

Treatment of Women in Rohinton Mistry's Fiction

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It is correctly said that if one wants to know the status of a society, he or she should scrutinize its women. Women in every age, society, faith and religion have been suppressed and marginalized. They are thrown in purdah (veil) and bound with several restrictions. In majority, they are circumscribed only for household chores and breeding children since ancient age. They are regarded as unholy, burden, pitiable, dependent and fearful of sex. The Parsi women also share such qualities of treatment which is full of limited and reductive world like of their Hindu and Muslim sisters in India. Mistry's Parsi female characters are not much developed but they are stereotypes in their own ways. They are also the victims of child marriages, truncated schoolings and multiple child births. They too come under the category of repressed women. They are harmed by the oppressive world of male domination which automatically circumscribes female space. As Nilufer Bharucha writes:

The Parsi women have not rigorously subjected to the regimen of the Purdah, but they share the limited and reductive world of their Hindu and Muslim sisters in India. Parsi traditions are rooted in the patriarchal society of ancient Iran and these patriarchal moorings have been reinforced by a 1300 year long residence in India. Association with the British during the Raj coated some Parsis with a thin Patina of Westernization and emancipation, but for the majority of Parsi women, the veil remained from the behind which they looked at the world (Bharucha 44).

This paper will examine Mistry's Parsi women from the point of patriarchy, marginality and haplessness. This paper will also examine the gender differences through a feminist reading. The main aim of this paper is to trace the mechanism of women characters who are shattered in the works of Rohinton Mistry. It would be appropriate to state Gordon Ekelund's views on this matter:

Mistry clearly casts his women characters as one of two types in a dichotomy that defines women as either pure and silent-suffering, or malevolent- Pativratas or treacherous wenches. This dichotomy transcends cultural boundaries and is strongly entrenched in Indian tradition.(Gordon 7)

Rohinton Mistry's female characters are categorized on two bases : one that deserves a status of respect and the other a female's rejection. This paper will present both types of the females. The first female character that comes, is Dilnavaz in *Such A Long Journey* who comes before us as the mindless drudgery. She is wife of Gustad, the most dignified male protagonist of the novel. Though the volume of Mistry's male characters is too prolific that they can be studied independently but female characters do need a magnifying glass to come under spotlight. This couple is the perfect contrast of male aggressiveness and female passivity. A worthy wife and a loving mother, Dilnavaz possesses all the qualities to be declared as a perfect housewife. She hovers at the periphery of the novel. Her domestic crisis assumes national importance. These lines below states:

At water- tap time Dilnavaz awoke automatically, and her
First thoughts were about Gustad and Soharb...Drums to fill. Hurry, Kitchen tank to
fill. That big bucket. And milk to buy... (SALJ 62)

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Dilnavaz is wholeheartedly trying to maintain peace at her house. She even takes the path of deadly supernatural tricks which are hard to imagine for Gustad. She does all such acts without permit that's why she is sidelined in the novel. Somehow Mistry does injustice with this character. Though she is not paid for her work but she is giving 24 hours dedication to her family. When her husband meets with an accident, she takes the role of meticulous nurse and follows all the instructions given by Madhiwalla Bonesetter. A loyal wife is also a loyal mother when her daughter Roshan is bed ridden patient of chronic diarrhea; she does all duties to her. Mistry shows Gustad's attitude who always shares his aspirations, dreams and all important things to his wife but Dilnavaz receives no appreciations by her husband. The incident of Major Bilimoria's letter shows that no doubt, Gustad tells Dilnavaz everything but she is only just informed about the decision which is already taken by him.

Another female character we meet in Mistry's first novel is Roshan. She is the actual shadow of her mother Dilnavaz. Roshan's role in *Such a Long Journey* is very delicate and feeble as compared to her brothers Darius and Sohrab. She is physically weak and emotional in nature and usually suffers from chronic diarrhea. Like her mother she too has no aspirations and dreams. She is drastically low in mental level who never questions her father's or brother's statements. We never find Roshan, discussing about any of her future ambition. In fact her father Gustad, never talks about her studies and future. Gustad is only worried about his son's betterment. Mistry showed this nature of partial behavior of the parents who want their sons to be well settled-educated while their daughters are only to grow, marry, breed children and die.

Another pitiable character is Miss Kutpitia. She is an unmarried helpless Parsi lady who is victim of her circumstances. After the death of her sister in law, Kutpitia decides to devote her life to her brother and a nephew Farad. The jinx of the lady made all her sacrifices useless. Her brother and nephew both died in an accident. Her life turns into a deep hollow vacuum. Her heartache forces her to believe in all ill-will deeds. She turns into a hypocritical advisor and starts supporting people by supernatural ways. When she comes to know about Dilnavaz's problems she provides her imported knowledge of spells and tricks to cure all domestic worries. Mistry pokes fun of such behavior of females but he is not able to give the hidden reason behind such sort of behavior.

Another character from Mistry's first novel is Alamai who is proudly pronounced as a 'domestic vulture' by her husband. Alamai is the wife of Gustad's friend Dinshawji. In the beginning we find her as lacking in duties of a wife. Dinshawji usually complains about her impulsive and ignorant behavior. She is as a lady who fails as a wife. Gradually we find that all the complaints of Dinshawji's were correct. She was much interested in her trunk deliverance than her husband's dead body. Such type of insensitive ladies in the society are actually the cause of all women's suffering. These silly females are responsible too for making women secondary to men.

Last but not the least female character of Mistry's first novel is Laurie Continuo. She is the minor character who is typist in the bank and target of Dinshawji's lewd jokes.

A fine Balance, the second novel of Mistry has female with a high status i.e Dina Dalal. She is a daughter, a sister, a wife, a widow and an independent business woman. The character of Dina is made with such a force that without her the novel couldn't be imagined. Mistry does a very special favour with Dina Dalal that he lets her develop as a strong individual in her life. She is a lady who deserves a salute from the readers. Circumstances make her life full of struggle but Dina is firm and maintains a balance in her life. She does not accept her brother's charity. The childhood of Dina is fully blissful and cheerful due to her father's love and care. In the beginning, she is like Roshan in *Such a Long Journey*. Everybody takes Dina as gifted child but the fate makes her a tragic lady. The turning of the fate can be seen when her father dies. This incident shakes Dina's life and future. The criticism and praise that Mistry has received for his treatment of women only scratches the surface of the broad range of females, in his three works of fiction. She lives alone after the untimely death of her husband Rustom and earns her living by sewing garments. Her moneymaking ventures also include the letting of a room in her apartment. Dina possesses a sharp, shrewd kind of intelligence. She is, as Mistry himself puts it, "a smart little girl (who) knows how to get what she wants..." (AFB 16). Her brother Nusswan contrasts hugely with her, he has no ambitions of his own nor does he have Dina's adaptability: "the son was not made of the same solid stuff... (he) wouldn't amount to much" (AFB 16).

Dina fights for her independence and individuality but she faces the continuous failures and threats by society. She loses her flat and her brother's home. Dina, chooses to be displaced from 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 re-structure her life without being economically dependent on a man. For her, life is a series of emotional upheavals and relocations of emotional bonds. Life of Dina is changed when it is dominated by her brother. He frequently beats her for gaining respect. She was slapped and beaten up "He got the ruler and stuck her with it flat across the palms, then, because he deemed the offence extremely serious, with the edge over her knuckles. 'This will teach you to look like a loose woman.' (AFB 23-24). Dina's brother, Nusswan, personifies the difference between the cultural pattern of Hindu and Parsi Community while suggesting her to remarry again after her husband's death. He points out that Parsi community won't forbid a widow in marrying again. Here Mistry highlights the generosity of his own culture and community. Even in Parsi community there is discrimination between male and female. After her mother's death, Dina protests and asserts her individuality. She marries Rustom Dalal, whom she loves intensely. Dina is the symbol of the new self dependent 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 is the lady who challenges the decision of the destiny. She earns her own livelihood and leads a self-dependent life. Nusswan creates several complications, he denies her to continue her schooling and even he restricts her to cut her hair. He is

totally trying to control her by his narrow mentality. 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.

Another woman character who comes next is Roopa. She is a lady who makes compromises with her 'self' for feeding her 'male child'. We are here surprised at the courage displayed by Roopa and the extent to which she is ready to take risk for the well-being of her child. The height of injustice can be gauged from this fact that all three daughters of Roopa die. But it will be strange to accept that the death of the girl child is normal? Roopa becomes victim of rape by watchman but she silently bears all tragic incidents for the sake of her child. This incident shows the helplessness of the women who entangles with everything but remain silent for her husband and child. Other gender discrimination episode can be seen in Narayan's family. His son and daughters are treated differently by the older women.

Omprakash's sisters resented his visits. No one paid attention to Leela and Rekha if their brother was in the house. It started as soon as he stepped in the door".

'Look at my child! How thin he has become!' complained Radha. 'is your uncle feeding you or not?'...

But she used the excuse to lavish on him special treats like cream, dry fruits, and sweetmeats, bursting with pleasure while he ate...

Roopa, too, relished the sight of her lunching, munching grandson. She sat like a referee, reaching to wipe away a crumb from the corner of his mouth, refilling his plate, pushing a glass of lussi within his reach... (AFB 141)

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 moral attitudes and liberal views through characters.

The next character is Dina's mother, Mrs. Shroff is just opposite in comparison to her daughter's strength. She is not able to cope up with the tragic circumstances. Her ill health is the cause of her weak mindset. A sudden death of her husband upsets Mrs. Shroff's life. After Nusswan's marriage she withdraws her self from life fully. With this incident we can find that for women the need of their spouse is must for leading life. They remain fully dependent on their husbands they can not imagine their own liberal life. Dina's mother, Mrs. Shroff, who is from a different generation, does not match up in terms of perseverance and strength to her daughter. For these women, being completely dependent on their husbands and never knowing personal freedom during marriage, is a question of the crisis of identity.

The last character is Ruby, sister-in-law of Dina. She has played a hidden role in Dina's life when Nusswan denied the continuing of her studies. Ruby provides sum of money for shopping. Dina utilized that for commuting to public library. Ruby's money helps Dina for education and musical concerts.

Mistry's third novel, *Family Matters* has also not been free from women portraits. Women of Mistry's world whether educated or uneducated, adopt same behavior within environment. Mistry's novels deal with Bombay Parsi men/women. No doubt Parsi men and women are well educated and well mannered in the society. Mistry has portrayed different types of women in his third novel who can be categorized as nurturer, bully, spiteful, timid and independent. Coomy, Roxana, Jeroo, Yasmin, Lucy, Phoola, Villi, the Card Master, Mrs. Kapur and Daisy are some of the women characters in this novel who are different from each other. Commonly mothers are referred as nurturers, Roxana and Jeroo come under this category. They both love their family and are very careful in the unity of the family members. Jeroo is Nariman's mother and Roxana is Nariman's biological daughter. When Nariman falls in love with the non-Parsi girl Lucy, Jeroo tries her best to divert Nariman's mind. She arranges a get together, So that all her family members and relatives may convince Nariman about the importance of marrying girl from his own community. Finally her motherly efforts succeeded and she arranged Nariman's marriage with Yasmin, a Parsi girl.

Another character who comes in the novel is Lucy Braganza. Some women feel shy and timid when they move with other people. There are strengths and weaknesses in being shy. They are very cautious thinkers. They think a lot before doing anything. Also they are easily approachable. They appear to be innocent and good to others and believable. At the same time they are very stubborn and strong in their decisions. She is introduced to us as the beloved of Narimann a pivotal figure of the novel. They both have an intense affair and want to be a couple. The objections raised by Narimann's family lead to separation of this loving couple. This incident shows how a love affair ends with the separation. Narimann tried his best to convince his parents but he failed which resulted in Narimann and Lucy both deciding to remain single. To quote:

...Lucy tried one last time to convince him; they could turn their backs on everyone, walks away from the suffocating world of family tyrannies, from the guilt and blackmail that parents specialized in. They could start their own life together, just the two of them. Struggling to maintain his resolve, he told her they had discussed it all before, their families would hound them, no matter what. The only way to do this was to end it quickly. (FM:13-14).

After Nariman's marriage Lucy follows him. She discontinues her studies and work as the helper in the same apartment where Narimann resides. She has abandoned her M.A., she does not have a job, and is still living at the YWCA. (FM 65) She is disowned by her parents and forced to close Narimann's chapter from her life. Infact, Narimann pleaded her to return to her own native place but she denied. She became mentally disturbed and met a tragic end. Still she hovers in the mind of Narimann.

Another character is Roxana, the gentle lady who is a biological daughter of Narimann. She is a selfless woman living in a small flat with her husband Yezad and two children Murad and Jehangir. Her world is nothing but her family. Roxana is very careful in maintaining the economy of the family. Though her husband earns less, she manages to run her family happily. She also wants to know very often whether her family members are happy and satisfied.

She often asked daddy, Are you happy Yezdaa, is everything okay? This question Mummy asked Murad and him too, she wanted happiness for all of them, needed to check it constantly. (FM 92)

She keeps her family members in well-mannered and disciplined way. Her kids are also very adjustable and obedient. They always show happiness like their mother even though they are not happy. When Narimann falls sick, she readily accepts all the daughterly duties. She takes care of her father though there was not enough space in her house. She was in great trouble with money and facilities. Roxana never complains about anything. This shows the ideal *sanskars* of Indian daughters who are born with a large heart. She also shares the responsibility of her half-sister Coomy. Another character is Daisy Icheporia who plays violin and is self-dependent. "She is the only one who has achieved much in her career without the support of a man—a commendable feat indeed. She has got the spirit to carry forward, achieving higher goals" (Sujata 155).

Mistry's another novel *Tales From Firozsha Baag* opens with the first story "Auspicious Occasion". It starts with Rustomji and Mehroo. Rustomji is a paradoxical character who is caught between tradition and modernity. He always behaves like owner of Mehroo as he orders and shows his anger on Mehroo. As the story opens, we find that she is cooking, making children ready to go to school, preparing for agiary. Mehroo is shown as a domestic lady, always ready to serve her husband; she is emotional and believes in rituals, social norms. She is sixteen year old while her husband is thirty six year old. She also belongs to a very orthodox family and carries traditional orthodox notions:

Mehroo came, her slippers flopping in time-ploof ploof-one two. She was considerably younger to her husband, having been married off to a thirty-six year old man when she was a mere girl of sixteen, before completing her final high school year. Rustomji, a successful Bombay lawyer, had been considered a fine catch by Mehroo's parents- no one had anticipated that he would be wearing dentures by the time he was fifty. (TFFB 3).

Though Parsis are most educated and liberal, we find that Mehroo is the victim of patriarchy. Mehroo runs as fast as her slippers allow but Rustomji calmly reads "The Times of India". However, women are not only tortured and harassed in household as Mistry exposes the main priest Dhunjisha, 'a salacious old man taking advantage of his venerable image', 'loves to touch and feel women, the old goat—the younger and fleshier, the more fun he has hugging and squeezing them'. He claims that the priest exchanges lewd remarks amidst scriptural recitals especially on days of ceremony (TFFB 16).

Once again Mistry shows the submissiveness of women as both Mehroo and Rustomji have travelled the same distance and Mehroo did all—cooking, moping, preparing children to go to school and went in the kitchen in order to prepare tea for Rustomji. She never takes tea, but she makes an exception that day for the sake of Rustomji and takes tea that's why Mistry portrays her as ideal and 'pativrata':

She prepared two cups of tea. Between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. She never drank tea; it was one of her strictest rules. Today, for Rustomji's sake, she would make an exception" (TFFB:24).

However, Mistry does not only portray middle class Parsi women and gender politics in this story, but also incorporates Hindu women who visit the Parsi homes as servants. Generally Parsis call them 'Ganga', 'Tanoo', 'Mala' etc. They are treated as things and we find that Rustomji keeps lusty eyes on these servants. As Mistry narrates: "Rustomji enjoyed watching gajra modify her sari each morning before she started work [TFFB 11]. He has listened to his father and other Parsi members singing the lines in the parties. Those were derogatory to the servants.

The story *The Ghost of Firozsha Baag* circles around Jakeline, a Goan. Her seth calls her "Jaakaylee". She is presented as an ayah to a Parsi family and she feels proud of it. Once again a woman character appreciated for her womanly qualities as for cooking and humiliated by both male and female due to her color. "So then new bai called me Jaakaylee also, and children do the same. I don't care about it now. If someone asks my name I say Jaykaalee" (TFFB 50). She says "I was saying it was very lucky for me to become ayah in a Parsi house" (TFFB 52). It suggests that she is very submissive lady and does not dare to defy patriarchy. However, she is visited at night by a mischievous ghost but when she tells about the ghosts' visit to seth and bai, all of them mock at her and once again a woman is not taken seriously. Once again Mistry shows women to be fearful and trapped in magic, superstition and ghosts.

In *Collectors*, we find two characters Mrs. Mody and Mrs. Bulsara. They have totally confined themselves to the kitchen work. They are always shown thinking and acting for the welfare of their sons and husbands. They have lost their identity to such an extent that Mistry does not consider important to introduce them by their names but they are always referred by their husband's surname.

Thus, Mistry's women characters are marginalized and powerless in every aspect of society. Knowingly, or unknowingly, Mistry himself does not let any female character develop thoroughly. Not only in novels but also in short stories too, almost all of the female characters are stereotyped and chained strongly in it; and those who are exceptions are not portrayed as courageous as men characters. In *Such a Long Journey* and *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry hangs between stereotyped and overpowering women but he remains tilted to the stereotype. While in *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* some women are independent and can be categorized as New Woman.

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