

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*: A Saga of Pain and Suffering**Dr. Naveen**

Assistant Professor

Govt. College Dujana (Jhajjar)

Abstract

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-Canadian writer who is a recipient of numerous literary awards. His famous novels are *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*. Mistry's second novel *A Fine Balance* was published in 1995. In this novel, he has skillfully depicted the effects of the Emergency on the lives of common people. The government tried to silence all the voices of protest and thousands of people were incarcerated. Avinash, a student leader, suffers a lot because of his activism. The theme of oppression is prevalent throughout the novel. Dina Dalal is the representative of oppressed women. Dina's wish of becoming a doctor remains unfulfilled as her brother did not allow him to study further. She is relegated to the position of housemaid only. She took the business of a seamstress after her husband's demise. The theme of caste oppression is presented through the characters of Ishwar and Om. They belong to the Chamar caste whose traditional business is making shoes. Narayan, Om's father is killed by Thakur Dharmasi because he demanded a ballot in the election. Ishwar and Om were also castrated in the family planning center because Om dared to spit on Thakur Dharmasi's side. The novel explicitly presents the predicament of women and the lower caste people.

Keywords: Oppression, activism, caste, predicament, traditional

Rohinton Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* has established him as a significant literary figure in the Indian-Canadian tradition of fiction writing. In his novels, Mistry deals with issues that are being faced by the people of India. A first-hand reading of his novels gives the impression that the basic purpose of his writing is social reformation. Discrimination based on caste and gender are the prominent social problems of the country and Mistry has successfully dealt with these problems in his fiction.

Rohinton Mistry moved to Canada just before the declaration of Emergency by the Indian government in 1975. The predicament of people during that period is successfully portrayed by the writer in *A Fine Balance*. He criticizes the policies of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi but does not mention her name anywhere in the novel. The common folks suffered a lot and voices of protest were suppressed. But the Prime Minister did not take cognizance and justified her position as:

There is nothing to worry about just because the Emergency is declared. It is a necessary measure to fight the forces of evil. It will make things better for ordinary people. Only the crooks, the smugglers, and the black marketers need to worry, for we will put them behind the bars. And we will succeed in this despite the despicable conspiracy which has been brewing since I began introducing programs [sic.] of benefit for the common man and woman. There is a foreign land involved against us—the head of enemies who would not see us prosper. (Mistry 327)

People who protested against the government had to suffer a lot and thousands of them were sent to jail. Thousands of men were sterilized without their consent in the name of family planning. Acts like MISA were imposed on leaders who raised their voices against the decision of the government. Censorship was imposed on the press and any anti-government news was treated as a crime. Coomi Kapoor in his book *The Emergency: A Personal History* writes:

The conditions in most jails were appalling. They were overcrowded, the sanitary arrangements were practically non-existent, there was an acute shortage of water, the food was nearly inedible, medical arrangements were inadequate and the whole atmosphere was oppressive. Delhi's Tihar central jail could accommodate 127 prisoners. But on 26 June 1975, there were already 2669. The number of inmates would rise to 4250 by March 1976. Water and sewage services were sufficient only for 750 people. (Kapoor 41)

The horrible condition of marginalized women is presented through the character of Dina Dalal, a Parsi woman. She is the daughter of a physician who wants to become a doctor. She is aware of the fact that education is the most important tool to becoming self-sufficient. After her father's death, Dina's dream of becoming a doctor remains unfulfilled as her brother Nusswan does not allow her to study further. She is relegated to the position of a housemaid only. After the death of her husband, she takes the business of a seamstress. She recruited Ishwar and Om as her helping hands. But the Emergency adversely affects her business. Eventually, she has to go back to her brother's house. Mistry realistically presents that becoming an independent woman is not an easy task in a patriarchal society. Society does not allow them to be self-sufficient and always wants them to be dependent on men. They have to face physical as well as mental torture. For instance, Dina's brother Nusswan slaps her when she amends her hairstyle. He says, "Don't question me when I say something" (Mistry 23). Nusswan abuses her when she refuses to obey him after her husband's death. He shouts, "Shameless woman! What a loose mouth! Such blasphemy! All I am saying is, appreciate your position. For you, it is possible to live a full life, get married again, and have children. Or do you prefer to live forever on my charity?" (Mistry 52).

Discrimination based on caste is a reality in India. Some castes in the Hindu caste system have been declared untouchables and touching them is considered a sin. These castes have been facing inhuman behavior for centuries. It is a difficult task to trace where this system started. But there are references in the religious texts which make the life of these people some sort of hell. The situation of these people had been worst than that of slaves before the constitution assured them the right to equality. E.A.H Blunt defines caste as:

An endogamous or a collection of endogamous groups, bearing a common name, membership of which is hereditary; imposing on the members certain restrictions in the matter of social intercourse; either following a common traditional off occupation or claiming a common origin, and generally regarded as forming a single homogenous community. (qtd. in Khatoun 6)

Ishwar and Om belong to the ‘Chamar’ caste which is considered untouchable in Hindu society. The novel exposes the class and caste disparities of Indian society. It also portrays cruelty and inhuman behavior experienced by the lower caste people. Untouchability has been practiced in India since time immemorial. Some religious texts prohibit education for a particular group of people. People from lower castes were not allowed to own property. They had to live in habitats far from the villages. Reformers like Jyotiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, and Dr revolted against this system. Indian constitution has declared untouchability as unlawful but it is still being practiced. There are various instances in the novel where the practice is visible. To quote one of them:

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; had had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range in the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, revenging on an agreement to plow a landlord's field, had been forced to eat the landlord's excrement at the village square. Dhiraj tries to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam, “the wages of 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!” (Mistry 7)

The cruelty for lower caste people can be seen in the above extract. People pelted stones at Sita as she dares to walk in the street meant for the upper caste. People from lower castes cannot recite or hear the holy mantras. The molten lead is poured into Gambir's ears as he accidentally hears them. Dhiraj is allegedly accused of thieving and hanged because he demands his wages. Dayaram has to eat human excreta.

Dukhi Mochi does not want his sons to be engaged in an unclean business-like leather curing. He sent Ishwar and Narayan to a tailor named Ashraf to learn the art of tailoring. Narayan and his wife are burnt alive by Thakur Dharmasi as they demanded a ballot in the village election. Thakur thinks that the untouchables have no right to vote. Even the police do not take any action against Thakur. Dukhi Mochi says:

Government passes new laws and says no more untouchability but everything is the same. The upper caste bastards still treat us worse than animals. More than twenty years have passed since Independence . . . I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, and walk where I like. (Mistry 11)

Thakur Dharmasi is the caretaker of the village vasectomy center. Ishwar and Om return to their village for the prospect of Om's marriage. Om does not control his anger and spits on Thakur's side. Dharmasi orders his men to castrate them both. Om becomes a sterilized person only days before his marriage. Ishwar's leg has to be amputated because of the infection from the surgery. They have to endure this pain only because of their caste.

To conclude, *A Fine Balance* can certainly be termed as “a saga of pain and suffering.” The predicament of common people at the time of the Emergency of 1975 is realistically portrayed in the novel. They endured suffering without any fault on their part. Dina Dalal becomes the representative of marginalized women who in pursuit of self-reliance face ill-treatment from a patriarchal society. Ishwar and Om are the mouthpieces of deprived sections. The discrimination done to them is an archetype of the pain and agonies of lower castes.

Works Cited

Kapoor, Coomi. *The Emergency: A Personal History*. Penguin Books, 2016.

Khatoon, Ameena. “Caste System in India: A Select Annotated Bibliography.” *Aligarh Muslim University*, 1995.

Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. Vintage, 2001.