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Search for Meaning: An Existential Approach of Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

Abstract : The present paper tries to deal with the novel of *Such a Long Journey* from the perspective of existentialism. As the existentialism focus on the individual, the aim of this paper to approach the protagonist of the novel from existentialist point of view and analyze what has made the character to behave in a existential way. The search of meaning is the focus of Mistry's novel and it is the primary focus of the existential thinkers, especially Sartre. In the novel, *Such a Long Journey*, focusing on Gustad's untiring journey towards finding the real purpose of his life, reveals his inner journey. His unassailable quest for finding a meaning in his life leads him to inexplicable experiences. As a family man and works for the welfare of his family, he never questions the mystery of his existence until he reaches a point where most of his beliefs and values of humanity comes under close scrutiny. Mistry skillfully portrays the life of innocent soul who searches for meaning in a politically turbulent situation. Existential thinkers believe in the idea that the meaning of life is not determined ever before his birth. Instead, it is decided by the choice of human beings and their responsibility to accept the pros and cons of their choices. The paper is also try to fill the research gap of this area of study where the study of Rohinton Mistry's works from the existential view point has not been seriously considered before.

Keywords - Existentialism, Meaning, Religion, Politics, Parsi

Rohinton Mistry is an acclaimed Indian born Canadian writer. Even as he is settled in Canada; he has left his soul in India. Most of his novels deal with social, political and

historical problems of India. The success of Mistry's novels lies in how skillfully he submerges the characters of his novels with the conflicts. Unlike other Indian novelists as they try to capture the Indianness of their characters, Mistry upholds the pathetic condition of human beings in general. In all of his novels, the characters can easily be related to the survival problems in their respective countries. Gustad in *Such a long Journey* represents the dilemma of common man, Dina, Kohlah and two tailors in *A Fine Balance* could be any one living under the rule of dictatorship. Nariman in *Family Matters* represents the turmoil of an old man who has his past memories as his only companion. The three novels of Rohinton Mistry have been shortlisted for Booker Prize. He has many accolades to his credit as a successful novelist. His novel can be considered as existential novels because the characters in these novels try to define life with their choices.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement rooted in the end of the 20th century. The movement is the result of confusion prevalent after the second war. The people faced hopelessness and frustration because there was huge collapse of moral values in the world. These kinds of thoughts were strong, especially in European countries. As a result of which, there emerged a group of thinkers who thought that human beings have to define his life by themselves. As there is no mechanism to attain moral support, they thought that it is the responsibility of the human beings to find out the purpose of life by themselves too. According to them, human beings are the ultimate reason for both their happiness and sorrow. They are the sole responsibility for their actions and its consequences. The eminent thinkers of existentialism were Soren Kierkegaard, Frerich Nietzsche, Heidegger and Satre. They are considered to be the key thinkers of existentialism. Even though, there are differences of opinions among them, they are united on the ground that life is meaningless, unless the meaning is given to it from the human beings.

The Rutledge dictionary of Literary Terms defines the existentialism as follows:

Literary and philosophical responses to the experience of nothingness, anomie and absurdity which attempt to discover meaning in and through this experience. All existentialist writers begin from a sense that an ontological dimension (Being; the encompassing; Transcendence; the thou) has been forced out of consciousness by the institutions and systems of a society which overvalues rationality, will-power, acquisitiveness, productivity and technological skill. (78)

According to existentialists, life has no meaning. Searching the meaning of life will land anyone in confusion. Science, religion and politics are the principle force which always tried to impose their respective ideology on the human beings. In *Such a Long journey*,

Gustad always tries to find the meaning of his existence in religion. Zoroastrianism is the only hope, he believes, teach everything. The problem occurs when there is a great gap between what he believes and what others believe about something. His religion teaches peace and inner happiness whereas others focus only on their personal needs. Politicians consider themselves as gods and neglect the duty to serve the people. Religious leaders pollute the mind of the people for their personal gain. Innocent people become the victims for their ambitions. Mistry in the novel constantly points out the existential state of the human beings through the character of Gustad.

The character of Gustad is designed to implicate the ideas of Nietzsche, particularly *Übermensch*. Nietzsche uses the word to indicate the importance of overcoming traditional and moral values. It suggests that a person is only liberated if he succeeds in overcoming the herd mentality. He further uses the word in a sense that it ultimately deal with overcoming oneself. Nietzsche urges the human beings not to dream of heaven and concentrate on earthly responsibilities. As Nietzsche, right from the beginning to the end of the novel, Mistry deals with Gustad as a person tied to look after the need of his family and personal satisfaction. Gustad does not feel the pleasures of understanding and respecting the other persons. To him, Sohrab is just a tool to fulfill his responsibilities. Dilnavaz is just a wife whose primary responsibility to obey to his decision. Dinshawaji is just his friend. The turn of events in his life leads him to think of other role a father plays in fulfilling the dream of his son. Forcing someone to achieve his desire is something which Gustad regrets at the end of the novel.

When a person is allowed to choose his own decision, he is left with too many choices. The problem with too many choices is that sometimes it will make one blind to certain core areas by which his whims and fancies are operated. The mystery of life also evades them. They set the goal and try to live up to the expectations of their goals. Sometimes, it seems to be possible to attain the ambition but most of the time they are perplexed to define the reason for their living. Gustad attempts to dream of a bright life through his children especially Sohrab. Unfortunately, each of his family members has their own perceptions about the world. Above all, Gustad believe in the success of his elder son. He believes that he has the ability to study in IIT. Contrast to his expectations, Sohrab prefers to study in Arts stream.

The setting in which the narration happens also need attention. The first few incidents happening of the story set the tone for the novel. It is revolving around Gustad. His character is established in such a way that there could be any doubt on his moral stand. He prays everyday and goes to fire temple often. He lives happily with his family members. He is

physically strong too. Mistry describes him as someone who is strong, even though he is more than fifty:

Tall and broad shouldered, Gustad was the envy and admiration of friends and relatives whenever health or sickness was being discussed. For a man swimming the tide water of his fifth decade of life, they said, he looked so soli. Especially for one who had suffered a serious accident just a few years ago; and even that left him with nothing graver than a slight lump. (1)

Gustad has to withstand against the test of time. He faces trials and tribulations in a short period of his life. All of his dear-ones are in trouble. The reason of their problems is connected with the actions of Gustad. Roshan is affected of diarrhea because whenever she is not well, he prescribes Sulpha-Guanidine pills because he cannot pay for prescriptions. Moreover, Dr. Paymaster has not kept up on current medical literature. Therefore, he have stocked on popular pills and syrups to treat all minor health problems to their children. Dilnavaz always insists her husband to avoid Sulpha- Guanidine pills to Roshan. When she cannot convince him, she lets him to whatever Gustad like to do with the children. However, the problem is now severe; she has to interfere at this stage. What has started as a casual conversation turns into verbal fight between Gustad and his wife. After the fight, Gustad feels guilty for preferring the medicine of his choice to treat Roshan's diarrhea.

Another person who is directly affected with is Sohrab, his son. He affected with the decision of Gustad. Sohrab gets a seat in IIT but he wants to study arts stream. Sohrab is the only hope of Gustad whom he believes that will restore his family name. When Sohrab is adamant in joining the arts stream, he tries to hit him with a belt. Gustad fails to come out with any other alternate solution other than making his son obey his decision. This disagreement between the father and son creates a great division in their relationship. Sohrab decides to leave the house as advised by his mother. However, he visits her often. Sohrab is the great blow to Gustad. His hope is completely shattered. Gustad approaches life from his own point of view but he fails to understand that his son also has a life on his own. He never learns this lesson until he loses his close associates. The reunion of Sohrab and Gustad happens only when he has lost Tehmul.

Throughout the novel, Gustad search for meaning in life. The novel starts with prayer of Gustad and ends with the same prayer. In the beginning Gustad find happiness in leaving all his problems to God. Prayer is the only solution he seeks to resolve all his difficulties in his life. He seems to not concentrate on the people and their indifference towards personal morality. Gustad finds meaning in his life by reciting the prayer and invoking for the welfare

of his family. God becomes the solution to all his inner questions and obediently follows the words of scriptures. Gustad is a middle class man. A middleclass man life's is so simple that he has to care only his day to day activities. He has to solve his problems of that day only. He needs not to have any vision or mission in his life. Gustad life represents the life of that ordinary middle class man in India. He concerns only with the family and works all the time for his family. The life of all the human beings takes unexpected twist at one point or the other. In the case of Gustad, it happens through the letter of Billimoria. The decision he takes changes his life forever. Gustad's conviction in his own religion is further shaken up during the time of her daughter repeated health issues. Malcolm, his friend, advises him to pray in the church. As Gustad is financially weak, he has no other way to solve the problem other than accepting his friend advice.

Existential search for meaning serves the purpose of understanding the psyche of the characters. Most of the time characters in Rohinton Mistry's novels find themselves in the situation from which they cannot escape immediately. The situations are not created from the outside of our lives. Mostly conflicts arise from their complex mentality and sometimes, inescapable or threatening experiences. These characters cannot be accused of having no moral responsibility to tackle the problems in their life. External factors also influence them to think in these ways. Differences of opinions between one character and another further add more complex issues. The beauty of Rohinton Mistry's characters and how they tackle all those problems differentiate him from that of the other novelists. The stigma these characters encounter from the country like India is tremendous and surpasses the problems of minority people in other parts of the world. Certainly, the religion from which all these characters of Rohinton Mistry are hailing from cause feeling of insecurity among them.

Alienation is another aspect of existentialism that can be found in the nostalgic feeling of Gustad. Gustad father has lost his business and bankrupted due to the carelessness of his brother. He is always reminded of his happy childhood days when he cannot connect the present life to the environment. The working table of Gustad is the constant reminder to his childhood days. Even at the beginning of the novel, Gustad seems to recall the furniture used in his father's life. Gustad strongly believes that he does not belong to the life he is leading at present. He needs not to beg his son to join IIT if he can afford to buy everything he needed as in the past. These thoughts always erupt in his mind and he suppresses the memories whenever possible. He cannot forget the fact that he has once a rich and deny accepting the fact that he has to live in the building for the rest of his life. Mistry describes the condition of Gustad and his father as follows:

The loss of bookstore had turned Gustad's father into a broken and dispirited man, no longer interested in those weekly expeditions to Crawford market. When his beloved books and his business disappeared, his appetite was also misplaced, somewhere in labyrinth of legal proceedings. Gustad worries deeply as his father visibly shrank. He did the best he could now as breadwinner, with his meager income from private tuitions to school children. But under Malcolm's advice and guidance, the rupees were stretched further than he had imagined possible. (22)

Not only Gustad but also other characters in the novel are perplexed to understand the meaning of life. The characters of the novel can be conveniently divided into Gustad's family members, inmates of Ghodadbad building and people related to Gustad. There are only few women characters in the novel. Dilnavaz is portrayed as someone who cannot participate actively in the decision making process of the family. She is helpless and tries to solve the problems between a father and son. Both Gustad and Sohrab do not listen to her. She attempts to resolve the problem through supernatural forces with the help of Kutpitia. When the division between the men is slowly enlarging, she advises Sohrab to leave the house temporarily and come back after the anger of Gustad is reduced. As Gustad is a middle class man who works for the financial fulfillment of the family, Dilnavaz struggles to work for the emotional balance of the family. She sacrifices her personal desire and always thinks of her family members. In this sense, she represents Indian women in general. Women are not expected to involve in the family affairs including financial matters.

Continuous death of loved ones in the life of Gustad makes him frustrated and to some extent not interested anymore. Gustad loses his family members including his father in early stage of his life. His father's death lands him in a situation from which he struggled to escape from. He is forced to accept bank job for monetary security of his family. Secondly, Billy his neighbor disappears from the compound without informing Gustad. After a long time, he ends up Gustad in a big trouble. Later, he also dies in prison. Thirdly, Tehuml dies during the fight between corporation and inspector. What unites all of them together is their innocence and light hearted.

On other side of narration in the novel, allegory is used to focus the pitiless state mechanism and how helpless individual unknowingly become the victim of politics. The novel criticizes the unscrupulous nature of the politicians as far as their political fortunes are concerned. Mistry recreates the atmosphere in which the common man is considered to be indispensable object for their political advantage. In Delhi, Gustad is shocked to find his friend on the verge of collapse. He is completely invalidated and tortured by the authorities.

The pain is so unbearable that he cannot narrate his story properly, but still he manages to complete the story to Gustad. Bilimoria has been tortured until he returned the money.

On the bed lay nothing more than a shadow. The shadow of the powerful-built army man who once lived in Khodadbad building. His hairline had receded, and sunken cheeks made the bones jut sharp and grotesque. The regal handlebar moustache was no more. His eyes had disappeared within sockets. The neck . . . was as cranny as poor behest Dinshwaji's while under the sheet and deep chest which Gustad and Dilnavaz used to point out as a good example to their sons, reminding them always to walk erect, with chest out and stomach in, like Major Uncle. (267)

Tehmul plays key role in the life of Gustad. His death reawakens Gustad's faith in humanity. When a pure soul is crushed because of selfishness of group of people, Gustad questions entire humanity about the respect towards each other. Gustad carries the dead body of Tehmul in his own hands and place him on the cot. Actually, it was not dead body of Tehmul but the condition of our society in the hands of politician. Gustad represents the angst of the people who do not know anything but voting for his favorite party. Gustad is always empathetic on the pitiful condition of Tehmul. Tehmul is ignorant of the cruel world outside Ghodadbad building. The people living in the apartment consider him as naissance and Gustad is the only person who understands Tehmul's feelings and his wretched condition. Both Gustad and Tehmul faced the same type of accident, but Gustad fortunately escaped and Tehmul become mentally challenged. Gustad imagines himself and treatment he would have received when he had become lame like Tehmul. Rohinton Mistry captures the mental agony of a person whose sexual desire is rejected because he is not following the norms of the society. Gustad acts as a mouthpiece to send out the message of humanity among the people of all levels of society. Society need not to be consisting only of the healthy and stable minded human beings. According to Gustad, God made the world for everyone. It is irrational to discredit the right of other person when he or she has the equal right to live and enjoy the pleasures of our world.

Another important factor for Gustad's anguish is the deterioration of his religion's rituals. All the religions in the world follow different kinds of rituals and custom. They are the identity of those religions. Rituals are closely associated with the belief and growth of those religions too. In this sense, Zoroastrianism faces the dread of extinction in the name of modernization. While it is affected with the dwindling population of Parsis, the rituals also worries Gustad as most of the people are against Tower of Silence. Zoroastrianism follows the traditional method of using the dead people as the food for vultures. Unlike other

religions, Parsi people believe that burial should take place inside the Tower of Silence called A Dakhma where there is an separate arrangements for vultures to eat dead bodies. According to Parsi people, five elements of the planet are sacred and they do not like to pollute them like Indian funeral methods. Therefore they use vultures to eat the dead bodies to avoid pollution in any form. Nandini Bhautoo-Dewanarin captures the religious sentiments of Parsis as follows:

At the centre of Such a Long Journey are religious rituals, especially those of death and burial. They are presented from the highly emotional perspective of the otherwise 'rational' Gustad, as he buries Dinshawaji and Bilimoria and later Tehmul Lungarra. The narrative of the first funeral conveys to the reader the ritualism surrounding the funeral to us through the prism of Gustad's emotions and inner version. (25)

Besides, Gustad attends the funerals of Dinshawaji and the thoughts of death stirs the question of existence in this world. Gustad compares the death Dinshawaji with humanity in general and connects his demise with himself. Gustad contemplates in the prayer and try to involve himself with the song of dustoorji. Mistry captures the existential anguish in Gustad when he recalls of his memories with Dinshawaji:

Dinshawaji dismantled. And after the prayers are said and the rituals performed at the Tower of Silence, the vultures do the rest. When the bones are picked clean, and the clean bones gone, no proof will remain that Dinshawaji ever lived and breathed. Except his memory. But after that? After the memory is lost? When I am gone, and all his friends are gone. What then?.(SLJ238)

Gustad is always reminded of his glorious past that prevents him from understanding that his son also has a soul. Religion and his past life become his first preferences which control his behavior. He is always conscious in recalling the greatness of his religion. He is proud to be a Parsi, but at the same time the condition of his religion is in pitiable state. Threat from all the side of the country forces his religion to change its age-old custom and rituals. The Parsis are afraid to speak out their problems loudly as the politics control them to remain silent. The government tries to satisfy the need of Hindu people where as people belonging to minority religion is suppressed and ordered to follow the stringent rules. His family comes to second in order as it is not in his control. Gustad was belonging to a family which had strong economical strength. The loss of bookstore cast Gustad to his pitiable condition. In the end of the novel, Gustad give up his family pride and embraces his son. Series of loss creates in him a kind of unbearable mental agony. He does not like to give up

his son again for his prejudice. He finally understands that human beings are important than principles.

Rohinton Mistry chooses to narrate the life of simple man in an ideal world. Gustad works as a bank employee with humble ambitions in his life. His dream of a happy life is to lead a normal life with his family. Gustad is represented as a person who is ready to sacrifice anything for his family. The family members of his family are also affectionate and their children are obedient. When his dear family faces unprecedented problems, he is perplexed and unable to find any solution for the problems. Nostalgia is the only shelter that helps him to forget the problems for a brief period of time. He never faces any existential anxiety until his families have to deal with the problems one after other. The question of his purpose to live in this world becomes relevant when his modes expectations about his family pose a great difficulty in achieving them. Gustad seems to be the lovable husband and affection father. What he expects in return is not the shower of money but air to breath peacefully. M.L. Pandit comments on Gustad's Plight as follows:

Gustad Noble's dreams and expectations are modest indeed, but circumstances prevailing in the India of his times conspire to deny him even these. It is very hard on him that he cannot make things happen in such a way as to fulfill his aspirations. Force, stranger than himself, come in the way of his achieving his ambitions. His elder son does not join IIT; Roshan, his favorite child, suffers from a prolonged illness; Dinshawaji, his friend, Bilimoria, betrays his trust. Gradually, Gustad Noble modifies his dreams and dilutes his expectations. (9)

Thus, In *Such a Long Journey*, Gustad is presented as an individual who is constantly searching for the meaning of his life. Rohinton Mistry casts him in a turbulent time of India. The external conflicts prevent him from identifying the reason for his loss of self- identity. In the course of his exploration for meaning, Gustad finds out the importance of love and self sacrifice to preserve the identity of his son. The novel revolves around his journey towards giving up the prejudices against the human beings. The filthy politics and false image of patriotism are portrayed to be the major obstacles in finding out the meaning of his life. In this way, Gustad can be ascribed to be the existential protagonist of the novel.

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