A Study on The Identity Crisis of The Protagonist In Rohinton Mistry’s Such a Long Journey

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the Identity Crisis which is faced by Gustad Noble, the protagonist of Rohinton Mistry’s 1991 novel Such a Long Journey. The main idea of this paper is to show how cultural and political climates of one’s life affect the whole identity of the individual. Along with the crisis of the protagonist, this paper also tries to depict the Identity Crisis that a lot of minority people of India are facing. Here the root causes of cultural and political reasons of Identity Crisis are discussed with the help of their history. Mistry’s own views of Identity Crisis and how it is depicted in the novel are also analyzed here. The method of analysis in this paper is by first discussing the history of the problem, then showing how it is depicted in the novel and finally ends with the analysis of a resolution that is put forward in the novel. Identity Crisis is dissected not only in literary sense but also in terms of general Psychology. Some portions of the paper will try to reason out the psychological reasons of Identity Crisis. In this way, this problem can be viewed from both sociological and psychological manner which will result in more grounded analysis.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, True Identity, Cultural Crisis, Psychology

INTRODUCTION:

Rohinton Mistry was born on July 3, 1952, in Bombay. His parents are Behram Mistry and Freny Jhaveri Mistry. He also has a brother, Cyrus Mistry who is a popular dramatist. He graduated with a Mathematics degree from the University of Bombay in 1974. His wife is Freny Elevia and with her, he immigrated to Toronto. There he worked as a bank clerk and he completed his second degree in English and Philosophy from the University of Toronto in 1982. His first notable work was his short story collection called Tales from Firozsha Baag. Then he wrote his debut novel Such a Long Journey in 1991. This book received the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and Governor-General’s Award. He has a very unique record that he is the only author whose all works were shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Also, he won one of the most prestigious literary prizes, The Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 2012.

His works also receive a fair share of controversies and criticism. In 2010, his Such a Long Journey came into a debate when Aditya Thackeray demanded that the book be removed from the syllabus of Mumbai University, claiming that the book contained abusive language against his grandfather Bal Thackeray, founder of Shiv Sena.

Despite controversies, his stories speak for those who haven’t felt at home anywhere. He writes for those who travelled from one place to another for a better life. His works deal mostly with the way of life of his people and how they struggle to live a normal life in India. His writing style reflects how Mistry is as a person. He tries to employ humour even during the hardest phases of the character’s lives.
Contrastingly, there is much sadness in his writing, it isn't the sadness of a lifelong tragedy or something, it is the sadness of life itself. The tiredness of waking up and living a hard life. His characters prefer to live in their past than facing reality, such sad they are about their life. In this novel too, this aspect is seen with Gustad Noble. This paper discusses the problems which triggered him to have an Identity Crisis.

Gustad Noble is a bank clerk living in Bombay with his wife Dilnavaz and his three children. They are living a middle-class life with its small joys and problems. But he was sad for some serious reasons. The change of Gustad Noble from a sad and desperate man into a hopeful man is the main idea of this novel. This happens by confronting his problems. Gustad has many problems and one of them is the Identity Crisis. Developmental Psychologist and Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson coined the term “Identity Crisis”. Identity Crisis may come to anyone at any time. This problem differs according to the age and nature of the person. The affected persons may face questions like who they are, what is the purpose of their life, what is their role in this world, etc. It leads to other psychological problems like depression, suicidal thoughts etc. So the effect varies upon the person. Some people may face this during adolescence, some during their midlife (popular midlife crisis) and even during old age.

Identity Crisis doesn't have any particular and singular reason and so it has different roots. Some of them are factors such as age, changes, trauma etc. This problem is also seen in people with mental illness like depression, bipolar disorder etc. Sometimes the problem of Identity Crisis can arise because of society. This happens when the person’s perception of themselves and the perception of that person from the point of view of the society faces a conflict. Even Culture plays a major role in the Identity Crisis. This is what diasporic writers try to do, when people face a different culture, they may question themselves about their values and who they are. Sometimes it may be due to a tragedy or a personal loss. That is why when a person undergoes trauma, they question everything.

Past of Gustad and Parsis

As mentioned, Identity Crisis occurs due to a lot of reasons but one of its main sources is when a person faces a traumatic event especially during one's childhood days. Gustad’s childhood defined him as a person and it is the root cause for his Identity Crisis. It is often said in flashbacks indicating that the person is looking for those old days. His childhood spans in a big house, unlike the current cramped one. In that house, there is light everywhere and Gustad always has this memory of running happily when other elders were working. Gustad’s grandfather owned a furniture shop named Noble and Sons. As the name indicates, that shop is the pride of that Noble family. And also it was a famous and profitable shop when Gustad was a small boy. That shop made the family happy and it was a legacy for them. But like everything else, all good things must come to an end. This happened here also when Noble and Sons went into bankruptcy. This is one of the main tragedies Gustad faced in his lifetime. But this is the most important one because this happened at the time when he was developing an identity for himself and in this process, his whole identity was crushed. Noble and Sons were the whole identity of Gustad’s family and that vanished with the bankruptcy. This is the main psychological reason for his identity crisis.

Identity Crisis can also be seen from a socio-cultural and historical point of view. If one looks at the history of Parsis, the search for Identity can be seen even there. Though they ran from their home to escape forced conversion, they flourished during the times of the British. When the British established a port at Surat, a large number of high-level workers were Parsis because they welcomed western tradition more than Hindus and Muslims. So right from there they went on to become a wealthy community. Again when the British wanted to expand the city of Bombay, the job came into the hands of Parsis. They moved from the Gujarat area to Bombay and it became their home. Their history gives us insights into what kind of community they are. Alienation has been there for many centuries. Right from their move from Persia, they were always looking for a place where they could live a peaceful life and still follow their beliefs, but that didn’t happen. They still look for a home.
Parsis follow Zoroastrianism. Purity is a very important element in the faith of Parsis. The concepts of purity and pollution form an important aspect of Zoroastrianism. They correlate purity and pollution as good and evil. Purity has an essence of god whereas pollution tries to destroy that godliness. This Purity versus Pollution is shown with the help of a wall that separates the Khodadad building. This wall is a place where fast-moving Mumbaikars slow Parsis follow Zoroastrianism. Purity is a very important element in the faith of Parsis. The concepts of purity and pollution form an important aspect of Zoroastrianism. They correlate purity and pollution as good and evil. Purity has an essence of god whereas pollution tries to destroy that godliness. This Purity versus Pollution is shown with the help of a wall that separates the Khodadad building. This wall is a place where fast-moving Mumbaikars slow down and they use it as a urinal. This wall is not just a wall that separates the apartment from the road, it is also a symbol that separates the way of living of Parsis from the threat of submersion of other beliefs. A symbol can show the state of an individual or the environment of the characters in art forms. The same goes here, the wall represents the rotting religious tolerance of India. This fear of not being able to follow their faiths is a major source of Identity Crisis for Gustad. Not only Parsis but also all minorities who are under constant fear of external threats face Identity Crisis. If they are not able to follow their faiths, they can’t follow their tradition, if they can’t follow their tradition, they will in a matter of time forget their roots; if they forget their roots, they cannot separate themselves from others. When one cannot differentiate oneself from others, then they will question their existence and they will ask the question of who they are. This is the socio-cultural reason for Gustad's Identity Crisis.

Another aspect that affected Gustad’s Identity was the political climate during that time. Such a Long Journey takes place in 1971. At that time Indian economy was poor and India had to import grain from the USA. India faced an internal rebellion from Naxalites and also millions of refugees from East Pakistan were entering India. There was a lot of reports of human rights violations. A lot of women and children in East Pakistan were raped and killed. This is mainly because dominant West Pakistan had put a lot of impositions on the east. So there was liberation in East Pakistan and the military tried to suppress the voice of liberators by mass murder. India has to house the refugees and also have to face the security threats of Pakistan. So, the people of that time knew that there was a war brewing.

Gustad still had memories of the 1962 war between India and China. There was a blackout paper in their house which was used during that time. Though the war ended nine years ago, he didn’t remove that blackout paper even in 1971. It is a symbol of insecurity. So this aspect of fear of war is another reason for the Identity Crisis of people. If people live in fear of death, the meaning of everything distorts over a while. In the novel, there were instances like a total blackout where People had to turn off their lights and hide in a safe place. This blackout practice was there from World wars and this was one of the defense mechanisms to save oneself. A lot of people faced a lot of psychological problems because of these blackouts. Even in the novel, we can see how the normal life of people was destroyed when there was a war just at the corner. During these times the whole city will be under darkness and the sounds of sirens and empty roads were a common sight.

Not only the war threatened the lives of people at that time, but there was also a party called Shiv Sena which affected the lives of minorities in Bombay. This is the period when the party started to grow. By the time Mistry wrote this novel, Maharashtra was under the rule of this party. They are a party filled with Hindutva Ideologies and they demanded work for local Maharashtrians than outsiders which included Parsis and Muslims. This Party is known for creating conflicts between communities. Especially, they tried to wash away all the minorities. At that time and even now they were a threat to Parsis. Gustad knew them and he tried to live accordingly. When Sorabh, his eldest son, was not planning to enter the Indian Institute of Technology which is a premier institution and a dream for a better life, Gustad became angry with his son. Because he fears there may not be a good future for Parsis because of such petty politics of parties like Shiv Sena. This fear of not having a future is also one of the main reasons for the Identity Crisis of Gustad.
CONCLUSION:

The main method used to describe the Identity Crisis in this novel is by the lens of Post colonialism. Post colonialism is an important tool in analyzing the Identity Crisis of all kinds of Literature. It is an important element in Literary Criticism and with the help of this, a lot of related problems can be analyzed. Right from the changing of the street names to the destruction of a wall that is so close to the sentiment of Parsis, this theme can apply everywhere in the novel. This aspect can be seen in all of Mistry's works; all his works try to show the aftermath of colonization and how it affected their community. When Socio- Cultural, Historical and Psychological views are used to dissect the Identity Crisis, it provides a better understanding of the problem.

WORKS CITED


