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Research Article



Struggles of Dalits in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* provides a vivid and deeply moving depiction of India's complex social fabric, skillfully intertwining the lives of characters from a variety of backgrounds. Central to Mistry's narrative are the Dalit characters, who embody one of the most marginalized and oppressed communities in Indian society. This research paper delves into the portrayal of Dalit characters in *A Fine Balance*, examining how Mistry illuminates their

experiences, challenges, and resilience in the face of pervasive systemic discrimination and social injustices. Mistry's narrative captures the harsh realities faced by Dalits, who are subjected to relentless oppression and prejudice. The novel highlights the socio-economic hardships and the persistent stigmatization that Dalits endure, offering readers a profound understanding of their plight. By focusing on the individual stories of key Dalit characters, the research explores how Mistry conveys their struggles and their capacity to endure and resist despite overwhelming adversity. Through a meticulous analysis of characters such as Ishvar and Omprakash, the paper underscores the various dimensions of Dalit oppression, including caste-based violence, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. Mistry's nuanced portrayal of these characters not only brings their suffering to the forefront but also showcases their unwavering spirit and determination to seek a better life. The thematic elements in *A Fine Balance* serve as a powerful lens through which the broader socio-political realities of India can be understood. The research paper emphasizes the significance of the Dalit narrative in the novel, arguing that their stories are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of India's socio-political landscape. By shedding light on the struggles of Dalits, Mistry's work encourages readers to reflect on the ongoing issues of caste discrimination and social injustice in contemporary India. The present research article aims to highlight the importance of Dalit representation in *A Fine Balance*, demonstrating how Mistry's depiction of their struggles and resilience provides a critical commentary on the entrenched socio-political inequalities in Indian society.

Keywords: Subaltern, Dalit, Social Struggles, Marginalization, Oppression

Introduction: The classical novel *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry depicts the complex geography of Indian society, where people from different backgrounds traverse social hierarchies, economic inequities, and political upheavals. The lives of the Dalit characters, who are at the bottom of India's caste system and face severe marginalization and persecution, are at the centre of Mistry's story. Mistry provides a window into the subaltern struggles of Dalits through their stories, showcasing their humanity, agency, and resiliency in the face of oppression. This research paper aims to explore Mistry's portrayal of Dalit characters in *A Fine Balance*, examining the intricacies of their lives and the broader sociopolitical context in which their stories unfold.

Dalits in Indian Society: A Historical Context

Before delving into the analysis of Dalit characters in *A Fine Balance*, it is important to provide a brief historical overview of Dalits in Indian society. Systemic discrimination, social ostracism, and economic exploitation have long plagued Dalits. Sociologist M.N. Srinivas asserts that ancient Hindu scriptures, particularly the Rigveda, mentioned the varna system, which is the origin of the caste system. The varna system categorised individuals into four main social classes, or varnas: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Outside these varnas were the "untouchables," or Dalits, who performed menial and degrading tasks considered impure by the higher castes.

Ancient texts such as the *Manusmriti* depict Dalits as facing severe social ostracism and denial of basic human rights. For instance, they faced prohibitions from public spaces, temples,

and educational institutions. Tasks deemed polluting, such as scavenging, leatherwork, and sanitation work, limited their occupations. The colonial period further exacerbated the marginalisation of Dalits in Indian society. British colonial administrators adopted a policy of indirect rule, whereby they relied on existing social structures, including the caste system, to maintain control over Indian society. Dalits, as the most oppressed group within the caste hierarchy, bore the brunt of British colonial policies, which reinforced their subordinate status.

Dalit scholar B.R. Ambedkar, in his seminal work *Annihilation of Caste*, criticised both the Hindu social order and British colonial rule for perpetuating the marginalisation of Dalits. He argued that caste discrimination was not just a religious or cultural phenomenon but a systemic form of oppression that required eradication through social and political reform.

In contemporary India, Dalit activism continues to be a potent force for social change, with grassroots organisations and political parties advocating for the rights and dignity of Dalits. However, despite legislative reforms and affirmative action measures, Dalits continue to face discrimination and violence in various aspects of life, including access to education, employment, and public services. The historical context of Dalits in Indian society reveals a legacy of systemic discrimination and marginalisation perpetuated by the caste system. From ancient times to the present day, Dalits have endured social ostracism, economic exploitation, and political disenfranchisement. However, resilience, resistance, and the ongoing struggle for equality and justice mark their history. Understanding the historical roots of Dalit oppression is essential for addressing contemporary challenges and working towards a more inclusive and equitable society in India.

Representation of Dalit Characters in *A Fine Balance*:

In *A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry offers a nuanced portrayal of Dalit characters, foregrounding their struggles, aspirations, and agency amidst the harsh realities of Indian society. The plot of the novel revolves around the four characters: Dina as a working-class subaltern and as a woman subaltern, and Ishvar and Omprakash as Dalit subalterns. Through these characters, Mistry encapsulates the plight, struggles, and predicament of Dalits living on the margins of society. In this regard, Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain writes: “Mistry works to represent the mentality of class subalternity, so that the reader understands the nature of challenge to tanner/tailor/subaltern, which the stories of Ishvar and Om represent” (*A Fine Balance*, 54).

Through Narayan and Ishvar’s eyes, Mistry provides readers with insights into the everyday challenges faced by Dalit communities, including limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Ishvar remembers that when he was a child, to discriminate based on caste, they entered the school of the village, and they were beaten by the headmaster, saying, “You Chamaar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school... To defile the tools of learning and knowledge... And you two removed your pants. After I am through, not one of you achhoot boys will never dream of fooling with things you are not supposed to touch...a dozen stroke each...” (*A Fine Balance*, 111).

Mistry in this novel tries to raise social consciousness against casteism by making bold and dauntless statements. Casteism divides us, weakening the sense of unity in diversity. People of the same caste and creed begin giving preference to their own caste in various professional

and political spheres. Rohinton Mistry, in his novel *A Fine Balance*, has sought to throw light on and articulate the silences of the century-old exploitation, domination, and oppression of Dalit people in India.

Dukhi Mochi belonged to the Chamaar caste of tanners and leatherworkers. Like the Chamaars of the village and their forefathers, Dukhi Mochi was dependent on the Thakurs and landowners of the village. They must take care of the landlord's numerous errands and, in exchange, receive payment in any amount. To earn a livelihood, they had to wait until a cow or buffalo died a natural death in the village. The Thakurs and the village's landowners would summon the Chamaars to remove the carcass. Sometimes carcasses were given away for free, and sometimes they had to pay, depending on whether or not the animal's upper-caste owner had been able to extract enough free labour from them during the year. The Chamaars skinned the carcass, ate the meat, and tanned the hide to make sandals, whips, harnesses, and waterskins. Dukhi learned to appreciate how dead animals provided his family's livelihood. Dukhi's father's smell impregnated his skin as he mastered the skills, persisting even after washing in the all-cleansing river. Dukhi says: Besides tanning and leather-working Dukhi learned what it was to be a Chamaar, an untouchable in village society. No special instruction was necessary for this part of his education. Like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked, the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere" (*A Fine Balance*, 96).

The story reveals that the village sat near a small river, allowing the Chamaars to reside downstream from the Brahmins and landowners. The Chamaars, who are well-deprived, have access to water. He says that "Dosu got a whipping for getting too close to the well" (*A Fine Balance*, 96). According to Dukhi's father, Buddha's wife must be hiding herself in the hut because "she refused to go to the field with the Zamindar's son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square" (*A Fine Balance*, 97). As a result, Dukhi listened to his father about the Dalits' predicament in the village. He had acquired all the knowledge he would need to perceive that invisible line of caste he could never cross and to survive in the village like his ancestors, with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions. This is the reason Dukhi did not want to keep his children in his ancestral profession of tanning and leather-working. He wants to make them so that they can get rid of their subaltern status in society and enjoy privileged positions.

One day, Thakur Premji called Dukhi to crush dry chilies. During the grinding process, an accident occurred when the mortar split cleanly in two and collapsed, with one piece landing on his foot and crushing it. Thakur's wife looked out the kitchen window and shouted, "Oiee, my husband! Come quick! She screamed. The Chamaar donkey has destroyed our mortar!" (*A Fine Balance*, 104) Rather than attending to his wounds, Thakur severely beats Dukhi Mochi. This naturally devastated and enraged Dukhi. These things happen pretty frequently. Dukhi made the decision to switch to a more honourable and lucrative line of work. He moved to a nearby city and started working as a cobbler. He made friends there with a Muslim tailor named Ashraf. In order for his children to become tailors and escape the stigma associated with the Chamaars profession, he apprenticed them to him. This was a personal choice, but the landowning elite did not approve because it would have given the members of the lower castes' independence. "In the olden days, punishment for stepping outside one's caste would have been death. Dukhi's survival

brought immense challenges. Because he couldn't get any more carcasses, he had to travel long distances to find work. Fellow Chamaars sometimes found it difficult if they discovered him secretly obtaining a hide from them. The items he fashioned from this illicit leather had to be sold in far-off places where they had not heard about him and his sons" (*A Fine Balance*, 118-19). Dukhi's sons' change of profession was a topic of discussion throughout the village. Dukhi and his wife Rupa both don't want Narayan and Ishvar to continue the caste-based occupation. Here, Mistry underlines how challenging it is to combat India's deeply ingrained caste structure.

It was well-known to Dukhi because he has not only witnessed himself the tyranny and pitiable condition of Chamaars in his village but also heard from his grandfather what it meant to raise a voice against the powerful upper-caste landowners. Dosu, a man of Chamaar caste, "got a whipping for getting too close to the well" (*A Fine Balance*, 96). The story reveals that the village sat near a small river, allowing the Chamaars to reside downstream from the Brahmins and landowners. The Chamaars, who are well-deprived, have access to water. According to Dukhi's father, Buddhu's wife must be hiding herself in the hut because "she refused to go to the field with the Zamindar's son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square" (*A Fine Balance*, 97). Bhola was accused of stealing the cow's skin, for which "they chopped off his left-hand fingers today" (*A Fine Balance*, 96). Dukhi's mother expresses relief as she comments, "Bhola is lucky." Last year, Chhagan lost his hand at the wrist" for the same reason. The tyranny and exploitation continue as the story of the novel advances. Dukhi was listening this type of news since his childhood, only the name of the tyrant has changed but their treatment was same. Sita from Dalits caste,

was stoned for walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Gambhir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his eyes because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord's excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam the wages for chopping wood, instead of setting 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. (*A Fine Balance*, 108-109)

Mistry's fictional world carefully records the exploitations committed against the oppressed, Dalits, and working-class people in the so-called civilized society, which claims equality by powerful upper-caste landlords. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the caste hierarchy has greatly disturbed the poise, balance, and fraternity of our society, and has drawn a line of discrimination in it. The Mistry narratives reveal that the poor and downtrodden still experience negative consequences for minor offenses despite legislation and land reforms. Women are in an exclusively dreadful state of affairs. Roopa was discovered stealing some fruits for her hungry children from the landlord's garden, and Dukhi's wife, Roopa, was repeatedly raped by the landlord's chowkidar. He threatens her, "leads her cringing to the cot, and rips open her top three buttons. He pulled them down and buried his mouth in her breasts, laughing softly as she tried to squirm away. I gave you so many oranges. You won't even let me taste your sweet mangoes" (*A Fine Balance*, 99). When she returns, Dukhi pretends to be asleep. He had heard muffled sobs several times during the night and knew, from the smell, what had happened to her while she was gone. Mistry, a genuine social democrat, is against all forms of exploitation.

He reveals the sinister aspects of Dalits' exploitation in society. The treatment of Dalits and oppressed people is inhumane and cruel. Caste hierarchy made them void of sympathy and compassion for the underdogs and subalterns.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* offers a compelling exploration of Dalit experiences in contemporary India, shedding light on the subaltern struggles of marginalized communities amidst the complexities of caste-based discrimination and social inequality. Through the vivid portrayal of Dalit characters and their interactions with other members of Indian society, Mistry invites readers to confront the harsh realities of caste oppression while also celebrating the resilience, solidarity, and humanity that endure in the face of adversity. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of Dalits, *A Fine Balance* contributes to a broader conversation about social justice, equality, and the ongoing struggle for a more inclusive and equitable society in India and beyond.

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