

The Marginalised Women in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Dr. C.V. Padmaja*, Dr. P. Phani Bushan Rao**

**Asso. Prof., Deptt of English, GITAM University &*

***Asstt. Prof. ,GITAM University*

Abstract

The paper studies the predicament of marginalized women in the context of India in Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance. Women belonging to marginalized communities are doubly marginalized as women as well as those belonging to marginalized communities. However, the strength of a woman lies in her struggle to change her lot in life. Some succumb and some emerge winners. Through the study of Dina Dalal, a Parsi woman we get to know the place of women in Parsi culture and in her struggle we see a woman's fight for her rightful place in the world. In living a life of her choice, Dina Dalal has to wage a single-handed battle for personal as well economic independence. Through the characters of Radha and Roopa who belong to the low cast the narrative highlights another perspective of Indian reality i.e. gender discrimination and asserts that every aspect of Indian society is gendered conferring specific advantages to men and disadvantages to women. The life of Dina Dala, Radha and Roopa show how women in general and women belonging to marginalised communities in particular have a long way to go to proclaim themselves independent.

Keywords : *Marginalised, doubly marginalised, gender discrimination, parsi culture, women independence, predicament of women*

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**Dr. C.V. Padmaja*,
Dr. P. Phani Bushan
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Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, with the narrative spanning across the pre- and post-colonial rule of the country highlights the period of Emergency that had been imposed by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. For the first time in post-independent India, Emergency in its wake suspended the basic fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution of India to its citizens. Strong opposition and healthy dissent guarantee effective functioning of a democracy. Crushing the voice of the opposition jeopardizes the very foundation of democracy. Since 1947 when India had been declared independent, in the name of Emergency, democratic institutions were suspended for the first time in the country; what followed was one of the most inglorious chapters in the history of modern India. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is an honest record of this dark shameful episode. Mistry states:

It seemed to me that 1975, the year of the emergency would be the next important year, if one was preparing a list of important dates in Indian history and so it was 1975. (Gokhale, 1996)

A Fine Balance, yet another landmark in Indian English fiction is a stark and moving portrait of life during Emergency. It shows how absolute power can corrupt a leader absolutely, all in the name of restoring order in the country. Emergency rule unleashed organized horror under the autocratic leadership of Indira Gandhi. Though it was aimed at her political opponents, in the process, it was the common man who was the worst affected during the Emergency. It was the time when leadership was at its tyrannical worst.

Corruption, injustice, discrimination, caste-exploitation, bloodshed, linguistic strife and communal disharmony ruled the roost during the period. The novel focuses on the Indian polity's struggle for power; with the nation torn by internal dissension with power hungry politicians controlling the strings of administration. Mistry depicts this post-independent India where the self-serving politicians had exploited the caste, class, ignorance, poverty, discrimination and above all the common man to meet the objective of enhancing their wealth and power. Corruption, a modern day phenomenon has been eating into the social fabric of India where the ordinary man remains caught between an unsympathetic and hostile system and his own individual aspirations. Portraying the struggle for survival and empowerment on one hand and poverty and exploitation on the other, Mistry depicts the most volatile and violent spectrum of the contemporary history which shook the socio-political economic fabric of the country during the emergency era i.e., 1975-77.

Corruption, wherever it may occur, violates human rights. It is designated as 'a crime against humanity,' and falls into the same category as torture, genocide, and other crimes that rob humans of human dignity. All human beings have basic rights to

live in a corruption-free society as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When corruption reigns, basic human rights and liberties come under threat. Corruption affects both civil and political rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights. Institutionalised form of corruption creates mass victimization resulting in a threat to the rule of law, democratic government and the social fabric in any society. (Shah Giriraj & K. N.Gupta, 32-37)

In this wide canvass of an epic proportion, the portrayal of women in their marginalized roles occupies an important corner. In fact the conflict in the novel revolves around Dina Dalal, a woman twice marginalized both as a woman and Parsi. Through a study of her character, we get to know the place of women in Parsi culture and in her struggle we see a woman's fight for her rightful place in the world. In living a life of her choice, Dina Dalal has to wage a single-handed battle for personal as well economic independence. Hers is a small, subdued voice heard strong as well meek to free herself of the shackles of male dominance. Dina Dala's life shows how women in general and Parsi women in particular have a long way to go to proclaim themselves *independent*. Dina struggles to defend her fragile independence from an autocratic brother as well to protect herself from a rapacious land lord. It's a life symbolic of a woman's rebellion within a patriarchy and religious taboos.

India is a founder member-state of the United Nations and it is party to its Charter. The Indian Constitution enshrines the principles of human values in the form of guaranteed rights. Despite the constitutional guarantee for equality and special protection, in every walk of life and at every stage of life, women are destined to suffer discrimination, exploitation or violence. The doctrine of equality, which is the foundation of social justice, enshrined in Article 14 of the Constitution is a galaxy of concepts of equality before law and equal protection of law. The primary imperative of Article 14 is equal opportunity to all. Article 15 [1] prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, sex, place of birth or any of them.

The Right to Life and Personal liberty is the most fundamental of all the fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution. This takes within its sweep every opportunity necessary to develop one's personality and potentiality to the highest level possible in the existing stage of our civilisation. Mere right to exist will have little value, if it is bereft of any chances to develop or to bring out what is in every man and woman. Being the basis of all the rights, the right to life is effectively provided under Article 21 of the Constitution. It has become a *sanctuary for human values* and therefore has been rightly termed as the *fundamental of fundamental rights*. The Right to Personal liberty postulates the creation of a climate wherein

there is no suppression of the human spirit, wherein there is no denial of opportunity for the full growth of human personality, wherein the head is held high and there is no servility of the human mind or enslavement of human body. In a society where definitions, policies and rules are male-oriented, the need is to understand woman and her rightful place in the society.

The International Convention on the elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women (ICDAW) (1979/1981) is one of the core human rights measures for the advancement and empowerment of women in private and public life, particularly in the areas of education, (Article 10 of ICDAW) employment, (Article 11 of ICDAW) health, (Article 12 of ICDAW) marriage and the family (Article 16 of ICDAW). But the life of Dina proves that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women.

Widowed at the age of 24, Dina Dalal is a lonely figure in the novel estranged from her parental family and leading a monotonous existence. Dina Dalal's life has been a cyclic pattern which begins at her brother's house and after a brief spell of independence and happiness, ends with her accepting the emotional subjugation of patriarchy, Nusswan, her brother symbolizes.

Dina feels a strong affinity to her, philanthropic father whose "fervour to ease suffering," (15) eventually leads to his death in the course of a medical campaign in the interiors of the country. Instead of trying to seize the deadly sickles or at the very least to blunt them (15) Dr. Shroff dies of a cobra bite. After his death, Nusswan presides over the house hold. For Dina it is hard to stomach Nusswan, obsessive of power and control, as a replacement to her father. Dina's personal freedom gets restricted and Nusswan forces her to neglect school and burdens her with the entire house hold work. Nusswan's personality is too weak to tolerate a teenager's harmless deviation from an adult norm: "Dina's defiance, her stubbornness, was driving him crazy," (20) but he discloses the short comings of his own personality by establishing an authoritarian family regime based on surveillance. "The little devils needed monitoring," (21) and "corporal punishment," (23). Nusswan attempts to conform to the role of his father proves not only disruptive to the family but severely affects Dina's peace of mind. If he turns into a despot to compensate his own shortcomings, it is Dina who is always at the receiving end of his whims. As a result Dina's life becomes a nightmare in an autocratic system characterised by restriction and tyranny. Dina gets obsessed with the idea of personal freedom because of the misery suffered under her brother's guardianship typical of the Parsi tradition. It is clear in the prologue of *A Fine Balance* itself, that Dina holds independence in high esteem. Talking about her tailoring business, which eventually allows her to quit seeing her brother

for money, she says:

“No need to now to visit her brother and beg for next month’s rent. She took a deep breath once again, her fragile independence was preserved.” (11)

Having to rely on Nusswan’s money means losing her freedom; giving into her brother’s rule involves giving up her independence. Therefore, her small tailoring business is not at least of all an attempt to escape the sphere of her brother’s influence. (Ross, 243) Dina relies on male career patterns of entrepreneurship in order to leave behind a male sphere that prevents her from coming into her own as a modern woman. In an act of rebellion against Nusswan’s manipulative power, Dina falls in love with Rustum Dalal, a compounder and marries him against the wish of her class-conscious brother. Unfortunately, her happily married life with Rustum comes to an abrupt end, when Rustum is killed in a cycle accident on the day of their wedding anniversary. Despite her brother’s genuine offer to help her, she decides to live by herself. Nusswan could not understand her “...strange idea of independence. Working like a slave to earn a pittance,” even as a widow. (369)

She earns her livelihood by sewing and maintains her independence as a dress maker. When failing eyesight threatens to end her tailoring career and the independence it provides, she refashions herself as entrepreneurial middle person; she undertakes to stitch readymade garments for Au Revior Exports owned by Mrs. Gupta, a client of her classmate and friend Zenobia. She hires two slum-dwelling tailors, the low caste Ishvar and his nephew Om for commercial piece-work in her back room and soon takes a student Maneck Kohlah, the son of an old school friend of her’s from the same community as a paying guest.

Her life as a widow is harsh and filled with the endless struggle to survive in a set up where single women have to struggle twice as hard to lead a life with dignity. Initially relations among these four are tense and guarded; class-conscious Dina is strict and exploitative of the tailors, the tailors too suspicious of her and Maneck divided in his allegiances. With Om and Ishvar working in her flat, the struggle for independence gradually becomes a struggle for control. Dina decided to maintain her distance in order not to lose control, “I have nothing against them, but they are tailors,-my employees. A distance has to be maintained.” (293)

She locks them in when she leaves the house thereby relying on strict boundary maintenance. Her decision is motivated by the fear of losing both control and independence at the same time. She is anxious not to lose her intermediary position in the process of manufacturing and selling dresses. “The tailors will put me out of business if I don’t lock them in.” (285)

She assumes that control guarantees economic success which means independence from Nusswan. In order not to suffer from her brother's rule again, Dina draws on the model of her brother's rule in her dealings with Om, Ishvar and Maneck. Maneck slowly makes friends with Om and takes their side and disapproves of Dina's treatment of the tailors, especially when she displays her class-consciousness. The Parsi Dina at first regards the Hindu tailors Om and Ishvar as dirty, undisciplined, irresponsible, lazy, liars, as alcoholics and promiscuous. Control over the tailors is not only for economic independence but it is something deeply ingrained into Dina's personality of the difference between class and ethnicities as determined by her culture that developed in her a fear for others. Dina reminds Maneck that, "there is a difference, and you cannot pretend there aren't—their communities, their background." (293)

She advocates segregation between the representatives of the two communities on the grounds of ethnicity. Dina's indifference towards the tailors is also revealed when she was not ready to accommodate them under her roof, when their shack is bulldozed to the ground as a part of the slum evacuation programme during Emergency. Dina's knowledge of the *crookedness* in the city never allowed her to risk offering shelter:

A trunk, a bag or even a satchel—— is the first step into a flat. Personal items stored on the premises- that's the most common way of staking a claim. And the court system takes years to settle the case, years during which the crooks are allowed to stay in the flat. (305)

Though within her own community she suffers as a woman, Dina is not free from her personal prejudices against class, caste and community. Maneck is put off by Dina auntie's refusal to accommodate even the tailor's trunk, "He was not ready to forgive her while the tailors remained un-accommodated in the night." (305) The tailors receive another blow when they are picked up by the police from the footpath where they usually sleep after work, consequent to evacuation of slums as a part of city beautification. It is during this period that Dina comes to know through Maneck the long-drawn suffering of Ishvar and Om as victims of caste oppression and thinks, "compared to theirs, my life is nothing but comfort and happiness—— People keep saying god is great, God is just, but I'm not sure." (340)

Moved by their plight Dina offers the tailors her veranda to live in and their overwhelming gratitude makes her feel guilty. She sheds several of her other defences and pretensions and starts sharing her kitchen with them. Soon the four have their meals together: "Sailing under one flag: There were always four people,

or at least two, busting about the kitchen in the evening. My bleakest hour, thought Dina, has now become the happiest.” (401)

Her decision to take them is a sign of her ‘affection breaking barriers,’ (Mantel, 184). In the microcosm of Dina’s flat all prior hierarchies and ethnic prejudices have ceased to be of relevance. Very soon many upheavals take place because of the imposition of internal Emergency. The characters themselves do not see their struggle for survival as linked to the existing political scenario. For Dina, the much spoken of Emergency is “government problems-games played by people in power. It does not affect ordinary people like us,” (75). For the common man it is nothing but “one more government tamasha.” (5)

Very soon they are proved wrong. Even their simple dreams are thwarted by the blows dealt by Emergency. The bright future of Om and Ishvar is clouded due to governments massive country-wide family planning programme to check the population explosion in the country. Dina is compelled by her landlord to vacate the premises on legal grounds that she is illegally carrying on the business and accommodating the tailors and the student as guest. Ultimately left alone to carry on the burden of her life, Dina now is forced to take refuge at her brother Nusswan’s much against her will. Mistry comments: Independence came at a high price; a debt with a payment schedule of hurt and regret. But the other option under Nusswan’s thumb was inconceivable. (473)

The *evolved* Dina Dalal finally finds refuge with her brother. Dina’s story is of the Indian women yearning for the almost impossible independence. Facing a life of misfortunes with dignity, refusing to give into debilitating memories, the female protagonist Dina leads a life finely balanced between hope and despair.

In contrast, the life of the minor women characters belonging to pre-independent India in the novel is very pathetic. Rohinton Mistry presents a very realistic and dehumanising portrayal of various forms of torture that the women of lower caste are subjected to in spite of any number of rights that free India sanctioned to women. Despite new laws regarding untouchability passed by the government, nothing has changed. Exploitation of the low castes by upper castes continues unabated. The human history bears witness to the occurrence of violence against women on account of sex discrimination.

Of all the violence against women, rape is one of the most violent forms. Rape as a violation with violence, of the private person of women, is an outrage by all canons.

“Rape in conflict is a weapon to terrorize and degrade a particular community often to achieve a specific political end. The rape of one person is translated into an

assault upon the community as a whole through the emphasis placed in every culture on women's sexual 'virtue.' The shame of rape humiliates the family and all those associated with survivor." (Women War Peace, 2004)

Women of low castes including tribal women are more prone to rape as in the case of Buddha's wife whose refusal to go to the fields with the zamindar's son results in the shaving off her head and being paraded naked through the square. Again the way Roopa, Dukhi's wife is raped by the watchman of the orchard, tells its own tale of helplessness. The heart touching episode of Roopa, the self-obliterating mother of Ishvar and Narayan losing the chastity of her mango-like breasts and the rest of her charming young body to the lascivious watchman of the rich man's orchard in exchange for a few oranges, she covets for her sons, (120) throws light on the exploitation of low caste women who willy-nilly have to succumb to the machinations of their very upper caste seducers. The tragic irony is that a high-caste lust-perversed man who is likely to be polluted even by the shadow of a low caste, still covets and sleeps with impunity with a desirable woman of the cobbler caste. This shows the irrational travesty of justice in independent India that guarantees fundamental rights irrespective of caste and creed.

The narrative here highlights another perspective of Indian reality i.e. gender discrimination and asserts that every aspect of Indian society is *gendered* conferring specific advantages to men and disadvantages to women. Women are relegated to a subordinate status in family and society. They are expected to be dutiful daughters, loving mothers, submissive daughters-in-law and faithful obedient wives. After marriage women become the property of their husbands and if daughters are born, are ordered to discreetly get rid of the newborn and they are strangled, poisoned or starved to death.

When a son was born to Radha and Narayan, sweets were distributed. However, when daughters were born to them, no sweets were distributed. When Shankar's mother was born, her drunken father slashed off her nose in his rage, disappointed with the mother for giving birth to a daughter instead of a son. Avinash's three sisters were aware of their father's sad plight at not being able to afford dowries for them. In order to spare their parents the shame of three unmarried daughters, they commit suicide by hanging from a ceiling fan. This is an indictment of the vicious norms of the society which reduces women to a commodity rather than recognizing her as an individual.

All these acts highlight the injustices done to women, interrogate the marginalisation of women in the male-dominated society and prove that inequality between the sexes is caused by the cultural construct of gender. Dina's life stands

an example of gender disadvantage. In the village too the women are seen totally at the mercy of the upper caste landlords and their servants who exploit them sexually or even immolate without any questions being asked. Whether one sees the village Roopa or Radha who are raped and burnt or we see Dina Dalal, where every effort is made to break her spirit—the story is one of gender oppression by a sexist male society. The recognition of women must be evident at every stage of the transitional process so that women can rebuild their lives with confidence that their human rights abuses have been addressed with the necessary respect and appropriate protection.

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