



THE PORTRAYAL OF CASTE SYSTEM IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

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ABSTRACT :

Caste system is one of the significant social issues in India. It is reflected in fictional as well as non-fictional writings of many Dalit writers like Namdev Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Laxman Mane, Daya Pawar, Annabhau Sathe etc. Some Indian English writers like Mulkraj Anand, Kanchya Ilahi and Rohinton Mistry also write about the disease of caste system and untouchability in India. The paper tries to analyse the disease of caste system in Rohinton Mistry's second novel *A Fine Balance*.



KEYWORDS : Caste system , non-fictional writings .

INTRODUCTION :

Caste system, untouchability and class operation are the major social issues in India. In *A Fine Balance* Rohinton Mistry highlights these issues with utmost reality. In the third section of the novel, he takes the readers to the ground reality of rural India. Some major characters like Dukhi Mochi, Ishvar, Narayan, Omprakash, Roopa, Radha etc suffer from caste system. Dukhi Mochi's belong to the Chamaar caste of tanners and leather-workers. His whole family becomes the victim of caste system. He is an untouchable in village society. He has to face the problems created by caste system. Mistry comments:

'During his childhood years, he mastered full catalogue of the real and imaginary crimes a low-caste person could commit, and the corresponding punishments were engraved upon his memory.' (Mistry: 2003: 117)

During India's freedom struggle movement, some leaders of Indian National Congress were working to eradicate untouchability and caste system. They arranged meetings to spread Mahatma Gandhi's message regarding the struggle for social justice. Once Dukhi Mochi and his friend Ashraf attend such meeting where the speaker says:

'What is this disease? You may ask. This disease, brothers and sisters, is the notion of untouchability, ravaging us for centuries, denying dignity to our fellow human beings. This disease must be purged from our society, from our hearts, from our minds. No one is untouchable for we are all children of the same God. Remember what Gandhiji says that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk.' (Mistry: 2003: 131)

But it seems that nobody accepted the message of Gandhiji and as a result, the age old caste system continues to flourish in our country.

The upper caste Thakurs and Pandits oppress Dukhi Mochi's family and his caste associates. Dukhi Mochi finally decides to leave his own village and goes to the nearby town to work as a cobbler. Here he comes across Ashraf, a Muslim who agrees to teach tailoring to his sons, Ishvar and Narayan. First, he refuses this offer and decides to live where he is born. But the sorrow and suffering of his wife

Radha, his own humiliation by the upper caste people and the severe punishment meted out to his sons by the village school master leave him a much dejected man. He goes to Pandit Lalluram to seek justice but he is humiliated and told that everyone should behave according to a 'dharmic' duty. Pandit Lalluram defends the teacher's action and tells Dukhi Mochi:

'Your children entered the class room. They polluted the place. They touched instruments of learning. They defiled slates and chalks, which upper-caste children would touch. You are lucky there wasn't a holy book like Bhagwad Gita in that cupboard, no sacred texts. Or the punishment would have been more final.' (Mistry: 2003: 139)

Unable to bear the suffering of his sons, Dukhi Mochi finally decides to send his sons to Ashraf to be apprenticed as tailors. Both Dukhi Mochi and his wife Roopa do not want that their sons should follow caste-based occupation. Mistry emphasises the fact that only through the change in profession, we can fight against the deep rooted caste system in India.

Dukhi Mochi, Ishvar and Narayan are Hindus and still they are discriminated and humiliated by the other Hindus like Thakur Dharamasi and the village Pandit. There is hatred, envy, and enmity between the upper castes and the lower castes. This conflict between the upper castes and lower castes is a social reality in rural India. Mistry, as a social realist, gives voice to the lower castes and, in this way, tries to eradicate this social evil. He wants to convey a message to the entire world that relationship should be based on humanity and not on caste, creed, colour and religion. He also demands social unity between the Hindus and the Muslims, and secular character of India.

Another important characteristic of caste system is discrimination not only among the higher and the lower castes but also among the lower castes itself. One caste is superior to another caste. Thus the cobblers think that they are superior to the Bhunghis. When a village Bhunghi approaches to Narayan for his dress measurement, Roopa (Narayan's mother) says:

'We are not going to deal with such a low-caste people! How can you even think of measuring some one who casts the shit from people's houses?' (Mistry: 2003: 163)

Politics plays a significant role in strengthening the caste system in our country. According to our constitution, every citizen has a right to cast his/her vote. But the lower caste citizens are prohibited to cast their votes. Dukhi Mochi's family becomes the victim of dirty politics. When Dukhi Mochi and some of his family members try to exercise their right to vote, they are beaten mercilessly, hanged and their bodies are displayed in the village square. Innocent women also suffer a lot from this caste-based politics. Mistry comments:

'The goondas began working their way towards the untouchable quarter. They beat up individuals at random in the streets, stripped some women, raped others, burned a few huts. News of the rampage soon spread. People hid, waiting for the storm to blow over.' (Mistry: 2003: 179)

Thus Mistry has made conscious effort to present ground reality of rural India. In an interview with Robert Mclay, he says:

'I made a conscious decision in this book to include more than this, mainly because in India seventy-five percent of Indians lives in villages and I wanted to embrace more of the social reality of India.' (Sushila Nasta: 2004: 204)

To conclude, though Indian constitution prohibits caste-based discrimination and upholds social equality and fraternity, still caste is a social reality in our country. And Mistry, as a social realist highlights this reality in the novel.

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