

EXPLOITATION OF DOWNTRODDEN MASSES IN A FINE BALANCE

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ABSTRACT

Rohinton Mistry being a Parsi Writer in India experienced cultural Diaspora in India. Now he lives in Canada and writes about Indian life and culture. The discrimination is created among the downtrodden masses on the basis of caste, creed and religion. As per the tradition, the existence and maintenance of the practice of untouchability, exploitation and caste system was creation and business of upper caste people in Hinduism. Still today we are finding such exploitation of untouchables and backward classes people through the hands of leading people of the society in variant branches like social, political, economical and religious. The paper tries to explore such conditions through Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* conditions of minorities and downtrodden masses was worst in post-Independent India. The Characters like Narayan, Dukhi, Ishvar and Omprakash was exploited on the basis of lower caste by Thakur.

Keywords:- Cultural Diaspora, discrimination, downtrodden masses, caste, creed and religion, untouchability, exploitation, Social, Political, Economical, Religious etc.

Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* weaves together a tale of 1970's India in the midst of a State of Emergency through the lives of its main four characters: Ishvar, Omprakash, Dina Dalal and Maneck Kohlah. The Emergency intrudes into the lives of all of these characters leading to their eventual loss and destruction.

The third chapter of the novel narrates the story of time to Ishvar and Omprakash confronted with caste oppression at its extreme. Ishvar's Father Dukhi violates caste restrictions in attempting to make his son tailors. This shows surprising courage in a man who has been socialized into accepting his position in the caste hierarchy unquestioningly.

During his childhood years, he mastered a full catalogue of the real and imaginary crimes a low caste person could commit and the corresponding punishment were engraved upon his mind. By the time he entered his teens, he had acquired all the knowledge he would need to

perceive that invisible line of caste he would never cross to survive in the village like his ancestors with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions. This is a turning point of the novel bringing to life the sordid living conditions of the lower caste Indians living in rural India. Even the upper caste women are not exempt from oppression. We found that they resented the birth of two sons to Dukhi.

“It was hard for them to be resentful – the birth of daughters of ten brought them beating from their husbands and families. Sometime they were ordered to get rid of the new-born. Then they had no choice but to strangle the infant with her swaddling clothes, poison her, or let her starve to death.” (AF.B. 99-100)

Through Dukhi’s story we are brought to the time of the independence struggle in India. It is ironic that pledges of fighting against caste injustice were taken then but still to be redeemed the speaker who comes to spread the Mahatma’s message says;

What is the 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 we are all children of the same God. Remember what Gandhiji says that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisonous milk. (AFB-107)

Ishvar’s father Dukhi having worked with dead animals all his life finds that:

“his own skin become impregnated with odor that was part of his father’s smell the leather workers stink that would not depart even after he had washed and scrubbed in the all cleansing river..... He wondered if flaying would get rid of it. Or did it go deeper than skin? He pricked himself to smell his blood but the taste was inconclusive..... And what about muscle and bone, did the stink lurk in them too? (AFB – 95/96)

Though well-intentioned this kind of rhetoric depends upon the good intentions of the upper castes and classes to create a social change that would enable a truly egalitarian society to come into existence. But as histories readily testify, no power group ever willingly, abandons power what was needed perhaps was not a speaker to speak of tolerance to the upper castes and classes but a preacher who preached revolution to the lower castes and classes. Dukhi works towards an individual revolution breaking with lifelong traditions to apprentice his sons as tailors with Ashraf:

“It soon becomes known in Dukhi’s village that his children were learning a trade other than leather working. In the old days, punishment for stepping outside one’s caste would have been death. Dukhi was spared his life, but it becomes a very hard life. He was allowed no more carcasses, and had to travel long distances to find work. Sometimes he obtained to hide secretly from fellow chammars, it would have been difficult for them if they were found out. The items he fashioned from his illicit leather had to be sold in far off places where they had not heard about him and his sons”. (AFB-11819)

In the end of course ‘everything ends badly’; Twenty years pass after independence and nothing changes. Narayan says;

“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)

Narayan points out that as a chamar he cannot still drink water at the village well, worship in the temple of the upper castes or walk where he likes when he attempts to assert his right to vote, he is brutally tortured and then hanged in the village square. The untouchables are beaten up at random, their women raped and their huts burnt down. Thus Roopas midnight forays to steal fruit and milk from the upper-caste homes and lands offer us a glimmer of the kind of courage that the daily ordeal of survival required in caste dominated villages. But before long she is made to pay for her actions by having to prostitute herself to the man guarding an orange grove. Thakur decided that Dukhi’s family deserves special punishment;

“What the ages had put together, Dukhi had 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)

Dukhi, Roopa, Radha and daughters along with Narayan’s corpse are burnt alive at the behest of the Thakur. Omprakash dreams of revenge but both Ashraf and Ishvar know the futility of such dreams and instead decide to send Om to Bombay. In the city, it is class rather than caste oppresses them.

Mistry tries to see the reality of exploitation of downtrodden masses in the rural India as well as to see the reality behind the glamour of the dream city, Bombay.

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