CHAPTER-6
CONCLUSION

Humanism has travelled a long way from the choice of subjects prescribed in the universities during the Renaissance period on the European mainland to our times when the postmodernists have deconstructed the term and pointed out fallacies, chiefly the notion that actually there is something called ‘essential human nature’. And yet what Protagoras, the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher said, “Man is the measure of all things”, remains central to all types of humanism.

There are several types of humanism which have been conceptualized by thinkers over the ages, like Renaissance Humanism, Christian Humanism, Naturalistic Humanism, Marxian Humanism, Secular Humanism, New Humanism etc. Broadly speaking, humanism can be hitched to two poles: religious and secular. A debate has always raged around whether it is the philosophy or the religion that forms the core of humanism. Those who believe in philosophy are called Secular Humanists and those who believe in religion are called Religious Humanists. Both of them, however, share the same worldview and basic principles. This is borne out by the fact that both signed the famous Humanist Manifestos No. I and II. It is only in the definition of religion and in the practice of the philosophy that Religious and Secular Humanists effectively disagree.

Religious humanists maintain that most human beings have personal and social needs that can only be met by religion which is taken in a functional sense. What we mean by ‘functional’ here is what role religion actually plays in the lives of the people, individually and collectively, rather than looking at it as something mystical. Religion is viewed as that which serves such needs of
a group of people sharing the same philosophical world view. If prayer helps one to rise high in the realm of consciousness then it is welcome.

The religious humanists feel that secular humanism is so coldly logical that it rejects the full emotional experience necessary to make true humans.

For humanism, “Man is at the centre of meaning and action; the world is oriented around the individual. Each individual is different, each possesses a unique subjectivity; yet also, paradoxically, each shares a common human nature. The combination of unique individuality and common human essence cohere around the idea of a sovereign self, whose essential core of being transcends the outward signs of environmental and social conditioning. Post-structuralism has sought to disrupt this man-centred view of the world, arguing that the subject, and that sense of unique subjectivity itself, is constructed in language and discourse; and rather than being fixed and unified, the subject is split, unstable or augmented.”

Whatever the objections of the postmodernists, it is a fact that humanism has not lost its attraction. Of course, it remains a loosely defined term. More than that, the movement has innumerable votaries and it remains a disorganized one. The proof lies not only in different types of humanisms, but also in the open-ended Humanist Manifestos which are supported by different groups of humanists. There does not appear to be any possibility of the mankind’s ever forgetting humanism for the simple reason that human beings, out of selfishness at least, would always place themselves first. Even the religious personalities, all over the world, can do little without reference to human being. So, whatever is in their own interest will always attract contemplation and action.
Different thinkers have viewed humanism differently. Hence we speak of the humanism of Bertrand Russell or the humanism of Vivekananda. So far as Mistry’s humanism is concerned, he seems to believe in the essential goodness of man. There is a wide cross-section of society portrayed in Mistry’s novels. His humanism is amply reflected in the treatment of characters occupying lower stations in life.

In the novel *A Fine Balance*, apart from Om and Ishvar who come from the countryside, there are the slum dwellers doing odd jobs like the Monkey-man and the hair collector. But there is hardly any character created by him who would embody evil only. Take for example, the characters of the Beggarmaster or the Rent Collector in *A Fine Balance.* To the outside world, a person running the ‘business’ of beggary is invariably a devil. But after acquainting ourselves with the actions of the Beggarmaster we do not really hate him. Instead, we find that he is helpful to a harassed Dina Dalal. His human feelings come to the fore in the treatment of his step-brother Shankar who is also a beggar. Similarly, Ibrahim, the rent collector, is, at heart, a pitiable figure because he has to follow the diktat of his employer much against his wishes.

Mistry’s character Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey* is, true to his name, a noble soul. His own cup of woes is full to the brim with a limited salary, son’s planned entry to the IIT, daughter’s constant illness and most of all, the intractable problem created by his one-time friend Bilimoria. Still, he is helpful to all around him. He discharges his duties towards the members of his family well and also says his prayers. More than that, he translates the Parsi ideals of *humata, hukatha and huvarstha* (good thoughts, good words and good deeds) in action. This character surely epitomizes human nature that transcends the socio-cultural surroundings. In his struggle through life, he
ennobles himself even more: “Everything in the novel happens as if some immanent will is firmly set to counter human action as in an epic or a heroic tragedy. In spite of everything it is destiny that Gustad find at the helm of affairs. Like Oedipus, he bows to the will of Providence, and not unlike Job, he finds in compassion and endurance a dignity and greatness withstanding all that fortune keeps in store for him.”

But through his myriad characters, Mistry also shows the awareness of differences among human beings. He locates innate goodness, which is, at times, gets diluted or distorted by compelling circumstances, because human beings are not mythical gods. They do err, so Gustad forgives Bilimoria. When pitted against his son, Gustad recognizes his own mistake and so forgives his son Sohrab.

In the novel *A Fine Balance*, we have a strong character in Dina Dalal, whose delineation would warm the cockles of any feminist. Feminism is, after all, another face of humanism. Dina is driven against the wall due to the dominating attitude of her elder brother who would not brook her attempt to be self-reliant. But she has it in her, so she struggles hard to be on her own and thus to prove herself. When she is not able to carry on the sewing work due to her failing eyesight, she hires two tailors Om and Ishvar. She treats them humanely and stands by them when they need shelter in the overcrowded space-starved city of Bombay. She is threatened by the landlord and is indeed thrown out finally but she fights till the end.

Similarly, in the novel *Family Matters*, we come across Mr. Kapur, who is a true humanist at heart. He is in love with not only the buildings and roads of Bombay but also with its cosmopolitan spirit. He thinks Bombay is as much his as it is of a Maharashtrian. Though a Hindu, he has Muslim and Parsi employees. He celebrates Christmas. He wishes to merge his identity with
that of the common Bombayite. To achieve this end, he tries boarding the train but does not get the cooperation of the crowd of daily passengers. He does not blame the people, rather he thinks his clothes show affluence which might have set the people off! This is nothing but liberal humanism.

Again, we find Percy as a young man in the story ‘Lend Me Your Light’ in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. He does not go abroad like his brother Kersi or friend Jamshed. Instead, he devotes his life to the service of the poor Indians in the countryside. Along with a friend of his, he starts work on improving the lot of the poor people by providing them soft loans and thus getting them freed from the stranglehold of moneylenders. This is a task fraught with difficulties and danger. His friend is murdered but Percy is not deterred. It is the mission of his life. Kersi yearns to follow in his footsteps but is not able to muster enough courage. A critic rightly notes, “There are others like Kersi, who aspire but fail to make the sacrifices needed to have his elder brother’s passion. He merely prays, “Lend me your light,” but the likes of Percy have shunned the ambivalence and acquired an identity, not necessarily a Parsi one but surely an authentic human identity.”

Religious humanism is what suffuses Rohinton Mistry’s work. Religious Humanists make sure that religion is never allowed to subvert the higher purpose of meeting human needs in the here and now. Indeed, like a true religious humanist, Gustad seems to believe that “it is immoral to wait for God to act for us”, as Kenneth Phifer declared. Thus, in His scheme of things, it is one human being coming to the rescue of the other. Dina Dalal continues to welcome Om and Ishvar, now turned handicapped beggars, to her brother’s home, much against the wishes of her big brother.

Like a true humanist, Mistry focusses his gaze on the scum of the earth and upholds their human rights. In *A Fine Balance*, he not only portrays the
hapless lives of Om and Ishvar but also of their kith and kin, back in the interior rural region of north India. The reader is flabbergasted when he comes to know of the inhuman treatment of the so-called low-caste people by the upper caste people in the countryside. How they are exploited economically, sexually, socially and politically is portrayed graphically and at great length in this novel. One is amazed at the research done by the author. What he has shown is something which any knowledgeable Indian would corroborate. In this his compassionate heart speaks. His sensitivity is reflected in the character of Maneck Kohlah crafted by him. Disillusioned by the fate that overtook his erstwhile friends Om, Ishvar and Dina, Maneck commits suicide. This episode shows the writer’s frustration over the inhuman treatment of poor people. Indeed, humanitarianism is an essential feature of humanism of all denominations.

In his third novel *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry portrays the life of Nariman Vakeel, an old Parsi who retired as professor of English literature. By taking up an old person as a protagonist of the novel, Mistry makes a humanist statement. Ageism is paradoxical in that it is a dehumanizing humanist ideology in so far as it rests on the unacknowledged essentialisation of the human as young, powerful, attractive and rational, particularly where the human character as a protagonist is considered. Viewed from this angle, the old people are driven to the outer margins of the properly human.

Similarly, in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Mistry focusses on the pain and problems as also the oddities and eccentricities of old people through the characters of Rustomji, Najamai, and Tehmina et al. In this collection of short stories Mistry’s main focus is on the lifestyle of the Parsi community living in an apartment block. It is believed that this is recollection of his own childhood days. The developments taking place in the lives of the inhabitants
are viewed from the point of view of a youngster. In this work also, the humanist outlook of the author informs the portrayal of the subaltern people like Francis and Jaykaylee – the former a handyman and the latter a maid. While Mistry’s mouthpiece, the youngster Kersi’s sympathy for the wronged Francis is quite evident, in the case of the old maid Jaakaylee, her frustration is given a humane treatment even though on the surface, she appears to be a sex-starved old woman with superstitious beliefs.

In Such a Long Journey, we come across Tehmul, a handicapped dim-wit, who is treated humanely by the protagonist Gustad Noble where others in the Parsi enclave do not care for him. It is Gustad who saves the man-boy from the taunts of the prostitutes, glosses over his unnatural sex with the doll and attends to his last rites when he dies as a result of a head injury. Similarly, Miss Kutpitia, whose name in Gujarati means ‘the quarrelsome’, is presented more as a pitiable character than an old crank living at the margin. Again, there is heart-rending description of Lucy, the Christian beloved of Prof. Nariman, who dies wallowing in disappointment in love, simply because the professor’s father, an orthodox Parsi, did not allow inter-faith marriage.

There is no doubt that in the name of humanism, politicians have committed many anti-human activities, as Edward Said notes, “…it has been the abuse of humanism that discredits some of humanism’s practitioners without discrediting humanism itself.” Mistry leaves no stone unturned to expose the Machiavellian politicians. His very first novel Such a Long Journey deals, in a major way, with their machinations which manifested in the Nagarwala episode. Mistry does not spare even the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and very candidly holds her responsible for framing Major Bilimoria (Nagarwala’s substitute) in order to save her skin which could have been
singed very badly because she diverted funds meant to help the Mukti Bahini of Bangladesh to fund her son’s car project.

In *A Fine Balance* again, we find the Emergency era of Mrs. Gandhi under scanner. Om and Ishvar are the representatives of common Indians residing in the countryside. As they settle down in Bombay because of the compulsion of their vocation, we also get acquainted with the urban poor thronging the slums of Bombay. How the politicians make use of the poor to further their personal agendas is effectively portrayed by Mistry. They are promised food and money and thus lured to attend election rallies. The Prime Minister likes to maintain an army of sycophants. While she cares two hoots for the court judgement setting aside her election on account of malpractices, she sermonizes to the countrymen to be disciplined! In the name of removing poverty, she gets the poor removed to forced labour camps! The common people are no fools and they do observe the tricks of the politicians’ trade. The nadir of the politicians’ lowliness comes in the form of a local politico Dharamsi getting Om castrated to settle personal score with him. Om’s father and grandfather as also their wives had been butchered by the same politicians back in the village at the time of elections.

This novel also describes in detail the Emergency-era sterilization camps where vasectomy operations were performed on all -- old as well as young men, on women past child-bearing age, on men already sterilized and even on unmarried young boys. By giving these details, Mistry highlights the violation of human rights of the poor people. That he gives such a large canvas to the scum of the earth speaks volumes about his humanist credentials.

A true humanist that Mistry is, he believes in reason and not superstition. Miss Kutpitia’s voodoo does not solve Nobles’ problems. What we see at the end is that her own room goes up in flames. Mistry does not the priestly class
in favourable light. Most of the Parsi dustoors are presented in different novels as lechers. So is the Hindu Pandit Lalluram in *A Fine Balance*. In his novels, Mistry “provides examples of how Parsi orthodoxy and rituals have been misused and abused and have caused havoc and suffering. It is made clear, for instance, that there is a good degree of self-seeking cunningness in the rituals Jaykalee’s employer performs in her balcony in order to get rid of the supposed ghost.”

So far as religion is concerned, Mistry takes a functional view of it, as the religious humanists do. The religious humanists agree that most human beings have personal and social needs that can only be met by religion. There is hardly any mystique attached to religion by the humanists. They take it in functional sense in that they judge it by the role it actually plays in the lives of the people. If prayer helps one to rise high in the realm of consciousness as it did with Gustad Noble of *Such a Long Journey*, then it is fine. But if it worked likewise in all cases, then Mistry would be a religious preacher rather than a humanist. Whereas Gustad’s is a noble mind and he remains helpful to everyone around him in his life, Yezad of *Family Matters* is built of a different stuff. Therefore, when Yezad tries prayer 24x7, to borrow a current coinage, he is merely lost to the world around him – his family and children as well, without, in any way, gaining for him succour and peace in search of which he put on the religious mantle. Through this negative character, Mistry wishes to highlight the problematic of religion in humanism by contrast.

Thus, on the basis of thorough examination of Mistry’s works, we find that Mistry’s humanism stands for essential human goodness despite individual differences, equal human rights, functionality of religion and end to socio-political exploitation of vulnerable sections of society.
References


