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## The Portrayal of Women in Rohinton Mistry's Works: A Study

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at exploring the women immigrants while settling down in a foreign country in a new milieu—their problems, anxieties, miserable plights in the light of present socio political scenario especially in the works of Rohinton Mistry. Over the past several years Rohinton Mistry has established himself as one of Canada's most critically acclaimed writers. He has gained a magnanimous popularity in the world of literature. His works such as, *Tales from FirozhaBaag* (1987), *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995) and *Family Matters* (2002) have received virtually unanimous praise. Mistry's characters, represent the Parsi Community, whose identity has been historically problematized. It is a progressive community with a glorious past and a dismal future. Mistry attempts at giving details about the lifestyles and culture of the Parsis wherever he gets an opportunity in his fiction.

**Key words-** Culture, Identity, Immigrant women, Dilemma.

### Introduction

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, on July 3, 1952. A member of the Parsi religious community in India, he completed an undergraduate degree in mathematics and economics at the University of Bombay. In 1975 he moved to Canada, where he lived in Toronto and worked for a bank. Mistry eventually returned to university, finishing a degree in English and philosophy in 1984 at the University of Toronto. It was while he was a university student in Canada



that he began to write and publish fiction. His first two published short stories won the Hart House Literary Prize (1983 and 1984), and another story won the *Canadian Fiction Magazine* contributor's prize in 1985. Those three stories, with eight others, became his first book, *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987).

This collection of linked short stories concerns the inhabitants of an apartment compound in Bombay. One of the stories, "Squatter," consists of tall tales told by the compound's local storyteller; one tale concerns Savukshaw, a heroic cricket player and tiger hunter, and the other concerns Sarosh, a Parsi who immigrates to Canada but returns to India when he cannot learn how to use a Western toilet. In another story, "Swimming Lessons," a young man connects the residents of his Canadian apartment to the family and residents in the Bombay apartment he has left behind.

### **The sufferings of women**

Though Rohinton Mistry has received widespread commendation for his fiction, he has also been criticized for his 'portrayal of women'. Critics find that Rohinton Mistry's female characters are one-dimensional and limited. They are seen to be house bound, rarely leaving their apartments, complexes while their male counterparts venture far and wide, not only in and around Bombay but also places such as Delhi. By attending the social contexts of his female characters' lives from a feminist perspective, this analysis examines the ways Mistry interprets the situations of women – their experiences, histories and responsibilities as wives, widows, mothers and single women – within the cultural rubric of Parsi India.

Parsis are the most Westernized religious group in India, and Parsi women have not been as widely subjected to the particular oppressive traditions and perceptions that Hindu and Muslim women have. Parsis, for instance, encourage women to pursue higher education and independence, and often to go abroad to pursue their interests (Trembour, 115).

Mistry explores the issues of education, independence, and ambition, while also addressing the continuing difficulties that even a relatively independent woman faces in a patriarchal society. In *A Fine Balance*, Dina, who was denied an education as a girl, is forced, out of economic hardship, to establish a tailoring business in her own home. And while her business does flourish for at least part of the book she continues to battle many oppressive traditions and constraints.



despite her fervent pursuit of freedom from her brother's financial support. Jasbir Jain observes that for Indian women "the concept of independence, freedom and self are all relegated to a world outside"(3) of the home. And while many of Mistry's women do experience a sense of selfhood and identity outside of their homes—Vera and Dolly, and Mehroo in *Tales from FirozshaBaag*, and Dina in *A Fine Balance*—several of them such as Daulat, Mamaiji, Najamai, and Dilnavaz, cultivate their independence within their apartments and apartment compounds.

### **The Exploration of women Identity crisis**

In *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, for instance, a series of short stories where the women are usually dealing with one situation, whether it be a day in the life of mothers such as Silloo Boyce and Mrs.Bulsara, Mehroos and Mrs.Mody's experiences as wives, or even Tehmina's ways of trying to cope until her cataracts ripen. It is in his novels, however, that Mistry's progress in probing the experience of his female characters becomes apparent because he has more room to develop a detailed account of their daily lives. His portrayals of Dilnavaz and Miss Kutpitia, are much more thorough than those of his characters in the FirozshaBaag compound, and the extended treatment of Dina is more expansive. And although each of his women has their roles determined, to some extent, by social conventions, they nevertheless are not stereotypes, but rather distinct individuals who frequently transcend their circumstances, refusing to be circumscribed by these social roles. Women such as Daulat, Dilnavaz, and Dina, find ways of coping with their various situations by taking matters into their own hands, stepping out of their expected roles, and exploring new possibilities.

Women characters who are in Mistry's fiction, defined by their relationships to men in which they develop their own identities while fulfilling their obligations as Parsi wives, mothers, and sisters. Mrs. Mody in *Tales from FirozshaBaag*, gains the recognition from her neighbours in the apartment compound as Dr. Mody's ill-tempered wife. After he dies, Mrs. Mody's life is spent coming to terms with the stormy and often mean relationship she had with him. Likewise, in *Such A Long Journey*, Alamai is only liberated from the way she is portrayed by her husband, Dinshawji, as his 'domestic vulture,' at his funeral. Even the independent Dina, in *A Fine Balance*, is in jeopardy of being forced to move back to her childhood home with her brother and his family after



the sudden death of her husband. Without him, she is on her own, and this is considered an unacceptable situation for a young woman to be in. She is therefore expected to reaffiliate herself with a man by remarrying or depending on her brother for shelter and financial assistance.

### **Isolation and Assimilation**

Silloo Boyce and Mrs. Bulsara in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, are only ever seen as mothers. Mistry portrays their unfailing commitment to their sons, as well as the strong, and often culturally prescribed relationships they have with them. And while Dilnavaz is given attention as a woman whose experiences are frequently independent of Gustad in *Such A Long Journey*, much of her time is spent performing her duties as a mother. Even her “dalliance in the dark arts” (Ekelund 11) with Miss Kutpitia has been criticized by Nilufer Bharucha as being something Dilnavaz does only “for the wellbeing of her family” (182). Kashmira and Khorshedbai in *Tales From Firozsha Baag*, and Miss Kutpitia in *Such A Long Journey*, are women who have each been placed in unusual and disturbing situations. With them, Mistry creates three characters who are imprisoned by various circumstances: Kashmira by her husband and Khorshedbai; Khorshedbai herself by her insanity and her past; and Miss Kutpitia by thirty-five years of grief-induced isolation. With the exception of Khorshedbai, who is taken away by ambulance at the end of “The Paying Guests,” they are eventually liberated from their situations. Likewise, in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry offers Tehmina and Behroze, two women who are objectified for their appearance and behaviour but, by the end of the stories, are released from the dies into which they have been cast.

*A Fine Balance* illustrates the deeper insight of political, nativity and struggle of suffering people. It always focuses on the deep structure of the individual’s existences of human life. *A Fine Balance* is taken up for analyzing the human sufferings in which Rohinton Mistry ultimately gives a space of endless sufferings of the individuals. Dina Dalal fights for her independence and individuality but she has faced continuous failures and threats by society. Finally she has lost her flat and forced to her brother’s home as a servant. Rohinton Mistry highlights crucial events in the country’s chronicle by depicting the background of each protagonist. Dina, chooses to be displaced 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 restructure her life without being economically dependent on a man. For her, life is a series of emotional upheavals and relocations of emotional bonds. Emergency made both Dina and Maneck fail in their attempt. In the name of poverty alleviation and civic beautification, beggars are carried away and made to be slaves in labour camps.

### **Dynamics of culture and cultural cross fertilization**

In *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry has portrayed different types of women such 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. Coomy, the step-daughter of Nariman, Yasmin, the second wife of Nariman and Mrs. Kapur, the owner of Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium are portrayed as rude and bully characters in this novel. Nariman marries Yasmin, who is a widow with two children, Jal and Coomy. So it is from the earlier time until the end Coomy behaves rude to her step-father. She always put forth too many rules and regulations to be followed. Being an old man, affected by Parkinson disease expects some sort of affection and love from his children but Nariman gets complete unbelongingness from Coomy. When Jal requests Coomy to be lovable to Nariman, Coomy frankly admits “I was already eleven years old when he became our step father. It was not like a baby growing up with her real father”. (64) Coomy feels that Nariman is responsible for her mother’s death. So she is not able to stop her hate even at his olden days. *Family Matters* weaves the lives and memories of a Parsi family.

### **Conclusion**

The novelist has succeeded in maintaining a fine balance between death and bigotry, family nurture and control. Mistry has explained different women characters in a single novel as caring, loving, rude, shy and independent. As Jaydipsinh reiterates, “through an intensely meaningful portrayal of women characters in this novel Rohinton Mistry has globalized the theme of contemporary complexity inferring that in the modern society beset by dynamics of culture, confused by cultural by cultural cross fertilization, marred by religious fanaticism and converging on inner fracture, the system gets protected from the ultimate fragmentation by one women or the



other. Though women soar high, with academic qualifications, and economic independence; they have space within themselves. To preserve the equilibrium of life, relationships should be revived and only a healthy and harmonious man-woman relationship will flourish.

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