



Dina Dalal's quilt in Rohinton Mistry's Novel 'A Fine Balance'

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Abstract: Rohinton Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* is the most ambitious amongst all his works. Here he casts his net much wider. It has almost an epic sweep and wafts the enchanted reader across vast seas of experience, from the ecstasy of the Indian independence to the traumatic emergency under Indira Gandhi. The time is 1975 the place is an 'Unnamed city by the Sea' i.e. Bombay (now Mumbai).

In this novel Mistry has made a conscious effort to embrace more of the social reality of India and no less of the Parsi religio-cultural ethos in which his other books are rooted. Although it opens with a Parsi woman Dina Dalal's story in Bombay, it soon enlarges its scope to include her lodger Maneck Kohlah from a hill station in Northern India, and her tailors, Ishvar and Om Prakash who come to her from a some remote village. Then there are rag-pickers, beggars and suicide victims/heroes.

A Fine Balance is a bold attempt at projecting a non-traditional Parsi woman in the person of Dina Dalal who is all 'fairness' can be called the 'heroine' of this novel. Not only is she at the centre of the story but is also the heroine in the literal sense of this word.

In Rohinton Mistry's post-colonial novel *A Fine Balance*, the seamstress Dina Dalal creates a patchwork quilt using remnants of fabric left over from her work. In various passages of the text, her elaborately stitched masterpiece is discussed and admired for its beauty and expertise. However, not only is the quilt elegant and functional but it also serves as a metaphor

for various aspects of Dina's life. The quilt contains three portraits: a self portrait of Dina and her desire for independence, a portrait of a nation-India which also attains independence and a group-portrait of a student's boarder and two tailors who become a part of Dina's life. Her quilt is a visual portrayal of everything going around in story of her existence and inter actions with people from different castes and background. It also acts as a replica between the representatives of various group and genders and depicts the meshing of their lives.

Dina follows the advice of Shirin Aunty and starts a collection of fabric.

Daring the time the boarder, a young student named Manek Kohlah, lives with her, she works on a quilt, one day as she looks over her collection of fabric remnants and arranges them on the sofa, Manek asks 'What are these?' (271) She replies, "My cloth collection.....Don't worry, I'm not going crazy. These prices are to make a quilt. A nice counter pane for my bed" (271). Manek suggests that with all the "different colors and designs.....it's going to be very difficult match them properly' (271). Dina exclaims, "Difficult, yes, but that's where taste and skill come in What to select, What to leave out-and each colour and each design in the quilt has a story to tell that has a direct bearing on Dina. Which goes nest to which " (271).

The concepts of the non-traditional woman is seen through Dina. Infect one of her significant bold acts is to choose her own husband. Not only does she refuse to have her brother involved in the selection of her mate, she also marries a man who is poor " I am going to married", (35) she announces, and where did we come across him?" (35) asks her brother." We didn't. I did " (35)' she replies. After her marriage Rustam Dalal dies and she has the option of living comfortably again with her brother but insists on existing alone. Nusswan's reaction is one of disappointment and puzzlement. Very soon her numbness and Nusswan's sympathy wear off and the brother and

sister indulge in a typical Parsi exchange of invectives and insults. Nusswan asks her, "Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the enlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage" However, his words are ironical since Dina considers Nusswan to be the oppressor and unenlightened one!

Mistry presents Dina as a strong woman who is in control of her life as Mistry himself puts it " a smart little girl who knows how to get what she wants". After her husband's death instead of depending on her brother, she insists on her independence even if it means working hard to make both ends meet. Now she becomes subject rather than an object she has the power to be a landlady, hires two tailors and be in control, she calls the shots, she makes the rules and she is their superior. It is their duty to respect her wishes and follow her laws. In this novel *A Fine Balance* Dina is working on her long tern project in the presence of Manack and the two tailors. By this time it is almost the size she intends it to be, 7 feet by 6 feet, and it only lacks two square feet at one end. They spread out the quilt and anlayze it together, taking note of the" neat stitches crisscrossed like symmetrical columns of ants" (479, which can be seen as common threads holding together their respective lives, as they observe the unfinished work, they see patches of fabric that are associated with the past. "Look," says

Om," look at that-poplin from our first job (480). Dina remembers and reminds them of how quickly they completed sewing those first dresses and tells them she thought she' had found two geniuses" (480). "Hungry stomachs were driving our fingers" (480), replies Ishvar. They continue to recognize other remnants and connect them with past experiences The "yellow calico with orange stripes is associated with a period of time when Om fought and argued" about everything" (480). Maneck recognizes the fabric with" blue and white flowers (280). Dina was used to sew skirts the day he moved in with her. This was the same day Ishvar and Om did not go to work at Dina's because they had been kidnapped to attend a meeting organized by the Prime Minister. In the case of the quilt, the attachments are often visual and tactile as she strokes a nine -patch quilt, she elaborates on the memories brought back to her'

Now this quilt, honey.....I made out o' the pieces o' my children's clothes, their little dresses and waists and aprons. Some of 'em's dead, and some of 'em's grown and married..... But when I sit down and look at this quilt and think over the pieces, it seems like they all come back, and I can see 'en cryin' and laughin' and callin me jest like they used to do. (60)

However, Mistry also provides a very general message through the metaphor of quilt. He teaches that in life

people are all given fabric pieces, they are born in a certain century, in a particular country and in specific family or situation and their challenge is to take these various remnants and "make the hero of what they have". They can cut the fabric pieces, arrange them, sew them together with whatever skill they possess and the result is a life. They have the power to reshape and change their circumstances to some degree, just as Dina had certain control over the outcome of her quilt. Moreover as people go about the process of cutting, piecing together and sewing the fragments of their existence they should constantly be aware of the delicate line between hope and despair and be sure to maintain a fine balance.

Infect the theme of independence is significant in this novel and it is particularly important in relation to Dina. Circumstances...evacuation of her rented flat, disappearance of the tailors- force Dina Dalal to return to her brother's residence.

She comes out as an exquisite example of an educated Parsi woman, a rebel fighting for her empowerment. Even after her return to the family fold, she is shown maintaining contact with the two tailors now reduced to beggars- thanks to their forced sterilization during the notorious Emergency period.

Dina's quilts is a mnemonic device that enables Dina, her tailors and Maneck to recall their lives together.

Each remnant, salvaged from the fabric used to make up the Au Revoir orders, has its own peculiar memory attached to it. Each diverse square, triangle and polygon when sewn together makes a connection with the other pieces to provide a new meaning of its own 'just keeping connecting patiently, Dina- that's the secret.

"Ji -hahn, it all seems meaningless bits and rags, till you piece it together" (197) Later in the narrative, when she has to return to her brother's flat as she gets settled in her room, she places the folded quilt at the foot of the bed. Her sister-in-law Ruby, who is standing by, exclaims, "That is beautiful!" (563). She spreads out the quilt to get a better look at it and asks, "But what happened in that one corner, why the gap?" Dina replies, "I run out of cloth" (563). Ruby offers to give Dina some of her own fabric to complete the corner, but Dina declines show her disagreement to complete the corner with some more added patches as per wish that she has displayed what she wanted. Mistry clarifies that "Dina had already decided there was nothing further to add" (563) Her creative project, with the gap in the corner, is finished with the future left open. The future left open displays Dina's satisfaction over his work which at the moment doesn't need any change.

Dina lies under that quilt at night and each piece helps her remember the

one year in which Ishvar, Om and Maneck had been a part of her life. Like the 'bits and rags' in Dina's quilt, Mistry's stories are also separate but when 'connected' hang together-distinct but united by the pen of the 'Story Master.'

The patchwork quilt, which bears the history of different events in the life of Dina Dalal offers an analogy of the multilayered history of India in which different groups of strangers have been accommodated into the nation without being required to assimilate their unique cultural differences. A rare artistic feat indeed. In manipulating this catchy symbol, Mistry has deployed his passion and special special skill as the seamstress has done in arranging and stitching the story shreds of fabric of varied hues and sizes into an exceptionally beautiful quilt.

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