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## Culture and Community: In the Fiction of Rohinton Mistry

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### Abstract

Rohinton Mistry has emerged as a significant literary figure during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He is an Indo-Canadian writer. Mistry was born on July 3, 1952 in Mumbai, India. Rohinton earned his Bachelor's Degree in Mathematics and Economics from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai in the year 1973. In 1975, he along with his wife migrated to Canada where he worked in a bank as a clerk for a short time before returning to his studies. He earned his degrees in English and Philosophy from the University of Toronto in the year of 1982.

As a writer of Diaspora, Mistry has occupied a remarkable place for himself. As a writer, who lives and writes from Canada, Mistry's writings focus mainly on India. Like other expatriate writers, he continues his relationship with his country in his fiction. His writings deal with his community that is Parsi community, social and political situation of India, communalism, casteism etc.

**Keywords:** Community, Culture, Rohinton Mistry, Fiction.

### Introduction

Article concern itself with representation of community and caste from the perspective of culture in Rohinton Mistry's fiction. India is home to 5,000 communities and in addition to castes, countless jatis, and endogamous clans. The subject of community and caste which has been a part of Indian culture has been discussed and thread bared by host of scholars, sociologists, psychologists, constitutionalists and law makers. Bhakti movement beginning 5<sup>th</sup> century in Southern India and from medieval times in Northern India with Kabir, Nanak, Tulsidas in the 16<sup>th</sup> has made a bit of indent on caste consciousness in the name of spirituality.

### Discussion:

Beginning 19<sup>th</sup> century social movements such as Arya Samaj, Brahm Samaj in Bengal and Dev Samaj in North India have not altered significantly the fundamental ground reality. Despite being in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite laws and their amendments from time to time, the ground has not significantly altered. Community and caste is so deeply ingrained in Indian psyche. It appears that it has become a part of our DNA. Mistry shows a world where the liabilities of Untouchability prevail because, despite the Constitution, and the proclaimed class warfare of Marxist parties and other sorts of political rhetoric, established power entrenches itself by neutering the democratic process. The fictional world of Mistry centres on untouchable segment of Indian society. Mistry shows that the mutating discourses of power simply redefine the meaning of Untouchability. If the Untouchables of the village are the chamars or leather workers in the city, where caste affiliation dissolves in urban anonymity, the new "Untouchables" are the beggars or the pavement dwellers, who dramatize through their situation the evolving dynamics of social ostracism. As Mistry's Untouchable characters turn into beggars at the end of the novel, it becomes clear that the Untouchable and the beggar are different manifestations of the same condition. In each case through the appeal to some ideal principle, which creates also its antithesis, the abject of society is identified and exiled. This studies, however, is not concerned with the discussion of community and caste from erudite perspectives baffling to the extremes sometimes, but focuses on how an artist represents it in his works, how Rohinton Mistry represents it in fiction. A writer captures the problematic not theoretically but in terms of characters and their life-narratives. He captures the anguish and the suffering existentially and socially through his stories through characters, their struggles to have a place under the sun as human

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beings. So the rest will illustrate copiously their suffering, sorrow, struggle as dramatized by Rohinton Mistry. Harrowing is the cultural representation of the Dalits in *A Fine Balance*. Rohinton Mistry in his fiction has been essentially concerned with the problematic of Parsis – family problematic, interpersonal relationships among themselves and their relationships with India and Indian society, their adopted country for centuries but in

*A Fine Balance*, Rohinton Mistry breaks away from his concern and deals with the suffering of the Dalit psyche represented in Dukhi mochi and his family.

He deals with the saga of suffering of Dukhi Mochi. In a very deep and extended way he brings to bear on the subject stark realism, his inimitable gift of empathy and insight. He tells a heart-wrenching story of Dalits downtrodden by the upper class. The Dukhi Mochi's family story is practically a short novel in *A Fine Balance*.

In order to understand Dukhi Mochi's sad tale the present searcher will go for a mixed perspective taken from Freud, Jung, and Lacan. Before the application we must briefly explain their perspectives. Freud was the first researcher on trauma. He worked on trauma together with anxiety, hysteria and neurosis in general. Trauma is unbearable pain that the organism is subjected to that it cannot cope with. Resultantly, the pain becomes entrenched physically in the body and in certain parts of the body. Freud studied traumas from the point of view of individual or personal clinical psychology. He was concerned with traumas in the family and traumas while growing up in school and from hostile antagonistic group. In his therapy he endeavored to bring out memories from the life narrative of patients to enable them to relieve their hurts and thin the traumas but he also asserted that there is no final exorcism of traumatic injuries. Sociologists built on Freud's theory of individual trauma and applied them to marginalized poor classes in any society.

Lacan, French, Neo Freudian does not have an explicit theory like Freud on traumatization, but his theory of the other can be applied to the Mochis. According to Lacan, we are basically narcissistic. We do not concern ourselves with others, their lives, and problems. In the absence of interest we project passions, prejudices on others. The projection waxes and results in demonizing the other. The evil in ourselves is displaced on the other.

In the novel, *A Fine Balance* the upper castes, comprising Brahmins and Rajputs make no attempt to know the Mochis. So they exploit them and finally kill them. The Iniquities committed by the upper castes will be brought out in the course of the exposition.

In addition to Freud's theory of traumatization, Lacan theory of the other, Jung's concept of the shadow would also be applied. According to Jung in addition to the persona, the outermost personality and ego, our sense of us right or wrong, we carry what he calls, shadow which is mostly in the unconscious. Though in the unconscious it is always projecting itself on others In Christian language instead of seeing the beam in my eyes, I see it in the eye of the other. Sometimes this inferior shadow takes on devilish dimension. Then it becomes archetypal satanic.

Now the Mochis traumatized from childhood become the target of the other and shadow of the upper castes. Pramod K. Nayar observes in this regard:

Exploitative power is the most prevalent type in the novel. This form of power is always associated with force in *A Fine Balance*. The potential of violence is inseparable from exploitative power. The sway of the upper caste Thakurs in Dukhi's village is a good example. The Thakurs indulge in a perennial caste war against the "Untouchables" of the village. This stranglehold is achieved through recurrent violence-beatings, torture, rape etc. (120)

*A Fine Balance* was written in the seventies, but the ground reality has not changed till now, the dailies, T.V. Channels daily expose us to news of the Dalits being hounded, tortured, killed, and burnt. Their women are gang-raped, The news was of the same type that Dukhi heard evening after evening during his childhood: only the names were different. Now Dukhi Mochi's suffering can be understood in terms of psycho-social traumatization. He grew up listening to the stories of suffering of his own father. Through his father telling the suffering of his community he grew up listening to the stories of how the young girls of community would be raped and killed and how they disappeared and were never heard of. Finally when he entered the profession as an apprentice of his father later on his own, traumatized as he was, he adjusted to the ways of the dominant class of Thakurs in particular. 'Like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked, the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere. And if that was not enough, the talk of adults, the conversations between his mother and father filled the gaps in his knowledge of the world.' (AFB 96) Vinita Dhondiyal comments in this regard: Though well intentioned, this kind of rhetoric depends upon the good intentions of the upper castes and classes to create a social change that would enable a truly egalitarian society to come in to existence. But as history would readily testify, no power group ever willingly abandons power. What was needed perhaps was not a speaker to speak of tolerance to the upper classes but a preacher who preached revolution to the lower castes and classes. Dukhi works towards an individual revolution breaking with lifelong traditions-to apprentice his sons as tailors with Ashraf. (105) Casteism like corruption is rooted in the core of India's depraved value system which is ultimately defiling the system. No doubt, we are living in an independent country, in a modern era, in 21<sup>st</sup> century where technology has so far advanced, which we could not have imagined five years back. And for this advancement we (Indians) are in the race of third world countries. And imagining for the developed country we feel happy that lots of progress has been made regarding the upliftment of country, but contrary to this rosy picture horrifying truth is still prevalent in our country casteism. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar did at their level best to uproot the caste system. According to them all human beings are the children of God and therefore they should be treated equally, we are nobody to discriminate between the human beings. "Harijan," literally meaning "children of God," is the name devised by Mahatma Gandhi for the Untouchables. But the horrible reality is that we are unable to throw out this evil system from our country. It is so ingrained in us like a

disincarnate, like Bhut, Pret, and we do not seem to succeed in exorcising it.

It is precisely this conflict between religion and benevolence that Dr B.R. Ambedkar alludes to in the following statement from his undelivered speech on the “Annihilation of Caste”: Caste may be bad: Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man’s inhumanity to man <sup>[83]</sup>.

Ambedkar was anxious to dissociate the interests of the Depressed Classes from those of the Hindu majority, whom he saw as the oppressors of the Untouchables. His solution to the problem of caste oppression was unequivocal. He enjoined upon the Hindu leaders for whom his above mentioned undelivered address was intended “to tell the Hindus, that what is wrong with them is their religion — the religion which has produced in them this notion of the sacredness of Caste <sup>[84]</sup>.

From Ambedkar’s point of view, caste exploitation could not be satisfactorily uprooted without annihilating the doctrinal authority upon which it is based.

Article 17 of the Indian Constitution abolishes “Untouchability,” forbids its practice in any form, and makes “the enforcement of any disability arising out of ‘Untouchability’ a punishable offence.” Article 15 of the Constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of caste. It must however be said despite all the laws and privileges given to untouchables the condition of these people is still same, it will not be exaggerated if I say that we are living in a modern era but with the same pathological mentality.

Rohinton Mistry though residing in Canada is well aware of the Indian system and thus he represents the caste system along with politics and corruption in Indian system and makes direct indictment comments of democratic system.

Lacan, the French thinker and psychologist who advanced Freudian theories observes that humans project the demon in themselves on the other. The other is a person that we do not

know and we have no desire to know. The other does not belong to our community. We feel that the other is an animal, a beast and we lay all our problems on the other. So we feel justified in making the other a scape- goat.

### Conclusion

It is understood right from the outset that Rohinton Mistry’s India which informs his fiction as seen by him existentially experientially is a very complex varie-gated, civilizational culture from Vedic times to the present.

Rohinton Mistry does not confine himself in portraying the Parsi community but brings in Indian community at length and in breadth.

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