

STRIVING FOR AUTHENTICITY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*

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ABSTRACT

The novel *Such a Long Journey* is Mistry's recreation of the life and times of Gustad Noble, an ageing Parsi- the protagonist of the novel. Mistry has presented various narratives with the central narrative of Gustad. The novel depicts life style of Parsis, living in Khodadad Building, the microcosm of the Parsis in India. It encompasses various issues and is woven around the background of various upheavals in the subcontinent, like the partition of the subcontinent and ensuing violence, the wars between India and Pakistan and India and China, the emergence of Bangladesh, and how the community of the Indian Parsis responded to all these occurrences. This paper attempts to point out Mistry's novels in some of the most turbulent periods of India's modern history. It projects the creative energy of Mistry's Parsiness and analyses the manner in which, he cobbles together a composite Parsi identity, from the shattered shards strewn through diverse times.

KEYWORDS: Culture, Diaspora, Identity, Politics, Parsi

INTRODUCTION

Post India has produced insurmountable Diaspora writers. Racial discrimination, cross cultural conflict, Diaspora, identity crisis and multiculturalism are the significant aspects of post-colonial literature. Exile, expiration, and immigration are the characteristic situations of diaspora. The post-colonial concern of Parsi writers like Rohinton Mistry always aims to create a distinct identity of their own. The Parsis are a moribund community whose number is declining very sharply. With such grave concerns in sight, Mistry as a young writer takes this onus on himself and says that his works will "preserve a record of how they lived to some extent", when the Parsis become extinct. As such, his first novel *Such a Long Journey* not only problematizes the Parsi diaspora in the Indian context, but also projects his anti-colonial resistance. Almost all the characters in this novel are chosen from the middle class Parsi background and are shown resisting the snares of power in their own idiosyncratic way. As Micheal Foucault writes : "where there is power, there is resistance" (120).

Such a Long Journey is set in 1971 during the time of the Indian Pakistan war. It is the work of a miniaturist, tightly contained within one claustrophobic community. It expresses the author's feeling about his community. This particular novel contributes in advancing the notion of Community Literature. It is a moving domestic tragi-comedy, that introduces readers to Gustad Noble, a devout Parsi and dedicated family man, who becomes enmeshed in the political turmoil's of the Indira Gandhi years. It is a gripping account of Parsi and Indian culture. Gustad Noble lives in Khodadad Apartments, in Bombay. Betrayed, disillusioned, and resigned, Gustad Noble finally journeys back to himself. It is a moving tale told compassionately by Mistry, the humanist.

Critical reception of Mistry's fiction has been very positive. Some critics like Keith Garebian, have seen his short-story collection as the first among works of short fiction, to express the Parsi sensibility. This attempt, to understand the

extent to which the work of the author is grounded in Parsi history, folklore and social statistics has also been made by BinduMalieckal, in an in-depth study. NiluferBharucha (1995 b), also contextualizes Mistry's fiction, in the context of the Parsi diaspora. Mistry's writing is characteristically grounded in firm, sometimes glaringly harsh realities.

A Journey from Despair to Hope

Mistry delineates the fluctuating fortunes of Gustad Noble, an affable middle-aged man of modest dreams and aspirations. While dealing with the communal life of the Parsi's in post - Independent India, the novel also captures the socio-political-cultural turmoil that has been witnessed in the sixties and early seventies. The novel is set in Bombay, against the backdrop of the Indo- Pakistan war of 1971 and the emergence of Bangladesh as a separate independent nation. The novel courses through a series of political events touching on various issues such as corruption in high places, minority complexes, majority adventurism increasing fragmentation of the social order and the advent of a personality-oriented political scenario. Thus, history provides an effective backdrop for the novel. The novel depicts life style of Parsis, living in Khodadad Building, the microcosm of the Parsis in India. It encompasses various issues and is woven around the background of various upheavals in the subcontinent, like the partition of the subcontinent and ensuing violence, the wars between India and Pakistan and India and China, the emergence of Bangladesh, and how the community of the Indian Parsis responded to all these occurrences.

At the beginning of the novel, Gustad is shown as a god fearing man, the envy of all: "Tall and broad shouldered, Gustad was the envy and admiration of friends and relatives whenever health or sickness was being discussed" (Such a Long Journey) and although he had met with "a serious accident just a few years ago" even that left him with "nothing graver than a slight limp" (18). Gustad, a happy man in his early fifties, is a bank employee. His wife Dilnavaz, their two sons Sohrab and Darius and daughter Roshan live in a Parsi residential colony of Khodadad Building in Bombay. The inhabitants of Khodadad Building are representatives of a cross-section of middle-class Parsi, expressing all the angularities of dwindling community. All the characters in the novel are individualized and memorably drawn with humour and compassion. Gustad, as an ordinary man, had to face many trials in life. But, he had his own dreams about the future. He also had plans for his eldest son, Sohrab. But one by one the aspirations crumble down like a pack of cards. Traditional family ties are witnessed loosening. The reticent attitude of his wife is explicit when she reassuringly says to him, "We must be patient." However, Gustad has borne this for too long and it seems that his patience has been tested to the last string: "What have we been all these years if not patient? Is this how it will end? Sorrow, nothing but sorrow" (52)

The family gets more and more involved with sufferings as Darius, the second son falls in love with Mr. Rabadi's daughter and the sudden illness of Gustad's daughter, Roshan. Yet, all these do not deter Gustad from facing life stoically. Gustad Noble's dreams and expectation are modest indeed, but circumstances prevailing in the India of his times conspire to deny him even these. It is very hard on him that he cannot make things happen in such a way as to fulfill his aspirations. Forces, stronger than him, prevent Gustad from achieving his ambitions. His elder son does not join the IIT and Roshan, his favourite child, suffers from a prolonged illness. Gustad has a few good and understanding friends like Major Jimmy Bilimoria and Dinshawji, the latter working with him in the bank.

One day Bilimoria suddenly leaves Khodadad Building, where he lived, without a word even to Gustad, which upsets him. Gustad is already disillusioned with the indifferent behavior of Sohrab and now, the disappearance of his close friend makes matters worse. After sometime, Gustad gets a letter from Bilimoria, who wants Gustad to receive a parcel

from him. Gustad readily does so, in the name of friendship. However, on opening the parcel, he finds himself entrapped in an intricate and apparently inextricable snare of difficulties. The parcel contains ten lakh rupees, to be deposited in the bank in an account, held under the name of a nonexistent woman, Mira Obili. Gustad seeks the help of Dinshawji for accomplishing this task. As soon as the work is done, Bilimoria wants the money back. This is another uphill task. Then Gustad has to go to New Delhi to meet the ailing Bilimoria. Gustad feels utterly lonely as both of his friends depart from this world one after the other. Dinshawji dies of cancer. As the years roll by, Gustad Noble modifies his dreams and trims his expectations in life. Experiences make him stronger and more enduring. He firmly resolves, to face life stoically and not to be crushed by the forces of destiny. This is his greatest triumph in life. Mistry reminds us how goods, donated by people to support the war effort at the time of the Chinese invasion later turned up for sale, in the Chor Bazaar.

Mistry makes critical reference to Indira Gandhi's handling of the Bangladesh war. The episode of Nagarwala, cheating the State Bank of India of several lakhs of rupees, by impersonating the Prime Minister on the phone, is woven into the fabric of the novel and intermingled with fate of Major Bilimoria. A notable concern in the novel is the raw deal that Bilimoria gets from the Government out of working for the RAW. Gustad gets involved in the shady deal and draws his friend, Dinshawji too into it. The death of Dinshawji from cancer is a high point in the novel, as it reveals the truly noble side of Gustad, who is the sole male mourner at the Parsi funeral rites that follow. It is a kind of cleansing process that pushes Gustad very close to an intense spiritual experience. In *Such a Long Journey*, the Zoroastrian worldview overtly constitutes the controlling point. Gustad's eventual acceptance of his lot with dignity is the triumph of the Zoroastrian faith. His journey is from uncertainty to certitude, from apprehension to affirmation, and from perplexity to perspicacity. Thus the progression of the Parsi mind in Gustad becomes central to the narrative. To this extent, *Such a Long Journey* is a "novel of character". The novel extends actual historical events beyond the curtain of silence in which the official discourses have tried to enshroud them. Since, Nagarwala was a Parsi, a victim of the hegemony of the state, the tale could only have been told by a Parsi.

The actual event that Mistry has focused on is known in India as the Nagarwala case. In the winter of 1971 it was reported in the papers that the Head Cashier of the State Bank of India in Delhi has given six million rupees to Mr. Nagarwala on the basis of a phone call from Mrs. Gandhi who, he claimed, had asked him to take this great risk in the name of Mother India. After he had delivered the cash to Mr. Nagarwala in a reassigned place, the Head Clerk had doubts about his act and went to the police. Mrs. Gandhi denied that she had made any such telephone call and the Head Clerk was suspended. Nagarwala was arrested a few days later and confessed that he had mimicked Mr. Gandhi's voice.

The story has remained alive in the popular imagination because Nagarwala died in prison under suspicious circumstances, without ever coming to trial. Also, the high-ranking civil servant who was investigating the bank's withdrawal and accounting practices met his death in a traffic accident on an isolated New Delhi road, giving rise to allegations of foul play. The mystery, thus, has never been satisfactorily resolved and Indians often allude to the incident and fit in their own versions to the missing parts of the tale. While dealing with the Nagarwala case, Mistry uses Gustad to plug the holes in the case. *Such a Long Journey* holds a mirror to the apprehensions, fears and doubts of the Parsi community.

The title *Such a Long Journey* has been taken from T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi": A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year for a journey, and such a long Journey (103)

The title has a symbolic significance. The journey of the three wise men to the birthplace of Jesus Christ is not an ordinary physical journey; it is symbolic of man's spiritual quest in which he has to undergo numerous hardships. Later, one of the Magi gives an account of his toilsome journey for the benefit of a listener. He distinctly reveals how he was impelled to proceed merely because of his faith. He succeeded in overcoming all the impediments that befell his way. The end of the journey was rewarding and satisfying, for he had reached his destination and found that the prophecy of the birth of Christ was true. "The Journey of Magi" is also symbolic of the re-orientation which is absolutely essential to attain higher and nobler values in life. Gustad's journey of life is so close to the journey of the Magi. Gustad was keenly desirous of the fulfillment of his dreams and aspirations.

At every stage of his life's journey, he met with unprecedented obstacles and the working of inexplicable forces. However, he is not the one to give in; he is like the wise man that very subtly pushed aside the hindrances of life, did not allow them to overpower him and went ahead with fate that the journey will surely end at a particular destination. Explicit references to the concept of journeying are made on quite a few occasions in the novel testifying to its perennial appeal for a sensitive protagonist wonders: Would this long journey be worth of it? Was any journey ever worth the trouble? (250)

Such a Long Journey is an accomplished first novel, weaving elements of myth and history into an intricate and vital narrative tapestry. It is a demanding work, as critic Ajay Heble has noted, forcing us to broaden our cultural horizons "to make sense of it all" (65-67). Indeed Mistry's great asset as a narrator lies in his ability to guide us on this literary journey into the streets of Bombay, the Parsi community and Indian politics, inviting us to discover shared values and a common humanity as we explore the "lay of the land." The journey is in fact the human one from past to present, from innocence to experience, a universal journey that the three epigraphs to the novel together re-create. The first epigraph is from Firdausi's Iranian epic, *Shah-Nama*, and recalls both the glorious Iranian heritage of a mighty Empire, as well as hints at the downgraded condition of present-day Parsis. The second one is from T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" and reminds readers of the ancient Zoroastrian religion and the belief that the Magi who attended the birth of Christ were Zoroastrian priests. Finally, Tagore's lines from "Gitanjali" sum up the way in which the Parsis have moved from one country to another and how they have had to adopt themselves to new realities. Thus, the old story of the archetypal Parsi journey from forcible assimilation to security and identity in a strange land is a recurrent motif in Parsi writings.

There is a wide reference to the conflict and adaptability of the Parsis with the demands of modern life, like the Tower of silence. For Gustad, no God appears at the end of his trepidation to explain or to dispense justice, no God to reassure him that he has passed the test and all will be well. Worry, sorrow and frustration threaten to crush him. Yet he survives without succumbing to any prolonged bitterness, still in possession of his essential human dignity. Gustad's long journey in a cold and malevolent world in which all forms of happiness and misery are woven inseparably is the journey of an ethnic group, a community that is on the verge of extinction. From a purely subjective plane of self-indulgence, he moves on to a much deeper and complex level to examine truths of life. Myopic at the beginning of his journey, he attains full vision towards the end. His long journey is a manifestation of the universal phenomenon –the conflict between Good and Evil and his survival is the triumph of the Zoroastrian faith. In *Such a Long Journey* Mistry, comes out as a critical realist and projects the kind of society he wants to be a part of. Mistry, thus, records in his fiction the ethnic atrophy that has set in his community. He is sensitive to the threats to his society. The fate of his characters is interwoven with the fate of his community. Having stated that Mistry's fiction is an expression of ethnic atrophy syndrome, it seems apt to round off the argument with an observation that A.K. Singh makes: "But the novel (*Such a Long Journey*), as a cluster of

narratives, centralize his (Mistry's) community as a protagonist (93).

There is constant dialogical interaction between stories about the past and the present of the Parsi community, and Mistry like his counterparts (Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy and Bapsi Sidhwa) informs the past of his community, comments on "its present and anticipates the flow of events to follow through his characters"(59).

CONCLUSIONS

The novel, apart from projecting the identity crisis of various characters continues to showcase Mistry's concern with bearing witness to a dying community. However, along with the Parsiana on show is also the foregrounding of the city of Bombay, and its fall from the pinnacles of cosmopolitan tolerance, to the depths of regional and religious fascism. A study of this novel therefore, is a Diasporic study of Parsi community in particular, as well as an epiphany study of people, place and occasions in general.

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