlaps between class and caste stratification, the two concepts derive from different principles. Mistry's novel makes it abundantly clear through a variety of options that dominion has its source in the oppressive subjection of the body of the other. Repeatedly, the postulated defilement of the Untouchables serves as the pretext for various landowners to visit upon them with impunity all sorts of brutalities. In one instance, after a day of back-breaking labour, pounding chillies for Thakur Premji, the upper-caste landowner, Dukhi, Ishvar's father, is beaten and his wages confiscated because the mortar used for pounding had split into two. In another instance, the young Ishvar and his brother Narayan, who are excluded from school under caste regulations, endure physical punishment for stealing into the classroom, when no one is around to satisfy their curiosity. Fascinated experimenting with chalks and slates, Ishvar makes the discovery that it is easy to make his mark before it is contradicted by the physical blows that rain upon his and Narayan's bodies when the

schoolmaster finds them in the classroom. By this time, Ishvar already bore on his face, like a caste mark, the scar that he had sustained on the day of his initiation into his hereditary occupation as a leather worker. Helping to shift a dying buffalo from the field of an upper-caste landlord, he is blushed on the face by the buffalo.

Mistry foregrounds the false schism upon which the notional alienation from the body is predicated when the upper-caste Pandit Lalluram belches, breaks wind, and blows his nose, as he pontificates upon the defiling touch of Ishvar and Narayan in the schoolroom. Although the sovereignty over the body that the Pandit aspires to is evidently beyond his reach, what is amply within his grasp is its ritual expression through the power exerted over Untouchable bodies. However, as Mistry proves, this is no disinterested quest for ritual purity since it also legitimizes and perpetuates an oppressive economic and social order. Similarly, gender hierarchy is asserted through the degradation and humiliation of female bodies.

After the death of their father, Nusswan becomes the figure of authority in their home, controlling even minor details of Dina's apparel and appearance. On one occasion when Dina defies Nusswan and cuts her hair, he chastises her for this exercise of autonomy by taping her severed plaits back to her head. He regards the severed hair as polluted. By forcing Dina to wear them, he not only revokes the autonomy she has exercised, but he is also bent upon constructing her body as degraded. Nusswan's action links the fertilizable female body with pollution.

Like the Untouchable who carries with him the liability of the contaminating touch, Dina carries with her the reminder of the pollution that is linked to her fertilizable body through the stock of sanitary pads that she has devised from the remnants of fabric. As Dina gradually crosses the pollution barrier between herself and the tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash, by dispensing with segregated cups, by dining together, and by massaging Omprakash's strained back, a reciprocal levelling of the gender hierarchy occurs. It is signified through Maneck and Omprakash turning Dina's sanitary pads into phallic symbols, which they attach to themselves, as they cavort around her room in an exuberant burst of masculine bonding during her absence. Yet this inclination towards symbolic equality between male and female bodies runs the risk of being torpedoed when Omprakash proposes to Maneck that they should satisfy their sexual voyeurism by peeping on Dina in the bathroom. This attempt to install the male gaze disintegrates as Maneck rises to the defence of Dina's honour. Since Maneck does not refrain from indulging his voyeuristic instincts with Omprakash on another occasion in another location where their object is an unknown woman, it must be assumed that the gender hierarchy is in abeyance only provisionally. Yet it is levelled sufficiently for Dina to contemplate accommodating the tailors on a permanent basis, and receiving into her household Omprakash's prospective wife. What motivates Dina is the surge of sympathy that she feels on being confronted with the visible suffering of Ishvar and Omprakash. They, in their turn, are moved by her recognition of their humanity.

Being aware of the current debate over identity within the Parsi Community, Mistry suggests a nuanced solution to this problem. His understanding of secularism in the public sphere is limited. If Mistry is critical of secularized religious identities and communal rights, his solution to the riddle is to emphasize the importance of the secular individual, who is a key to manage the demands of both entities.

**Work Cited:**

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