

# Exposing Widow's Psyche in a Fine Balance: A Study of Rohinton Mistry's Widow Characters

N. Mounisha<sup>1</sup>, & Dr. V. Vijayalakshmi<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, Tamilnadu, India

Correspondence: Dr. V. Vijayalakshmi, Assistant Professor Senior, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, Tamilnadu, India. E-mail: vvijayalakshmi@vit.ac.in

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## Abstract

Indian writers including both male and female novelists generally utilise novels to reveal the psychological conditions of the female sex with the help of their dramatic personae. One such Indian writer is Rohinton Mistry, who unveils the mental states of women through his independent female characters, especially fictional female singletons. Among his numerous works, *A Fine Balance* is a notable piece that falls into this category. The novel is about the life struggles of the widow heroine Dina Dalal after the death of her husband. Apart from Dina, Mistry has used many widow characters who play minor roles in developing the storyline. The paper aims to exhibit the mental fluctuations of the fictional widows that comprise the widow protagonist Dina Dalal. The investigation with the help of the female characters uncovers the psychological oscillations of the widows due to their singlehood statuses. It unmask the emotional transpositions, loneliness, fears, regrets, hopelessness and mental instabilities of the widows. The analysis avails the psychoanalytic Literary Theory to support its arguments and to obtain its objectives. With the aid of the select prose narrative, the research brings out Rohinton Mistry's typical representation of widow characters to have psychological problems because of losing their husbands. Hence, the article projects that despite picturing the fictional widows as persons who are bold and liberating, Mistry has represented them to be psychologically vulnerable rather than presenting them as mentally strong and stable individuals.

**Keywords:** Anger, Depression, Despair, Fear, Loneliness and Remorse

## 1. Introduction

India as a country has witnessed a surge in the number of widows. It is explicitly visible that despite widowers, widows in India are seen to come across many discrepancies because of losing their partners. It is seen that Indian women when becoming widows generally endure many obstacles due to their widowhood statuses. It is essential to point out that apart from discrimination that they face from their families, friends, acquaintances and society, they confront psychological trials and tribulations as well. In addition to the sorrows that they undergo on the death of their husbands which cause mental fluctuations, the differences that they come into contact from people around them in turn force psychological disorders within these individuals. Shafi (2012) comments that the major hindrance that Indian widows confront is their mental imbalances after the death of their spouses. She also adds that they have psychological or mental setbacks and emotional distress from the day they become widows (P. 150). Thus, as Shafi has stated, Indian widows predominantly confront mental disturbances throughout their lives. It is noticed that the psychological instabilities of widows are reflected in Indian literature from the past to the present. It is spotted that among various kinds of Indian literary works, novels in most cases are identified to mirror the mental states of widows through widow dramatic personae.

### 1.1 Objectives

The paper has five main aims that are to be researched. The first intention of the study is to bring out how the characters in *A Fine Balance* are unconsciously stuck in their pasts, wherein it reveals the fictional female's denial of accepting the loss of their husbands. Next, the analysis focuses on unveiling the psychological hollowness that fictional women experience in becoming widows in the select prose narrative. It also works towards uncovering the fear and uneasiness that the widow characters come across due to their widowhood conditions. Similarly, the research unveils the widow's dramatic personae's changing emotions throughout the fiction. Finally, the investigation exhibits the negative thoughts and perspectives of the widows in the novel *A Fine Balance*. With the help of the women protagonist and other minor widow characters, the work unmask the purpose of the research. Likewise, with the aid of secondary sources and supporting studies, the research attains the objectives and thus justifies its arguments. Hence, the examination points out the mental imbalances of widows in the fiction *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry.

## 2. Material Studied

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian Canadian writer who is known for writing many literary works including novels and short stories. He is greatly acclaimed for bringing in the life struggles of migrants and the cultural heritage of India through his writing style. Due to his Parsi descendant, he has utilised Parsi linguistics in most of his literary pieces which indirectly shows his inclination toward the Parsi religion.

Clemons (2016) comments that new women which refers to women characters who are bold, strong and independent are not only depicted by female novelists but also by male writers (P. 48). This statement of Clemons is suitable to Mistry as his writings have a feminist touch to them which implicitly shows his bent toward empowering the female sex with the aid of his novels and short stories. Rohinton Mistry's important literary pieces comprise *Such a Long Journey*, *Family Matters* and *Swimming Lessons*. He has won countless awards and honours including Governor General's Award and Neustadt International Prize for

Literature. (Takhar, n.d.)

The paper examines Rohinton Mistry's second novel *A Fine Balance*, which has been initially published in the year 1995. The novel has won the Giller Prize in 1995 which has later been adapted for stage performances and has been enacted by theatre artists. The prose fiction circles the lives of four major characters including the widow heroine Dina Dalal. Apart from Dina, a few more widow dramatic personas in the story develop and enhance the storyline. The fiction exposes the physical and mental hurdles of the widow characters through its narratives. The thorough character sketches, in-depth explanations of the scenarios and realistic portrayals of the situations make the novel to be undertaken for study even in the 21st century. In addition to this, the study of widows in the select novel from a psychological perspective which presents the mental states of the widow characters has not been previously taken up for research. This showcases the rationale and significance of choosing this research topic and area. Hence, the widow characters' psyche is analysed to attain the aims of the paper.

### 3. Area Description

The investigation revolves around a feminist perspective, wherein the female characters are studied through a feminist lens. The analysis of the fictional widows of the select fiction *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry justifies the standpoint of having a feminist view. Apart from taking up the feminist viewpoint, the article also whirls on a psychoanalytic way of looking at the novel. It discloses the psychological states of the imaginative widows, thereby proving the intentions of the research. Heidarizadeh (2015) articulates that at times feminism and psychoanalysis come together in literature. He also avers that when these two come into contact in literature, then Feminist Literary Criticism as an approach can join in the examination process of the literary work (P. 790). These statements of Heidarizadeh are also applicable to *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry. Thus, the study of the widow characters' psychological conditions falls into this process as the mental states of the fictional female singletons are analysed.

### 4. Method

The paper undertakes the qualitative research method to study the novel *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry. The textual analysis approach is utilized for the examination as the fiction is investigated in depth. Similarly, this procedure is also used as the widow characters' psychological conditions in the select fiction are critically studied. The article avails the Psycho-Analytic Literary Theory to display the mental states of the widow's dramatic personas in the novel. Hasa (2016) voices out that the psychoanalytic literary approach has been influenced by the works of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung (P. 3). Hence, it can be said that this literary theory is a result of psychology. According to Moazzam (2023), when splitting Psycho-Analytic Literary Theory, the terms Psycho, analysis and literary criticism stand alone. He says that the word Psycho derives its definition from the Greek word Psyche which means Soul, and Analysis which refers to the examination of something. He also mentions that Literary Criticism denotes the study and interpretation of a literary work (P. 2). Thus, Psycho Analytic Literary Theory investigates a literary work from a psychological perspective. It discloses the mental makeovers of fictional characters when it is applied to a novel. As a result, this theory is availed for the paper to investigate the psychological conditions of the widows in the prose narrative *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry.

### 5. Unacceptance

Indian widows normally have a low level of recognising skills, wherein it is commonly hard for them to differentiate reality and imagination. Jain et al. (2022) through their research bring out that Indian widows face numerous issues, wherein their cognition skills which is the mental state of understanding things become less after they have lost their husbands (P. 3). These are reflected in Rohinton Mistry's characterisations of widow dramatic personas. It is identified that the widows in the novel *A Fine Balance* are observed to be pictured by the novelist as persons who do not trust the death of their husbands. They are illustrated as people who consider that their spouses will return and are sketched to start living with their dead husbands in hallucinations. Likewise, the novelist also provides an image of the widows as individuals who rethink their husbands who are dead, rather than drawing them as characters who accept the loss of their partners and lead their lives as single women.

In the fiction, the heroine's aunt Bapsy who loses her husband is portrayed as not believing that her spouse is dead. It is observed that despite the passage of years, Bapsy Aunt is witnessed to expect her husband to be alive. It is spotted that until the end of the novel, she is presented to the readers by the recollection of Dina that she trusts that her spouse is not dead by the bomb blast. Hence, Bapsy is sketched by Mistry as a person who states that her husband is still alive and will come one day. "She felt her husband was alive,... she believed her husband would be found.... the calamity did not diminish her faith. She spent her time chatting busily with his photograph," (Mistry, 1995, P. 65). Through the memories of the protagonist, the readers get to know the psychological condition of Dina's aunt who does not accept the death of her husband and thinks that he will return miraculously someday. This shows that Mistry has drawn his widow character as a person who has a mental disorder of not believing that her life partner was dead long back.

Similar to Aunt Bapsy, Dina is too pictured to think that her dead husband Rustom is alive. During the first few days of Dina's

widowhood, the readers come to know that she sits on her veranda and expects her husband to come to meet her on his favourite bicycle. Pathak (2020) utters that Dina in the novel *A Fine Balance* is seen to be haunted by the death of her husband and his memories (P. 161). This comment of Pathak indirectly reveals that the worries of her spouse's loss make Dina imagine and visualise his presence. "the separation temporary.... she caught herself gazing out from the verandah to see if Rustom's bicycle was approaching." (Mistry, 1995, P. 62). The excerpt from the prose narrative reveals that Dina imagines that the separation between her and her husband does not last long and everything will soon turn back to normal. It is seen that she later realises that thinking that Rustom will someday return will make her mad and thus sympathises with herself. Unlike Bapsy Aunt, Dina is depicted as a character who accepts her widowhood status and believes that her husband is dead and begins to lead her life as a widow. This situation exposes that Mistry has represented his widow heroine to have mental disturbances of mistrusting reality and thinking that her husband is still alive and will come back.

Dina is also noticed to rethink her days with Rustin even though he is dead. Priyadarshini (n.d.) points out that the morning rituals in turn trigger Indian widows to think of their husbands (P. 4). This comment of Priyadarshini implicitly showcases that Indian widows are reminded of their dead partners on seeing certain things and undertaking specific duties. This is reflected in the behaviours of Dina, wherein she remembers her times with her dead husband. It is witnessed that throughout the novel, Dina is seen to rethink her life with her spouse despite knowing that he is dead. It is visible on many occasions through the thoughts of Dina when she is alone or when she converses with her lodger Maneck or the tailors. These arguments uncover that Mistry has used the age-old presentation of his widow protagonist to frequently remember her days with her husband rather than depicting her to know the reality and stop recollecting the memories which lead her to become sorrowful. Thus, the character sketches of the heroine Dina and Bapsy Aunt unmask that Rohinton Mistry has pictured his widows in his second novel as characters who are psychologically weak. It also presents that he has painted them to think of their husbands most of the time. Similarly, he has drawn them as dramatic personas who imagine that their spouses are still alive and hence do not believe that they are dead.

## 6. Aloofness and Emptiness

Rohinton Mistry has characterised his widows as persons who restrict themselves from the outside world and think that it is better to remain lonely rather than to be isolated from their surroundings. It is also seen that he uses the image of widows as people who think that they feel a vacuum after losing their husbands. These are visible in the characterisation of Dina and her mother who lose their partners due to various reasons. In addition to these, Mistry's depictions of the fictional widows unveil his picture of them as psychologically delicate individuals.

In the fiction, Dina's mother Mrs. Shroff is observed to become secluded from the world outside after the death of her husband. Kumar (2023) says that Dina's mother who has been stoic during the funeral of her spouse is found to isolate herself from people around her. He adds that she is spotted to put herself in a cocoon, wherein her cocoon consists of only her (P. 45). As Kumar articulates, Dina's mother is noted to suddenly become silent and restrain herself from speaking and being with others. "her mother's dreamy silences," (Mistry, 1995, P. 29). This description of the novelist presents that Dina's mother becomes soundless and dreamy after the loss of her husband. It brings out that Dina's mother is affected by the death of her husband and is in turn mentally disturbed because of the sudden traumatic incident. Apart from these, it also shows that the novelist has represented the widow character as undergoing mental silence due to the loss of her husband.

Like her mother, Dina also faces loneliness. However, rather than restricting herself from the outside world like her mother who remains quiet throughout her life after becoming a widow, Dina is portrayed to be in isolation due to circumstances of encountering differences from her family members and society. Abirami and Kiruthika (2018) state that like other male and female characters in the novel *A Fine Balance*, Dina too strives for respect and independence. They vocalise that her struggles are indirectly showing that she is in a sense of remoteness due to her widowhood status (P. 3). As Abirami and Kiruthika voice out, Dina is noticed to be in aloofness until the end of the prose fiction. This is visible in many scenarios including her conversations with other characters and with the help of her thoughts as well. This is implicitly noted when she thinks that she is deserted again after Maneck and the tailors have gone from her house. It is seen that she wonders how she is feeling alone again after Maneck and the tailors leave her house despite being lonely for many years without the company of her husband. "how was it possible to feel lonely again after living alone most of her life?" (Mistry, 1995, P. 578). This narration of Mistry informs that Dina has been in solitude for many years after the death of her husband. It also announces that she is in isolation after Maneck and the tailors leave her flat.

Dina in the prose narrative is sketched as a person who finds an emptiness in herself after becoming a widow. Pathak (2020) avers that Dina faces isolation throughout the novel after the death of Rustom, which exposes that she experiences a vacuum within her (P. 161). It is seen that Dina considers herself as a void, wherein this thought of hers is due to her husband's death and her longing for his companionship despite knowing that he would not return. "her long, empty days." (Mistry, 1995, P. 61). The words that are availed by the novelist inform the readers that the heroine is feeling a hollowness in her from the moment she has seen her husband's dead body after the road accident. The illustration of Mistry about the mental state of Dina conveys that she has been experiencing a space in her due to the loss of her partner. It indirectly points out that the writer has depicted the widowed protagonist as a character who is mentally weak, wherein she is represented to consider that she and her days are empty without the presence of Rustom.

The analysis exhibits that the novelist has utilised a storyline and situations which consists of widow characters who are in aloofness and decide to restrict themselves from people around them because of the death of their husbands. Likewise, the examination projects that

Mistry has presented his dramatic personas as mentally fragile people, wherein they are depicted to feel aloof until the end of the story. It shows that the writer has portrayed them as individuals who are unaware of their mental vulnerabilities and accept their feeling of being left lonely rather than understanding the reality and overcoming it.

### 7. Emotional Fluctuations

Rohinton Mistry is witnessed to paint his widows in *A Fine Balance* to have various emotional breaks and sudden transformations. They are observed to undergo depression and grief throughout their lives after losing their life partners. Likewise, they are also spotted to get furious very often at people around them which includes the individuals whom they are familiar with as well. It is noted that these differing feelings and sentiments of Mistry's fictional widows are due to the psychological problems that they endure, especially due to their widowhood statuses. It is essential to point out that these oscillating reactions are predominantly visible in Dina Dalal and other minor widow characters.

In the novel, Dina is found to be in a state of melancholy after the death of her spouse. Paul and Das (2023) aver that widows, specifically young widows are noted to be in sadness (P. 307). Paul's and Das's comments are also indirectly exhibited in the lives of the widow's dramatic personas. However, Dina who cries after her husband's death at a young age, is observed to feel miserable even after becoming a middle-aged woman. In parallel to this standpoint, it is seen that despite the passage of many years, she is noticed to sob when she realises that she has become a widow. "sometimes crying softly,... pattern of mourning for... weeks," (Mistry, 1995, P. 61). Similarly, the other widow characters in the novel are also seen to shed tears for their late husbands, despite knowing that their spouses will not return. This reveals that Mistry has depicted his widows as psychologically weak and repeatedly feeling sad after the death of their partners.

Apart from crying, the widows in the prose narrative are captured to undergo depression. Kristiansen et al. (2019) aver that widows have high levels of depression because of their widowhood states and the discrimination that is forced upon them (P. 3). This is reflected in the fiction, wherein Dina is noted to become emotionally low on the loss of Rustom. This is conveyed throughout the novel with the help of the words that are uttered by her brother. "'It's your depressing behaviour which reminds me of Bapsy Aunty,'" (Mistry, 1995, P. 65). Like Dina, her mother Mrs. Shroff and her aunt Bapsy are also recognised to become depressed throughout the prose fiction on being widows. These arguments project that Rohinton Mistry has pictured his widows to be in a state of unhappiness until the end of the novel, which shows that he has painted them to have mental disturbances.

In addition to becoming sorrowful, the widows in the prose narrative are noticed to get angry most of the time. According to their research, Pathak and Tripathi (2016) state that many Indian widows have reported in their survey that they normally get furious (P. 141). The result of Pathak and Tripathi is mirrored in *A Fine Balance*, wherein the widow characters are seen to be in rage throughout their lives. It is spotted that they get irritated frequently toward their family members and the people whom they know. This viewpoint is explicitly visible in Dina's characterisation, wherein she is found to mostly get annoyed initially with her brother and later at Maneck and her tailors. These reveal that Mistry has sketched the widow's dramatic personas including the protagonist Dina as persons who are indignant until the end of the fiction. Thus, the novelist has represented his widows with psychological disorders of becoming emotionally aggravated, wherein he shows it through their grief, depression, aggression and anger.

### 8. Trepidation

Mistry is noticed to have picturised his widows as persons who are fearful for their lives because of being single.

Trivedi et al. (2009) vocalises that Indian widows' major issue is their fears of being lonely and losing their self-esteem (P. 5). This is seen in the novel, wherein the characters are witnessed to be afraid of and for everything that occurs to them. The heroine Dina, Mrs. Shroff and Aunt Bapsy are all spotted to be dreadful during various situations. The readers with the aid of the thoughts of the widow characters and the scenarios of the novel are aware that the widow's dramatic personas are predominantly in fright. It is necessary to point out that the terror in them is a reflection of their psychological vulnerabilities.

The fiction presents that Dina after losing her husband undergoes a major obstacle of being unable to face her husband's apartment. It is seen that she takes her brother's children when she has to visit her late spouse's house. "If a visit to the flat was necessary, she preferred not to go alone, and took her little nephews with her." (Mistry, 1995, P. 62). This explanation by the writer unveils that the protagonist fears going alone to the house where her husband and she lived together, and hence takes her brother's son and daughter with her as a support and comfort. It also uncovers that she is drawn to be mentally fragile with timidity rather than facing her husband's loss with courage and boldness.

Dina is also presented by Mistry as a woman who does not trust anybody around her. It is seen that she distances herself from the outside world, wherein her restriction unmasks her fears after the unexpected loss of her husband.

Almond (2004) voices out that Dina's heart turns into a stone in the novel *A Fine Balance* after becoming a widow (P. 215). This point of view of Almond implicitly shows that Dina's emotions of trusting people have faded away over time. "Afraid of me? What nonsense,... I was afraid of them." (Mistry, 1995, P. 391). This utterance from Dina exposes her fears which are projected through her mistrust and doubts toward the tailors. Dina's frights are also directly visible in her advice to Maneck, wherein she asks him to be cautious when believing and becoming friends with her employees. It is necessary to exhibit that the apprehension within her toward the tailors and Maneck prevails until the end of the story. In addition to these, it exposes Dina's doubts and terrors of being cheated, defeated or left alone again after experiencing the aloofness because of the sudden loss of her husband. It also showcases the protagonist's mental

weakness and fears of not believing people around her which is due to the trauma of her past and her present widowhood state.

Hence, this section of the investigation brings out that the novelist has utilised a storyline that displays that his widows are fearful throughout their lives. Apart from these, they are painted to become horrified on facing their lives after the death of their partners. Likewise, he has depicted them as mistrusting the world outside due to their widowhood statuses. Similarly, he also depicts them as having trust issues until the end of the story. Thus, the analysis presents that he has pictured his widow characters as psychologically weak individuals from the beginning to the end of the fiction.

### 9. Despondency and Regret

Rohinton Mistry in the fiction *A Fine Balance* projects his widow's dramatic personas to have a change in the way they look at life after becoming widows. Barman (2021) articulates that Indian widows experience a change in their attitudes when they lose their spouses (P. 145). Barman's statement discloses that widows' positive perspectives toward their lives transform into a more pessimistic view when becoming widows. This is mirrored in the novel, wherein the widows undergo a transposition of their opinion of the world and their lives. It is explicitly visible in the character sketching of the widow protagonist Dina Dalal.

Dina is witnessed to lose her hope and sink into grief and melancholy during many situations. It is seen that initially, she becomes less sanguine in her life when she hears the news that her husband has passed away in a road accident. Later, she is observed to become less buoyant when she is forced into the circumstance of losing her apartment. Finally, she is depicted as becoming hopeless when she identifies that both Maneck and the tailors will not return to her house. It is spotted that Dina who has been pictured as a strong and optimistic woman is suddenly painted by the novelist to undergo despondency in her life when she comes across hard times. It is noted that rather than presenting the widowed heroine as a positive woman throughout the novel who confronts hurdles with sanguinity, the writer has drawn the character to frequently lose hope and become less buoyant.

Apart from painting Dina as an individual who becomes hopeless when she loses her husband, the writer has also represented her as a person who undergoes regrets about taking up her major life decisions. She is sketched to repent for choosing to live independently in her late husband's house without getting any help from her brother and brother's family. The readers come to know that Dina who decides to start a tailoring business, later undergoes regrets for her decision when she encounters obstacles during the work. Correspondingly, it is seen that Dina thinks that it is her mistake to have started a tailoring business when she faces a delay in the delivery of the order. Likewise, it is noticed that at the end of the novel when Dina is playing cards with her brother, she states in a conversation that she has made numerous life decisions believing that those will end up rightly but they have turned in the opposite direction. It is seen that Dina who is projected as a cheerful and optimistic person during her childhood is portrayed the other way around as becoming an individual who often undergoes regrets for what she has done.

Thus, the analysis shows that Mistry has pictured the widow in his novel as a character who predominantly becomes hopeless due to life-changing hindrances. It is also observed that Dina usually repents for what she has done in her life both consciously and unconsciously. Hence, this part of the investigation brings out that Rohinton Mistry has failed in representing his widow's dramatic persona as a person who can tackle situations by herself and can lead her life with hope. Similarly, he has not presented her to be happy and satisfied with her life decisions, rather has sketched her to worry about her life choices. In addition to these, the study shows that Mistry has thus painted his fictional widow as a psychologically weak individual throughout the fiction.

### 10. Conclusion

The paper discloses that Rohinton Mistry has sketched his widow characters with many mental disorders from the beginning to the end of the story. Kanwat and Kumar (2022) announce that several Indian writers have been misrepresenting widows in their literary works due to their ideological imbalances (P. 224). This standpoint of Kanwat and Kumar is also applicable to Rohinton Mistry since he has presented the widows in *A Fine Balance* as persons who are psychologically vulnerable individuals.

The article establishes that the widow characters in the select fiction experience many mental disturbances. It projects that they do not believe that their spouses are dead and begin to live in hallucinations with their dead husbands. Similarly, they are painted to frequently think of their late-life partners despite knowing that their rethinking which makes them sorrowful will not bring their spouses back to life. Likewise, they are displayed to feel lonely, wherein they restrain themselves from the world outside. Additionally, they sense a vacuum within themselves after losing their husbands. In addition to these, they are sketched to have emotional disorders of getting angry very often and frequently sobbing for their dead husbands despite the passage of many years. The study also unveils that they are pictured by Mistry as individuals who do not trust anybody and are fearful. Apart from these, they are shown as people who are hopeless and generally undergo regrets for their present state. Hence, the examination uncovers that the writer has depicted his widows as having psychological issues from the beginning to the end of the novel.

The research with the aid of the select fiction *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry points out that it is necessary for Indian writers to optimistically present mentally stable Indian widows in their literary works. As Kundu (2018) states in his work, Indian writers should be courageous in representing widows as bold women characters which in turn paves the way for them to be looked at by people with love and respect (P. 71). The study finally brings out that despite exhibiting widows as characters who strive to become independent, Indian writers including male and female novelists should draw them as dramatic personas who are psychologically indestructible individuals. This in turn will inspire and pave the way for the world to view widows as people who are strong both physically and psychologically.

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Ms. N. Mounisha was responsible for the data collection and drafting of the manuscript, and Dr. V. Vijayalakshmi was responsible for proofreading it.

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