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Voices from the Margins: Analysing Subaltern Narratives in Rohinton Mistrys: *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract: ***This paper explores the representation of subaltern voices in Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance, a novel set against the backdrop of India during the Emergency period of the 1970s. Through a close reading of the characters and their narratives, this study delves into the lived experiences of marginalized individuals—tailors, beggars, and outcasts—who are often silenced or rendered invisible in mainstream discourse. Drawing on the theoretical framework of subaltern studies, the paper examines how Mistry gives voice to these marginalized groups, highlighting their struggles for survival, dignity, and agency in a society marked by systemic oppression and social hierarchies. The analysis reveals how the novel not only critiques the socio-political landscape of the time but also engages with broader questions of power, identity, and resistance. By foregrounding the subaltern experience, A Fine Balance challenges the reader to confront the stark realities of inequality and the resilience of those who exist on the margins of society.***

Keywords: Subaltern, Injustice, Oppression, Struggle, Suffering, Rohinton Mistry.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry is one among the influential authors in the field of contemporary literature. Born in Bombay (Mumbai), India on July 03, 1952, Mistry belongs to the Parsi community, an ethno religious group in India that practices Zoroastrianism. His father's name is Behram Mistry and mother's name is Freny Jhaveri Mistry. He received his primary education at St. Xavier High School. It was here, that he wrote a short story "the Autobiography of a Cricket Bat." He graduated from the University of Bombay in 1975. In the same year, he emigrated to Toronto, Canada with his wife Freny Elavia. Initially he worked in a bank while pursuing his passion for writing. Around 1980, he gets himself enrolled at the University of Toronto, where he studied English and Philosophy.

Mistry's writing journey started with the genre short story. His cultural and religious background has highly contributed to his literary sensibility. He has a knack for writing about common people struggling amid a grave historic, socio-religious or political event. Mistry's literary works deal with a wide a range of deep issues that are rooted in the social, political and economic context of India. He focuses on the themes of social injustice, suffering and struggle of the subaltern, impact of political and historical events on common people and the experience of the masses. His works portray the inequalities prevalent in the Indian society emphasizing the oppression, discrimination and helplessness of the lower class under the codes of caste system. The political upheaval, such as the Emergency, also disrupts the lives of ordinary people and that fact is also showcased in the works of Rohinton Mistry. Apart from these, Mistry also delves deep into the issues related to identity, exile, nostalgia, memory, alienation and the difficulties of the diaspora.

Rohinton Mistry's work, particularly in *A Fine Balance*, poignantly captures the relentless struggle and suffering of the common people in India. Through his vivid portrayal of characters such as the tailors Ishvar and Om, the widow Dina Dalal, and the beggar Maneck, Mistry paints a harrowing picture of lives ensnared in the vicious cycles of poverty, caste discrimination, and political repression. His narrative delves deeply into the everyday hardships faced by these individuals, highlighting their resilience amidst a backdrop of systemic injustice and social inequities. Mistry does not shy away from exposing the brutal realities of life for the marginalized, where dreams are often crushed by the weight of an indifferent society. Through his compassionate storytelling, Mistry humanizes the struggles of the downtrodden, giving voice to those who are often overlooked in the grand narratives of history. His work serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring human spirit, even in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance*, is a thought provoking narrative set during the enforcement of state of Emergency (1975-77), in India by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. This leads to a nationwide political turmoil, forced sterilization and curbing of civil liberties across the country. The novel also depicts the injustice, oppression, exploitation, violence, destruction and a reign of uncertainty in India along communal, religious and linguistic bounds. The rights of people were suspended, public meetings were banned and even strict measures were laid down on the press. Mistry has highlighted the horrors of political and social reality of those emergency years which have made miserable the lives of subalterns.

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Through the four downtrodden characters, the writer has delineated the suffering of common humanity. Interpreting this novel as political injuries and domination of land lords, Vijayalakshmi M states:

The novel is mainly rooted with beautification, sterilization, state-of-emergency, political injuries and domination of land lords. Its protagonists-Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow in Bombay, Ishvar and Omprakash, two village tailors from low caste as labourers and Meneck Kohlah, the college-student as paying guest of Dina. They all become victims of the turbulence caused by the state of emergency. (277)

The story revolves around four central characters whose lives become intricately intertwined due to the socio-political upheavals of the time. Dina Dalal, a widow struggling to maintain her independence, decides to take in two tailors, Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash (Om), who have come to the city from a small village seeking work. They are fleeing from the caste violence that destroyed their family. The fourth main character is Maneck Kohlah, a young student from a mountain town who comes to stay with Dina as a boarder while attending college in the city. As the characters live and work together in Dina's small apartment, they form a fragile, makeshift family, each trying to find balance amidst the instability around them. However, their lives are soon disrupted by the harsh realities of the Emergency, including forced sterilizations, slum demolitions, and rampant corruption. The characters endure immense hardships—Dina fights to keep her independence against oppressive landlords, Ishvar and Om struggle to survive as Dalits (untouchables) in a caste-ridden society, and Maneck grapples with his disillusionment with the world around him. As the novel progresses, their fragile equilibrium is shattered by the escalating political and social crises.

The story concludes with a heart-breaking depiction of the characters' fates, highlighting the brutal impact of systemic oppression on ordinary lives. Mistry's novel is a poignant exploration of survival, resilience, and the thin line between hope and despair in a world marred by injustice. Adate Suryakant writes: "The most obvious accomplishment of the novel is its realistic portrayal of the brutalities of lives of the people, who are living in dire poverty. The novel evokes the readers' sympathy. Mistry uses the tradition of Victorian realism to talk about the evils of modern India and to give a voice to middle and lower middle class Parsis" (125).

The exploitation of poor people is imminent under political and social turmoil as they become easy prey to political parties seeking huge gathering for their political rallies. The people in power and position use all possible means to use them for their selfish ends. And once their selfish ends are satisfied, the poor are again at the mercy of fate. Some have to migrate to big cities in search of better economic opportunities and to avoid the ossified rural orthodox atmosphere. Emergency years snatched their rights and forced them to lead a wretched life. Not only in their village but also in the city, they are the victims of caste and class system respectively. Interpreting the novel focusing on the plight and predicament of untouchables in India Rohit Singh says:

Mistry's A Fine Balance concentrates on the miserable life of untouchable characters who try to change their living condition by entering the centre from the periphery, but their attempt falls apart when it comes into conflict with reality. Changing their profession and moving into the city for better prospects do not favor them. They are forever victims of oppression, either in the form of caste or class. (62)

Dukhi embodies the profound struggles faced by the lower-caste individuals in India. As a Dalit (untouchable) in a rigidly hierarchical society, Dukhi's life is defined by relentless hardship, discrimination, and exploitation. Born into a caste that condemns him to a life of menial labor and social ostracism, Dukhi's existence is marked by constant humiliation and oppression at the hands of the upper castes. Dukhi's life is a testament to the brutal realities faced by the subaltern in Mistry's narrative. His unyielding efforts to rise above his caste and secure dignity for his family are ultimately met with tragic consequences, underscoring the pervasive and inescapable nature of systemic oppression.

The Thakur's wife was watching from the kitchen window, 'Oiee, my husband! Come quick!' She screamed. 'The Chamaar donkey has destroyed our mortar!'... 'What have you done, you witless animal! Is this what I hired you for?'... 'I swear on the heads of my children,' begged Dukhi, 'I was only pounding chillies, as I have done all day. Look Thakurji, the sack is almost empty, the work'. 'Get up! Leave my land at once! I never want to see you again!' 'But, Thakurji, the work-' He hit Dukhi across the back with his stick. "Get up, I said! And get Out!'...Thakurji, have pity, there has been no work for days, I don't'... 'Listen, You stinking dog! You have destroyed my property, yet I am letting you off! If I wasn't such a soft hearted fool, I would hand you to the police for your crime. Now get out!' (104)

All this took place when India was gaining her independence from the British Rule. But Indian subcontinent was divided into two nations based on religion. Millions have to leave their native place and migrate after the partition. The suffering of those million can only be felt and need not to be explained. But even after independence, the change in society was lacking. It's because change can never take place over night. So the struggle and suffering of these subalterns passed on to the next generation. The cyclic oppression and discrimination then victimized Ishvar and from Ishvar to the representative of younger generation, Om.

Such atrocities increased and these subalterns were left on their dark fate. India's politics also made it difficult for these oppressed to lead a normal life. The laws of government curbed their basic rights and left them on the mercy of corrupt government officials. In the name of city beautification and poverty eradication, thousands of poor people were cheated and used for selfish ends of various political leaders. Mistry severely criticizes all those brutal actions and activities that are meant to torture the oppressed during the Emergency.

Ishvar and Om are shown to suffer the most under the weight of Emergency laws enforced on them. Corruption and injustice were at their peak. Politicians, policemen landlords and other government officials are seen humiliating the common and poor people. Their suffering has no bounds and their helplessness increased their agony. What they have done to deserve such discrimination? After the slum destruction, Mistry illustrates an example where a policeman threats the poor people and gets money from them based on their poverty:

We are waiting for the train,' said Ishvar. 'This is not that kind of station. No waiting room. Come back in the morning.' 'But these other people are sleeping.' 'They have special permission.' The policeman jingled the coins in his pocket. 'Okay, we won't sleep on the platform, we will just sit.' ...'Ssst,' called a woman lying next to them. 'Ssst. You have to pay him' ...the policeman returned with a bucket of cold water and emptied it over the sleeping tailors. They howled and jumped off their bedding. (AFB, 300-01)

Their suffering does not end here. Police picked them up from their rented pavement to work at the construction sites for the city beautification project. Ishvar cries that they are not baggers but of no use. Ishvar and Om are forced to live in work camp where the conditions of living were intolerable and wretched. Dina and Maneck keep waiting impatiently for their return and the night watchman reveals the truth that Maneck tells to Dina: "It's terrible! He thinks they were mistaken for beggars - dragged into the police truck - and God knows where they are now!" (334). Through Maneck, Dina comes to know the long-drawn suffering of Ishvar and Omprakash, inheritors of caste victimization.

Dina Dalal, one of the central characters in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, experiences various forms of oppression throughout her life, reflecting the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal and socio-economically stratified society. As a widow striving to maintain her independence, Dina faces the constant threat of losing her autonomy, both personally and financially. Dina's oppression begins early in life, with the untimely death of her father and the subsequent pressures from her overbearing brother, Nusswan, who seeks to control her life and decisions. He insists that Dina should remarry to secure her future, but Dina resists, determined to live life on her own terms. This defiance sets the stage for a lifelong struggle against societal expectations and familial domination. After her husband's death, Dina's struggle intensifies as she tries to sustain herself in a society that offers little support to single women. To avoid dependence on her brother, she starts a small tailoring business, hiring Ishvar and Om as tailors. However, her efforts to build a self-sufficient life are continually thwarted by a patriarchal society that devalues women, particularly widows, and by the pervasive corruption and exploitation she encounters.

In conclusion, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* provides a poignant exploration of the subaltern experience, depicting the lives of marginalized characters caught in the tumult of India's socio-political landscape. Through a meticulous portrayal of their struggles, Mistry not only gives voice to those often silenced but also challenges the reader to confront the harsh realities of inequality, caste oppression, and systemic violence. The novel's narrative, rich in detail and empathy, serves as a powerful reminder of the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. By engaging with subaltern perspectives, *A Fine Balance* invites a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between power, identity, and survival, ultimately reinforcing the need for more inclusive narratives in literature.

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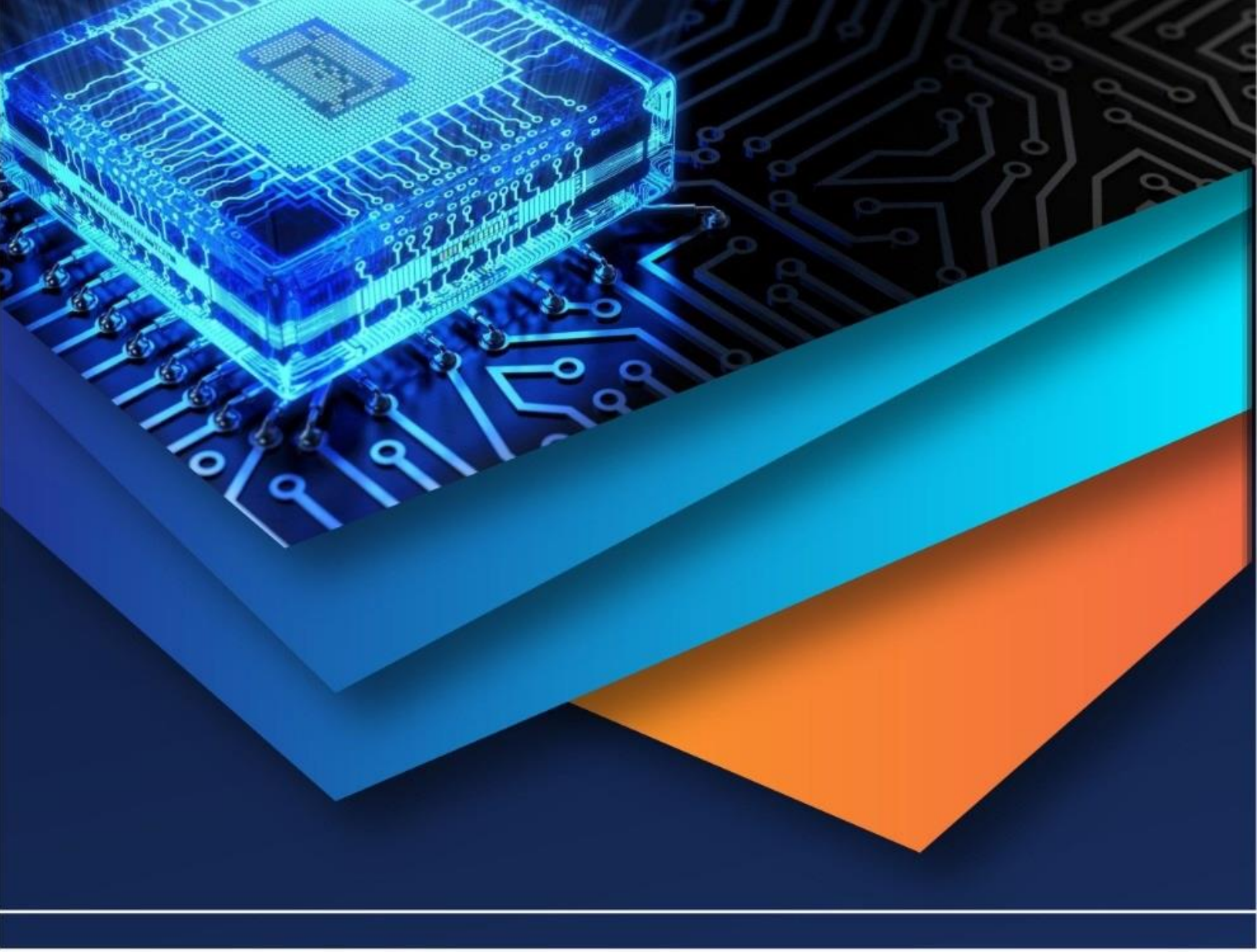

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