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Representation of Women Characters in *A Fine Balance*

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Introduction:

The movements for the rights of women which later on became the movement of feminism, with its numerous sub-branches in the areas such as political, ideological, and social, endeavours to define, establish, and advocate gender equality. The movement also attempts to achieve equal opportunities for women to avail education and freedom to work and above all freedom to acquire social space as much as it is given to men. In the western world, a number of movements and campaigns have been undertaken for achieving the aforesaid objectives of feminism. There are a number of feminist activists who still continue to promote the issues of women. The feminists also lead the campaigns for the rights of women that includes the right to vote, right to avail an office in public, right to work and earn to name a few. With the advent of Virginia Woolf's call for 'room of one's own', the conscious attempts to promote women's writing in creative fields commenced. The representation of women authors in creative fiddles has increased remarkably during the second half of the 20th century. It is interesting to note that there were many male authors also who represented the issues of women. Further, there are authors who have not dealt with women's issues directly in their works of fiction; nevertheless, there can be seen representation of life and condition of women of a section of society.

Rohinton Mistry is one such spokesperson novelist who represents not only his community with microscopic details and precision but also the condition of women in their time. His novels focus on the socio-cultural issues of the Parsi Community. Parsi Community is in minority in India and yet has played a significant role in shaping the pre and post-industrialization, globalization and liberalization. Rohinton Mistry's novels deal with the struggles and achievements, strength and weaknesses, ups and downs of the Parsi Community in India. Thus, Mistry's novels fairly represent all the aspects of the Parsi Community. However, his works do not portray the women characters with appropriate deliberation. Any representation of a community would remain incomplete without providing the details of the women of the time. The present paper aims at exploring the subtle representation of women characters in *A Fine Balance*.

Representation of Women Characters in *A Fine Balance*:

Women characters in Rohinton Mistry's novels are not the lot that receives a limelight. However, there can be seen a steady growth in the amount of space dedicated to women characters in his novels. It was exactly after four years of the publication of his first novel *Such a Long Journey*, that Rohinton Mistry published his second novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995). The way it was in his first novel this novel too dealt with the human struggle in general and Parsi community in particular. The human struggle of existence and



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quest for identity are the most recurring themes of most of the narrative since ages. Rohinton Mistry took the novel to next level by elevating it to a struggle between two extremes: hope and despair.

In *A fine Balance* Mistry has given the women characters comparatively a high representation and status. Woman characters in Rohinton Mistry's novels can be categorized in two broad categories: the first are those who earn readers' respect and acceptance due to their larger than life characterization and the second are those who earn readers' contempt as well as rejection. Dina Dalal is one such character who has received accolades and exclaimed of every literary critic as well as feminist scholar. She plays a multiple roles of a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a widow at the family front. She also plays a role of an independent business woman in the latter half of the novel. Mistry wrote her character with so much of feminine energy and force that it is impossible to imagine the progress of the novel without her vital role in the novel. Unlike the character of Dilnavaz, Mistry develops Dina Dalal as an independent character that plays an adequate role in the development of the male protagonists as well. In spite of host of struggle in her life, Dina remains unshakable and demonstrates 'a fine balance' in her life. Dina refuses to receive any help from her brother. She had been fairy-tallish due to her father's loving treatment. In her temperament, her character has many resemblances with Roshan of *Such a Long Journey*. She has many heroic traits that made her character 'hero-like'. Further, her fate makes her a tragic lady. The death of her loving father was the turning-point of her otherwise happy life. Her father's untimely demise turned Dina's life and future for ever. Later on, she loses her husband Rustom as well which compelled her to be miserable. She started sewing garments for earning her living. For her character, Mistry shared his views:

"...a smart little girl (who) knows how to get what she wants..." (AFB 16)

She is portrayed in sharp contrast with brother Nusswan who has never developed any ambition in his life. She has been described as "the son was not made of the same solid stuff... (he) wouldn't amount to much" (AFB 16).

The novel depicts the life and time of Ishvar Darji and his maternal nephew, Omprakash. They both belonged to the low-caste untouchables from a family of tanners. The novel has rural and urban India as its background that the struggle of two untouchable who thrive to rise above their nominated caste role and enhance themselves by becoming tailors. Mistry commented on the maltreatment of untouchables with very harsh and violent comment throughout the novel. He condemned the exploitation of untouchables who had to submit to the will and fancy of the manoeuvrings of the upper caste exploiters. Though the fictional



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account of Rohinton Mistry in his novel is quite realistic and to great extent true according to the prevailing practice of untouchability in India, it would be gross exaggeration to say that - this is the reality that still exists in the Indian subcontinent – a typical radical leftist outcry. The theme of untouchability was brought to mainstream Indian literature by Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable*, a novel which foreshadows the said theme.

Apart from untouchability the author, also dealt with the theme of the secular character of the Indian attitude. The Indian spirit of secularism was beautifully demonstrated when Hindu Dukhi's sons were looked after by a Muslim family Ashraf even in the difficult time of communal tension among the communities. Thus, Mistry highlighted the strong secular spirit that India could maintain even after independence and in spite of the British strategy of dividing the country into India and Pakistan based on religion. The value of *A Fine Balance* as a fictional account of historical facts is enhanced by Rohinton Mistry being Indian Parsi author who is intensely aware of the events of the history and social background. In spite of the fact that the novel depicted some of the evils of the society and the author gave his comments on it, nowhere can there be seen any preaching or moral lecturing in the novel i.e. the narration was explicit and the message was implicit.

Women Consciousness and Social Orthodox Oder in *A Fine Balance*:

It can be seen inevitably that Rohinton Mistry's novels cover women characters in a two wide categories: the good one and the adverse one. Nevertheless, it does not mean that Rohinton Mistry has deliberated upon the women consciousness. It also does not mean that he was concerned with the issues pertaining to women of the then Indian society. If we look at the range of women characters in the novel we came to know that most women characters are counterfoils of their male counterparts. Rohinton Mistry is one of the most representative Parsi novelists who represents his community with microscopic details and precision. His works focus on the socio-cultural issues of the Parsi Community. Parsi Community is in minority in India and yet have played a significant role in shaping the pre and post-industrialization, globalization and liberalization. Thus, women are not truly speaking represented unless attempted by a woman writer. These are the primary concerns of the feminist activist and writers ranging from Mary Wollstonecraft to Virginia Woolf and from Second Wave of Feminism to the Third Wave (also known as Radical Feminism) of Feminism.

There are some of the subtle terms used by Rohinton Mistry to represent his point of view in *A Fine Balance*. Hair, hairstyle and even the length of a woman's hair are also used as a leitmotif by Mistry. The



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protagonist, Dina cannot remove the plants which she doesn't like at all however, she is forced to wear plaits by her brother as a part of the social tradition. Nevertheless, she changed her hairstyle by shortening her hair. The length of a woman's hair represents the amount of freedom she is allowed to express. The longer the hair, the lesser the freedom she is allowed to enjoy. After the phase of struggle got over, the suffering of Dina also surprisingly got over. Nusswan explicitly put forward the reciprocal relationship between the public and the private domains unambiguously when he says:

“The curfew is over, and your punishment is over. We can throw away your plants now,’ he said, adding generously, ‘You know, short hair does suit you.’” (AFB 25)

In spite the fact that the novel has many merits and aspects to cover, as proposed in the hypothesis of the present study, the novel does not represent the women characters and their struggles and anxiety with same breadth and length as the male characters are represented. The few women character that appear in the novel such as Dina Shroff, later Dina Dalal after getting married to Rustom Dalal; Zenobia, Dina's friend; Mrs. Gupta, Dina's boss and Zenobia's client; Shanti, a girl in the slum and Ruby Shroff, Nussawan's wife that are represented as the counterfoil to the male characters or their supplements. Even the protagonist of the novel, Dina Shroff is referred to in the novel as the centre of the tale however, she is not dealt with the feminist depth and vigour. Though these stories deal with the human struggle to exit in adverse economic conditions there can be seen a fair amount of representation of women characters in the novel. These women characters play a considerable role in spreading out of the narrative flow of the novel and other male characters. In fact, we can see the perceptions of other male central characters through their charismatic characters.

Hence, it is inevitable that it covers women characters in it. However, it does not mean that Rohinton Mistry dealt with women consciousness. It also does not mean that he was concerned with the issues pertaining to women of the then Indian society. If we look at the range of women characters in the novel we came to know that most women characters are counterfoils of their male counterparts. Thus, they do not demonstrate the women consciousness that feminist discussed and deliberate upon.

Conclusion:

Thus, the female characters of Rohinton Mistry exhibit a considerable amount of roles in extending the novel along with other dominating male characters. In fact, we get to know the perspectives/standpoint of another male protagonist through her charismatic/compelling character. Hence, it is inevitable that it



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covers women characters in it. However, it does not mean that Rohinton Mistry dealt with women consciousness. As mentioned in the hypothesis of the novel, the study especially aims at studying, the women characters in particular and the representation and treatment given to them in the selected novels of Rohinton Mistry. There can be seen a prototypes thematic concerns in all three select novels of Rohinton Mistry i.e. the representation of Parsi Community in India and their point of views which has its historical significance. There can also be seen the recurrent theme of identity crisis among the Parsi Community and their struggle to survive as an indigenous community in India even after centuries of their official assimilation in India as one among many who can to India as outsiders but ultimately they become Indian during the process.



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