UNTUCHABILITY AND ROHINTON MISTRY’S A FINE BALANCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to the study the representation of untouchables in Rohinton mistry’s A Fine Balance (1995). I wish to present the devastating effects of the cast system on the educational, social, and economical status of untouchables in Indian society. My wish is to highlight the harsh reality of the suppression; struggle and torture dalits face every day of their miserable lives. This paper systematically set out to destabilize hegemonies based on cast, gender and class. I am particularly interested in the use of the idea of tragedy in mistry’s novel. The present journal explores the humiliation, torture and problems of residence faced by untouchables. It presents how different, and often contradictory, discourses on dalits both incorporated and interrogated in Indian literature; I will analyse the position to which dalits are allocated, in both cultural and political discourses, in relation to the contested conception of the Indian nation, in civil society, and in the Hindu community.

KEYWORDS: Community, humiliation, Indian society, Suppression, Untouchable.

INTRODUCTION

Untouchable is a term that denotes to a group of people who face economical, social and cultural discrimination in Indian society. The atrocities faced by downtrodden are depicted in A Fine Balance, Rohinton Mistry’s second novel. Untouchables has been poor, deprived of basic human rights and treated as social inferiors in Indian society. It is a record of the life of the country from 1945 to 1984. Mistry portrays the predicament of untouchables section during his contemporary Indian society. It portrays the personal history of an untouchable family. The reader is given a glimpse into hierarchies in rural society through the violence that greets the transgression of the city of Bombay. The inequalities of caste in rural India are merely substituted through those of class in the city as the tailors struggle to make a living in slums the twin margins of caste and class intersect with those of gender when Dina Dalal subcontracts work to the tailors to make ends meet. Life of Om and Ishwar becomes miserable due to emergency and finally they are ruined.

A Fine Balance is a fictional presentation with three major strands in it- the stories of Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow who bravely strives for a free and independent existence; young Meneck Kohlah who grapples with problems of existence and the Chamaar-turned-tailors Ishwar and Omprakash both of whom struggle for survival in a world that is hostile but occasionally allows them to find refuge in feelings of kinship and togetherness. The narrative avoiding the linear mode moves easily between the past and the present. Mistry emerges as a master story-
teller as he adroitly weaves the three strands into the plot of the novel. And in the process he brings all the four protagonists into contact with each other and they eventually end living together under the same roof, a miracle given the caste-ridden Indian society and its hierarchical character. Mistry accomplishes all this in the most convincing manner without straining the credibility of the reader, a real triumph of his fictional art. It would be useful to recall Raymond William’s fine statement on the realist tradition in fiction. He remarks:

When I think of the realist tradition I fiction, I think of the kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons. The balance involved in this achievement in perhaps the most important thing, the sort of the things most novels do…. Yet the distinction of this kind is that it offers a valuing of a whole way of life, a society that is larger than any of the individuals composing it, at the same time valuing creations of human beings who, while belonging to and affected by and helping to define this way of life, are also, in their own terms, absolute ends in themselves(314).

A Fine Balance achieves the ideal balance between the general and the personal. The life of the chamaars in a villages and their traumatic existence in a caste-ridden society is evoked realistically by Mistry without any over-dramatization of their tragic plight, as it often happens in the novels of Mulk Raj Anand, the champion of the oppressed in Indian English fiction. Dukhi Mochi learns to survive with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions in the village. The silent suffering of his wife Roopa and the ruthless punishment meted out to his sons Narayan and Ishwar for transgressing the caste code by entering into the school premises makes Dukhi Mochi a much dejected man. When Dukhi unable to bear these humiliations goes to Pandit Lalluram seeking justice, he is told that everyone should act as prescribed by Dharma. He then courageously decides to break the timeless chain of caste by sending his son to Ashraf in the nearby town to be apprenticed as tailors.

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It is perceptive insight of Mistry that it is only through a change in their profession that the Chamaars could ever achieve upward social mobility in the Indian society. Narayan returns to the village and sets up his own tailor’s shop, an event strongly resented by the villagers especially Thakur Dharamsi, the village chieftain. Even though Narayan’s life has changed, he confesses his deep dissatisfaction to his father. Dukhi Responds:

How can you say that? So much has changed. Your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth. And look at your house, your-Those things, yes. But what about the more important things? Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals. Those kinds of things take time to change. More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like … Son; those are dangerous things to want. You changed from Chamaar to tailor. Be satisfied with that. Narayan shook his head. ‘That was your victory (Mistry 174-175).

When Narayan attempts to cast his vote in the Parliamentary elections much against the prevailing and accepted practice, his entire family is burnt alive by the henchmen of Thakur. Only his brother Ishwar and son Om manage to escape. After the influx of readymade garments, Ashraf’s business suffers and they are forced to move to the city by the sea looking for better
Their life in the city turns out to be a horrendous experience until they meet Dina Dalal who is on the lookout for tailors.

However, it is the Emergency that gets represented most realistically in the novel since the fusion between the general and the personal is seen here at its best. Ishwar and Om manage to find a shack in the jhopadpatti that, incidentally, is most vividly portrayed by Mistry, something of a novelty in recent Indian English fiction. Their daily life is picturised with a Dickensian eye for detail. We have a memorable account of the inhabitants of the jhopadpatti being taken to a village to form part of the audience where the Prime Minister speaks to them of the numerous benefits of the emergency to the poor. Mistry terms this performance of hers, rather satirically, as “a day in the circus.” Though Ishwar and Om are not able to intellectually comprehend the factors that lead to the imposition of the emergency, they do feel its repercussions purely at the personnel level when their jhopadpatti is bulldozed as a part of the city beautification programme. And now homeless, they end up as pavement dwellers, but even here there is no solace available to them. Om and Ishwar are then taken away to a nearby irrigation project site where they go through the hard grind of manual labour, while being provided with semblance of a shelter and offered some food. They are eventually rescued by Beggar master and are back in Dina Dalal’s flat. The intellectual response to the emergency is dramatized in a long conversation between Maneck and Avinash. It is further seen in the manner in which the student’s union are split and in the submissive support of the college teachers for the declaration of emergency. Mrs. Gupta and Nusswan both represent the vested interests hail the emergency as a true spirit of renaissance and regard the Prime Minister as our visionary leader.

Mistry deftly handles the growing intimacy between Dina Dalal, Maneck and the Chamaar-turned tailors, Ishwar and Om. When the tailors and Maneck arrive together at Dina Dalal’s dingy little flat, she is relieved since her fragile independence was preserved. She is initially quite appalled by their sloppy work and tardiness. The various stages in their relationship, from her initial resistance to any kind of intimacy with the tailors to the longing for their company, given her loneliness, and the rapid growth of concern for them once she learns of the enormity of their suffering, are described in painstaking details by the novelist. This transformation of such a relationship, as the one between Parsis and Chamaars is an exceptional event in Indian English fiction. Mistry does not resort to any romantic simplification. It is the mutual dependence between them that finally forces Dina Dalal to agree to let the tailors sleep in her veranda for she could not afford to lose their services. Note her reflection:

But how firm to stand, how much to bend? Where was the line between compensation and foolishness, kindness and weakness? And that was from her position. From theirs, it might be a line between mercy and cruelty, consideration and callousness. She could draw it on this side, but they might see it on that side (Mistry 469).

All the sides of the dining table in her house are fully occupied for the first time after eighteen long years. Once she even tells Ibrahim, the rent-collector that Ishwar is her husband and Maneck and Om are her sons. When Ishwar and Om go to their village to celebrate Om’s marriage, and Maneck returns home to leave for Dubai, solitude returns to the house of Dina Dalal after one year of their living together. And she looks back on the past with nostalgic yearning and wonders how Zenobia,
Could never realize that the four of them cooked together and ate together, shared the cleaning and washing and shopping and laughing and worrying? That they cared about her and gave her more respect than she had received from some of her own relatives? That she had, during these last few months, known what a family was (Mistry 550)?

It is nothing short of a marvel that such a possibility is made into a fictional reality by Mistry. A year of togetherness with such disparate experiences to share, acts of kindness to remember, hilarious moments to savour, occasional quarrels to forget— all these contribute to a real bonding between the four of them. Of course, it is Dina Dalal who emerges as the informing centre of their life because it is she who, from her initial reluctance and resistance, gradually gets to know the others and comes to realize the value of friendship and fellow feeling. Mistry creates a memorable symbol in the quilt acts as a storehouse of memories to each one of them, for every piece has individual association and acts as reminders of particular events in their life. In fact, Maneck rightly believes that God is a giant quilt maker.

Mistry reveals unsuspected insight into constitution of the human urine as well. Note Dina Dalal’s reactions to Ishwar and Om using the water-closet in her flat for the first time: “the smell in the WC bothered her. Living along for so long, I’ve grown too fastidious, she thought. Different diets, different habits – it was only natural their urine left a strange colour” (Mistry 93). But the urine smell that used to flutter like a flag in the air gradually grows unnoticeable. She also learns how one gets accustomed to things and then it struck her: the scent was unobtrusive now because it was the same for everyone. They were all eating the same food, drinking the same water. Sailing under one flag. These ages are not meant for readers with finer sensibilities and delicate stomachs! All these are refreshingly new to the world of Indian English fiction, for what we had so far was the representation of a sanitized, sterilized and deodorized world. Such details were dreaded in the past, perhaps, by both the writers and readers and hence they were scrupulously avoided. In the light of such evidence, it is strange to find Khair posting the view that while Dina Dalal’s story “is realistic in every classic sense of the term, the stories of (Coolies) Ishwar and Omprakash borrow heavily from different genres: the fantastic, the fairy tale, newspaper reportage etc.” (Khair 141). This kind of reading is the malaise of our present day critics, who have forgotten the simple art of reading a novel, but are otherwise well-grounded in literary theory. Khair, a specialist in Indian English fiction, besides being himself a novelist, sadly, is no exception to this recent phenomenon.

A Fine Balance is a brilliant example of a prototypical realistic novel. Apart from exhibiting the classical features of Social Realism as defined by Raymond Williams, it predominantly dramatizes the very ordinary, day to day realities of Indian life. Nonetheless, it describes the hopes and aspirations, the pain and suffering of the average Indian. The average Indian in this novel is epitomized by the two Parsis, Dina Dalal and Maneck and the two Chammars-turned tailors, Ishwar and Om. There is no romanticizing of India’s poverty in the novel as alleged by Paranjape and Khair. Instead, A Fine Balance presents a candid and honest vision of Indian life. Mistry is at pains to show the moments of joy, fulfilment, celebration and happiness I the lives of the four persons, even though they might be few and far between. If the novel seems to emphasize more on the darker side of life, adequate reasons are offered within the text itself. Mistry, among his contemporaries, stands out as the master of the quotidian in view of the amazing grasp over little details and seemingly trivial incidents. He uses them to create a
solid, recognizable India from the mid-40s to the mid-80s and in the process manages to give to give us a work that is, undoubtedly, an important signpost in Indian English fiction.

Ishwar and Om are forcibly taken to a Family Planning clinic and sterilized. Om, in fact, is castrated. Ishwar loses his legs due to infection and they are now back once again in Bombay, but now as beggars. In the meanwhile, Maneck returns from Dubai after eight years to attend his father’s funeral sisters (Avinash himself having been earlier killed in police custody). He curses God and the final blow to Maneck’s sanity is the news that Ishwar and Om have become beggars. Though he sees them, he refuses to recognize them and kills himself walking into a moving train. The novel ends with the old Dina Dalal feeding Ishwar and Om without the knowledge of her brother Nusswan and his wife with whom she now stay. And we are told that those two made her laugh every day and this extraordinary relationship, it is implied, will continue. As Vasantrao Valmik puts it, “there is always hope-hope enough to balance our despair, or we would be lost” (Mistry 690). This indeed is the secret of survival as Mistry magnificently demonstrates in A Fine Balance.

The narrative voice in Mistry’s fictional discourse achieves ‘a fine balance, between involvement and detachment thus providing a reliable witness to an eventful era in the nation’s history. Mistry’s humour is gentle, subdued and occasionally quite amusing. The novel’s conclusion more than amply demonstrates the values of human relationships and fellow feeling among people, despite their distinctions in caste and class. Mistry’s view of life makes for health and sanity, a need most compellingly felt today more than ever before. He has given the subaltern (the Chamaars) a voice and visibility in this fine novel. Mistry himself has confessed, “Post-modernism is so terribly clever-far too clever for me. Faithfulness to the story and the characters is what concerns me most” (Gokhale 6). We have in A Fine Balance a wonderfully successful account of the life of the country between 1945 to 1984 with the middle classes, the lower castes and the poor figuring prominently, an accomplishment quite unusual in Indian fiction in English. Rohinton Mistry has made it possible for Indian novel in English to explore into areas of human experience which were hitherto only tangentially touched upon. And his novel rooted in the Indian reality helps us grapple with the multifarious problems confronting our society.

WORKS CITED


