

AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIO-POLITICAL CONCERNS IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S: *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*

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Abstract: Social, political, and historical event continue to be a significant theme adopted by various writers throughout the world to reveal the situations that occurred in the past and continue till date. Contemporary Indian writers use these themes to reflect the impact of events and its effect on the ordinary people. They mainly focus on socio-political issues like war, violence, displaced communities, and marginalization. Rohinton Mistry is one among these writers whose works reflect the contemporary social and political life of the parsi community. Nostalgia, alienation, diaspora, politics and marginalization form the basic tenet of Rohinton Mistry's novels. *Such a Long Journey* is one of the important works by Mistry which explore the various aspects of India like culture, community, administration, society, life, and faith of the Parsi community. Mistry, re-ports the historical backdrop of this group and nation as it has been in the post-independence period. This paper attempts to analyze the experience, anguish, and the nostalgic feeling of the Parsi community in India even after the independence.

Keywords: Nostalgia, diaspora, alienation and politics.

INTRODUCTION

Parsis are the small group of people described as an "ethno-religious minority" who are the faithful followers of Zoroastrianism. These minority people are separated from Iran to avoid forced conversion into Islam community. Finally, they came to India and got settled and practiced their faith. India is like a heaven for them but they are subjected to marginalization. Parsis writing illustrates the life and experiences of the past and present-day Parsis in India. Being the minority community, the Parsis feel insecure, alienated, nostalgic and feel threatened by the dominant Hindu culture. These are also major themes in Parsis literature. According to N.S Dharan, "post-independent Parsi writing in English is ethnocentric, culture-specific and community oriented" (7). Many writers are inclined to write about the contemporary political condition of the nation and their community especially about the Parsi community who merely struggles under the government's hegemony.

Bapsi Sidhwa, Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai are well-known Parsi writers whose works reflect the contemporary socio-political issues faced by the Parsi community. Rohinton Mistry is one among these writers. He is of Indian origin and belongs to Parsi community. Mistry developed as a significant and notable literary figure during the contemporary periods. He was an Indo-Canadian novelist and short story writer. He was born in 1952 in Bombay and immigrated to Canada in 1975. He studied

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English and Philosophy as a part-time scholar at the University of Toronto. His notable fictional works are *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matter* (2002) and non-fictions are *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), *Searching for Stevenson* (1994), and *The scream* (2006). His works are intact with the major themes like religion, community, politics, human relationship, diaspora, alienation, nostalgia, and homelessness.

SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

His first novel, *Such a Long Journey* portrays the common lifestyle and anxieties of the Parsi community during post-Independent India; it also explores the social, political, and cultural chaos during the early sixties and seventies. The title of the novel, *Such a Long Journey* has been taken from the poem “The Journey of the magi” by T.S. Eliot.

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey. (qtd in Mistry i)

Eliot’s poem is extremely emblematic. The journey of the three wise man who wants to visit the birthplace of Jesus Christ undertakes a hazardous journey and overcome many problems and difficulties in life. Similarly, this novel is also symbolic representing the long journey of the Gustard Noble who overcomes many ups and downs in his life. The novel is set in Bombay against the milieu of the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971 which gave raise to a new independent country, Bangladesh. It also deals with the major political issues like corruption, domination, and unlawful government. The novel has won many awards like Governor General’s Award, the commonwealth writers prize for the best manuscript and has also shortlisted for the Prestigious Booker Prize.

Such a Long Journey is one of the remarkable and best works by Rohinton Mistry which portrays the realistic conditions and political history of the Indian society especially the life of the Parsi community before and after independence. Mistry has well studied the history, social and political condition of India during his stay in Bombay and has adapted it in the novel, which is interesting and traditionally significant. Jasbir Jain says that,

Rohinton Mistry’s work raises a whole lot of other questions specifically related to the ‘homeland’ and political memory. Neither nostalgia nor memory in itself can account for this rootedness and preoccupation with the homeland and the environment boundaries of the city of birth. (qtd in Dhodiya 42)

Such a Long Journey is an imaginative story which explores the life and anguish of the middle-class Parsi people. Amrijit Singh says, “*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” (214). The author describes the pitiable circumstances and the melancholic story of Gustad Noble, who is the protagonist of the novel. He belongs to the middle-class Parsi community, who worked as a clerk in a bank. Being a clerk, he has to face many problems in life. He was a dedicated family man, works very hard to uphold his family’s financial situation. Noble was a father of three children, elder son Sohrab, youngest son Darius and Roshan, his daughter. He lived in the Khodadad building with his family where most of the Parsis reside. Major Jimmy Bilimoria and Dinshawji are the faithful friends of him who also lived along with the Noble family in the Khodadad building.

Parsi communities are shaken by the rise of Shiv Sena in Bombay, the party promises to give job for the middle-class people. The party is against the South Indian immigrants, typically immigrants from Tamil Nadu especially the job seekers. The party Shiv Sena in the novel is despised by the Parsi people as the supporters of the Shiv Sena ill-treated the individuals of the Parsi community as a “Parsi crow-eaters”. Furthermore offending the community’s funeral cremations, Dinshawji and Gustadare frightened that the Parsis might become “second-class citizens” in the future. Gustad says, “No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America-twice as good as the white man to get half as much”(SLJ 7). The novel charmingly reveals the certain political conflicts which affected the life of ordinary middle-class people. Dr. Paymaster says,

Our beloved country is a patient with disease at an advanced stage. Dressing the wound or sprinkling rose-water over it to hide the smell of decaying tissue is useless. Fine words and promises will not cure the patient. The decaying part must be removed. You see, the municipal corruption is merely the bad smell, which will disappear as soon as the decaying government at the Centre is removed. (SLJ 313)

The above quote describes the present political condition of India. The Government is the only root cause of all the troubles and problems which occurs in India. Such problematic people should be thrown out of the country. Gustad Noble’s hallucinations and ambitions are quite ambiguous. Many uncertain events have taken place in Noble’s life. Firstly, his friend Major Jimmy who is a gentleman and also philosopher to him, suddenly disappears from the Khodadad building. Secondly, his son Sohrab refuses to register as a scholar in IIT where he got the admission. Noble has a great hope for his son Sohrab’s future and wants to reclaim his family’s lost prosperity. But his dreams are spoiled and he loses his hope on him. Moreover, Sohrab’s unpleasant behavior during his sister’s birthday was unbelievable which shocked Noble and he wanted to know the reason behind

his unacceptable behavior. Sohrab replies: "It's not suddenly. I'm sick and tired of IIT, IIT, IIT all the time. I'm not interested in it, I'm not a jolly good fellow about it, and I'm not going there". (SLJ 48)

Sohrab discloses his wish to study Arts programme with his friends. Gustad was unable to control his anger in front of his wife Dilnavaz, who herself was stumped, wants him to be quiet. Noble says it is his obligation to look after his son's future.

Gustad fears that there is no life and occupation for the minorities in Bombay mainly due to unlawful government. Dinshawji reminds the good old days of the parsis: "What fun we used to have....parsis were the kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the banks". (SLJ 38).

Noble being an ordinary middle-class man had to face many trials in life. For example, the mysterious parcel which he had received from his friend Major Jimmy, slowly pulled him into a government deception including threats, corruption, and robbery which turns his life into a great tragedy. The mysterious parcel that contained ten lakh rupees invited a lot of trouble which puts him in addition to the existing problem. Moreover, the outside wall of the khodadad building that is considered as the 'sacred wall' and 'security' for his family is demolished by the government as a means of extending the road. These untoward incidents affect Noble so much that he feels frustrated and alienated. The wall is symbolic of the Parsi community. Once it is destroyed, Noble feels that the security of the Parsi community is under threat. Nilufer Bharucha says that "the wall both includes and excludes. It is protective as well as reductive. It protects the Parsee community from the ingress of the engulfing Indian world. However, it also makes this world isolationist". (123)

The problems multiplied when Noble found that his friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria was arrested. He is one of his close friends and also like a second father to Noble's children. He utters about his difficulties and India's political situation during the tenure of Indira Gandhi as the prime minister. Major Jimmy was instructed through the phone by the PM Indira Gandhi to withdraw the sum of 60 lakh rupees from the SBI bank on the emergency basis. Later, police found that it was illegal money and PM refuses to accept that she was directly involved in the money scandal. Major Jimmy was arrested and tortured by the police. He was imprisoned for four years. Finally, he becomes bedridden and died due to the heart attack before the period of his imprisonment gets over. This pitiable condition of the Major in the novel is very painful. Mistry beautifully describes the sorrowful situation of the Parsi people through Major Jimmy:

On the bed lay nothing more than a shadow. The shadow of the powerfully built army man who once lived in Khodadad building. His hairline had

receded, and sunken cheeks made the bones jut sharp and grotesque. The regal handlebar mustache was no more. His eyes had disappeared within their sockets. The neck, what he could see of it, was as scrawny as poor behest Dinshawji's while under the sheet there seemed barely a trace of those strong shoulders and deep chest which Gustard and Dilnavaz used to point out as a good example to their sons, reminding them always to walk erect, with chest out and stomach in, like Major Uncle. (SLJ 267)

When Gustard returns from the funeral of Major Jimmy, Dilnavaz asks her son to speak to his father. But Sohrab refuses to speak to his father because he says to his mother about the father's reaction towards him: it's no use. I spoilt all his dreams; he is not interested in me anymore (SLJ 321). The family is disintegrated due to politics. The distress of the Parsi community is well portrayed in *Such a Long Journey*. The inhabitants of Khodadad building represent the unity among the Parsi community. Mistry hints that when that wall is destroyed the community collapses.

Mani Meitei notices that:

though Mistry is highly imbued with an original writer's imagination in the development of a flawless story in *Such a Long Journey*, his awareness of the contemporary social and political situation of India, particularly the period of the 1971 Indo-Pak war, is extremely exciting. As a realist, he wields the weapon of satire, which makes him a ruthless artist, a harsh political satirist and a devout critic of war. (9)

Mistry portrays the agony of Parsi community during the reign of Indira Gandhi. The Parsi community stands as a marginalized minority community. Their sense of displacement is perfectly picturized by Mistry thus: "Tell me what happens to my life, Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me" (SLJ 74). Not only Gustad is affected but also the whole community which lives in the Khodadad building suffers. Gustad tries to bring in unity among the Hindus and the Parsis, but gets deeply hurt when the building collapses. His enthusiasm, thoughts, and desires were destroyed. Firstly, unexpected departure of major Billimoria from the Khodadad building. Secondly, his daughter Roshan's illness, thirdly, Sohrab's disloyalty and finally tragic death of his friends makes him to suffer more. In addition to this, the Khodadad building collapses. Mistry stoically says "it was becoming too much to bear, Roshan's sickness, Jimmy's treachery, Dinshawji stupidity, sohrab's betrayal, nothing but worry and sorrow and disappointment piling up around him, walling him in, and threatening to crush him. He moved his massaging hand from the forehead to his nape and closed his eyes" (SLJ 177). All these incidences fall as a blow on Gustad head. Gustad makes a journey which is full of up and downs.

CONCLUSION

The novel clearly explores the socio-political issues which affect the lives of the characters and also the anxieties about their future as minority people. Mistry has effectively intertwined components of Parsi society and religion in his writing. It signifies different classes, professions, caste, and daily lives of the common parsi people in a unique way. He utilizes his writing as a weapon against the exploiters and giving the reader information about the political exploitation and its consequence on the common middle-class people. In one of the interviews conducted by Ali Lakhani, Mistry says that “a new country is revealed with its wonders, life is....a journey without destination. Sort of like a wall that goes on and on with pictures” (1-2). *Such a Long Journey* thus beautifully reveals the huge picture of the Parsi community in India.

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