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## Socio-Political Irregularities/Anarchy and Caste Aberrations in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*

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Rohinton Mistry with his novels like *Such a Long Journey* (1992) and *A Fine Balance* (1996) showed to the literary world that he is a novelist who believes in depicting life as it really is. Both the novels exhibit his excellent understanding of Indian social life. A veracious portrayal of the Indian middle class is the high point in Mistry's narratives. His bitterness and disappointment with the government's hostile attitude towards the poor is evident in his novels.

*Such a Long Journey* (1991) is a great work of art by Rohinton Mistry. The novel announces Mistry's advent as a gifted Indian writer. The novel is set against the background of the Indo-Pak war of 1971. It delves into the human predicament meted of its central character, Gustad Nobel whose hopes are shattered by circumstances beyond his control. Mistry depicts Gustad Nobel as a classical tragic hero. Gustad appears to be completely serene and tranquil in his approach towards life. His sufferings and struggle with fortitude and humility in life reminds us of the classical tragic hero's life and sufferings. The novel has an optimistic note with its hero making a journey which takes him from hopelessness to hope.

The novel derives its form from the classical literary tradition. Mistry's narration reminds the readers of the great tradition where the novelist not only changes the possibilities of art for practitioners and readers but becomes significant in terms of that human awareness they promote -- the awareness of the possibilities of life. We find the elements of comedy, tragedy and satire in the novel. We also find Mistry sharing his thoughts on beliefs, superstitions, the super natural, rites, nationalistic ideas, humanism, discrimination, secular views and so on and so forth. We find the central character of the novel, Gustad, having pains and sufferings in his life. The readers are reminded of the fact that no happiness can last forever.

In the opening of the novel, Gustad is described as a God-fearing man, the envy of all:

Tall and broad –shouldered, Gustad was the envy and admiration of friends and relatives whenever health or sickness was being discussed.(Mistry, 1992: 12)

He is a bank employee and has three children. During the course of the novel we find that Gustad's hopes, dreams and aspirations get shattered. He considers destiny to be the cause of his misfortunes. The sudden disappearance of Major Bilimoria, who had been a loving brother to him and a loving and affectionate uncle to his children, from Khodabad building, his son's Sohrab's aggressive temper and bad manners and finally his refusal to become an IIT student, the prolonged illness of his daughter, Roshan, his receipt of a package from Major Bilimoria and the trouble thereafter to hide ten lakh rupees, his close friend Dinshawji's illness and his ultimate death, the death of Tehmul Langra, an idiot and retarded child of the Khodabad building and the

destruction of his sacred wall by the municipal authorities are events in Gustad's life which bring utter gloom and hopelessness in his life.

Sohrab's selection in the IIT was a matter of great pride for Gustad but his refusal to become an engineering student and his fierce temper shows a hostile father-son relationship in the novel. The sudden and uncalled for Sohrab's snub at the party Gustad had arranged as a celebration of his selection in engineering, shatters his hopes and dreams. He finds it difficult to have a check on his emotions:

Throwing away his fortune 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 [slapping his hip]. But that is what a father is for. And if he cannot show respect at least, I can kick him again. Out of my home, out of my life! (Mistry, 1992: 52)

Gustad, as a loving father had done everything possible for the happiness of his children, even got himself fractured his hip to save his son's life. Therefore the son's hostile attitude makes him suffer immensely.

The physical surrounding which Gustad has to bear fills him with annoyance and disgust. The horrid smell and flies and mosquitoes coming from the wall side of his home, used as a public latrine fill him with repugnance:

The flies, the mosquitoes, the horrible stink, with bloody shameless people pissing, squatting alongside the wall. Late at night it became like a wholesale public latrine. (Mistry, 1992: 16)

The above passage can also be seen as a depiction of an Indian society where people do not have common civic sense. Mistry gives a real and truthful picture of the country's general lifestyle with its dirt and filth in the absence of sanitation facilities for the poor and a subhuman insensitivity among them to the stench and squalor they cause and are a part of.

The novel also exhibits Mistry's awareness and understanding of the Indian superstitions. Miss Kutpitia, one of the characters in the novel, maintains that Gustad's daughter Roshan's illness is caused by some evil eye or some "jaadu-mantar". To protect her from "jaadu-mantar" she asks Dilnawaz (Gustad's wife) to use a common talisman:

Take your needle and thread, a nice strong thread with a big knot at the end. Select a yellow lime, and seven chillies. Chillies must be green, not turning red. Never red. String them together with the needle. Lime goes at the bottom. Then hang the whole thing over your door, inside the house. (Mistry, 1992: 149-50)

She continues to say,

It is like a *taveej*, a protection. Each time Roshan walks under it the evil eye becomes less and less powerful...Actually everyone in your family will benefit. (Mistry, 1992: 150)

However, Mistry's concept of faith and belief is more inclined towards rationalism which is well expressed in the novel. His pavement artist speaks in the following manner about faith:

You see, I don't like to weaken anyone's faith. Miracle, magic, mechanical trick, coincidence – does it matter what it is, as long as it helps? Why analyse the strength of the imagination, the power of suggestion, power of auto-suggestion, the potency of psychological pressures? Looking too closely is destructive, makes everything disintegrate. As it is life is difficult enough. Why to simply make it tougher? After all, who is to say what makes a miracle and what makes a coincidence? (Mistry, 1992: 289)

An important preoccupation of the novel is its emphasis of Indian composite culture. The novelist emphasizes the importance of religious tolerance in the Indian society and demonstrates his hatred for divisive forces. The pavement artist, who has painted gods and goddesses from all religions of the world on the wall, is one through whom the Indian secularism is reinforced. The *morcha* director shouts:

The wall of Hindu and Muslim, Sikh and Christian, Parsi and Buddhist! A holy wall, a wall suitable for worship and devotion, whatever your faith! (Mistry, 1992: 326)

*Such a Long Journey* (1992) shows Rohinton Mistry's awareness of the social and political situation of India during the 1970s. Mistry gives a realistic and satirical picture of the Indian political system of the time. He appears to be unrelenting so far as his attack on Nehru and Indira Gandhi is concerned. He condemns Nehru for India's defeat at the hands of Chinese in the Indo-Chinese war of 1962. He describes Nehru's frustrations, his ill-temper, his political maneuverings; his feud with Feroze Gandhi for the latter's exposure of scandals in his government, his fixation for his "darling daughter Indira", who leaves her husband in order to live with the father. Quite conversely, he praises Lal Bahadur Shastri, who became India's Prime Minister after the death of Nehru. He believes that during his reign, "the stagnant waters of government would at last be freshened and vitalized." (Mistry, 1992: 114) Mistry considers Shastri to be far better than Nehru in the war against Pakistan in 1965. Dr. Paymaster, one of the characters in the novel describes Shastri thus: "Short in height but tall in brains is our Lal Bahadur" (Mistry, 1992: 114). Indira Gandhi is shown to be a suspect in his sudden death at Tashkent "so that her father's dynastic democratic dream could finally come true" (Mistry, 1992: 114). We find scathing criticism of Indira Gandhi for her nationalization of banks, for her support to make a separate Maharashtra state that causes mayhem and riot, for her creation of Shiv Sena to divide people on the basis of class. Dinshawji remarks about her policy to be "wanting to make the rest of us into second class citizens" (Mistry, 1992: 39). Mistry attacks her for her political gimmicks, to get the votes of the poor and show them that she is with them. Mistry exposes the crumbling political order of the country by describing the political scenario in detail in the novel. Sohrab, Gustad's son suggests two things for a drastic social change. He comes up with the words of Major Bilimoria:

Only two choices: communism and military dictatorship, if you want to get rid of these Congress party crooks. Forget democracy for a few years, not meant for a starving country. (Mistry, 1992: 68)

Mistry takes into account a contrastive perspective and gives it a voice through Sohrab. Gustad's immediate response to his son's Sohrab's views on dictatorship and communism suggests Mistry's dreams and longings for the nation:

Be grateful this is democracy. If that Russiawala was here, he would pack you and your friends off to Siberia. (Mistry, 1992: 69)

The novelist feels that the sickening dirt, ugliness and pollution in the city, in the bazaar, and at the Kholabad building are symbolic summation of what happens at the centre. Congress government, at the centre is like a 'rogues' gallery' (Mistry, 1992: 325). People cannot tolerate the crumbling of society, deceit, dishonesty, loss of morality and cheating for long. These are the things which take the nation back. Dr. Paymaster puts the magnitude of the situation metaphorically in the following terms:

.....our beloved country is a patient with gangrene at an advanced stage. Dressing the wound or sprinkling rosewater over it to hide the stink of rotting tissue is useless. Fine words and promises will not cure the patient. The decaying part must be excised. You see, the municipal corruption is merely the bad smell, which will disappear as soon as the gangrenous government at the centre is removed. (Mistry, 1992: 313)

The world which Mistry creates in the novel is a world in which all forms of corruption can be seen. The rampant hypocrisy, cruelty towards the poor, despair and decay and loss of moral and ethical values have made the situation dire. He is perturbed to find people living in sub-human conditions because of corruption. He appears to be a reporter of human conditions as it is. Wars between nations show the degenerating political situation of the world. Breakdowns of communication between nations lead to political unrest and upheavals. Mistry becomes ruthless in his criticism of the government because he is a nationalist at heart and is concerned about the lives of the people of the nation.

*A Fine Balance* (1996) is an absorbing and moving text about life of common, vulnerable people who scuttle about on this globe and whose lives are caught in the vicious cycle of poverty. The novel depicts the picture of the present-day India, shows the sufferings of the outcasts and innocents trying to survive in a cruel and hostile world and grapples with the question of how to live in the face of death and despair. The poor who are the main characters in this novel are also maimed, mutilated, poisoned, homeless and hopeless. The novel is largely pessimistic in which Mistry gives us images; of God as a giant quilt maker sewing patches together, of life as a game of chess, of reward being immediately matched by a disaster. He proposes a world in which nothing can really change or improve the condition of the poor and the deprived. The society is a place only for the rich, the corrupt, the oppressive and the unscrupulous. They keep growing luxuriantly. Mistry concludes the novel on the intriguing note that no matter how much the lower and deprived class struggles it will always find it difficult well nigh impossible to break the very shackles of poverty. It will be suppressed, driven into extreme survival struggle by the fraudulent and the malicious system.

The period which Mistry sets *A Fine Balance* is a period of great civil unrest. The novelist is successful in creating the story around his readers and involving them in the lives of his

characters. Mistry's depiction of the Indian society at the time of Emergency is so vivid that a reader gets a feeling that the events are getting unfolded before one's eyes- the smell of the street, the loud, blatant vendors screaming their slogans as the pedestrians walk by take the readers directly to the locale of the novel.

The first part of the novel give the reader brief histories of each of the main characters. The story takes place in an "unnamed city by the sea", somewhere in India, exploring the lives of four very different people of diverse backgrounds. Mistry beautifully uses his descriptive language to make ordinary things extra-ordinary. The first section of the novel reveals the interaction of the characters quite differently from the interaction they eventually have. We find the characters being rigid and formal with each other. Their bonding with each other grows as we move to the next section of the novel. They try to help and protect each other through the trying and testing circumstances they face.

Dina Dalal, whose fortunes we follow in the first part of the book, hopes to live as an independent woman after her husband's early death, managing a small tailoring business and maintaining her own apartment. She embodies the woman who is far ahead of her times, she is completely independent and free thinking. Greedy landlords, a mean and ignoble brother who never cared for her because of his hypocritical ideals and only bullied and used her, and sheer misfortune robs her of this modest dream after years of struggle. After the early demise of her husband, Dina tries to regain her foothold on life but indeed, the road towards independence and self-reliance proves bumpy and full of obstructions.

Maneck represents the young hero who is on a journey of self discovery whereas Ishwar and Omprakash- the two tailors uncle and nephew; represent the hard working lower class who always strive for better. They struggle to come out of their abysmal conditions as "untouchables" in their village and come to town and work for Dina. They hope that their fortunes will change in the city and they will be able to lead a decent and comfortable life. Ishwar hopes that some day he would be able to find a good match for his nephew Om and dares to hold out for it. The misfortunes that later fall on them are unbelievably dreadful. Dina is forced to make Ishwar and Om spend several nights on the streets as they were illegally living in her apartment. On one of these nights, the two men get rounded up with the other street dwellers and taken to a work camp far outside the city. Trouble emanates when they have no way of telling Dina about their whereabouts. They eventually come back to the city only to leave again for their village when Ishwar decides that Om needs a wife. Their misfortunes do not stop following them even in their village. Mistry leads up to the dramatic events in their village described with loads of foreshadowing and short diction and sentences. What finally happens to Ishwar and Om is utterly devastating. Ishwar ends up legless on a trolley and Om is castrated; a victim of sterilization targets on the eve of his wedding. Maneck, finds himself in extreme despair and ends up throwing himself under a train when he hears what has happened to his friends.

The happiest person in the novel is a beggar called Shankar, nicknamed "Worm", whose legs and fingers were chopped off soon after birth-he has nothing much to lose and scoots about on a little trolley, wise-cracking and helping people. Everybody else has hopes, and is therefore vulnerable.

It is clear in the novel that the political situation of the nation is responsible for the sufferings of the common man. The characters of the novel pay a heavy price for their simplicity and their



lack of understanding of the national politics during the time of Emergency. The novel is a harsh condemnation of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her associates, and of the disparaging viciousness of Emergency. Mistry takes his readers to a roller coaster of emotions throughout the novel leading them from happiness to depression in the blink of an eye. He makes it clear that the world can be a cruel place. He shows his anger and disgust for the Indian government for being remorseless in bringing destruction on his characters. The giant figure of Mrs. Gandhi, the huge slogans of her regime, the irony of her “Beautification” programs (meaning cleaning people off the city streets and having them forcibly sterilized or killed), the descriptions of labor camps and poisonous, stinking factories, the sheer misery of millions made to labor to produce a certain image for the powerful is the subject of Mistry’s book. He is certainly not happy with the government’s style of functioning during the Emergency. He shows his exasperation with the oppression of the lower class.

Mutilation, both physical and emotional is such a strong theme of the novel that it’s hard not to equate it with the geographical mutilation of the original, arbitrary act of partition. The novel is also about the power of human perseverance and the ability of the downtrodden to always look forward to the next day with optimism. The characters in this novel face tremendous ordeals in their lives and yet they manage to maintain a small amount of control over their lives. Rohinton Mistry writes in such a manner that one can see the vulnerability of the characters as well as their mental strength at the same time. They find solace in small little things and show their faith in a system that is continually failing them. Mistry, like Amitav Ghosh appears to be against the divide in society on the basis of caste and religion. They believe that there has to be a balance in the society:

““You see, we cannot draw lines and compartments. Sometimes you have to use your failures as stepping stones to success. You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair. He paused, considering what he had just said. ‘Yes’, he repeated, ‘In the end it’s all a question of balance’” (Mistry, 1996: 214)

The struggles of the characters to cling to life hold our attention all through the novel. Mistry, undoubtedly succeeds in depicting a moving tragedy with his strong impulse toward political and social commentary. The novel explores the resilience of human spirit and the searing heartbreak of futile imaginings.

His novels *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* can be read for their treatment of the layers of socio-political irregularities and caste aberrations that generate a world of anarchy.

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