

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and Patriarchy

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Rohinton Mistry, the Indian born Canadian novelist, is one of the most popular contemporary Indian novelists. His novels are remarkable for their range of experience. His creative oeuvre includes *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), *Family Matters* (2002), and *The Screem* (2006). His strength as a writer lies in the delicate analysis of the relationships. He likes to work slowly outwards, beginning with the family, developing characters and exploring where the fault lines lie and gradually widening into social, cultural and political worlds that his characters perilously inhabit. *A Fine Balance* is a novel set by Rohinton Mistry during the time of internal Emergency in India between the years 1975 and 1977 (a period of expanding Government power and crackdown on civil liberties). This paper, however, focuses on desire and entrapment, assertion and submission. In whole world and the Indian society various norms and values are there, which every person living in that society follows. These norms and values are violated, though not without invoking the wrath of near and dear ones and the society, when these are biased and start suffocating people. In whole world directly and indirectly gender discrimination is there. Women have to face domination patriarchy and they feel suppressed. There are different yardsticks for assessing the actions by males and females. Many writers through their writings have often raised

their voice against social and cultural principles that constrained women's liberty.

You may write me down in history

With your bitter, twisted lies,

You may trod me in very dirt

But still, like dust, I'll rise... (Angelou)

Maya Angelou, a Black American poet, in the above lines from her poem '*Still I Rise*' refuses the gap between White and Black people and she aware the Black subaltern. However, Angelou as an Individual, and as a representative of the black people in America, will not be pushed in to dirt any longer. Instead the whole black population of the subaltern people will raise up phoenix its own ashes. The oppressed people will defy their oppressor to raise their heads and make their presence felt.

Her voice is, eventually, heard locally and globally to prove to everyone that the subalterns can understand their situation and are able to speak for them and define those irrespective of the 'power' that their oppressor might wield.

The superstructures of race in USA and caste in India inform, deform, and complicate the identities of the marginalized along lines of gender, class, and family structure. Effectively, a type of domestic colonialism, exercised by the respective national elites, silence and exploit the subaltern women and emasculate the men. This repression from above disrupts the respective family structures in the societies, traumatizes the children, and confuses the relationships between

all the members of the families. While African American women, children, and men negotiate their national identities in USA, Dalits, the former Untouchables, attempt to realize their national identities guaranteed by the Indian Constitution. While successful resistance to oppression, informs the literatures written by these historically marginalized peoples, thereby giving voice to the silenced subalterns.

Worldwide, the condition of the subaltern population is the same. Different writers in the world have represented subaltern voices through their writings. Among the Indian English writers, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan played a crucial role to bring India's 'dark' and 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 they have a universal appeal. Even today, some writers have continued the trend of representing the struggle of the subalterns in their writings. Rohinton Mistry is one such important writer.

Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996) captures the intricate texture of multi-ethnic Indian society as no other writer has done before. In it he presents the colours of pathos and humanity and the novel establishes Mistry as a master storyteller. The readers feel that the characters he has depicted in the novel are like them. The novel is a convergence of four lower extremes – the subalterns- a widow, two tailors living in slums and a disillusioned student. The novel is set in Bombay (now Mumbai) of the Emergency period during the late 1970's.

The novel is set in an 'unnamed' city by the sea. The corrupt and brutal government of the country declares a state of emergency. In the backdrop of

such political turmoil, an unlikely alliance is formed among these four characters. Although each one of them hails from a different social segment, their individual needs bring them together. Dina, a middle aged, widow desperately clinging on to her ever fragile independence, two tailors - an uncle and nephew team - fleeing from the cruel caste violence in their village and a young student, scared away by the brutal and humiliating ragging in a hostel - when they all come together they formed a family of sorts. This assorted family initially starts on a very cautious note, each skeptical of the other's intention, but gradually and surely they form a bond that is hard to break. Through the course of the novel, they face adverse conditions that threaten their very existence, but they survive, though not without scars. The weakest of them all, Maneck, succumbs to the external pressures and commits suicide. The characters in *A Fine Balance* are unforgettable and present true picture of India's political and social mire. As Dodiya reflects his view for *A Fine Balance* in *The Novels of Rohinton Mistry: A Critical Study*:

It reflects the reality of India the predatory politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence and bloodshed. The novel also gives an insight into rural India focusing on injustice, the cruelty, and the horrors of deprivation and portrays the trauma of India along communal, religious and linguistic lines. (22)

Leading protagonist of the story is a Parsi, Dina Dalal, a middle aged widow. Through this female character Mistry reveals the idea that a female is always 'subaltern' in every society in this world. No matter, whether, she belongs to the West and the East. She may be Black or White, Negro or Parsi, Hindu or Muslim, untouchable or upper cast etc.

she I condemned to fight for her identity from childhood till her death. And this notion is very much proved by Anand:

In childhood a woman should be under her father's control, in youth under her husband's and when her husband is dead, under her sons, she should not have independence. (1)

When Dinna Shroff was a young girl, people predicted of glorious opportunities for her. An apple of her father's eye, she enjoyed all the love and attention of her family. Being a general practitioner by profession and honest by nature, Dr Shroff, Dina's father wants to go into the interior districts. Mrs. Shroff tried to stop him from going through Dina. "After all, Dina, at twelve, was Daddy's darling" (16).

In a party when asked that Nusswan, Shroff's son after studying will he become Doctor like his father? He simply ignored his father's profession. But five-year-old Dina had seen the hurt on her father's face before he could hide it. She ran to him and clambered on to his lap. "Daddy, I want to be a doctor, just like you, when I grow up" (16). There is a strong bond between father and daughter as is the case in many Indian families. A father plays an important role in his daughter's life. A daughter's relationship with her father is usually her first male-female relationship. Young Dina's thoughts for 'being a doctor like her father' reveals, she was far more capable to hold all kinds of patriarchal powers, under the protection of her father. But during his philanthropic streak in a remote district, Mr. Shroff dies of a cobra bite.

The loss of her father proves fatal for Dina. Her mother is of no help as she retreats into herself after the death of her husband. The responsibility of the household shifts on Nusswan, Dina's

brother, a man in the family. After Dr. Shroff's death, patriarchal power shifted to Dina's brother Nusswan.

He now assumes the role of head of family, and legal guardian to Dina. All their relatives agreed this was as it should be. They praise his selfless decision, admitting they had been wrong about his capabilities. He also took over the family finances, promising that his mother and sister would want for nothing: he would look after them out of his own salary. (18)

Nusswan's first decision as head of the family was to cut back on the hire help. The cook, who came for half the day and prepared the two meals, was allowed to continue while the Lily, the live-in servant was asked to leave. "We cannot continue in same luxury as before... 'I can't afford the wages" (18).

After Lily is dismissed it is decided that every member in the house will be self-dependent. However, gradually Nusswan's work begins to shift to Dina. As a result of this new decision by the new ruling dispensation, the whole domestic burden falls on little young Dina's shoulders. Her absent minded mother was not capable to cope with the burden. Dina starts suffering silently under domestic burden.

With the passing of days, Dina's chores began to increase. As a token of his participation, Nusswan continued to wash his cup, saucer, and breakfast plate before going to work. Beyond that he did nothing. 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!'

'Listen to the little tigress', said Nusswan amused.

'you mustn't speak like that to your big brother, 'chided Mrs. Shroff gently. (19)

Young Dina's life story resembles the life story of every Indian girl who falls a prey to the ubiquitous patriarchal system. Even mothers, though females themselves, never make balance between boy and girl. Similarly like Dina, Sarita, the main protagonist in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* had to put up with gender-based discrimination which was so typically common to the Indian middle class. She had been taught to behave in a particular fashion and she had implicit faith in that teaching. She was a victim of social conditioning and she was made to realize that being a girl she was inferior to her brother in every way:

Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker.

Who cares?

We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married.

I don't want to get married.

Will you live with us all your life?

Why not?

You can't.

And Dhruva?

He's different. He's a boy. (Deshpandae, 45)

Nusswan is not a supporter of women's liberation and strongly believes that the duty of a girl is to grow in to a respectable woman, find a suitable match and become a dutiful wife to her husband. His ideas spell doom for Dina, for her brother does not approve of her tomboyish lifestyle. Under the pressure of Social system Dina was victimized and her brother's dictatorial attitude curtails her liberty:

Dina was no longer allowed to spend time at her friends'

houses during the holidays. 'There is no need to, ' said

Nusswan. 'You see them every day in school'. They could visit her after being granted his permission, but this was not fun since he always hovered around. (21)

He tries to persuade her to mend her ways but Dina rebels accusing Nusswan of trying to impose his will upon her. All her accusations fall on deaf ears and Nusswan takes a firm stand by laying down guidelines by which the entire household would function. Dina defies his orders and this led to physical assault:

You have always the habit of blurting whatever comes into your loose mouth. But you are no longer a child. Someone has to teach you respect'. He sighed, 'It is my duty I suppose, ' and without warning he began slapping her. He stopped when a cut opened her lower lip. (21-22)

The domestic helps are dismissed and Dina is made to do all the household chores. Nusswan tries to force her into submission by insulting and humiliating her in many ways. He refuses her to get a haircut going by the trends, but these measures turn her even more rebellious. She gets her hair cut all the same.

Dina continues her defiance of Nusswan's autocratic attitude, though never being able to score over him. Nusswan gathers all the sympathy of the community by projecting her as a difficult girl who was required to be checked by the most severe of punishments. She is not even allowed to do her hair the way she wanted. As if this were not enough, Dina is made to give up school when she fails to score well. He refuses to accept that her studies suffered because of her involvement in the household chores.

Don't make excuses, a strong young girl doing a little housework – what does that have to do with

studying? Do you know how fortunate you are? There are thousands of poor children in the city, doing boot polishing at railway station, or collecting papers, bottles, plastic – plus going to school at night. And you are complaining? (27)

She was unable to make her brother appreciate see perspective, Dina submits to her fate. The invisible hold of patriarchy has taken to toll. Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* points out:

Under patriarchy, the female did not herself develop the symbols by which she is described. As both the primitive and the civilized worlds are male worlds, the ideas which shaped culture, in regard to the female, were also of male design. The image of woman, as we know it, is an image created by men and fashioned to suit their needs. These needs spring from a fear of the "Otherness" of woman. Yet this notion itself presupposes that patriarchy has already been established and the male has already set himself as the human norm, the subject and reference to which the female is "other" or "alien". (46-47)

Due to all these reasons, woman feels choked. She finds herself alone and aloof. This feeling takes the form of alienation. After Mrs. Shroff's death, despite her keen desire to pursue her education, Dina is not allowed even to matriculate. Nusswan, her brother, tries to impose his will on her and suggests that she marry a person of his choice, but Dina protests and asserts her individuality. Dina spends all the time that she can spare outside the suffocating four walls of the Shroff house. She visits libraries, music libraries to satiate her unfulfilled desire of learning. Music made Dina forget her misery and brought peace to her heart: If she was lucky, she found something with a name that resonated richly in her memory; and when familiar music

filled her head, the past was conquered for a brief while, and she felt herself ache with the ecstasy of completion, as though a missing limb had been recovered. (30)

Her hope in life is rekindled when she finds love in Rustom Dalal. Despite all the pressure from her brother, trying to dissuade her from marrying Rustom, Dina takes the plunge and finds happiness in matrimony. Her happiness though is short lived. Rustom, her husband, dies in an accident on the day of their first wedding anniversary. Dina is devastated. Left alone and vulnerable she is forced to turn to her brother and live on charity. As usual she was not got the chance to live the life of her own: "A month passed, and Dina settled into her old routine, assuming her former place in the household. The servant was let go" (47).

Nevertheless, before long she decides to take charge of her life and embarks on a journey towards self-reliance and independence. Very soon, the brother and sister relationship is spoiled as is evident in the following exchange of attacks and insults:

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 into your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with him. I can always go to the Towers of Silence and let the vultures eat me up, if that will make you happy. (52)

Nusswan's words reflect the deep-rooted Parsi feeling of the superiority of his religion vis-à-vis the Hindu religion. However, his words are ironical since Dina considers Nusswan to be the oppressor. Dina chooses to leave her brother's home, because

she wants to assert her individuality and self-dignity. She has grown up in Mumbai, 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. She left her brother's place and takes up sewing as a fulltime occupation and a means of earning a living wherein Zenobia helps her. Dina receives order from one Mrs. Gupta who deals in the supply of readymade garments. In order to complete the orders taken, Dina decides to employ two tailors. After looking everywhere for tailors, one fine day she finds Ishvar and Om standing at her doorstep. Thus begins an association between the three with lot of caution initially and easing out with the passage of time. Due to self-reliance and self-dependency, Dina Dalal got new identity with her name from 'Shroff' to 'Dalal', steered her life to move from subjugation to liberation. Mistry in this novel gives the subaltern, the Parsi women a voice and visibility but also expose the reality how female loose self-identity under patriarchy system in Indian society.

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