

The Invisible Struggles of Marginalized Women in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract

*This article examines Rohinton Mistry's portrayal of women's marginalization through the character of Dina Dalal in his novel *A Fine Balance* from an Ecofeminist perspective. Dina, a strong and independent woman, navigates the oppressive forces of patriarchy and economic hardship after her husband's death. Despite her efforts to maintain financial independence through a tailoring business, she is repeatedly undermined by societal structures that limit women's autonomy. The novel critiques the intersection of gender, class, and economic oppression, illustrating how women, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, are marginalized and denied opportunities for self-sufficiency. Through Dina's struggles, Mistry highlights the difficulties women face in defying patriarchal norms, even when they demonstrate resilience and determination. The narrative ultimately underscores the harsh realities of life for women in a male-dominated world, where personal autonomy is constantly under siege, and social and economic systems work against their freedom.*

Keywords: Gender Politics, Patriarchy, Marginalization

Mistry's novels portray society, history, politics, culture, psychology, myth, tradition, and religion, among many other topics. He tends to analyze the life histories of Parsi women in all the spheres of society. His female characters walk through experiences that vary from small incidents to major events. He underlines both the micro and macro directions of patriarchal gender relationships and women's marginalization. Often, he positions his female characters within the middle or disadvantaged classes of society. Indeed, the characterization of women belonging to the downtrodden classes demands a lot of research and sensitivity, which Mistry appears to achieve with great effectiveness. This chapter examines the theme of gender politics concerning the marginalization of women from an Ecofeminist perspective.

One of the most poignant representations of women's marginalization in the novel is that of Dina Dalal. Initially, Dina is portrayed as a strong and independent woman who is set on creating her destiny beyond the confines of male domination. After the death of her husband, she rejects the idea of remarriage and chooses to

support herself through a tailoring business. However, despite her persistence, she constantly faces setbacks that underscore the precariousness of her independence. The world does not readily welcome an independent single woman, and she is always pressured by her domineering brother, Nusswan, who thinks that she cannot succeed without a man in her life.

The novel is a critique of economic oppression and how it disproportionately impacts women, entrenching their subaltern position. Women, particularly lower-caste women, are often denied access to education and employment opportunities, making them vulnerable to exploitation. The widows in the novel, forced to beg or live in ashrams, symbolize how a lack of economic independence makes women powerless. Dina's struggle to maintain her tailoring business further illustrates how the financial independence of women is always under attack, as she has to navigate bureaucratic corruption and social prejudice. The economic system, designed to favor men, ensures that women are kept dependent on male kin or exploitative bosses, barring their way to self-sufficiency.

Dina has a fighting spirit that knows how to struggle and confront doom without giving up. She took advantage of free singing lessons, where she fell in love with Rustomji. Despite her brother offering her many rich suitors, she married Rustomji despite him. Though what is meant to be cannot be undone, her world is shattered when Rustomji dies in an accident on their third wedding anniversary. She does her best to stay positive and independent, but ultimately must return to Nusswan. Too bad, though, Nusswan gets progressively more tyrannical, making her do household tasks such as cooking and doing dishes.

In this case, it is evident that whenever she says what is in her heart, she is mocked. The professional meeting between Dina and a young Parsi individual named Fredoon turns into a personal friendship. But Fredoon and Dina's wedding was not possible because Dina chose to remain unmarried. Her past was still haunting her brain. The memories of her earlier life still lingered in her mind. When they had ventured into the secluded garden of intimacy, their relationship was filled with challenges. There were some things she could not do. The garden bed was forbidden, sacred, and only for married people. Recalling the innocence of the moment, Dina likened it to her present. What she and Fredoon did in this room was a grim, mechanical procedure that left her drowning in shame and remorse.

It does not seem that Mistry aims to free Dina from patriarchal and gender-role constraints. The scenario gets even more ridiculous when her oppressive, disciplined, and strict brother takes her to the fire temple to have her enlightened. Dina finds the whole experience ridiculous and disturbing, as she does not like the priest's physical affection, such as touching, hugging, and patting. It looks like Mistry is satirizing Nusswan, the priest, and religious teachings.

Though she encountered a lot of hardships and challenges, she decided to free herself from the clutches of her brother. She went back to live with her late husband's family members, Darab and Shirin Aunty, where she started teaching embroidery. But the novelist's needles kept calling her, and she started taking several trips. Destiny catches up with her, as happens in Hardy's novels, and takes Darab and Shirin Aunty away. Left once more to make her way through life on her own, Dina is confronted by the brutal realities of a man's world. Again, she takes up residence in her late husband's tiny apartment. With the help of her former school friend Zenobia, now a hairdresser, Dina learns how to cut children's hair. On Zenobia's advice, she starts going round to her friends' houses to provide haircuts for their kids. However, her effort to defy social norms is not successful since most people, out of conviction, do not permit haircuts for their children in their own homes.

Although Mistry makes it possible for Dina to push back at the patriarchy, he maintains boundaries around her in that he tells us: Some people did say she might have their kids' heads cut off. But only outside, they demanded. Dina said no. She had limits around what she was prepared to do. She worked as an at-home children's stylist, not a street cutter.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry not only describes a Parsi family and the subjugation of women but also a Hindu family and the marginalization of women in it. Roopa, a low-caste (chamar) woman, is the center of Mistry's narrative. Roopa is the quintessential Indian woman who does not show love for her daughters but gives special attention and affection to her son. Even though three of her daughters died in infancy, she poured herself intensely into her fourth child, a boy.

Rather than lose her independence, Dina supports herself as a tailor. However, when her eyesight begins to deteriorate, she calls on Zenobia for assistance and hires two tailors, Ishvar and Om, to help her in her flat. She also lets Maneck Kohlah stay with her as a paying guest. Dina once more builds her independent world. The intrusion of the men in her life again takes away her autonomy and independence. The constant danger exposed by her rent collector keeps her on edge, but it does not deter her, and she can survive even after Ishvar and Om exit her life. Sadly, while Ishvar and Om go back to their village to get married, they get involved in Indira Gandhi's twenty-point program, which results in a forced vasectomy on one of them. Gangrene is caused by the improper and unclean instruments used in the vasectomy, and as a result, Ishvar's leg has to be amputated.

Despite this circumstance, the rent collector tries to push her out of her apartment and back into the stifling conditions she was attempting to leave behind for her freedom. Though her autonomy is stripped away from her by a male-dominated world, she still offers assistance to Ishvar, who has lost a leg, and Om, who has been castrated.

This is where Dina's struggle for autonomy ends. It appears that besides her determined personality, Dina has some of the subcontinent women's realities in her. Being a woman and a widow, Dina's life is controlled by many limitations. The focus of the novel on social realism does not allow a fairy-tale flight from material reality. Despite her fiery nature, dynamism, and independence, Dina's feminist activities are hampered by the same social constraints that affect the lives of her tailor friends

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