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Touching the Untouchables: A Representation of Dalit Women in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Dalit women are one of the most exploited and segregated groups in the world. They are a special category who because of their triple victimization cannot be considered either as women or as Dalits. Ruth Manorama, an active member of the National Alliance of women stated that in a male dominated society

“ Dalit women face a triple burden caste, class and gender. Dalit women in India are considered the Dalits among the Dalits, and suffer a threefold oppression - On account of gender because of existing patriarchy, On account of their caste, the untouchable, finally on account of their class – as they hail from the poorest and most marginalized communities ”(News Archives)

The Hindu religious texts like Manusmriti and the Vedas have only added to the burden of a Dalit woman. Hindu apologists consider the Manusmriti as the divine code of conduct both for men and women. But in most of the verses women are treated inferior to men and without respect. But defending Manusmriti's representation of women apologists often quote the verse: “Yatre naryaasto pojyantay, Ramantay tatr.”

Where women are provided place of honour, gods are pleased and reside there in that house hold, but they knowingly forget those verses which are full of prejudices and discrimination against women. The laws in Manusmriti and other scriptures thus justified all the exploitation meted against women especially Dalit women. Even killing of an untouchable by an upper class was justified as a minor offence.

Even though Indian Constitution provides equality to all its citizens irrespective of castes, creed and religion and orders the State to take drastic steps to eradicate these tendencies, the problems still persist. The uneducated minority is unaware of its own rights and still gropes in the dark for a better treatment from the upper class.

Rohinton Mistry's novel, 'A Fine Balance' gives a glimpse of the atrocities meted out on the Dalit Women. Even though the political issues during the emergency and other Dalit issues occupy the main text, the representation of the struggles and cruelties done on Dalit women attracts much attention.

The chapter 'A Village by the River' of the novel narrates the story of Dukhi Mochi, a chammaar (leather worker) who sick of the cruelties of the upper class sends his children to learn tailoring, breaking the timeless chain of caste. The family of Dukhi Mochi comprises his wife Roopa and his two sons Ishvar and Narayan. Before Ishvar was born Roopa had given birth to three daughters, but none survived beyond few months, But Roopa “ looked after her sons with special ardor and devotion she had learned was reserved for male children.” (pg 97) Women were ill treated even within Dalit families and it began from birth. Birth of daughters was always considered as a curse and a burden, while the birth of sons made their parents proud and happy. Special care was given to male children while the daughters were made to live on the leftovers of the male children.

Two years after Ishvar was born, Roopa and Dukhi had another son. This one was named Narayan. Even the upper caste felt jealous at two sons being born in a chammaar family.

The news of a second son created envy in upper caste homes.... It was hard for them not to be resentful – the birth of daughter often brought them beatings from their husbands families. Sometimes they were ordered to discreetly get rid of the new born. Then they had no choice but to strangle the infant with the swaddling clothes, poison her or let her starve to death. (pg 100)

The acute poverty at Dukhi's house made Roopa steal at nights to feed her sons. As a mother, she could not bear the thought of her sons sleeping hungry. Often going hungry herself was a matter of course – that she often did even to keep Dukhi fed. She knew that if she was caught stealing at night from the land lords she would be hanged to death. But she took the risk for her kids.

“After her milk went dry, Rupa began nocturnal visits to the cows of various land owners while Dukhi and child slept, she crept out of the hut with a small brass haandi, sometime between midnight and cockcrow. She took only a little from each cow thus, the owner would not sense a decrease in the yield. When Dukhi saw the milk in the morning he understood. If he awoke in the night as she was leaving he said nothing and lay shivering till she returned.”(pg 97)

Such great risk from women, often made them silent victims of sexual exploitation as once happened to Roopa. One day during one of her nocturnal visits to a landowner's orchard, she was caught by a watchman.

He said he would let her carry as much as oranges she wants without informing the land owner if she would agree to surrender to him. When Roopa seemed not ready to accept his bargain he said,

One shout from me and they will come running. In only have to shout, and the owner and his sons would be here at once. They would strip you and whip you for stealingAfter whipping you they would probably show you disrespect and stain your honour. They would take turns doing shameful things to your lovely soft body. (pg98)

Surrendering to the man Roopa wept badly and ran to her home with the oranges. Dukhi was pretending to be asleep while she returned. The smell and the muffled sobs of her made Dukhi guess what might have happened at night. He badly wanted to comfort and speak to her. But felt afraid of learning too much. “He wept silently, sending his shame, anger, humiliation in tears. He wished he would die that night. In the morning Roopa behaved as if nothing had occurred. So Dukhi said nothing and they ate the oranges”. (pg99)

Dalit women were punished severely even for minor offences. They were raped, stripped and whipped according to the upper class whims and fancies. Often the offences were varied and imaginative. These women were like play things in the hands of the upper class men. They made these women work, exploited them sexually and when tired killed them. Nobody questioned it because Hindu religious texts justified it.

As times passed exploitation and subjugation continued but only the names of the victims changed. The condition was no better inside Dalit families also. Dalit women were still treated inferior to the Dalit male. Narayan, Dukhi's second son, now an established tailor talked much about the injustice done on the Dalits. One day sitting on the porch with his father Narayan said, “Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper caste bastards still treat us worse than animals.”(pg 142) One who so much wanted the society to change seemed unaware of the injustice done inside his own family. When a son was born to Narayan he named him Omprakash and there was celebration. People were invited to rejoice with them at the happy occasion. But when three daughters followed Omprakash's

birth there was no celebration and mirth. “Three daughter were born after Omprakash. Two survived. Their names were Leela and Rekha. No sweets were distributed.” (pg139)

Omprakash was sent to town to learn tailoring, while his sisters remained at home helping their mother. His sisters resented his visits. No one paid attention to Leela and Rekha if their brother was in the house. It started as soon as he stepped in the door.

Look at my child ! how thin he has become ! Is your uncle feeding you or not? She used the excuse to lavish on him special treats like cream, dry fruits and sweetmeats, bursting with pleasure while he ate..... Roopa too sat like a referee, reaching to wipe away a crumb from the corner of his mouth, refilling his plate, pushing a glass of lussi within his reach.(pg 141)

Omprakash’s sisters Leela and Rekha watched these care and love pouring on the son enviously. They were always a silent spectators to the meal time ritual. They always kept quiet without protesting and arguing with the adults. During rare moments when nobody was around Omprakash shared his delicacies with his sisters. More often, though they wept quietly in their bed.

Times have changed and laws have changed, but there are thousands of women like Leela and Rekha who are the silent victims of subjugation both in the society an home. They still weep quietly in their beds without being able to protest and argue. There are only a few instances of injustice quoted from Mistry’s novel. Dalit women around the world still wallow in the shackles of caste with a hope that the systems will change and thus transforming their lives for the better.

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