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Portrayal of Female Characters: In the Fiction of Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract:

Parsi wives are great householders and homemakers. In addition they are strong and protective mothers. Present study examines the world view provided by Parsi women from behind the veil of patriarchy, marginality and helplessness and attempts a feminist reading from the three selected novels under study. Roxana in *Family Matters* and Dilnavaz in *Such a Long Journey* and Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance* are the true representatives of Parsi women. They are not today's feminists which mean they neither are not stubborn and head-strong females nor are they second class partners in the man-woman relationship. They excel in domesticity, household management and accounts involved therein. They excel in the alchemy of cooking and delight in fixing traditional and gourmet dishes. They respect their males because they are bread-winners. They realize that they work hard and hustle at the market places. In the critical periods of economic crunch they are not reluctant to guide their partners and tightening their belts. This makes them sensitive and loving companions though not in sentimental mode. Compared to their husbands they are more psychically tuned though the men folk are more vital in terms of their persona and exteriority because of their functioning and struggling in the world out there away from home. Resultantly the children are more balanced in their relationships with their parents. It is because of this harmonious bond between father and mother that the Parsi family has endured in an exemplary way despite the various changes in lives of members of families like vicissitude, wreckage of institutions and erosion of values.

Keywords: Feminist, economic crunch, exemplary, harmonious, vicissitude.

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry, an Indian-born writer of international repute and fame presently lives in and writes from Canada. He was born on July 3, 1952 in Mumbai. In 1975 Mistry along with his wife migrated to Canada and has lived there since then near Toronto. In 1983, he started his writing career as a short story writer and within a very short span of time he produced works which was internationally acclaimed and bagged many awards. His three major works are *Such a Long Journey* which is set at the time of Pakistan's war with Bangladesh; *A Fine Balance* is set during Indira Gandhi's Emergency and *Family Matters* in post 1992 Mumbai the year of the Babri Masjid Crisis in India. As a writer, who lives and write from Canada, Mistry's writings

focus mainly on India and its culture. Like many expatriate writers, he continues a relationship with his country in his writings and has enriched his readers understanding of it. His novels expose parental authority, class hierarchies, personal betrayal, political supremacy and corruption. He also dealt in depth with the problems of untouchables, the poor people and downtrodden who are at the bottom of the society. Regarding the identity issue Nilufer Bharucha writes:

That as an Indian who now lives and writes from Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the Indian Diaspora. However Mistry is also a Parsi Zoroastrian and as a person whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in a Diaspora even in India. This informs his writing with the experience of multiple displacements. (Bharucha 36)

Rohinton Mistry has very skillfully portrays all the characters including males and females. Despite his great sympathy for the oppressed and downtrodden, Mistry's women do not enjoy the generosity. His women characters are often invisible, silent or presented within the frame work of stereotypes. Perhaps it would be too difficult for Rohinton Mistry to enter the mind and spirit of his female characters in that depth as he manages with his own gender but he has wonderfully portrayed the female characters in his fiction. Other Parsi writers like Bapsi Sidhwa and Firdaus Kanga have mentioned about the unique appearance of the Parsi ladies. The dress of Parsis gives them a unique presence. They can be easily recognized in the crowd.

The Parsi women [...] tied their heavy silk saris differently, with a triangular piece in front displaying broad, exquisitely embroidered borders. The knotted tassels of their kustis dangled as if pyjama strings were tied at the back, and white mathabanas peeked primally from beneath sari covered heads. The men wore crisp pyjamas, flowing white coats fastened with neat little bows, and flat turbans. They looked quite distinctive. (Kanga 56)

Dilnavaz – Such a Long Journey

Rohinton Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* has been one of the most remarkable and interesting novel which explore the relationships among self, community, place and identity. The story of the novel is based upon a series of real events that took place during the time of Indo-Pak war in 1971. *Such a Long Journey*, as a cluster of narratives, centralizes his community as a protagonist, basically a story of a man named as Gustad Noble a Parsi by community living with his wife and three children in the Parsi residential colony of Khodadad building in Bombay The novel captures the socio-political cultural tumult of the sixties and seventies. Dilnavaz, the wife of Gustad is the home maker, the well meaning mother. She is soft and pretty. Her life was restricted to her family. She proved to be a good mother, a good house wife. She constantly cared for her family, her elder son

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Sohrab got selected in IIT then Gustad threw a party and brought the live chicken at home. Though she was reluctant but then also she cooked it and served in the dinner. She without fail supported her husband when he enmeshed in a bank fraud. She is superstitious because she is so concerned for her husband and children that she succumbs to Miss Kutpitia's 'jaadu-mantar' non-sense. She is seen conspiring with Miss Kutpitia in creating spells for her family's well-being. Miss Kutpitia, often seen in novel suggesting some superstitious remedies to Dilnavaz when Sohrab refused taking admission in IIT"

Miss Kutpitia maintains that Roshan's illness is due to some evil eye. To protect her from it, she asks Dilnavaz to perform a ritual "Take a needle and thread, a nice strong thread with a big knot at the end. Select a yellow lime and seven chillies. Chillies must be green, not turning red. Never red string them together with the needle. Lime goes at the bottom then hang the whole thing over your door, inside the house." (Mistry 149-50)

Dilnavaz becomes so unnerved when her husband and Sohrab carry on fighting abusing each other very frequently, and about her daughter Roshan's incurable diarrhoea that goes on worsening day by day. In fact the misfortune that befalls on Gustad's family is interpreted by Miss Kutpitia from her own ideological point of view rooted in beliefs and superstitious, culturally accepted and transmitted from generation to generation.

Regarding this M.Mani Metei states-

The novel while representing this larger rhythms with universal significance, tries to bring in other smaller rhythm within its fold. One notice alongside the main plot there runs a sub-plot to affect the return of Sohrab and cure of illness of Roshan through magico-religious rites performed by Mrs. Dilnavaz following the advice of Miss Kutpitia. Miss Kutpitia is a person who "wanted to offer help and advice on matters unexplainable by the laws of nature. She claimed to know about curses and spells: both to cast and remove; about magic, black and white; about omens and auguries; about dreams and their interpretation. Most important of all ... was the ability to understand the hidden meaning of mundane events and chance occurrences; and her fanciful, fantastical imagination could be entertain in the times." (Metei 4)

Dina Dalal- A Fine Balance

A *Fine Balance* tells the story of friendships of four disparate people – Dina Dalal,

Ishvar, Omprakash and Maneck who come to live together during the tumultuous period of emergency in 1975. In this novel Mistry's characters exhibit a quiet deliberateness despite the senseless tragedies that threaten to overwhelm their lives. Apart from the main plot there is a sub-plot which is perfectly woven to depict the story of an intelligent middle-class woman, Dina Dalal who sets out to seek independence within her society. Dina was living with her parents and her elder brother Nusswan. Dina was very dear to her parents but unfortunately and untimely death of her parents brought her bad luck in her life. She was forced to leave her studies in between and do chores. She was living the life of a caged bird with her brother. Dina from very early stage of her life she started taking her own decisions defying her brother. Gradually she started going out in market for shopping and later she developed interest in music and often went out to attend concerts, where she met a Parsi boy, Rustom Dalal and slowly they became friends and finally lovers. Despite of her brother's wish Dina decided to marry Rustom. For the first time she realized this kind of love. This was absolutely new experience for Dina after her parent's death. Later, for the three years of marriage she was very happy with her husband. Unfortunately her happy married life with Rustom comes to a tragic end when Rustom is killed in a freak cycle accident on the day of their third wedding anniversary. Despite her brother's genuine offer to help her, she decides to live by herself. For Dina the memories of her married life with Rustom were so precious that she cannot ever think of marrying again. And she courageously decides to live a free and independent life. Initially, she earns her livelihood by sewing but when her eyes give way, unable to withstand the strain, she undertakes to stitch readymade garments for Au Revoir Exports owned by Mrs. Gupta, a client of Dina's classmate and friend Zenobia. To continue with her stitching business she hired two tailors Ishvar and Omprakash. Dina was a very dignified woman. She managed her long journey alone and without any body's help. She withstood all the odds and arrays boldly. The odds have been against her from childhood still through her choices she made a great deal of her cramped existence. In fact, she went beyond existence for oneself to existence for others. In the family living with .Mochis later converted in to tailors and Maneck, she achieves a rare transcendence through existential depth relationship which would have not been possible if she had not taken her freedom as a pre-pubescent. Rohinton Mistry rightly points out through his novel that the way out of the caste viciousness is not that of Gandhi who came to address it from the religious perspective and not really that of Ambedkar either who tried to take care of the evil. Now four are living like a family. They work together, cook together, wash together they show concern for one another. In terms of the title of this chapter they have freed themselves from community and caste consciousness freed themselves from the cultural shackles, they are relating as existential beings on the basis of their needs and emotions. Regarded thus Dina Dalal offers that the way out is through the alchemy of relationship. Novel progresses through a series of seemingly separate stories. Dinabai's childhood, romance, early marriage and death of her husband and struggle for survival.

Nilufer Bharucha observes of Dina:

Dina as a young girl, a married woman and a dependent widow, constantly

upset 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 and ultimately her much prized independence. Dina however is a fighter and after every loss of balance, she clammers onto the knife-edge gain to once more achieve that ever-elusive fine balance. (Bharucha-20)

Being an insider to the Parsi way of life author is at his best in depicting the quotidian realities of Dina's life. She wants a way out of caste barbarity through the dynamic of loving relationship that she offers to the untouchables across the caste lines.

Jagdish Batra states:

Zoroastrianism does not believe in casteism. The Parsis attach great value to righteousness, integrity and universal brotherhood. They believe in one God (Ahura Mazda). To prophet Zoroaster were revealed the various tenets of their faith. He did not favour any ritualism but with the passage of time, it has seeped into the Parsi faith. Zoroastrianism finds dualism in creation and looks upon the clash between the good and evil inevitable. Asha denotes the divine principle of righteousness, justice and harmony. A life of strict regimen leads to the reunion of man with God- a position that comes very near Indian Yoga. Druj is the devil's way. While in the Indian system, we have sattva, rajas and tamas as the different states of mind, in Zoroastrianism these are referred to as mainyus- spenta mainyu or the higher spiritual self consciousness which leads to humata, hukatha, and huvarstha or good thoughts, good words and good deeds and angra mainyu or the lower self-consciousness which leads to dushmata or evil deeds. (Batra 45-46)

Roxana-FAMILY MATTERS

Family Matters delves into the trials of a Parsi family coping with events that swirl seemingly uncontrollably around them. The plot centers on 79-year-old Nariman Vakeel a Parsi who, due to the ravages of Parkinson's disease, falls and breaks his ankle, forcing a reluctant daughter to care for him. *Family Matters* explores the nature of Nariman's relationships with his extended family: his step-daughter Coomy and his stepson Jal. There is one biological daughter of Nariman and Yasmin named Roxana. She lives in the same city in another flat named Pleasant Villa with her husband Yezad and their two sons Murad and Jehangir. Yezad is working in Sporting Goods Emporium. Roxana is an another interesting but underdeveloped character, she seems to have the most balanced attitude towards religion, not being comfortable with Yezad's initial abandoning of the Zoroastrian religion, and also with his new aggressive orthodoxy. Roxana appears to be the most significant female character. She is a selfless woman coping

up with needs of family and performing her daily duties without fail. Her life is centralized to her family only. She seems to be a reserved person, often seen in a situation of apparent domestic happiness with both Yezaad and her children, while she can be fair and objective. Her childhood was the happiest with all her family members and relatives but now she leads a lonely life. Despite of all the odds in her life She manages them all in an earnest way. Though, the income of her husband was not fairly enough to meet the two ends but she skillfully managed the expenditure and requirements of the family. She has brought up her family members in well-mannered and disciplined way. She was the only member in family who proved to be worth for her father when Nariman fall sick, she readily accepts to take care of her father though there was no enough space and money in her house. She shares the responsibility of her half-sister Coomy. Patience is the main quality of the Roxana, which is focus in the novel. Rangarajan, the plasterer who thought of her to be an excellent example of womanhood. He further expressed Roxana as a lady of serenity and poise.

He pays a tribute to her as a house wife, "What are you saying, dear lady? Housewifery is the most important calling, requiring umpteen talents. Without housewife there is no home: without home, no family. And without family, nothing else matters, everything from top to bottom falls apart or descends into chaos. Which is basically the malady of the West...?" (Mistry 175)

Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry has given to his characters in his fiction the real picture. The sub-plots and the main plots are so well structured and woven that the readers feel riveted and involved while reading. The pleasure of reading Mistry's work lies in the experience of encountering emotional truth in fiction. The truth of characters and actions is so rooted in human nature that they go on existing in the imagination long after the reader has finished reading. Mistry has explained different women characters in his novels as caring, loving, rude, shy, independent, fiery and energetic. Though all the women characters are not highlighted in the novel, but each character plays an important part for the development of main story. The only experimentation with an independent, self-willed woman is through the figure of the young and rebellious Dina Dalal, who can be treated as an existential character throughout her whole life for the most part. Dina represents some of the realities of the condition of the women in the subcontinent. As a woman, as a widow, Dina's life exists at the junction of too many margins. She lead her life as an existentialist character, she took all her decisions by herself and never let anybody to interfere. Contrary to Dina in *Such a Long Journey*, Roxana and Dilnavaz portrayed as true Parsi ladies their lives was dependant on husbands, They never exercised their freedom and throughout they restricted themselves to maintain homes and families. In the above discussion we can say that Mistry's India is not the India of the Vedas, Upanishdas, Dharamshastras, Brahmans'...It is not the India of Sri Aurobindo and Raja Rao... Rohinton Mistry envisions India in terms of his and his characters existential experience.

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