

Critical Estimation of Rohinton Mistry's Novel Such a Long Journey

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Abstract:

The present paper emphasizes on the presentation of the predicament of Parsi community in Indian context as reflected in Rohinton Mistry's novel 'Such a Long Journey' (1991). The novel selected for the study provides sufficient background to grasp the socio-political status of marginalized group of Indian society viz. Parsi in post-colonial era. Rohinton Mistry being associated with Indian Diaspora in Canada utilizes his fictional writing to explore the life, struggle, frustration and middle-class aspirations of an average, lower middle-class Parsi family in Bombay in the novel under scrutiny.

Index Terms: – Diaspora, Marginality, Indian English Literature, Parsiness, Post-colonialism.

Rohinton Mistry (born 1952) has become one of the preeminent writers of the post-colonialist writing movement. He was born in Mumbai, of Parsi decent; and has been living in Toronto, Canada since 1975. As a gifted novelist of worldwide fame, Mistry makes a rich contribution to the areas of Indian English Literature, Indian-Canadian Writing, Commonwealth Fiction and Cross-cultural Studies. Although he now lives in Toronto, Canada, he sets his novels primarily in his native Bambay. Mistry is a writer of the Indian Diaspora, a term used to describe the growing number of Indian-born authors who write about their native land from abroad. He is a socio-politically committed novelist. The most remarkable feature of his fiction is that it brilliantly captures the crowded, throbbing life of India. The relationship between literature and life seems the object of increased attention of his writing. His seminal literary contribution comprises a maiden anthology of eleven linked short stories entitled '*Tales From Firozsha Baag*' (1987) and three thought-provoking novels- '*Such a Long Journey*' (1991), '*A Fine Balance*' (1995) and '*Family Matters*' (2002). His fiction has been translated into 29 languages around the world.

Mistry's '*Such a Long Journey*' (1991), "a highly poised and accomplished work", was shortlisted for Booker Prize and won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book. It is loosely based upon a series of real events that took place in 1971, the year of conflict with Pakistan. Set in Bombay against the backdrop of war in the Indian sub-continent and the subsequent birth of Bangladesh, the novel concerns a Parsi man, Gustad Noble and members of the Parsi community of Bombay. The novel's protagonist, Gustad Noble, is a hard-working bank clerk and represents the Parsi community in Bambay in particular and in India in general. Though the author takes the large socio-historical-political setting to place and explore the life, struggle, frustration and middle-class aspirations of an average, lower middle-class Parsi family in Bombay, '*Such a Long Journey*' is an authentic study of Parsiness and the socio-political perspectives of Parsi community being a minority group in Hindu-dominated

India. Hence, the present paper is a deliberate attempt to mark ‘*Such a Long Journey*’ as “a minority discourse” and trace certain relevant rudiments of Parsiness as expounded by a Parsi decent writer in the context of a year in the life of Gustad Noble, a God-fearing, middle-class bank clerk in his mid-40s.

There are few novelists like M.G. Vassanji, Farrukh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga, Bapsi Sidhwa, Dina Mehta and Rohinton Mistry who have fashioned fiction about their community. Firdaus Kanga’s ‘*Trying to Grow*’, Farrukh Dhondy’s ‘*Bombay Duck*’, Bapsi Sidhwa’s ‘*The Crow Eater*’ and ‘*The Pakistani Bride*’, etc. reflect Parsi community in diverse colours. In the similar way Rohinton Mistry, Canada-based Indian Parsi writer, is known for the manifestation of Parsi culture and community in Bombay in his novels like ‘*Such a Long Journey*’ (1991), ‘*A Fine Balance*’ (1995) and ‘*Family Matters*’ (2002). The world of the Firozsha Baag and Khodadad Building is lavishly suffused with the breath of contemporary Bombay where the Parsi community retains its distinctive ethos and culture in a predominantly Hindu India.

As a Parsi, Mistry is part of a dwindling community of fewer than 125,000 people worldwide, most of whom (approximately 70000) concentrated around Bombay and the rest in Europe, North America and Iran. Parsis are descended from the religious followers of Zoroastrianism who fled from what is now Iran to the West coast of India to avoid forced conversion to Islam there in the 8th Century. While India offers them a safe heaven, present day Parsis are subject to marginalization as well as widely-held stereotypes, both positive and negative. In spite of being an ethnic minority, they have contributed much to the development of India. However, it is a dying race. Closely knit as a community, Parsis are often treated as a little-understood and foreign presence by the Hindu-dominated nation of India. Mistry grew up in this charged atmosphere in Parsi areas of Bombay. The Parsi writers such as Boman Desai, Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry write about the question of Parsi identity and Parsi Diasporas.

Mistry’s ‘*Such a Long Journey*’ is set in Bombay and has a Parsi milieu. He writes about what he knows best--- the Parsis in Bombay, the Parsi psyche, habits, myths, legends, angst and sympathy in the novel. In the novel the Parsis are more comfortable in Indian ethos. The Indo-Pak war of 1971 which led to the liberation of Bangladesh has the Parsi world interacting at the highest levels of finance and politics with the Indian world. The plot is based on the real-life scam of Rs. 60 lakhs which had rocked the contemporary government in 1971. At the centre of the scandal was Sohrab Nagarwala, the Parsi cashier in the State Bank of India. He claimed that he had withdrawn the sum on the basis of a telephone call by the Prime Minister. Mistry has evolved his story around this incident. “The fictional world of Rohinton Mistry as reflected in ‘*Such a Long Journey*’ centers on a lower, middle-class segment of the Parsi Community of metropolitan Bombay.” His fiction is rooted in the streets of Bombay, the city he left behind for Canada at the age of twenty-three. Coming from people who today feel they are at the margins of Indian society, refusing nevertheless the domination of Hindu culture, in his fiction Mistry tries to preserve the memory of his native environment and to testify the specificity of his being a Parsi, both in India and in Canada. Dealing again members of the Parsi community of Bombay, Mistry strikes the opposition between the values of family and tradition and the corruption of the outside world affecting the simple-going life of minority people in India.

In *'Such a Long Journey'*, Mistry is more interested in probing various features of "Parsiness" and the Parsi predicament against the backdrop of socio-political events affecting the community during the Indo-Pak war of 1971. On the surface, *'Such a Long Journey'* appears to be a story of journey of the protagonist Gustad Noble, his Dilnavaz and their three children- Sohrab, Darius and Roshan. But it attains significance and even controversy through its discourse on political issues built around questions of identity, religion, culture, community and country. The most significant element is the novel centralizes the Parsi Community "as a protagonist". There is a constant interaction between stories about the past and the present of Parsi community. Mistry traces the history of the Parsi community in India through Malcolm Saldanha, Gustad's friend and a representative of yet another minority group in India called Christian community, who tries to establish historical superiority of his Christian community. Christianity came to India over 1900 years ago when Apostle Thomas landed on the Malabar Coast long before the Parsis came in the 7th Century from Persia, running away from Muslims. But Gustad retorts:

"This may be but our prophet Zarathustra lived more that fifteen thousand years before your son of God was even born; a thousand years before the Buddha, two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrianism influence Judaism, Christianity and Islam?"

This sets the tone of the novel as it tries to sum up the fears and anxieties of the passive Parsi community. Though the Parsis are minorities in India, they have contributed to its development. The contemporary politicians such as Nehru and Mrs. Indira Gandhi become an object of their verbal assault because they did not treat Feroz Gandhi, a member of their community, with respect. Mrs. Gandhi also destroyed their authority in banking system by nationalizing banks in 1969. As Dinshawji says, *"Parsis were the kings of banking in those days."* Gustad feels that minorities have no future in India. Various characters belonging to the Parsi community in the novel express their anguish. The racist and communal forces lead agitations, ultimately resulting in massive violence. People like Dinshawji are not aware of this fact.

Dinshawji expresses his fear about the rising communal forces in Bombay wanting to make the Parsis into second class citizens. The members of the Parsi community are scared of politicians. The residents of the Khodadad Building make an experiment in channelizing religious sentiments of people with the help of the pavement artist. They change the wall of Khodadad Building that is used as a public urinal into a collage of pictures of Gods and Goddesses of all religions. They think that it would do something to promote tolerance and understanding the world. Inspector Bamji's "pisser-proof" wall becomes a symbol of Indian secularism. The pavement artist paints on the wall the Gods, Saints and Prophets of Hindu, Judaic, Christian, Muslim, Zoroastrian, Buddhist and Jainis. But this wall is resented by some who disapprove of "Perjaat God--- on a Parsi Zarathosti building wall". The municipality breaks the wall and the pavement artist leaves the place and goes on journeying.

As a community, the Parsis have played a vital role in the social, economic and cultural life of Bombay. Bombay seems to offer safety and security to the community. Those who leave it court disaster. Gustad's friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria who leaves Bombay ends up in the Tihar jail and dies. Gustad's journey to Delhi is fraught with psychological turbulence which he cures by returning to Bombay. Further, individual traits of Parsi community and individuals are given an authentic expression

with the help of minute observation of rituals, their characteristics, idiosyncracies and language. They are conscious of their distinctive identity. Yet they are fully aware of Indian national identity. For them rootlessness involves preservation of their communal identity and national identity as well. That is why stories about the individual, the community and the country remain distinct and yet interrelated. Almost all characters from Gustad to Peerbhoy Paanwala articulate their fierce disapproval of the forces inimical to Indian interests. The Parsi community with its members from various strata of society measures itself in terms of the unfortunate wars that India had to fight with its neighbouring countries like China and Pakistan. “The wicked Chino of 1962 war” becomes “the number one bogeyman” and the Parsis use abusive language against the American and Pakistani leaders responsible for the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971. Their counter stories about Nixon and Kissinger defame America. Mistry narrates and renarrates stories of the country, culture and community in ‘*Such a Long Journey*’. The characters like Gustad, Dinshawji, Bilimoria and Peerbhoy Paanwala are vehicles of conveying ethic, communal and to an extent, national consciousness.

Rohinton Mistry brilliantly depicts the Parsi way of life, Parsi culture and vision in ‘*Such a Long Journey*’. He sweeps over the whole India through Bombay. The Parsis are facing a grim “to be or not to be” crisis of existence. Yet they go on with their “kustis and prayers” to Ahura Mazda. Gustad Noble offers orisons to Ahura Mazda. He comes under the soothing and gentle sway of the death-time prayers and listens to them reverently, though he is not able to understand a word of them. Thus religion is no nonsense for Parsis. The “Tower of Silence” is the central symbol of the Parsi culture. Mistry says, “*Such a ghoulish system--- still became a community with progressive reputation and forward thinking attitude.*” The Parsis are burned to ashes, like Hindus or chewed by worms like the Englishmen or eaten by vultures. But they do not reject the Tower. High intellect is the Parsi obsession and pursuit. Gustad’s sense of loss at his son’s throwing over a chance of admission to IIT is pathetic. This points out their drive towards elitism. The Parsis are too refined, too sophisticated and highly cultured to merge with the down-to-earth Indian masses. They are reluctant Indian. They feel a little rootlessness in India. They feel a sense of insecurity. Their grievances are pointed out by Mistry in Canada through Noble and Dinshawji. Mistry is generous in sprinkling his book with obscenities. For instance, “*Not like our Parsi girls with all their don’t touch here and don’t feel there fussiness. Everything they would open up. In very gully-gutchy, yaar in the dark, or under the stairs, what what went on?*” Tehmul commits a rape on the doll of Roshan. Parsis do need better sex-management. For them sex is more duty than fun. Suffering and death are the two most loved motifs in the novel. Miss Kutpitia, a spinster loses her widower brother and his son. She remains unmarried for the nephew who is her reason for living. Dinshawji laughs away the tears and tortures of life. He lives the joke of life laughing and dies so. Gustad’s life is a tragedy but he begins a new life after his reconciliation with Sohrab. What the Parsis value and what really sustains them, is love and nothing but love. The centuries of suffering have brought the Parsis to a vision of life where nothing is amiss and perhaps this is how they are ready even for their extinction.

To sum up, on the basis of above discussed features of Parsiness as reflected by Mistry, we can assert that ‘*Such a Long Journey*’ tells us more about the Parsi community in Bombay than a book of Sociology could. Mistry can describe daily life among the Parsis of Bombay touching, at the same time, meaningful themes and significant issues of contemporary multicultural and migrant realities. The

melting pot of religious ideologies and political ideas was at a particularly turbulent point in the early 1970s that Mistry makes the ideal backdrop for the novel that will remain socio-politically relevant for years to come. Furthermore, Mistry is able to project the emotional life and personal relationships of the Parsis as a valuable part of the wider human experience at the international level by writing about these things from across the worlds. The novel displays the characteristic diasporic features of a sense of loss, nostalgia and problems of identification with the host country. Mistry renarrates India and Parsiness from a Parsi's point of view. Hence, Parsiness becomes inseparable part of the fictional world of Rohinton Mistry's novel '*Such a Long Journey*.'

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