

## **Women's Marginalisation in *A Fine Balance***

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One is not born, but rather becomes a woman...It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...which is described as Feminine.

Simon De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

### **Abstract**

It is the irony of fact or situation, that a woman, who occupies half of the entire humanity, is considered an inferior to man in society. We have innumerable historical references and examples in which woman has been shown as submissive, emotional, and prevented from enjoying the same privilege and rights as those of her counterpart. In our society we prioritise one group naturally putting the other at margin by the help of language and action. Pushing a particular community or group to the margin or to the periphery, or away from the centre creates a hegemonic binary opposition. This is created through a long process of cultural other. Woman is the pillar of family and society, but she has become the victim of multiple atrocities practised upon her through ages. This paper will analyse and discuss the place of women in our so-called civilised society as revealed in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. It will discuss how woman characters lead a life of discrimination and oppression in male dominated society. Depiction of woman characters in *A Fine Balance* would be re-examined and discussed with new parameters and methods.

**Keywords-** *Patriarchy, Oppression, Subaltern, Marginalisation, Gender Discrimination*

Rohinton Mistry's novels are the embodiment of society, history, politics, culture, myth, tradition, religion, gender discrimination, dalit oppression and much more. The subaltern women thus created burdened with the subordinated positions imbibing with the negative at all levels, whether it is social, cultural, sexual, personal, or economical. She is considered bereft of voice and dignity. She began to be identified with the image that she has zero performance or a cipher with no essential meaning or sense of being. She is the deviant, the deformed signifying all the lacks, the voids. She is the victim of racism classicism, and most importantly, she is subjugating ideology of patriarchy. They have

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naturalised their subjugations in the mind set of men and they often fail to recognise their pitiable condition. They accept their positions as laid down by the patriarchal systems of society for the benefit of men. It is universally true that being a woman is a biological categorization but being feminine is a cultural construct. So called feminine categorization was constructed keeping in view the traits of male, the masculine. Thus women were culturally put aside and termed as subaltern. Simon de Beauvoir points out the process of cultural othering in the following lines, “She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the identical, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute- she is the Other. (Beauvoir 16)

Patriarchal ideology tries to reinforce an already entrenched system of exploitation. It has taken a form of ideology and is executed with a set of multiple forces of oppression. They are the one who occupy the lowest position in the social ladder. Patriarchy plays an important role in maintaining and supporting this ladder of oppression. Literature by male authors indoctrinated by the ideology of patriarchy provides a prejudiced, mutilated graph of women.

Women’s marginalization is an old story. They have been regarded as subservient to men since time immemorial. We find even great scholars describing them as an inferior to men. The great Greek philosopher of immense popularity, Aristotle believed that women are an incomplete version of masculinity. He considered women defective by nature and incomplete in contrast to men. They are physically and mentally weaker and needed to be looked after by men. Sigmund Freud, the well known psychoanalyst too was prejudiced against women. He propounded a theory named ‘Penis Envy’ in order to define female sexuality. He was of the view that girls began to recognise the distinction between them and men when reached the age of maturity enough to notice penis of their male counter parts. This deficiency develops among them inferiority complex which instil in them a ‘penis envy’. Consequently they began to consider male gender superior. Gender bias was not limited to theoretical level only, rather in every realm of society they are treated as secondary and subaltern to men. In our family which is the basic institution of society women are given secondary place and marginalised. Traditional family institutions set a niche for men as a head of the family where as women destined to play secondary roles of housekeeping and child rearing only.

Kate Millet in her ‘*Sexual Politics*’ (1970) argues that there is always pulling for power and most of the institutions are made and possessed by men so all the social arrangements to manipulate and prolong the dominance of men over women. We find that women are marginalised in every field whether it is familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal or artistic. We find that Hebrew Bible, Greek Bible, Islamic writings, Parsian writings, and Hindu writings in each religious books woman are given secondary place. All the texts are portraying women as subaltern because they lack

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masculinity. The feminist's writers argue that women have accepted and socialised themselves in patriarchal ideology.

Rohinton Mistry's works are infused with the themes of women's marginalisation and oppressions. His every fiction carries this theme. His *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, a collection of eleven short stories is rich in presenting women subaltern position in the society. Most of the women presented in his fiction are marginalised and subaltern. The statement given by Gordon Ekelund regarding women's place in the works of Mistry is mentionable-

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- pativrata or treacherous wenches. This dichotomy transcends cultural boundaries and is strongly entrenched in Indian tradition. (Chakravorty, 132)

*A Fine Balance* deals with the theme of woman marginalised position in the society. It incorporates several women characters leading marginalised and subaltern life depriving of fundamental rights. Important among them are- Dina Dalal, Roopa, Leela, Rekha, Mrs Shroff, Mrs Aban Kohlah, Ruby, Zenobia, Mrs Gupta and Shirin Aunty. Dina is the central character in the novel *A Fine Balance*. She is the daughter of Mr Shroff who met many ups and downs in her life. She is an ill-fated woman. She wanted to lead a successful, independent and contented life but situation went beyond her expectation turning her in an absurd situation and life. She married a man of her own choice who was a doctor by profession but her conjugal life did not stay long. With a very short span of time her husband met an accident and died, having left Dina all alone in the world of dejection, suppression and marginalisation. Nusswan, her cruel bother dominates her in every walk of life and wanted to put her in under the veil. He becomes dominant after the death of his father and forced Dina to leave her study. She couldn't complete her matriculation. She was relegated domestic works and to lead a life of destitute. The pitiable condition of Dina and patriarchal behaviour of Nusswan can be described in the following lines-

He slapped her. 'Don't question me when I ask you something...He slipped her again 'No back talk, I'm warning you.' He got the ruler and struck her with it flat across the palms, then, because he deemed the offence extremely serious, with the edge over her knuckles...He stepped back and flung a mugful of cold water at her from the bucket. Shivering, she started defiantly at him, her nipples stiffening. He pinched one, hard, and she flinched. 'Look at you with your little breasts starting to grow. You think you are a woman already. I shall cut them right off along with your wicked tongue. (*A Fine Balance* 23-24)

If we analyse Dina's character in the modern perspective, we find that she was a woman of dauntless soul who never wishes to be trapped in the net of patriarchy. She rejects many rich marriage

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proposals approached through her brother Nussawn. She falls in love with Rustomji, a doctor by profession in the concert classes and married him without having consent of her brother. She was fated to suffer and lead a marginalised life. At the third marriage anniversary her husband died and she was forced by situation to live at her parental house against her wishes. Now once again she was trapped in the hands of Nussawan from where she wanted to get freedom for ever. Nussawan now becomes more suppressive and orders her strictly to perform domestic works more effectively. After having brought many marriage proposals for Dina Nusswan became angry at her non-inclination attitude and rebuked her-

What excuse do you have? You were at funeral, you saw Rustom's body, and you heard the prayers. He has been dead and digested for more than a year now'. As soon as he said he said it, he rolled his eyes heavenward to ask forgiveness for this bit of irreverence. 'Do you know how fortunate you are in our community?' Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown 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 him. 'I can always go to the Towers of Silence and let the vultures eat me up, if that will make you happy.' Shameless woman! What a loose mouth! Such blasphemy! All I am saying is appreciate your position. For you it is possible to live a full life get married again, have children. Or do you prefer to live forever on my charity. (*A Fine Balance*, 52)

Nusswan's statement regarding women's place in Hindu society is noteworthy. Through the mouth of Nusswan, Rohinton Mistry highlights the drawbacks of Hindu Indian society. He pointed out marginalised and oppressive condition of women. We always find gender discrimination and marginalisation of women. Nussawan stands for every man who wants to put women under the four walls of the house.

As per tradition of Parsi community Dina was taken to the fire temple by her tyrannical brother to pray for enlightenment. Priest's touching, hugging and patting her became ludicrous and boredom for Dina. Rohinton Mistry presents the religious dogma in the following lines-

Dina squirmed in his grasp as he patted her head, rubbed her neck, stroked her back and pressed himself against her. He had a very short beard, stubble that resembled flakes of grated coconut, and it scraped her cheeks and forehead...Heartened by their support, Nusswan began taking Dina with him to the fire temple once a week. There, he thrust a stick of sandalwood in her hand and whispered fiercely in her ear, 'Now pray properly-ask Dadaji to make you a good girl, ask him to make you obedient.'... 'Good. Now all the bad thoughts will leave your head, you will feel peace and quiet in your heart.' (*A Fine Balance* 20)

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Dina can be described as the epitome of courage and patience. Despite of all pressures and threats she decided to live all alone and face the harsh realities of her life. Now she started dwelling with her deceased husband's relative Darab and Shirin Aunty. Darab and Shirin had performed a determinant role in the life of Dina. They helped her and encouraged to lead a life of independence. But the situation changes and she became orphan. Both of her patrons died and she was left all alone in a destitute condition. She once again shifted to her husband's tiny flat. Her decision of providing hair-cut for children was too shattered because of being prevailed male mind set up in the society. Dustoor Framji, a priest in the temple irritated Dina too much that she had developed antipathy for him because of his lewd comments towards all the young girls. She was too terrified to avoid visit to the temple. In her marriage ceremony she tried her best to be away from the priest. Rohinton Mistry does not stop here for narrating the marginalised positions of women in our society. He presented the example of gender discrimination and subaltern position at the places which is considered the repository of women's rights and privilege. Dina was surrounded by lawyers at the court showing their degrees to allure her. Some of them make advances towards her-

What are the charges, madam?' shouted someone standing on his toes to be seen. 'I can handle criminal and civil!' Specks of his spit landed on her glasses and cheeks. She flinched, and tried again to free herself. Then in the crush, a hand was squeezed her bottom, while another passed over her breasts. 'You rogue! You shameless rascals! She struck out with her elbows, and managed to kick a shin or two before they scattered. (*A Fine Balance* 560)

Instead of being dominated and crushed by both fate and people of the society, she succeeded in creating a world of freedom and own choice where male candidate has no interference in her decision making process. She began to work as a tailor. But with the passage of time her eyesight grew weak and now no more in the condition to sew. With the help of Zenobia, she had decided to hire tailor and accepted Maneck Kohlahas her paying guest. Om and Ishver too helped her for creating a world without fear and male interference. Rent collector began to threaten her continuously for letting live Ishvar and Om. He forced her to evacuate the flat and return to the oppressive place from where she wanted to get freedom. She tried her best to lead a life of self respect and honour but our male dominated society always snatched her freedom and happiness. She was proved to be a good caretaker of Ishvar and Om whom she had helped during their adverse situation of life. When Ishvar's leg is amputated and Om is castrated she helped them. Nandani Bhanto Dewnarain wrote about her condition at that time-

This is where Dina's fight for independence ends. It would seem that beyond the sheer intensity of her character, Dina represents some of the realities of the condition of women in the subcontinent. As a woman, as a widow, Dina's life exists at the function of too many margins.

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The novels choice of social realism does not allow for a fairy-tale transcendence of material conditions. Though she is fairy, energetic and fiercely independent, Dina's feminist struggles are thwarted by the same kind of social predetermination that affects the livelihood of her tailor friends. (Dewnarain 106)

The return of Dina at her father's house after having lost everything, she had raised a very pertinent and debateable issue. It questions and suppresses the power of woman and lays emphasis on the fact that women can do nothing if family members are not with them. They cannot take decisions all alone. She is again and again trapped in the net of slavery and patriarchy. Mistry might be suggesting us that Dina was a kite. She set herself free to walk and soar but controlling was in the hands of patriarchy. Commenting about Dina's return to her parental house Gita Vishwanath points out-

Dina Dalal's ultimate return to her brother's household prioritises the norm of the male headed family. This defeatist end constructed by a male writer for Dina is of significance in feminist style. The single woman imaged as helpless, and incapable must therefore be restored to her 'rightful place' i.e. within the family structure. (Dodiya 41)

Regarding Dina Dala's up and down in a stereotypical, man headed society and her bold behaviour to subvert the norm of the society, the following lines quoted by Bharucha is mention worthy-

Dina as a young girl, a married woman and a dependent widow constantly upsets the balance of patriarchy and has to pay for it in her truncated education, her husband's death, the loss of her tailors her home ultimately her much prized independence. Dina, however is fighter and after every loss of balance, she clammers onto the knife-edge again to once more that ever elusive fine balance. (Bharucha 166)

In *A Fine Balance* we find that even the old people who are at the edge of death discriminate women on the basis of caste colour and language. Ruby after having been understood as ayah by Nusswan's grandfather was shouted at. Parsi people preferred good looks and fair complexion. Ruby was discriminated on the basis of her colour-

Ruby sat on the sofa holding the old man's hand. She asked if he would like her to massage his feet. Without waiting for an answer she grabbed the left one and began kneading it. The toenails were yellow, long overdue for a clipping. Enraged, he tore his foot from her grasp. kya karta hai? Chaloji! Too startled at being addressed in Hindi, Ruby sat there gapping. Grandfather turned to Nussawan, 'Does not she understand? What language does your ayah speak? Tell her to get off my sofa, wait in the kitchen. Ruby rose in a huff and stood by the

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door. 'Rude old man!' she hissed. 'Just because my skin is a little dark! (A Fine Balance 27-28)

Another female character portrayed in 'A Fine Balance' with the theme of women marginalisation is Roopa. Hailing from a low caste (chamar), she became the centre of Mistry's narration. She has been presented not showing love and affection to her female children. She offers special love and affection to her son. Her three daughters died in infancy but the fourth turned to be male one for whom she lost her pride and purity of womanhood. Illustration of gender discrimination can be presented by putting following lines-

Then they had a son, and the family rejoiced greatly. The child was called Ishvar, and Roopa watched over him with special with the special ardour and devotion she had learned was reserved for male children. She made sure he always had enough to eat. Going hungry herself was a matter of course- that she often did even to keep Dukhi fed. But for this child she did not hesitate to steal either. After her milk went dry, Roopa began nocturnal visits to the cows of various landowners. While Dukhi and the child slept, she crept out of the hut with a small brass haandi, sometime between midnight and cock-crow. If he awoke in the night as she was leaving, he said nothing, and lay shivering till she returned. (A Fine Balance 97)

Poverty forced her to violate the norm of the society. She dares to go to steal milk for her baby boy but she was caught red handed by watchman; she was molested by the watchman for that thief. The incident is not simple one rather it raises the issue for the safety women in our male dominated society. It throws light on the courageous aspects of her character and role of a mother as to what extent a mother can do for the safety of her baby child. Dukhi couldn't take these extreme steps of stealing the milk in the night. Mistry wants to highlight that women are stronger and more courageous but their all steps and wishes turned futile in the cruel hands of male. Her typical condition is presented like this-

"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... Is It.? But wait, you cannot go just like that,' he said with laugh. 'You haven't given me anything in return.' He walked towards her. Stepping back, she forced a laugh too. 'I don't have anything. That's why I came here in the night, for the sake of my child.' 'You have got something,' He put out his hand and squeezed her left breast. She struck his hand away. 'I only have to shout once,' he warned, and slipped his hand inside her blouse. She shuddered at the touch, doing nothing this time. He led her cringing to the cot and ripped open her top three buttons. She crossed her arms in front. He pulled them down and buried his mouth in her breasts, laughing softly as she tried to squirm away. 'I gave you so many oranges. You won't even let me taste your sweet mangoes?' She wept softly while undressing, and lay

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down as he instructed. She continued to weep during the time he moved and patted on top of her. (*A Fine Balance* 98-99)

Gender discrimination is intensified with the illustration and discussion of Om and his two sisters Leela and Rekha. Leela and Rekha are confined to domestic work while Om was sent to the city for tailoring. Here this gender discrimination reminded us the pitiable condition of Judith Shakespeare; an imaginary character depicted 'A Room of One's Own' by Virginia Woolf. Judith Shakespeare, the sister of William Shakespeare was more intelligent than Shakespeare himself but she was confined to the domestic works. There was no use of her talent that is why she remained behind. Here the condition is the same. Om was given special facility to grow and excel his talent. Whenever Om visits home, he is treated in a very special way by his mother and grandmother. He became the centre of his family. No one cares about Rekha and Leela. This double standard in behaviour meted out with them filled them with inferiority complex. Mistry points out the weakness of Indian mother towards their baby girl and double standard behaviour adopted by them in rearing. Women themselves became the oppressor of women. Following lines are rich in this context-

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?' 'He looks thin because he has grown taller,' was Narayan's explanation. But she used the excuse to lavish on him special treats like cream, dry fruits, and sweetmeats, bursting with pleasure while he ate. Now and then her fingers swooped into his plate, scooped up a morsel and tenderly transported it to his mouth. No meal was complete unless she had fed him something with her own hands...Omprakash's sisters were silent spectators at mealtime ritual. Leela and Rekha watched enviously, knowing better than to protest or pleas with the adults. During rare moments when no one was around, Omprakash shared the delicacies with them. More often, though, the two girls wept quietly in their beds at night. (*A Fine Balance* 141-142)

These girls are totally marginalized within the same boundary of the house. They are never offered dry food to eat, milk to drink. They remain all alone to weep. Nobody comes forward to respect their emotional and feelings.

We know that men are centre of all power since ages but in reality they are hollow without women. Man is himself half women in nature. But this is irony of our double standard behaviour that we feel pride and happiness at the birth of male child at our home and become gloomy and sad at the birth of female child. It is due to our patriarchal mind set up. This mind set up is fatal for safety of goals and is the base of gender discrimination. We find the same situation in Roopa's family. When she delivers a male child it brings rejoice and celebration in the family. In Indian society women are



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bullied for not delivering baby boy. They are seen as ill-women. Women are held responsible for the delivery of baby boy. But we all know and it is scientifically proven that the determination of gender of the fatal is not in our hand. Men are consisted of xy chromosome while women possess xx chromosome only. The mingling of xx chromosome results in a girl while the mingling of xy chromosome results in baby boy. Thus how a woman is responsible for delivery of girl baby. P Shelvan writes in this connection-

After their marriage, women became the property of their husbands to be abused and bullied. Women are thrashed by their husbands and if daughters are born, are ordered to discreetly get rid of the new born and they are strangled, poisoned or starved to death. (Shelvan, 69)

We find such situation prevailed in the house of Roopa. Following lines present the pitiable and marginalised condition of Roopa-

The news of a second son created envy in upper castes homes where marriages had also taken place around time Dukhi and Roopa were wed, but where the women were still childless or awaiting a male issue. It was hard for them not to be resentful- the birth of daughters often brought them beatings from their husbands and their husbands' families. Sometimes they were ordered to discreetly get rid of the newborn. Then they had no choice but to strangle the infant with her swaddling clothes, poison her, or let her starve to death. 'What is happening to the world?' they complained. 'Why two sons in an untouchable's house, and not even in ours?' What could a Chamaar pass on to his sons that the gods should reward him thus?' Something was wrong; the law of Manu had been subverted. (*A Fine Balance* 99-100)

### Conclusion

To conclude we can say that representation of women in *A Fine Balance* has been artistically depicted and narrated. They have been given secondary place in every walks of lives which need to be discussed and explored from feminist point of view. Their choice, feeling, and priority of lives are buried under the pillow of patriarchy. Through the depiction of such characters in the novel the novelist has suggested us to change our mind set towards women in the society.

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