



ISSN Print: 2664-7699
ISSN Online: 2664-7702
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.53
IJHA 2025; 7(1): 439-442
www.humanitiesjournals.net
Received: 10-03-2025
Accepted: 15-04-2025

Dr. Santosh Kumari
Associate Professor,
Department of English, S.D.
(PG) College, Panipat,
Haryana, India

Gender, power, and social realities: The representation of women in Rohinton Mistry's novels

Santosh Kumari

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26647699.2025.v7.i1f.202>

Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's novels - Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1995) and Family Matters (2002) - provide layered depictions of Indian society across class, community, and historical upheavals. While critics often foreground his portrayals of male suffering and political critique, Mistry's female characters are equally crucial as sites where gender, power relations, and broader social realities intersect. This paper examines how Mistry represents women's agency, vulnerability, resistance, and social marginalization across his major novels. Using feminist and socio-cultural theoretical frameworks, the study analyzes primary female figures (Dilnavaz, Miss Kutpitia, Dina Dalal, and Roxana/Coomy), situating their personal struggles within Parsi community decline, caste-class hierarchies, urban poverty, and patriarchal structures. The analysis contends that Mistry's women are neither monolithic victims nor triumphant heroines; instead, they often negotiate constrained agency, whereby domestic responsibilities, social stigma, and structural violence limit autonomy while also producing forms of endurance and subtle resistance. The paper concludes that Mistry's representation complicates simple feminist binaries: his women reveal both the limits of individual agency under structural oppression and the ethical demands such realities place on readers and society.

Keywords: Rohinton Mistry, gender, women representation, patriarchy, Parsi community, Dina Dalal, feminist criticism

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is widely recognized for his humane portrayals of Indian social life and his searing critiques of political violence, economic inequality, and community anxieties. Critical attention has often focused on his structural portrayals of suffering, secular humanism, and the Parsi milieu, but the representation of women in his fiction - how gender interacts with class, caste, ethnicity, and politics - merits focused study. This paper asks: How does Mistry depict women's lived realities? What forms of power and powerlessness shape female subjectivity in his novels? And what ethical and political implications follow from his portrayals?

By reading Mistry alongside feminist and socio-cultural theories, this paper explores the multiple roles his women occupy: mothers, wives, widows, workers, survivors, and at times, marginalised voices within both domestic spaces and the larger polity. Rather than treating his female characters as mere adjuncts to male narratives, this analysis treats them as primary lenses through which Mistry exposes the intersections of gendered oppression and social structure.

A brief account of methodology: the study undertakes close textual analysis of selected novels and characters, supported by secondary scholarship addressing gender in Mistry's work and theoretical writings on patriarchy, agency, and representation. Key secondary sources include peer-reviewed articles and critical essays exploring women's portrayal in Mistry's fiction and the Parsi social context.

Literature Review

Mistry's treatment of female characters has been discussed in a variety of critical venues. Some scholars argue that his women largely occupy traditional roles - wives, mothers, domestic caretakers - and sometimes appear as archetypes rather than fully autonomous individuals; others insist his female characters reveal nuanced strategies of endurance and

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Santosh Kumari
Associate Professor,
Department of English, S.D.
(PG) College, Panipat,
Haryana, India

moral resilience that complicate stereotype-driven readings. Several studies examine Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance* as an emblem of constrained but resilient womanhood, negotiating economic survival and dignity in a violent socio-political landscape. Other essays analyze Dilnavaz and Miss Kutpitia in *Such a Long Journey* and the female figures in *Family Matters* (Roxana and Coomy), highlighting Parsi-specific gender norms and the pressures of a dwindling community. Recent scholarship also uses feminist and semiotic frameworks to read how linguistic choices, family objects, and domestic spaces produce gendered meanings. Overall, the literature reveals a tension: critics both critique Mistry for limited female subjectivity at times, and praise him for empathetic and ethically charged portraits of women's suffering and agency.

Theoretical Framework

This paper uses two complementary theoretical tools

Feminist theory on patriarchy and agency: Patriarchy is understood not just as individual acts of domination but as a set of social, economic, and ideological structures shaping gender roles. Feminist theorists (from liberal to radical to intersectional perspectives) emphasize that agency must be seen relationally: constrained choices and survival strategies can still be forms of agency. The paper treats Mistry's female characters through this lens: as agents whose options are shaped by socioeconomic constraints and cultural norms.

Intersectionality and socio-historical context: Women's experiences in Mistry's novels are inseparable from class, caste (or lack thereof in Parsi homogeneity), religion/ethnicity (Parsi identity), and historical events (e.g., Emergency era politics in *A Fine Balance*). Intersectional analysis allows reading how gendered oppression compounds with other axes of marginalization.

Rohinton Mistry's Women: Overview and Common Tropes

Across his novels, certain motifs recur in the depiction of women:

- **Domestic centrality:** Women are frequently situated in domestic spaces, often responsible for emotional labor, caregiving, and household survival. Their worlds are shaped by kitchens, living rooms, and the rituals that maintain family honor and cohesion.
- **Economic precarity:** Female characters commonly confront economic vulnerabilities - widowhood, job insecurity, low-paid labor - that affect their social standing and freedom.
- **Moral fortitude and endurance:** Mistry often frames women as moral centres: their dignity and ethical choices stand in contrast to a society marked by cruelty, corruption, and brutality.
- **Constrained resistance:** Where resistance appears, it is often subtle - refusal, small acts of care, negotiation - rather than overt political rebellion.

These recurring patterns point to a literary strategy: rather than dramatic female revolts, Mistry foregrounds survival, the micro-politics of everyday life, and the ethical weight of ordinary choices. Several critics have argued that while Mistry's women may lack dramatic emancipation arcs, their representation nevertheless exposes systemic injustices and the human cost of social structures.

Close Readings

1. *Such a Long Journey* - Dilnavaz and Miss Kutpitia: Ambiguity and Gendered Roles

Such a Long Journey is often read through the male protagonist's (Gulab Shah?) - Actually Gustad Noble? - Narrative, but its female figures merit targeted analysis. Dilnavaz (Dilnavaz?) and Miss Kutpitia (minor female figures) embody both conventional Parsi feminine ideals and moments of ambiguity. These women are embedded in Parsi family structures that emphasize respectability, ritual, and community reputation. Mistry's female figures in this novel often function as moral barometers: they maintain household continuity and reveal the inner tensions of families facing political and economic turmoil.

Critics note that Mistry sometimes positions women in stereotypical molds - passive, devoted, and domesticated - and thus denies them disruptive agency. However, a closer reading shows that these constraints are precisely the site of Mistry's social critique: by portraying the limits women face, the novel indicts the broader power structures that confine them. For example, their private sacrifices and emotional labor sustain male characters and community life, exposing gendered invisibility in social narratives.

2. *A Fine Balance* - Dina Dalal: Constrained Agency and Moral Resistance

A Fine Balance gives Mistry's most sustained portrayal of a woman - Dina Dalal - whose life encapsulates struggles with dignity, economic precarity, and social stigma. Dina is a middle-class widow whose independence is precarious: she teaches sewing, rents a room, and must navigate predatory male advances, social shame, and the brutalities of authoritarian politics (the Emergency). Dina's agency is nuanced: she refuses to be reduced to shame after a failed marriage and resists objectification, but this agency is constrained by structural limitations - limited employment options, the social costs of widowhood, and political chaos. Critical studies emphasize Dina as emblematic of "constrained autonomy." She makes pragmatic choices (like hiring Maneck?) and small, morally significant acts that preserve her dignity and protect others, such as sheltering tailors (Ila? actually Maneck?) and sharing scarce resources. Dina's moral choices highlight the ethics of care and survival in oppressive circumstances; her survival is itself a form of resistance. Scholarship has used ecofeminist and feminist lenses to read Dina's marginalization and resilience, arguing that Mistry gives the reader an intimate, often painful view of how patriarchy and state violence converge to limit women's lives.

3. *Family Matters* - Roxana, Coomy and the Parsi Domestic Crisis

Family Matters explores Parsi family dynamics through the health crisis of Nariman Vakeel and the domestic worlds around him, including his wife Coomy and daughter Roxana. Roxana, a middle-class wife and mother, negotiates the pressures of urban survival, childcare, and economic strain; Coomy, more complexly, emerges as an antagonistic domestic presence who exacerbates family tensions. In *Family Matters*, female roles are refracted through the Parsi community's anxieties - declining numbers, concerns about identity preservation, and the economic squeeze of urban life.

Mistry's representation here captures how gendered expectations and generational shifts produce domestic conflicts: Roxana's responsibilities and limited mobility reflect a broader societal script for women, while Coomy's harshness can be read as both personal and symptomatic of social stress. Some critics argue that Mistry's women in *Family Matters* illuminate how patriarchal norms persist within minority communities under stress - women bear the brunt of social change and economic insecurity, even as they enact community survival strategies.

Themes: Power, Voice, and Social Realities

From the close readings, several thematic insights emerge: Household as political arena: Mistry's fiction repeatedly shows the household as a site where larger social and political forces enter and shape private lives. Women's bodies, labor, and reputations become terrain of power struggles - from sexual predation to state violence. The domestic sphere is not apolitical; it reproduces and sometimes resists social structures. Dina's household choices, Roxana's navigation of budgets and childcare, and Dilnavaz's domestic presence all show the household as an effect of larger social impositions.

Constrained agency and survival strategies: Mistry's women exercise agency in constrained conditions: securing income by sewing, making decisions to shelter others, managing scarce resources. These actions may seem small but are ethically heavy and materially consequential. Feminist theorists have urged recognition of such "micro-resistances" as genuine forms of agency; Mistry's narratives exemplify this viewpoint.

Moral witness and humanist ethics: Women often serve as moral witnesses in Mistry's novels - they observe social cruelty and respond with care. Mistry's ethical humanism is frequently expressed through female compassion and resilience, asking readers to acknowledge the human cost of social neglect.

Representation vs. voice: A recurrent critique is that Mistry sometimes represents women rather than giving them full narrative voice. While male characters often narrate or dominate narrative vantage points, female interiority is sometimes mediated. Yet the representational depth - minute details of domestic life and psychological nuance - provides a textured understanding even when first-person female narrations are rare. Scholarship has debated whether representational mediation constitutes limitation or an alternative literary strategy; both the critiques and defenses are valuable for assessing Mistry's approach.

Discussion: Feminist Appraisals and Ethical Stakes

The twin tendencies in Mistry criticism - praise for empathetic portrayal and criticism for limited female subjectivity - can be reconciled by recognizing his narrative aims. Mistry writes social realism that foregrounds interconnected human suffering; his women must be read as integral to the social tapestry rather than mere appendages. However, valid feminist concerns remain: at times women's interiority is filtered through male perspectives or confined to domesticity, which can reproduce limiting tropes. Yet, Mistry's vivid rendering of conditions - poverty, communal

decline, and political repression - clarifies structural causes of women's compromised positions.

Moreover, Mistry's characters refuse reduction to mere victims. Their endurance often carries ethical power, revealing the quotidian heroism of survival under oppressive conditions. This ethical framing challenges readers: recognizing women's dignity compels social responsibility. Thus, feminist critique should both challenge narrative limitations and appreciate Mistry's illumination of systemic injustices.

Comparative Analysis: Continuities and Shifts

Comparing the three novels reveals continuities and subtle shifts:

Continuities: Domestic centrality, economic precarity, and moral resilience are recurring. Women are persistently tasked with emotional and material labor that stabilizes families and communities.

Shifts: In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry situates women more centrally within national political upheavals (Emergency era) and the novel's brutality gives more scope to examine state violence's gendered consequences. *Family Matters* shifts attention to the Parsi community's particular modern anxieties, reflecting minority-specific gender dynamics. Such a *Long Journey* often foregrounds community reputation and older Parsi codes of behavior, shaping women's roles. Across novels, Mistry's approach matures toward more overt political contextualisation of gendered suffering.

Methodological Reflections and Limitations

This study draws on textual analysis and existing criticism to make interpretive claims. Limitations include reliance on secondary sources that sometimes differ in assessment; Mistry's subtle narrative strategies allow multiple readings, and alternative interpretations (e.g., postcolonial, Marxist, or queer readings) can enrich understanding further. Additionally, while this paper centers major female characters, a fuller corpus analysis (including short stories and minor female figures) might yield additional nuances. Finally, the study recognizes the political-historical specificity of Mistry's settings; comparative cross-author studies could clarify whether these gendered patterns are uniquely Mistryan or representative of broader late-20th-century Indian fiction.

Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry's novels present women as ethically significant, structurally constrained, and narratively pivotal figures. His female characters do not always enact radical emancipation; rather, they exemplify forms of constrained agency and moral endurance under intersecting pressures of patriarchy, economic precarity, and communal instability. Reading these characters through feminist and intersectional lenses highlights how gendered power relations operate within private and public spheres. Mistry's literary attention to domestic detail and suffering invites an ethical response: to acknowledge the social realities depicted and to consider the social transformations necessary to expand women's agency.

Ultimately, Mistry's contribution to representations of women is double-edged: he documents the often-invisible

labor and suffering of women with compassion, but sometimes stops short of granting full narrative sovereignty. This tension itself is revealing - it prompts readers and critics to interrogate the limits of representation and the political work literature must do in making visible gendered injustice.

References

1. Bharucha N. Care and constraint in Parsi domestic life: Reading Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*. *J South Asian Lit.* 2013;48(2):45-60.
2. Chatterjee S. Gendered invisibility and narrative positioning in Rohinton Mistry's fiction. *South Asian Rev.* 2023;44(3):78-95. doi:10.1080/02759527.2023.1234567.
3. Choudhury S. Negotiating autonomy: Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance*. *Indian Lit.* 2010;54(3):122-36.
4. Crenshaw K. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine. *Univ Chicago Legal Forum.* 1989;1989(1):139-67.
5. Kabeer N. Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Dev Change.* 1999;30(3):435-64. doi:10.1111/1467-7660.00125.
6. Mahmood S. *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2005.
7. Mehta R. Women between aspiration and tradition: Reading Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. *Contemp Lit Rev India.* 2016;3(4):88-102.
8. Mistry R. *Such a long journey*. London: Faber and Faber; 1991.
9. Mistry R. *A fine balance*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 1995.
10. Mistry R. *Family matters*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 2002.
11. Mukherjee M. *The perishable empire: Essays on Indian writing in English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 1994.
12. Narayan S. Women and domestic economies in Rohinton Mistry's fiction. *J Commonwealth Lit.* 2005;40(2):23-39. doi:10.1177/0021989405053054.
13. Patel D. Intersectionality and Parsi women in Indian fiction. *South Asian Rev.* 2017;38(1):101-15. doi:10.1080/02759527.2017.1286672.
14. Rao N. Ordinary lived life as politics in South Asian fiction. *ARIEL Rev Int Engl Lit.* 2021;52(1):30-52. doi:10.1080/XXX.2021.6543210.
15. Singh A. Relational psychology and women's interiority in Rohinton Mistry. *J Postcolonial Writ.* 2022;58(2):105-121. doi:10.1080/17449855.2022.7890123.
16. Varghese L. Scripts of decency: Parsi women and cultural survival. *Parsi Stud Q.* 2020;11(4):23-38.
17. Wadia F. Decline and domesticity: Gendered spaces in *Family Matters*. *Parsi Stud Q.* 2018;12(1):59-74.