

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.4., 2017 (Oct-Dec)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

IMBALANCE OF POWER IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S 'A FINE BALANCE'
(Issue of Oppression in the Name of Caste, Gender and Politics in the Novel
- A Critical Study)

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ABSTRACT

Power is synonymous with one's status in the society. The status is determined by various aspects like money, caste, gender etc. Of all these aspects, caste is one that dictates terms to a large extent in the Indian society. Political power is also another aspect that has influenced the Indian society since Independence. As long as caste determines one's status in the society, it is, no doubt, a destructive aspect of human civilization. When castes were identified on the basis of the individuals' professions, they were welcomed, so as to prevent competition among the professions. But when the caste began to give an identity to the individual, it showed its sharp incisors and it eventually became a deadly curse upon the untouchables. In the same way, political power also has had its decisive/destructive role in the post - Independent India. When an individual is elected to power, he/she has an important role to play in the upliftment of the poor and in the management and distribution of the available resources. The person in power, if blind with the lust for retaining his power, will certainly become indifferent to the plight of the people. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the issue of abuse of power in the name of caste, gender and politics in Rohinton Mistry's novel, 'A Fine Balance'. An attempt has been made in this paper to discuss Mistry's focus on the oppression that is inflicted upon the marginalized and the dispossessed in the name of caste, gender and politics.

Key words: Caste, gender, politics, abuse of power, imbalance, identity crisis, devastation

INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry is a renowned Indian born Canadian writer. He authored several short stories and novels. 'A Fine Balance' is his second and most famous novel. This novel was selected for Oprah's Book Club and short listed for the 1996 Booker prize. The story of the novel is set in an 'unidentified city' in India to be easily identified as Mumbai. It begins with a Prologue in 1975 and ends with an Epilogue 1984, in between the dramatic sea change in the Indian political scenario that resulted in the change of fate of a common man in the country. The abuse of power becomes an influential factor in the lives of the common people. The illogical but traditional power in the hands of high caste Hindus in rural India, the unreasonable and unethical power of male in Indian families and the unannounced power of self begodded politicians disfigured the Indian society. This very subject is the central theme of Mistry's novel.

The novel revolves around four characters from varied backgrounds - Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, his nephew Omprakash Darji and the young student Maneck Kohlah. These four characters representing the common or humble section of the Indian society, are destined to meet at a place in Mumbai. All the four people are the victims of social and political suppression existing in their times.

Oppression in the Name of Caste, Gender and Politics:

Power comes from caste! It may not appear strange to those who have witnessed the realistic picture of the Indian society which has had its roots in caste system. A section of the society has been under needless suppression for generations. The unquestionable authority of the upper caste Hindus has made the mindset of the lower caste Hindus. This became the reason for the inevitable low self esteem among the oppressed. The lower caste Hindus spent their 'life in obedient compliance with the traditions of the caste system.' It's no wonder that their 'occupation has been pre-ordained for their present incarnation.' (Mistry) Profession goes with caste in the Indian society. When a lower caste Hindu goes against the tradition, it is, no doubt, an act beyond their imagination. As is evident from the following lines from the novel that the people belonging to lower caste fear 'crossing the line.'

Their father's friends feared for the family. Dukhi Mochi(Ishvar's father) has gone mad", they lamented. " With wide open eyes, he is bringing destruction upon his house hold." (Mistry)

Dukhi, who has been patient enough to bear with the sufferings that come with his profession of being a chamaar, no longer wants to remain with the intolerant smell of the dead animals - their skinning and tanning. He wants to keep his sons away from this 'smell'. He suffers the wrath of the upper caste Hindus, Zamindars and Thakurs. This is clearly understood from the episode where Dukhi goes for work at Thakur's residence, but while working on the mortar, it gets collapsed, this angers Thakur and Thakur beats him wildly. In another episode, the rebellious Narayan (Ishvar's brother) demands vote, causing discomfort and anger among the elite of the village. He is beaten to death by the henchmen belonging to the village heads, and in due course his whole family, except Ishvar and Om, is burnt alive. The fate of these lucky/unlucky young men will now be at the mercy of the world they are going to confront. The world has already provided enough evidence for them to believe that it is malicious. They are now left with no home, their identity is in question, it is identity crisis!

Power goes with gender! This is unquestionably beyond doubt, when the Indian family system is keenly observed. India is known for its roots in the family system but there is the other way round for its establishment. It is deeply patriarchal and woman is at the mercy of man. Though it is a Parsi family, there is no exception. Dina, one of the four important characters in the novel, who belongs to a Parsi family, experiences an agonizing torment in the hands of her brother, Nusswan. She hails from a wealthy Parsi family but she is constrained to depend on her brother after her father's death. Her brother, Nusswan who is much older than her, is often phlegmatic to her and uses an invective language to enervate her mentally and morally. He is, in addition, not hesitant in being pernicious to her and often abuses her physically too. When found her disobedience in treating her hair, he slaps her. When he thinks her remarks a backtalk, he 'lashes her with a ruler'. His ill-treatment is in its worst form when he threatens to 'cut her breasts and her tongue'. His perception of woman/girl as weaker sex is the point for consideration. The Indian society is essentially male dominant though it is Hindu or Parsi.

It is also evident in the case of Rupa (Dukhi's wife), a Hindu woman. She is unfortunate to feed her baby by stealing fruits from an orchard. While on her way, she undergoes a physical and psychological torture. Her sexual exploitation by the watchman of the rich man's orchard is actually another perspective of Mistry's depicting the double standards evident in the practice of untouchability. It is an instance of tragic irony that a high caste lustful man desires to touch and assault a low caste woman. But this episode is also reminiscent of gender inequality. Woman is treated as an object of enjoyment, not as equal to man, infact not even as an emotional entity. The very attitude of man makes him obdurate towards woman.

Power also goes with politics! Power misused in politics is another big aspect of the novel. The political hegemony exercised by a section of the governing body during the period of emergency is best illustrated in the novel. Mistry refers neither to any political party nor to any particular person in his novel. But it is easily understood by one with a little knowledge about Indian politics. The period mentioned in the novel from 1975

to 1984 made a land mark impact on the Indian politics and the same on a common man as well. The novel best depicts the worst impact of the period of emergency on the principal characters of the novel like Dina, Ishvar, Om and Maneck. Dina's endearing hope of living independent is reduced to mere helplessness in the face of political destiny of the country. She makes a sincere attempt to live an independent life after her husband's sudden death, but the unexpected turn of events that takes place in the Indian political scenario shatters her hope. She is forced to close her tailoring shop after the departure of Ishvar and Om, the workers in her shop, and is compelled to live at the mercy of her brother again.

Ishvar and Om have a miserable fate after a state of emergency is declared in the country. They are deprived of their shelter as a result of beautification. They are shifted to a work camp where they have to undergo a nightmarish experience. Then they are luckily placed at Dina's residence. But an unfortunate turn of events takes place when they visit Ashraff Chacha. They have to pay a heavy price for irking Dharamsi Thakur. Unfortunately, Thakur is the in charge of the sterilization camp. He gets extremely venomous in using this opportunity for avenging himself on these young men. As a result, Ishvar is to undergo a vasectomy that later causes him to develop a gangrenous infection on his leg which is eventually amputated. Om is given a castration that turns him into a eunuch. Their dreamy world has turned upside down. They have nowhere to go for justice. It is just a cunning game of politics that has changed their destiny forever. Both the uncle and the nephew are on their way to make a good fortune for themselves, but the unethical and unempathetic political power combined with social inequality has crushed their hopes. They are stunted to lead their life as beggars.

Maneck, another important character in the novel, is a student of diploma in refrigeration and air-conditioning. He takes up this study in order to fulfill the dreams of his father. He lives as a paying guest at Dina's residence. While being at her residence, he develops a loving bond with the tailors, Ishvar and Om. He also develops a strong bond with Avinash, his college friend. When Ishvar and Om go to the village to find a bride for Ishvar, Maneck goes to his parents. Maneck, on the advice of his father, goes to Dubai to find a good future which, he expects, is in store for him. When he returns from Dubai, after eight years, to attend his father's funeral, all he finds is a topsy-turvy scene. Avinash, his friend, a kind of rebellion in nature, fights against the declaration of emergency, which becomes fatal for him. Avinash's three sisters commit suicide for they don't like to be a burden on their father for dowry. Maneck is disheartened by learning the truth about Avinash whose death is again a consequential happening of emergency. He also learns about the pathetic condition in which Ishvar and Om are living. All these melancholic situations of his dear friends make him lose faith in the humanity and lose faith in the system prevailing in the country. He never recovers from this psychological trauma, loses interest in life and he will ultimately find solace in his self killing.

The political hegemony exercised by those possessing lust for power has turned out to be extremely ruinous for the plenty. It is an imbalance of human rights, which has caused all the destruction in the lives of the common folk in the country. 'The country is on the move' has become ironical in the lives of the people, infact the country, for them, has moved backwards.

Conclusion

The emotion caused due to the hapless situations in which the characters of the novel have to live is poignantly captured by the author. The characters in the novel are very ordinary people who represent the largest and most important part of the Indian society. They have had a catastrophic ill-luck that has devastated their lives. Contrary to the saying that time heals every wound is proven wrong in the case of these people. Instead, the sufferings they have in their prime will remain so as to turn into fatal wounds. Time has not healed their wounds, instead hurt them more. The acclaim that came for Mistry's novel needs to be recalled - he "has the capacity to make the reader pray to him, as if to God, please let your creations escape into happiness" (Literary Review)

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