

# 'Survival of the Fittest': Existential Crisis of Mothers in Gurcharan Das' *9 Jakhoo Hill*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Gurcharan Das in his play 9 Jakhoo Hill portrays the struggle of two mothers—Amrita and Chitra. They belong to two different classes in the changing society of India in 1960s. Their existential struggles erupt from this changing concept of class as Amrita fails to accept the change and Chitra adopts the change in her own way to move in higher class in the society. But their struggles are utterly different from each other. This paper shows this existential anguish and struggle of two mothers, how they look at the society, what they do for their family, why their observation is different and what the outcome is. Further the research paper also explores the changing society of India and how it affects the people belonging to all classes.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Survival, Struggle, Existential Crisis, Mother, Class Division in India, Collective Consciousness, Gurcharan Das.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Gurcharan Das is one of the prominent authors of India and has written three plays, fiction and non-fiction in English. Despite not being a prolific dramatist, still he has shown the Indian stage a new way through the depiction of the reality of Indian society which is constantly in a state of flux for its continual accommodation of global,

especially British, culture. Consequently, since the independence of India, Indian society has seen a blending of colonizer's culture and Indian culture along with the rise of new social division that emphatically changes the preferences, predilections, ethics, values and morality by providing a new definition to these concepts. Whether these new definitions are right or wrong are debatable matter but preferences of individuals are shifting to acquire higher social order of respectability governing with money and mercenary attitude. In this circumstance, existential crisis arises for few people who are not able to change and adapt themselves in this changing environment and to many people this has given them an opportunity to rise on the ladder of social order. *9 Jakhoo Hill*, written by Gurcharan Das, depicts this transformation of Indian society and struggle for existence of two mothers from two different but related families in the changing values and morality.

## **2. 1960s AND CHANGING SOCIETY IN INDIA**

The play is set in 1962 and the decade of 1960s is a transitional period in Indian society. Nehru's attempts to eradicate poverty by bringing socialism in India have given the rise of a new middle class that is a peculiar blend of Indian culture and European culture. During 1950s and 1960s the educated Indian youth looked for monetary security and the respectability of government job. In an attempt to wage

war against the poverty the Indian leaders confronted lack of awareness and responsiveness from the people of the country and without active involvement of the people this war against the poverty became more challenging than the war waging against the foreign rule. But the attitudes of the new young generation showed a significant change in the development process and eradication of poverty due to the spread of democratic vote rights, implementation of legislation to eradicate caste privileges, and increasing levels of education that were also responsible for breaking down of traditional values. Gradually new values and ethics were instilled in the mind of this new generation which took the appearance of assertiveness and crude self-seeking rather than traditional and noble values but they were not ashamed of it. This prepared the Indian society to move forward to the next stage with the collective effort of this new generation. Gurcharan Das says, “It had a liberal, humanistic outlook, which was tolerant of ambiguities. It shared a community of thought, feeling, and ideas, and this partly built up a modern sense of Indian nationality” (Gurcharan Das 9). The play’s pivotal point is this shifting value of society. Arundhati Ray in an article titled “Solid Dramatic Substance”, published in the online edition of The Hindu newspaper observes in the play:

The play is set in Simla during Diwali 1962, and the political turmoil and the disillusionment of the outside world, India’s demoralizing war with China, the gradual decline of Nehruvian ideals and optimism is echoed in the sitting room of 9 Jakhoo Hill where a once well-to-do family watches in incomprehension as its genteel world disintegrates in the face of a brash new social-climbing middle-class.

### 3. INDO-CHINA WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON INDIAN SOCIETY

In the background of the play Indo-China war is going on and this war has played a vital role in shaping the mind of the younger generation as it proves the futility of Nehruvian ideology and optimism in shaping the future of Indian society. Gurcharan Das observes that “[. . .] the war ended our age of innocence and shattered our Nehruvian dreams. Nehru soon died afterwards and our society also began to change” (Gurcharan Das 27). The disillusionment of society reflects in the criticism and gossips of the characters that put the onus of this failure on the lack of leadership in the country and the ineffective decision taken by the leaders during the war. The conflict of socialism and communism is one of the main reasons behind Indo-China war and the play has shown the advent of capitalist attitude in the psyche of the people who cannot free themselves from the clutch of neocolonialism. The influence of colonizer is reflected in their thoughts, actions and preferences to equip themselves with the changing society and they try to become like the British to assume superiority in society. Despite the freedom of India, English language has played a prominent role in the making of Indian society by designating itself a symbol of status among the new middle class as they solely depend on English education for their advancement. Gurcharan Das highlights the characteristics of this new middle class in the following way:

The new class is street-smart; it has had to fight to rise from the bottom, and it has learnt to manoeuvre the system. It is easy to despair over its vulgarity, its new rich mentality and its lack of education. [. . .] The new middle class, on the other hand, is

based on money, drive, and an ability to get things done. Whereas the old class was liberal, idealistic and inhibited, the new order is refreshingly free from colonial hang-ups. (Gurcharan Das 24)

#### 4. ANALYSIS

The play *9 Jakhoo Hill* depicts the lives of three different classes—elite class, elite class in declining state and new rising middle class through two different families—one consists of Ansuya, Amrita who is mother of Ansuya, and Karan and they belong to the elite class in declining state; another family is of Deepak and his mother Chitra who belong to the new rising middle class. Both of these families came from Lahore after partition and shifted in Delhi and Mumbai respectively and at present are struggling for their own existence. There is another character Rai Saheb who belongs to elite class but he is not struggling for existence rather his character is in stark contrast from that of the two families which aspire to become like him as he is the symbol of successful government employee with power in his hand and fulfillment of materialistic comfort.

##### 4.1. EXISTENTIAL CRISIS OF AMRITA

Before partition Amrita's family in Lahore was considered to be an aristocratic family which had seen much better days. But after the partition their migration to Delhi changes their fortune but still they manage to maintain that aristocratic status with their earnings from three mills. After the death of her husband, gradually their business has suffered severe loss in the inefficient hands of Karan who undertook the responsibility to run the business after

leaving his job of university professor. Unable to cope up with the mounting expenditure they sold out their mills, shares and bonds and finally left with the current residential house at 9 Jakhoo hill in Simla, which once had been used as their summer residence. Now to meet the daily expenses, to maintain that old aristocratic status, to keep themselves worthy of being invited in a party thrown by other aristocratic family and to keep themselves in respectable position in the society they have started selling their furniture, painting, chandeliers, boilers etc. and the condition is too severe that their only residence at present is also going to be sold. At this declining state they are left with themselves and have created an illusion of being in the same position in the eyes of others thereby facing a severe existential crisis in the present society which knows nothing but money in every situation and where ostentatious lifestyle is more valued rather than intrinsic quality of individual.

Desperate to maintain her class status similar to that of earlier and to keep the present economical condition hidden from her elite social circle, Amrita keeps ignoring her present destitute condition willingly and lives her life in the glory of past in an attempt to remind herself, as well as others, about her true position in the society. She purchases the costliest saree in Simla to attend a party to cherish the remark of other people as she says to Ansuya, "The Colonel complimented me on it, and Mrs Dewan kept looking at it the whole evening" (Gurcharan Das 159). She struggles to survive in the society through an illusion of being in an elite class and behaves like elite ignoring the facts of monetary condition of the family. Even when her daughter reminds her of the financial condition she just ignores it.

Facing the severe existential crisis and caught in between the dilemma of leading a life in elite manner that she

belonged to earlier and the present declining elite state, Amrita turns to her glorious past of elite class which becomes a type of refuge and solace for her from the bitter realities of present condition which she does not want to accept. As a matter of fact, her nostalgic rumination becomes a source of inspiration for the family to live. In such declining condition of aristocracy, she does not have the courage to face reality of existential crisis in the changing social division of society. Ashamed of her present condition to be exposed and embarrassed for the dying aristocratic status, she, on being questioned by Chitra after her arrival at her residence, is not ready to reveal what happened to the costliest furniture, paintings etc. She is aware of the class consciousness of the people of Simla and their attitude towards the people of inferior class that makes her feel humiliated. That is why she brings costly scotch for Rai Saheb to celebrate Diwali at home without paying any attention to Ansuya's objection regarding expenses.

The residence of 9 Jakhoo hill is the only reminiscence of her earlier elite status and a matter of pride for her at the present stage as this is the only proof of her being in elite class. She is afraid of losing her status and respectability in the eyes of the other people that compels her to deny the truth that the house is going to be sold as this hurts her ego and status in the society. When Rai Saheb asks her whether the house is up for sale her reaction becomes desperate:

Rai Saheb. [ . . . ] I say, is it true about your house?

Amrita. (*Turning pale.*)  
What about this house?

Rai Saheb. (*Realizing his mistake.*) No, nothing.

Amrita. (*In a loud, unnatural voice.*) What about this house, Bunty?

Rai Saheb. I must be mistaken.

Amrita. (*Almost screaming.*)  
Bunty, what about this house?

Rai Saheb. (*Sheepishly.*)  
Well, that it's up for sale.

Amrita. (*In tears.*) Who says it's up for sale? Filthy lies! (Gurcharan Das 158)

Her screaming, loud, and unnatural voice reflects her desperate efforts to suppress the truth as well as her fear of losing the status which this house bears. In an attempt to ignore truth, she loses her temper and is able to utter only 'Filthy lies' which is not enough to convince Rai Saheb. She realizes the existential crisis of the family in the society of Simla but her class consciousness compels her to refute it. Moreover, there are lots of memory attached with this house and in this dying elite status, when everything seems to be lost and what remains will be lost very soon, she wants to cherish those moments ignoring the bitter truth and impending destitution as this has given a trajectory of life force in the family. They are inhabitants of the past and the sense of belongingness remains in the past rather than in the present. This nostalgia has become an essential element of their life in the face of the severe existential crisis as this also enables them to forget the harshness of the life they are facing. Amrita recollects:

(*Pointing to the drapes.*) See those drapes, Ansu? Your father brought them from England, and they were the talk of the town that season. Oh, the parties we used to have, Ansu! The servants were forever polishing the silver. Why, the whole of Nehru's first Cabinet must have dined here some time or another. (Gurcharan Das 160)

Her recollection is so deeper that she even denies listening to Ansuya's warning about

the house. Ansuya forcefully says, “Everyone seems to know about it except us” but Amrita vehemently replies, “I don’t want to hear about it” (Gurcharan Das 160).

Since the house, for Amrita, has become a symbol of savior, pride, and a token of class division in the society of Simla and her last memory of nostalgic refuge, she wants to cling on to the house for her survival in the fast changing society amidst the rising new middle class. She says. “It’s the only beautiful thing we have” (Gurcharan Das 167). Despite her acute agony of existential crisis she pretends to be happy in her social circle but the loss of everything and fear of being ousted from home makes her unhappy all the time at home. Her movement in the parties and elite circle is an effort to keep herself oblivious of present predicaments so that she may exude happiness but her struggle to keep the family at the highest rung of social order causes her unhappiness and delusion. The narrator Karan observes:

What is happiness, anyway? You are dropped into the world one fine day, and you are snuffed out another, without so much as a warning. And in between, you try to snatch a few moments of happiness . . . and discover too late that it wasn’t happiness after all. And it doesn’t matter whether you are at the top or at the bottom of the social scale. (Gurcharan Das 161)

Human being is the slave of fate as he can’t put a fight against the fate. Whatever his fate and destiny decides, a human being must experience it in this gloomy world. Neither his birth is in his hand nor does his death. Between his birth and death, his all attempts to create happiness in this world go in vain and when the realization dawns upon him about the futility of the existence it is too late. This happens with anyone whether he belongs to elite class or middle

class. He runs after happiness and this happiness remains an illusion to human being forever. This existential struggle of human being comes to an end in death. The whole life passes in delusion of being happy but he is not able to find what he is looking for and his strive for seeking meaning of life always remains illusory for him. It is this existential anguish in which Amrita suffers from and her life gradually plunges in the life of deception in which meaning cannot be found. Aspirations to be at the top order of society become a mere illusion for her and that illusion is shattered at the arrival of new rising middle class family of Deepak and Chitra

It is this illusion and existential anguish which brings Amrita and the Indo-China War at the point of a parallel comparison. Like the socialist dream and optimism of Nehru’s ideology that wages a physical war on the battlefield, Amrita’s war at societal front to keep the family intact with elite class meets the same fate. Like Nehru, her dream and vision is shattered in her struggle for survival but she keeps on deluding herself and others. Karan’s comment on the defeat of Indian army in the battle is worth mentioning, “They think they can fool us with their words. Nehru and Krishna Menon are merely living out their illusions of grandeur” (Gurcharan Das 161). This is the same situation with Amrita. Drawing a parallel between Amrita and futility of Nehruvian ideology and war is in reality to show the existential crisis and the struggle for survival becomes apparently fruitless for her. Her realization that “The sun shines only once in life . . .” (Gurcharan Das 162) is an acute expression of existential anguish she has been internally suffering from.

#### 4.2. EXISTENTIAL CRISIS OF CHITRA

The other family, which is of Deepak and Chitra's, are also going on same existential anguish but not in the manner of Amrita's. Unlike Amrita's family, they want to get rid of the stigma of belonging to a poor class for which they are not looking back at the past rather they are looking for the bright future with hope and optimism. Once they were staying in the compound of Amrita in Lahore and after partition they shifted to Mumbai, lived a poor life on the meager earnings of Chitra's husband from a small shop in Ghatkopar. Obviously, at the present, they are ashamed of their impecunious past as they now belong to the rising new middle class solely because of English education of Deepak who is now earning a handsome salary as a business executive in a big company in Mumbai and is living in a big house in Malabar hill.

Behind the success of Deepak, Chitra has played a major role. She "is a survivor: street smart, calculating and unconcerned about her ways. She has one item on her agenda: to push her son up" (Gurcharan Das 151). Despite her belonging to rising middle class, her way of carrying herself and her attire reflects her poor class mannerisms which the playwright describes as "[. . .] attractive in a fleshy and flashy sort of way. Wears synthetic saris, too low to be tasteful. She is coarse, has no qualms about taking advantage of people and will go to any lengths to make sure her son succeeds in life" (Gurcharan Das 163). Having experienced indigent condition throughout her life and "endured the terrors of Partition" (Gurcharan Das 151) she realizes the importance of money in life more than anyone else. Thus she wants lots of money which can buy her all materialistic comforts to forget her sorrowful past. After realizing the impoverished condition of Ansuya, Chitra compels her son not to marry Ansuya as she has been teaching her son with her typical rising middle class philosophy of mercenary attitude: "don't marry beauty;

don't marry for love; marry a rich girl!" (Gurcharan Das 199). She preaches her son on the necessity of money:

Oh-ho, we always need more money. There's never enough. Oh, *tu kya jaanta hai*, what it is like to grow up poor. What do you know what it was like to be tenants of these people in Lahore? *Kisi ke tukdon par palna, tu kya jaanta hai?* After Partition, what do you know what it was like to be a petty kiranawalla's wife in Ghatkopar? (Gurcharan Das 199)

Desperate to transpose her disadvantaged position to the position of elite class and being aware of all the existential anguish of living in deprived condition, she becomes completely mercenary and materialistic in her approach towards life that leads to a further desire to move on the higher class by eliminating all obstacles that come in her way. With society, the value system and morality also constantly shift and she doesn't hesitate to spend hours with Rai Saheb at his home to procure, for her son, the license for his company. Not only that, she even arranges marriage for Deepak with the niece of Rai Saheb as this will give them an opportunity to move in the elite circle of the society with which the difference from middle class lies only in the amount of money one has. As this marriage may bring rich dowry, she tries to convince Deepak with the profit he may gain through this marriage in a businesslike manner; thus bringing down the grace of marriage to sordid business transaction:

Rai Saheb's niece! Look Deepak, you won't find another match like her. *Beta, beta, thande dimag se soch*. My guess is the dowry is not going to be under two lakhs. And maybe they will also give a car, a fridge and an air-conditioner. *Uff! Main to khushi se pagal ho rahi hoon!* I don't think I shall be able to

sleep tonight, Deepak. [. . .] Think about your future, son. When they find about her in your company, you will probably get a double promotion. (Gurcharan Das 200)

Her indomitable will to climb up in the societal order is an outcome of her survival instinct which teaches her a new kind of morality in which the old values and order are no more considered; rather adjustment and compromise become the mantra of successful life. In a cool and calculating businesslike attitude she discards Ansuya, “a fine person, with ideals” (Gurcharan Das 200), by showing the disadvantages of marrying her in this changing time:

Oh-ho, that girl is only after your position and your job. She has trapped you, you simpleton. Deepak, think of your future. She doesn't have a naya paisa to her name. You're on the way up, son. Your star is going to rise. You need a rich girl to help you climb up. Her family are on the way down. She should be satisfied with a municipal clerk. (Gurcharan Das 200)

What Chitra has said is actually the projection of her inner guilt consciousness for running after the position and trapping Rai Saheb by indulging in physical relation to procure the license and this is transferred to Ansuya who loves Deepak without any materialistic desire. This transference of guilt is an expression of her existential anguish resulting in implacable will to select the most natural and easiest medium available to climb up. Her existential anguish is hidden in her declaration, “I want my son to rise above the stink of his father's life” (Gurcharan Das 200). For her, Deepak is a money earning machine. To run this machine effectively, ‘natural selection of the best partner is required and she has to make Rai Saheb that ‘natural selection’ for

obtaining license (license is the offspring of their agreement) which will promote Deepak further in the societal status. This collective consciousness of the middle class enacts as a catalyst in the process of the survival of the fittest.

Her existential anguish is prominent in her behaviour with Rai Saheb who, like a predator finds its prey, on the first meeting with Chitra realizes her weakness and grabs the opportunity to exploit the situation. Chitra on the other hand initially finds it very awkward but then gradually compromises with the situation. Sandwiched between middle class and elite class, she cannot forget her lower class manner but hesitates to move on like elite but takes the situation comfortably. She doesn't drink but on being asked by Rai Saheb she starts drinking and then dancing with him. Very soon she mingles with Rai Saheb and what she does to eliminate poverty from her life is the reflection of new value system which has no qualms for anything in the matter of survival. Thus her act should not be seen in the perspective of morality/immorality or ethical/unethical rather, since she has been the victim of the oppression and deprivation in society, she should have been seen in the light of collective consciousness of lower class and middle class anxiety and sufferings, a chain of beings in the existential struggle to benefit herself among the predators. In this evolutionary process from lower stratum to the higher stratum in the society Chitra does what has been deemed right in accordance with her own preconditioned circumstances. She says to Deepak:

You bring him into the world in suffering. You feed him from your own breast. You stay awake at nights so that he can sleep. And when he wets the bed, you pick him up and put him on the dry side and yourself sleep on that wet side. You wear the same dirty rags, so

that he can go to school.  
(Gurcharan Das 201)

Thus the existential anguish of a mother amidst immense sufferings, being in a lower class, is evolved, through the struggle for survival, as the new rising middle class and further wants to transform it into the struggle-less existence of elite class through adopting the ways of their life and using them as a rung of the ladder in the same manner as they have been using for their whimsical merriment.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Thus Gurcharan Das sketches the existential anguish and struggle for survival of two mother figures belonging to two different classes in two different ways to highlight the 'survival of the fittest' in the society. Amrita is struggling to keep her position same in the society whereas Chitra is struggling to move higher class in the society; Amrita willingly denies the bitter truth of her situation and Chitra realizing her deprived condition is ready to accept any means to leave poor life and ready to lead the life of elite class; Amrita wistfully looks back in the past for an escape from her present worst condition whereas Chitra looks towards the future with hope and optimism to alter the present worst situation; but both these mother figures are struggling for one reality—money and worldly comforts. And in this survival of struggle Chitra evolves to a higher class after acquiring the changing values and moralities in the changing society whereas Amrita fails to change herself in this new society as she clings to the dying traditions and values though at the end of the play Ansuja comes in rescue with her plan to convert the residence in exclusive season hotel which provides Amrita a new life and new realization, "Yes, we mustn't look back" (Gurcharan Das 205).

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