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**IDENTITY AND CASTE-HEGEMONY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE***

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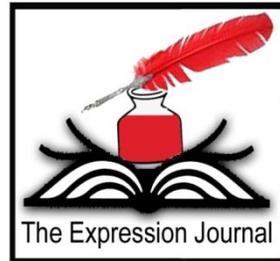
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**Abstract**

This paper is an attempt to analyse and assess the issue of caste discrimination in Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance*. The novel deals with the heart-rending pictures of Dalits how they are thrown away at the back side of the society and how their rights are snatched. The paper highlights the devastating effects of caste system on the social, educational and economical status of the underprivileged classes. When they try to claim their rights they have to face the atrocity and tyranny of the upper caste people. The other poor Dalit people don't ever dare to save the tyrannized people from the tyrannizer due to fear. When somebody tries to destabilize the hegemonies on the name of caste then that person is either killed or made invalid or is suppressed. This paper throws lights how powerful people from the upper caste snatch the rights of the poor Dalits. The story of the novel revolves around a heinous killing of a whole Dalit family just because a member of this family has dared to claim his rights. The novel is also a search for identity of the four characters Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohlah and two Chamars-turned tailors, Om and Ishvar Darji. How these four characters have to see the bad days they had never expected has been tried to investigate in this paper. Dalit exploitation, subjugation, oppression etc. is the main concern of this paper.

**Key-Words**

Caste, Injustice, Untouchability, Torture, Subjugation, Fear, Tyranny.



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Rohinton Mistry is a diasporic writer who was born in Mumbai on July 03, 1952. He resides in Brampton, Ontario in Canada. He belongs to a Parsi community. His brother Cyrus Mistry is a playwright. He did his graduation with Mathematics and Economics from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai. He immigrated to Canada in 1975 and he studied at the University of Toronto from where he did his B.A. in English and Philosophy. He worked in a bank for some time. His novel *A Fine Balance* is set in the city of Bombay. The setting of the novel is between 1945 to 1984. In this novel Mistry delineates the predicaments of the Chamaars (leather-workers) who are considered untouchables. The novel is a search for identity by four characters. Dr. Jaydipsinh Dodhiya writes in this context:

*A Fine Balance* Rohinton Mistry's one novel is set in mid 1970s India. Mistry's novel beautifully narrates the story of four unlucky people whose lives come together during a time of political turmoil (Dodhiya 15).

The novel tells the story of Dukhi Mochi and his family. Dukhi Mochi is considered an untouchable in his village. He works for the upper caste people. He does not like the way he is exploited and suppressed by the upper caste people. He and his wife, Roopa think that their children may somehow get out of the cruel clutches of their caste. They do not want to see their children in the same profession. But they have fear from the society also. They send their two sons Narayan and Ishvar to become tailors to Ashraf Chacha who lives in Mumbai. When they go there Narayan is ten years old and Ishvar was twelve years old. Their father takes this bold step in those circumstances when everybody was frightened from the upper caste people as Dalits were not allowed to go beyond the work of their caste. Mistry writes: "Dukhi Mochi's decision to turn to his sons to tailors was indeed courageous" (109). When people come to hear about this news they start raising fingers on

him. Dodhiya writes, "They say that Dukhi dares to break the timeless chain of caste, which high caste people would not like at all (Dodhiya 15).

Two leather-workers turned tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash are the victim of their circumstances. Story starts with Dukhi Mochi who lives under terror and suppression. He is unable to hear more humiliation; he goes to Pandit Lalluram for seeking justice. Pandit tells him that one should do according to the dharma/religion. That's why he sends his son Narayan to Ashraf in the nearby town so that they may become tailors and get rid of their family profession of leather work. After becoming a tailor Narayan returns to the village and opens his shop for sewing the clothes. He does not sew the clothes for the upper caste people. He finds many changes in the village but his father says that nothing has changed for the poor Dalit people:

Your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth... 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 (174-175).

Narayan takes a very bold step in the village. He declares his own independence in the village. He does not want to vote for the upper caste people. He wants to vote for the candidate of his choice but this mistake by him proves very dangerous to him. Thakur Dharmdasi gets angry with him and his goons took him and two of his companions to Thakur's flat. They are tied with a rope upside down on a banyan tree. They are made without clothes and are badly beaten throughout the day and when Thakur Dharmdasi wins elections in the evening then the burning coal is stuffed into their mouths. They keep crying. Their scream reaches to the village but nobody comes to help them. Their tongue and lips are melted away and ultimately they are killed by strangulating with the rope. Thakur becomes blind with the anger. Thakur's ager does not pacify with their death. He orders his goons to bring all of the members of Narayan's family and burns them alive. He wants to show his power to the poor dalits. He sends their dead bodies on the village square so that any other Dalit may not dare to speak against him. When Ishvar and Ashraf Chacha try to lodge an F.I.R. against the real murderer, Thakur Dharamsi the inspector does not take any action rather he scolds them: What kind of rascality is this? Trying to fill up the F.I.R. with lies? You filth *achoot* caste are always out to make trouble! Get out before we charge you with public Mischief (172).

The novel tries to explore the problems of identity, poverty and casteism. Mistry tries to throw light on the problems of the dalits. He tries to strike a balance between the bad and good; loss and gain; richness and poverty; and hope and despair. The story of the novel has the themes of identity, casteism, nationalism, identity, oppression and tyranny. The life of the slum-dwellers and beggars moves the readers. The novel throws light on the real condition of the lower class city life.

The problems of Dalit women have been beautifully delineated. The exploitation is a long process and dalits are being exploited since long time. Dalit women are physically exploited. Jaydipsinh Dodhiya writes about the exploitation of a dalit woman, Roopa:

Dukhi Mochi's wife Roopa stands for docility and tolerance. Her shameful exploitation by the watchman of the rich man's orchard is Rohinton Mistry's harsh comment on the double standards prevailing in the contemporary Indian society in the form of untouchability (Dodhiya 75).

Dalit women have to work and they are therefore under the constant threat of their exploitation. They are just the play tools for the Jamindars and Thakurs. They use them to quench their sexual thirst. Thakur Dharamsi is a political goon in the novel. He tyrannizes the poor. He is a person who misuses his power. Ratna Shiela Mani writes about his misuse of the power.

Thakur Dharamsi achieves respectability as a political leader because he organizes many sterilization camps. His cruel misuse of power indicates the beginning of the trend of criminalization of politics and politicization of crime (Shiela Mani 207).

There is another illustration from the novel. There is a Dalit woman, Buddu's wife who keeps her self esteem high and she does not go to the field at the call of the zamindar's son but she has to face very bad consequences due to it.

The novel is a struggle for identity also. There are some characters who seem to struggle for their identity. Dina Dalal is a main character who is marginalized and exploited by her own brother. Her name means poor or destitute in Hindi and her surname Dalal means an agent. She works as an agent in an export company to fight with the financial problems.

Dina's real name is Dina Shroff who becomes Dina Dalal after her marriage with Rustom Dalal. She belonged to a traditionally well-to-do family as her father was a doctor. But she could not live a satisfactory life as her father died when she was just twelve years old. Her brother, Nussawan's behaviour is not good with Dina Shroff. She has to do all the household works and she is abused by her brother. She does not allow her to go to school and he hits her if she misbehaves. He is about to molest her when she gets her hair cut without his permission. Dina does not like her brother, Nussawan and she rejects all the prospective suitors who are brought by her brother for her marriage. She finds her life partner at a theater. Nussawan and his wife Ruby are happy to get rid of her. They have a sigh of relief from her. Dina and Rustam are happy by this marriage but their happiness proves short-lived as her husband dies by hitting a bus. Dina has to face a very difficult time after the death of her husband. She is in her early forties. She neither wants to return to her cruel brother nor does she want to remarry. She becomes a tailor but she could not do this work also for a long time as her eye sight gets weak due to embroidery work. She starts working in Au Revoir Exports Company. She has to prepare dresses for the company and the company gives her payment for this work. As she has poor eyesight she has to hire tailors to run her business. She puts Maneck Kohlah and two tailors, Ishvar and Omprakash

Darji to work under her. She is not intimate with them initially but gradually she becomes so friendly with them that they all four live like family members. They are from a different status yet they are happy at Dina's rented flat. They discuss with one another, share the stories of their lives, share their meals and live very happily:

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 (550).

Though they seem very happy outwardly but in fact, there is a sea of sorrow inside them. Ishvar and Omprakash have seen very bad days in their life. Omprakash's brother, Narayan is murdered mercilessly. He is just seventeen years old while Ishvar is in her early forties. They have seen the astute penury in their lives. They don't have the sufficient money by which they could buy sewing machines for them. They have to take their sewing machines on rent. They are crushed down by the societal system still they try to start their life afresh. At the time of Omprakash' marriage, both of them go to village. It was an occasion of happiness and glee for them but this turns to be very unlucky time for them. Om is castrated by the dominant politicians when he dares to change the Thakur who had murdered Om's family members. Ishvar also becomes a victim of the Family Planning Programme run by the central government. He gets infection and loses his legs due to gangrene. On the other hand, Dina's flat is snatched by her landlord. She has a misconception that her tailors, Omprakash and Ishvar and Maneck have deserted her. When Omprakash and Ishvar return the city they are shocked to know that Dina also has lost her flat. Their life becomes like labourers and beggars without home. They have to sleep on the pavements and footpaths like beggars.

Maneck also return after eight years from Dubai. He loses his father there. When he returns he is also deeply shocked to see this changed situation. He gets absolutely broken when he sees Ishvar and Omprakash handicapped and living like a beggar. He recognizes them but he refuses to identify them and ends up his life by coming under a moving train. The train stops at his death like the opening of the novel in which the train stops due to the death of an unknown person. Jaydipsinh Dodhiya writes in this context:

The closing of the book with the similar stoppage of train service due to suicide by one of the young aspiring characters whose dreams of India are shattered so badly that he decides to commit suicide. (Dodhiya 66).

Dalits have to suffer in their own community also as even other Dalits don't cooperate a person who tries to change the world. In this novel nobody tries to help Narayan who fights for his rights but he has to face very dire consequences. Not only he but his innocent family also dies due to his adventurous act. Moreover, there is no place for the poor in this world as Mistry writes that nobody pays attention to them and they have to live life like beggars on footpath while the rich enjoy themselves by snatching their rights. The life for the poor and Dalit is very difficult in this world.

As a conclusion, dalits are always kept under suppression. This is a long process and they are being exploited since centuries. Mistry has beautifully depicted the pitiable plights of the poor and dalits. The programmes initiated by the government are just for the formalities for the poor and in fact, other people get benefitted by them. The unity of the Dalits and their education can improve their lives. They live their lives on this hope as Mistry writes:

There is always hope—hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost. After all, our lives are but a sequence of accidents a clanking chain of chance events. A string of choices, casual or deliberate, which add up to that one big calamity we call life (652).

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