

In A Village By A River – Exploring The Struggles Of The Marginalized In Mistry's "A Fine Balance"

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Abstract

The paper critically analyses one single chapter – *In A Village by a River* from Rohinton Mistry's full-length novel 'A Fine Balance'. The full novel is centered mainly on the lives of four characters Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow, Maneck, a young Parsi boy, and two chamar characters Ishvar, the uncle, and his nephew Omprakash. The novel shows the life struggle of the four in Bombay in a very critical time for the country. The present chapter taken for critical analysis presents us with short and simple annals of the poor and the marginalized, where the family of the Chamaars is in a village by the river. But this single chapter itself has become epic regarding the portraiture of the poor lower caste people of Independent India. Quite naturally caste prejudice, oppression, poverty, corruption, and above all the fatal effects of the partition and its aftereffects in the name of the Hindu-Muslim riot come to the forefront of the discussion in the paper. The paper also shows the futile attempt of the oppressed to uproot the system.

Keywords: oppression, poverty, caste-prejudice, dominance, helplessness

Rohinton Mistry moves from his self-segregated way of expressing the Parsi community in the novel *A Fine Balance*. Like the previous two works *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and *Such a Long Journey* which solely depict the customs and cultures of the author's community, the novel *A Fine Balance* is somewhat different. This work may also be termed a semi-political novel. Some critics have also termed him as a historical novelist like Scott finding his association with historical incidents of India after independence. In *A Fine Balance* Mistry has selected the time frame between two major historical incidents of India, namely the Emergency declared by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi followed by her assassination. But these historical details and political turmoil are surpassed by the presentation of the abject poverty, oppression, and casteism in the presentation of the lower-caste people in the countryside. Reading the graphic details of the lives of the *Chamaar* caste one may astonish and would certainly consider it melodramatic but this is the essential realism of Mistry and the true picture of India before and after almost three decades of independence.

Regarding the change in the subject matter in the novel *A Fine Balance* Rohinton Mistry said in an interview –

...after writings my first two books I became aware that they were stories about a very particular and special kind of city and even

then, I had focuses only on a very small part – the Parsi community – and I made a conscious decision in this book to include more than this, mainly because in India seventy percent of Indians live in villages and I wanted to embrace more of the social reality of India. (mclay1996)

The presentation of the *Chamaar* family in the countryside, in an unknown village in India gives us a realistic picture of India shortly before and after the independence. The curse of casteism, particularly the evil system set by the Brahmanical tradition makes the mockery of the fact that it is the land of Gandhi whose life struggle was itself meant for the abolishment of untouchability. Mistry's presentation of casteism reminds us of the social concerns in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, like *Coolie (1936)* or *Untouchable (1935)* or the Bengali novels of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and the short stories of Munshi Premchand.

Impact of Globalization

Globalization has a greater impact worldwide and in every sphere of lifestyle whether it is economy or it is society or politics or literature. It is the strongest medium to upset the prevailing standards of society both at social and economic levels. From city to country, it draws humanity itself into a new setup. The world is seen to be a village and each one has opportunities to make his or her dream big. Globalization is a meaning to those who dare to

accept it (Jubas 2005). The novel *A Fine Balance* is written shortly before this great change world wise but the premonition is to be felt here also. Even the poor villagers can look forward to better opportunities in the city. They are waiting for the day when everything will be changed and work value will be the ultimate. Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash wanted to erase their bleak past and went to the city for a better life.

Presentation of Abject poverty

The chapter *In a Village by a River* describes the simple tale of Dukhi Mochi who belonged to the *Chamaar* caste, tanners, and leather workers living in a rural village by the river. Dukhi Mochi was five years old when he began to learn the *Chamaar* works. The description of his tale not only gives us the description of abject poverty but also shows us how the *Chamaar* caste was thwarted in the countryside. They were even permitted to live in a small downstream village by a river. Dukhi married at the age of eighteen to a girl named Roopa. Early marriage resulted in the mishandling of children and their first three daughters died. After that, they had two sons Ishvar and Narayan. The birth of two male children created envy in the upper caste of the village. Dukhi and his wife had to suffer a lot of hardships in the upbringing of their sons. Sometimes they had to starve and sometimes they had to work for the whole day in the upper-caste household and return, they got kicked and received obscene language and neglect.

And they are all like that. They treat us like animals. Always have, from the days of our forefathers. (AFB P.105)

But Dukhi did not possess a conventional mentality and intensely hated the custom of casteism. That's why he took the courageous decision of sending his sons to Ashraf, his friend, at a very early age to become tailors. It made a revolution in their society. Even his wife did not appreciate the decision. But Dukhi did not like his sons to be restricted only to the job dealing in the flesh of dead animals like their forefathers. He knew that time would change one day and his sons would have better prospects as tailors in the future. Dukhi was someone of his caste to break the '*timeless chain of caste retribution*'. This is an instance of cross-cultural activity and also indicates the fluidity of caste-barrier which was solely made based on work and not of social value. Dukhi told his sons-

From now on you are not cobblers – if someone asks your name, don't say Ishvar Mochi or Narayan Mochi. From now on you are Ishvar Darji and Narayan Darji. (AFB P.115)

Extended family concept

Rohinton Mistry himself believes in the extended family concept. The caste bar of religious obstacles did not pay anything in that relationship. He shows us minutely that the lower-class people in the rural areas felt more at ease with their Muslim brothers than the upper-class Thakurs. Dukhi sent his two sons to his friend Ashraf to learn the art of tailoring there. He told his sons to regard Ashraf as their uncle. Ashraf also took care of them not as apprentices but as his sons. Ashraf-Dukhi's relationship is an example of that extended family concept. Regarding the extended family concept, Mistry himself said in an interview with Robert McLay.

Yes...again it is part of the extended family I mentioned earlier. When the brothers were small (Ishvar and Omprakash's father Narayan) their father took them to a Muslim tailor and he said 'Ashraf, he is like my brother so you must call him uncle, you must call hi Ashraf chacha. (mclay1996)

Evils of casteism and sexual oppression

Sexual oppression and the evils of Casteism, particularly the Brahmanical dominance in the society are two main aspects in this part of the novel. The lower caste women had to go to the upper caste without any protest. Protests faced severe torture also. Lower-caste women had no self-respect in the eyes of the upper class. In the village one could often hear such types of talking, -

She refused to go to the field with the zamindar's son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square. (AFB P.96)

Roopa, Dukhi's wife faced sexual torture while stealing milk for his newborn babies at night. Roopa had to steal milk from the upper-class house for her infants, otherwise, they would starve. She had to pay for that. One day she was caught red-handed by the guard and fearing the torture of the upper class she paid herself to the gardener as punishment.

Brahmanical superiority

The Brahmanical tradition of casteism is a curse in India. It was extreme some fifty years ago. the novel graphically presents the tortures

faced by the lower caste, particularly, the *chammars* from the upper-class thakurs. They were not allowed to live with the upper caste. They were deprived of the fundamental rights mentioned in the Constitution. Ishvar and Narayan were bitterly scolded by the pundit when they entered the classroom for learning without permission.

You Chamaar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school. (AFB P.110)

When Narayan refused to take out the flesh of a dead animal, He was mocked by the Thakur. At every inch, the lower caste had to remind the fact of taking birth in a *Chamaar* caste family.

Violence of partition

This part of the novel quite poignantly picturizes the extremist activities and violence of the partition in India. The evil effect of the partition was indeed felt everywhere soon after the independence. Punjab and Bengal witnessed the worst of the violence between the Hindus and the Muslims. This novel presents us with the massacre in an unnamed village in rural India. Hindus killing Muslims and Muslims killing Hindus became common everywhere. Ashraf had to change the name of his tailoring shop and paste the images of Hindu gods and goddesses to avoid the cruelties of riots. Ishvar and Narayan prevented the impending death of Ashraf by telling the Hindu extremists that it was not a Muslim house and it was a Hindu house. Things may seem to us unreal and astonishing but this had the hard reality for a time being.

Lower caste uprising and massacre

It is not every time that the lower or the downtrodden of society always tolerate the oppression and torture in the prevailing setup of the society. Sometimes they try to eliminate the condition by employing protest though their protest does not get the accumulation and is suppressed with brutality by the upper class in the society. Narayan the younger of the *Chamaar* brothers was very much aspirant and did not want the caste prejudice in the society. He believed in equality and freedom and the principle of work. He thought that there was no harm in doing his prosperity by hard work. But unfortunately, he became a targeted person in society. Narayan himself was also very obstinate and so he protested against corruption-practice in the election by Thakur Dharamsi. He along with the other family members was taken by the men of Thakur

Dharamsi and burnt with torture, even though their bodies were not recognizable. The political system in the democracy of India is always in the control of power. The power holders now take the form of leaders and distort democracy everywhere. The protesters against this system have to face severe torture as Narayan and his family members faced in the novel.

Casteism among the Caste

Casteism among the lower castes is another important aspect to be found in the chapter. It is an important thing for analysis. Very often it is seen that there is a competition or superiority felt by the lower castes among themselves in the society. Categorization among the lower castes is seen in the novel *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand. Here Anand portrays the character of Bakha who clears the drains in the society and shows how he is humiliated by the other lower castes there. The same thing is to be seen in this part of the novel. Roopa disagreed that his son Narayan would sew for the caste Bhunia as they were regarded as lower to them. But this Caste prejudice did not work for Roopa and she was corrected by her son.

"I think I should sew for anybody who comes to me, Brahmin or Bhunghi." (AFB P.133)

The others reminded Roopa that it was the same thing that they had to tolerate from the upper-class takers. So, they must not possess such a kind of prejudice in their minds.

Momentary happiness

The great novelist Thomas Hardy believed that happiness is a momentary and transient part of life. To him, happiness is an occasional relief in the lifelong drama of pain. Hardy believed in the concept of fate and regarded that everything in the world is predestined and we have to undergo suffering in our life but amidst suffering we get some momentary phases of happiness that make us lively. In the chapter of the novel, we get the fact that the misfortunes and sufferings of the *Chamaarcasteare* permanent but, in some parts, we find occasional happiness and community feeling among them. The whole episode of Narayan's marriage is humorous. The bride-seeing episode of Narayan or the marriage party episode is a very interesting and amusing aspect of such occasional happiness. The fully loaded vehicle of Narayan's bride-watching party and the gossip among the community

about Narayan's marriage also give us instances of Mistry's humor in the narration.

Conclusion

This particular chapter in the novel *A Fine Balance* itself is enough to give a picture of the rural parts of Independent India. Mistry's realistic presentations of the oppression, corruption, casteism, poverty even ruthless physical torture by the upper class to the lower class show us the sordid details of living for a particular class. Even close reading of this part may raise the fundamental questions about the country to us and may give birth to thousand other such questions of oppression and hypocrisy. We must ask the question ourselves about the life struggle of the chamar caste – what a living is it, is it at all a living? Whatever issues may arise, if taken for another study, one may surely feel at heart after reading this part that truth is stranger than fiction.

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