CHAPTER- 2
GLORIFYING THE HUMAN SPIRIT

The epical characters presented by great poets of ancient times like Homer and Virgil underline the glory that man could crown himself with. We also find heroes with divine or super-human stock. In the Greek epic Iliad, Achilles is the son of the sea-nymph Thetis and in Virgil’s Aeneid, the hero Aeneas is the son of the Roman goddess Aphrodite. However, the age of kings and queens is passé. The contemporary writer is realistic who portrays the world around him with all its warts.

Coursing through late Roman and medieval writing of Rabelais, Montaigne and Cervantes, realism overtook literature. In the twentieth century, it comes to manifest itself in the post-realist fiction of Virginia Woolf “in whose dissolving and intermingling subjectivities Auerbach discerns the appearance of a new humanity, embodied not in the heroic individuals of epic, romance and reliast narrative but in the anonymous ordinariness of common life.”\(^1\) As such, Rohinton Mistry’s characters are ordinary people belonging to the lower middle class of society. At the same time, we can say that it is the innate goodness of Mistry’s characters that likens them to the epical heroes of ancient literature.

It is because of the advances made in the field of psychology, particularly on account of the findings of Sigmund Freud and Lacan. The notion of self as a unified whole stands rejected now. In our postmodern times, there has been attack on essentialism of every type. The poststructuralist theories inspired by deconstruction had a clear anti-humanistic stance. The advocates of poststructuralism assert that human-centred systems of norms and values are based on the fallacy of essentialism. They believe that there is “no essential
human nature or set of defining human features, which is innate, universal, and independent of historical and cultural differences”. Further:

A number of structuralist and poststructuralist philosophical and critical theories were expressly anti-humanistic, not only in the sense that they undertook to subvert many of the values proposed by traditional humanism, but in the more radical sense that they undertook to “decenter” or to eliminate entirely, the focus on the human being, or subject as the major agency in effecting scientific, cultural and literary achievements. According to Foucault, man was a simple fold in our language who is destined to “disappear as soon as that knowledge has found a new form”.  

Despite this onslaught on the essentialism of man, it is a fact that the philosophy of humanism has not lost appeal. The proof lies in the various Humanist Manifestos which have continued to be signed by leading personalities of the world including Nobel laureates. The latest in this series was published in 2003. Even though people differ in their physical and mental make-up, yet when it comes to matters concerning human welfare and human rights, there is broad agreement the world over which is based upon recognition of some basic truths about man. These basic truths form the philosophy of humanism.

An individual also has a biological make-up that distinguishes him from other species. This is borne out by science also in the form of bio-information contained in one’s DNA. This basic imprint could travel down from parents, ancestors as also humanity at large living on this planet since times immemorial. From simple heredity to the Jungian concept of collective unconscious, thinkers and scientists believe in the psychological commonality which can be looked upon as part of essential human constitution. The
powerful characters like Gustad and Dina drawn by Mistry seem to convey the message that there is surely a human nature. But as the existential humanist Sartre argues, human reality is a possibility between factuality and transcendence and “there is always a possibility for the coward to give up cowardice and for the hero to stop being a hero. What counts is the total commitment, and it is not by a particular case or particular action that you are committed altogether.”

Mistry locates innate goodness, which at times, is diluted or distorted by compelling circumstances. It appears that to him, failing to recognize what is given by nature in the form of basic instincts; and what is jointly given by nature and society in the form of individual predilections, faculties of perception and judgement, is also not a realistic assessment of human being, and as such, goes against the basic tenets of humanism.

Rohinton Mistry does not seem to agree to the postmodern formulation. Had it been so, he would not have drawn powerful characters like Gustad or Dina Dalal. His characters – the major ones at least – are men and women of substance. The author focusses on how an ordinary person, by sheer grit and imagination, overcomes stupendous problems. Had Gustad been the son of a king, his life history would have been a real saga fit for narration in an epic. This is the glory of an ordinary human being pitted against opposing societal forces.

Taking up the protagonist of Such a Long Journey first, we find that Gustad Noble is true to his name in ways more than one. He is a middle-aged family man working in a private bank. His father was the owner of a prestigious book shop in Bombay, now called Mumbai. The writer, however, refers to the city as Bombay even as he takes up the political agitation let loose by the Shiv Sena, demanding change of the name of the city from Bombay to Mumbai.
Such a Long Journey is confined to the Parsi community and to Bombay. It can be said that primarily, this is a novel that throws light on the lifestyle, social relationships and problems of the Parsis. Mistry portrays their plight vis-à-vis the majority Hindu community in India. In such a study, it is natural that the problems of the Parsi community will get highlighted and the majority community will be viewed with suspicion. As the novel starts, this perception gets strengthened but when the reader reaches the end of the novel, Mistry’s point of view becomes clear from the symbolic tearing off by Gustad of the black paper put on the windows long back. A sea-change has occurred in the thinking of the protagonist and he no longer needs to secure his house against the suspected voyeuristic gaze of the majority community. Thus, the question of relationship between the minority and the majority has been sorted out by the writer in favour of reconciliation. In this way, the cardinal humanist principle of universal fraternity is upheld.

Gustad passed his childhood almost luxuriously. His father was the owner of a prestigious book-shop in the city of Bombay, but he lost everything when he was hospitalized leaving the whole responsibility of the business to his brother. This brother of Gustad’s father was an alcoholic and a gambler, who did not take long to squander away the profits from the shop in his wasteful activities and yet Gustad’s father remained indulgent towards him, much to the chagrin of Gustad. Thus, the first lesson in humanism came from his father. Even though he hated his father’s attitude towards his uncle, he vowed, in positive fallout, never to cry the way his father had. And yet this very Gustad turns indulgent towards his repentant friend Bilimoria when the latter is admitted to the army hospital in Delhi.

The bookstore business was soon in the red. It ran into debts. To pay off the debts, it had to be declared insolvent and was auctioned by the court. Gustad
could never forget to this day the treachery of his uncle and the proceedings
of the auctioning of the bookstore. His father did not survive for long. The
onus of fending for the family devolved on him. Gustad had to work hard to
support his family. While visiting Crawford Market, he grows nostalgic about
bygone times. He remembers how his father would usually buy more than one
chicken. He was always accompanied by a servant for carrying things. But the
loss of the bookstore had turned Gustad’s father into a broken man. Gustad
did his best at that time to help his family. But only his income was not
sufficient to raise the status of the family.

Mistry is sympathetic towards people like Gustad, who lead a genteel life
now. The writer is also alive to the normal human concerns of an individual.
As human being, almost all of us desire to have a family which provides us
with emotional sustenance and is our immediate support system in times of
distress. It is the family which looks after the basic need of a newborn, brings
him up and provides him with the means to lead life in this world. Therefore,
Mistry’s portrayal of the family life of Gustad Noble is suffused with this
humanistic concern.

When the novel starts, Gustad is shown as a tenant in a two-room flat in the
Khododad Building where he lives with his wife Dilnavaz, two sons Sahrab
and Darius and his only daughter Roshan. He has his dreams and aspirations
related to his children whom he loves sincerely. His hip was broken when he
tried to save his eldest son from an accident. He had pinned much hope on his
eldest son Sohrab. Finally Sohrab gets admission to I.I.T, a prestigious
institute of learning which anyone could be proud of. But when Gustad
throws a small party to celebrate this event on the day of Roshan’s birthday,
the things go astray, in the presence of the sole guest Dinshawji. Sohrab says
rudely that he is least willing to take up engineering; he would rather opt for
the arts course which his friends are joining. That comes as a shock to Gustad which finally leads to parting of ways between the father and the son. Here the point Mistry makes is that our wishes, propped by beliefs and sentiments are not necessarily realized because there is no logical connection between what we wish and what happens. “Mistry, through this fiasco of the central wish, underlines his views about human nature which for all its evolution is still seeped in non-logical ways of thinking and acting.”

Apart from this soured relationship with his elder son, Gustad presents the picture of a perfect family man. He performs his duties towards his wife Dilnavaz and his other two children – Darius and Roshan. He loves his children from the core of his heart. He is very anxious about Roshan’s health when she suffers from diarrhea. He takes her to Dr. Paymaster and even sells his camera to buy medicines when he is short of money.

Gustad’s mind is also disturbed on account of the ‘betrayal’ of his friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria when he suddenly left the Khodadad Building without informing anyone, leave alone wish goodbye. He stayed in the building for many years and was Gustad’s bosom friend. When Gustad had an accident, the Major helped him. He had been more than a neighbour to Gustad. At the very least, he was like a loving brother. When Gustad was carried home after the accident, it was Bilimoria who advised that the physicians would be of no help in that situation. He knew about Madhiwalla Bonesetter and took the trouble of taking Gustad to him.

Gustad could not understand Bilimoria’s sudden disappearance. He was still expecting letter or any communication from Jimmy’s side. Finally, we come to know that Gustad receives a letter from Major Bilimoria in which he tells about his job. He requests Gustad to collect a packet from a book – stall in the ‘Chor Bazar’. Gustad shared all this with his wife Dilnavaz who tried to
dissuade him from acting according to the Major’s wishes. But Gustad, as a good humanist, had forgotten the Major’s treachery and was determined to help him. This thing cost him very dearly in the long run but he could find comfort only when he had lived up to his humanist ideals in helping Bilimoria at great risk to himself.

Gustad received the packet from Ghulam. Later, he noticed that the packet contained ten lakh rupees. Dilnavaz requested Gustad to return the money. Gustad reminded her that the Major had instructed him to deposit the amount in the account of one Mira Obili. It was easier said than done because depositing ten lakh rupees in a fictitious account was not a simple job. His wife was also not in favour of undertaking the risky deal. She chalked out a plan to escape from the trouble. If Gustad would write to the Major that he had been transferred to some other department and was therefore, unable to deposit the amount, he would get an alibi to return the money. Gustad also supported the idea and thought of returning the money to Ghulam Mohammed who had given his address.

Gustad’s refusal to deposit the money invited a lot of problems in his life. He found a headless bandicoot that had been thrown into Gustad’s Vinca bush and next Sunday, it was a cat, brown with patches of white, whose head was severed from the body and it attracted hosts of crows who were flapping and pecking at it. The Nobles began to suspect everybody until Gustad noted a piece of paper, folded and inserted securely between two adjacent branches, as though in a letter holder. He found two innocuous lines written in pencil which seemed to be a child’s rhyme in Gujarati and meant, “Stole the rice of Bilimoria, we’ll take a stick and then we’ll beat ya.” There was no doubt now about the meaning of the two decapitated carcasses. He told Dilnavaz, “We are dealing with heartless people-poisonous snakes. It could have been Roshan
and Darius instead of the Bandicoot and cat.”

Gustad had been threatened for not depositing the money of Bilimoria.

Gustad was so much affected by this second betrayal, so to say, by Bilimoria that he felt as if some vital part of him had been crushed to nothingness. He sat with the scrap of paper before him. “Years of friendship swam before his eyes and filled the piece of paper; it turned him, mocked him, and turned into a gigantic canvas of lies and deceit. What kind of world is this and what kind of men, who can behave in such fashion?”

Gustad felt himself stabbed in the back by someone who was like a brother to him.

With the help of his friend and colleague Dinshawji, however, Gustad deposited the money into the bank. But then the lid was blown off the whole thing and Bilimoria was caught. In fact, Bilimoria worked with the RAW or the Research and Analysis Wing of the Government of India. This is the major Indian agency for espionage in other countries. Trouble erupted in the then East Pakistan as a result of the failure of the Government of composite Pakistan to honour the electoral mandate which went in favour of the Awami League of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. He should have been made the Prime Minister of Pakistan but at that time Z.A. Bhutto in connivance with the military General Yahya Khan resorted to suppression of the people of East Pakistan. As a result, the demand of an independent Bangladesh, which had been raised from time to time, gathered force. There was infighting on a large scale to avoid which people started crossing over to India.

Different regions surrounding East Pakistan were swamped by the refugees. The Indian Government set up camps and provided them with food and other amenities of life. But the number of refugees grew to one crore. Naturally, it was not possible to keep on feeding them for long. Nor was a continued struggle in the vicinity in the interest of our own country. The then Prime
Minister Indira Gandhi sent appealed to superpowers and also sent envoys abroad to make the world aware of the enormity of the problem. With no practical steps taken by the U.N.O. or other powers to defuse the problem, it was left to India to safeguard her own interests. The only way out was to support the Mukti Bahini, the militia that was fighting to secure an independent Bangladesh. But India could not openly support it as it went against the sovereignty of Pakistan. As such, money and arms were supplied to the Mukti Bahini secretly.

In this novel, Bilimoria is charged with the responsibility to provide this help to the Mukti Bahini. He was a staunch patriot who received the shock of his life when he found out that the money meant for the militia was not reaching it and it was being intercepted by the personnel of the Prime Minister’s office. He came to know that the funds were being directed to help the car factory set up by the Prime Minister’s son. In fact, all these are facts. The fictional Bilimoria represents the historical Nagarwala. He had been detailed to get sixty lac rupees from the State Bank of India, Parliament Street, New Delhi. The chief cashier of the bank was telephonically told by the Prime Minister to give the money to a person whose code word would be ‘Bangabandhu’. The money was taken away but then lack of rapport between the banking staff brought the whole thing into the public domain. When these reports were published in the media, the Prime Minister sensed danger and tried to come clean and persuaded Nagarwala to own up the mission as entirely his own machination and thus save the reputation of the government. One he agreed, he was put behind bars and slowly poisoned to death.

In the novel, Bilimoria is shown to have undergone a change of heart. When he learnt the Prime Minister helping her son in this way, his faith in patriotism was shaken. He decided to keep a part of it for his own as also his friends’ use
in future. This money amounting to ten lac rupees was entrusted to Gustad. But Bilimoria’s seniors swung into action. He was imprisoned and threatened with dire consequences unless the money was paid back. As a result, word was sent to Gustad via Ghulam Mohammad to withdraw the money which was done in the same way. Naturally, Gustad and his wife were put to great mental strain. They cursed Bilimoria but when Ghulam prevailed upon him to visit Delhi to meet the Major, Gustad came to know the reality. Major Jimmy Bilinoria’s suffering and agony after he was trapped badly in the political scandal is heart-breaking. Mistry’s humanism stands out clearly in his depiction of this victim of power play at the highest level.

Gustad’s other friend Dinshawji was his colleague at the bank. He was of middle age and had a jolly nature. Dinshawji was the only friend who came on Roshan’s birthday. He helped him in depositing the money in the bank. Unlike Gustad who was rather tolerant and remained aloof from direct politics, Dinshawji got involved in politics and criticized the Shiv Sena vehemently. But Dinshawji also had the marvellous quality of managing rising conflicts that grew out of serious debate with his humorous comments. Dinshawji was better known as a clown or a joker.

But there is another side to Dinshawji’s character which shows him as a strong human being with a lot moral courage and fellow feeling, explicit in this volunteering the risky job of depositing ten lakh rupees in the account of a fictitious Mira Obili. Just as he deposited rupees ten thousand per day, so also he withdraw rupees ten thousand every day lest there be any doubt in someone’s mind about the huge amount. This continued till the entire amount was desposited. “Dinshawji handled it so well, thought Gustad, filling with admiration for the cool courage and good sense. There was no clown or buffoon, but a solid dependable friend.” Soon after the total amount of ten
lakh rupees was safely withdrawn, Gustad learnt that Dinshawji had been hospitalized. He never returned alive from the hospital. Gustad was deeply shocked over his death. Gustad helped Dinshawji’s wife Alamai in his funeral. Dinshawji’s death came as a fatal blow to him.

The picture of the society as drawn in the novel *Such a Long Journey* does not present a happy scenario. It is full of corruption and political machinations at various levels. The novel is set in 1971, the turbulent year of the struggle between what were then the east and west wings of Pakistan, which eventually drew India into its vortex and culminated in a brief, two-week war leading to the creation of Bangladesh. It also harks back to the political history of India in the 1960s, the decade that saw the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India and the accession of his daughter Indira Gandhi to the coveted chair of Prime Minster. Events of the 60’s -- the Indo-China war, the sudden death of Nehru’s successor Lal Bahadur Shashtri, superpower meddling, and the rise of Indira and her son Sanjay -- all are mentioned in the text and seem to be characteristic of a political landscape of decline, deceit and corruption. Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister of India in 1971 and there were rumours about her secret activities, which could not be officially proved. Through the feelings and apprehensions of some Parsi characters, Mistry reveals those secret activities and through an imaginary character Major Bilimoria, he reconstructs the fraud case in which a Parsi gentleman Mr. Nagarwala was implicated and for which the entire Parsi community felt humiliated.

Mistry shows how the war affects one’s life. During the war with China in 1962 Gustad, the protagonist put black-out paper on the glass panes of the windows and the ventilators. Lives of people are affected by war and they remain in their houses but politicians at that level do not think of them. They
only think of their political interests. Jawahar Lal Nehru worried about his political career and that of his daughter Indira Gandhi. He never forgave his son-in-law Feroze Gandhi for exposing scandals in the government and his overwhelming obsession was how to ensure that she should become Prime Minister after him. Fund-raising at the time of war or any natural calamity is a common practice in India, but it is never made clear to the public how the amount raised through collections from the poor and the underpaid is sent. As pointed out by Mistry: “Teams of fund-raising politicians toured the neighbourhood. Depending on which party they belonged to, they made speeches praising the congress government’s heroic stance or denouncing its incompetency for sending brave Indian Jawans with outdated weapons and summer clothing to die in Himalayas at Chinese hands… while fund-raisers shouted themselves through megaphones, exhorting people to be as selfless as the Jawans who were reddening the Himalayan snow with their precious blood to defend Bharat Mata.”

The novel also reveals that some of the articles received from the people as donation to war fund, were displayed in the Chor Bazaar.

In such a scenario, it is not uncommon for the politicians to use intelligence agency for their personal interests. When Sohrab commented that Indira Gandhi used RAW like a private police force, sending men from RAW to spy on opposition parties and to create trouble, Gustad refused to accept his remark as true. He felt sorry that his son was spreading rumours at a time when the enemy was at border. “That Pakistani drunkard Yahya was cooking something in partnership with China and fools like his son went around saying rubbish about the Prime Minister.” But it is the good and unsuspecting nature of Gustad that makes him disbelieve these allegations. He stands tall amidst this turbulence rocking the nation. He holds fast to his
innate goodness and does not deviate from his humanistic ideal which looks upon all as equal: “Gustad, like Job in the Old Testament, finds in compassion and endurance, a dignity and greatness for withstanding that entire destiny keeps in store for him.”\textsuperscript{12}

Mistry concludes through the example of Major Billimoria how politics at the highest level affects an ordinary life, i.e. of Gustad and his family. Similarly, his friend Dinshawji also suffered along with him as he was the conduit to deposit Billimoria’s money in the fictitious account. After depositing the amount, they had to withdraw it in the same fashion, i.e., ten thousand rupees per day. Soon after the money was withdrawn in total, Dinshawji fell ill and was sent to the hospital from where he did not return alive.

The novel clearly shows that politicians are interested only in their personal motives even as they claim to work for public welfare. In their case alone, the public is private as Indira Gandhi uses public funds to finance her son’s car project. Even the time of war is appropriate for them to grind their axes. Their main purpose is to take benefit from the situation and make people emotionally fool. In this context, sociologist Wilfred Pareto’s division of people in two classes – those of foxes and lions is quite apt. While the politicians are foxes, people like Gustad are lions. “Major Billimoria, who symbolizes ‘Nagarwala’ of the real political sandal, appears to be a fox to start with but Gustad remains a lion throughout: both are sentimental fools, however.”\textsuperscript{13} Sentimental people are normally considered fools in the contemporary materialistic world.

The ending of the novel hints at the need to resolve the opposition between the self and society even if their merger at times leads to unpleasant consequences. Gustad is seen tearing the black sheets of paper off the window panes which action sends a moth scurrying out indicating that the fear and
distrust has departed and the fresh light is expected from the outside world. In
a critic’s words, “The novel is, in fact, the story of Gustad’s education that
man does not always control his destiny, that there are forces beyond his
control and larger than he is and of his learning to come to terms with it.”
Celeste Fernandes adds, “So, at the end of the novel, we have Gustad, a man
with principles and dreams and aspirations, realizing that some compromise
has to be reached in life. He emerges out of his problems, a survivor with
tremendous resilience.”

In our opinion, however, Gustad, through his constant brush with unforeseen
forces, has developed confidence to face the ‘light’ from outside. He has
attained knowledge that the world around him consists of human beings like
him. The residual reservation based on racial basis, too have evaporate and
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. According to
another critic, “He [Gustad] discovers his own strength. He finds himself. In
charting this small but insignificant journey, Misry has brought about a
victory not for the ordinary Parsi but for the ordinary struggling individual,
the humanity of the unsung middle class, clinging to the middle path
everywhere.”

If it was a man in the novel Such a Long Journey, who fitted in the role of a
powerful human character, in the novel A Fine Balance, it is a woman, who
stands tall amidst the trials and tribulations of life. Dina Dalal nee Shroff fits
in well with the humanist perception of an essentialized human nature. She is
the pampered child of Dr. Shroff whom her elder brother Nusswan wishes to
dominate so much so that at one point of time, when she wears a particular
hair style, her hair is singed on the angeethi by Nusswan. After the death of
Dr. Shroff, Nusswan becomes de facto head of the family even though his
mother is alive. Her dreams of studying to be a doctor like her father are laid to rest for ever. In this, Nusswan behaves like any non-Parsi Indian even though the Parsis are supposed to have imbibed western values.

She was withdrawn from the school and almost turned into a domestic help. Dina shows grit and tries to educate herself by visiting public libraries. She is also interested in music. Therefore, she attends music concerts in the city. At one such concert she meets her future husband Rustom. She noticed in the lobby a young man who, like her, was watching from a distance while others were mixing up. Since she came from home early she also noticed the young man coming on a bicycle and dismounting there. He would sit in his favourite corner of the lobby to study the programme and the public. Sometimes their eyes did meet and so began comments about the programme. From these stray comments, the nearness increased and after introductions they made it a point to watch the musical programmes together so that “In a few weeks the concert regulars came to regard them as a couple. Their every move was viewed with concern and curiosity. Rustom and Dina were amused by the attention but preferred to dismiss it in the same category as Mr. Toddywalla’s antics.”

Rustom now did not use bicycle to come to the venue of the concert. Instead, he would come by bus and then go back by bus in Dina’s company.

Dina’s brother Nusswan was not really amused when he learnt that the boy Dina had chosen was a pharmaceutical chemist, which to him meant a compounder only. However, seeing that Dina was hell-bent on marrying Rustom, the brother asked her to bring him home so that he could “advise” her properly.
After he had visited their house, Nusswan expressed his frustration to Dina:

Selecting someone without looks, without money, without prospects. Some fiancés give diamond rings. Others a gold watch, or at least a little broach. What does your fellow bring? A bloody umbrella! To think I wasted so much time and energy introducing you to solicitors, chartered accountants, police superintendents, civil engineers. All from respectable families. How will I hold my head up when people hear that my sister married an unambitious medicine–mixing fool? Don’t expect me to rejoice or come to the wedding. For me it will be a day of deep, dark mourning.¹⁹

But Dina was determined and Nusswan knew she was twenty-one year old and had the authority to decide for herself. In calmer moments, he thought that it was better that she was getting married to a lowly-placed fellow. It would have been difficult for him to tolerate if she had rejected his friends in favour of someone superior. So, now he chalked out the wedding plans quite enthusiastically. Against his plans to hire a ‘four piece band’ and arrange evening dinner for three hundred guests, Dina favoured a simpler affair and Rustom also agreed to the suggestion.

The wedding took place in the morning reminding one of the Parsi practices that was fostered on the king Jadhav Rana’s instance so that the local people did not feel jealous of the expatriate Parsis. It was a “quiet ceremony in the same fire-temple where her parents’ prayers were performed on each death anniversary.”²⁰ However, in the evening a party was arranged by Nusswan. Only forty eight guests, of whom six were Rustom’s friends, attended the celebration. Others were from Nusswan’s circle or from their extended family. This party was organized at the Shroff residence. Liquor was also served here. “Now we will put some life in the evening, and into this newly married pair!” said the men folk gathered on the occasion to one another.
There was a lot of laughter accompanied by whispering. After the dinner was over, the guests went away.

Originally, Dina and Rustom were to spend the night there. But as the things were in disarray, they decided to go to Rustom’s flat. Nusswan was in good mood and gave his sister and his brother-in-law a hug. “It was the second time that day for Dina. The first time had been in the morning, after the dustoorji had finished reciting the wedding benediction; it had also been the first time in seven years.” Thus, through her determined approach, Dina was able to get married to the boy of her choice.

The happiness in Dina’s life was, however, short-lived. Dina and Rustom decided to celebrate their second wedding anniversary by going to the cinema to watch the movie High Society, a brand-new release. They enjoyed the film immensely. Afterwards, they went for dinner. On their third anniversary, they decided to invite her brother Nusswan, his wife Ruby and their two children to dinner. Relations between Dina and her brother had remained cordial since her wedding. The little anniversary party proceeded in good mood. Rustam had to go to the market to get ice-cream after the dinner was over. When he did not return even after fifteen minutes, they grew anxious because the ice-cream shop was not far off. Dina and Nusswan set out to find him.

The time was past 9 O’clock and the streets were empty. In the lane at the end of which stood the ice-cream shop, a group of people had gathered by the footpath. As Dina and Nusswan neared it, they noticed the presence of policemen. They discovered a pool of blood and came to know from people there that a ‘bastard lorry driver’ had overrun the victim who had been removed to the hospital. To their horror, they found out from Rustom’s bicycle that the victim was none other than Rustam.
Mistry portrays vividly her struggle through life after Rustam’s death. She started sewing clothes but her failing eyesight made it necessary for her to procure the services of two tailors. At first, she got orders from private people, but later she got attached to an export house – Au Revoir Exports. She was now dependent on the two tailors, who, with the passage of time grew wiser and Om, Ishvar’s cousin, even planned to find our Dina’s contacts and start dealing with the exporters directly. Dina’s problem is very graphically portrayed:

Of late, she sensed haughtiness in Mrs. Gupta, as though the manager had discovered they were not social equals. She no longer left her desk to greet her and see her off, nor did she offer tea or a Fanta. Her fingers returned nervously to the folded garments, picking one up at random, examining its seams and hems. Would this lot pass Mrs.Gupta’s inspection? How many rejections? The angelic tailors had fallen from grace; carelessness was rife now in their handiwork.\(^{23}\)

The stress of dealing with the sloppy work of the two tailors was wearing her out. She feared Mrs. Gupta would cancel the arrangement soon. “The only question was, which would disappear first, the tailors or her health. She envisioned two leaky faucets: one said Money, the other, Sanity. And both were dripping away simultaneously.”\(^{24}\)

However, she fights the battle of life admirably and with grace. She stands tall like no man would, not even her brother, in the turbulent sea of life. What is more, she exhibits a rare human sympathy for the ‘other’, and becomes the mouthpiece of the humanist that Mistry is.

Running business from her flat in a residential block was not permitted by the landlord, who sent goons to destroy the fabric and machines. She took them
on bravely and even went to the court. We know how the legal system works in our country. Finally she had to vacate the premises but she showed grit and steadfastness in fighting the evil forces.

The tailors duo Om and Ishvar had to leave for their village in connection with search for Om’s bride. Her paying guest Maneck too went home because of the death of his father. Dina was all alone for so many months waiting for the tailors and also for Maneck, who had promised to come back for three years degree programme but in vain as Maneck could not get admission to the degree programme and tailors were passing through a very difficult phase of life. Worst of all, the Beggarmaster got murdered by the Monkey man. And the landlord succeeded in evicting Dina from her flat.

Finding all avenues blocked, she had to return to her dominant brother’s home. So ‘The Circle is completed’ as the title of the last chapter declares, and she had to lose her prized independence and again accept the shelter of her brother. Thus, she had to pay a heavy price all these years, living from hand to mouth and suffering the misdeeds of suckers around her. But she stood her ground fearlessly as long as she could. Even while living under the aegis of her brother, she hardly compromised her views. A token of this rebellious nature is seen in the cup in which she serves tea to Om and Ishvar who have now turned beggars. The cup is the one in which Nusswan takes his tea!

There is another Parsi character in *A Fine Balance*. His name is Maneck Kohlah and he is a relative of Dina Dalal’s friend residing at some hill station in North India. Maneck Kohlah’s journey from his home in the hills to the city-by-the-sea takes thirty six hours. Maneck reached the city to get admission to an engineering college.
Finally, When Maneck got admission to a college and stayed in a hostel, it was Avinash who became friendly with him. For pathetic condition of the hostel, his friend Avinash explains: “The money for maintenance is all going into some one’s pocket. Just like the canteen. The caterer has a fat contract and provides garbage for the students. But you get to choose your garbage—veg or non-veg.”

Avinash is also a character made of sterner stuff. One day, there is a big commotion in the dining hall as a piece of meat was found in a vegetarian dish. Avinash urges and succeeds in persuading vegetarians to protest democratically and lodge a complaint with the college administration. The Principal issues a letter of termination of contract of the caterer and authorizes hostel committee to select the replacement. The students are full of youthful euphoria over their victory. “Their President promised that, one by one, they would weed out all the evils of the campus; nepotism in staff hiring, bribery for admissions, sale of examination papers, special privileges for politicians’ families, government interference in the syllabus, intimidation of faculty members. The list was long, for the rot went deep.”

Full of enthusiasm, students believe that their example would inspire other universities and organizations also to get rid of all evils, complementing Jay Prakash Narayan’s movement which was rousing the nation with a call to return to Gandhian principles. They believe these change would help India to lead and awaken the whole humanity with its ancient wisdom of the Vedas and the Upanishads. Inspired by his success in the canteen episode, Avinash gets more and more involved in college politics. Meanwhile, Emergency is declared and Avinash explains to Maneck that this was a ploy by the Prime-Minister to hold on to the power, after the High Court found her guilty of cheating in the last elections. He tells Maneck, “Under the pretext of
Emergency, fundamental rights have been suspended, most of the opposition is under arrest, union leaders are in jail, and even some student leaders. But the worst thing is the press is being censored.”

Maneck is worried about his friend’s well-being, who is actively involved in collage politics. And his fears come true when Avinash disappears from the scene and after a very long gap, we are introduced to his parents who have just cremated his badly mutilated body—obviously a tortured victim of the infamous Emergency.

Thus, Mistry has very poignantly captured the tumult brought about the heroism in ordinary people. The heroism of the ordinary people embodies the true essence of man, because the ordinary man dominates the world in terms of number – which should be the criterion now that kings and queens are gone.

There is no doubt that to start with Mr. Kapur and Yezad seem at opposite poles in their moral character. Kapur has innate innocence, goodness and openness. He has a broad humanist outlook which is borne out by the fact that he tries to identify himself with the people around him in a genuine manner. He believes that all human beings, whether belonging to higher class or lower class, are equal. He tries traveling by the local train but is mocked by the regular passengers. In the process, he makes a fool of himself as he describes his strange adventure in detail: He had gone to the station eager to become one of the millions who travelled like livestock upon the rails. Acclaimed novelist and former union minister Shashi Tharoor’s not-too-old reference to these passengers as the ‘cattle class’, though in bad taste, relates the reality. Each time a train came in, Kapur pushed his way forward, and each time he was left behind on the platform. Once, he was at the very nucleus of the
throng, certain that he would get on, but some centrifugal surge had elbowed him aside.

Yezad nodded. “That happens.”
“After trying for over an hour I gave up. But I’ll make another attempt tomorrow. I think it’s a question of practice, like bowling a legbreak.”

So, when Mr Kapur tries to savour the same spirit, the daily commuters just laugh at him and do not extend the helping hand. The reason, as he analyses it, is the fine clothes and shoes that he puts on. So, he would now get ill-fitting cheap clothes from the pavement vendors. It is clear in his mind when he says, “I want to embrace everything my city has to offer. I want to mingle with her people, be part of that crush of bodies in the streets and trains and buses. Become one with the organic whole that is Bombay. That’s where my redemption lies.” This desire for oneness with the native is not a colonial mimicry but a genuine humanistic response.

What Mr. Kapur opposes is the infringement of human right to freedom of thought and action which the Shiv Sena men try to do, by forcing upon him change of name of the city, as painted on the signboard of his sports shop, from Bombay to Mumbai. Clearly, it violates the Renaissance Humanism and all the later interpretations of the Humanist credo, down to the Humanist Manifesto 2003. The Point No. 14 in the first Humanist Manifesto of 1933 lays down:

“The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good.”

Forcing a fellow human being to act against his wish, which is very much in consonance with the broader objective of universal harmony and goodwill, is an inhuman act.
The Shiv Sena’s act is not in sync with even the postmodern perception of humanism in which essentialism is attacked to “let the other be truly other” because “the affirmation of ‘otherness’ only makes sense in light of the aspiration to an identity freed from social constraints.”\textsuperscript{32} What the son-of-the-soil theory supported by this political party means is to efface the ‘other’ violently and brutally.

Husain is another staffer of Mr Kapur’s sports shop. He lost members of his family in the post-Babri riots that rocked Bombay for a long time. Mr. Kapur, himself a victim of the 1947 riots that accompanied the vivisection of India, tries not to remind Husain of the riots. Husain hardly retains the bitterness of the past, which could have been a normal phenomenon in any ordinary mortal. Another humane character is Vilas, who works in the adjoining bookshop and as a side-job, writes letters for the illiterate migrant labourers who come to Bombay from far-off places to earn a livelihood. Thus, the total influence of the individuals working with Yezad should have been positive.

But Yezad resorts to a devious plan to raise funds. In a politically vitiated climate, he reports to his boss the fictitious demand from Shiva Sena activists for money in lieu of permission to keep ‘Bombay’ instead of ‘Mumbai’ in the name of the firm. Mr. Kapur is in deep love with every old thing about Bombay. Not just its pictures, Mr. Kapur also loves the people of Bombay for their cosmopolitan spirit. He would not hear of such a thing as change of name and instead would part with money. On the appointed day, however, real Shiv Sena men descend demanding change of name but before they have spoken out, Mr. Kapur castigates them for their earlier demand and throws the money at them at which they take offence and murder Mr. Kapur.

Thus, whereas Mr. Kapur becomes a martyr to a cause, Yezad, the nominal hero of the novel, can be classed as a fallen angel, nay a human being, whose
character is drawn to bring home the moral as to what it means to deviate from humanistic principles. It is the human conscience, the centre of all that we talk of as essentiality of the human – that asserts it and as a result the protagonist suffers pangs of repentance.

Mistry’s concept of an ideal humanist character is realized in the character of Percy in the story ‘Lend Me Your Light’. The story begins with a quote from Rabindranath Tagore’s Gitanjali: “…your lights are all lit – then where do you go with your lamp? My house is all dark and lonesome, -- lend me your light.” The deep-seated unity – be it of soul as we in India believe or of human nature as the West thinks – sympathy in the human heart for the scum of the earth underlines this wonderful story. Kersi yearns to copy his brother who has devoted his life to ameliorate the lot of the poor and the destitute in India while he himself lives a life of comparative ease and comfort in Canada. His craving reminds one of the following lines from The Waste Land:

“We think of the key each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours
Revive for a moment a broke Coriolanus”.

The story ‘Lend Me Your Light’ also has a character Jamshed who is infatuated by the glitz and glamour of western life so much so that he starts hating India, the place of his birth. Jamshed and Kersi had left around the same time for America and Canada (Toronto) respectively. The motive for migration was obviously material prosperity through better job prospects and career advancement. This story also presents the Parsis who have totally identified themselves with postcolonial India. The narrator’s brother Percy is such a man. He is actively involved in work at grass-roots level in a village and feels little kinship with this family and even less with his childhood friend
Jamshed, who is totally westernized and now lives in New York. Jamshed is always full of disdain for India and Indian people.

In one of his letters to Kersi he dubs India as a “dismal place” where “Nothing ever improves, just too much corruption” which is ‘all part of the ghati mentality’ (ghati is an umbrella word for a person who has a low mental caliber and has all that is undesirable). Kersi wonders why Jamshed is so much full of “disdain and discontentment even when he was no longer living under those conditions”. Kersi feels irritated by Jamshed’s condemnation of his country India. He tries to prove that he does not share his thoughts by joining Parsi-club and Parsi get-togethers.

Kersi is truly a divided personality because when he comes on a short visit to India, he also begins to see India from the Jamshed’s angle. He says, “Bombay seemed dirtier than ever. I remembered what Jamshed had written in his letter, and how it had annoyed me, but now I couldn’t help thinking he was right. Hostility and tension seemed to be perpetually present in buses, shops, trains.”

When he tries to feel the calm beauty of night sitting at a footpath stall, Jamshed startles him with his arrival. He mocks him asking if he had come for shopping and then he says disdainfully, “Terrible, isn’t it, the way these buggers think they own the streets – don’t even leave you enough room to walk. The police should drive them off, break up their bloody stalls, really.”

But a critic finds that “He is angry with Bombay. In fact, he is angry with himself, because he suffers from guilt.” But according to another critic, Jose Verghese, “Once he becomes just a visitor to India, he finds that India has changed much more than he could imagine. And he finds the disparity between the idea of India as ‘home’ and the real dirtier, crowded place India as it surfaces in his visit from a place of a better standard of living.”
Nevertheless, Kersi’s brother Percy sets a different kind of example. The group of which he is a part, arranges interest-free loans for the farmers in the form of seeds and fertilizers at cheaper rates, from the cooperative they have formed. When the money-lenders kills his friend Navjeet, one of members of the group, Percy is shocked, shaken and afraid but soon overcome them. Jamshed says “I told you from he beginning all this was a waste of time and nothing would come of it, remember? Every time we met we would talk about it, and you used to make fun of me wanting to go abroad. But I still think the best thing for you is to move to the states. There is so much you could achieve there. There, if you are good at something you are appreciated and you get ahead. Not like here, where everything is controlled by uncle-auntie, and…”

Percy discards Jamshed’s self-centred wisdom. He has actually related himself to his poor compatriots and is no longer afraid. He turns to his mother and says in a quiet voice: “Could we have dinner right away? I have to meet my friends at eight O’clock. To decide our next move in the village.”

Jamshed with his guilt and anger and Kersi with his dichotomies, ambiguities and resulting confusions and blurred self, waiting for an epiphany are marginal human beings. Kersi feels guilty for himself when he compares his easy life with that of his brother waging battles against corruption and evil while he was watching sitcoms on his rented Granada TV. All that weighed heavy on his conscience. Thus, we find that Kersi, though considered Mistry’s alter ego, brings into bold relief through his longing to be like his brother, the importance of the humanitarian work being undertaken by his brother Percy.
References


3 Ibid., p. 130.


8 Ibid., p. 141.

9 Ibid., p. 207.

10 Ibid., p. 110.

11 Ibid., p. 93.


13 Batra, p. 79.


18 Ibid., p. 33.
19 Ibid., p. 36.
20 Ibid., p. 37.
21 Ibid., p. 39.
22 Ibid., p. 45.
23 Ibid., p. 87.
24 Ibid., p. 188.
25 Ibid., p. 236.
26 Ibid., p. 241.
27 Ibid., p. 243.
29 Ibid., p. 348.
30 Ibid., p. 346.
34 Ibid., p. 181.
36 Ibid., p. 190.

39Mistry, *Tales* 192.

40Ibid., p. 192.

41Ibid., p. 184.

42Batra, p. 72.