

Intolerance and Revolt in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract

Such a Long Journey is Rohinton Mistry's second novel set in the socio-political scenario during the rule of Congress Party led by Mrs Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister. The writer brings to light the agonies of the minorities in India during India-Pakistan war of 1971. The novel depicts socio-political intolerance and protest against hegemonic forces. The paper aims to examine the novel that emerges as a postcolonial discourse of protest against the nation-state that, in the eyes of this minority writer, has failed to provide security, democratic rights and equal economic opportunities to all sections of the society, particularly the ethnic and religious minorities and the economically underprivileged classes. The events and characters carry a strong element of protest against the social and political hierarchies. This novel is set against the backdrop of Indo-Pak war of 1971 and delves into the intolerance and political pressure experienced by the central character, Gustad Noble, ruining all his hopes by circumstances. Gustad's story is allegorical of the plight of Parsi's in India and the paper examines how Mistry uses the medium of fiction to capture this plight. This research paper confines to the intolerance which a minority subject faces, politics of identity and protest. *In Such a Long Journey*, Rohinton Mistry focuses on the hopes and aspirations, anxieties and frustrations, strengths and weaknesses, customs and beliefs of the Parsi community.

KEYWORDS: Intolerance, politics of identity, protest, postcolonial fiction.

Introduction: Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* is set in the socio-political unrest during the rule of Congress Party led by Mrs Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister. The writer brings to light the agonies of the minorities in India during India-Pakistan war of 1971. In the 19th century, hegemony came to denote the "Social or cultural predominance or ascendancy; predominance by one group within a society or milieu". Later, it could be used to mean "a group or regime which exerts undue influence within a society." Similarly, the Oxford Dictionary of English Language defines Intolerance as "Unwillingness to accept views, beliefs, or behavior that differ from one's own". And Protest as "A statement or action expressing disapproval of or objection to something." In theorizing the nature of Mistry's protest it needs to be understood that it is not purely a critique of political practices but also of the social world of Bombay/Mumbai, the major characters of which becomes an important theme. The present research paper gives the picture of Emergency in India through the memory of Parsi characters in the novel. It is also important to note that in trying to build a contrast between the present and the past Mistry deals with them differently. Whereas while dealing with the past he avoids specifying the temporal details clearly the present is historicized in great detail. This makes the depiction of the past an idealized and vague mixture of different periods in colonial and postcolonial times dealing with personal rather than historical domains.

Published in 1991, *Such a Long Journey* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won several other awards. In 2010 the book made headlines when it was withdrawn from the University of Mumbai's English syllabus after complaints from the family of the Hindu nationalist politician Bal Thackeray. *Such a Long Journey* takes place in Mumbai, Maharashtra, in the year 1971. The novel's protagonist is a hard-working bank clerk Gustad Noble, a member of the Parsi community and a devoted family man struggling to look after his wife Dilnavaz, and three children. But his family begins to fall apart as his eldest son Sohrab refuses to take admission in the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). His youngest daughter, Roshan, falls ill. Other conflicts within the novel involve Gustad's ongoing interactions with his eccentric neighbors and his relationship with his close friend and co-worker, Dinshawji.

Mistry's fiction can be read as a postcolonial discourse of protest against the nation-state that, in the eyes of this diasporic minority writer, has failed to provide security, equality, democracy and equal economic opportunities to all sections of the society, particularly the ethnic and religious minorities and the economically underprivileged classes. The events and characters are presented in Mistry's narratives that a strong element of protest against the social and political hierarchies pervades the texts.

Gustad is the grandson of a prosperous furniture dealer, a lover of books and tasteful living, whose fortunes were squandered by an alcoholic son Gustad's uncle. Gustad's father was too gentle and weighed down by the sense of family loyalty to salvage his share of the inheritance. Gustad now works in a bank as a clerk and lives in straitened circumstances, among other Parsis at Khodadad building. His grandfather's taste survives in Gustad's nostalgic day-dream of building a bookcase in collaboration with his son Sohrab, to house his decimated collection of books. His father's goodness and compassion inform all of Gustad's actions and relationships which constitute the novel. The title of the novel *Such a Long Journey* comes from T.S. Eliot's poem "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...

Mistry portrays the picture of the post-independent Indian political context particularly of the crucial period of the sixties and seventies. The novelist offers commentary on the socio-political situation and raises a national debate on corruption in high places. He also evokes the perennial Bombay problem of limited water resources and an ever burgeoning population. This is the first instance of many in the text when the personal and the political are interleaved. It was then that Gustad had put up the blackout papers on his window panes and ventilators that he had still not removed. The family had at first grumbled but then "grew accustomed to living in less light" (*SLJ* 2). The blackout papers thus become symbolic of the many hardships that families like Gustad's have to learn to live with. Some characters in the novel make really illuminating comments. For instance, Gustad thinks about the position of the Parsis in Bombay and comments, "No future for minorities, with all these fascist

Shiva 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 3).

Regarding the change of the street names in Bombay, Dinshawji comments on the notion of displacement:

“Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared; in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkhamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it’s on Lokmanya Tilak Marg. I live at Sleater Road. Soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And one fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me!” (SLJ 4)

Gustad Noble the central character in the novel is an individual depicted as a classical tragic hero, who is passing from happiness to misery and is pitted against heavy probabilities, which he faces almost with placid tranquility. The author cherishes the values of friendship, condemns the curse of war, and criticizes corrupt, corrupt and hypocritical political leaders who have eaten in the vitals of the nation. His frankness in exposing social and political ills of India is due to the fact that he has no political axe to grind. Furthermore, Mistry’s strong opposition to social and class distinctions and his anguish over the environmental pollution have widened the spectrum of the contemporary scope of reality the novel conveys.

In the beginning of the novel, Gustad is seen 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” (SLJ 5). And although he had met with “a serious accident just a few years ago; and even that left him with nothing graver than a slight limp” (SLJ 6). Gustad 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.

Further, Gustad intends that his eldest son, Sohrab should join the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and find a more productive and prestigious career than his own. Gustad bears many bitterness from the past that have limited his opportunities. On the other hand, Sohrab doesn’t want to go for an IIT because his major interest is in arts. Subsequently, these differences create disputes between the father and the son. Sohrab is an outstanding student. His father consistently supports his interest, even when Sohrab decides to collect butterflies. Later on, Sohrab gives up this hobby out of pity for the creatures he was capturing and killing. Sohrab is as stubborn as his father. Eventually, he leaves the family house rather than submit to the demands of his father to enroll in IIT.

Gustad and Dilnavaz’s second child, Darius, is 15-years-old. In the initial stage, he collects tropical fish and birds. Later, Darius turns to body-building, like his grandfather and he is muscular like his father. Mr. Rabadi, a neighbor whom Darius’ parents hate, comes up with the charge that Darius is molesting his daughter, Jasmine. On the other hand, Darius explains to his mother that he is merely trying to help a shy

girl learn to ride a bicycle. She has trouble with balance and none of the other boys have the stamina to run alongside for long, steadying the seat.

Gustad and Dilnavaz's laughing, fragile 9-years-old daughter, Roshan's ninth birthday is celebrated by serving a chicken fattened at home. Her great joy is a large, beautiful doll, imported from Italy, and clothed as a bride. She had won it in a lottery. It is so valuable that her parents demand it be locked in a suitcase until a suitable display case can be prepared. Roshan is frequently ill and her illness brings Gustad into contact with a politically active doctor. Gustad's superstitious wife, Dilnavaz, falls under the influence of an upstairs neighbor Miss Kutpitia who practises black magic. Like Darius when he was younger, Roshan suffers intestinal problems, which her parents treat without a sensible medical advice. Finally, Gustad takes her to see Dr. Paymaster. Roshan is put through painful tests and treatments, to no avail. Hospitalization is prescribed but it gets delayed. Dilnavaz is so concerned about her daughter's continuing declining health that she consults Miss Kutpitia and carries out a magic spell that appears to work.

Tehmul, a seemingly unimportant and mentally disabled character, is essential in Gustad's life, as he brings out the tender side of him and represents the innocence of life. A letter that Gustad receives one day from an old friend, Major Bilimoria, slowly draws him into a government deception involving threats, secrecy and large amounts of money. He then, begins the long journey, which sheds new light on all aspects of Gustad's personal and political life. The novel not only follows Gustad's life, but also India's political turmoil under the leadership of Indira Gandhi.

Mistry condemn on the social, cultural and personal can be easily stitched back to the political at both explicit and implicit levels. Mistry's characters experience and deal with the Maratha world around him. The present paper attempts to approach Mistry's texts from this perspective and read in them a protest against the politically determined social culture leading to insecurities in vulnerable sections.

In the Parsi context the memory of the past is generally linked to a period of prosperity. Moreover, the element of memory is integral to the progress of the narratives. There are sustained and regretful comparisons between the past and the present, highlighting the real or perceived disadvantages the Parsis have had to suffer in post-Independence India. The gaps into memory help to construct the political unconscious of the novels as Parsi narratives expressive of their instability in the new socio-political environment. At yet another level recovery of the past is a way of writing about a dying way of life. Writing here functions as a method of cultural self-preservation.

Mistry portrays the characters of Gustad in such a way that their deprivations and frustrations become their defining traits. Gustad is painfully aware of the family's fall from a privileged social status to the present one where they are too cramped even to adjust an extra bed for the children. There are repeated references to lack of space. When Gustad's daughter Roshan wins a raffle at school and gets a large porcelain doll as prize there is no room in the house for it. The doll has to be undressed so that her dress and her body can be stacked separately. Financial condition of Gustad's family head towards a crisis when their daughter falls sick. Gustad first has to sell his camera to pay the medical bills and later on when the doctor prescribes a special diet for Roshan, Dilnavaz has to sell off her wedding bangles. Through these details and

descriptions, the novelist draws attention to the fate of ordinary Parsi families in Mumbai. Gustad's problems hurt him and his family even more because their present state is a huge climb down from what they had been one generation ago. Gustad's grandfather owned a furniture shop and his father who went bankrupt owned a book store which too was dangerously, desecrated and crumbling. That was the time when as a nineteen year old Gustad saw his life go to pieces: "When all anxieties intensified, and anger grew – a strange, unfocussed anger – and helplessness" (SLJ 8).

Mistry discusses the power of money and political position in *Such a Long Journey* wherein the era of Emergency becomes the era of autocracy in which the human rights and democracy are never valued. Major Bilimoria knows very well that the Prime Minister has control over everything – press, media, army, law and the government. This makes him to withdraw his voice. He knows that she is autocratic and corrupt but he does not have the courage to speak it out. He is aware equally that during Emergency his voice will be silenced. Therefore, he articulates all his anger, frustration, helplessness and uneasiness to Gustad, Bilimoria says: "Not what I should have done...but something very stupid. Should have exposed the whole thing. Told the press, opposition parties. Started an inquiry. But I thought, everything is controlled by her. RAW, the courts, broadcasting.... everything is in her pocket, all will be covered up..." (SLJ 278).

Eventually, the barrier between the father and the son dissolves. Mistry ends the novel with Tehmul's death and Sohrab's arrival. But, these incidents do not turn him into a pessimist. Gustad triumphs in a calm manner as he faces each trial of his life and he accepts the harsh realities of the world. Dilnavaz's quiet attitude is unambiguous and she requests him to calm down. However, it seems that his patience has been tested to the last sequence: "What have we been all these years if not patient? Is this how it will end? Sorrow, nothing but sorrow" (SLJ 52). Yet all these moments do not discourage Gustad from facing life-long suffering. His greatest moment comes towards the end of the novel, when he forgives Sohrab in a noble gesture of acceptance of his decision to lead his own life.

Apparently, Mistry here also intends his readers to take his protagonist's fate to be symbolic of his community. In great contrast to the earlier days, Gustad yearns for books and has virtually no furniture left in his small home. Gustad repeatedly retreats into the world of memories remembering with a feeling of nostalgia the good old days, grandfather's furniture store and his father's book store when there was a prosperous business family. When Gustad realizes that he has fallen into a trap after he receives a letter of threat for not depositing the money sent by Major Bilimoria, he miserably sits in his grandfather's chair and wishes for an escape route: "If I could let the world go by, spend the rest of life in this chair" (SLJ 141). The past also has a way of entering into the present in a recurring pattern in the form of family inheritances like the ivory paper knife with a sculpted handle which Gustad brings out to open Bilimoria's letter. Gustad has a special fondness for the possessions which have come down to him from his ancestors. These few articles are the only connection he has with his past prosperity, dignity and pride.

Gustad's dreams and expectations are modest indeed, but circumstances prevailing in India of his times conspire to deny him even these. Forces, stranger than himself, come in the way of his life's journey, he meets unprecedented and the workings of inexplicable forces. Once something is off the normal course, others soon

follow. Many things start surfacing at an alarming rate: his eldest son refuses to join IIT and his bad manners and violent temper spoil the ninth birth day party of Roshan, culminating in his desertion of his home; Roshan suffers from a prolonged illness a complicated case of diarrhea; his friend Bilimoria suddenly disappears from Khodadad building without a word to Gustad and after some time, Gustad gets a letter from Bilimoria asking him to receive a parcel from chore bazaar. Gustad's fortune is the coming of the long-awaited package from Bilimoria. Gustad receives the parcel in the name of friendship. On opening the parcel, he finds himself entrapped in an intricate and apparently complicated trap of difficulties. The parcel contains ten lakh rupees to be deposited in the bank in an account held under the name of a non-existent woman Mira Obili. The whole thing makes both Gustad and his wife Dilnavaz's hair stand erect, who do not know how to hide such a huge amount. At this point Dilnavaz senses threat to Gustad's much needed service and voices her hatred at his betrayal: "For him (Bilimoria), it in his job, he joined the secret service, let him do all his secreting and servicing himself, without making us starve to death" (*SLJ* 15). And even before the amount is deposited, the secret of the money being received is found out by others. Gustad feels ill-at-ease when the halfwit Tehmul tells the inspector, Bamji, that the former has a mountain of money in his flat. Another woman also makes a reference to the money to his utter dismay. The forbidden package thus drives away Gustad's peace and happiness and he feels annoyed and betrayed. First he hides the money in the kitchen, and then he takes the help of Dinshawji to deposit the whole amount in the bank since he is unable to meet Ghulam Mohammad from whom he has got the parcel. Taking Dinshawji into confidence, he lets him know all about Bilimoria a RAW officer, his letter and direct involvement in the training of Mukti Bahini against the Pak army. But the situation never improves. Amidst fear and restlessness on two consecutive days, Gustad finds a headless Bandicoot at the base of his Vinca bushes and again a headless cat in the compound. Then a folded paper on which is written a nursery rhyme in pencil is also found inserted between two adjacent branches of his Vinca bush. All these contribute to Gustad's fear and unhappiness, leaving him in the dark land of suspicion. Then follows his quarrel with Mr. Rabadi. As soon as the huge amount is deposited in the bank, Bilimoria wants the money back because of his own problems. This is another uphill task on the part of Gustad.

As things rush towards a climax, the arrest of Major Bilimoria on charge of corruption is published in the paper. The heavens fall; Gustad's horizon is completely darkened with fear and uncertainty that his complicity may be established. In the meantime Ghulam Mohammad asks Gustad in a semi threatening tone to return the whole amount in one month's time to save Bilimoria's life. And to make things worse, Roshan's illness continues and even the worst thing happens. Poverty haunts Gustad; he cannot make both ends meet, sells his camera and his wife's two gold bangles. It in at this critical juncture again, that Dinshawji is hospitalized after a sudden collapse in the office. Before long, his health was steadily deteriorating. Yet he never allows others to know about this. His suffering is deftly disguised under the mask of his cheerful personality and way of joking. Gustad comes to his assistance and advises him thus: "what you must do is stop your jokes and teasing with everyone. At the same time, I will start telling people that poor Dinshawji's health in not well again, he is feeling completely under the weather" (*SLJ* 17). The first great blow in Gustad's life comes in the form of the death of Dinshawji.

Shortly after that Gustad makes a trip to Delhi to meet the ailing Major Bilimoria who wants to tell him all that had happened. Major Bilimoria's reappearance on the scene of action disturbs the already risky position of Gustad. Through the representation of Nagarwala case the author makes an important political statement. Nagarwala received nearly sixty lakh rupees from a bank manager in Delhi, apparently on the strength of a phone call from the then Prime Minister which, it was said, he imitated. Nagarwala was dead after a few months. Nobody knew where the money went. Since this involved a member of Parsi community, the Parsis were considerably disconcerted and the death of Nagarwala itself raised many eyebrows.

It is a big fraud of sixty lakh rupees in which Prime Minister gets directly involved. Bilimoria is asked to get the money from the SBI Director on an emergency basis to finance the guerilla training pending official sanction by impersonating Prime Minister's voice on telephone:

Assuming that Mr. Bilimoria has the talent of voice impersonation, is it routine for our national banks to hand over vast sums of money if the Prime Minister telephones? How high up does one have to be in the government or the Congress Party to be able to make such a call? And was the chief cashier so familiar with Mrs. Gandhi's voice that he accepted the instructions without any verification whatsoever? If yes, does that mean that Mrs. Gandhi has done this sort of thing frequently? (SLJ 18)

After that Major Bilimoria is as asked to write a confession which he did without any second thought. But as soon as the money was received, Prime Minister's office intercepted the money before it was used for the original purpose. Knowing the trick, Bilimoria kept ten lakh rupees for distribution to his friends. Before long he was arrested and kept under detention and tortured cruelly until he returned the money: "On the bed lay nothing more than a shadow - the shadow of the powerfully-built army man who once lived in Khodadad Building" (SLJ 19).

Bilimoria gets four years imprisonment and while serving his term, he dies of heart attack and his funeral at Tower of Silence takes place. Gustad feels utterly lonely and lost as two of his friends depart from this world one after the other. Dinshawji dies of cancer and Bilimoria dies of heart attack. As the years roll by, Gustad modifies his dreams and trims his expectations in life. Experience makes him a stronger and more enduring man. He firmly resolves to face life socially and not to be crushed by the forces of destiny.

It is quite obvious that Gustad is not in control of things. But this does not make him turn into a defeatist. It lies in his acceptance of the harsh realities of the world to which he belongs. His grandest moment comes towards the end of the novel, when he forgives his son and clasps him to his bosom in a noble gesture of acceptance of Sohrab's decision to lead his own life. Gustad returns to Bombay with a sense of absolution and forgiveness. It is a certain inward journey travelled by Gustad towards an awareness of a distance that will ultimately have to be covered - that long Journey of life - to be endured with patient flexibility. At the end of the novel is the beginning of the real journey, of a consciousness that the search is without end entails countless such journeys.

Gustad returns home at the time when the outer wall of Khodadad building, now converted into a holy wall with so many gods and goddesses from all religions painted by a pavement artist at the request of Gusted so that the area could be saved from pollution, from the horrid smell of urine and excrement, and from the flies and mosquitoes bred there, is about to be broken by a team of municipal workers under the command of Malcolm Saldanha. To communicate his own views about God, Man and Destiny, the novelist creates a pavement artist who paints pictures of Gods representing different religions. He gives these Gods a variety of facial expressions by means of his brush:

“The holy countenances on the wall – some grim and vengeful, some jovial, some compassionate, others frightful and awe-inspiring, yet others kind and avuncular - watched over the road, the traffic, the passers-by, day and night. Nataraj did his cosmic dance, Abraham lifted his axe high above Isaac, Mary cradled the Infant Jesus, Laxmi dispensed wealth, Saraswati spread wisdom and learning.” (SLJ 23)

Conclusion:

To conclude one can say that, the focus of this research paper is on the depiction of socio-political intolerance and protest against hegemonic forces in *Such a Long Journey*. The novel emerges as a postcolonial discourse of protest against the nation-state that, in the eyes of this minority writer, has failed to provide security, democratic rights and equal economic opportunities to all sections of the society, particularly the ethnic and religious minorities and the economically underprivileged classes.

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