

## Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance: A Living Testimony of Unvoiced Cry of the Marginalized Women, A Socio-historical Reading

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**Abstract:** *Rohinton Mistry is a pioneering voice and a towering literary personality in the field of Indo-Anglican novels of our contemporary Indian Diaspora. His simple, yet powerful narratives explore different issues and problems of The Post-Colonial Diaspora, such as rootlessness, existential alienation, nostalgic quest for the homeland and the marginality in the foreign lands as well. One of his central concern is the problem of marginality and the voice of the voiceless people. He delineates the plight of the disempowered and the marginalized people or community with adequate human dignity and captivating narrative interest. One of the major aspects of Mistry's works is the depiction of the marginalized women and the repression of his female characters within the caste oppressed as well as patriarchally constructed society. His most popular and widely acclaimed work, "A Fine Balance" (1995) has such a few female characters whose stories epitomize the multiplied misery and forced marginalization of women within their family as well as in the broader socio-economic perspectives. In the present article, I'll make an attempt to explore and demonstrate Mistry's depiction of the female marginals against the backdrop of the changing socio-political and historical scenario of India before, during and after the period of 'National Emergency' in 1975.*

**Keywords:** *Diasporic, Marginality, Otherization, Patriarchy, Feminine Subalternity.*

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## **Introduction**

Rohinton Mistry as an accomplished immigrant literary voice of post-colonial Indo-Anglican novels of Indian diaspora, incorporates several conflicting social and political issues of post independent Indian rural and urban life. He dwells upon important aspects of our contemporary Indian ethos. Through his lucid, yet sweeping narratives, Mistry delineates the deep-rooted maladies and malpractices prevalent in our class based and cast ridden society, without entering into any controversy. The problem of the greater Indian society is harmoniously and artistically interwoven with the alienation and conservative structure of Parsi families and community. The problems of dire poverty, rootlessness, caste discrimination and exploitation in the villages, inhumanity, and struggle for survival in towns and cities and futile search for identity constitute the central crux and primal drive of his narratives.

Critics like M. Vijaylakshmi, P. Sylvam, John Ball, et al have thrown light on Mistry's narrativizing the stories of the sufferers and the oppressed section of the society with intense human appeal and sustained narrative interest. He set their stories against the massive backdrop of a sweeping socio-political phenomenon and humanised and transforms them into stunningly vibrant narrative of flesh and blood people. The overwhelming factor of his writing style is, his human approach, rather than any complex technical nuances.

## **Major perspectives in the novels of Rohinton Mistry**

As mentioned earlier, Mistry's exploration of the problem of marginalized people, encompasses multiple layers of displacement and disempowerment. He hits upon several forms of oppression and marginalization, such as class, caste, gender and other socio-economic bordering with enormous enthusiasm and immense sympathy for the worst sufferers before a phenomenal social or historical change and national development. Among several shades of marginality and subjugation dealt with in Mistry's works, I'll focus primarily upon the marginalization of women, and conventional gender stereotyping in rural as well as urban life of our country. To facilitate my discussion and substantiate my point of view, I'll analyse a few major female characters of Mistry's novels in general, and '*A Fine Balance*' in particular. Dina Dalal and Roopa, two major characters of the above novel, may be cited as appropriate examples to epitomize the struggle of the subjugated women against the ruthless inhumanity and conservative construct of our society that allows no space and identity to a struggling woman: a mother, a wife or a daughter.

The pivotal aspects of Mistry's depiction of the struggling marginalized, are, the gender based oppression, exploitation for power and caste based oppression. All these intertwined issues are focused upon by the novelist through his simple method of story-telling. He depicts the sordid aspect of the rural India as well as the grimly dark aspects of city life with the means of social realism. In his portrayal of the reality of our times and the ceaseless misery of the disempowered, Mistry reminds us of the great 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European realists like Dickens and Tolstoy. He sets the stories of the ostracized sections against a vast socio-political event like the Emergency during which the individuals were denied of their fundamental rights and the situation became worst for the poor and the disempowered.

### **Female marginality: its different shades**

The four principal characters of '*A Fine Balance*' are the victims of this changing and turbulent socio-historical milieu. Dina Dalal, Ishvar and Omprakash (the chamar turned tailors) Maneck Kohla are the marginalized individuals who are trapped in this complex whirlwind of political crisis, and their quest for identity and independence ends in failure and utter disillusionment. Their stories of futile journey for independence and an honorable social life individually and collectively represent the terrible disaster and fragmented dream.

### **Major female protagonists and their struggle**

Dina is the central protagonist, round whom the latter part of the novel revolves. She represents the bold and assertive femininity and tireless quest for freedom from restrictive patriarchal norms of the family as well as of the society. The tragic waste of Dina's individuality as a female marginal, symbolizes, the disastrous effect of the repressive period of Emergency and in a broader context, of a parochial nature of male centric Indian society. In course of the narrative, her struggling saga becomes indispensably linked together with the unequal battle of the main protagonists.

Dina belongs to a conservative upper middle class Parsi family. She asserts her independent mindedness and quest for an honorably self-reliant existence from adolescence. In describing her early life, the novelist gives enough glimpses of her bold assertion and protest discrimination within the family. On one occasion, being insisted by her brother to wash his breakfast utensils, she refused to do and protested vehemently. Mistry writes "One morning' after swallowing his last gulp of tea, he said, "I'm very late today, Dina. Please wash my things."

"I'm not your servant! Wash your own dirty plates!" Weeks of pent-up resentment came gushing. "You said we would each do our own work! All your stinking things you leave for me!"<sup>1</sup> Even, Nusswan sarcastically called her younger sister 'a little tigress'.

Though she could not complete her matriculation because of her father's untimely death and her brother Nuswan's persistent opposition to her studies. She defiantly disapproves her brothers arrangement of her marriage to a wealthy Parsi merchant, and instead marries a promising young man Rustom K. Dalal of her own choice.

Her marital bliss and comfort did not last long as on their third marriage anniversary, Rustom died in a road accident leaving Dina all alone to combat with the blow of fate. Instead of going back to a life of drudgery and subservience in her brother's custody, Dina continues to cherish her dream of independence and decides to stand economically on her own feet. With the help of her classmate Zenovia, she starts taking order for sewing ladies garments from Miss Gupta, a client of Zenovia. She arranges for a sewing machine and starts her small business at her own rented apartment.

At this point, the most debated period of emergency begins in India, promulgated by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. This notorious period brought about tremendous socio-political unrest and trauma in the minds of the ordinary Indians. Mistry's story gives enough evidence of the crisis and sufferings that the poor homeless destitutes encountered during that troubled period. The eviction of the poor slum-dwellers, bulldozing of the road

side shacks where Om and Ishwar lived, made thousands of poor homeless and displaced. In course of his rendering of the ceaseless misery of the poor subalterns, Mistry gives poignant descriptions of the ruthless torcher and inhuman treatment which the poor marginals like the two tailors were subjected to.

Mistry's narrative registers ambivalent responses from the common man to this period of great socio-political turmoil. For Mrs. Gupta, Emergency is necessary for reimposing order among the chaotic masses. At first Dina too was indifferent to the changing political scenario and thought that Emergency had nothing to do with the common people, for her, it was a "Government problems –games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us."<sup>2</sup> But ironically, her own life and quest for independence is terribly affected by the restrictive ambiance of the period.

Because of the tremendous unrest and turmoil during Emergency and immense disturbances in their personal lives, the four principal characters are united and brought on the common platform of sufferings, misery, and humiliation. Ishvar, Om, Dina and Maneck are all victims of this troubled face of history and join hands in the struggle for survival and desire for autonomy. Their individual aspiration becomes a collective battle for a free and honorable existence in the face of enormous personal, social, as well as national crisis.

Because of the increasing amount of order, expansion of her business clients, and her falling eyesight, Dina desperately was in need of helping hands to run her sewing works smoothly. At this point, she came in contact with Ishvar and Om who were also in need of a job as tailor and a suitable accommodation. They were made homeless destitute because of the bulldozing of their slum and road shacks under the city "beautification project", initiated during the Emergency.

At first, the relation between Dina and the two tailors were that of mistress and servants. She did not welcome them cordially and considered them as alien strangers. Once suppressed and dominated within her family, Dina now becomes an authoritarian mistress. She exercises her absolute authority over the poor tailors and did not take them in to confidence. She thought them to be treacherous, indisciplined, dirty, alcoholic, and promiscuous. She denounces them by saying "The tailors will put me out of business if I don't lock them in."<sup>3</sup> Her inherent class consciousness and feeling of superiority predominates in her dealing with them. Mistry suggests a complex shift of power equation at this juncture, by representing Dina as the stubborn and unfeeling mistress.

She also admits Maneck, a young college student and the only son of her childhood friend Faroke kohlah as a paying guest in her rented apartment. Gradually, a friendly and intimate relation developed between Maneck and the two tailors which even was strongly opposed by Dina. When Maneck protests against Dina's misbehaviour and suspicion about the tailors, she disagrees and warns Maneck against mixing with them freely as friends. She says "I have nothing against them, but they are tailors-my employees. A distance has to be maintained."<sup>4</sup> She reminds him of the class difference between themselves and the lowly tailors and also of their inferior status. She also maintains a strict authority and seriousness in her conduct with

Maneck, as an elderly aunt, though she was somehow affectionate to this young boy. At first, He was very shy and reserved before Dina. On one occasion, immediately after Maneck's arrival at Dina's apartment, he complained about the untidiness and his fright about worms and insects. In a grave and serious tone Dina says "Come on, please wrap your towel and open the door. I don't have time to stand here all morning.' He dressed fully before letting her in. "Shy boy. I'm as your mother. What was I going to see now? Where are those worms that frightened you?' 'I was not frightened. They just look so disgusting. And there are so many of them." Naturally, it's the season of worms. The monsoon always brings them".<sup>5</sup>

As the narrative progresses, Dina's character undergoes a steady transformation. She gradually softens towards the tailors. From a strong minded despotic mistress, Dina gradually is transformed into a responsive and sympathetic human being. She sympathizes with the tailors listening to their plight and utter helplessness as they were evicted from the slum. She comes to know of their misery and homeless condition from Maneck and arranges for them and accommodation at her varanda. She becomes repentant of her past behavior and is overwhelmed to witness their gratitude and sincerity. Hearing from Manek, the account of their pitiful condition and enormous sufferings in the hands of the police and government machinery, she is moved to pathos. It is for the first time, that Dina feels the dismal condition and relentless misery of the poor marginalized, the displaced and the disempowered. She comments "Compared to theirs, my life is nothing but comfort and happiness. And now they are in more trouble. I hope they come back all right. People keep saying God is great, God is just, but I'm not sure".<sup>6</sup>

### **A critical glimpse**

The four principal characters now start living under the same roof, sharing the common emotions of familial attachment, homely comfort, bliss and mutual adjustment. Dina even allows the tailors to share her own kitchen. The two tailors and even Maneck join hands in Dina's works to run her business unabated. Within the microcosm of her small flat all the barriers of class, caste, ethnicity, and economic differences ceased to have its relevance. Mistry wonderfully depicts the harmonious coexistence of the four protagonists from different backgrounds under the umbrella of humanity, fellow-feelings, peace, and solidarity. The novelist projects their collective battle for survival and stability against a hostile socio-economic ambiance. He dramatizes their rigorous journey and search for happiness within the narrow domestic walls of a tiny, rented apartment, in contrast to a turbulent political situation outside, that brought the entire nation into a crisis.

Dina, along with her companions enjoyed the stability, comfort, and economic security for a temporary period of time like the glimpse of a bright sunshine before a black, overcast sky. Newer problems emerge in their lives as Ishver and Om while travelling to their village, were taken forcefully into the sterilization camp by the men of Thakur Dharam Si. These camps were organized by the Government of India during the Emergency under the Family Planning scheme. In the process of operation, Ishver fell a victim to gangrene of the leg and his one leg had

to be amputated. Mean while Om was castrated and was turned permanently impotent. Thus, through the tragic waste of these two prospering tailors, Mistry depicts the sordid reality and concomitant maladies as well as negative consequences of this traumatic period of Emergency. The age-old caste discrimination that proved detrimental to the growth of the nation, testifies its irrecoverable wound and permanent stigma to our independent Indian society, that even wipeout a person, a family, or a community dwelling at the margin of the society. The novel epitomizes the terrible result of the caste discrimination and operation through Thakur Dharam Si's burning desire for revenge on Dukhi Mochi's family, that extinguished after burning alive Narayan's family and destroying Om and Ishver as well.

Dina's happiness too, did not last long, as she had to encounter serious set back and a series of complications destabilized her. She could no longer run her business smoothly, due to the loss of the devoted service of the two tailors and the landlord's objection against her illegal taking of the boarders in the flat. She was constantly bullied and forced to vacate the apartment by the rent collector and the landlord. Her single-handed combat against a hostile socio-political ambiance and a narrow patriarchal domain ends in utter disillusionment, tragic defeat and complete despair. Her ever cherished quest for independence and economic stability shattered before the harsh reality of her life. Through the inter woven tragedy of the four principal protagonists, and their ultimate failure, Mistry depicts the powerlessness and dismantling of the poor marginalized before an inhumanly hostile and contaminated social system. The narrative makes the point unambiguously clear, that, the marginalized woman like Dina, in spite of her strong resistance to the patriarchal domination and in equality within the family and society, is far from extricating the barrier that crushes their spirit. In spite of several movements of women empowerment, the much-desired freedom is a long way to achieve. *'A Fine Balance'*, through its simple yet captivating narrative, foregrounds several issues of class, caste and gender marginalization in the face of a massive socio-political upheavals. The much-debated Emergency and its after months makes the thousand homeless, jobless, and disempowered in the name of imposing order in a chaotic nation. Dina's words "God is great God is just, but I'm not sure", echoes within the poignant narrative of the struggling marginal, and may be taken as the comprehensive metaphor that makes the tone of the novel unbearably better.

As I have mentioned earlier, the novelist depicts the contrasting pictures of the complexity and malpractices in rural as well as urban Indian society, my next focus will be on the caste and class prejudices operating on a more serious scale in rural India. In order to substantiate my point of view, I will deal with the inhuman torcher and molestation that the poor lower class village women were subjected to by the upper-class village leaders and their associates. I will analyse in brief, the tragic plight of Roopa, the wife of Dukhi Mochi and refer to a few incidences of her awfully pathetic life.

Roopa belongs to the lower caste section of the village (ie . that is the chamar community) and is the mother of Ishver and Narayana. She silently accepts her doubly subalternized condition, as being a woman and a member of the poor untouchable section of the society.

Her acceptance of poverty, gender discrimination, and exploitation by the rich zamindar and his men, symbolizes a passive yet powerful resistance to the dehumanizing custom of the caste ridden rural society. Her subservience to the socially assigned role as a mother and a wife and her fragile attempt of taking care of her children paradoxically represents a calm and greater rebellion against the age-old sex and caste discrimination, prevalent in our society.

Compelled by poverty and other adverse circumstances, she even risks her own security in trespassing the orchard of Thakur Dharamsi for stealing oranges and cow milk to feed her children. She does show, by paying no heed to the conventional morality, knowing fully well that she has to pay for it. Nandini Bhautoo –Dewnarain in her book “Contemporary Indian Writers in English Rohinton Mistry An introduction” writes “In a manner similar to Dina’s fight against dominant social forces, the futility and hopelessness of Roopa’s silent resistance against poverty, caste violence and the conventional norms of morality highlights the similarity of their fates.”<sup>7</sup>

On one such occasion, Roopa stealthily enters the zamindars orchard at a pitch dark night and starts picking up oranges. As she was coming out, all on a sudden the zamindar’s watchman caught her red-handed. In spite of repeated request and complete surrender, he did not take pity on her. Instead, the watchman tries to convince her to his indecent proposal. Roopa express her gratitude for allowing her to pick up plenty of oranges and was about to leave with thanks. But the watchman had evil desire and looked lustfully at her. She intends to leave with thanks, but the watchman had evil desire. He intends to take advantage of her helpless situation. Mistry writes “you cannot go just like that, he said with a laugh. You haven’t given me anything in return.’ He walked towards her. Stepping back, she forced a laugh too. ‘I don’t have anything. That’s why I came here in the night, for the sake of my child.’ ‘You have got something.’”<sup>8</sup>

The marginalized in general, and the women in particular, had to bear with such dehumanizing treatment by the privileged section of their villages, including sexual dishonoring, social and economic humiliation. The narrative unambiguously articulates the fact that Roopa’s humiliation and disrobing is not an isolated instance but is a common tragedy to all the marginalized women, especially to those who belong to poorer sections of the society.

There are other minor instances in the text that reinforces the poignant reality of feminine subjugation in the caste ridden Indian society. The discriminatory behavior towards the two daughters of Narayan, within the family, may be a case in point. After the birth of Omprakash, his sisters had to experience negligence and lack of parental care. The narrative goes as “Omprakash’s sisters were silent spectators at the mealtime ritual. Leela and Rekha watched enviously, knowing better than to protest or plead with the adults. During rare moments when no one was around, Omprakash shared the delicacies with them. More often, Though, the two girls wept quietly in their beds at night.”<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the incidents that I have incorporated into the purview of this discussion, there are other examples in the discussed text that shows the dismal condition of women in post independent Indian society. The birth of a girl child is still an unwelcome event in a family,

the sexual exploitation and gender stereotyping in rural India, particularly among the socio-economically weaker sections. Sweets were distributed when Shankar (the crippled beggar) was born, while the birth of his sister was not a welcome gift to his family. On the other hand, the refusal by Buddha's wife of the amorous advances from the men of Thakur Dharamsi may also be taken into consideration.

### **A socio-political context**

Rohinton Mistry sets the tone of his narrative against a complex and turbulent political/historical phase of our contemporary India of nineteen seventies, when the country was passing through a critical era of trauma, commotion, and transformation. The political tension was mounting with the promulgation of emergency and the seizing of fundamental rights of the common people. But instead of probing deep into the political turmoil or engaging himself into any controversy, Mistry does in fact depict the sordid reality of the then Indian society along with the dismal plight and troubled condition of the poor subalterns. In the complex process of unraveling several issues and problems of marginality, he foregrounds the misery, subjugation and Otherization of the marginalized women in male centric Indian society. He starts his exploration by projecting the discrimination of women in the family and goes further into exploring their multiplied marginality in the patriarchally constructed society.

'*A Fine Balance*' like Mistry's earlier works, links the issue of feminine marginality and the problem of women in gender biased society with other aspects of marginalization, dispossession and dismantling. In the present novel Dina Dalal is unlike his earlier women characters is not passive, accepting her fate and stereotypically assigned role in the family as well as in the society, rather she fights against the adversities and restrictive social norms, in her quest for identity and independence. Unlike the other parsi women of Mistry's other works, Dina transgresses the abuse of her familial and ethnic boundary and steps out into the broader social domain to stand at her won feet. Though her struggle for independence ends in utter disaster, yet her bold assertion of feminine identity and respectability is no doubt, praiseworthy.

### **Conclusion**

'*A Fine Balance*' though and instant success, has received mixed critical responses. Some consider his projection of India as real and authentic, while others consider the novel and the story it gives is exaggerated. The latter critic suggest that Mistry with his Diasporic alienation and foreign consciousness looks only into the seamy sides of life and the malignant aspect of our country. What he narrates is only the glimpse of the reality. In fact, he pays no heed to the brighter side of the coin. For some, it is very difficult to find out a redemptive vision from his projection of the ugliness and squalor of our fanatically caste-based society. The famous Australian writer/critic Germaine Greer was not convinced at all with Mistry's treatment of the Indian ethos and for her, *A Fine Balance* is "a Canadian book about India."<sup>10</sup>

Mistry sets out with the local elements and transforms them in to universal. To conclude it may be said that Mistry's depiction of the stories of marginalized women both within and without parsi community, is poignant and heartrending and humane. It constitutes a living



testimony to the ever-increasing domain of Indian women's movement for independence and empowerment. Feminists may argue that Dina's failure to achieve her desired goal is in fact a flaw in Mistry's writing, yet it can be assuming that her futile quest for a distinctive feminine identity is noteworthy and paves the way for subsequent movements of women empowerment.

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 285.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
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