

ABUSE OF HUMAN RIGHT IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *FINE BALANCE*

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Rohinton Mistry (1952 -) is one of the eminent Fiction writers writing in English. Being settled in Canada, he contributes his valuable works to the development of the Indian English Literary tradition. He strongly opposes the discrimination prevailing in the Indian society in the name of caste, community, race, gender, and so on. He has written an anthology of short stories and four novels so far namely **Tales from Firozsha Baag** (1987), **Such a Long Journey** (1991), **A Fine Balance** (1995), **Family Matters** (2002), and **The Scream** (2008). This study aims at an analysis of the novel **A Fine Balance** so as to bring out the inhuman treatment and the denial of the legitimate rights of the communally marginalized section of people. The novel sets in Bombay and the surrounding areas. In one such adjacent village of Bombay, there is a community called "Chaamar." Chaamars are cobblers and they are treated as untouchables by the caste Hindus. Their profession is to skin the dead animals, eat the flesh of them and to tan the skin into sandals, whips and shoes. The practice of untouchability is a sin and crime but the Chaamars are being ill-treated indescribably by the caste Hindus such as Brahmins, Thakurs, and others.

Everyone has the right to live with dignity in the world. All men are equal according to the constitution of the country and there should not be any discrimination. Though the constitution assures the equality of people, there is always discrimination and subsequent ill-treatment in the name of caste, class, and gender. Man has created divisions in the society on the basis of caste of a person. He divides the society by naming some sections are high or superior castes and others are low or inferior castes. Man gets religious endorsement for such divisions in the Indian society. It is unfortunate that even after the independence of the country and attaining development in various fields, Indians practice caste system. Caste in India plays an important role in every respect in the life of a person. People who are branded as "low caste" suffer a lot in the society especially at the hands of the "caste Hindus." The so called "low caste men" suffer enormously and their miseries are indescribable. In Indian Literature in English, there are a few writers such as Rabindranath Tagore highlight the issues related to caste system and the affliction of people. In fact, Rohinton Mistry has made a realistic portrayal of the sufferings of the "low caste" people at the hands of high caste men in this novel. He vividly brings out the human rights violations committed by the caste Hindus against the "untouchables" in the novel.

In this novel, Rohinton Mistry narrates such horror stricken incidents in which the abuse of human rights takes place in the worst way. Dukhi Mochi is one of the poor Chaamars in the

village. He always obeys the unwritten laws of the caste system. If any Chaamar violates the caste rules, horrible punishments will be given to him or her. This happens everywhere in the country. Caste is a monster which destroys the peaceful life of people. The caste Hindus blame and abuse the Chaamars for violating the caste rules. Often they are punished inhumanely for walking on the wrong side of the temple, overhearing the sacred shlokhas, stamping their footprints on the courtyard and meeting the Brahmin's eyes with their unclean eyes. For these "crimes," they get the extreme punishments such as beating, stoning, whipping, pouring the molten lead into the ears, hanging and so on. The nature of these punishments reveals the cruelties faced by the Chaamars at the hands of the caste Hindus. These are the worst acts of human rights violations. These violations happen in India for centuries. Though India got its independence, the Chaamars do not have the freedom from the oppression of caste Hindus.

The Chaamars are not allowed to walk on the streets of the caste Hindus and move along with other men in the public places. Their mere touch is considered to be dirt to the higher caste people. They are prevented to enter the temples and ponds of the village by the higher caste men. The Chaamar women are not permitted to draw water from the public well. If they get second son in their families, it is noted to be an ill-omen by the higher caste men. For these reasons the Chaamars are cruelly subjected to tortures by their fellow men. Sometimes, the punishment leads to the death of a person. Even though they are the citizens of the same nation, these downtrodden people are treated as the mere servants and subservient to the upper caste men and they treat the suppressed class of men worse than animals.

Rohinton Mistry portrays the terrible treatment undergone by Dukhi Mochi and his family in a moving way. Every member of the family is subjected to torture. Their legitimate rights are curbed by the caste Hindus. If they voice against it, they will be eliminated from the world. Dukhi Mochi's wife Roopa is blamed for giving birth to a second son in a Chaamar family. The family members of her starve due to poverty. With motherly affection, Roopa visits the landlord's farm to get something to feed her son. She is raped in the garden by the cunning watchman who belongs to the higher caste. He threatens her to yield to his desire otherwise face the deadly consequences as a thief. Rape is used as a form of punishment by the caste Hindus against the women of suppressed class. This is a great injustice done to a Chaamar woman by the higher caste man. Rape is the worst form of human rights abuse. This is an irony that the higher caste men who are not ready to even see and touch the shadow of the lower caste men but stealthily rape the downtrodden women and escape from their act. Consequently, Roopa and Dukhi Mochi feel humiliation, shame, and anger. Their inability to fight against the injustice is exposed in silent tears. Rohinton Mistry has movingly portrayed the inexplicable miserable condition of the Chaamar couple:

Dukhi pretended to be asleep as she entered the hut. He heard her muffled sobs several times during the night, and knew, from her smell. What had happened to her while she was gone. He felt the urge to go to her, speak to her, comfort her. But he did not know what words to use, and he also felt afraid of learning too much. He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night. In the morning Roopa behaved as if nothing had occurred. So Dukhi said nothing, and they ate the oranges. (99)

Being a downtrodden woman, she could not raise her voice against the cruel act of the upper caste man. All her rights such as a woman and human being are utterly violated by the caste

Hindu man. She is turned to be a toy at the hands of him. Her feminine virtue is treacherously despoiled by the man and there is no one to protect her. It clearly shows the vulnerability of the Chaamar women who are exploited by the caste Hindus.

Dukhi Mochi has experienced many ordeals in his life at the hands of the caste Hindus. Once, he has suffered from thrashing on his back. Another time, he is beaten and chased out without getting any wages for his hard work for a whole day under the hot sun. During the work, his leg is crushed by the split mortar and it causes a bleeding injury on his left foot. When he begs for the wages from the landowner, he is chased away by him. Out of shame, anger, and humiliation, he never shares his pangs to anybody. The exploitation of labour force is another serious form of human rights abuse. The worker should have been paid for his hard work by the employer. Here the due recognition for Dukhi Mochi's hard work i.e. the salary is denied to him. Later, he narrates it to his wife as if "his bitterness overflowing like the foul ooze from his foot" (105). He decides not to work for the landowners and says: "I spit in the upper-caste faces. I don't need their miserable jobs from now on" (105). From this statement, it is obviously revealed that he will no longer endure such difficulties which are cruel to the core.

Ishvar and Narayan, the sons of Dukhi Mochi and Roopa, have experienced the horrible ill-treatment in their early childhood days. They are very much interested in studying in the village school like other children. But they are not allowed to get education. They are prevented from entering the classes and touching the study materials available there. Once, when Ishvar and Narayan try to enter the school premises, the teacher spots them and chases them away. He abuses them: "Shameless little donkeys! Off with you or I'll break your bones!" (109). When these boys, out of curiosity, touch the writing tools like slate and white chalk, they are given severe cane punishment on their bare back just for aspiring to study. According to the caste rules of the society, they pollute the learning materials by touching them. Dukhi Mochi becomes speechless on seeing the sad plight of his sons. The basic right of education is denied to them for being Chaamars. The denial of education to these children is the important form of abuse of human rights committed by the caste Hindus on the Chaamars.

Being a rebel, Narayan wants to break all the caste rules which are followed in the village. He wants to live as a human being with all rights like the caste Hindus do and not ready to be treated as an animal by others. To him, "Life without dignity is worthless" (144). He desires to drink water from the village well, worship in the temple, and walk around the village without any restriction. All these are not criminal deeds. They are reasonable desires and legitimate rights of any human being. The caste Hindus consider these acts as crimes and they do not allow him to perform them. He is not permitted to lead a life as a normal human being which he wants to be. Narayan is not the only individual who has faced the hardships to lead life with dignity, but also there are millions of people face the same fate in the Indian society. The restrictions put forth on a person to move freely in the world can be the serious human rights violation. Rohinton Mistry has brought out vividly the sad plight of the Chaamars here by the portrayal of Narayan.

Being a citizen of the Independent India, when Narayan asks for his legitimate right to vote in the election, he is not permitted to enter the polling booth. Narayan argues: "It is our right" (145). The high caste thugs do not allow him to cast his vote. They take him to their place. They put burning coals into his mouth and genitals until the lips and tongue are melted away. Thakur Dharamsi, a high caste man and the head of the village wants to establish the caste rules

strictly. He likes to prove his supremacy over the downtrodden. Hence he decides to teach a lesson to the Chaamars. He has ordered his goondas to destroy the Chaamars: “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” (146). Rohinton Mistry has clearly exhibited the ill-treatment faced by the Chaamars at the cruel hands of the powerful caste Hindus. When the mutilated body of Narayan is brought before his family members, his wife starts to howl. Rohinton Mistry observes: “But the sound of grief soon mingles with the family’s death agony” (147). The whole family is burnt alive by Thakur Dharamsi due to Dukhi Mochi’s violation of the caste rules by converting his sons from cobblers to tailors and the desire of Narayan to vote in the election. They are not allowed to change their profession. Even the right to choose the desired profession is also denied to the downtrodden people. This cruel incident proves the malice of caste system in India. Only Ishvar and Omprakash are escaped from the death of the whole family. Unfortunately, later they are also suffered terribly at the hands of Thakur Dharamsi. The right to vote in the election of the country is one of the basic human rights of a citizen. Sadly, even this right also is denied to the Chaamars by the caste Hindus. Narayan is subjected to the cruel torture and he died of consequently unable to withstand the brutality. The caste Hindus have not stopped with the death of Narayan, rather they wiped out the entire family of him. All the family members of Narayan except Ishvar and Omprakash are burnt to death. These brutalities have shown obviously the serious human rights abuse which takes place in the name of caste in India.

Ishvar and Omprakash are forcibly taken to the sterilization camp and Omprakash is castrated there by the order of Thakur Dharamsi. This is done to them as an act of revenge for Narayan’s violation of the caste rule by asking the right to vote in the election, Om’s disrespectful spitting at Thakur and the subsequent verbal duel between them. Omprakash is castrated while he is preparing for his marriage. On seeing the castration of Om, Ishvar begins to lament uncontrollably: “Hai Ram! Look! Look what they have done! To my nephew! Look! They have made a eunuch out of him!” (526). There will be no one in the family to survive in the world. This makes Ishvar’s agony intolerable. In the sterilization camp, “There was no one left to comfort Ishvar. Alone through the night, he howled and wept, slept for a few minutes when exhausted, then wept once more. Om came out of the chloroform past midnight, retched, and fell asleep again” (527). When Ishvar has sought the help of the higher officials in order to register a complaint against the castration done to Om, they neglect him. Ishvar appeals to them to consider his plea and Om does not want him to lose dignity. So he controls his uncle: “You really thought they would help? said Om. Don’t you understand? We are less than animals to them” (529). Unable to bear this loss and helpless condition, Ishvar begins to weep.

Rohinton Mistry brings out movingly the sad plight of them: “Ishvar’s eyes filled with tears. ‘So you are saying we should have stayed hidden on the verandah for the rest of our days? What kind of life, what kind of country is this, where we cannot come and go as we please? Is it a sin to visit my native place? To get my nephew married?’ He could walk no further, and sank to the pavement, shaking” (530). The writer has portrayed the most miserable condition of the poor and untouchable in the country. Soon both the legs of Ishvar are amputated due to the infection caused at the time of sterilization. Losing his both legs, he feels that his life is wasted. He expresses his despair: “My life is over, wept Ishvar. Just throw me in the river that runs by our village. I don’t want to be a burden to you” (531). They have lost their livelihood due to this

heavy loss. They are unable to work as tailors. At the end, they become beggars on the streets of Bombay. Rohinton Mistry has portrayed vividly the sufferings of the downtrodden people in the novel. All the basic rights such as free movement, drinking water, social life, education, modesty of woman, proper wage for the labour and the right to vote are denied to these Chaamars by the caste Hindus. In fact, Rohinton Mistry highlights these serious abuses of human rights committed by the upper caste men in the Indian society by the name of caste system. The novel is an eye opener for the Indians to realize the evil of caste system which affects the life of so many people in the Indian society. The treatment of the abuses of human rights in the novel displays Rohinton Mistry's concern for his fellow people and his humanism.

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