Indian Writing in English: Subaltern Literary concept - Oppression of Untouchables in Rohinton Mistry’s a Fine Balance

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Abstract: In the present global research scenario, subaltern theme has become so prominent that it is regularly used in various disciplines such as history, sociology, psychology, anthropology and literature. The word ‘subaltern’ is German word which means ‘inferior rank’ or ‘secondary importance’. The genealogical study of ‘subaltern’ refers to three outstanding thinkers. They are: Antonio Gramsci, Ranjit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The concept of ‘subaltern’ is also defined by Julian Wolfreys, “It contains the groups that are marginalized, oppressed and exploited on the cultural, political, social and religious grounds”. Thus Subaltern literature reflects various themes such as oppression, marginalization, Gender discrimination, subjugation of lower and working classes, disregarded women, neglected sections of society. Deprived classes etc. In the context of globalization, ‘Third World’ countries are encountering the state of poverty and oppression. Subaltern literature is one of the subdivisions of post colonialism. Post-colonial lays down conjectures in philosophy and literature that wrestles with the legacy of colonial rule. Post-colonial literature is a stems from postmodern literature concerned with the political and cultural autonomy of the people who were subdued in colonial domains.

The word ‘subaltern’ is drawn from the Late Latin ‘subalternum us’. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary denotes that the word, subaltern, as noun means any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain. Its adjectival form denotes ‘of inferior rank’. But Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci for the first time used it outside the non-military sense. In Latin ‘sub’ means ‘under’ and ‘alter’ means other. So literally it denotes to any person or group of inferior. According to some thinkers, perhaps he used the term as a synonym for proletariat. Literally, he refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, ethnicity or religion. Gramsci’s explanation of the oppression of the bucolic peasantry in Southern Italy depicts the persisted oppression of the rural peasantry, the working class, and the untouchables in post-independent Indian society.

Gramsci stressed the connotation of this expression in terms of Gender, Class, Caste, Race, and culture. Gayatri Spivak includes a new dimension to the term ‘subaltern’ for the colonized people, oppressed generations, working classes, blacks and muted women. B.K. Das opines that Gayatri Spivak has expanded the meaning of subaltern who laid the stress on gendered subaltern-that women who are doubly oppressed by colonialism and particularly in the Third World countries”.2 It can be presumed that G.Spivak has given prominence to the plight of women. Ranjit Guha interprets the subaltern studies as “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and officer or in any other.”3 Thus subaltern groups may belong to any gender, caste, class, sex, ethnicity and religion. Antonio Gramsci opines that the subaltern classes allude to any lower rank person or group of citizens in a distinct society suffering under the hegemonic domination of governing aristocratic class that denies them the fundamental rights of involvement in the making of provincial history and culture as active individuals of the same country. Perhaps, Gramsci, at that time had in his mind the workers and peasants who were marginalized, oppressed and suppressed by the fascist leaders. In the opinion of G Spivak, that the term ‘subaltern’ is flexible and it can have room for social identities and struggles such as women and the colonized that do not plummet under the reductive expressions of stern class analysis. “like the word subaltern for one reason. It is truly situational. The word was under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism ‘monism’, and was obliged to call the proletarian subaltern: That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that doesn’t fall under strict class analysis. I like that because it has no theoretical rigor.”4 G.Spivak attempts to justify lucidly the lives and histories of subaltern groups who are exploited economically and oppressed politically. Her writings clearly exhibit the experience of social and political oppression in postcolonial societies such as India cuts across difference in class, region, language, ethnicity, religion, generation, gender and citizenship. She further points out that “The colonized subaltern subject is irretrievably heterogeneous. Mr. Habib claims ‘the term was used by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to refer
to the working mass that needed to be organized by left using intellectuals into a politically self conscious force. Rohinton Mistry is one of the internationally acknowledged writers since his works have won international accolades. Canada based, Rohinton Mistry is the author of three novels and a short story collection set amidst the closely knit and isolated Parsi community in Bombay. His writings bear a social purpose. He is one of the prominent writers of the post colonial era. His novels deal with the theme of exploitation basing on the political, economic, and social aspects stressing the necessity of social purpose in fiction. Among the very few Indian writers in English, he is one of the novelists who dealt with plight of untouchables in his novel, A Fine Balance. Untouchability-Dalitism has been India’s most grave societal evil since time immemorial and is still practised in various parts of rural India. The so called, downtrodden- or lower castes are refuted to pursue education because education may enlighten them to their rights as citizens and may claim their rights. The caste discrimination and repression is mostly found to be in practice among the Hindus of our country. Rohinton Mistry attempted his best to voice the cruelty and oppression experienced by these muted untouchables in his novel A Fine Balance. The novel exposes class and caste disparities of Indian society which also mirrors a visual rendering of those who endure its inequities. Rohinron Mistry depicts about ‘Chamirs’ who are born into a leather-making chamir family. The upper caste people have treated them brutally in a distressing manner. The inhumanity of upper castes is glaringly evidenced in the novel. One of the examples is as to how untouchables are treated cruelly is illustrated in the following lines by Rohinton Mistry. “For walking on the upper-caste side of the street, Sita was stoned, though not to death- the stones had ceased at first blood. Gambir was less fortunate; he had molten lead poured into his ears because he ventured within hearing range of the temple while prayers were in progress. Dayaram, reneging on an agreement to plough a landlord’s field, had been forced to eat the landlord’ excrement in the village square. Dhiraj tried to negotiate in advance with Pandit Ghanshyam “the wages for chopping wood, instead of settling for the few sticks he could expect at the end of the day; the Pandit got upset, accused Dhiraj of poisoning his cows, and had him hanged”. The downtrodden were cruelly treated by the upper castes which is exhibited clearly in their activities such as- stoning Sita- just for walking in the streets of upper castes till her first blood is seen; Into the ears of Gambhir molten lead was poured just for hearing the prayers of temple who was nearby and Dayaram was compelled to eat stools of the landlord for asking wages and so on. Such inhuman actions by the upper castes has become routine phenomenon. The untouchability is a kind of disease, denigrates not only Hindu culture but it is also a blot on Indian society which is reflected in the words of Rohinton Mistry: “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, and from our minds. No one is untouchable, for are all children of the same GOD. Remember what Gandhiji says, that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk”. It is clear that Rohinton Mistry is in favour of untouchable because he feels that untouchability is not only disease but it is also poisoning the sacred philosophy of Hinduism.

There are four characters –Dina and Mameck who are Parsees and two tailors Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash. The lives of the tailors’ forefathers who were in fact ‘Chamars’ or ‘Mochis’ mirror the ruthless cruelty of the caste-system in the rustic India where unbelievable oppressions are carried out on the lower-castes by the upper-caste Jamindars and Thakurs. Tyrannical caste-violence has compelled Dukhi, a Mochi, and the grandfather of Omprakash and father of Ishvar from their traditional occupation of working with leather to learn the dexterities of tailoring in the town. They migrated to metropolis. The tailors experience the poignant dislocation of following a novel professional uniqueness, struggling to get a safe place in a new city and the physical displacement from their village to the city. Quite often they desire to go back to their village after earning some money. Ishwar’s father was doing unclean work, and he wished to see a better life of his sons Ishvar and Narayan so he sent them to a nearby town to learn tailoring. He leaves his sons with his Muslim friend Ashraf in the town who takes them as apprentices in his tailoring business. Dukhi Mochi opines sarcastically ‘ that at least his Muslim friend treated him better than
his Hindu brothers”. 9’ Ishvar and Narayan saved Ashraf’s shop by claiming that it belonged to them, leaving Ashraf forever in their memory owing. Narayan comes back to his village and started a tailoring business for the people of his village in which he is successful and earned a enough of money to construct his own house and married who is blessed with a son and two daughters. Narayan’s business was flourishing well till the till the local elections were declared by a landlord Thakur who burnt both the parents of Omprakash by tying together. Atrocities of upper castes on the lower castes are unabated. Even the lower caste people were not permitted to continue their education. Ishvar an Narayan have been beaten up for entering the village school. Then Dukhi approaches Pandit Lalluram, a Brahmin priest whom he trusts that he can do justice to him: even an untouchable could receive justice in his hands”. 10 Pandit Lalluram is bitterly satirized as an unmanered, greedy ingrate who is not concerned in doing justice for lower castes. Dukhi is frustrated at this attitude of the Lalluram and feels that the life he leads as an untouchable raises a query about his identification with the order of caste: : " government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals… More than twenty years have passed since independence… I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like” 11 Thus Dukhi opines his anguish about the injustice and oppression imposed on the untouchables who are not allowed to drink the water from the village well and forbidden to enter the temple. Even the women of village were exploited due to the caste system. For example, Dukhi’s wife, Rupa was victimized and raped by the Zamindar’s gardener for stealing fruits and milk from upper-caste houses in order to feed the children. Her disgraceful exploitation by the gardener is Mistry’s ruthless observation on the dual standards existing in the contemporary Indian society in the form of untouchability. These subalterns are subjugated and received heartless treatment at the hands of the upper castes. Even in the local elections, the blank ballots were filled in by the landlord’s men. Thus the lower caste people were forbidden to vote freely and use their franchise in a Democratic country like India. The family of Prakash’s father and his two grandchildren are knifed to death. After knowing this brutal incident Ishwar and Om rush to police station to file an F.I.R. But the Sub Inspector rudely comments on them: " What kind of rascality is this? Trying to fill up the F.I.R. with lies? You filthy achoot castes are always out to make troubles! Get out before we charge you with public mischief” 12. At every stage of their lives, the untouchables encounter oppression. During emergency, chamars-turned –tailors pay a visit to their village in search of bride for Om, they are victimized by their old high-caste enemy, Thakur Dharmasi and are maltreated and crippled under the alleged reason of the ‘free vasectomy program me’ of the Government.

One of the themes of subaltern literature is oppression besides exploitation of untouchables is poignantly depicted in the novel, A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry who gives a heart-rending version of man’s barbaric inhumanity to man and also the unimaginable deprivation and inequalities experienced by the downtrodden and oppressed in India.

REFERENCES

1. Wolfrey, Juiuan. Key Concepts in Literary Theory
8. Ibid P. 120
9. Ibid P. 130
10. Ibid P. 126
11. Ibid P. 163
12. Ibid P. 170