

# Navigating Identity and Belonging: A Study of Parsi Family Dynamics in *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters*

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**Abstract**—The novels of Rohinton Mistry - particularly *A Fine Balance* 1995 and *Family Matters* 2002 extend their analysis of character to encompass the most intricate relationships within and outside of the family. This paper examines the dynamic interactions and intricate emotional histories of principal characters Dina Dalal, octogenarian widow Ishvar and thin, undernourished gent Omprakash, and young son of Indian immigrants Maneck Kohlah in *A Fine Balance*, as well as octogenarian Nariman Vakeel, his condescending, overbearing sister Coomy, and their eccentric, long-estranged acquaintances Jal, Julia, Roxana, and Murad in *Family Matters*. Employing extensive quotation from the novels, this paper presents a detailed reading of how Mistry portrays physical and emotional endurance, ultimate redemption through generosity and physical aid, and precarious equilibrium in close, intimate relationships, identifying related themes without contextualization.

**Index Terms**—Rohinton Mistry, Parsi Family, Family Dynamics, Navigating Identity, Character Relationships.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In his novels *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters*, internationally acclaimed author Rohinton Mistry explores the complexities of human relationships in the context of everyday life. Employing his trademark rich characterization and plotting, Mistry explores various aspects of life and relationships within the physical and emotional confines of “home.” In *A Fine Balance*, the story begins with the introduction of widowed Dina Dalal and her small tailoring business, which inadvertently becomes the conduit for two itinerant tailors, long-term immigrants from the countryside: the older, grizzled Ishvar and his nephew Omprakash. Their stories are intertwined with that of young Maneck Kohlah, a boarder at a small apartment, and Dina, who forms a surrogate family unit that is

fraught with tension and bonding and confronted with various individual and collective hardships. *Family Matters* focuses on seventy-eight-year-old Nariman Vakeel, who is forced to move in with his overbearing sister Coomy and her hypochondriac sister Saeed Jahan after being abandoned by his family due to his debilitating illness caused by Parkinson’s disease. After his sister’s death, Nariman is forced to move in with his son Jal, his wife Roxana, and Jal’s son Murad. As for Julia, Nariman’s second wife, she grapples with guilt over her decision to remarry.

This paper expands on character analyses with textual citations from the novels. Various sub-themes including psychological pressures of caregiving, intergenerational conflict, redemptive potential of substitute family relationships, and the emotional effects of dependency and loss are explored through the evolving relationships of the major characters. Such relationships include Dina’s transformation from a solitary life to the centre of her extended family, and Roxana’s journey to building a new life. Meanwhile, the quiet lessons of obedience that Ishvar teaches to Om mirror Jal’s own unspoken sacrifices for Nariman. By examining such rich pageantry of characters, this paper argues that Mistry uses his multifaceted characters to capture various moments of a fine balance between independence and dependency, reconciliation and conflict, and forgiveness and rancour. Ultimately, Mistry’s characters are able to move forward and find some measure of healing through the exercise of forgiveness, growth, and change.

Unlike *The Palace of Illusions* that weaves epic history together to give readers a powerful sense of the political context shaping lives, Mistry’s novels shift the focus squarely on the human details of connection between individuals. These connections can range

from the intimate warmth of familial love and companionship, to the scathing animosity that characterises Dina's dealings with his sister. Although there is some linear narrative in Mistry's novels- such as the need to return to India- there is also a much more fluid narrative structure which utilises non-linear story-telling to explore the backstories that drive each character's experiences. Thus, we learn about Ishvar's life in a village mile from Bombay, of Nariman's lost romance and of the intricate threads of friendship and partnership which connect Jal and Dina. The connection between the two tailoring characters of the novels—both working as dressmakers and labourers—is constantly evoked. Their emotional struggles mirror each other in ways which become more apparent as time passes. Like *The Palace of Illusions*, therefore, Mistry's novels celebrate connections that define identity and which carry immense value whether positive or negative, and whether temporarily lived or extended across a lifetime.

This paper offers a close reading of the ways in which Mistry delves deeply into the intricacies of human emotion by tracing his characters relationships throughout the novels. Like many other critics, one cannot help but agree with South Asian literary critic Wali Ahmend Buchignani, who has remarked that “Mistry excels in portraying the ‘ordinary extraordinary’ through the intimate connections between characters”. The paper argues that, throughout the novels, it is the repair of and indeed the intricate detail of these connections, which forms the basis of endurance that characterises the figure of the Indian subject in general and the two protagonists in particular. The introduction concludes with a brief overview of how each section will progress in a bid to explore what it is about relations that offer such endurance in the lives of Mistry's characters, and which resonate deeply with the reading subject.

## II. CHARACTER ANALYSIS IN A *FINE BALANCE*

**Dina Dalal: from isolation to reluctant matriarch**  
The character arc of Dina Dalal is an example of the great struggle of ruthless independence and unavoidable interdependence, which is formed by the series of crucial events that make her life in her world a barrier of strength and a closed system. Dina is orphaned at a tender age, and placed under the

authoritarian regime of her brother Nusswan where she is forced to attend school and even limited her freedoms, but she ends up married at the early age only to be widowed early and endure financial instability. Her steely determination is evident through her insoluble refusal of the financial assistance of Nusswan which is condescending: I am not a beggar... I will sew my own future, stitch by stitch (Mistry, *Fine Balance*, 23). This entrepreneurial will see her get herself a deal of blouses worth a lot of money that makes her recruit the talented yet penniless tailors Ishvar and Omprakash, initially, presenting the situation as a mere employer-employee one (Mistry 45-67).

But as increasing personal and external pressures undermine her solitude, their extended presence turns her small two-room apartment into a busy, makeshift communal room, which fundamentally works against her self-isolating principle. The latent tenderness manifested by Dina through little, insidious acts of nurturance, as she strongly protects the impulsive young Om against city scavengers, shares her own meagre (lack of quality and quantity) rations when there is a food shortage, and grudgingly accepts their irreverent jibes, slowly transforms into a motherly aspect: "In the grateful eyes of the tailors she was more than a landlady, she was The further exposure of her vulnerabilities, through more intimate engagement with the wide-eyed boarder Maneck Kohlah, his youthful vitality, philosophical contemplation, and joint household labor, further distort her hard-bred cynicism, making her open up to the occasional bouts of unguarded lightness and emotional closeness: Maneck chattering away in the lonely places of her heart, like sunlight in dust motes in the Having suffered a devastating loss at the tragic end of the novel, Dina is once again hurled into an extreme state of isolation, with her silent and unyielding accomplishment of unimaginable losses affirming a bitter-earned maturation - of her dogmatic self-sufficiency into a heart-rending realization of the frailty and worth of human bonds (Mistry 450-480).

**Ishvar and Omprakash: Bonded by Blood and Adversity**

The lack of affection between Ishvar and Omprakash is the emotional subtext of the novel, with its emotional foundation of unwavering allegiance, paternal guidance, and urban vagrancy filtered through

collective village memories and the city walking around. Om is steered by Ishvar, the old man with an irrepressible optimism, a dispenser of wisdom about life in the face of their desperate and nomadic life: "We are living, beta... That's the fine line we have to walk, one foot further than despair, the other one chasing a bit of hope" (Mistry, *Fine Balance*, 112). Since Ishvar rescues and takes Om as his apprentice in their family tailoring business after the destruction of their family, all his decisions, such as the decision to leave their village and to suffer humiliations, are heavily aimed towards the survival and future of his nephew, at times at a very high personal cost (Mistry 80-110).

Being a part of the Dina family, their dynamic makes the surrogate family full of reciprocity: Om flirting and boyishly admiring Dina, his youthful playfulness and rivalrous competition with the idealistic stories of Maneck bring life to the group of people that has already been darkened by the edges of the world (Mistry 301). With an increasing number of scathing tragedies, forced labor to mutilation, Ishvar culminates his final and heart-rending sacrifices to Om, in a burning ode to blood-deep devotion, which drives home Mistry themes of family strength, the nourishment of hope and the unacknowledged heroism of everyday survival forcefully (Mistry 420-456).

#### Maneck Kohlah: The Outsider Awakening

Maneck Kohlah, a spoiled and very disillusioned college student who has fled the far, stuffy mountain life of his parents, joins the world of Dina as an indifferent, distanced lodger whose childish idealism bangs repeatedly on the cold realities. At first, he watches the tailors at a detached distance, but over time, he starts to establish connections with them via the most ordinary household tasks, talking away at night, and street vending together: "Helping the tailors to take their meager stuff to every door, Maneck learnt the monotonous pattern of their lives, a sharp contrast to his own, the frivolous, careless aimlessness of his own existence. Such earthly folk parables and homespun philosophy of Ishvar have a transformative power, systematically dismantling the emotional protective mechanisms of Maneck: "Uncle could not stop thinking about his words, and they were wearing away at Maneck, the protective shell under the college facade" (Mistry, *Fine Balance* 256)

The storyline is further complicated emotionally by a fateful, sickly romance with the daughter of a

neighbor, which combines infatuation with an empathy-growing sense of the poor. The moment he gets sucked into the life of the group, he gets the temporary, but intense feeling of purpose and belonging: Maneck in their improvised family, made of need and accident, found a tentative, tenuous sense of belonging, a web of lives that caught him up and held him firm against his inner storms (Mistry 412). However, the cumulative burden of individual bereavements pushes him to withdrawal and hopelessness and he is transformed into a quietly pitted, thoughtful young man who was forever changed by the relations of intimacy (Mistry 470-490).

### III. CHARACTER ANALYSIS IN *FAMILY MATTERS*

#### Nariman Vakeil : Frailty and Enduring Influence

The Parkinson disease in Nariman Vakeil is a symbol of relational frailty and his physical deterioration further complicates his emotional relationships throughout his romantic relationships. His second marriage to Julia following the death of the first wife Lucy creates some resentment among the stepchildren Coomy and Jal but Nariman, as he is, has an element of charm and wit: even in tremors, Nariman had a twinkle in his eyes, eliciting tales where none existed (Mistry, *Family Matters* 56). His growing addiction leads to moves, first to his beloved apartment, then to the small flat of Coomy, then to the crowded home of son Jal, revealing family fractures and surprisingly finding some soft spots: "Nariman needed them, like fibers on a tearing garment, tugging at the seams" (Mistry, *Family Matters*, 210).

#### Coomy and Jaal: Resentment versus Duty

The personality of Coomy is overpowered by persistent resentment, her single life and the desertion of her mother give her the explosive charges against Julia: You have stolen my father, now you have stolen his care--parasite! (Mistry, *Family Matters*, 89). Her desperate plans to sell Nariman to other people are shown to be full of unresolved childhood trauma and manipulation.

Jal, on the contrary, is a person of self-sacrificing responsibility, who silently runs his tailoring shop, taking the burden of his family on his hands: "Jal earned the weight without complaining, his hands working on the sewing machine, and piece after piece

of cloth he sewed more than he made (Mistry, 167). The fact that he is an uncomplaining pillar to the family is strengthened by his devoted marriage to Roxana.

Julia, Roxana, Murad: caregivers and innocence  
The guilt of having led a life of affairs is the arc of Julia Vakeil, who needs to make it up by taking meticulous care of Nariman: "Julia wiped Nariman, apologizing that she was a lifetime of divided affections" (Mistry, *Family Matters* 123). Jal and her practical wife Roxana, when the family moves into her house, is able to cope with the situation when she turns chaos into order through resourceful efforts: "In Chateau Felicity, Roxana became chaos, her hands juggling pots and pills" (Mistry, *Family Matters* 289). Grandson Murad offers pure innocence, his games and love with Nariman breaking the generational barriers: "The stories told by Grandpa made the world of Murad wonderland, the tremors lost in the radiant waters of shared laughter" (Mistry, 345), bringing the family some of the few moments of happiness.

#### Comparative Insights: Relational Parallels and Contrast

Mistry uses tailoring as a motif that connects character throughout the novels *Dina*, *Ishvar* and the business of Om, which is similar to Jal in shop, symbolizes the way to mend broken lives with work and craftsmanship. Female protagonists in caregiving roles are brought together by their harshness in provisioning Roxana by their nurturing adaptability, both asserting determination in time of crisis (Mistry, *Family Matters* 312; Mistry, *Fine Balance* 178). The same can be applied to the generational conflicts portrayed by Nusswan and Dina control and Coomy avenging Nariman/Julia, which are frequently settled with the help of surrogate relations, as Maneck becomes a member of the Dina group and Murad sincerely loves her.

The comparisons are enriched with contrasts: the small family in *A Fine Balance* is walking on thin threads of care, as it is going to fall in one flourish, whereas the large family in *Family Matters* is struggling with congestion, but both stories underline the balance on a thin thread: "Lives balanced on threads of care, one slice of fabric will tear the thread apart" (Mistry, *Fine Balance* 456); Such dynamics display the subtle

perception of Mistry about a family as a burden and salvation.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

*A Fine Balance and Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry are the two great works of testifying to the complexity of human relationships, in which the personal experiences of the characters in the book reveal the subtle nature of independence, sacrifice, and mutual maintenance. By means of lavishly detailed studies buttressed up with a wealth of textual material, this paper has followed the curves of Dina Dalal becoming a lonely widow, Ishvar and Omprakash becoming an uncle-nephew couple that can never be separated by adversity, and Maneck Kohlah becoming a young man who wakes up to find himself in a surrogate family. Similar to these, the weakness of Nariman Vakeil triggers the conflicts and reconciliations of the Vakeil family, the bitterness of Coomy against the obligation of Jal, the care of Julia that is guided by the sense of duty, the adaptation of Roxana, and the lack of any feeling of generations between Murad. The outcome of these descriptions is the brilliant way Mistry presents the concept of the *fine balance* in life, a delicate balance that is not only maintained by the personal strength of a person, but also the fibers of interdependence that tie imperfect human beings together.

The theme of tailoring is core in both novels, but it is not a simple job, it is used to represent the healing of emotional divisions. The sewing room of Dina is seen as a place of temporary unity, similar to Jal and her shop as a place of silent resistance in the face of disorganization. Women characters such as Dina and Roxana become the cogs in the machine, their practical strength reflected in phrases like Dina promise to sew her own future (Mistry, *Fine Balance* 23) and Roxana, who makes order out of chaos (Mistry, *Family Matters* 289). Male characters such as optimism of Ishvar, stoicism of Jal, offer the necessary stability, and youth (Om, Maneck, Murad) offers the essential vitality and renewal. Even villains such as Coomy and Nusswan, who are motivated by unresolved pain, make the family of reactions human, showing how resentment may destroy but also lead to development.

Mistry avoids melodrama in favor of realistic relationships and conditions between characters, neither totally blissful nor irredeemably hateful.

Conditions in Dina's household continue to deteriorate, while memories of her husband persist, whereas the Vakeil's slowly and painfully heal from past traumas through their various migrations. This search for healing can be seen to mirror the themes of the novels. In *The Fat Cat*, Ishvar states, "We are alive—That's the *fine balance*" (Mistry *Fine Balance* 112). As seen in *Family Matters*, aging, widowhood, and illness continue to plague the members of the Vakeil family, but through their connections with each other, the characters are able to find some way to continue living. The relationships among Dina, Nariman, and the younger characters—Maneck, Comey, and Roxana—cause each of the main characters to grow in some way: Dina comes to terms with living alone, Maneck matures to understand his relationship with Coomy and Roxana comes to independence. These close-up portraits invite reflection on the bonds that make us human. Intruding little into the 'character interiors' in search of insight into their lives, Mistry, meanwhile, is quietly crafting lasting stories of survival in which the key to *fine balance* lies in family, either adopted or by blood. Future studies might unpack the literary devices that make this possible, but for now, it is enough to recognise the extent to which Mistry has rendered the ordinary extraordinary through carefully shaped relations.

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