

EXISTENTIAL ANGST IN THE SELECT WORKS OF ROHINTON MISTRY

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ABSTRACT

*The Indo – Canadian Diaspora writing is one such phenomenon where writers like Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, M. G. Vassanji, etc. have received wide critical acclaim. The writings of all these authors have one common theme: the expatriate experience and their alienation from the socio-cultural atmosphere. Rohinton Mistry has marveled as a writer in the field of Diaspora writings and his works are often the mixtures of history, human sensibility, issues of identity, and problems of ordinary life, Indian ethos and the enigma of existence. His works often are the reflections on history and express existential angst. ‘Existential Philosophy’ – whose key figures include Jean Paul Satre, Albert Camus, Soren Kierkegaard, and Martin Heidegger – focuses on the human as an isolated creature delving into an alien universe where life has no purpose and significance as it moves from nothingness to nothingness. The same philosophy of alienated universe is what the writings of Rohinton Mistry attempts to suggest as the characters of his works move through their historical past to the present of their host country. His novels *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995) deal with the ‘balancing’ of this existential angst of the humans in an alien world – the adopted country. Thus, he depicts his character’s suffering and frustration and their survival. The present paper aims at the discovery of the ‘existential angst’ of the characters as found in the aforementioned fiction of Rohinton Mistry and critically analyze them in the light of Existentialism.*

Key Words: Existential angst, Alien universe, Human suffering, Purposelessness.

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INTRODUCTION

The present global world has multiple opportunities of business, economics and education which prompt the migration or settlement in a new land. Such migrations are not easier as it comes with the problems of settlement and assimilation in an adopted country. The expatriates have expressed their problems through their writing which is generally categorized as the ‘Diaspora writing’. Indian writers have settled in various countries

of the world but their writing always leads them back towards their origin. Canada is a country facilitating multiculturalism policy but yet the people have to face the troubles of racism and unsettlement. Indo – Canadian writing depicts the ‘Indianness’ and the problems of settlement and assimilation in a new land. Rohinton Mistry is a Booker Prize winner author whose writing mostly depicts the ‘Indianness’ and diasporic sensibilities. His works also depict the troubles and toil that the people have to go through. The

present paper will discuss such issues of Mistry's works in the light of Existentialism.

The migration of Indians to Canada began as early as 1904 when the 5000 Indians from Punjab settled in British Columbia for the purpose of securing jobs over there. Indians found a great employment opportunity there which encouraged further immigration. Such immigration of various communities of the world to Canada has generated a variety of multicultural communities there. India is one such community contributing to the overall literary oeuvre of Canadian writing.

Indo – Canadian writing generally deals with the depiction of the problems of the Indians at Canada. Most of the Diaspora writing focuses on the expatriate experiences and their psychological suffering. The writers mostly set their works in an Indian background and describe their nostalgic past and discuss their present issues. Uma Parameswaran, M. G. Vassanji, Rohinton Mistry, Anita Rau Badami, Bharati Mukherjee, etc. are the established and widely regarded authors of Indo – Canadian Diaspora writing. Their works are the mixture of their 'Indian' instincts as well as assimilated ideals of the adopted country. These writers have immense contribution in the development and recognition of Indo – Canadian writing.

EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism as a philosophy has its precursor in the Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard whose ideas developed thoroughly in the mid – 20th century in France and Germany. This background became imminent in its flourishing during the 1920s and 1930s and the prominent existential writers like Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Maurice Merleau – Ponty came with their

influential works. The basic aim of existential philosophy is to suggest that primarily humans have no given essence or nature but to survive they need to forge their own values and meanings in an inherently meaningless or absurd world of existence. It simply suggests that as humans we are 'condemned to be free'. Existential themes include the aspects of absurdity, alienation, suicide and rebellion. The characters in such works are shown as surviving in a frustrated situation. It deals with the suffering and pain which are the inevitable parts of human life and humans constantly try to overcome it in one or the other way. According to Camus, there are three possible philosophical solutions to this situation: physical suicide, religious solution or accepting the absurdity. In the background of this theory the next section of the present paper tries to discuss Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995).

SUCH A LONG JOURNEY: A STUDY of EXISTENTIALANGST

Rohinton Mistry is one of the remarkable writers of present era. He is a Booker Prize winning author. He belongs to Parsi Community and his works most often deal with the depiction of Parsi life and experiences. *Such a Long Journey* (1991) is his very first novel which established him as a writer of remarkable talent from Canada. The novel is set in Bombay against the backdrop of the Indo – Pakistan war of 1971. The central character of the novel is Gustad Noble – a Parsi. He is a bank official. He lives in the Khodadad Building, an apartment of Parsis representing the whole Parsi community. The novel shows the corruption, knavery, hypocrisy, ugliness, tyranny and decadence of the society. Also, the author tries to show the

contemporary social and political upheavals of India. But yet, it is imbued with the existential angst of the Parsis in an adopted land.

The character of Gustad is full of dreams and aspirations. But Gustad does never lose his hope of fulfillment. He affirms his faith in reaching at a particular destination at the end of this toilsome journey of survival. The novel is more like a historical document of the personal relations and emotional life of the Parsi community. The novel is prefaced with three epigraphs; the third one is the lines from Tagore's *Gitanjali*:

And when old words die out on the tongue,
new melodies break forth from the heart; and
where the old tracks are lost, new country is
revealed with its wonders.

The above lines are used to illustrate the Parsi's migration from one country to another and how they assimilated in an adapted land to survive. Also the title of the novel is suggestive of the continuing journey of life as well as man's struggle to survive with dignity.

The whole plot of the novel is based on the personal experiences and observations of Mistry who himself worked in a bank for ten years. The novel revolves around middle class characters and their life struggles. Gustad Noble is a middle class man trapped in the Indian political world and his domestic life clashes with the forces of money. In the beginning of the novel Gustad is shown presenting his early morning prayers and ends with his action of tearing off the black out papers which symbolically suggests the acceptance of light and reality. The novel is full of beliefs and superstitions, magic, rites, nationalistic ideas, humanism, radicalism and secular views. Also, there are many characters interwoven with their own beliefs and ideals.

One more striking thing about the novel is it is dominated by the male characters while the female characters are presented as the passive recipients of the male actions.

Gustad is an aspirant man but his wishes and aspirations have been destroyed as the novel progresses. The sudden disappearance of Major Bilimoria from Khodadad apartment, Sohrab's refusal to join the IIT, a parcel of ten lakh rupee from Major Bilimoria, Dinshawji's illness and eventual death, Tehmul Lungraa's death, the perpetuating illness of Roshan – his daughter – and the destruction of the compound wall by the municipality add to his misery and meaningless struggle for survival and achievement. Every moment of happiness leads to the element of sorrow and pain. Sohrab's refusal to join IIT at the ninth birthday party of Roshan strikes the imbalance in Gustad's life because from then on the father and son decides to live apart from each other. Gustad's misery increases as there is no one to share his sorrow, even his closest friend Major Bilimoria is missing. His hopes are refreshed when he receives a letter from Major Bilimoria to receive a parcel. This parcel entraps Gustad in great difficulties as it contains ten lakh rupees to be deposited in the bank account in the name of Mira Obili, a non-existent woman. The news of the huge amount of money spreads across creating more trouble for Gustad but somehow, with the help of Dinshawji, Gustad succeeds in depositing the amount in the bank but then Bilimoria wants the money back which is again a risky task. This event thus collapses Gustad's mind and happiness. Gustad feels betrayed and helpless.

The story of Major Bilimoria is based on a true incident. Though Bilimoria is not physically present in the actions of the novel

afterwards but he is alive everywhere in Gustad's memory because without him Gustad has lost his path and is struggling around to make meaning of his life out of all this hectic mess created by the people and situation around him. The news of Bilimoria's arrest on charges of corruption are published and this makes Gustad depressed and shocked. Betrayal is something which Gustad has never expected from Bilimoria but this news highlights the fear and uncertainty of Gustad's struggle. He is forced to somehow return the amount of ten lakh rupees within a month's time to save Bilimoria's life. Thus, it seems that Gustad's journey has become more complex and he is involved in more than one anxieties of his existence. Gustad is informed by Bilimoria that he is used as a scapegoat in this whole matter of money transfer and this matter is 'beyond the common man's imagination, the things being done by those in power.'(SLJ: 280)

During all these turbulence, his daughter Roshan's illness worsens and the doctor also insults him on the grounds that he might have modified the prescription. This situation contributes in the restlessness of Gustad. The novel not only expresses the existential angst of Parsis but also of various other minority communities. This angst is causing the loss of tradition and respect. The novel also describes the Parsi's growing poverty through Gustad as he is now not able to even buy milk whereas his childhood had been very much affluent. But his hopes are now transplanted into his son Sohrab who in turn disheartens him all the while by not obeying him. Thus, from every corner of the existence Gustad finds betrayal and refusal. This adds to his existential angst as he feels that there is nothing left to hold on to and the world has

turned bleak and dark.

A FINE BALANCE : A STUDY of EXISTENTIAL ANGST

A Fine Balance (1995) also contributes to the existential angst of people belonging to different strata of society – the life of middle class and urban society, the world of young Parsis as a burden to lift and the life of the people of rural India. Again, the novel is set in the political backdrop of Emergency period in India. The novel explores the atrocities and suffering of the downtrodden people. The characters are from common areas of society having their own hopes and despair. The novel also tries to depict the struggle of lower class people against the capitalist system of social structure. The characters are not only struggling to survive with each other but also in the surrounding disparaged situation which has given them a fatal blow. In a way, the novel offers an insight on injustice, deprivation and cruelty.

The novel has four protagonists: Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, Omprakash Darji and Maneck Kohlah – a student. All these four characters have their own stories and as strangers they begin to live together but at last, they develop a bond among them. Dina is an independent woman. She loses her parents at a very early age and then also loses her husband Rustom Dalal. But then also she struggles to survive and emerges as a dressmaker with Om and Ishvar as her tailors.

The Emergency of 1975 plays a crucial role in creating and destructing the identity of these characters. Om and Ishvar's forefathers belonged to the lower caste and they had to go through the caste system hierarchy which angers these two children and so they decide to make their own identity by changing their profession.

Dina employs them but at the time of the evacuation of their slum quarter they are left on the streets and even Dina does not allow them to live with her. This is not the end of their suffering. The Emergency period slams more of it on them. Om is forcefully sterilized to be impotent and Ishvar who tries to prevent this act loses both his legs. At last, they turn into beggars – the worst of their existence is this stage. They are deprived of everything; even their identity is also snatched away from them.

In the case of Maneck loss of existence and identity occurs with the destruction of the forest when the government decides to connect hills with the city. The family is forced to migrate from their village. The city life does not attract him but while staying at Dina's apartment he develops a bond with Om and Ishvar as they also have a down to earth nature like him. But, Dina does not approve of this bonding. Thus, the novel entails many issues altogether in the framework of its plot such as, class struggle, identity crisis, historical and political issues, caste discrimination, social imbalance and poverty, etc.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the in depth study of both the novels, reveals the existential angst of not the Parsis in India and Canada but also within themselves. They are forced to adapt something which they are not ready for and in the process they lose so many things. Their struggle is multifaceted and involves assimilation by choice or by force in their adopted land. In short, Mistry is a writer who tries to show the concerns of humanity and the dying community – the Parsis; it seems that he is concerned with the 'humane' in the

humans. The novel also shows the suggestions for such issues. Only humans can accompany humans and this is what everyone is struggling to achieve through their existential journey of life.

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