Representation of the Untouchables/Subalterns in Indian English Novels: Anand’s Untouchable and Mistry’s A Fine Balance

Aroop Saha*

Abstract

In modern India, the concept of untouchability draws an enormous attention from the civilized society for cruel, inhuman and violent physical and psychological treatment of the lower class/caste people. Although this concept is fully man-made from the ancient time, the society as well as the upper class (which possesses power and position) have absorbed it as a stereo-typed ideology to subjugate the untouchables in economy, politics and society until the present time. The image of the untouchables is hegemonized with such biasness that it limits the possibility to treat those untouchables as human beings. It was dreamt that the struggle of the untouchable/poor/lower class people would meet a happy ending with the independence of India but independence of India does not change the scenario, rather the untouchables have faced more intense complexities and difficulties in independent India. Realizing this uncomfortable situation, the Indian English writers have come forward to represent those oppressed untouchables through the medium of literature. They have attempted to provide voice to those untouchables/subalterns/lower class people hoping to elevate their status by portraying the untouchables’ terrible struggle to survive in this world with dignity. But are those writers able to represent the untouchables to reduce their pain and restore their honor with sympathy in reality?

Keywords: Untouchability, representation, subalterns, struggle, and escape.

Why are we always abused? The Sentry Inspector and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That’s why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That’s why they don’t touch us, the high-castes. The tonga-wallah was kind. He made me weep telling me, in that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Muhammadan. They don’t mind touching us, the Muhammadans and the sahibs. It is only the Hindus and the outcastes who are not sweepers. From them I am a sweeper, sweeper—untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!’

Anand, 2001:43

*Lecturer, Department of English, Stamford University Bangladesh
What is it, what’s bothering you?’
I was just thinking that … thinking how nothing changes. Years pass, and
nothing changes.’
Dukhi sighed again but not with pleasure. ‘How can you say that? So much
has changed. Your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth …
‘Those things, yes. But what about the more important things? Government
passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same.
The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals.’
‘Those kinds of things take time to change.’
‘More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much
longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the
temple, walk where I like.’

Mistry, 1996:142

Untouchability is the most controversial issue in the Indian Subcontinent, specially in the Union
of India, not only for its religious and economical hierarchy but also for its cruelty to suppress the
subalterns as well as the lower caste people in both ancient and modern Indian society. At the
very beginning, the concept of untouchability began with the religion of Hinduism and later it has
spread into the root of the Hindu societies in India. Most of the times, the upper class people, who
are known as Brahmins, use the religion to defend a strongly defined hierarchical structure to
dominate the economically lower class people. The hierarchical structure introduces caste system
which has been determined by one’s profession inherited by birth. The concept of untouchability
is implemented mainly on the lower caste as well as lower class people. They are the prime
sufferers. As they do not have the economic and political power to fight back the upper class
people’s domination, they accept subjugation. They do not have the voice to speak out their
condition and portray themselves before the world. They are named subalterns. The notion
subaltern covers not only the untouchables but also all the poor, unprivileged and marginalized
groups of people. These subalterns have very few opportunities to alter their fate because the
society, which is controlled by the elite class, closes the options like education, awareness and
equal rights to elevate their position. Literature always sketches the vulnerability and struggle of
subjugated human beings. Like literatures from different locations of the world, Indian English
writers have marked those issues with special attention in their works.

Among the Indian English writers, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan played a
crucial role to bring India’s controversial inner issues in front of the world in the first half of the
twentieth century. Those issues can be considered local issues of the Indian sub-continent but
those have a universal appeal. We also observe that the other Indian writers from the present time
have continued the trend of representing the struggle of the subalterns at various phases of life.
Among those writers of the present time, Arundhuti Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Kiran Desai and
Rohinton Mistry are remarkable writers for their creative and in-depth perspectives. In this
article, we will critically examine the representation of subalterns which are brought from the two
renowned novels Untouchable by Mulk Raj Anand and A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry.
Mulk Raj Anand and Rohinton Mistry are the two prominent writers in their respective time. They are considered remarkable novelists for their attempt to represent so vividly the poor as well as the lower class people struggling for survival. Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable and Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance concentrate 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. The portrayal of the subalterns in the two novels is the crucial subject to be analyzed critically because of their authenticity to represent the subalterns. The article attempts to examine how far the two novelists are able to reflect the real situation of subalterns’ psyche and reality in the two novels and how successful they are in shaking the readers’ consciousness and realization about untouchability and subalternity.

The issues can be raised because the two novelists, Mulk Raj Anand and Rohinton Mistry belong to the educated elite class of India. How far is it possible to show the untouchable part of India by those authors in a realistic way? Do they fictionalize the story? These questions will be difficult to answer. But the representation of the subalterns before the world is an important issue to be analyzed. The most vital part of these two novels is their self-analytical approach. Both the stories are presented to readers from the subaltern perspective which is unacceptable to the society. Although there is more than fifty years’ gap between the two novels, the essence of the stories echoes in both the novels. Anand’s Untouchable is published in 1935 and Mistry’s A Fine Balance is in 1996. Untouchable focuses on Bakha, an eighteen years old sweeper in colonial India. It also scrutinizes the depression of untouchables or lower class people and their rage against the upper caste. It gives a glimpse of a story of a day’s rural experience. The story displays the critical and tense relations among untouchable subalterns, upper caste Hindus, Muslims and Christian British colonizers. On the Other hand, Mistry’s A Fine Balance (Mistry, 1996) looks at the curse of untouchability and poverty of the lower class village and city people in the colonial and Independent India. The novel shows several generations but Ishvar, Om (Dagis), Dina and Maneck are the protagonists presenting different backgrounds with various realities. Ishvar and Om come from the village to the city to find a job. They get a job in Dina’s house as tailors. Dina is a widow living in a rented house and earns her livelihood by delivering the readymade clothes to the shops. With Dina, Maneck lives as a paying guest. Maneck is a college student. Her mother is Dina’s school friend. At the end of the novel, Maneck comes back to India from abroad and discovers the changes of the society, the shut down of Dina’s business along with her, the rented house and the alteration of both Ishvar and Om into street beggars. The story goes through various flashes-backs. It helps to denote the uncertain individual lives in turbulent India. It reflects the subalterns falling into the cyclic trap of poverty.

When the two novels are compared, it is visible that Untouchable (Anand, 2001) can be one of the stories of A Fine Balance (Mistry, 1996). Untouchable (Anand, 2001) revolutionizes the traditional portrayal of India and Indian literature by challenging India with a new vision of literature. The themes, contents and perspectives of literature are addressed from the root of the society in Untouchable (Anand, 2001). The novel introduces a remarkable gateway for the Indian English writer to explore a new world of subalterns. And we see the matured and constructive outcome of that in A Fine Balance (Mistry, 1996). This novel does not limit itself in one
particular area. It focuses on various areas and stages of India as well as the characters’ lives. The most adroitness of the writer is in the attempt to intermingle national politics and individual’s life not only in colonized India but also in postcolonial India. How the national unrest and politics affect the common people is exhibited with a lot of remarkable issues such as the fate of the poor and the lower class people. *Untouchable* (Anand, 2001) indicates a hope both for the untouchable Hindus and India bringing the philosophy of Gandhi which attempts to raise awareness with the purpose of erasing the caste system as well as hierarchy of the Indian society.

The Gandhian vision is seen by every Indian as the roadmap to liberate India internally and externally and to build the nation in independent India. But the reality of independent India is vividly portrayed with a lot of diversities in *A Fine Balance* (Mistry, 1996). Apparently, the state makes laws to regulate the dominant power and empower the lower class. The actual fact is that all laws and documented rights of the citizens (the rule of law and the equal rights) cannot ensure peace and development for the subalterns; rather they increase chaos and complicacy rapidly. The laws of the state are supposed to help and protect the common people. Ironically, state and laws victimize the subalterns. Instead of protection and nurturing, state pushes the subalterns into a risky and uncertain life. If we trace the incidents such as Narayan’s (who is Ishvar’s younger brother and Om’s father) demand for the right to vote in the election and for this the killing of Narayan including his entire family by the village Chairman, Thakur, breaking the slums in the city where poor people like Ishvar and Om live, the arresting of Ishvar and Om by the Police Inspector for sleeping on the pavement at night and selling them to a farm on condition of providing them only food and shelter, threatening and harassing Dina to leave the house because of her garment business and having a paying guest, it becomes clear how oppression is being carried out on the subalterns. At the end, we, the readers, observe gradual collapse of the state functionaries. Later the disorder and political upheaval are intensified when the contemporary Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi’s son, Sanjoy Gandhi, with the help of the government starts camping and implementing the sterilization program. The people, specially poor village and city slum people, are forced with to be sterilized. And Ishvar and Om also face the same problem. This sterilization program signifies a lot in the sense of future. It does not only sterilize the Indian young generation physically, but also paralyzes India as an unproductive nation. The agitation along with violent riots emerges soon in reaction and pushes the country into emergency.

The representation of the subalterns is always a controversial issue for its authenticity. The subalterns are represented by the other’s voices, specially by the writers and the historians. Though a perspective is automatically imposed to represent the subalterns before the reader, there is a chance of being biased and corrupted. Every time, the writer portrays the subaltern reality according to his/her background and viewpoint. Most of the time, other perspectives are overlooked. Interestingly, the historians as well as the writers who represent the national histories and important events of the past, rarely focus on the subalterns or lower class of the people in the society. They do not portray the lives and perspectives of the subalterns. The subalterns remain silent always in the history of a nation. At first, the term subaltern is used and defined primarily by the Italian Marxist and Philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1881 – 1937) in his writing. According to Gramsci, the subaltern is any person or group of inferior rank and station because of race,
class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. Bangladeshi writer and critic, Dr. Syed Manzoorul Islam (2002:376) in the essay ‘The Culture of Subalternity and the New Historiography of Colonial India,’ comments farther on the concept of Gramsci’s subaltern.

… “Notes on Italian History” remains a model for the subaltern studies project … Under the rubric “History of the Subaltern Classes: Methodological Criteria,” Gramsci writes that “the subaltern classes, by definition, are not unified, and cannot unite until they are able to become a ‘State’: their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society.” (Islam, 2002:376)

After this, the concept of subaltern has revived in the 1980s in the context of India and South Asia. A group of South Asian scholars starts their activities under the title-The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) or Subaltern Studies Collective led by Indian historian Ranajit Guha. The purposes of SSG are interesting to examine which are identified by Dr. Islam (2002:375) in the sentences below:

The subaltern historiography in South Asia, diligently pursued by the Subaltern Studies group under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, has projected a deconstructive reading of the “un-historical historiography” of colonialist elites with two basic aims: (i) to pluralize “the moment(s) of change,” plotting them as “confrontations rather than transition,” and (ii) to read the “functional change in the sign system that signal such changes … The subaltern studies project attempted to enlarge upon these “subordinate currents” and “emergent energies” with a two-fold purpose—to deflate the bourgeois-elitist myths and paradigms of the history of dominance and control (nationalism, power, authority, knowledge), and to restore the site where “subaltern consciousness” is both embedded and has a free play. Subaltern studies, in short, attempt a reversal of nationalistic historical discourse, investing hegemony with subaltern. (Islam, 2002:375)

Here the most crucial thing is the deconstructive reading of the elites’ history and to re-install the ‘subaltern consciousness’ in the realm of national history. The Subaltern Studies Group investigates the national discourse and points out the hegemony of the ruling class. For reviving the subaltern history, the examiners create a methodology. ‘… the subaltern methodology begins by examining … oral history texts, court and prison, records, police statements, literary texts, administrative notes etc … (Islam, 2002:375).’ This is how the Subaltern Studies Group tries to construct an subaltern history. But they face a huge challenge from the critics questioning and arguing the authority and authenticity to represent others, specially the subalterns who do not have power and position. The doubt also arises concerning interest of the speaker on behalf of the subalterns. In this stage, Indian critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks a significant question- can the subaltern speak? in her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ There, we get the answer—‘The
subaltern cannot speak (Spivak, 1995:104)’. And if s/he gets the voice to speak out or is represented by other, s/he will no more consider as a subaltern. S/he will lose her/his position and status. Although Spivak’s main object is to show the double subalternized position of women in the Indian society, she also mentions general situation of the subalterns. She clearly draws a dividing line to mark out the group of elite and subaltern. This identification helps to bring out the actual structure of a society as well as the position of subaltern. According to Spivak in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’,

1. Dominant foreign groups.
2. Dominant indigenous groups on the all-India level.
3. Dominant indigenous groups at the regional and local levels.
4. The terms “people” and “subaltern classes” have been used as synonymous throughout this note. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the “elite”. (Spivak, 1995:79)

Although Spivak identifies the subalterns, a debate is still out there. The debate is about the real subaltern. The position and status of subalterns is fragile. The subalterns are in constant change. Those who are considered as the subalterns today, tomorrow they may not be found as the subalterns. Because whenever the subalterns get the voice to speak out and are able to draw the attention of the centre or powerful elites or authority, they are no more seen as the subalterns. Their subaltern identity changes into the elevated status like the elite after earning the elite’s favour. This is why the subalterns are always in shaky position and are difficult to identify in reality.

The other element, which is also an important for this paper, is the representation. It is difficult to find a definite definition of representation. Even Gayatri C. Spivak attempts to draw a definition. To do that she brings the French Philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s idea of representation.

… Deleuze declares, ‘There is no more representation; there’s nothing but action’ – ‘action of theory and action of practice which relate to each other as relays and form networks …. Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as ‘speaking for’, as in politics, and representation as ‘re-presentation’, as in art or philosophy. Since theory is also only ‘action’, the theoretician does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group. Indeed, the subject is not seen as a representative consciousness (one re-presenting reality adequately). These two senses of representation – within state formation and the law, on the one hand, and in subject-predication, on the other – are related but irreducibly discontinuous. (Spivak, 1995:70)
The two senses of representation are noticeable for their different applications. If we try to look at Anand as well as Mistry’s writings through the eyes of Deleuze and Spivak, several questions arise. Do Anand and Mistry speak for the subalterns as part of the politics of gaining name and fame? Or do they re-present the subalterns with new perspectives to draw the attention of the centre? Or are the writings just for the action, or perhaps reaction? In both the novels, another set of questions comes forward. Whom are they representing? What are they representing? When are they representing? Where are they representing? How are they represented? Are their representations authentic? These questions provoke many issues and controversies about the representation of the subaltern. After asking a lot of questions, now another burning issue sparks out—since when the representation of the subalterns has started or is it the new phenomenon in the modern world?

Actually the attempt to portray the subalterns in the writings was initiated long ago. If we look at the two novels, Untouchable (2001) by Mulk Raj Anand and A Fine Balance (1996) by Rohinton Mistry, we shall get the evidence that the writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R. K. Narayan achieved the ability to give voice to the subalterns and explore the subaltern consciousness more than fifty years ago. Both the novels show the surrounding world from the individual’s perspective. They exhibit the agony and tension of the individuals for being the subalterns. Anand and Mistry emphasize the whole societal structure to delineate how the lower caste people are deprived of getting all opportunities. At the same time, the role of religion, deep rooted conceptualized ideology, imperial attitude, and poverty are brought out to exhibit the ways of dominating the unprivileged caste in the Hindu society. They also indicate the options to escape the curse of untouchability as well through the hope of Gandhi’s revolution to abolish the cruel caste system or accepting Christianity as well as imitating the British colonizers. But both the novels do not give any kind of solution or path to overcoming the torments of untouchability as well as poverty although they keep a hope up at the end of the story—a hope for the future—Gandhian philosophy to erase the untouchability in Untouchable (Anand, 2001) and emergency to stop the violence to the subalterns in A Fine Balance (Mistry, 1996).

Here, critics may ask the question — are the two novels successful in portraying or representing the lower caste people’s daily life, their sufferings and conscience? For Anand’s Untouchable (Anand, 2001), answer to the above question can be found in the preface by E. M. Forster to Untouchable (Anand, 2001). There he says:

Untouchable could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no Untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity. Mr. Anand stands in the ideal position. By caste he is a Kshatriya, and he might have been expected to inherit the pollution-complex. But as a child he played with the children of the sweepers attached to an Indian regiment, he grew to be fond of them, and
to understand a tragedy which he did not share. He has just the right mixture of insight and detachment, and the fact that he has come to fiction through philosophy has given him depth. It might have given him vagueness—that curse of the generalizing mind—but his hero is no suffering abstraction. Bakha is a real individual, lovable, thwarted, sometimes grand, sometimes weak and thoroughly Indian (Anand, 2001:vii).

It is obvious that the portrayal of the character of Bakha is a unique creation in the realm of Indian English literature. Although a lot of characters like Bakha are available in reality, they are rarely depicted literature. Anand brings Bakha or a subaltern to the lime light. He gives Bakha a voice. He shows the reader how Bakha, an eighteen year old strong man, faces obstacles while he goes out from the sequestered slum (village) in which he lives to the city. The unkind and humiliating attitude of Brahmins, priest of the temple and all other upper class people torments his innocent mind. Although the story is about one journey, psychic violence in Bakha is shown intensively. The psychological torment and the physical disgrace to which Bakha is subjected to Baha are portrayed in realistic manner. The evidence of realism can be identified from the reaction of E. M. Forster:

The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound for ever, born into a state from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social intercourse and the consolations of his religion (Anand, 2001:vi).

The analysis of the character of Bakha shows that the life of a lower caste Hindu is more painful than the life of a slave. What Forster argues is true in a sense because a slave is always bound to his/her master. S/he can earn his/her freedom by satisfying the master. But there is no escape from the curse of untouchability for the lower caste Hindus. The cause is that the whole Hindu society internalizes the ideology of untouchability in society’s grand narrative and gives it a view of institutionalized concept. The untouchability cages the lower caste Hindus with iron chains from where it is very difficult to come out. The protagonist of Untouchable (Anand, 2001), Bakha has also fallen into the same vicious cycle of untouchability. But he wants to escape from this condition and unconsciously he is attracted to the English soldiers and their life style in the army barrack. “... Bakha was a child of modern India. The clear cut styles of European dress had impressed his naïve mind (2).” Apparently he imitates the English because of the impression of feeling good but in his mind there is an intense desire to become superior so that he can turn into the dominator from the dominated. The mimicry of Bakha can be seen from two perspectives. One is from the larger point of view in which he stands between the British colonizer and the Indian colonized. The other angle is from within the Indians who view him as a creature between the upper class Hindus and the lower class Hindus (Muslims and Christians are also seen as the lower class in the eyes of the upper class Hindus). Here Bakha’s desire to be an English man is going straight to the position and power of the English colonizers who are superior, compared to
the Hindu upper class people. This unconscious desire to elevate his position and power confronts the two dominating forces. The desire of a lower class colonized Indian like Bakha can be compared to the concept of ‘the mirror image’ by the Indian postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994):

> It is true for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place. It is always in relation to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated: the phantasmic space of possession that no one subject can singly or fixedly occupy, and therefore permits the dream of the inversion of roles… The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place while keeping his place in the slave’s avenging anger … It is not the colonialist Self or the colonized Other, but the disturbing distance in-between that constitutes the figure of colonial otherness- the white man’s artifice inscribed on the black man’s body (Bhabha, 1994:44-45).

Here, the colonized individual always wants to conquer and possess the power and position of the colonizer. The desire is for the other’s position and power. The irony of the reality is that the colonized can never be able to achieve that. We see it in Bakha at the initial stage when he is trying to imitate the English. Anand describes that stage with Bakha’s voice sarcastically.

> Bakha had looked at the Tommies, stared at them with wonder and amazement when he first went to live at the British regimental barracks with his uncle …. And he had soon become possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life. He had been told they were sahibs, superior people. He had felt that to put on their clothes made one a sahib too. So he tried to copy them in everything, to copy them as well as he could in the exigencies of his peculiarly Indian circumstances …. ‘I will look like a sahib,’ he had secretly told himself. ‘And I shall walk like them. Just as they do, in twos, with Chota as my companion. But I have no money to buy things’ (Anand, 2001:3).

Although the desire to be superior by imitation is seen in Bakha, it is also shown how his desires are destroyed gradually while he faces the unbreakable societal structure and ideology. His identity remains the same and continuously announces his identity by uttering—“Posh keep away, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming posh, posh, sweeper coming! (Anand, 2001:42)” Not only the victims of the racial domination but also his sister, brother and father are. Each case of his relatives is related to his experiences so intimately that the whole story becomes powerful and appealing. For example, Bakha’s sister Sohini with other lower class women has to wait for someone (from upper class) to pull up the water from the well, because the notion is that if the outcaste people (lower class) bring the water out from the well, the water will be polluted. It is forbidden for the outcastes even to touch the water or go near to the well. The outcaste can
the water, when someone who belongs to the upper caste comes and kindly gives them some water. To get some water, most of the time, the outcaste people have to wait for hours.

Sometimes, the upper class man, like the priest of the temple Pundit Kali Nath, takes the advantages of the poverty of the outcaste. That priest sexually harasses Sohini when Sohini goes to the temple for work which is offered by the priest. Coincidentally, Bakha moves towards the temple compound fascinated by the temple songs at the same time. But when the temple people identify that Bakha is a sweeper and an outcaste, they humiliate him physically. Here Bakha finds Sohini crying. After knowing about the teasing of his sister, he tries to protest with anger but he cannot proceed because of the upper caste’s mass power in the temple. To investigate the issue of untouchability, Anand brings the experience and realization of Bakha’s father, Lakha. Lakha’s realization is—‘We must realise that it is religion which prevents them from touching us (Anand, 2001:74)’. So the pathetic reaction comes from Bakha which reveals the state of his mind.

Why are we always abused? The sentry inspector and the Sahib that day abused my father. They always abuse us. Because we are sweepers. Because we touch dung. They hate dung. I hate it too. That’s why I came here. I was tired of working on the latrines every day. That’s why they don’t touch us, the high-castes. The tonga-wallah was kind. He made me weep telling me, in that way, to take my things and walk along. But he is a Muhammadan. They don’t mind touching us, the Muhammadans and the sahibs. It is only the Hindus, ad the outcastes who are not sweepers. From them I am a sweeper, sweeper—untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!’ (Anand, 2001:43)

Bakha tries to escape from the curse of untouchability. He attempts to have access to the English society around him in every possible way. But he finds three ways to escape from his situation. One is mimicking the British. The second is to convert in Christianity and the third is to follow the Gandhi’s ideology and activities. At the end, Bakha understands that it is better to follow Gandhi because influence of Gandhi and his philosophy can help them to get rid of untouchability:

As the brief Indian twilight came and went, a sudden impulse shot through the transformations of space and time, and gathered all the elements that were dispersed in the stream of his soul and a tentative decision: ‘I shall go and tell father all that Gandhi said us,’ he whispered to himself… (Anand, 2001:147-148)

The question, which is discussed in this paper, is — which of the two novels is more successful than the other in portraying or representing the lower caste people’s daily life, their sufferings and consciousness? We have analyzed Anand’s Untouchable (2001). Now what is about Rohinton Mistry’s A Fine Balance (1996)? Mistry’s focus is on the characters of Ishvar, Om, Dina and
Maneck. The story of the novel begins with the train journey and conversation among the passengers about the emergency. The novel starts with a journey in the emergency and also ends with the departure of Maneck in the emergency. Ishvar and Om are going to Dina’s house by train for getting a job as dress tailors. They meet Maneck in the train. Maneck is a college student going to Dina’s house to live as a paying guest. They listen to the common people’s reaction to the government’s activities and the complex situation in the city.

‘Manybe it has to do with the Emergency,’ said someone.

‘What emergency?’

‘Prime Minister made a speech on the radio early this morning. Something about country being threatened from inside.’

‘Sounds like one more government tamasha.’

‘Why does everybody have to choose the railway tracks only for dying?’ grumbled another. ‘No consideration for people like us. Murder, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police-custody death – everything ends up delaying the trains. What is wrong with poison or tall buildings or knives?’ (Mistry, 1996:5-6)

Although Mistry makes a start giving a picture of turbulent Indian city, he continuously flashes back to the past. Ishvar is the uncle of Omprakash who is his brother’s son. Ishvar and Om’s father, Narayan change their profession and at the same time, they change their identity by altering their surname. Here, we, the readers, also see the curse of untouchability. Ishvar and Narayan’s father, Dukhi, who comes from Chamaar caste is threatened by the upper caste people because Dukhi is the father of two sons. They spread the rumour that Dukhi has abducted a Brahmin’s son. So the upper caste people have the right to take the boys in their custody. This again shows repression for being untouchable:

‘What is happening to the world?’ they complained. ‘Why two sons in an untouchable’s house, and not even one in ours?’ What could a Chamaar pass on to his sons that the gods should reward him thus? Something was wrong, the Law of Manu had been subverted. Someone in the village had definitely committed an act to offend the deities, surely some special ceremonies were needed to appease the gods and fill these empty vessels with male fruit.

But one of the childless wives had a more down-to-earth theory to explain their unborn sons. It could be she said, that these two boys were not really Dukhi’s. Perhaps the Chamaar had journeyed afar and kidnapped a Brahmin’s newborns – this would explain everything. (Mistry, 1996:100)

Like Untouchable (Anand, 2001), the Gandhi’s classless society concept touches Dukhi’s heart while India is fighting for its freedom from the British Empire under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi not only struggles for the independence of India in non-violent fashion, but also
attempts to reform the society’s hundred-year old notion of untouchability. Gandhi’s concept of equality spreads to unite various cultural, regional, linguistic, religious people all over India. The bad effect of untouchability finds expression in a speech of an unknown leader who says:

‘What this disease? you may ask. This disease, brother and sisters, is the notion of untouchability, ravaging us for centuries, denying dignity to our fellow human beings. This disease must be purged form our society, from our hearts, and from our minds. No one is untouchable, for we are all children of the same God. Remember what Ganhiji says, that untouchability poisons Hinduism as a drop of arsenic poisons milk.’

(Mistry, 1996:107)

Even after the awareness for removing the untouchability problem has been created, the untouchables suffer. They do not get any benefits. Rather they are compelled to be isolated. For instance, Ishvar and Narayan are severely punished by the school teacher for entering the classroom and touching the reading materials. The untouchables do not get the opportunity to take the education. This indicates that illiteracy is used as a weapon to suppress the lower caste people:

‘You chammar rascals! Very brave you are getting, daring to enter the school!’ He twisted their ears till they yelped with pain and started to cry. The schoolchildren fearfully huddled together.
‘Is this what your parents teach you? To defile the tools of learning and knowledge? Answer me! Is it? (Mistry, 1996:110)

During this tensed and racial conflict for suppression, the Indian Subcontinent has been liberated from the British colonizers and divided into two different countries. But the countries are born on the basis of religions. So an unstable situation is created with the partition of India. India is created for the Hindu population and Pakistan for the Muslim population. For this reason lots of Hindus and Muslims are being displaced or evicted from one country to another. Sometimes they willingly go to their desired country. But many are forced to leave their native land. And the force takes the form of violence which leads to riots marked by mass killing, burning houses and gang rape. The horror of the riots are described in the lines of *A Fine Balance* (Mistry, 1996):

… the stories kept multiplying: someone had been knifed in the bazaar in town; a sadhu hacked to death at the bus station; a settlement razed to the ground. The tension spread through the entire district. And it was all believable because it resembled exactly what people had been seeing in newspapers for the past few days: reports about arson and riots in large towns and cities; about mayhem and massacre on all sides; about the vast and terrible exchange of populations that had commenced across the new border.
The killings started in the poorer section of town, and began to spread; the next day the bazaar was empty …

‘Bread is become rarer than gold,’ said Ashraf. ‘What madness. These people have lived together for generations, laughing and crying together. Now they are butchering one another.’ He did no work that day, spending the hours gazing out the door at the deserted street, as though waiting for something dreadful to make its appearance. (Mistry, 1996:124)

Up to this, Mistry shows the condition of the untouchables in the colonial era as well as in the time of independence. But as the story progresses, we see that the problems and sufferings of the subalterns do not end; rather multiply. The nation cannot guarantee the protection of the right of the subalterns and the untouchables in the way the rights of elite are guarantied. The domination over the subalterns remains the same even after Indian independence. The government passes the new laws but in reality the laws do not protect the lower class people; rather the laws go against them, allows the elite to harass them. For example, Narayan is killed and his whole family except Ishvar and Om is burnt alive by the gang of Thakur, the upper caste Brahmin and the village Chairman. They are tortured and killed because Narayan demands to have his own voting right. And the upper class is jealous of Narayan’s prosperity. The elite class gets angry with Dukhi for making his sons tailors instead of initiating them into the inherited profession of a cobbler. Before that, Narayan expresses his dissatisfaction with the unchanged condition of the lower class people’s fate. This portrayal of the lower class people shows the social discrimination which was to be eliminated in postcolonial India but ironically it has not happened.

‘What is it, what’s bothering you?’
‘I was just thinking that … thinking how noting changes. Years pass, and nothing changes.’

Dukhi sighed again but not with pleasure. ‘How can you say that? So much has changed. Your life, my life. Your occupation, from leather to cloth …

‘Those things, yes. But what about the more important things? Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same. The upper-caste bastards still treat us worse than animals.’

‘Those kinds of things take time to change.’

‘More than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like.’ (Mistry, 1996:142)

After the whole family’s death, Ishvar and Om go to the city. But they cannot change their life in the city. There, they seek for a shelter and a job. Even though they get a job in Dina’s house as tailors, misfortunes continuously follow them. Their slum house is destroyed by the government and they live in pavements. They struggle a lot but cannot have the opportunity to change their
fate because of the government policy. The reaction to the government activities can be seen in the voice of a Sikh taxi driver when Maneck takes a ride in that taxi:

‘That’s a very long time, sahib. That means you left before the Emergency ended – before the elections. Of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed. Government still keeps breaking poor people’s homes and jhopadpattis. In villages, they say they will dig wells only if so many sterilizations are done. They tell farmers they will get fertilizer only after nussbandhi is performed. Living each day is to face on emergency or another.’ He beeped a warning to someone trudging along the shoulder. ‘You heard about the attack on the Golden Temple, no?’ (Mistry, 1996:581)

Even the political killings are pointed out in the novel by Mistry referring to Avinash’s death. The cause of the death is mysterious. Police say that he died in a railway accident. On the other hand, Avinash’s parents claim that he was killed for Police torture. At this juncture, government and politics both fail to protect a student leader who shares anti-emergency opinion:

He tore his eyes from the photograph to read the rest of the article. The reporter had met the parents; he wrote … they had, during the Emergency, lost their eldest under circumstances that were never satisfactorily explained. The police claimed it was a railway accident, but the parents spoke of wounds they had seen on their son’s body at the morgue. According to the reporter, the injuries were consistent with other confirmed incidents of torture ….’ (Mistry, 1996:594)

At the end, it is discovered by Maneck that Ishvar and Om become the beggars. When Maneck expresses his surprise knowing that he is stopped to think or investigate by Dina. This transformation of Ishvar and Om is significant. With this, the destination of the subalterns is revealed. Although it cannot be said in strong voice, what has happened to Ishvar and Om that happens to every subaltern in this world. But this is the outcome that most of the subalterns have to accept as their predetermined fate. The subalterns or peripheral group of people struggle hard for the changes in their life. Ironically, except few, all of them fall apart into disaster where their existence turns into miserable story:

‘There is no wife, no children. They have become beggars.’
‘Sorry – what, Aunty?’
‘They are both beggars now.’
‘That’s impossible! Sounds crazy! I mean – aren’t they ashamed to beg? Couldn’t they do some other work, if there’s no tailoring? I mean –’
‘Without knowing everything you want to judge them?’ she cut him off. (Mistry, 1996:606)
The two novels, Anand’s *Untouchable* (2001) and Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1996), represent the subalterns with a close analysis of the condition of the subalterns which a few writers can attempt. But both the writers and their novels have not shown any direct path to the resolution of the problems of the untouchables. It can be understood from this paper that the struggle of the subalterns cannot end so easily. The writers have expressed their hope for the future relying on their own times’ expectation. Anand tries to pin his hope for betterment of the situation on the dream of Gandhian ideology and vision. On the other hand, Mistry shows how Anand’s hope is destroyed in so called modern India and how everything remains the same except the expectation for change which ultimately becomes for the writers, the characters and the readers the illusion of hope. Between Anand’s and Mistry’s novels, the time gap is around fifty years, but irony lies in the fact that – time passes, thing changes but the fate and struggle of the untouchables/subalterns do not change. They remain stagnant at same point where they were before independence. But can we hope for any change in future? Both the novels reflect the same background with a lot of harsh conflicting realities. Although there is more than fifty years’ gap between the two novels, they portray situation of the subalterns, a similar hostile falling to hold out any hope for them. We see a development of India as a country and nation, but the development has no positive effect upon the untouchables. The representation of the subalterns in the two novels is realistic, putting many controversial issues aside. Ironically, the struggle to reduce and erase the caste system along with poverty from the Indian societies has started from the beginning of the 20th century with the fall of British Empire, but till now the division into classes exists with its escalated strength and authority in independent India. The writers, specially Indian English writers utilizing the medium of literature, are continuously trying to give voice to the poor and lower class people for altering the subalterns’ status. This attempt may be evaluated as insignificant, but the representation of the subalterns has created a resonance to shake the foundation of the societal stereo-typed ideology causing the people to rethink the whole problem of the subalterns, so that all classes of humanity might be guaranteed respect, sympathy, and fundamental rights.

**Works Cited**


