

Vol. 8, Issue-VIII (July 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Resisting Hierarchies: Foregrounding Caste Politics and Subalternity in *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry

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Article History: Submitted-04/06/2017, Revised-12/07/2017, Accepted-14/07/2017, Published-31/07/2017.

Abstract:

The discourse around caste is responsible for the exclusion and discrimination of certain groups on the basis of their low caste identity in India. My article “Resisting Hierarchies: Foregrounding Caste Politics and Subalternity in *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry” elaborates on the discourse of caste as a technique of ‘Othering’, which targets to isolate and marginalize the disempowered and poor low castes within the geography of a city and nation. It not only underlines the injustices inherent in the practice of caste and the inhuman nature of untouchability but also projects the material and ideological violence of the nation-state over the subaltern sections of Indian society at a particular time of political turmoil in the Indian history. Representing the struggle of the low caste for social mobility and the sufferings of the ordinary citizens to maintain stability against the irrationality created by the misuse of power, it foregrounds their resistance to the established power hierarchies in the postcolonial India.

Keywords: Caste Politics, Dalit, Discrimination, Exclusion, Exploitation, Hierarchy, Marginalization, Other, Power, Resistance, Untouchable

Reflecting on the pervasiveness of caste system in the Indian context, Rashdeeduddin Khan says, “‘The Caste system is truly a synonym for Hindu society’, ‘For the orthodox Hindu it is something so traditional as to be self-evident’” (29). This article conceptualizes caste as a prominent power structure that works on the principle of exclusion and exploitation. As an extreme form of social stratification, caste is the sole determinant of hierarchy or social ranking in the Indian society as it segregates people in a hierarchical order on the basis of their birth in a particular caste that cannot be changed with any talent or skill. Its four-fold division of *varnas*— Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras, ascribing separate qualities and functions to each caste, places the Brahmins at the top rank as the head of the hierarchy whereas Shudra occupies the bottom position. The rigidity in civil, cultural and economic rights of each caste and restrictions on the occupational mobility implies exclusion and discrimination as the governing principle and an internal part of the caste system. The worst form of social exclusion is the formation of untouchable groups that are consist of people belonging to low caste. It segregates them not only in physical terms rather they are excluded from civil and cultural spheres by putting limitations on their access to education, religion and even basic facilities such as water, food and residence etc. In this sense, the caste system stands for “institutionalized inequality; guaranteed differential access to the valued things in life” (Berreman 159). In the words of Gerald D. Berreman, “The human meaning of

caste for those who live it is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honor and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety” (159). Despite the attributes like inequality and differentiation, caste divisions are regarded by the upper castes as “divinely ordained” and are placed within the metaphysical framework of *Dharma* which is interpreted as “nature’s law” or “law of cosmic being” (Dube 26 Nagendra 263). In this way, the caste system is justified and considered as based on the law of one’s nature that implies that “each individual will exist in his naturally ordained place” and “the allocation of privileges and responsibilities was determined by the specific requirements of each individual’s nature” (Carstair 46). Therefore, the caste system is a “fixed or more appropriate ‘an irrevocable’ system of stratification” (Carstair 46).

Caste hierarchy along with the social status of the caste groups also reflects their economic status. The division of functions between castes entailing unequal power distribution makes the dominant caste the locus of power and relegates the low castes to inferior position, thereby, depriving them of power and agency that results in their marginalization and seclusion from the society. Low caste groups remain economically weak sections because they are denied access to sources of wealth and forced to take up low mobility occupations and low-wages jobs that perpetuate their low social and economic status. Their confinement to unskilled and unclean occupations has resulted in their segregation from the mainstream and their classification into ‘untouchable’ groups — a status that descends from the performance of unclean works that are considered the source of pollution such as skinning animal carcass, tanning leather and making shoes, butchery of animals, attending dead bodies at cremation grounds, removing human waste etc. Thus, the category ‘untouchable’ has been constructed out of the cultural principle of purity and pollution that remained the central motif in Indian civilization; and kept lower castes and menial labourers in a miserable and inferior position by necessitating the observance of physical distance from them considering them as impure and unclean people. There are groups based on the nature of profession such as *Chamar*, *Chandala*, *Swapacha* etc. that stand for untouchable castes. Their segregation into groups or castes gave permanent nature to the practice of untouchability — an epitome of the most discriminatory practices having exclusion, humiliation-subordination and exploitation as its three main dimensions.

The rigidity in caste system renders its unjust and oppressive rules of untouchability and social behavior of untouchables as intransgressible. Any kind of rejection or transgression of caste norms by untouchables has been retaliated by the upper caste violently in the form of untouchable atrocity that has left an indelible mark on the psyche of untouchables. This is an established technique, used by the upper caste to assert their superior status and to reinforce their power and domination over the lower castes. There are various other social mechanisms to regulate the caste norms and to ensure their strict adherence such as social and economic boycott etc. Generally, these mechanisms are imposed on the untouchable castes to deter their social and political mobility and growth. The oppressive and violent characteristics of the caste system propel Susan Bayly to interpret it as a “scheme of social and material disabilities. . . . as a source of dehumanizing inequalities and enfeebling social divisions” and she dismisses it as a “legacy of a backward and inequalitarian past” (6).

Rohinton Mistry, in his novel *A Fine Balance (AFB)*, has also underlined the injustices inherent in the practice of caste and the inhuman nature of untouchability that has eroded meaning from the life of the outcastes. By presenting the tale of three generations of an untouchable family and their struggle for social mobility, this novel deals with the issues of subaltern sections of the society and foregrounds their resistance to the established hierarchies in the postcolonial India. It projects violent caste-stratification and problematic of the misuse of power in the Indian society at a particular time of political turmoil in the history of India. The setting of the novel in the time of Internal Emergency in 1975 brings forth the crippling effects of the bizarre events upon the lives of ordinary people and presents history from the margins by narrating the historical events from the perspective of the dispossessed, the lower caste *chamar* community, in other words of a subaltern. The four characters, Om, Ishvar, Dina and Maneck, from different backgrounds represent the hierarchical status and power structures inherent in the Indian society. Through the characters of Om and Ishvar — victims of caste prejudice, the novel has shown the use of caste as an exploitative power structure by Thakurs and Brahmins to achieve their stranglehold in their caste war against untouchables in the village.

Om and Ishvar belong to an untouchable family of *Chamar* caste who has endured the most of caste discrimination and violence in their village at the hands of upper caste family of Thakur Dharamsi. Ishvar's father and his family, besides their training in leatherwork, "learned what it was to be a Chamaar, an untouchable in village society" because "the worker in leather is among the lowest of the low, the most tainted of the tainted" (*AFB* 96 Naipaul 60). They do not need any special instructions for this part of their education in a village in which the ethos of caste were smeared everywhere. The series of caste atrocities in the village unleashed on the lower caste by the Brahmins serve to make them internalize the traditional caste system and force them to comply with the codes that are meant to govern the *Chamar* behaviour. Dukhi's narrative account of his memory of caste tyranny confirms this:

Dukhi listened every evening to his father relate the unembellished facts about events in the village. During his childhood years, he mastered a full catalogue of the real and imaginary crimes a low-caste could commit, and the corresponding punishments were engraved upon his memory. By the time he entered his teens, he had acquired all the knowledge he would need to perceive that invisible line of caste he could never cross, to survive in the village like his ancestors with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions. (*AFB* 97)

There are various social mechanisms that are used to regulate the norms and rules of the caste system that ensure their strict adherence such as punishment for transgressions, social and economic boycott etc. Generally, these mechanisms are imposed on untouchable castes to deter their social and political mobility and growth. Because of their low origin, they are discriminated and excluded from the civil and cultural spheres like temples, the upper caste water resources, schools etc. The notions of purity and pollution deny them access to household job and they are restricted to do unclean jobs. There are incidents in the novel of harsh punishment given to untouchables for their petty crimes and transgressing the line of

caste barrier. They are whipped for going too close to the well, molten lead is poured into their ears for venturing within hearing range of the temple to overhear the sacred *shlokas* while prayers are in progress, their fingers and hands are chopped off for stealing and many more of the same kind. Dukhi's son Ishvar and Narayan are beaten harshly by the schoolmaster for transgressing the caste code by entering into the school premises and over hearing school lessons. Dukhi, feeling dejected at the punishment meted out to his sons decides to bring his grievance to Pandit Lalluram — the *chitpavan* Brahmin, famous for his sense of fairness and justice, “even an untouchable could receive justice at his hands” (*AFB* 112). Nevertheless, Pandit Lalluram's advice that everyone should act as prescribed by his or her Dharma ultimately denies him justice. Pandit Lalluram uses Dukhi's lower caste as a pretext to justify the thrashing of his children as they have crossed the line of caste and defiled the school by entering and touching books of high caste students that is a serious crime according to their high caste guidelines. It is significant to note that Dukhi as an untouchable has no claim to justice and the low order of his caste is considered outside the scope of justice.

As Foucault conceptualises that “Where there is power, there is resistance” even the helpless victims have the potential to counter aggression and oppression (*The History* 95). The novel has also brought into attention how despite the oppressive ideologies of the dominant, the subaltern characters have the potential to resist the hegemonic control of the powerful and they continue to emerge from the margins to engage themselves in “strategies of selfhood” and bring about a meaningful change (Bhabha 1). Their will to transgress in order to define their own subjectivity and bring change in their marginal lives enables them to interrogate and subvert the hegemonic discourses that deny them subjecthood. The ill-treatment of Dukhi's children and his futile attempt to seek justice deprives him of meaning and satisfaction with his life as an untouchable; and this realization leads him to revolt against the caste system by transgressing the rigid occupation barrier. His desire for a better life for his children prompts him to take a courageous decision to send his sons to be apprenticed as tailors rather than cobblers. He sends his sons to his friend known as Ashraf Chacha— a muslim tailor in the nearby town.

Dukhi's act of changing profession of his sons is an act of rebellion that challenges and defies the rigid occupation code of caste and questions the legitimacy of caste system and Hindu philosophical justification of ‘Varna’ order and social inequality inherited in it. His resistance to the rigid caste code testifies the failure of hegemonic system to control and subjugate its subjects absolutely and shows how despite the rigid rules of inclusion and exclusion; the oppressed is not fully excluded from the power centre. Dukhi's resistance against structural restraints of the caste system by changing profession of his sons allows us to understand the “transformative” potential of resistance and how it traverse the rigid social-stratification and reconfigure the subject into a new one that cannot be spoken of as the same subject (Gupta and Ferguson 19). His decision of changing the profession of his sons is informed with an awareness that it is only the change of occupation that can bring them some upward social mobility and is an indicative of growing consciousness and awareness among dalit castes of unjust social stratification, degradation of lower castes, poverty and their need

for self-identity, respect and dignity. Gita Vishwanath also see untouchables' act of changing their profession from cobblers to tailors as “. . . an act of resistance to the curse of untouchability associated with the Chamaar community” (40). However, the lower caste people are forced to display the obsequious attitude to the upper caste in the novel but they employ other subtle forms of resistance such as their use of highly sexualized vocabulary to refer the *Thakurs* and Brahmins that serves as an expression of their contempt and resistance against the upper caste domination.

The setting of the novel in the early years after independence brings into question how even after the twenty years of independence; government's new laws against untouchability remain ineffectual to change the servile conditions of the lower caste people. Dukhi comments on the ineffectiveness of the government and the present condition of their lives, “Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper caste bastards still treat us worse than animals” (*AFB* 142). His realization of the fact that “life without dignity is worthless” makes him to decide to change the profession of his children; and he sends them to learn tailoring in town (*AFB* 144). This transgression of the traditional code and age-old chain of caste system brought them wrath of the upper caste. The retribution for stepping outside the caste code comes in the form of ostracisation of the whole family of Dukhi and the interdiction of the supply of carcasses by the upper caste that made their life very difficult. It explains the vulnerability of untouchable communities that emerges from their dependence on upper caste landlords for the means of their subsistence that makes them subject to exploitation and discrimination. Through the misery of Dukhi, Mistry has brought forth the social, political, economic and religious impairments confronted by the untouchable people in the village.

Further, apart from economic, religious and civil spheres, the untouchable castes' exclusion from political sphere is marked by the oppression faced by them in using their right to vote. The upper castes controlling the political sphere violate the lower castes' right to vote and use power and persuasion over them in order to use their vote for their personal benefit that is an indicative of lower castes' reduction to mere a vote bank rather than a potential voice in the decision-making process. Any kind of political assertiveness on the part of untouchables has given rise to violence unleashed against them by the upper caste. In the novel, caste violence takes its gruesome form when Thakur Dharamsi and his henchman set the whole family of Narayan on fire for asserting his constitutional right to vote in the assembly elections. While the father revolted against the caste based occupational restriction, the son— Narayan, struggles for the political participation of the untouchables in the elections guaranteed to them by the Constitution. He revolts against the previous trends set by the upper caste in which the untouchable families were denied the right to cast their votes according to their own wishes and were forced by Thakur Dharamsi to put their thumb impression on a register much against their desires. Narayan's insistence on exercising his right to vote results in brutal violence inflicted on him and his family. For thwarting the wish and order of Thakur Dharamsi, Narayan and other two untouchables are “flogged as they hung naked by their ankles from the branches of a banyan tree” (*AFB* 146). They have to bear other tortures as Thakur's men urinates on their inverted faces and then in the evening, after

the election officials take away the ballot boxes, “burning coals were held to the three men’s genitals, then stuffed into their mouths” and finally “the ropes were transferred from their ankles to their necks and three were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square” (*AFB* 146).

The inhumane punishment for the assertiveness of untouchables does not end here. After the gruesome murder of Narayan, Thakur Dharamsi wants to punish the whole family for threatening the rigid codes of caste. He gives his verdict, “. . . the father is more to blame than the son. His arrogance went against everything we hold sacred’. What the ages has put together, Dukhi has dared to break asunder; he had turned cobblers into tailors, distorting society’s timeless balance. Crossing the line of caste had to be punished with the utmost severity, . . .” (*AFB* 147). The other members of the family— Dukhi, Roopa, Radha and their daughters are bound in a room and burnt together by Thakur Dharamsi’s goons. Such brutal punishment is used to set an example for the future challengers of the caste hierarchy. This type of savage brutality and gory episodes of caste violence that emerges from the insecurity of the upper caste after being threatened by the lower castes’ claims of equal rights cannot be denied their existence in a society rigidly stratified on the basis of caste.

Another important issue in the novel is to reveal nation state’s role in the articulation of modern power relations between elite and subaltern groups. State as a political structure is “envisioned as a kind of political power which ignores individuals, looking only at the interests . . . of a class or a group among the citizens” (Foucault *Subject and Power* 213). In Foucault’s point of view, state is not something that owns power rather it builds systems of relations between individuals to make the political system work. Rather than the physical existence of a sovereign, it presupposes a tightly knit network of material coercions. There are specific mechanisms, political technologies, and state apparatuses through which political power is articulated. The setting of the novel in the time of Internal Emergency in 1975 brings forth the crippling effects of the political ideology and the oppressive state policies upon the lives of ordinary poor people. Mistry has used the episode of Emergency to reveal the discrepancy between the nation state’s rhetoric of democracy and its material realities faced by the poorer sections which it claimed to protect.

The fatal consequences of the violent policies and injustice during the Emergency are felt through the fate of Om and Ishwar who migrated to the city to escape the caste-ridden rural society. The inequalities of the caste in the village are substituted by those of class in the city and the locus of power shifts from dominant caste to dominant class that controls the economic and political resources. They find themselves beset with a new set of problems like poverty, unemployment, homelessness etc. They live in a rented shack of the slum colony that describes the insalubrious conditions of the slum dwellers that live in an unauthorized *Jhopad-patti* built by the land mafia on municipal land. They, along with other subalterns of the city like slum dwellers, beggars, people below the poverty line and the marginalized minorities, become victims of political ideology and the oppressive state policies that trap them in darkly absurd political events like Emergency in the history of India. Neelam Srivastva comments on Mistry’s concern for the marginalized in the novel that he assumes a

subaltern perspective to portray the feelings and thoughts of two poor tailors who escape from the caste-ridden and oppressive society of their village to the city only to find themselves “harassed and persecuted by the very state that claims to be ‘protecting’ them” (101). The state brings chaos in their neatly arranged lives through its apparatuses and welfare programs such as ‘city beautification’ campaign which bulldozes the houses of the poor with its objective of clearing the slum area in order to beautify the city; and the family planning program that deprives the poor of their dreams of family and aspirations. The forced sterilization camps make use of the state sanctioned violence through police raids in the market square to grab unwilling people, particularly from the poor section of the society, to perform forced sterilization on them.

The novel projects an ambivalent picture of the Indian nation’s progress towards what Aijaz Ahmad terms the “utopic horizon” which was expected to be offered by anti-colonial, specifically Nehruvian, nationalism: “planned and independent economic development, a balance between market exchange and social regulation, popular sovereignty, universal suffrage, the promise of social justice for the oppressed castes, classes, and other subaltern strata, . . . and secular equality in a multi-denominational society” (Ahmad 184). Narrating the events from the point of view of the dispossessed and marginalized people, Mistry has exposed how India is now being “colonised by the ruling elite which has imbibed the “culture of imperialism”, taking the place of the coloniser and excluding the subalterns, or the ignorant millions from the interests of the nation. The Emergency demonstrates the critical stages of this phenomenon. The subalterns were not only being overlooked but also tyrannised by their own government” (Kaur 28-29). Indira Gandhi takes the role of colonizer with her oppressive policies and misuse of power through the declaration of Emergency in 1975 which eroded the secular ideals and values of the Indian nation with its suspension of the constitution and the fundamental rights, censoring of the media, closing of courts and murder of student activists like Avinash who struggled against the reckless violation of democratic norms with an intention to reform the country and the political system.

The most affected people in the Emergency are the slum-dwellers and the other poor strata—the subalterns, whose lives are left indeterminate by the misuse of power during Emergency and injustice that prevailed the situation. It turns the lives of the poor shaky and uncertain. “With the Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night. With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy. There’s even a new law called MISA to simplify the whole procedure” (AFB 299). The slum-dwellers and other subaltern sections of the city are easy prey for the government who can be rounded up anytime for government work camps or political rallies much against their wishes. Ishvar sums up his reaction to such adverse conditions, “I have seen nothing so unfair” (AFB 260). The ill-advised city beautification programme leaves slum dwellers homeless as the government orders to bulldoze hutment colony in the course of cynical vision of a beautiful Bombay without arranging for the rehabilitation of the homeless. Ironically the controller of the unauthorized hutment colony— Mr. Thokray, who built it illegally on the municipal land and rented it out to people like Om and Ishvar, is the supervisor of the slum evacuation programme. Slum dwellers, trapped in inextricable and perplexing situation, have

nobody to complain and no place to sleep. Om and Ishwar have to bribe the police to sleep on pavement. The various slogans such as “The City Belongs To You!”, “Keep It Beautiful!”, “Food For The Hungry! Homes For The Homeless!”, “The Nation Is On The Move!” written on the huge billboard with the face of Prime Minister mock at the poor and their adversity (*AFB* 303). After being homeless in the city beautification campaign and having become pavement dwellers, they are rounded up by the police as labourers with all the other able and disabled homeless people and transported to a Government work camp for a large irrigation project. The government work camp that builds on the ‘development’ issue in the nation pays them nothing for their labour except meagre meals. In Alessandro Monti’s view, “. . . Mistry highlights transportation and the use of forced labour as the channels through which the post-colonial nation-state grounds its politics of reforms, that is of compulsory modernisation” (50).

Mistry has shown the irony that how the concepts of ‘beautification’ and ‘development’ institutionalize exploitation and cruelty and exploit the lives of the poor in the name of government laws. The politics of development is always implemented at the cost of human life. It is the poor and dispossessed like Om, Ishvar and slum dwellers that are at the receiving end of the Government’s theoretical and political plans like ‘City Beautification’ and ‘Garibi Hatao’ program that leaves them homeless and shelter less. Om and Ishvar’s saga of misery and suffering that continued from village to city, speaks about the powerlessness and oppression of the subaltern (rural and urban poor) who become ‘Other’ to the government and rich. Alessandro Monti puts in word the attitude of the government towards its subaltern citizens,

Emasculation and cruel mutilation, either operated by the feudal-like landlords or by the Gandhi dynasts, constitute in Mistry the hegemonic response given by class and authority to the rebellious attitudes of the subalterns or, more radically, to their mere disturbing presence. Transportation and forced labour are the strategic weapons used in the *garibi hatao* campaign: once more the fight is against the subalterns, in the high name of revised nationhood and select inscription. (48-49)

In contradiction to the miseries of the poor section of the nation, Emergency brings enthusiasm and appreciation in the dominant or ‘ruling’ class that occupies the economic power and control over the sources of wealth. The affluent and middle class bourgeoisie people like Mrs. Gupta— the owner of Au Revoir Exports and Nusswan— a businessman, endorse the Emergency as it provides a lucrative production environment to the business houses. It helps their capitalistic agendas with its incessant flow of business by curbing the demands of the labourers and imposing bans on strikes and protestation of the Labour Union. In their point of view, Emergency aims to improve the economy of the country though at huge human cost. With her capitalistic attitude, Mrs. Gupta is more concerned with an uninterrupted flow of profit in her business than the well-being of the tailors who play central part in her business by manufacturing dresses for her Au Revoir Export Company (*AFB* 73). Nusswan who affiliates himself with the government, approves of the autocratic attitude of the government towards the poor. He enjoying a comfortable life is unaware of the troubles

of the poor and believes that “Poor sleeping on the pavement give industry a bad name” (*AFB* 372). He appreciates the city beautification, as it will get rid of the unemployed masses. “Counting them as unemployment statistics year after year gets us nowhere, just makes the numbers look bad. What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be mercy” (*AFB* 373). Both Nusswan and Mrs. Gupta representing their contingent interests call the Prime Minister “our visionary leader” for implementing her strict measures in Emergency. Their assessment of Emergency as “a true spirit of renaissance” with its characteristic control over the civil disobedience and activities of labour union is cynical for these characteristics of Emergency are diametrically opposed to the renaissance ideals of humanism and liberalism (*AFB* 352).

Mistry has employed irony to depict the absurdities of state politics and the hollowness of the political pursuit of Emergency that, despite its adverse effects on the lives of millions of people in the society, has been projected by the Prime Minister “as a programme of national regeneration. . . . India would be reborn”. (Frank 390). He has made the political rallies a subject of mockery by showing the disinterestedness of the people who are forcibly brought to the site where the Prime Minister is going to address the crowd. The alienation of the ordinary people from the political discourse and their rejection of the political leaders are evident from of ironic comments of the slum dwellers with the party workers. While the rally is in progress, the activities of the forced audience expose the emptiness of the political speeches, which are devoid of concern for the issues related to the poor strata. While the Prime Minister is delivering her speech at the top of her voice, the people in crowd like Raja Ram play cards to avoid the boredom. The fawning politicians and their rehearsed hand-clapping exercise to instruct the audience to clap after each line of speech is being compared with the circus show by Rajaram. He tells Ishvar jokingly, “I told you it’s going to be a day at the circus — we have clowns, monkeys, acrobats, everything” (*AFB* 263). The Prime Minister explains the benefits of Emergency for the poor and her Twenty-Point Programme that covers the targets of eliminating poverty from cities, towns and villages, control of population growth and provision of houses for the poor. This programme shows its direct and adverse impact on the lives of slum dwellers very soon as its implication uses coercion, abuse and tyrannical method to achieve its objectives.

The most horrific experiences of the Emergency come with the forced sterilization camps that make use of the state sanctioned violence to grab unwilling people, particularly from the poor section of the society, to perform forced sterilization on them. Mistry describes the inhuman conditions prevailing in these sterilization camps, malfunctioning of equipments, non-sterilized and infected instruments used by the doctors to perform operation. The government announces rewards for doctors or other organizations that provide the maximum numbers for sterilization. The senior administrators of Family Planning centre focus on achieving targets rather than the sanitary conditions for performing surgeries that results in serious health hazards later on. The horrifying intersection of the nation-state violence and caste prejudice in the village has been brought out through Om and Ishvars’s gruesome encounter with the horrors of sterilization camp during their return to the village in search of a bride for Om to get him married and has a family of their own. Om’s encounter with

Thakur Dharamsi gives way to his anger and disgust and he spits in front of him as an act of defiance against their oppression by the upper caste. Thakur Dharamsi, in order to take revenge from Om for spitting in front of him, uses his political power over the state officials to have him castrated fully. This act of Thakur Dharamsi implies the criminalisation of politics in the hands of corrupt politicians compounded with the authorized, organized brutality of the state and the impact of caste on politics that oppresses the lower caste for their deviant behaviour such as the transgression of the traditional caste code. The only crime of Om and Ishvar is that they tried to achieve social mobility by changing their profession from cobbler to tailors.

Thakur Dharamsi's objective as a powerful politician is to maintain the old hierarchy and power structures and to punish those who dare to transgress the caste barriers. He sees Dukhi's act of changing profession of his sons as an act of defiance and transgression of the old rigid codes of tradition, therefore, subject to punishment. His motive that Dukhi's "family name will die without children" leads to Om's castration (*AFB* 535). Ishvar develops post-operation problems like gangrene that cost him his both legs. Om's castration on the other hand, symbolizes lower castes' impotence to fight against the caste oppression. Both of them return to Mumbai after their disastrous confrontation with their old adversary Thakur Dharamsi, but the disastrous effects of Family Planning campaign leave them unfit for work so they take to begging that places them in a new kind of urban subalternity in the form of beggary. The crippled bodies of beggars including Om and Ishvar come to symbolize the disempowerment of the subaltern classes in the novel. Thus, the stories of poverty, oppression and disempowerment of Om, Ishvar, and other poor of the city foreground their subalternity and their marginal socio-political existence at the periphery of middle-class consciousness. By portraying Om and Ishvar as 'Others' who are doubly disempowered, firstly, in the village as members of a low caste tanner family—the untouchables, and secondly as representatives of the rural poor class who encounter unending cruelty in the city, Mistry has represented the class and caste subalternity and the challenges faced by the subaltern or 'Other' on these pretexts.

Mistry's critics criticize him for portraying his untouchable characters succumbing to their marginalized existence in the novel and blame him for not acknowledging the potential of the lower castes to struggle against their oppression that has brought changes in political and economic structure of the Indian society and has resulted in social reform and mobility among the lower castes. He is accused for ignoring the fact that the untouchable communities in their history of exploitation appeared not merely as victims rather they have revolted and resisted against their subjugation in various forms and movements. Their resistance arises majorly from their objection to the practice of untouchability and their demand for social respect and their claims to equal economic rights. It approves that they have never accepted untouchability without challenge or protest. Their various movements and struggle against the oppressive caste system have offered a critique of oppressive social and cultural practices by interrogating the principles of hierarchy and hierarchical practices associated with Hinduism.

However, the marginalized characters in the novel are not able to subvert the centre that plans to erase the ‘other’ but resisting the oppressive centre, as Avadhesh Kumar Singh points out, “in an unprotesting manner, the seemingly meek margin subverts the homogeneity of centre (13). The subaltern characters, despite the cruelty of fate and forces of the authoritarian world outside, find their own personal way to undermine their oppression. The novel brings in the crucial moments and spaces in which the subaltern characters are enabled to broaden their horizon and form hybrid communities crossing the boundaries of caste and class differentiation and have a harmonious hybrid existence in the face of dominant exclusionary discourses that categorize and differentiate individuals on the basis of their caste and class status. The construction of unconventional family in Dina’s apartment by Dina, Maneck, Om and Ishwar— all hailing from different social, cultural, economic, religious and geographical backdrop, transcends the barriers of cultural differences, ethnic prejudices and prior hierarchies that seem to advocate intercultural understanding and sharing as a new concept of social interaction. In their classless household, there is no “‘assumed or imposed hierarchy’. In this space, identities are prevented from settling into ‘primordial polarities’ because they all undergo change and transition, which . . . makes them more fluid in nature and gives them a liberal perspective to life” (Kaur 52). Their solidarity, despite their differences, has been foregrounded against the state ideologies that operate on the basis of difference as a criterion for otherness. The patchwork quilt made from leftover pieces of fabric becomes another trope for providing counterpoint to the essentialist discourses by reflecting the union and intertwining of the lives of Dina, Maneck, Om and Ishwar through its fragments. This multi-layered, interwoven patchwork quilt stresses “the multiple kaleidoscopic interconnections of experience” between four characters despite their cultural and social differences and is appropriated as a metaphor for challenging the hegemonic construction of social ties to suggest the possibility of unity in diversity or difference (Morey *Fictions* 174). Even in the caste-ridden rural society, the display of humanity and fellow feeling of the subaltern groups towards other communities despite their cultural and communal difference undermine the concept of ‘other’ for they consider the Muslim “Other” as “more like our brothers than the bastard Brahmins and Thakur” — the actual oppressors (*AFB* 123).

Apart from the intercultural unity of the powerless, the novel has brought forth their everyday practices as reflecting their resistance against the dominant hegemonic order. These everyday practices and tactics might not be categorized as an obvious forms of resistance but they covertly express their resistance against the coercive forces and enables them to negotiate the power structures. The use of humour by the powerless against the powerful can be seen as a subtle way of verbal resistance. In the village, though, the lower castes are forced to display the obsequious attitude to the upper caste but they make the upper caste a butt of their humour; and their use of highly sexualized vocabulary to refer the *Thakurs* and Brahmins serves as an expression of their contempt and resistance against the upper caste domination. Dina’s act of secretly offering food to Om and Ishwar—tailors turned beggars, after her confinement to the degraded role of domestic drudge, is an everyday act of resistance against the patriarchal domination of her brother Nusswan in his family. However, this act does not bring any change in their conditions, but it is definitely a symbolic act of

resistance and subversion of the power structures. Further, Dina and tailors turned baggers' humours gatherings and the act of cracking jokes away from the sight of their masters are not merely everyday events rather they are considered as counter-hegemonic dialogic mode of resistance. However, they seem insignificant acts of everyday life but the way they are done implies their protestation against the dominant power structures.

Mistry by narrating the stories of poverty and sufferings, has made the subaltern characters his centre of consciousness. He foregrounds an alternative history by presenting the historical events from the point of view of the subaltern and represents the silences of the oppressed groups who are not given voice in the socio-political space of a nation. In Phupinder Kaur's words, "Rohinton Mistry's version of history challenges official history. His is the unofficial voice of the people more in tune with the realities of the time. Throughout his work, he "narrates the nation" based on his actual perception of reality" and illustrates how the "powerless have the potential to narrativise the nation" (32 14). He projects the marginalization and oppression of the subaltern sections by the hegemonic discourses and state ideologies as a "testament to the failed notions of nationhood; a nationhood prescribed by the hegemonic elite and not the marginalized" (Kaur 30). The subaltern characters such as Om, Ishwar, Ashraf are the "unofficial voices of the marginalized which demand a hearing in the national narrative"; and through the representation of their struggle, Mistry wants to make a plea that "we need to rethink our ideologies of nationhood" in order to include the silenced voices of the marginalized. (Kaur 30-31).

Though Mistry, by writing about the oppression and resistance of the subaltern groups, has shown his political solidarity with them but his upper class status and his projection of subalterns as victims in need of savior or objects without agency and voice has raised questions about the authenticity of such representation because the act of representation is largely beset with the questions: who speaks about whom which further depends on categories such as power, class, race, sexuality etc. Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar expresses her point of view that with the portrayal of Ishvar and Om, though, Mistry has tried to give Dalit space in his fiction but keeping in view the upper class status of the writer, we cannot interpret it as an authentic Dalit voice. Nevertheless, it seems neither appropriate nor justifiable to undermine Mistry's humanitarian concern for the downtrodden and to reject the literary merit of his novel completely due to his non-Dalit status because literature has a self-validating quality and a book of literature is justified by the quality of its content not by the worthiness of its writer. Salman Rushdie also emphatically says,

"Literature is not in the business of copyrighting certain themes for certain groups. . . . the real risks of any artist are taken in the work to the limits of what is possible, in the attempt to increase the sum of what is possible to think. Books become good when they go to this edge and risk falling over it—when they endanger the artist by reason of what he has, or has not, *artistically* dared" (*Imaginary* 15).

Due to the novel's quality of inclusiveness that gives space to other social perspectives along with the Parsi community, Peter Morey calls the novel a "national allegory" that reflects the "multiplicity and plurality of Indian society" (Terrible 85).

The widened spectrum of Mistry's fiction with characters from communities other than the Parsis and representation of their stories of struggle impart a moral meaning to his fiction. Mistry believes that one's story is a crucial aspect for individual identity because "we haven't got an identity until somebody tells our story. The fiction makes us real" (Kroetsch 30). Moreover, spinning and sharing stories "act as a defense against the randomness of life" and counter a loss of meaning in one's life brought about by personal loss or social marginalization (Morey *Fictions* 177). Therefore, Mistry uses storytelling as "a worry-defeating, life-embracing vehicle that confirms confidence and instils hope by holding out not only the possibilities of survival but also a quasi-creative reward of telling a wise, enduring story to oneself and others" (Malak 116). Vasantro Valmik a pre-eminent storyteller in the novel becomes the mouth speaker of Mistry in his advocacy of telling stories. In Genetsch's words, "Vasantro resembles the postcolonial writer who, endowed "with a commonwealth of language" . . . narrates the stories of those previously marginalized" (176). Through the example of Vasantro Valmik, Mistry wants to suggest the writers "to mediate and mediate for the silent ones of the world—the marginalized peoples. . ." (Sheshadri 233-34).

To bring change in the political and social circumstances and to deliver social justice to the marginalized sections of the society, it is crucial to expose the processes and methods of marginalization as these power tactics compromise the fundamental human need of autonomy and freedom. They undermine the essence of humanity by threatening the selfhood of the oppressed group; therefore, it is unethical not to speak about marginalization.

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