

## SOCIO-CULTURAL INFLUENCE IN THE NOVELS OF ROHINTON MISTRY

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Rohinton Mistry, the Indian born Canadian writer in English, initiated his career as a short story writer and his first short story, *One Sunday* (1983) won him the first prize in Canadian Hart House Literary Contest. Although many of his short stories were published in various Canadian magazines, his first collection of short stories *Tales from Firozshah Baag* earned him great recognition and reputation. The book consists of eleven short stories, all set within one apartment complex in contemporary Mumbai. His first novel, *Such a Long Journey*, won the Governor General's Award, the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best Book, and the W.H. Smith Books in Canada First Novel Award, indicating very clearly the appeal and the power that his writing conveyed. It was also shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize and the Trillium Award. The book has been translated into many languages like German, Norwegian, Japanese, Danish, Swedish, etc. and also converted into a film in 1998. His second novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995) won the second annual Giller Prize in 1995 and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction in 1996. It also won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and was shortlisted for the 1996 Booker Prize. His third novel *Family Matters* (2002) is a contemplation of the complications that come with ageing. In 2008 Mistry was back with his short fiction *The Screem*. His books portray varied features of Indian socio-economic life as well as Parsi Zoroastrian existence, tradition and belief.

*Such a Long Journey* is based on the life of a virtuous Bombay clerk, Gustad Nobel that gradually develops into a tale of a minority community along with its uncertainties, apprehensions and feelings of vulnerability. In recounting the story of a middle class Parsi protagonist, Mistry is also in a manner re-narrating the tribulations and quandaries of not just a community but the entire country. The central character is at first besieged by feelings of failure and insecurity but comes through quite a number of chastising occurrences and becomes an altered man. The apprehensions for the Parsi community figure predominantly in the novel. The residents of Khodadad Building are representatives of a cross-section of middle-class Parsis articulating all the angularities of the declining community. Even some traditions and practices of the community are also focused in a very emphatic way in the novel.

Gustad Nobel, the man who clasp on to his self-esteem, potentiality and humanity is in a blistering surge of severe frustration and mystification, treachery and dishonesty. He is a commonplace bank clerk who shares the societal invisibility and obscurity of the average lower middle class society. The grandson of a thriving and exceedingly revered furniture dealer and the son of a reputed bookseller, Gustad faces despondency having abridged to a confined subsistence in his Khodad Building apartment with his wife and three children. All hopes pine around

Sohrab, Gustad's brilliant and intelligent eldest son, and happiness is let loose when he secures admission to the reputed Indian Institute of Technology. But it is Sohrab's inconsiderate act of disobedience, declining to join the IIT that leads to melancholy and frustration and a peculiar strain between the father-son relationship. When in the dinner party, organized on the occasion of his daughter Roshan's birthday, Sohrab bursts out *'It's not suddenly. I'm sick and tired of IIT, IIT, IIT all the time. I'm not interested in it, I'm not a jolly good fellow about it, and I'm not going there.'* (p. 48), it was a loss of dream for Gustad. The journey that he had taken to reach that ultimate hope of light extinguishes forever and he fails to collect his tattered self. Anger and defeat pave their way into his heart and the desperateness of it is visible in his unrealistic exclamation –

'Every year at exam-time we fed him seven almonds at daybreak'. His bitterness turned to the past for nourishment. 'With holes in my shoes I went to work, so we could buy almonds to sharpen his brain. At two hundred rupees a kilo. And all wasted. All gone in the gutter-water.' (p. 122).

Gustad gets more frantic as he remembers the accident when he had dislocated his own hip bone to save Sohrab –

'What have we been all these years if not patient? Is this how it will end? Sorrow, nothing but sorrow. Throwing away his future without reason. What have I not done for him, tell me? I even threw myself in front of a car. Kicked him aside, saved his life, and got this to suffer all my life.' He slapped his hip. 'But that's what a father is for. And if he cannot show respect at least, I can kick him again. Out of my house, out of my life!' (p. 52)

Gustad's feelings and thoughts are chained as he locks his imagination to the past, refusing to bounce by the present developments. Somewhere in the depth of his heart he feels that Sohrab is challenging his authority as a father in the household and so trying to maintain his position in the family he lets his repugnance expressed whenever Sohrab comes up with any kind of proposal or remark. It is only the natural outcome of this growing tension that Sohrab finally leaves the house. In a way it is a betrayal that Gustad had never thought of and his emotions are hacked with despair and devastation.

Another cause of resentment and treachery for Gustad comes from the unbelievable corner of his onetime closest friend, Jimmy Bilimoria, who used to reside in Khodadad Building but had vanished suddenly without any information. Gustad comes to know later that he had joined the RAW, a wing of the Indian Intelligence Service. Major Bilimoria's sudden departure has hurt the sentiments of Gustad so much and the vacuum becomes so magnanimous that Gustad finds their friendship lost forever. Still remembering Jimmy and his favours, the indebtedness that he owes to him during the time of his accident, Gustad fails to equate the terms of friendship and the prospects of such intimate attachment. The shock is so overpowering that Gustad loses his self-control and is doubtful about the very intimacy of friendship. Questions related to friends and friendship keeps haunting his spirits and his outburst justifies his disappointment –

*Gustad could contain himself no longer. 'Friends? Friends? Don't talk to me of friends! If you have good reasons, I will listen. But don't say friends! You must be blind if you cannot see my own example and learn from it.'* *'What happened to the great friend Jimmy Bilimoria? Our Major*

*Uncle? Where is he now, who used to come here all the time? Who used to eat with us and drink with us? Who I treated like my brother? Gone! Disappeared! Without saying a word to us. That's friendship. Worthless and meaningless!' (p. 48-49)*

Although Gustad's grandfather was a furniture maker and the family had actually owed and enriched a lot from the 'wood and dowels', his father did not proceed with the business, rather linked his profession with his liking and ensured 'the finest bookstore in the country'. But with time, during his illness, the prosperity of the store was reduced to fiasco due to the negligence of his younger son. Impoverishment plagued the family and Gustad's 'once invincible father' was 'completely broken'. The shame and the sorrow snatched the life of Gustad's humble and uncomplaining mother as well. Gustad feels the pain and tames the poison and his present despondency sneaks into his past depression.

For the protagonist Gustad, there is no God who would appear to end the tribulations and solve his problems and to assure and reassure him that everything will be fine at the end. Yet he survives without surrendering himself to any kind of lingering desolation or hostility and still in control of his fundamental human dignity. But his journey through these days of commotion and confusion is undoubtedly a long one and often Gustad loses his composure handling the difficult extremities that he faces unexpectedly without any prior warning. When his wife asks him to be patient, he says '*What have we been all these years if not patient? Is this how it will end? Sorrow, nothing but sorrow.*' (p. 52) But somehow they manage to face life stoically and submissively, at times complaining but often accepting and thus realizing the various twists and turns of adversity and calamity. Gustad experiences the challenges of panic and persuasion one after the other. In spite of his qualms and concerns he confronts the crucial chances conniving against his optimism and enticement so as to recompense his failure of fortune and contentment. Mistry seems to put forward the vision that man is chained to the helm of destiny and has to struggle incessantly against the verdict of providence –

*Over the years, a precise cycle had entered the rhythm of his life, the cycle of arrival, creation and obliteration. Like sleeping, waking and stretching, or eating, digesting and excreting, the cycle sang in harmony with the blood in his veins and the breadth in his lungs. He learnt to disdain the overlong sojourn and the procrastinated departure, for they were the progenitors of complacent routine, to be shunned at all costs. The journey – chanced, unplanned, solitary – was the thing to relish. (p. 184)*

Finally for Gustad the revelation is too shocking and uncompromising; to apprehend that the actual fault is the government is very difficult for him to digest. Gustad reads the letter of Bilimoria and decides to act according to the instructions given. With the support of his friend Dinshawji he deposits the large sum of money sent by Bilimoria for some secret purpose. And later when Gustad personally meets Bilimoria in the hospital he is shaken by what he hears –

*'Everyone knows there's corruption,' said Gustad. 'But to this level? Hard to believe.'* (p. 280)

Having been incarcerated and later hospitalized, Bilimoria pours out his heart in the company of Gustad – the shady agreements and policies of the government, how he was tricked and trapped into making an acknowledgment of his culpability in the entire scandal. Gustad is perplexed thinking how a mature and solicitous man like Bilimoria trust the lady in charge of the government so completely –

*It baffled Gustad. The worldly-wise Jimmy Bilimoria, the cynical Major he had known for so many years, whose motto in life was: when in doubt, keep doubting. Could he really have done the foolish things he is describing? What kind of woman is she? (p. 278-279)*

Mistry uses the event, the life and death of Jimmy Bilimoria, to bring together the personal and the political; the maltreatment of influence and corruption among the political elite class who threateningly invade into the private lives of ordinary citizens turning their smooth existence into havoc. Gustad is a forlorn person throughout – niggling troubles at home and the office front drag down his fervor and passion. Apart from his eldest son, Sohrab, and his closest friend Bilimoria's unwanted exposures, Gustad is surrounded by other minor but intricate and heart-rendering issues like – his daughter's recurring sickness; his friend and colleague Dinshawji's, who had hidden his physical problems and his marital distress behind his tomfoolery exterior, sudden death; the complaints lodged by his neighbor against Darius, his other son, who it seems is after his neighbour's daughter; the wall outside the building used as a public urinal; the lack of space and the intensity of noise in and around the building; so on and so forth – everything leaves Gustad a 'broken' man. It is not just personal problems or national politics that gives vent to Gustad's apprehensions and concerns; it is the professed threat to the Parsi identity that triggers his anxiety and uneasiness. The treat to this minority community is seen through the eyes of Gustad as equivalent to the situation of the Black Americans and this intensifies his trepidations regarding the future of Sohrab after his denial to join the IIT –

*What kind of life was Sohrab going to look forward to? No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America – twice as good as the white man to get half as much. How could he make Sohrab understand this? How to make him realize what he was doing to his father, who had made the success of his son's life the purpose of his own? Sohrab had snatched away that purpose, like a crutch from a cripple. (p. 55)*

Completely counterpoised to the ignominy and confrontation of the present are recollections of the security and cultural dignity of the past. Gustad's sentiments encircling around isolation, apprehension, diffidence and cynicism exert out the encompassing sense of loss and bereavement. Throughout Gustad tries to establish a connection between his traditional long lost past and his contemporary uncontrolled present. To ensure solace he retreats into his grandfather's black ebony desk and this helps him to come out of the crisis and confusion of the present. The complicated journey of life becomes a long one as comparing and contrasting the past and the present, Gustad feels the pressure of it on his nerves.

*Such a Long Journey* might seem, in some way, not very optimistic about India and it maybe because it is expressed from a minority point of view. But another thing is also made unquestionably apparent – Mistry's encompassing wide visualization – its optimism associated with an exploration for individual humanity and selflessness against the odds of filthy paucity and skepticism. Gustad's friendship is at stake as he thrashes the cane of betrayal and Mistry desperately tries to set things right so that a finger is not raised on such a pious affiliation. Mistry introduces Ghulam to bridge the souls that have fallen apart by trying to convince Gustad about Bilimoria's mistaken identity –

*'You are wrong, he did care. He made sure you did not get into trouble after he was arrested.'* (p. 234)

It is through Ghulam that Gustad comes to know how Gimmy had made certain that Gustad does not get into any kind of problem with the amount which he had asked him to deposit in the bank by even refusing to confess to the authorities anything regarding the hidden money. Equations are sorted out and friendship is restored with high value with the Major's final apologetic clarification –

*'Had to protect you and Ghulam ... did not want any trouble for you. Once money was returned, everything fine. Transferred to hospital, proper treatment ...' 'Gustad, it is beyond the common man's imagination, the things being done by those in power. But I did not call you here to make you worry ... to feel sorry for me. What has happened has happened. I just wanted to talk to you. To make sure you don't think I tried to trick you. You were so angry, Ghulam told me ... in your place I would also have been. But I was hoping ... you will forgive me now.'* (p. 280)

Mistry lifts this friendship to a much higher altitude with a wider spectrum in relation to Dinshawji whose death raises various questions in the mind of Gustad, makes his heart swirl with emotions and his life's journey is exposed to new realizations. Never had Gustad shed a drop of tear for anyone close and in Dinshawji's funeral too, though extremely shocked, tears do not trouble him –

*Crunch, crunch, crunch. A fitting sound, thought Gustad, to surround death. Awesome and magnificent as death itself. And as painful and incomprehensible, no matter how many times I hear it repeated. Crunch, crunch, crunch. A sound to stir the past, to stir up sleeping memories, to whisk them all into the flux of the present, all the occasions when I marched thus, up the hill, upon the gravel walk, as though to crunch, to grind, to crush all loss, all sorrow, into dry flakes, pulverize it into nothingness, be rid of it forever.*

*But it always comes back. So much gravel to tread, so many walks to take. For Grandma: who insisted on live chickens, know spices and half-nelsons, and the secret but universal connections between matchmaking and wrestling. For Grandpa: who made furniture as stout-hearted as his own being, who knew that when a piece of furniture was handed down, the family was enriched by much more than just wood and dowels. For Mamma: fair as morning, sweet as the music of her mandolin, who went gently through the gauze-like net, and departed much too early. For Pappa: lover of books, who tried to read life like a book and was therefore lost, utterly lost, when the final volume was found missing its most crucial pages ....* (p. 253-254)

But finally Gustad's long journey is overpowered by the death of Tehmul, the half-wit who had earned a secret acknowledgement of empathy and humanity from Gustad, when he is fatally hit by a brick in the riot that takes place because of the municipality's attempts to remove the boundary wall around Khodadad Building. Gustad carries the lifeless body to Tehmul's dwelling place, lays him down and starts praying softly. For the first time tears roll down his cheeks and he fails to control them. Completely in contact with humanity that he had searched for in every nook and corner, he endorses it then and allows the tears to flow freely. All the emotions that had swelled up, for years, in his heart, gush out in the form of tears relieving the pain that was trapped inside and expanding his vision to a wider prospect. As the novel moves to

the ultimate threshold, Gustad's prior feelings of failure and treachery gradually take a turn and convert into conviction and reconciliation.

At the conclusion of the novel Gustad becomes mature enough to acknowledge the authenticities of life and understands that it is evidently unfeasible for him to oppose such forces at work which are actually beyond his reach. He sits by the motionless body of Tehmul, with prayers on his lips and tears in his eyes, as if finally he has got a chance to cry not just for Tehmul but for all those who had left him and he had escorted their lifeless body to the Tower of Silence – his grandpa, grandma, mamma, Pappa, Dinshawji, Bilimoria – all who had to wait for so long. It is not just the pinch of pain that he recognizes; it is the quintessence of perceptive that administers his actions. Emotionally broken and ethically balanced, he augments his life towards an affirmative track. Forgetting all differences he accepts his son's return with an open heart –

*Gustad turned around. He saw his son standing in the doorway, and each held the other's eyes. Still he sat, gazing upon his son, and Sohrab waited motionless in the doorway, till at last Gustad got to his feet slowly. Then he went up and put his arms around him. 'Yes', said Gustad, running his bloodstained fingers once through Sohrab's hair. 'Yes', he said, 'yes', and hugged him tightly once more. (p. 337)*

Extended over an anonymous coastal metropolis, a close by village and a small city in the Hills, *A Fine Balance* gives repugnant particulars of the iniquitous Emergency imposed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1977 and also the existence of the slum dwellers of the metropolis including the castration on Omprakash and the death of the monkey man. Positioned during the regime of Mrs. Gandhi's India, the novel is written with empathy, hilarity and insight. A stunning, splendidly textured and authoritative novel, Mistry discreetly depicts the persecution of the four major characters – Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Omprakash and Manek Kohlah, during the time of emergency. The novel opens with a chapter entitled 'Prologue 1975' and ends with 'Epilogue 1984' and this give a special significance to the regime the implications and the controversies of those in between years. Mistry also uses the flashback technique to synchronize the different proceedings speckled here and there in the classic novel. The novels encircles the valiant struggle of Dina Shroff and her two tailors who find themselves caught up in a world of isolation, subjugation and corruption where sincere service is deprived of and an earnest employee is even punished under the autocratic system.

Ishvar and Omprakash (the uncle and the nephew) face their first experience of uninhibited relentlessness of the latest order with the opening of the novel itself, when their train journey to the city is interrupted by the detection of a dead body on the track ahead. Both Ishvar and Omprakash originally belong to the Chammar Caste of the tanners and leather-workers. It is in a small village where Dukhi Mochi resides with his two sons Narayan and Ishvar but his intention to create a better life for his sons allows him to send them at the age of ten and twelve respectively to learn the art of tailoring. Both Dukhi and his wife Rupa are against the caste-based occupation and so they send their sons to their close friend, a Muslim tailor named Ashraf. The sons learn the art of tailoring from Ashraf and his wife Mumtaz and it is at this point that Mistry emphasizes on the fact of how difficult it is to fight against the deep-seated caste system in India. The whole is against the decision of Dukhi and they comment that Dukhi's act of imprudence, daring to break the chain of caste system which has been knitted from a long past, will not be appreciated by the high caste people –

*Dukhi Mochi's decision to turn his sons into tailors was indeed courageous, considering that the prime of his own life had been spent in*

*obedient compliance with the traditions of the caste system. Like his forefathers before him, he had accepted from childhood the occupation preordained for his present incarnation. (p. 95)*

It was during the time of India's independence that came along with the cataclysm of Partition aggravating the communal riots and Mistry develops his characters in such a way that they are capable of developing their own strategies to tackle the frantic circumstances. The signboard of Ashraf's tailoring shop was changed from Muzaffar Tailoring Company to Krishna Tailors to circumvent any kind of provocative assault from the Hindu community. Still, when one day a group of around thirty men attack the shop having received information from reliable sources that it is in fact a Muslim shop, it is Narayan and Ishvar who come to the forefront and save the family. They face the humiliation of even lowering their pyjamas for identification and are released after the leader is confirmed about the foreskin being intact. The family of Ashraf is overwhelmed with gratitude and Mumtaz feels so indebted to them that she even touches their feet in thankfulness. Dukhi is also appreciative of Ashraf's family – the constructive and sympathetic treatment that he has never received from his fellow Hindu community, he cherishes from his Muslim friend. The never-failing emotional-tie of humanity holds them together.

Narayan marries and has a child whom they name Omprakash. Everything goes on smooth until the time of the assembly elections when Narayan decides to vote for the candidate he wishes to. Narayan's obdurate attitude enrages Thakur Dharamsi and he is abducted and brought to the Thakur's farm by his men. Narayan, along with the other two men who have committed the same mistake of preferring someone other than the Thakur, are made to hang naked by their ankles from the branches of a banyan tree and whipped heartlessly. The men even urinate on their inverted faces and later in the evening, when the ballot boxes are taken away, the torture goes to the height of sadism and atrocity – burning coal is first held up to the genitals of the three men and then stuffed in their mouths. The whole village is traumatized by their excruciating screams until their lips and tongue melt away. When they finally become silent their bodies are taken down and a little stir in them makes the men feel that they are still alive and so they transfer the rope from their ankles to the neck. The three men hang for no fault of theirs and the lifeless bodies are exhibited in the village square for others to learn a lesson from it. These goondas of the Thakur eye the untouchable quarters once they are done with their election duties.

Thakur Dharamsi considers that to cross the border of caste is a heinous crime and whosoever does so should be severely punished. This is the reason that he decides to take revenge of Dukhi Mochi whom he blames for transforming their children from cobblers to tailors, thus deforming the everlasting stability of the society. The blame-game and the vindictive disgust reaches its pinnacle when all the members of the family of Dukhi Mochi, except the two Ishvar and Omprakash, who have escaped, are bound and dragged out to the main room to see the mutilated dead body of Narayan. A howl broke out from Radha, the wife of Narayan but soon everything became silent engulfed in the flame as the house was set on fire –

*The light tore away the benevolent cloak of darkness. The naked corpse's face was a burnt and broken blur. Only by the red birthmark on his chest could they recognize Narayan.*

*A long howl broke from Radha. But the sound of grief soon mingled with the family's death agony; the house was set alight. The first flames licked at the bound flesh. The dry winds, furiously fanning the fire, showed the only spark of mercy during this night. The blaze swiftly enfolded all the six of them. (p. 147)*

The horrific news reach Ishvar and Omprakash quite late in town and when they, along with their Ashraf Chacha, go to the police station to lodge a complaint the police officer accompanies them halfheartedly to the house to validate the incident and finally reports that he had found nothing to support the accusations of arson and murder. The sub-inspector is inhuman enough to comment to Ishvar and this injustice is inconsolable –

*'What kind of rascality is this? Trying to fill up the F.I.R. with lies? You filthy achool castes are always out to make trouble! Get out before we charge you with public mischief!'* (p. 148)

Mistry very well exposes the austere actualities and sickening insinuations of anarchism and the exploitation that could go on in the name of regulation, ornamentation and progression in a democratic country. Ishvar and Omprakash have escaped to the city primarily to get away from the caste oriented oppression imposed on them by the village landlords. They find work at Dina Shroff's house as tailors and on the first day at work Omprakash asks Dina –

*'Dinabai, what is this Emergency we hear about?'*

*'Government problems – games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us.'*

*'That's what I said,' murmured Omprakash. 'My uncle was simply worrying.'* (p. 75)

This trouble-free concern, however, turns to be a harsh truth when their cardboard thatched lodging is demolished in the shanty-town under the municipal beautification arrangement. It also becomes particularly heartrending when Omprakash is castrated as there were no more volunteers obliging and the management has to issue evidence for the results of the family planning vocation carried out by its workers.

Dina Dalal, one of the protagonists of the novel, has to surmount the desperate urge of pulling herself out and scratching away the distrust with which her life has become thickly coated from the time her husband expired. When Ishvar and Omprakash join work at her place she is initially uncomfortable by their physical presence of the tailors and especially when they are compelled by nature's call to use the lavatory in her home and she shrinks back to the unfamiliar stench of urine in her toilet. To maintain a distance she segregates the cups in which she serves them their break-time tea. Though she detaches herself from those working for her, she remembers very well how she had herself been a victim of physical discrimination; especially when she was in her teens and her brother cum guardian, Nusswan, had imposed so many rules and regulations for her, not even agreeing to the hair cut that she had gone for –

*'Please come here, Dina. Explain why you have disobeyed me.'*

*She scratched her neck where tiny hair clippings were making her skin itch. 'How did I disobey you?'*

*He slapped her. 'Don't question me when I ask you something.'*

*'You said you couldn't afford my haircut. This was free, I did it myself.'*

*He slapped her again. 'No back talk, I'm warning you.' He got the ruler and struck her with it flat across the palms, then, because he deemed the offence extremely serious, with the edge over her knuckles.*

*'This will teach you to look like a loose woman.'*

*'Have you seen your hair in the mirror? You look like a clown,' she said, refusing to be intimidated.* (p. 23-24)



Dina's struggle and fortitude symbolize a woman's plight in the society. Although Dina belongs to a Parsi family, her brother Nusswan epitomizes both, male supremacy and an artificial pride of the community –

*'Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with him.'* (p. 52)

Throughout the novel there examples of resistance – Roopa's midnight expedition to steal fruits and milk from upper-caste gardens and homes portray a sparkle of the type of bravery that was required for survival in such caste dominated villages. She had even to reimburse for the dishonest endeavor that she carried out by forcing herself to the act of prostitution to the man protecting the orange grove. As far as her character is concerned, she is loyal and devoted but circumstances cripple her and she is forced to submit her body for the invincible requirement. The lady who stands for submissiveness and forbearance has to submit herself to the shameful and reprehensible exploitation of the watchman of a rich man's orchard just for the sake of picking some oranges for her family. She cries in the dark, not letting anyone know the shame and the torture she had to bear but her sob reaches the ears of her husband but Dukhi knows that he is incapable of either consolation or revenge. The helpless tortured class has always to bear the twinge and the trauma, has to calm themselves down with silence and calmness and carry on with their lives forgetting and avoiding the past –

*Dukhi pretended to be asleep as she entered the hut. He heard her muffled sobs several times during the night, and knew, from her smell, what had happened to her while she was gone. He felt the urge to go to her, speak to her, comfort her. But did not know what words to use, and he also felt afraid of learning too much. He wept silently, venting his shame, anger, humiliation in tears; he wished he would die that night.*

*In the morning Roopa behaved as if nothing had occurred. So Dukhi said nothing, and they ate the oranges.* (p. 99)

Similarly Dukhi confronts the existing caste restrictions by sending his sons to the cities to become tailors. One of his sons, Narayan, returns to the village and helps to perk up the lives of his family members for a while. During the time of the elections, he persists on registering his vote against the benefits of the local leader, Thakur Dharamsi. Later the Thakur's rigging of the ballot goes unquestioned by everyone else and he takes revenge of Narayan for his rebelliousness by killing him and burning his entire family to death. The amalgamation of a viciously suppressive condition, crushing poverty, and caste oppression overpower any such individual act of resistance or rebellion. On the lighter side there is Mrs. Gupta, owner of Au Revoir Exports and Dina's employer whose middle-class mentality supports the politics of the Emergency just to express superficially their caste interests. Thus the characters move around, quite unaware of the politics around but knowingly or unknowingly becoming a part of it. From the forced labour camps to the programmes of sterilization, the effects of the Emergency are clearly visible on the ordinary people, but the main characters fail to make sense of the political pronouncements that are responsible for their pathetic situation.

Often the storyline moves backwards in time so as to recount the previous lives of the protagonists and their ancestors who were forever transmuted by the gruesome operations of Partition. It was Partition that had deprived Maneck's father of his ancestral property and also endangered the serene co-existence of Hindu and Muslim communities to which the tailors

belong. Dina, searching and seeking some pattern in a situation of confusion, starts utilizing the scraps of leftover of the materials after the day's work, to convert into the making of a quilt. The variety of colours and textures used in the quilt, to a great extent, represent the experiences that the 'little family' shared during times of emergency. Contemplatively does Omprakash visualizes the days gone by as a patch of fabric and wishes to stitch together the good parts and erasing the bad ones. Maneck imagines God as a colossal quilt-maker whose handiwork has become so wide-ranging that it becomes difficult to see the pattern within. The different opinions are so well articulated that the dilemma of reality is expressed through imagination and the essence of imagination is uttered through reality.

The novel spins around the specification of space as well – on the one hand, Dina, the daughter of a doctor, and Mr. Kohlah, the proud shopkeeper, belong to the middle class category who enjoy the comparative luxury of independent living though, of course, they too face quite a number of drawbacks in their lives, and, on the other hand, the life of the lower grade tanners-turned-tailors who are stamped with deficiency and discrimination. However it is not that these spaces are not judicious or divergent from one another or resistant to the interference of other systems around – such outlines are crossed too – Dukhi and Narayan shatter the attachment of the caste system by shifting their profession; Dina's apartment is inhabited by 'foreign bodies' and Mr. Kohlah's instinctive recognition with the mountains in which he had always lived and worked for such a long time is battered by the invasion of developers and 'nation-builders'. The forces of capitalism and pre-capitalism or feudalism are also exposed through different characters. Mrs. Gupta through her Au Revoir Exports exemplifies capitalism and as her control-freak inclinations are nurtured by customary outings to the hairdresser where she goes just to settle down her disorderly curls, and, with her slogan crammed speech, she is a vocal supporter of the Emergency. It is she who infuses in Dina the necessity of preserving a distance between herself and her tailors and it is she who delighted to know that Emergency legislation has brought in a restrain on the trade unions.

The sub-plots of the novel play a great role, ensuring a complete support to the structure of the story. Mistry projects the character of Nussawan sarcastically – a despotic figure who believes that nothing should be undertaken against his desires. He is very upset when Dina goes against his wishes, falls in love and marries Rustom. Incorporating in himself all the arrogance and pretense of a shrewd businessman, he falls short to comprehend his sister's logic of yearning for absolute freedom. The fine linking anecdotes of Beggar master, the chief of the beggars and Rajaram, the hour-collector who later converts himself as the Balababa, enhances the basic theme and concept of the plot. Beggarmaster is a prominent and influential person who protects Dina when her landlord plans the strategy of deportation against her. As soon as Beggarmaster takes charge of the responsibility of Dina no one dares to come to the front. When Shankar, the beggar whom Ishvar and Omprakash and sometimes even Maneck used to meet at Vishram Hotel, dies, Beggarmaster arranges for an emotional funeral as he incidentally has come to know that Shankar was his brother. Ishvar and Omprakash could not attend as they had gone to their village for Om's marriage but Dina and Maneck attended to oblige the Beggarmaster. Infusing a mild tone of satire under the main current of pathos and grief Mistry very well narrates the funeral of Shankar –

*Beggarmaster gave everyone the afternoon off to attend the cremation ceremony. The assembly of crippled, blinded, armless, legless, diseased, and faceless individuals on the pavement soon attracted an audience.*

*Onlookers inquired whether some hospital, for lack of space, was conducting an outdoor clinic. (p. 503)*

Another interesting sub-plot is based on the story of Rajaram, the hair collector, who was initially the neighbor of Ishvar and Omprakash. When Rajaram fails to earn enough money through his means of selling hair, his greed goes to such an extent that he takes the drastic step of murder as well. To attain his purpose he kills two of the beggars, belonging to the clan of the Beggarmaster, who had beautiful long hair. Ishvar and Omprakash had at times helped him by safeguarding the bag of hair that he leaves in their custody. Rajaram also takes a plunge into another profession and becomes the motivator of family planning and this miserably destroys the lives of many innocent people like Omprakash and Ishwar. Finally completely exhausted with everything, he relinquishes the world and becomes the famous Balababa and says to Ishwar and Omprakash –

*'I will go bare feet, my soles and heels cracked, torn, bleeding from a dozen lesions and lacerations to which shall be applied no salve or ointment. Snakes wandering across my path in dark jungles will not frighten me. Stray dogs will nip at my ankles as I roam through strange towns and remote villages. I will beg for my food. Children, and sometimes even adults, will mock me and even throw stones at me, scared of my strange countenance and my frenzied inward-looking eyes. I will go hungry and naked when necessary. I will stumble across rocky plains and down steep hills. I will never complain.'* (p. 485)

The Monkey man, like Balababa, is another fascinating character. Performing jugglery acts first with the monkeys, he later shifts his performance with his sister's children whom the Beggarmaster later takes away from him. This anger and infuriates the Monkey man and he becomes revengeful and vindictive, finally murdering Beggarmaster for the injustice he has done. Ibrahim, the rent collector, substantiates the murder of the Beggarmaster –

*'At first it looked so comic. As if he was playing with a plastic folding knife from the balloonman. But he took his time, and finally Beggarmaster stopped moving. He who had lived by the beggings of helpless cripples died by those beggings, rooted by their heaviness. You see, sister, once in a while there is a tiny piece of justice in the universe.'* (p. 556)

It is indeed an appraisal of Mistry's dexterity as a raconteur that the cameo role manifestation of the trivial characters are often as mesmerizing as the anecdotes of the central characters – the Beggarmaster who has an weird empathy for all those who are under his supervision, in spite of his eagerness to mutilate them in order to make them more efficient mendicants; the hair-collector who transforms himself into a fortune-telling godman; the rent-collector whose scruples put him in dilemma despite his keenness to transmit the landlord's orders and the Monkey man who can go to the ultimate extent of murder when he learns about the maltreatment of his nephew and niece, the children he used to play with. On the other side Ishvar is crippled as he loses both his legs and is forced to beg for a living.

For Dina freedom remains always a dream; even after spending sixteen years nurturing and defending herself, she has finally to return to her despot brother. Almost all her endeavors of organizing her life are disenchanting either by providence or by the man-made social or political classifications. In spite of her brother's solemn objections, she determinately marries Rustom who meets with an accident and leaves her forever. To cope herself with the loss and to secure her independence, she initiates a new life and ventures into the business of tailoring with the help

of the two migrated individuals, Ishvar and Omprakash. Innumerable problems crop up but Dina is happy to lead a life of her own – an independent existence altogether. Although she is the supervisor of Ishvar and Omprakash and she even tries to maintain a distance with them, she is enclosed with compassion as is visible from her action of deciding to weave a patchwork quilt as a gift for the newly-wed bride of Om. It is this *mélange* quilt that indicates the extreme optimism of Dina which is finally shattered with the court order of eviction by Sergeant Kesar. Dina even fails to approach the court because the powers are in the hands of corrupt officials like Sergeant Kesar. She has no other option but to sustain herself, striking a balance between despair and hope. Mr. Valmiki, the advocate, advises Dina and it is an incredible awareness that Dina understands from the close quarters of her heart –

*'There is always hope – hope enough to balance our despair. Or we would be lost.'* (p. 563)

As for the two simple-hearted tailors life becomes dark and futile and the more they attempt to pull themselves out of it the more they become entrapped into the mesh of the complicated tyrannical surrounding. Even Maneck Kohlah, the boy from the Himalayas, who does his best to liberate himself from the domination of his father's dreams and desires by attaining education and then placing himself in a job in Dubai, finally could achieve nothing and puts a full stop to every wish that he has churned in his heart by committing suicide. He throws himself in front of a moving train in an uncanny burlesque of the reported death sequence of his friend, Avinash. The system and its tyrannical methods take a total control of the lives of the individuals and crush their hopes, leaving them thoroughly disenchanting. Freedom, thus, remains a cherished dream, desirable, of course, but unattainable.

Closely connected with socio-cultural survival of the Parsis, Mistry's novels forefront the restricted situations and establish an archetypal antagonism to community dominance and control. There is a magnificent exposition of Mistry's art of plot construction in the novels as he brilliantly intermingle the sub-plots into his main plot. In *Such a Long Journey* if the major events of history during the post-independent period, is the main plot, then the history of Parsi community can be considered as a sub-plot in the story. In the novel the plot is intended in such a way that the main protagonist, Gustad Nobel, is acknowledged as a spokesperson of the common public. He has entwined history to explore into the extensive concern of Parsis and also of national distinctiveness with fate and war as the two major themes of the novel and has also encroached into great struggle in order to reflect on these issues at individual, social and national levels. Some of the thoughts incorporated in the novel, like fate overriding the lives of the human beings, the hypothesis of *karma*, the sequence of birth and death, the uncertainty of life, the practice of black magic, etc. are speckled all through the novel giving the readers a feeling that it is very difficult to come out of such extraordinary things in life. In the novel, the storyline is shoved frontward in statistical progression and is sequential rather than spatial in the expansion of the plot. In *A Fine Balance*, with the city at the centre, Mistry intertwines a delicate and proportional narrative about four implausible characters, aspiring for different destinations but getting connected by the overpowering fate.

Mistry's works typically reveals an inconsistency of circumstances or a huddle of anxieties entrenched within the customs itself as the consequence of interaction between assurances and obligations of the past and the veracity of the present. In his work, cultural prototypes find international acceptance and adaptation through the narratives of the individuals. His strategy of incorporating terror and temptation administers the contemplation and proceedings of his frustrated yet optimistic characters. And, his novels ingeniously emulate the

perceptions of the Parsi community that endeavors to surmount their fright of extinction with the enticement of endurance. He also uses metaphors and symbols in his novels: 'Khodadad Building' might represent India with all its splendors and limitations, the 'collapse of the wall' might link the past with the future through the present, etc. Myths incorporated from the Hindu, the Persian, the Greek and the Christian resources are correlated to numerous perennial facts by Mistry, in order to portray the quandary of the modern man. He even includes a pinch of salt to give his novels a tinge of satire. It is because of this sparkling wit and consistent humour, which is cautiously structured into the texture of the novel that permits the characters to register a stamp of accomplishment in spite of abnormalities.

Mistry is a commanding chronicler of social and political life. One of the noteworthy features of his fiction is that it incarcerates the crowded throbbing life of India. The enthralling history-fiction interface that Mistry implies is undoubtedly captivating and ethnically momentous. The political concerns that have changed the lifestyle of many and are very close to the mind and spirit of the people are his main thematic concerns. He goes to the depth of relationships, tries to explore those arena where the self is at a loss at times accepting and at times rejecting the community values and traditions. The identity that an individual tries to create for oneself is so dependent on the factors around him that he fails to understand the genuine requirements of events around and is in a dilemma while acknowledging or eliminating a situation that might affect him in both ways. Closely connected to the social and political milieu, Mistry brings forth the issues that are extremely relevant in the day to day life of the common man and they feel a part of it. Subjects like corruption, problematic political decisions, the common man's fears and traumas, caste and class problems and many more such pertinent concerns are so well portrayed that people feel intimate and associated. The cultivation of such a wonderful socio-cultural essence intermingled with the beauty and artistry of form and language gives the novels of Mistry a perceptive approach and a trendsetter in English literature.

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