

HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL SUBJECTIVITY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*.

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Abstract

Hermeneutic Phenomenology aims to describe and interpret lived experiences of human beings. Hermeneutics theory focusses on subjective experiences of individuals and groups and attempts to unveil the world as experienced by the subject in their lives. This research article portrays the myriad experiences and activities depicted in the novel *Such A Long Journey* by Rohinton Mistry. The paper also explores subjective human experiences and its interpretations. It demonstrates the value of hermeneutics as a creative way to address various subjective experiences of human beings. It makes explicit how hermeneutic phenomenology is useful in studying the personal, social facets, of psychology and philosophical truth hidden in human experiences.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Subjectivity, Lived experience, Interpretations, Human experience.

The term 'philosophy' is derived from the two Greek words 'philo' and 'sophia' meaning 'love' and 'wisdom' respectively and it is defined as 'the love for wisdom'. The modest explanation of philosophy deals with information, landscape, truth, human survival and efforts to arise with some resolutions to 'larger than life' questions. Subsequently, philosophy is the only subject that incorporates all the other units and branches of information. It enhances human knowledge and assists them to preserve themselves with reason. It aids in analysing the things around and improve one's perception of the world.

Focussing on the perception and experience of the individuals, philosophy diverges into various branches of study such as ontology, phenomenology, epistemology, logic and ethics. Among the broad disciplines, phenomenology is the philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness. This broad spectrum occupies a distinctive method to study the structural features of experience and of things experienced. It distinctively investigates various human and material aspects. The study of 'phenomena', describes about the appearance of things as well as how they are perceived in the human consciousness. It also examines about the ways the things are experienced, lived or interpreted from the first-person point of view. The study of subjective or first-person experience that is acquired consciously is known as phenomenology. Timothy, a phenomenologist, in his book explains the scope of phenomenology as,

... Phenomenology then does not stop with the appearance but seeks the essence of the appearance. It aims to be a science of essences, a science that makes the essence of things that appear visible to the enquirer, similar to the manner in which geometry, another eidetic science studies the essential relations that hold in space. (Timothy 22)

He points out the intrinsic quality of phenomenology and its interconnectedness with other disciplines.

Tracing the roots back through the centuries, the discipline of phenomenology came into existence in the first half of the twentieth century with Edmund Husserl. Husserl first used this term in his work *Logical Investigations*. He defines Phenomenology as Transcendental Idealism. Before Husserl, the Phenomenological movement has been proposed by early philosophers like David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Franz Brentano. Phenomenology gained momentum with the successors of Husserl like Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. These critics debated about the methodology and definition of the discipline for a longer period and the debates still exist.

During the twentieth century, phenomenology became an important part of the inheritance of continental European philosophy, whereas philosophy of mind emerged from the Austro-Anglo-

American tradition of analytic philosophy. According to the contemporary critics, phenomenology describes not only sensory qualities but also the specific kinds of feelings that are far more than just sensations. Phenomenology, therefore addresses the significance of objects, events, tools, the passage of time, the self and others that shape the personal experiences. In addition, phenomenology explores perception, thinking, memory, imagination, emotion, desire and volition, as well as physical awareness, embodied action and social involvement, including language activity.

Husserl states that intentionality or the directedness of experience towards the objects in the world, or the consciousness about something, frequently defines the structure of various types of experience. Dermot Moran, an Irish philosopher opines about phenomenology as,

... phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophy, which emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears that is as it manifests itself to consciousness to the experiencer. (Moran 7)

He adds that phenomenology thus turns out to be a useful method to outline the structure of experience with authenticity.

Phenomenology as a method has four characteristics, namely, Descriptive Phenomenology, Phenomenological Reduction, the Essence of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Intentionality. Descriptive Phenomenology considers the basic emotions and experiences expressed by all individuals to be subjective. Phenomenological Reduction, enables to free oneself from the captivation in which one is held. The Essence of Phenomenology is about what makes things, or what makes the phenomenon to be that very phenomenon. Phenomenological Intentionality expresses that every act of consciousness that is performed directs towards an object.

Combining the characteristics of phenomenology, modern phenomenologists have explored different branches of phenomenology such as Transcendental Phenomenology, Existential Phenomenology and Hermeneutic Phenomenology. Hermeneutic Phenomenology, being a new branch of study is explored from various perspectives. The term 'Hermeneutic' is derived from the Greek word 'Hermeneuein' which means "construe". Hermeneutics analyses spoken words of people and reaches a conclusion by adding meaning or interpretations. Hermeneutics focusses more on the language as meaning or conclusion is drawn from the expression of words in day-to-day realities. Hermeneutics refers to the theory and practice of interpretation, in which interpretation involves an understanding which can be justified. Willig, Psychologist, opines, "Interpretation is at the heart of qualitative research because qualitative research is concerned with meaning and the process of meaning-making". (Willig 276)

The word 'hermeneutics' is found initially in the writings of Martin Heidegger, a follower of Edmund Husserl, the father of Phenomenology. Later, it was developed by Hans – Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. Phenomenology becomes hermeneutic when its process is considered interpretive. The hermeneutic phenomenology as a theory, probes into the experiential and introspective activities. According to Van Manen, these activities are depictions of individual incidents, informal discussions, and close inspections. Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research leads to the explanation and construal of the fundamental nature of lived experiences and recognise its significance in pedagogy. It reflects on the personal experience and professional work that evaluates the crucial facets of the experience by giving them the required sagacity and significance to the phenomena. The theory of meaning and interpretation, often draws on phenomenological study. Hermeneutic Phenomenology seeks to realise and discern the meaning of speech, acts, texts, gestures and lived expressions that might tie together the experiences of living with one another in the common world. Being closely related to words, Hermeneutics deals with formal characteristics of speech, styles of speech, words and expression. It analyses spoken words of people in a qualitative manner and reaches to a conclusion through interpretations. This is akin to John's verse in the Holy Bible: "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But it dies, it produces many seeds" (John. 12: 24). In the above verse, the words of Jesus Christ is

interpreted by the theologians and they observe that it speaks about the death of Jesus Christ, though it overtly talks about agriculture. Hermeneutics thus refers to the theory and practice of interpretation, where interpretation involves an understanding which can be justified. Willig states that interpretation forms the core of anything that is said. He says, "Interpretation is at the heart of qualitative research because qualitative research is concerned with meaning and the process of meaning-making" (Willig 276). So, interpretation of experiences is an important characteristic of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics phenomenology can be observed in any cultural, anthropological, social, ethical and religious background. As people are inter connected and interact with each other in various social circles, they find it difficult to discern their own as well as others' thoughts, feelings and motives. The Hermeneutic Phenomenology of self-understanding is used as a means of understanding oneself and thereby others. This methodology asserts that individual people are as unique as their life stories. This approach emphasises subjective interpretations and experiences in texts, art, culture, social phenomena and thinking. The methodology of study involves observing the texts and understanding of its historical, cultural and literary context. It is conducted by analysing the collection of experiences. Gadamer, a hermeneutic, expresses it as,

Every work of art, not only literature, must be understood like any other text that requires understanding, and this kind of understanding has to be acquired. This gives hermeneutical consciousness a comprehensiveness that surpasses even that of aesthetic consciousness. (Gadamer 157)

Hermeneutics was used for interpreting written texts. According to Heidegger, all human practical involvements are interpretative. He is of the view that one never encounters some new naked things or situations. He also opines that humans always have a pre-understanding of everything which determines how they experience something in life. The world of life just portrays the reality of daily life, which is investigated under a non-critical eye, whereas under the law of hermeneutics life is an interpretive experience and a new understanding can be achieved through renewed interpretive attention to further possible meanings. When it comes to hermeneutical, understanding of a text, one experiences what one understands, not simply as a novel or an enriching idea, rather a person experiences it subjectively as something that makes a claim to be true.

Each person is special and unique according to the values one possesses stress varied ideologies. In the same way, experiences are also subjective in nature and these experiences depend on the time and space, sense and sensations and further affected by the values each person holds. These values play a vital role in defining their subjective lived experiences, as Sikes put it, ...subjective experience is the intact, meaningful, and experimental understanding of both the emotional and cognitive impact directly consequential to an individual in how they understand and interpret an event or events, witnessed or otherwise processed. (Sikes 5273)

He adds that subjective lived experiences are the personal knowledge that someone gains about the world around them through events that happen in their own life. He also states that these experience form and shape them who they are and deeply impact their views of the world. In other words, lived experiences informs the decisions one makes and it influences the way he/she sees and thinks about the world around. As experiences are subjectively lived, new meanings and appreciations can be developed to inform or even re-orient how one understands that experience.

Lived experience emerge mostly from direct and personal experience of a particular issue. People gain lived experience through direct first -hand involvement in every day events rather than through assumptions. According to Cahour,

We focus on what people have experienced subjectively during their activities which includes the whole stream of actions, thoughts, emotions and perceptions that occur at a given moment while performing an activity, of which the actors are either aware at the time or can be subsequently made aware. (Cahour 261)

These discussions make it very clear that Hermeneutic Phenomenology and subjective lived experiences are crucial in a life of any person from any background.

India, being a land of diverse culture, language, society and religion abounds in varied lived experiences of people. Indian Writing in English portrays these experiences in a variety of forms and novel as a popular literary genre, provides more scope for it. The novel *Such A Long Journey* is undeniably one such recent novel of the twentieth century written by Rohinton Mistry. Mistry is an Indo-Canadian Writer. He was born in 1952 in India. He belongs to the Parsi community, a smaller religious sect of India. He immigrated from Bombay to Canada in 1975. He studied English and Philosophy at the University of Toronto on a part-time basis. He has authored several novels and short stories which include *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matter* (2002), *Tales from Firozabad* (1987), *Searching for Stevenson* (1994), and *The Scream* (2001).

Rohinton Mistry grew up in the multicultural city of Bombay but he was trapped emotionally and psychologically in the Parsi cultural and religious enclosure. Having experienced the life of a Parsee, Mistry depicts the same in *Such a Long Journey*. He represents the identity of Parsi Community which has long been contested and its future clouded by uncertainty. Mistry's works frequently contain references to the Parsi's way of life and culture and reflects the anguish of his community. The novel is described as,

Such a Long Journey is the story of Gustad Noble, the little man who holds on to his dignity, strength, and humanity in a sweltering tide of disappointment, confusion, betrayal and corruption. (SLJ 214).

Gustad Noble, the protagonist, reflects the actual realities and political history of Indian society, before and after independence and its impact notably on the lives of the Parsi community.

During Mistry's stay in Bombay, he researched India's history, social, cultural and political realities and incorporated them into the novel, which is historically significant. In the novel, Mistry, portrays the painful life of Gustad Noble, a Parsee, journeying through his life filled with challenges. He lives in an apartment in Bombay with his wife, Dilnavaz and three children Sohrab, Darius and Roshan. The family confronts unforeseen hurdles and problems that constitutes their long journey of life. Gustad is worried that his children's lives are in trouble. The elder son, Sohrab refuses to join IIT and leaves home and his youngest daughter Roshan remains ill most of the time making him devastated. Added to his familial issues, he becomes even more shattered when Jimmy Billimoria, his trustworthy friend disappears suddenly.

Gustad's life is made miserable by political reasons too. The rise of a new party to power shakes Gustad and the entire Parsi community as they fear it may make their lives vulnerable. Then Gustad meets Jimmy who was imprisoned for many years and witnesses his illness. Later he receives the news of Jimmy's death and the death of Dinshawji, his faithful friend. These deaths greatly disturb Gustad. The pain of Gustad's personal loss is aggravated by the social, cultural and political turmoil of the time like Indo-Pakistan war and the Independence of Bangladesh. The anguish, humiliations, nostalgic feelings and experiences of Gustad Noble are thus evident throughout the novel. Towards the end of the novel, Gustad comes to term with the realities of life and reunites with his son Sohrab. As discussed, Rohinton Mistry explores the relationships existing within his community, its culture and experience. He also chronicles how they finally attain peace after crossing a lot of difficulties and uncertainties in life.

Subjective experience refers to everything a person experiences at a particular moment related to his/her activity. In the opening chapter of the novel, Gustad is seen as a faithful and traditional Parsi. He regularly does his Kusti prayers and reads the newspaper. "The first light of morning barely illumined the sky as Gustad Noble face eastward to offer his orisons to Ahura Mazda" (SJJL 1). Prayer is generally subjective and a personal experience which cannot be objectively measured by others. The recitation of prayer, the tone and the voice can be heard by others but the delightful experience cannot be understood by them. It is a very personal experience. In the same way, the pain that one undergoes is a subjective way of experiencing it. Others can identify and see the external expressions or remnants of the pain, but no one can fully measure it or feel its subjective experience. In the novel Mistry stoically expresses Gustads' pain,