Chapter-7

Conclusion
CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

“Literature not only describes reality but also adds to it. Yes, literature is not merely a depiction of reality; it is rather a value-addition.”

— C.S.Lewis

Literature, by virtue of its being an art form used for expression, realistically presents the sum total of a society’s thought process, vision of life, aspirations, traditions and values, and preserves its cultural ideas, customs and morals. It reflects the spirit of the age in which it is written. Even if a writer is highly individualistic, he cannot avoid the influence of social environment and main currents of life around him. A work of art, no matter how much it rejects or ignores harsh social realities of life, is deeply rooted within them and thus it exposes the reader to the wide array of human experiences.

Life, in all its varied forms and shapes is reflected in literature which has been maintained as mirror to life and society. It depends upon the writer through which perspective he views life and places the mirror. And it is up to the reader through which perspective he interprets the reflection of society presented. Literature facilitates our study of human nature through tragedy and romance, joy and sorrow, in epiphanies and denial, in moments of heroism and in moments of cowardice. By discussing harsh realities of life and various social perspectives, literature allows us to question some of our most prominent beliefs, traditions and rules.
From the Palaeolithic period to the present age of Information Technology, human society has undergone enormous change. Our political, social or moral values have never remained uniformly consistent or unchanged. In its reciprocal relationship with society, literature too has gone through remarkable changes in terms of theme and style. The subjects and issues in literature keep changing in accordance with the multiple spheres of life and society. From time to time writers have been exploring various perspectives and dimensions of relationship between man and society placing various social issues at the core of their innumerable works of art. These issues include hypocritical social norms, outmoded customs, and traditions, worries of gender, class or caste prejudices, communal hatred and carnages, feeling of alienation, struggle for identity, loss of faith and values, East-West encounter, disintegration of family and many more. These are those harsh realities of life which find ample expression in literary works. A writer views and presents these harsh realities of life either from the perspective of his own culture and society, or from his character’s whom he creates to strongly hold the mirror up to the society. We, the readers as members of different cultures, read, interpret, react and get affected from our own chosen perspectives. Thus in a single work of literature, there can be multiple social, cultural and personal angles and interpretations similar to or different from the writer’s.

Good works of literature, novels in particular, with their broad canvass by presenting various social perspectives and harsh realities of life, are known to have greatly influenced the direction of human mind and attitude, and directly or indirectly settled course of action that men may follow. A novelist with his strong social sense presents the trends, compulsions, tensions, fears, aspirations and
expectations of his time and endeavors to give deeper meanings of life. Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry are two such novelists who with their extremely absorbing and interesting works, capable of being viewed and analysed from varied social perspectives, have greatly contributed to the process of social change. The present study has focused upon their selected novels which by presenting harsh realities of life help in our better understanding of human nature as well as strongly highlight the need to uproot social evils and demand for a radical restructuring of social thought. Through literature they have either pronounced their points of view in order to describe a certain social group or specific situation that affects people’s way of life or have directly protested against what they believe unfair for a harmonic development of people’s life.

Both Sidhwa and Mistry are the authentic voices of the numerically insignificant Parsi community. Like most other Parsi writers, they also assert their ethnic identity in their creative writing through which they want to preserve their ethnicity for future. They have endeavoured to spell major problems and prejudices, aspirations and ambitions, eccentricities and idiosyncrasies, identity crisis and confusion, the ethos and ethnic anxiety of their community in diverse hues through their characters like Col. Bharucha and Lenny’s parents (Ice-Candy Man), Gustad, Dinshawji and Dilnavaz (Such a Long Journey), Nusswan, Dina and Maneck Kohla (A Fine Balance). As observed by A.K.Singh, “…their works exhibit consciousness of their community in such a way that community emerges as a protagonist from their works though on the surface these works deal with their human protagonists.”
In any work of literature, there is a stamp of the society and culture of the artist to which he belongs. His social life and manners are reflected in his works distinctly or vaguely. H.A. Taine’s statement that “a literary work is not mere individual play of imagination, the isolated caprice of an excited brain, but a transcript of contemporary manners”\(^2\) is true in case of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry both.

They have authentically and faithfully articulated the hopes, aspirations, fears and anxieties of their community. The findings of this study reveals that they have not only tried to show concern for their microscopic and fast diminishing Parsi community alone but for all the hitherto marginalized people, groups and communities. While preserving a deep commitment to their own Parsi community, and capturing its quintessential ethos in their works, both Sidhwa and Mistry have woven their novels around contemporary issues and individual suffering. Not only this, they have employed their talents to explore the contemporary reality at political, social, communal and economic fronts of the nation which can be studied from various social perspectives.

After the study of the four selected novels (*The Pakistani Bride, Ice-Candy Man, Such a Long Journey, A Fine Balance*) of these novelists, it may safely be concluded that despite their religious exclusivity, ethnic anxiety and feeling of alienation, these novelists have marvelously captured the pulse of contemporary society in which they grew up. The present study reveals that a huge variety of harsh realities and their respective perspectives find place in their novels. Tribal women’s problems, marginalization and victimization of women, displacement and alienation,
inter-community marriage, communal disharmony and riots, Partition and its resulting violence, suffering of individuals, loss and betrayal, struggle for survival for middle and lower class in India, political corruption, generational clash, Emergency and its horrors, superstitions, disease, extreme poverty, suppression and oppression of the weaker sections of society, class conflicts, caste system and many others harsh realities have been presented in the novels under study.

The present research shows that Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *The Pakistani Bride* is a scathing indictment against the atrocities of the patriarchal society, particularly Kohistani community in Pakistan. Known to be based on a real incident, the novel places woman perspective at the centre of the novel and emphatically draws special attention to the harsh reality of life that a woman’s identity and her status are always determined in relation to man and in every perspective of a man-woman relationship, it is the woman who is established as dependent on and sub-ordinate to man.

Written with great cultural insight and perspective, the novel takes on an unforgettable journey into the tribal areas of Pakistan and leaves us with a range of emotions: awe at the majestic mountains, shock at the primeval conditions, fear for the protagonist and her piteous situation, and anguish at the brutality that women have to face on a day to day basis.

The novel, though, refers to the historical Pakistan of 1940’s and 1950’s, and a lot of change has come in people’s mind-set in general since then, yet many of the customs, traditions and women’s living conditions described in the novel still prevail in Pakistan especially in rural areas. Sadaf Fareed observes that “Though the story speaks about Pakistani society or the Indian subcontinent yet the issues discussed are
entirely universal....Although the book reflects the society of 1940s but the issues discussed here still seem contemporary."3

This, in fact, is a grim reality of life that women’s subjugation, objectification, dehumanization, victimization and secondary position is one of those deep-seated evils confronting women all over the world which are as intense today as they were at the time of their origin.

The manner in which fifteen years old Afshan’s forced marriage with ten years old Qasim takes place, clearly conveys Sidhwa’s complaint that women, marginalized members of human society, have no say in decision-making process. Afshan is treated nothing more than a sellable-purchasable object, a bargaining commodity, which is used as compensation for an old debt that her father owes to Qasim’s father. As he is unable to pay the debt, he offers his daughter Afshan as settlement to avoid a blood-feud. Sidhwa, a woman, through the story of another woman Afshan, sensitively and successfully highlights the harsh reality of subjugated womenfolk who are forced to accept their life-partners imposed upon them as a result of bargain in economic transactions.

Through the life and travails of Zaitoon, Sidhwa further draws our attention to the harsh reality of victimization of women and their being forcefully compelled to encounter an environment they are not familiar with. Zaitoon’s marriage is also an enforced one which is doomed to fail. A child of Partition, brought up in cosy environment in Lahore, she is offered in marriage by Qasim to one of his tribesman Sakhi simply because he has given his word. Qasim even threatens to kill him if she transgresses his will.
Zaitoon, a young bride from a world where she is protected and guarded, is forced to leave all her dreams of being loved and protected and move to a world of her father’s dreams. Her entry into the new world turns out to be an utter nightmare. Her merciless tribal husband with no human feelings at all inflicts inexplicable miseries and violence upon her. He drags her, beats her and thrashes her on the slightest pretexts. From being loved and protected to being abused and assaulted: verbally, sexually physically and emotionally, Zaitoon plans to flee from her husband’s place only to face further more harsh realities. The misery, torture and suffering that Zaitoon comes across during her flight for survival through the mountains just can’t be forgotten long after the book has been closed. Two tribals from Chherkhil keep her hostage for two hours and mercilessly rape her till she becomes unconscious. Here again sexual violence against a starved, tired, helpless girl brings into focus the extent of cruelty of male desires. Sidhwa vehemently points out the animal instincts of men that take advantage of the helplessness of women and thereby subjugate them physically and psychologically whenever, wherever they get a chance.

No matter how insensitive a reader of The Pakistani Bride to women’s question may be, he can’t turn a blind eye to the scenes of torture and a deaf ear to the screams of pain that Sidhwa has powerfully and artistically portrayed and conveyed through the life of an orphan protagonist named Zaitoon.

The account of the civilized middle-class Western (American) woman Carol, married to a Pakistani, reinforces Zaitoon’s story and conveys how women are denied their identity and expected to have silent voice or no voice. Apparently
surrounded by gentility and sophistication, she is also oppressed and exploited by men. She is put under great mental and emotional trauma by her jealous and overpossessive husband. Through her relationship with her Pakistani husband Farukh and her Pakistani lover Major Mushtaq and a chance encounter with some tribal people, Sidhwa underlines again how women are subjugated by being treated just as an object. Sidhwa unmasks male hypocrisy through Mushtaq who apparently seems to love his wife, cannot even think of forsaking her, but does not hesitate in sleeping with his friend’s wife (Carol).

Sidhwa emphasizes the harsh reality of exploitation and subjugation of women in human society also through the plight of some other minor women characters. The images of these women display a very tragic scene of our male chauvinistic society in which a woman does not have any right to rule over her own body; instead she is treated as the property of her male kin.

Sakhi’s mother Hamida, is a victim of bodily exploitation. She has been ‘used’ by her husband all her life for the production of children whom she carried in her womb, nurtured with great labour but has no rights over them or over her husband.

The harsh reality of female exploitation is revealed through the dancing girls like Shehnaz whose lives and bodies are controlled by male pimps. The tragic picture of the blind, disabled and diseased woman, useless in the house or in bed, who is mocked at, forced to dance and being hit with cane, further highlights the pathetic and dehumanized treatment that women receive by the men who ‘own’ them.
Viewed from the woman’s perspective, the novel raises voice not only against their subjugation, oppression and victimization at male hands, but also against our process of social conditioning of girls that teaches them right from the cradle to imbibe in themselves the values of martyrdom, self-abnegation, humility, forgiveness and subservience. They have to accept and adjust without any complaints. Afshan also has no other alternative but to accept her fate uncomplainingly. As Furrukh Khan opines,

““The major figures like Zaitoon, Carol and Miriam (Nikka, the shop vendor’s wife) are confined within the narrow framework of rules imposed in general by the patriarchal society and the male figures of the household in particular. They are not expected to play any pivotal role in the “significant” decisions, even though their feelings and their whole being might be at stake. This aspect of their suppression is abundantly enunciated by the treatment meted out to the young Afshan. . .”

An alternative perspective of the reading of the novel notices the silver lining in the cloud. A woman’s virtue of resilience is exhibited in Afshan’s story. She is bartered away by her father. Her mis-matched marriage is a transaction of bodies and not a relationship based on mutual consent and understanding. Though disappointed in the beginning, she accepts her new role as a daughter-in-law and as a wife without making any complaints. Her resilience is the only virtue that keeps her calm and composite.

Zaitoon’s fighting spirit and will to live encourage her silently but forcefully to move from passivity to active assertion of her will against suffocating and rigid patterns of existence. She escapes into the unknown, indirect, difficult and
untrodden path and consequently is lost in magnanimous mountains. Like a wounded animal hunted by tribal men, she wanders in mountains for nine days and nights and ultimately defying her fate, succeeds in her struggle to survive and reaches major Mushtaq and his military camp. Viewed from such a perspective, the novel is a story of strong will and mental courage of a woman Zaitoon, who ultimately becomes an emblem against subjugation and victimization of women in the name of tradition and culture.

Fortunately Zaitoon survives, but by the end of her flight she is such a total wreck who can hardly be identified as a human being. Half-dead, half alive, utterly shocked and tormented she is that her mental hygiene is just unpredictable. Her triumph in defying her fate can properly be appreciated when she is compared with other women in the novel: Afshan, an object of settlement; Miriam, matronly and domesticated, in purdah always; Carol, an American educated woman victimized by husband and lover; Hamida, tortured by husband and son, Shahnaz, forced to do the business of prostitution; the crazy sick beggar woman, a hapless plaything in the hands of her rapists. Against the images of these women, Zaitoon with all her docility, submissiveness and obedience refuses to stay and acclimatize with the oppressive and barbarous tribal society and chooses to struggle for survival against impossible odds.

“Zaitoon’s odyssey from the plains to the snow mountains and back to the plains is symbolic of the inner journey of the young woman from the fantasy world of love, romance and heroes to the harsh and hostile realities of life, where man is
the hunter and exploiter, cruel and inhuman treating woman and animal alike. It is a barbaric world of uncivilized people that Sidhwa brings to life and light.”

My study of the novel has found that the novel, written with a feminine perspective, is an absorbing read, a good book to indulge in, if one has faced or witnessed the harsh realities of gender difference in one’s country, city, home, college, on road or anywhere else. Though the novel does not deal with Parsi community, it shows the perspective of a Parsi woman who objectively sees the sad plights of Pakistani women and stresses their aspiration for a change. The feminist perspective of the novel demands for a society wherein a woman, ‘the other sex’ has her own identity, wherein her status is not to be defined only in relation to man, wherein she is not exchanged as gift or ‘object of settlement’ to enhance or develop men’s economic and social relationships and wherein a rebellion against the authoritative, anarchic and subjugative patriarchal set-up is not viewed as a war against divinity.

The second novel investigated in the present research project is Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* which discusses violence and trauma of the Partition of the subcontinent giving voice to the marginalized groups on the levels of gender, class, religion, ethnicity and nationality. The partition of 1947 remains the cruelest reality in the history of the nation. Both in scale and method, the character of violence was unpredictable and unprecedented. The trauma of vivisection of the country left behind such a deep resentment and animosity that a kind of historical hatred keeps simmering even today, seventy years after the partition.
Dividing India was a political plan but the harsh reality attached to it was that it entailed crimes of unprecedented violence, brutality, murders, rapes and savagery. Bapsi Sidhwa, from more or less a feminist, childish, Parsi and Pakistani perspective, sensitively portrays the political anxiety, social insecurity and large-scale wreckage as a result of forced migration of population and the demographic dislocation.

The novel, in fact, is a story of communal solidarity and of communal frenzy; a story of individuals and their inseparable communal identities; a story of vivisection of a nation and of emerging nations; a story of characters from all communities and of an individual. There are Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and Parsis, and thus multiple perspectives of partition emerge as viewed and experienced by all the affected communities.

Sidhwa’s narrator Lenny, being a child, female, Parsi and a victim of polio is a marginalized member of society. According to Robert L. Ross, “Lenny’s naiveté, her privileged position and her religious background lend her version of partition a quality that other novels about this tempestuous period in Indo-Pakistan history lack. The momentous events leading to partition and the aftermath are constructed incrementally through the child narrator’s point of view, as she repeats the overheard conversations, tells of strange sights and sometimes even misinterprets situation.”

Lenny reveals trauma of partition through her memories. She narrates all the harrowing, blood-curdling details of how the lofty ideals of nationalism, friendship and brotherhood were suddenly bartered for communal motifs, hatred and
malevolence resulting in unprecedented destruction, political absurdities and imbalanced social sensibilities.

Like most other partition novels, *Ice-Candy-Man* is also replete with horrifying details of brutality, dislocation, human loss and violence.

The heart-rending scenes of the Inspector General of Police Mr. Rogers’ mutilated body discovered in a gutter which kept his “English toes and kidneys float before my (Lenny’s) disembodied eyeballs. . .” (ICM 116), the barbarous murder of “A naked (Muslim) child, twitching on a spear struck between her shoulders, waved like a flag” (ICM 134) by Sikh mob, and its counter posed brutal murder of the Hindu Banya by tying his legs to two jeeps pushed back to back and ripping him asunder are some of the cruelest examples of violence and mental and physical trauma that Sidhwa narrates through Lenny. Such scenes of intense horror and pain are presented to highlight the harsh reality that during the tumult of Partition love and devotion for one’s religion turned into extreme madness for religion and communal violence and that too to such extent that people were slaying innocent children and helpless people in the most cruel and inhuman manner to manifest the victory of one religious group over the other one. The Hindu Banya being “divided” alive by the Muslims meets a horrible death. His vivisection stands for India’s vivisection. Sidhwa, through this scene conveys the pain and torture of the partition of the sub-continent which is like an inhuman act of tearing apart a living human being with extreme brutality and savagery causing extreme pain and complete destruction.
The novel has one after another heart-rending representations of violence. Lenny and Himat Ali (Hari) find the mutilated body of Masseur in a gunnysack on the road. Masseur who was in deep love with Ayah and had assured her safety and security was “reduced to a body. A thing.” (ICM 175) The scene has a heart-rending appeal: “The swollen gunny-sack lies directly in our path. Hari pushes it with his foot. The sack slowly topples over and Masseur spills out—half on the dusty sidewalk, half on the gritty tarmac—dispelling the stiletto reek of violence with the smell of fresh roses…” (ICM 174)

Ranna’s story of genocidal massacre in his village Pir Pindo is perhaps one of the most excruciating presentations of obnoxious and atrocious violence captured in the entire partition literature. The episode of blood-bath that Rana narrates brings out the vilest side of adult nature which continuously haunts the reader:

“Dost Mohammad stepped out and walked three paces. There was a sunlit sweep of curled steel, his head was shorn clear off his neck, turning once in the air, eyes wide open, it tumbled in the dust. His hands jerked up slashing the air above and above the bleeding stump of his neck. Ranna saw his uncles beheaded. His older brothers, his cousins. The Sikhs were among them like hairy vengeful demons, wielding bloodied swords, dragging them out as a sprinkling of Hindus, darting about at the fringes, their faces vaguely familiar, pointed out and identified the Mussulmans by name. He felt a blow cleave the back of his head and the warm flow of blood.” (ICM 201)

Sidhwa’s female-oriented perspective in the novel is unique. She chooses a Parsi girl of eight as the narrator of the disastrous and traumatic drama to provide
objectivity to the narrative. The character Ayah is a Hindu woman, abducted, gang-raped at the hands of her own friends and admirers and at last settled as a prostitute in Hira Mandi. Through the tragic plight of Ayah, Sidhwa brings home one more harsh reality that during the time of partition crisis, women were physically, sexually, psychologically and emotionally exploited and traumatized, and controlled by men who loved them and also by those whom they did not even know. By using ‘women-as-victim’ paradigm, Sidhwa points out that it is the women always who are targeted victims because their bodies are treated as symbolic battlefields that male offenders always want to conquer. Ayah’s abduction and rape by Muslim mob headed by Ice-candy-man, who claims to love and adore her, but strips Ayah of her identity as a woman and as a Hindu, is the most loathsome scene in the novel. The communal violence of Partition robs her off her religion, her home, her name and her identity. She becomes Mumtaz, the prostitute, and suffers the trauma of disrespect and humiliation. Her faith is so utterly shaken that when Rodabai tries to comfort her, she replies—“I am past that… I’m not alive.” (ICM 262)

Hamida, Ayah’s replacement in Lenny’s house, was also kidnapped and besmirched by the Sikhs and eventually discarded by her family. She represents hundreds of those “fallen” women who were abducted and raped by Hindu or Sikh mob and then considered impure and rejected by their own family. Both Ayah and Hamida speak for the collective tragedy of female victims during partition who were up-rooted, displaced, looted and raped during the most tumultuous political phase in the history of the sub-continent. Sidhwa says “Terrible vendetta were enacted on their bodies, not so much to dishonor them as to humiliate the men of another faith.”

261
Sidhwa depicts the trauma of Partition from the prism of Parsi sensitivity also. According to E. Kurke, “Amidst banter, repartee and humour the novelist subtly portrays the underlying fear of the Parsis about Partition and Independence.”

Mental turmoil and feeling of insecurity of the marginal community during the clash of dominant Hindu-Muslim-Sikh communities can be detected in the Jashan prayer at Lahore and regular holding of parties by Lenny’s parents. Sidhwa presents in the novel the Parsi dilemma of whether to support Swaraj or to maintain their allegiance to the British. Dr. Bharucha suggests staying neutral in the tug of war among the three major communities of India. However, this neutral position was not as simple as that and could result in a kind of alienation. As Dr. Mody says “Our neighbours will think that we are betraying them and siding with the English.” (ICM 37) Siding with Hindus or Muslims was also a grave puzzle as “which neighbor are you going to betray? Hindu? Muslim? Sikh? (ICM 37)

In the novel Sidhwa purports to present an alternative Pakistani perspective of the Partition also and rejects the British and pro-Hindu versions of history. To counter these versions, she not only tries to substantiate the image of Jinnah by calling him the “Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity” (ICM 171) but also seeks to demystify the images of Gandhiji and Nehru. She holds British policies of divide and rule, Nehru’s prime-ministerial aspirations and Gandhiji’s mixing of religion and politics responsible for the vivisection of the country. She accuses that “Gandhi and Nehru are forcing the League to push for Pakistan.” (ICM 63) They are presented in unfavorable terms in the novel. She argues how Britishers favoured India over Pakistan:
“The Hindus are being favoured over the Muslims by the remnants of the Raj. Now that its objective to divide India is achieved, the British favour Nehru over Jinnah. Nehru is Kashmiri, they grant him Kashmir. Spurning logic, defying rationale, ignoring the consequence of bequeathing a Muslim state to Hindus…” (ICM 100)

Thus, in Ice-Candy-Man, the harsh reality of the 1947-Partition can be read, studied and interpreted through a number of perspectives, and each one provides a better understanding and a more clear glimpse into the events of turmoil on the Indian subcontinent during the partition. Bapsi Sidhwa has indeed brought to life the physical, spiritual and emotional trauma resulting out of communal hatred and frenzy.

Rohinton Mistry, yet another Parsi novelist under the scanner of this study, exhibits in his novels his penchant for social realism which subsumes his concerns for the fast-eroding value system in individual and public life, ethnic anxiety and identity crisis of his community and an essential humanism. The study reveals that Mistry has studied harsh realities of life in a remarkable manner and commented on them as a great intellectual and social thinker. State of Emergency, political corruption, individual suffering, loss and betrayal, tradition versus modernity, extreme poverty, identity crisis, class and caste oppression, women subjugation, struggle for survival, beggary are some of the harsh realities of life that Rohinton Mistry deals with in his novels with particularly a Parsi perspective. While centralizing his community in post-independent India in his discourse, he captures
the harsh realities of socio-political and cultural disorder in sixties and early seventies.

Mistry’s first novel taken up for exploring harsh realities of life and social perspectives is *Such a Long Journey* which tells a story rich in subject-matter and characterization. The novel discusses the suffering of ordinary people at different levels and in various forms and establishes that suffering is something inevitable and even sometimes inexplicable. This is a bitter truth that without facing problems, sufferings and anguish, it is impossible to exist in the world. One has to learn to strike a balance between sorrow and happiness.

Through the life and experiences of the protagonist of the novel, Mistry explains the harsh reality of life that the suffering of ordinary people at personal and familial level is aggravated by the corrupt and deteriorating political, economic and administrative state of affairs of the nation leaving them with a feeling of loss and being betrayed.

Mistry portrays the life, ideas, dreams, aspirations and experiences of a middle class Parsi bank official, Gustad Noble who struggles hard to keep his family happy and satisfied. But at every stage of his life he meets unprecedented obstacles, problems and the workings of inexplicable forces which cause him continuous mental anguish and suffering. Mistry tactfully underlines that not only personal problems at family front, but political and administrative corruption, ethnic anxiety and insecurity, poor economic condition and diseases etc also become the cause of suffering of an ordinary person.
Gustad’s suffering can be analysed through a number of perspectives. Seen from the perspective of the middle class, Gustad represents people who are struggling hard to keep a balance between their meager income and rising prices. Gustad had a prosperous past the memory and loss of which trouble him and his wife Dilnavaz. He remembers that bankruptcy, betrayal and the loss of bookstore had turned his “once invincible father” completely broken, visibly shrunk and “dispirited man” and shattered his ailing mother. Mistry points out the harsh reality that bankruptcy and poverty have a damaging character about it.

Another cause for Gustad’s mental suffering is the father-son relationship. Gustad’s wistfulness regarding his desire to claim the lost fortune is dashed by his son Sohrab’s refusal to join the prestigious I.I.T. This becomes the cause of hostility and estrangement between the two and continues to be the reason of Gustad’s suffering till Tehmul dies. Though at the end of the novel “the tradition entrenched father breaks down the barrier to embrace his son’s difference through a compassionate transcendence.”

Gustad’s dream of launching his son as a successful engineer is a lofty one and a purely Indian one and can easily be comprehended from the perspective of Gustad as a father. He takes Sohrab’s defiance as betrayal and as loss of his hopes for a bright future for his son who belongs to a marginalized community in a multi-cultural country.

A lot of unforeseen and undesirable things happen in quick succession in Gustad’s life which keep him in a tormented state. Sohrab refuses to join I.I.T.; his favourite child Roshan suffers from a prolonged illness; he struggles hard with the
memories of his financially sound and emotionally balanced past, especially at the financially tough and emotionally perturbed time; his best friend and co-worker Dinshawji dies of cancer; another intimate friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria disappears mysteriously and later dies in suspicious circumstances; he himself unwittingly gets involved in illegal activities, laundering money through his bank, purportedly to support the aspirations of East Pakistan; he falls in conflicts with his eccentric neighbours; the mentally retarded boy Tehmul dies in a mishap; the sacred wall around Khodaad building is demolished. All these chastening experiences instill him with perpetual feelings of loss, betrayal and insecurity.

Mistry emphasizes the point that it is not one’s personal gloomy world alone, but the outside world with its political and administrative corruption, conspiracy, treachery, social unrest and war-like situations is also responsible for one’s intense suffering. Mistry presents harsh reality of prevailing corruption in politics and administration from the perspective of an average middle-class citizen of India. He reiterates how an ordinary citizen can get nothing done without bribes, if he has any dealings with the municipality, police department or the politicians. Mistry remarkably brings out the harsh reality through Dr. Paymaster, the family physician of Gustad Noble, who pointed out that “municipal corruption was only a microcosmic manifestation of the greed, dishonesty, and moral turpitude that flourished at the country’s centre. He described meticulously how, from the very top, whence all power flowed, dripped the pus of putrefaction, infecting every stratum of society below.” (SLJ 312-13)
The novel views socio-political realities from a minority (here Parsi) perspective, when Mistry tries to bring to the fore the searing issues of casteism, cultural conflicts and corruption during the early pre-Emergency years. He, like his counterpart Bapsi Sidhwa, delineates the perturbation and unease of a microscopic community living in the heterogeneous society of India.

Nationalization of banks, rising communal conflicts, political hegemony of groups like Shiv Sena, growing fundamentalism and political powers of Marathas are the factors that are taken by Parsi minority community in the novel as sort of jolt to their honesty and identity and as impending danger to their community. Thus the various anxieties felt by the Parsi characters cause a lot of mental suffering to themselves.

Dinshawji suffers from the fear of loss of identity, connection and heritage by the change in the names of roads and localities, “…one fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life? Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me!”(SLJ 74)

Mistry presents fictional rendering of Bilimoria’s story through a Parsi perspective and questions the nature of the hasty trial, the general ambiguity of the case and suspicion arousing death of Bilimoria during imprisonment. The entire Gustad-Bilimoria plot is an expression of the suffering of the Parsi community during the reign of Indira Gandhi government. Viewed from the perspective of a marginalized community, the novel reveals the harsh reality that innocent people like Jimmy Bilimoria and Gustad Noble are made scapegoats for political ends.
Mistry’s focus remains the nation’s helplessness under a dynastic government rule that is corrupt to the core. He probes into the contemporary socio-political harsh realities with the eyes of a concerned citizen and to veritably portray it “many historical events are touched upon and are seamlessly woven into the storyline, such as the looming threat of the Indo-Pakistan war, failed Russian communism, and America’s support of Pakistan and people’s hatred for Nixon who became synonymous with scandals.”

The study of the novel shows Mistry as a ruthless artist, a stern political satirist and a devout critic of war who presents a world of harsh realities, a world in which all forms of suffering, corruption, knavery, hypocrisy, loss, betrayal, tyranny, disease, ugliness, and decay have become the order of the day. Through the life and story of Gustad Noble, Mistry has successfully conveyed the idea that it is impossible for a human being to exist without facing trials and tribulations, suffering and anguish, loss and betrayal as they are unavoidable phenomena of human life. “Gustad’s suffering is no suffering abstraction, for deep down it there is immense significance through which the novelist’s high imaginative power to evince his vision that no happiness will last forever is implanted.”

The study of Mistry’s second novel A Fine Balance asserts him as a social humanist. With a strong commitment to expose discrimination, social imbalance, political tyranny and exploitation of all kinds, he focuses upon the harsh reality that some members of society are unjustly discriminated, dehumanized and oppressed on the grounds of their gender, class, caste, race, social status, religion and ethnicity
and are denied their rights, freedom and a fair participation in society by the so-called powerful ones.

Through the lives of its four main characters Ishvar and Ompraksh Darzi, Dina Dalal and Maneck Kohla, Mistry reminds of the grim realities of the crisis-ridden times of the infamous state of Emergency in India and explains how the Emergency intrudes obtrusively into the lives of all these characters leading to their eventual loss and destruction. Through the depiction of their unending struggles, untold misery and unlimited pains and sorrows, Mistry highlights the harsh reality of life that a continuous state of oppression badly shatters one’s confidence, sense of pride and crushes the personality of the victim.

One of the perspectives with which to view the harsh reality of oppression in the novel is the feminist perspective. After her father’s death, Dina in the novel is not allowed even to matriculate, despite her keen desire to pursue her education. She seeks to escape from the oppression within the family by her dominating brother Nusswan and struggles to maintain her independence and individuality in an unorthodox manner. But she faces continuous failures and oppressions from society in multifarious forms, particularly for the reason that she is a woman. Trying to restructure her life post her husband’s death and to escape oppression, she moves to her husband’s flat, becomes a lowly-paid seamstress. To start her own business, she employs two tailors Ishvar and Om and keeps Maneck Kohla as paying guest in her poverty-stricken rented apartment for a little extra income. However her attempt to remain free ends when Indira Gandhi declared the State of Emergency. This is again a harsh reality that it was a period of oppression, suppression, exploitation, tyranny and
violence. The socio-political disturbances of the time shattered Dina’s all hopes for a better future. The state of Emergency affected Dina’s tailors in an inexplicably tragic and horrible way leaving them crippled and castrated. Dina is forcibly evicted from her apartment by the landlord’s goons. Under the societal oppression she becomes utterly helpless and has to be ‘rescued’ from dire poverty by her brother’s family and transplanted back into the very situation of oppression that she sought to avoid.

Casteism and caste-based oppression have always been a harsh social reality in India. Several instances of horrendous consequences of caste and class oppression in the novel insist one to view this harsh reality of oppression from the perspective of lower-class untouchables as they are called by people like Thakur Dharamsi. The Thakurs and Pandits in the village try “to whip the world into shape” by flogging the lower-caste people for varied and even imaginative crimes. (FB 101) Chopping off fingers for an unjust accusation or losing a hand or wrist for the same, being severely whipped for getting too close to the well, melted lead poured into the ears, murder at the drop of a hat, forced to eat human shit on getting late for cleaning, women being shaved and walked through the square for refusing to go to the field with zamindar’s son—all blood-curdling and shameful acts present the cruel picture of oppression in the rural India of 1975.

Dukhi’s violation of caste restrictions in attempting to make his sons Ishvar and Narayan tailors, and Narayan’s assertion of his right to vote have so grave repercussions that show caste-oppression at its starkest. Narayan is mercilessly murdered; Dukhi, Roopa, Radha and the daughters along with Narayan’s mutilated corpse are burnt alive. Even after a gap of several years, the Thakur remains
revengeful and inflicts stringent punishment on Ishvar and Om for having violated social/religious order by changing their caste and profession from Chamar to Darji. They are forcibly operated upon by the Thakur’s men under the family planning drive during the Emergency. The unhygienic operation causes gangrene upon Ishwar and his legs are amputated. Worse still is Om is castrated and thus every possible future seed of the defiant family is erased. Even a casual reader would burst into tears to see their tragic plight in the end of the novel. The hard working tailors, in a continuous state of all types of oppression, are reduced to helpless beggars. There can be nothing more heart-rending sight than this one.

Maneck, the fourth protagonist is a victim of displacement. From Maneck’s perspective his parents’ decision for him to study in a technological college in Bombay, away from his home in mountains, is an act of betrayal, an act of mental oppression. The separation from his home and parents makes him feel isolated and mentally oppressed. At college hostel, he becomes the victim of continuous physical and psychological oppression and humiliation due to ragging by his seniors. Mistry gives a horrible account of his ragging when his seniors pull him, drag him, shut him in a freezer, force him for the humiliating “thermostat check-up”. An oppressed student’s perspective explains how and why many of the ragging victims succumb to such oppression, develop a fear phobia that haunts them throughout their lives, or give up their studies, some commit suicide, some lose their mental balance and some are seriously injured.

The novel is intensely political. What Mistry started in Such a Long Journey, continued in A Fine Balance and has emphatically proved that law and politics are
chief instruments of suffering and political oppression. He underlines the harsh reality that people who rule the country, “for votes and power, they play with human lives.” (FB 583) Analyzing from this perspective, the novel becomes a scathing criticism of Indira Gandhi’s decision of imposing the state of Emergency. Though she is never named in the novel, it is difficult not to catch the description of the woman on election banners and grandiose displays of power. Mistry has been successful in making us see and experience the nightmare of the Emergency. It rendered life precarious for the poor, muffled opposition and led to oppression of all types. That is how Maneck’s friend Avinash is tortured and eventually murdered for standing up to Student Union goondas and Dina is tormented by her rapacious landlord. The breakdown of law and order is illustrated when Beggarmaster is “sorting out” the landlord, and Dina asks him if she should inform the police, he responds: “…if you want. But you might as well tell this crow on your window.” (FB 535)

The horror of the political oppression experienced by the tailors is unparalleled. They represent several those oppressed people who are at receiving end of the insane plans of government. It is through their fate that the reader is made to understand the human dimensions of the theoretical and political plans for “City Beautification” and “Garibi Hatao” which lead to loss of homes and freedom of the poor. Rather than adopting a humane approach in tackling the problems, government exercises oppression, coercion, and tyranny to achieve its objectives.

The long episode of Om and Ishvar’s experience at the stone quarry presents a horrible series of poverty and oppression. The novel is thus “the finest and most
intense of Mistry’s three novels where his concern for the poor, the destitute and the powerless becomes a political statement.”¹²

Mistry gives vent to his anger against the government’s vasectomy drive for population control by depicting the brutality and extent of oppression and atrocities committed at the family planning camps. It is in such a camp that Ishvar and Om receive a final and fatal blow to their identities.

Apart from the tragic stories of the protagonists, there are several other examples of oppression that reassert that oppression is the grim reality of life. Dina is a victim of oppression by the patriarchal structure of society. She is physically chastised by her brother, sexually harassed by “Dustoor Daab-Chaab” in fire temple, assaulted by educated and unemployed lawyers in Bombay court, threatened by her landlord in her building. Dukhi’s family, monkeyman, Rajaram, beggars, the tailors are all oppressed by poverty and class and caste discrimination. Mistry brings out the harsh reality that poor people are exploited and oppressed not only by the government but also by fellow citizens, as it is the case with Beggarmaster who abuses people, deforms poor children and turns them into disable beggars to gain more money.

Avinash is a victim of political oppression, and his parents and sisters are oppressed by social compulsions and pressures of social evils like dowry system. Maneck is oppressed by the burden of life and so great is his depression at the revelation of Avinash’s murder and his sisters’ suicide and at the sad predicament of Dina, Ishvar and Om that he throws himself in front of a moving train and commits suicide.
The novel thus abounds in cruelty and oppression. Each figure is located at the centre of a complex social network of power and oppression. All the four protagonists discover that there are other forces to play larger than their individual selves. Due to continuous state of oppression they are doomed to undergo everlasting suffering, which afflicts them physically and mentally. Dina, too, faces irrevocable damages to her individuality and self-reliance. She is reduced from female individualist to feminine subject. An extremely depressed Maneck fails to find balance in his life and ends his life, which becomes the final tragedy of the book. Maneck’s suicide is a statement of despair with implication that the state of oppression, when sustained and perpetuated by means of excessive physical or mental violence, ruins the victims physically and psychologically. “The morbid end each meets becomes the author’s sensitive reply to the grimness of living during the times of political imbalance.”

Thus the two novelists under the scanner of this study, Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry, brilliantly present harsh realities of life and various social perspectives through fictional medium. By choosing appropriate story, plot, characters and writing technique, they discuss vital issues like victimization of women, communal hatred and violence, individual suffering, degenerating human-relationship, social imbalance, loss and betrayal, oppression based on gender, class and caste, political corruption and tyranny, wars and animosity etc. The present study establishes that Sidhwa and Mistry are not just Parsi writers voicing the concerns of their own dwindling miniscule community, but the writers, who consciously watch, observe, analyse and dissect humanity and its experiences in various situations. They have not only succeeded in initiating a dialogue between
their community and their others but also in probing their readers making them self-
introspect through their widely ranging thematic concerns. To expose the social
evils, vices and harsh realities, they combine the sensibility and imaginative power
of the artist with the intellectual penetration and analytical power of sociologists.

A thorough study of their novels reveals them as chroniclers of social and
political India of the time from Partition and Independence to post-Emergency. Both
Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry, by re-narration of history, focus on those issues,
moments and events of history, the presentation of which makes their novels emerge
as a parallel history of modern India.

The present study ascertains that both Sidhwa and Mistry, with their strong
sense of humanism, have palpably verbalized the untold misery of individuals and
the marginalized sections of society and strongly advocated for a change in the
mind-set of the people. Horrors of Partition and the state of Emergency are
presented with a greatly humanism-imbued message. Accepting it as their moral
obligation, they make their concerns for social welfare as the core motive of their
literary creations. In all the four novels studied here depict various harsh realities
that human beings come across during their long journey of life. These harsh
realities are presented from various social perspectives with varied implications.
Viewed from the prism of any perspective, their main thrust in the novels studied
here is for a change in society and in the minds of people to usher in a new realm of
impartial and healthy relationship in the world community where peace, love and co-
operation reign supreme.
However, the writings of Sidhwa and Mistry do not demand for any Utopia kind of a society. With their deep understanding of human nature and acceptance of life with all its colours, joys and sorrows, ups and downs, they accept suffering in any form as a part of human life. Suffering and loss, being an integral part of human experience, are unavoidable experiences but learning to maintain a balance between happiness and woe, success and failure, hope and despair is a must for continuing the long journey of life in a dignified manner. Their oeuvre exhibits the rich tapestry of life and shows that even if social dynamics is powerful and beyond human calculations, it is always significant and praiseworthy to strive towards a perfect end.

Human problems require human solutions. Both Sidhwa and Mistry, by presenting harsh realities of human life and weaknesses of human nature, suggest some solutions to reach a kind of social harmony and balance. The study of their novels proves that harmonious man-woman and societal relationship can be achieved by the discontinuation or removal of gender disparity, and for that we need to understand that the root of woman’s subjugation lies not in biology but in social conditions. As for communal fraternity and solidarity, it is highly relevant to learn from history that there can be no religion greater than humanity. The study also intends to promote the idea that a free India should be a harbinger of peace, dignity and prosperity for every section of society without any discrimination. For individual’s mental peace and internal happiness it is suggested that one should learn to embrace emotions, and not to run away from them. And even if it fails, there is always the human will-power which can triumph over the exasperating, depressing and vexing problems of human life.
In conclusion it can be safely asserted that both Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry have applied their minds, hearts, emotions and intellect in their observation, analysis and depiction of the harsh realities of human experiences with various social perspectives. Apart from their diasporic voices, the central drive of their novels of enduring quality and surpassing merit is to provide possible answers, offer solutions and impart meaning to these real life experiences. Such a zeal makes their literary creation not just a book of fiction to be read and put away, but a gripping read which distills human emotions and experiences, and sets one ruminating, introspecting and reflecting long after the book has been closed.

The brilliance and relevance of both these novelists’ writing deserve to be honoured by the widest possible readership. This study is a humble attempt to record their contribution to the vast ocean of literature in English. It cannot claim to be comprehensive or exhaustive as no study can be complete in itself. It has concentrated on very few aspects of their wide-ranging works. There is, in fact, a lot more to explore in the writings of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry.
REFERENCES


10. Ibid., 63.

