

**PREDICAMENT OF WOMEN AND DALITS IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S WORKS  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO A FINE BALANCE**

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**Abstract:**

The sufferings of the poor and downtrodden have been a familiar sight in India throughout the ages. Poverty is glorified in theological terms, but in real life, the poor, the women and the downtrodden are looked down upon and ill-treated. Rohinton Mistry is an Indo - Canadian diasporic Parsi writer, who established himself as one of Canada's most critically acclaimed writers, with his writings. He advocates a total re-structuring of the existing society. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze how Mistry tries to uphold the values of non-violence, harmony in a community and seeks to build up a social balance in the Indian society by verbalizing the untold misery of the marginalized.

**Keywords:** marginalized, downtrodden, social balance, subaltern.

The word 'subaltern' is derived from the Latin word 'subalternus' which means 'any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain'. In Latin 'sub' means 'under' and 'alternus' means other. The subaltern studies originated from Marxism, Poststructuralism and turned out an ingredient of postcolonial criticism. The subaltern concept gained its impressive momentum in England at the end of the 1970s. This concept dealt with the group that is marginalized, oppressed and exploited on the cultural, political, social and religious grounds. It dealt with the not only socio-cultural and historical facet of the society but also people who were subordinated and subjugated in terms of class, gender, religion, and sex.

The colonial powers exploited, suppressed and oppressed the native people in all fields. The end of colonialism paved the way for post-colonialism which appeared as a decolonization process. Subaltern studies probe into the issues of self-identity of women, Dalits and neglected sections of the mainstream of society. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyze Rohinton Mistry's exploration of the subalternity of women and Dalits in his novel *A Fine Balance*. This novel underlines the marginality of women and Dalits under the prevalent class structure.

Rohinton Mistry is one of the internationally acknowledged Indo-Canadian writers of the post-colonial era. Mistry is known as a critic of the colonial hegemony. His novels deal with the theme of exploitation based on political, economic, and social aspects. He deals with the plight of women and Dalits who survive on patriarchy, caste-system, and class-based privileges.

De-Sexualisation and unrelenting tyranny over women is seen in Mistry's works. He portrayed the humiliation and depersonalization of women and Dalits in Indian society. He also portrayed silent subjugation of women under patriarchy instead of outrage at such a state of affairs. Mistry's works explore the ideologies, the traditional Hindu beliefs and male prejudices which sustain the patriarchal Hindu society.

Michael Foucault suggested that "power operates through the construction of particular knowledge. And it is through the constructed knowledge of sexuality that controls over an individual is exercised. Male and female bodies have different social values depending on their location in the power structure. The discursive construction of male and female behavior proceeds from there" (1977: 55). The stereotyped image of a man as strong and determined who has made his fortune with his sincere labor is given wide currency in a patriarchal society. In order to emphasize this manliness, the deliberate construction of women as weak and feeble becomes necessary. Therefore, women are shown as the weaker version of strong men. Sexual exploitation based on religion is mentioned in the novel *A Fine Balance* through different characters. For instance, Roopa, wife of Dukhi Muki, was exploited by the watchman of the orchard when she had plucked the oranges from the orchard to feed her children. It is obvious that upper caste lustful men who believed that they would be polluted by the shadow of a low - caste still covet and sleep with a desirable lower-caste woman. In the same novel, the orchard watchman threatened Roopa in this way: "One shout from me, and they will come in running. I only have to shout, and the owner and his sons would be here at once. They would strip you and whip you for stealing.... They would take

turns doing shameful things to your lovely soft body... (AFB: 97). It is obvious that a woman needs to toe the line dictated by men of higher caste and should ingrain in themselves the feminine virtues like patience and docility in order to justify the role of an ideal woman. Mistry gave an elaborate description of the woes of a tanner woman, who was a victim of sexual exploitation. Bhungi, one of the characters in the same novel, said: "His wife refused to go to the field with zamindar's son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square" (AFB: 97).

Mistry underlined the marginality of women. He proved that gender and sexualization of the bodies also play a significant role in keeping the women down at the bottom of the social hierarchy. He mentioned it through the character Dina Dalal, who was harassed by the educated and unemployed youth and the lawyers in the Bombay court. Mistry in the novel *A Fine Balance* wrote: "Dina approached the court gate, a group of lawyers surrounds her and demand charges, showing their degree and advising her to be careful in choosing the lawyer, some of them made indecent advances" (AFB:101).

The belief that a woman is impulsive by nature and should be under the supervision of men is reflected in the novel *A Fine Balance* through the character Dina Dalal, who chose to be displaced from her home because she wanted to assert her individuality and sense of self. She resolved to restructure her life without being economically dependent on a man. But at the end of the novel, she had to reach her brother's house to live with him as there was no other alternative.

In a patriarchal society, a woman is considered as a product — a good possession of her husband's family. Marriage for a woman is her destiny around which her whole self revolves. She is trained to become a docile, well-mannered and gentle housewife, who will fulfill her dreams by following the decrees of her husband. After marriage, a woman tries to live up to the expectations of patriarchy.

After marriage, Hindu women try to live up to the expectations of patriarchy. The *pativrata* ideology takes the center stage in her life. A Pativrata is expected to realize that a man marries to continue his family line by getting sons. Through this, a woman expects to gain love and respect in her home and society. It is believed that the role of a wife is to perpetuate the social order and enable men to gain immortality through their sons. According to Anton Gramsci, "Offspring, the due performance of religious rites, faithful service and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and for oneself depend on the wife alone" (1971:55). This is pointed out in the novel *A Fine Balance* through this incident. "A son was born to Narayana; they named him Omprakash. People came to sing and rejoice with them on the happy occasion. The proud grandfather personally carried sweets to every house in the village" (AFB: 133).

The novel *A Fine Balance* explores the different aspects of caste prejudices which work against the interests of untouchables. Moreover, caste has been closely associated with a variety of ritual practices and with religious beliefs about a person's station in life" (2002: 119). Gail Omvedt defined the caste-system as, "Caste is a material reality with a material base; It is not only a form but a concrete material content, and it has historically shaped the

very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today" (1995: 14).

In a caste-hierarchized society, Brahmins are considered higher caste in the society with their ritualized pure selves and the untouchables are considered as impure and lower caste people in the society. The former enjoy social power, with control over material resources through their lineage and by being in contact with other influential people of the ruling camp. Chakravarty Uma stated in the book *Gendering India through a Feminist Lens* that: "Caste is not merely the opposition between pure and impure but at a fundamental level it incorporates other kinds of oppositions such as domination and subordination, exploitation and oppression, based on unequal access to material resources" (2003:21).

Rohinton Mistry, in his works, deals with the ritual and religious basis of caste in Indian society. The character Narayan in the novel *A Fine Balance* says, "I cannot still drink water at the village well, worship in the temples of the upper castes, or walk where I like" (A FB: 166). The untouchables lose their identities as human beings as it is considered that untouchability is the result of Karma and untouchables are physically contaminated.

The children of untouchable people were meted out inhuman treatment by upper caste people. They are never allowed to learn to read and write. Even the teachers who are called the God (guru=god) punished them savagely whenever they violated the norms. Narayan and Ishvar, sons of a tanner, were very eager to learn reading and writing like the upper-class children. When they ventured into the school they were not only verbally abused but also cruelly beaten up by the teacher. The inhuman treatment of the teacher is presented in the following lines:

Shameless little donkeys! Off with you or I'll break your bones!... You chamber rascals! He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry... Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of learning and knowledge?... Wanted to look! I will show you now! I will show you the back of my hand! Holding on to Narayan, he slapped six times in quick succession across the face, then delivered the same number to his brother's face (A FB: 200).

After the savage beating and ill-treatment by the teacher, Dukhi Muki decided to call on the so-called chit-pavan Brahmin who is considered to be a descendant from the purest among the pure, from the keepers of the sacred knowledge. Pandit Lalluram gave an ointment to Dukhi and advised him:

For it is the path of happiness, otherwise, there would be chaos in the universe. You understand there are four varnas in society: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Each of us belongs to one of these four varnas, and they cannot mix. ...Your children entered the classroom. They polluted the place. They touched the instrument of learning. They defiled slates and chalks, which upper- caste children would touch. You are lucky there wasn't a holy book like

the Bhagavad, Gita in that cupboard, no sacred texts or the punishment would have been moved final ...(AFB:113).

Mistry gave graphic details of ruthless exploitation, tortures, booth rigging and the sufferings of the poor and the downtrodden. Dukhi Mukhi one of the characters in the novel *A Fine Balance* says:

For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death-the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambhir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing a range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, renegeing on an agreement to plow a Landlord's field, had been forced to eat the Landlord's excrement (AFB: 113).

The narrative brought into focus the reality of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh in the same novel through the character Narayan, who says that "Even after twenty years of Independence nothing changes. Government passes laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same" (AFB: 142-143). When he raised his voice against the Thakur who filled the ballot papers by taking their thumb impression, he was not only hanging in the village square but also all his family members were burnt alive at the behest of the Thakur.

#### Conclusion:

The narrative voice of Mistry's fictional discourse swings between involvement and detachment and provides a reliable witness to an eventful era in the nation's history. His works demonstrate the values of human relationships and fellow feeling among people, despite their distinctions in caste and class.

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