A Critical Study of Women Portrayal in The Novel - “A Fine Balance” of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract:

Over the past eleven years Rohinton Mistry has established himself as one of Canada’s most critically acclaimed writers, with his three works of award-winning fiction, Tales from Firozha Baag (1987); Such a Long Journey (1991) and “A Fine Balance (1995) have received virtually unanimous praise. 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 unidimensional 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.
INTRODUCTION

In Rohinton Mistry’s novel, “A Fine Balance”, he 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 in the novel 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.

A FINE BALANCE – AT A GLANCE

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 “AFine 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 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 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 hives. I 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 role.

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. 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 grand daughter’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.

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 parsí 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 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 sexploited. 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 sexploitation of 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 educated and unemployed youth and the lawyers in the Bombay court do not spare women from sexual harassment. When Dina approaches the court gate, a group of lawyers surround her and demand charges, showing their degree and advising her to be careful in choosing the lawyer, some of them make indecent advances. Mistry conveys his own moral attitudes and liberal views through characters. Various episodes in the novel reveal Mistry’s sympathy for the oppressed and his
righteous anger at the excesses during the period of Emergency. A Fine Balance opens with a
train journey and concludes with “Epilogue” 1984, after Dina completes her journey
emancipation and self-realisation.

CONCLUSION:

Rohinton Mistry’s characters are ordinary people belonging to the lower middle class of society.
At the same time, the goodness of Mistry’s characters, that likens them to the epical heroes of
ancient literature. Mistry locates innate goodness compelling circumstances. The author focuses
on how an ordinary person, by sheer grit and imagination, overcomes stupendous problem.

Thus, Mistry has very poignantly captured the tumult brought the heroism in ordinary people.
The heroism of the ordinary people embodies the true essence of man, because the ordinary man
dominates the world in terms of number – which should be the criterion now that kings and
queens are gone.
References
