

REPRESENTATION OF STATE EMERGENCY AND CASTEISM IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S NOVEL A FINE BALANCE

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Abstract

The idea of caste division is deeply rooted in Hindu religious belief. People are segregated according to the caste to which they belong and allowed to perform corresponding occupations. According to the chaturvarna system, Brahmins occupy the topmost place and Shudras the lowest. However, there was a group of people who were not given any space in the varna system, and these people were popularly known as “untouchables.” Since there was no space provided to them, they were treated in subhuman ways by the upper-caste people. They were denied basic human rights and were treated as inferior beings. The condition of people from lower castes people is intertwined with the State Emergency imposed by the Prime Minister of India from period 1975 to 1977. Rohinton Mistry's novel "A Fine Balance" deals with the topics of the caste system and the period of Emergency in India. The novel takes the reader back to the time when India was fighting for its Independence. Moving between the past and present, Mistry has shed light on marginalized segments of society. This paper will examine the social, economic, and physical conditions of people from lower castes in India and how the period of State Emergency affected their lives. This paper will highlight the injustices done to these marginalized groups by the so-called “civilized” people and high-caste people.

Keywords: Chaturvarna System, Untouchables, State Emergency, Marginalized, High-Caste

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry was born in India and lived in Mumbai but migrated to Canada and has been living there since 1975. Although he shifted to Canada, he never stopped astonishing his readers with the depiction of reality in his fiction and short stories. He is the author of a collection of short stories, “Tales from Firozsha Baag,” and later produced three very fine novels, all of which were shortlisted for various awards. These were Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1996), and Family Matters (2002). He predominantly writes about the Parsi Community and their sufferings, but in his second novel, A Fine Balance, he

included other oppressed sections of society, too. In the novel "A Fine Balance," the story revolves around four people who come together due to their situation, but the story unfolds their social and economic backgrounds. The story talks about Dina Dalal, a young widow, Maneck Kohlah, who comes to live with Dina to complete his course on refrigeration, and Ishwar and Omprakash, who had to migrate to Mumbai due to their economic conditions and the oppression they face in their village. The novel narrates their life together and apart, how the political scenario outside the four walls affected their lives inside, and how they tried to make a fine balance in the chaos.

Discussion and Analysis

It is rightly described by Arundhati Roy in the introduction of *The Doctor and The Saint* that "Caste was implied in people's names, in the way people referred to each other, in the work they did, in the clothes they wore, in the marriages that were arranged, in the language they spoke." (Roy, 2014) The novel *A Fine Balance* takes the reader to a time when untouchability was in practice. Ishvar and Omprakash, who used to be cobblers and became tailors later, belonged to the "Chamber caste of tanners and leather-workers." (*A Fine Balance*, 95) But before they started working as tailors, they had seen the never-ending chain of caste systems in their village. Dukhi, Ishvar, and Narayan's father have thought to break from the traditions of the caste system and occupation that they were assigned before they were born because of their caste. Dukhi Mochi defied the rigid social hierarchy of the caste system by refusing to accept the occupation that was predetermined by his birth and instead sending his sons to be apprenticed as tailors. As said by Dukhi Mochi, "Like his forefathers before him, he had accepted from childhood the occupation preordained for his present incarnation." (*A Fine Balance*, 95) But he took a courageous decision to break off from the "timeless chain of caste" and sent his sons Ishvar and Narayan to Ashraf Chacha to be apprenticed as tailors. No one in the village has dared before to diverge from the assigned occupation since birth.

This division among castes that we know today has its foundation in Hinduism's founding texts known as varnashrama dharma or chaturvarna, the system of four varnas. These texts describe more than four thousand castes and sub-castes (jatis) in Hindu society. These defined castes were divided according to hereditary occupation, which also provided them with social status in society.

The division can be seen into four varnas – Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (soldiers), Vaishyas (traders), and Shudras (servants). But there were other groups of people also who were not given any position in these four varnas. They were kept outside it and called varna castes, the AtiShudras, subhumans, arranged in hierarchies of their own—the Untouchables, the Unseeables, the Unapproachables. These were those people who were assigned every kind of menial job. They were not only kept outside of the varna system but also not given any privilege in the living world. Their presence was not tolerated by the high-caste people. These people were not allowed to enter the temple where high-caste people worship. These

untouchables cannot own their piece of land anywhere where high-caste people live. Moreover, they were not treated less than animals by those who considered them as privileged. The people who belonged to the Chammar caste or known as untouchables, had to keep their heads down and follow whatever they were asked to do. They were treated with pure savagery.

The untouchables were denied every human right. They did not have any food to eat, no place to work that could provide them with a good economy, no clothes to wear, no place to get educated, and, more importantly, no place they could call their own. There were times when these people were asked to carry spittoons so that their saliva could not touch the floor and to tie a broom to their waist so that their marks of footprints could be cleaned immediately as they walked past it. And if they tried to raise their voice, they were punished harshly and made them quiet. Moreover, the woman was raped and tortured by the upper caste people. There is an incident in the novel where Dukhi's wife, Roopa, goes out at night to find some food to feed her babies. As no food is there at home, she is caught in the field while filling her sack with oranges. The man who caught her was hired by upper-class people to look after the field, and in exchange for a few oranges, he sexually harassed Roopa. "He put out his hand and squeezed her left breast. She stuck his hand away. 'I only have to shout once,' he warned and slipped his hand inside her blouse. She shuddered at the touch. doing nothing this time." (A Fine Balance, 99)

The idea of resistance for lower caste people is expensive. They cannot resist because the fear and horror of being killed or punished have affected their human psyche. It is like a never-ending disease.

In the society. The disease of untouchability has been ravaging society for centuries. But Dukhi diverted from this by deciding that his sons would not follow the same profession as his. And he turned Ishvar and Narayan not as Ishvar Mochi or Narayan Mochi but as Ishvar Darji and Narayan Darji.

The cycle of resistance and punishment of Dukhi's family remains constant in the novel till the end. For instance, people belonging to Chamaar Caste were not allowed to enter the school, but Ishvar and Narayan took the courage to enter the class. But when they were caught by the teacher, they were thrashed badly and were almost beaten to death. Later in the novel, the rage against the caste system can be seen in Narayan when he gets to know that people belonging to lower castes were not allowed by Thakur Dharamsi to cast votes as per their choice when Narayan and a few of his fellow mates raised their voices against this and denied casting their vote. Thakur Dharamsi forcefully took their stamp on the paper and later beat them while hanging on the tree. Thakur Dharamsi said, "I want those achhoot jatis to learn a lesson." (A Fine Balance 146) To give them a lesson, he killed all those who resisted casting a vote, and Narayan's family was dragged, tied, and thrown into a room and burned alive. It is very rightly said by Ambedkar that "There cannot be a more degrading system of

social organization than the caste system. It is the system that deadens, paralyzes and cripples the people from helpful activity.” (Roy, 2014)

Ishvar and Omprakash were saved as they were in town at this time. But the horror of their condition struck them when a State Emergency was imposed by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from period 1975 to 1977. They learned tailoring at Ashraf and decided to work in the city to get good money. After working here and there, they were appointed as tailors by Dina Dalal. For them, if one trouble ends, then another begins.

At the time when a State emergency was declared, fundamental rights and the constitution were suspended. The immediate power went into the hands of those who belonged to the power. The idea behind the imposition of Emergency was to control the population, balance the economy of the country, and give benefits to those who are devastated. As said by the Prime Minister in her speech in the novel while addressing the audience who were asked forcefully to sit there that they do not have to worry about anything because of the Emergency, "It will make things better for ordinary peoples. What we want to do is provide houses for the people. Enough food so no one goes hungry. Cloth at controlled prices. We want to build schools for our children and hospitals to look after the sick. Birth control will also be available to everyone.” (A Fine Balance, 265)

But on the other hand, the Emergency proved to be fatal for those it was declared. Ishvar and Narayan, after coming to the city by the sea, find a jhoppadpatti to live in somehow, but it is attacked by the bulldozer, and they are forced to leave that place. According to the government, it was important to remove slums as it would help eradicate poverty. Later, when somehow Ishvar and Narayan find a place on the roadside to live for the time being, they were picked for the construction work, which was a part of the "City Beautification Program." They were mistaken as beggars and were thrown to work hard labor. All those who were beggars were brought together to work as construction workers to beautify the city. Ishvar protested this by telling the owner that they were not beggars; they were tailors, but no one heard them out. Later, they were saved by Beggar's master and were taken back to their old place of work. Now, Dina Dalal, the woman they were working for, took them to her rented flat.

They thought that things were better now, but the major blow came in their life when Ishvar decided to find a girl for Omprakash. He took Omprakash back to Ashraf Chacha so that they could find a suitable girl and marry him immediately. But they were not aware that their life would take a major turn here. In their journey to find a bride, they were forcefully taken to the sterilization camp as a

The result of a raid by police in the market area they were roaming. People were pulled and thrown in the truck to take them to the sterilization camp. They were not asked or told even if they wanted to be castrated or not. It was forcefully done to the poor people to fulfill their targets for the scheme. Meanwhile, Ishvar and Omprakash were castrated from the equipment, which was not sterilized properly, and were asked to lie down with castrated

people. When Thakur Dharamsi saw them, he asked the doctors to remove the testicles of Omprakash as he would lose his manhood forever. He did this to show them that if low-caste people thought to revolt against the high-caste people, then they would be punished brutally. As a result, Ishvar lost both his legs due to the infection caused by castration, and Omprakash lost his manhood and never married. Lastly, when they managed to return to Bombay, they were again forced to take the job as beggars. Life comes full circle at the end of the novel.

Shashi Tharoor abruptly explained how “Most of the real victims of the Emergency were among the poorest classes of Indians - the ones who, most needed the protections of democracy.” (Tharoor, 36) It is being said that the State Emergency by Indira Gandhi was the opposite of the views of his father, Jawahar Lal Nehru, for whom the idea behind the successful government was to enact schemes and programs that benefit the poor people the most. But State Emergency proved to be the opposite of this view. During the Emergency period, poor people were affected the most. The political power in the hand of Indira Gandhi, who claimed that all these schemes were for the upliftment of society, left the poor people in a devastated state.

The Prime Minister claimed that poor people will benefit from the schemes she has launched, and they have nothing to worry about as time is supposed to change. But Mistry, through "A Fine

Balance" brings to light the condition of marginalized people who were adversely affected by the State Emergency. Moreover, people like Omprakash and Ishvar, who belonged to the lower caste, suffered the most as they did not have a say in anything. Moreover, it was a reminder to them that they cannot change the system where power lies in the hands of politicians and high caste society. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was not wrong when he said that the “Caste system is not the division of labor, but it is the division of laborers.” (Roy, 2014)

Conclusion

The novel “A Fine Balance” is a masterpiece that brings the lives of four different people together and narrates their conditions without beautifying them. He explained how society functions where no individual is given equal rights and freedom. The effect of casteism is so deeply rooted in the psyche of the human being that it is extremely hard to even think of a casteless society. An ideal society where everyone will live happily without the hindrance of any caste name. The protest by the family of Dukhi in the novel brings the end to their family name. And when Omprakash tried to revolt against the Thakur Dharamsi, he was snatched of his manhood. This is a clear reminder to the reader that protests by lower cast people will not be heard. Moreover, the schemes by those who claim that they know the condition of poor people are making their condition worse. Mistry described cleverly that society cannot work properly if there is no equal division of power among people. Society will fall in a way that no one can think of.

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