

## Depiction of Culture and Women's condition in India - A Canadian Writer's perspective

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### Abstract

The criticism and praise that Mistry has received for his treatment of women only scratches the surface of the broad range of females, he has created in his three works of fiction. This discussion will focus on the wives, widows, mothers and single women in each of his books, while at the same time, examining the intimate details of their private and public lives. In addition to the exploration of women in India and in particular, parsi women, this study will also use a variety of socio-historical and cultural theories that aim to explain the alternately oppressed and liberated status of women in their various roles.

### Introduction

Mistry has become one of the preeminent writers of the postcolonialist writing movement. Although he now lives in Toronto, he sets his novels primarily in his native Bombay, combining a natural, direct style with simple description to present an honest and loving image of India. With attention to the detail of his characters' everyday lives, his books often explore the tragic circumstances of India's desperate poor even as he balances this misery by presenting the dignity and joy they feel in simple and their extended families. Critics have praised Mistry's growth as a writer and his transparent style.

His Parsee roots have had a strong influence on his growth and development as a writer and his works mostly deal with the pathos and culture of the Parsees in India, specifically Mumbai. His writings give a glimpse into the life of the people of his community and their experiences as a minority in a highly diverse society. Like *A Fine Balance*, *Family Matters* is set in Bombay. As a book in which hope and human endurance keep the characters buoying along, it also picks up some of its forerunner's preoccupations. But for Mistry at least, the connections are negligible. "I wanted to do

something completely different here," he says. "The word family might suggest there is a carry-over, because the poor in *A Fine Balance* did indeed come together to constitute their own family, which sustained them for a while. But I think it's a different world, an entirely different world here.

In Rohinton Mistry's novel, his characters are ordinary men and women whom can be seen in everyday life. Search for the self is yet another feature found in Mistry's works. *A Fine Balance* is an evidence for this, where he gives a vital role to a woman character Dina. It is seen in his novel very well that how he projects a female's status of mind, expectation, struggle and her longing for self identity. For one thing, the novel is set in the mid-1990s, and while the world through which the characters pass is rich enough, the background isn't as naturally dramatic as it was with *A Fine Balance*'s depiction of the emergency. And if in the previous novel Mistry took up with poor, dispossessed characters through whom he could explore, in his phrase, "history from the bottom up," in the new one he settles in with 79-year-old Nariman Vakeel, a former professor of English slowed increasingly by age and the onset of Parkinson's. For the first part of the

novel, he lives with two of his adult stepchildren, Jal and Coomy, in an apartment building called Chateau Felicity. Of course it's neither a chateau nor particularly felicitous, least of all for Nariman.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry has said, family is all. Not just blood relatives, but the people around you, with whom you work, in your community, your church or temple. "Family," he said during his *Oprah* broadcast, "redeems everything, ultimately." Not so much in the new novel, though. For Nariman, the matter of family is an altogether painful one. He's frail, to be sure, but does he really deserve to be treated (by Coomy, in particular) as a chronically misbehaving child? Harried in the present, Nariman is also haunted by a past, which Mistry tells in flashback, wherein he was forced by his family to give up the woman he loved in favour of a more, well, suitable candidate. As told to *Oprah*, *A Fine Balance* sprouted in Mistry's imagination from a single image, of a woman working at a sewing machine. *Family Matters* he traces back to a short story he wrote in the 1980s. "I don't want to make a direct connection with that," he says. "The story was in the first person, and the narrator was an old man in his eighties. And I think I enjoyed what I did there, so I think it may be related to that, I wanted to do more of that, in a bigger way. I think that could be in some indirect manner the starting point. That idea of writing a story about an old man. Because that story deals with – well, he feels he's been rejected by his family. He feels that they're undervaluing him. Underestimating his capacities."

He admits to a false start or two: "For a while I toyed with the idea of writing it from Nariman's point of view, in the first person. And then I played with the idea of using multiple first-person narrators. I played around with that. But it began to feel too much like an exercise. Not real storytelling. And anyway I always like to tell everything – or as close to everything as possible, which requires an omniscient narrator. So I abandoned the first person." Despite this widespread enthusiasm for Mistry's work, there is one area of his fiction that has received recurring criticism: his portrayal of women. Many critics find Rohinton Mistry's

female characters are one-dimensional and limited. They are seen to be house bound, rarely leaving their apartments, complexes while their male counterparts venture far and wide, not only in and around Bombay but also places such as Delhi. By attending the social contexts of his female characters' lives from a feminist perspective, this analysis examines the ways Mistry interprets the situations of women – their experiences, histories and responsibilities as wives, widows, mothers and single women – within the cultural rubric of Parsi India.

In his novel, "A Fine Balance", Rohinton Mistry has portrayed a galaxy of characters efficiently and elegantly. By portraying a cross section of Indian society especially those who called riff-raff, the writers draw the real picture of India. There are four protagonists Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Om Prakash and Maneck Kohlah in this novel. The other leading characters are beggar master, Rajaram, the hair collector. Thakur Dharmasi, Vasantra Valmik, Ibrahim the rent-collector, Shaker- the beggar, Ashraf chacha, Mumtaz Chachi, Dukhi Mochi, his wife Rupa, Mrs. Gupta Narayan, Radha, Rustom Nussawan, Ruby, Monkey Man, Jeevan, the tailor and others.

In "A Fine Balance", however falls victim to enforce sterilization, indicating the socio-political environment in India during 1975-77 Emergency. His characters, for example, experience the everyday trials of human condition such as the death of family members and friends, financial despair and common disagreements that occur between husbands and wives. In a review of "A Fine Balance", Linda Revie points out that while Mistry does include several depictions of male sexual desire and power. He also expresses the despair and indignities of the human experience-when all is said and done. Mistry creates 'a fine balance' between the sexes. In another review, John Ball observes that Dina, the main character in the novel emerges as a woman of rich complexity and strength. Mistry's portrayal of Behroze, an emancipated parsi girl in 'Tales From Firozsha Baag' explores a new generation of young women who despite the mistrust of conservative parents, are willing to play "a lead role in seeking intimacy with boys of their age group".

The four main characters converge in Dina's apartment as refugees from contracting caste, gender or social roles. They each live in an unimportant position in the context of India. They are transferred by the community and try to center their own individuality. The apartment is viewed as the worldly site of individuals in a troublesome society. Their life in Bombay is contrary to their expectations and symbolizes the anguish, pain, anxiety and restlessness of people cut off from their native villages. Dina fights for her independence and individuality but she faces the continuous Failures and threats by society. Finally she loses her flat and forced to her brother's home as a servant.

Rohinton Mistry highlights crucial events in the country's chronicle by depicting the background of each protagonist. "A Fine Balance" illustrates the deeper insight of political, nativity and struggle of suffering people. It always focuses on the deep structure of the individual's existences of human life. "A Fine Balance" is taken up for analyzing the human sufferings in which Rohinton Mistry ultimately gives a space of endless sufferings of the individuals. Dina, chooses to be displaced her home, because she wants to assert her individuality and sense of self. She has grown up in Bombay, but her sense of independence after her husband's accidental death keeps her away from her family. She resolves to restructure her life without being economically dependent on a man. For her, life is a series of emotional upheavals and relocations of emotional bonds. Emergency made both Dina and Manech fail in their attempt. In the name of poverty alleviation and civic beautification, beggars are carried away and made to be slaves in labour camps.

Dina Dalal's new family creates an idyllic space where different cultures mingle and people of different classes transgress sanctioned spaces in symbiotic equations. Rohinton Mistry, the socio-political novelist, emerges as a significant literary figure during the recent years. "A Fine Balance" has established him firmly as a significant literary figure in the Indian and Indo-Canadian traditions of fiction writing. Three sisters, whose father is too poor to provide then dowries, hang themselves to spare their parents the shame of having unmarried daughters. A picture of them hanging from a

ceiling appears in the newspaper after their brother Avinash, a college student union chairman who is the only source of future income for that family gets killed in police custody.

Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with his (AFB 52)

In the above passage, Dina's brother, Nusswan, personifies the difference between the cultural pattern of Hindu and Parsi Community while suggesting her to remarry after her husband's death. He points out the parsi community which won't forbid a widow in marrying again. Here Mistry highlights the generosity of his own culture or community. Even in Parsi community there is discrimination between male and female. Dina's brother, too ill treats her, does not allow her to visit her friends, makes her do the household chores and she is expected to be the little tigress", said Nusswan (AFB 14). After Mrs. Shoroff's death, despite of her keen desire to pursue her education, Dina is not allowed even to matriculate. Nusswan, her brother tries to impose his will on and suggests to her that she could marry a person of his choice, but Dina protests and asserts her individuality. She marries Ruston Dalal, whom she loves intensely. Dina is the symbol of the "new woman" who refuses to be acquiescent and submissive and does not accept the stereotypical feminine role assigned to her. Even on that cruel night, when her husband dies, she behaves in a very dignified manner. "No wailing, no beating the chest or tearing the hair like you might expect from a woman who had suffered such a shock, such a loss". (AFB 46)

Dina refuses to buckle under pressure and resolves to rebuild her life without being economically dependent on a man. She emerges as a strong, progressive and an independent woman. She fetches two tailors, Ishvar and Om and starts working for Au Revoir Exports. Mistry stresses the fact that in post colonial India the plight of the common people is no different and it requires amelioration and freedom from exploitation and injustice. One of

the characters says, “of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed”. It seems as if the native rulers have merely replaced the foreign rulers and the Indian government has failed to resolve the basic problems of poverty, hunger, unemployment, illiteracy and disease. Sexual exploitation based on religion is one of the major perspectives of Mistry. An untouchable woman is a selfless and soulless object to be exploited. The guard in Mistry’s “A Fine Balance” is so confident of the social ostracism a tame community woman can be subjected to; intimidated by:

One shout from me and they will come in running. I only have to shout, and the owner and his sons would be here at once. They would strip you and whip you for stealing..... They would take turns doing shameful things to your lovely soft body..... I don’t have anything. That’s why I came here in the night, for the sake of my child...” I only have to shout once”, he warned Roopa’s exploitation by the watchman of the richman’s orchard is Mistry’s harsh comment on the double standards evident even in the practice of untouchability. It is an instance of tragic irony that a high – caste lustful man who would consider himself polluted even by the shadow of a low-caste still covets and sleeps with a desirable low-caste woman. The text raises difficult questions such as right and wrong in such a dubious social context.

There is yet another cruel, dastardly, beastly and inhuman sexual exploitation of a tanner woman narrated in Mistry’s novel: “And you won’t for many more. She must be hiding in her hut. She refused to go to the field with zamindar’s son, so they shaved her head and walked her naked through the square”.(AFB 97).

Mistry pictures how the women are harassed by the priest in temples and churches. The worth of a civilization can be judged by the place given to women in the society. Of the several factors that justify the greatness of India’s ancient culture, one of the greatest is the honoured place ascribed to women. Manu, the great lawgiver, said long ago, ‘where women are honoured there reside the gods’. According to ancient Hindu scriptures, a man without the participation of his wife can perform no religious rite with perfection. A

wife’s participation is important in some religions, such as in Hinduism. Married men along with their wives are allowed to perform sacred rites on various important festivals. Wives are, thus befittingly called ‘Ardhangani’ (better half). They are given not only important but also equal position with men. The necessity for educating women is not only for family, society and country, but also for their self development and self recognition and personal success.

The reason for an inadequate representation of women among these writers can be typical Indian sub-continental tradition that silences the female voice. This situation is further complicated by the fact that in a strange and often hostile environment, where these South Asian women are almost entirely dependent on their men, it would be extremely difficult to take autonomous, feminist stances. (Nilufer Bharucha, *South Asian*, 16). During the meeting, Jimmy Bilimoria explains everything to Gustad about how corruption goes to the top of the Indian political establishment, implicating that “strong woman, Gustad, very strong woman...very intelligent”, (SLJ, 270). He admires the Prime Minister and exhibits her cunningness:

Protect herself..... yes.....trap me.’ Once he located the place he proceeded as though he had not stopped. ‘She said, I arranged for money.....because Mukti Bahini must be helped....but. Having second thoughts. She said, I have enemies.....everywhere. If they find out about this money, they will use the information against me. No difference to them that money is for a good cause.....our country will suffer if government destabilized. Very dangerous border situation....CIA, Pakistan agents.... (SLJ, 277)

Mistry also shows the awareness of differences among human beings. He locates innate goodness, which is, at times, gets diluted or distorted by compelling circumstances, because human beings are not mythical gods. In the novel *A Fine Balance*, we have a strong character in the name of Dina Dalal, whose delineation would warm the cockles of any feminist. Dina is driven against the wall due to the dominating attitude of her elder brother who would not brook her attempt to be self-reliant.

But she has it in her, so she struggles hard to be on her own and thus to prove herself. When she is not able to carry on the sewing work due to her failing eyesight, she hires two tailors Om and Ishvar. She treats them humanely and stands by them when they need shelter in the overcrowded space-starved city of Bombay. She is threatened by the landlord and is indeed thrown out finally but she fights till the end.

Some critics, such as Australian feminist writer Germaine Greer, loudly protested *A Fine Balance's* inclusion on the Booker shortlist, dismissing it as “a Canadian book about India” (www.quillandquire.com) and insinuating that Mistry's version of Bombay is an overly harsh and unhappy place. Savita Goel says that Rohinton Mistry in his works tries to revisit the history of his homeland and defines his ethnic identity and sense of self. (Savita Goel, 119).

#### Conclusion:

The writer describes the plight of a poor old man who undergoes vasectomy and because of that he dies. He agrees to be operated upon because of cash bonus and gifts, which may help for his granddaughter's dowry. Mistry portrays this shameful aspect of Indian society. He highlights the injustices done to women, interrogates the marginalization of woman in the male-dominated society and contends that inequality between the sexes is caused by the cultural construction of gender differences.

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