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ROHINTON MISTRY'S *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*: A PORTRAIT OF SOCIAL REALISM

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Abstract:

*Social realism pens down sordid realities of life, and focuses its attention to the darker side of the life of a lay man or woman. It can be differentiated from other isms such as socialist realism in that it does support any political party. To some extent, it focuses on the true incidents that happens in the society and renders it in the fiction with the help of fictitious but plausible and convincing situations and characters who are normal human beings as we are. The aim behind this is to explore the real social milieu of a particular period in a particular society. To a large extent, it exposes the fact that the human condition, though supposed to be very orderly, rational, interesting, optimistic and satisfying, is controlled by the hidden social evils, especially political, economic and religious factors and nothing remains in the hands of common men, and they become victims to the onslaughts of the social system. With the help of daring exposition of evils in politics, government and religion, the writers in this mode aim at change in the society, social structure, and the fate of poor, common people. The current research paper aims at drawing out these factors in the novel *Such a Long Journey* written by Rohinton Mistry.*

Keywords: *Oppression, Corruption, Economic and Political Exploitation, Marginalization.*

Rohinton Mistry was born on July 3, 1952, Mumbai (India). His father's name is Behram Mistry and his mother's name is Freny Jhaveri Mistry. He is the second child to his parents. He took his primary and high school education in Mumbai. He took his graduate degree from the St. Xavier's College in 1974 in the subjects Mathematics and Economics. After that he migrated to Canada in 1975. There he got married with his girlfriend Freny Elavia. There, he initially worked as a clerk in the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, but, after three years, he and his wife, joined studies the University of Toronto, and learned English and Philosophy.

Mistry wrote his first short story, *One Sunday* in 1983, and won first prize in the Canadian Hart House Literary Contest. In 1985 he got the Annual Contributors' Award from the Canadian Fiction Magazine. His early stories were published in a number of *Canadian Magazines*, and his short-story collection, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, was first published in Canada in 1987. Till the date, he has written three novels, first is *Such a Long Journey* which was published in 1991, tells the story of a Mumbai bank clerk who gets involved in a fraud by mistake committed by the government. It won the Commonwealth Writers Prize. *A Fine Balance* that was published in 1996 is set during the period of emergency in India in the 1975 and tells about the sufferings of untouchables, and *Family Matters* which was published in 2002, tells the story of an elderly Parsi widower living in Mumbai with his step-children. *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* were both shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction, and *Family Matters* was shortlisted for the 2002 Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

The novel is set against the background of the Indo-Pak war of 1971. The heart of the novel is Mistry's recreation of the life and time of the protagonist Gustad Noble, and the action of the novel takes place in Bombay in the year 1971.

Gustad Noble an aging Parsi, is a hard working bank clerk. He is devoted to his family and always tries to keep his wife Dilnavaz and two sons Sohrab and Darius, and a daughter Roshan, out-of poverty. He lives in the Parsi residential colony of Khodadad building in Bombay. When everything is going well, the problem arises when his eldest son Sohrab, refuses to attend the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). And moreover his daughter Roshan falls ill. Other conflicts within the novel involve Gustad's ongoing interactions with his eccentric neighbours and his relationship with his close friend and co-worker Dinshawji. Tehmul, a seemingly unimportant and mentally retarded character, is essential in Gustad's life as he brings out the tender side of him and represents the innocence of life. One day he receives a letter from an old friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria which slowly draws him into a government deception involving threats, secrecy and large amounts of money. He then, begins the long journey that sheds new light on all aspects of his personal life and India's political situation. The novel not only follows Gustad's own life, but also India's political turmoil under the leadership of Indira Gandhi.

The novel is full of the episodes which expose corruption, knavery, treachery, tyranny, moral turpitude and greed. The society has been depicted as completely deprived of resilience. When Gustad and Dinshawji briefly discuss Shiv Sena, a Hindu nationalist political party whose followers have recently demonstrated outside the bank against non-vegetarians like the Parsis, what Dinshawji says about the condition of Parsis is:

What days those were, *yaar*. What fun we used to have.' Dinshawji touched the corners of his lips to wipe the foam. Parsis were the kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the banks. (Mistry, SLJ, 38)

Further Dinshawji incorporates:

Believe me,' said Dinshawji, 'she is a shrewd woman, these are vote-getting tactics. Showing the poor she is on their side. *Saali* always up to some mischief. Remember when her pappy was Prime Minister and he made her president of Congress Party? At once she began encouraging the demands for a separate Maharashtra. How much bloodshed, how much rioting she caused. And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens. Don't forget, she started it all by supporting the racist buggers. (Mistry, SLJ, 38)

This is how the threat of the national and other political parties has been shown right from the beginning in the novel.

The story of Major Bilimoria who is manipulated as a pawn by the Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi, in her money scandals, depicts the corruption existing in the highest political circles. She misuses her power and position to divert money from training Bangladeshi freedom fighters to the car business of her son. Her use of Jimmy Bilimoria as a scapegoat exposes the hollowness of the governmental system and the callous disregard for the country's citizens who are fed on the empty rhetoric of national fervor and patriotism. The common people see the pettiness of their leaders and their corrupt politics in which they (the citizens) are dispensable pawns. Indira Gandhi becomes Mother India.

There was report after report of the citizenry's generous support for the fighting men: about an eighty-year old peasant who travelled to New Delhi, clutching her two goldwedding bangles, which she presented to Mother India for the war effort (some newspapers reported it as Mother Indira, which really did not matter – the line between the two was fast being blurred by the Prime Minister's far-sighted propagandists who saw its value for future election campaigns). (Mistry,SLJ,297-298)

In this novel, Mistry has not hidden names behind facades but clearly named the culprits behind a selfish government. The criticism is severe and the indictment harsh. The State advocates an undifferentiated unity which is belied by the parochial or regional politics of groups like the Shiv Sena. What is shown is the mass of common people who are poor, disabled, middle class and ordinary are marginalized in the political process. Their homes are in danger of being pulled down and their artistic efforts can be ruthlessly demolished any time the central authority wishes to broaden roads. Not only this novel but also other novels such as *Family Matters* and *A Fine Balance* are a huge panorama of hideous political and economic corruption and exploitation of the poor as well as marginalized.

To give some examples from *A Fine Balance* about how these poor people are cheated by the politicians? Ishvar and Om come to know from one of the man who comes with these buses that they are party-workers and they have message from the Prime Minister that she is holding a big meeting today and all are invited. But to the astonishment of the party – worker very few paid attention to his words. So, again he insists that the Prime Minister especially wants to talk to honest, hardworking people like them. Those buses will take them to the meeting, free of charge. Despite this, the queue for the water tap does not show any response. Instead there was laughter among them. The party-worker tried again but there was no response.

When the leader understood that these people would not easily agree to come with them, he induces them that each person would get five rupees for attending the speech. Even then people are not enthusiastic to attend the meeting. Rajaram know it very well. He has very nice experience. He tells Ishvar and Om that nobody will get anything. All these are bogus announcements. This is nothing but a show.

When the party – workers see that very few people are coming to attend the meeting, they declare that two people from each jhopadi must attend the meeting; otherwise, they will be arrested for trespassing on municipal property. Though, some of them raise the voice that they are not trespassing any property as they are giving rent against it. But who would listen to them. Literally, these people were forced to attend the party. Om and Ishvar were also forced with all the others.

The meeting was arranged in an open ground, where there was no shed at all. Near about for two hours people were being brought there and when the ground was full, it was closed. Some people fell because of harsh heat of the sun. They were taken to the shed. At twelve o'clock in the afternoon the Prime Minister arrived there in a helicopter. All the dignitaries on the stage rushed to garland the Prime Minister. Here, comments of Rajaram really suit the situation. He calls it as a circus where all the animals are present performing different acrobats. The speeches by some leaders over and Prime Minister came in front of the microphones to deliver her speech. We get clear cut idea from the description of Prime Minister by the author that the Prime Minister who is referred in this novel is no other than Indira Gandhi who imposed Emergency in our country in 1977. What she says is:

There is nothing to worry about just because the Emergency is declared. It is a necessary measure to fight the forces of evil. It will

make things better for ordinary people. Only the crooks, the smugglers, the blackmarketeers need to worry, for we will soon put them behind bars. And we will succeed in this despite the despicable conspiracy, which has been brewing since I began introducing programmes of benefit for the common man and woman. There is a foreign hand involved against us—the hand of enemies who would not wish to see us prosper. (Mistry, AFB, 265)

Despite these assurances, she also wants to provide houses for the people. Enough food, so no one goes hungry, cloth at controlled prices. She wants to build schools for children and hospitals to look after the sick. Birth control will also be available to everyone. And the government will no longer tolerate a situation where people increase the population recklessly. She promises that we will eliminate poverty from the cities, towns and villages.

And the irony of the situation is that the poor people are actually leading the life of creatures on this earth. Nobody is there to pay attention to their conditions. Rajaram was right when he said that nothing would come out of this type of meeting, because he has seen this type of meeting many times before. The politicians come; promises and assurances are given to the public and nothing happens after that. The poor of this country are becoming poor and the rich are becoming rich.

As it was destined most of the people did not get tea and snacks and moreover the sum of five rupees assured to them was also not given to them. Some of them got four rupees. When they said that five rupees were assured, then the worker told them that one rupee is charged for their tea and snacks. So, in this way, the system that arranged this entire programme had actually fooled the people. Ultimately, it was the poor strata of the society that was highly affected by this programme because they had come there instead of going to their daily jobs where they could have earned their daily wages. In spite of all these adversities, Ishvar and Om were doing their job honestly but one day they become homeless as the Maintenance of Internal Security Act was imposed on the civilian on the pretext of beautification of the city.

In the seventh chapter namely On the Move, government officers demolish the shacks. After the partial completion of the demolition people were allowed to collect their belongings. Some of them got an opportunity to steal other's material. Even after this calamity we see a strong zeal to live life among these poor people. Om and Ishvar were now homeless. Dina could also not provide them a place to live in because she was bound by the laws of flat owner. The person Nawab who had brought them in this hutment was also arrested for false crime. Ishvar and Om search for a home but cannot find any. One day a watchman of shopping complex in the market allows them to sleep them in the gap between the two shops against three rupees per night. As they got a place to pass the night, Dina allows them to keep their trunks in her flat.

In the next chapter, namely Beautification Ishvar and Om are forcefully thrust into trucks to be taken away on a project. The matter is that the government has taken the programme of beautification of the city and as per the orders of the officers, all the beggars as well as homeless people were decided to be moved in the other region. Since the two were sleeping in the gap of shop in the market, they were also taken to be the homeless and as a result of it. They are stuffed into the truck. However, they tried to convince the officers in charge that they are not beggars or homeless people, nobody listens to them.

There was a disabled person among them in the truck. All of these beggars were taken to the irrigation project to work there in return of food, shelter and clothes. On the other hand, Dina was very much worried about the absence of the two brothers. Whenever they remain absent, she is haunted by the fear of visiting to her brother for rent which she never liked. As she was very much nervous, Maneck helps her stitching the dresses.

On the irrigation project Ishvar was made to carry gravel basket of building material to the mixer. Nobody was allowed to waste even a single minute; even if a baby cried mother was not allowed to

attend them. Om and Ishvar vomited after eating unhygienic food there. Therefore they were allowed to take rest for the rest of the day.

As such Politics interferes and intrudes into the life of common people. It plays havoc and even kills them like Major Bilimoria. When the common people organize a morcha to protest against bad civic amenities, the march turns violent and Tehmul is killed. The disabled boy is innocent of what is happening around him and of the politics of social intercourse. He is a citizen yet not an accepted member of society. Like Major Bilimoria, he is an unfortunate victim of political manipulations.

The novel deals with the trials, frustrations, anxieties and depressions of middle-class living. The residents of Khodadad Building mostly belong to this class and their strategies for trying to survive in a respectable way are portrayed in this novel. The life of Gustad is a prime example of this. Today what is seen under the veneer of India shining is the darkest face of India; and these politicians are just pretending and making propaganda of false picture of India Shining. Their concerns are financial, moral, social and political. Mistry focuses on ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity with an identical picture of the contemporary society.

After the detail study of the select novel of Rohinton Mistry what is concluded is Social Realism in fiction exposes the fact that the human condition, though supposed to be very orderly, rational, interesting, optimistic and satisfying, is controlled by the hidden social evils, especially political, economical and religious factors and nothing remains in the hands of common men, and they become victims to the onslaughts of the social system. The characters of these types of works are no other than common, humble people especially from the middle class family or even from so called lower social strata of the society, such as workers, patients, virtuous women, widows, retired teachers, students and marginalized members of the society such as Parsis, Muslims, Sikh and poor people. The subject of this type of works is the struggle of these humble people for their existence in the world of inequality; their physical, economic and mental exploitation at the hands of landlords, and various ruthless, callous and hard hearted agents of government systems and plans.

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