

Journey as a Catalyst for Growth in Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract

Since times immemorial journeys have figured in stories. Right from fairy tales to epic poems, journeys help the hero to achieve a tangible goal, which test the endurance of the central protagonist and finally prove his mettle. This paper explores Rohinton Mistry's use of the journey motif in his novel *Such a Long Journey* where the protagonist undertakes a physical journey, which awakens him to the corruption and murkiness in politics, at the same time the novel also shows the hero's figurative journey which leads him to the realization that blending with the Hindu majority from which the Parsis felt so alienated, could not be ignored and happiness and fulfillment can only be achieved by accepting in the fold the larger Hindu majority. The writer uses several metaphors to depict this liberation from the self-imposed imprisonment to the final emancipation and acceptance of the Indian reality.

Key words- journey, motif, alienation, emancipation, Indian reality, blending.

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Journeys have prominently figured in stories since times immemorial. In many of these stories the journeys enable the hero to reach a tangible goal. Physical journeys, be they in mythological tales or fairy stories or in literature, lead not only to the accomplishment of the material goal after grappling with obstacles but lead to self realization through an inner struggle. The obstacles and the struggle thus act as a catalyst to purge the soul and help the characters to grasp the truth and reveal the hero's moral fibre.

Rohinton Mistry, a Parsi diasporic writer, based in Canada, uses the journey motif in his novel **Such a Long Journey** to explore themes of alienation, exclusion and inclusion in the land where the Parsis obtained refuge, on the Indian subcontinent.

The Parsi community, an ethnic minority, to which Mistry belongs, journeyed and migrated to India centuries ago to avoid Muslim persecution and found shelter in India having been granted permission to practice their religion. The 'sugar in milk' policy followed by them enabled them

to adapt to the local culture though maintaining their own distinct identity. Progressing under British rule they prospered and flourished in India and their rapid progress earned for them an elitist status at the same time alienating them from the Hindu majority. The dawn of Indian independence and the British sailing away from Indian shores left them feeling cheated and left out. We thus see in their novels a search for an Eldorado, a Utopia, a place to call home; for unlike the Jews who returned to their homeland centuries later, the diminishing community of Parsis seem to have no such prospects. Nostalgically looking back at past glory in Persia and later in India under the British, they feel alienated in the country of adoption. We notice in the novel, a search for a haven, where the Parsi protagonist can be assimilated with the majority.

Like the 'Fravashi' (Guardian Spirit) which guards the spirits of the Zoroastrians on the right path, Gustad Noble, the central protagonist in *Such a Long Journey* treads the path of 'Asha', (truth) negotiating a place in an environment of alienation in a nation dominated by the Hindu majority.

That the journey motif is central to the theme of *Such a Long Journey* becomes evident from the title and the three epigraphs, all of which reflect the central protagonist's journey through pain in life and the ultimate awakening and acceptance from pain. In the backdrop of the socio-political events of the seventies in India, the novelist presents the life of a common man from a marginalized community who counters the cruel vicissitudes of life and yet retains his moral fiber.

As the novel begins we find the eponymous Gustad Noble performing the Kusti prayers, reflecting the Zoroastrian belief in purity – physical, psychological and spiritual, struggling to seek and find happiness in a world where things have not turned out to be as he would have wanted to. The several flashbacks take us to a past where the relative affluence, reflected through the food and vacations at hill stations has disappeared.

Grappling with the relative poverty of the present, and yearning for a better future, he again meets with failure as his son refuses to join the Indian Institute of Technology, which will enable him to obtain jobs abroad and his daughter's illness and his inability to do anything about it. This gives a chance to the novelist to explore themes of betrayal and loss and to explore history (what can also be termed as 'alternative history'), from the point of view of a marginalised community,

The sickness and deterioration at home finds a parallel in the political situation of the country at war with Bangladesh bringing out the corruption at the highest political level in the country. The parallel journey of Major Billimoria to serve the country through the Research and Analysis Wing, lands him in trouble by being falsely embroiled and implicated in a money laundering racket.

Shock and disillusionment at the perceived betrayals both at the personal and political level thus infiltrates Gustad's psyche. For he feels that Major Billimoria who was like a brother and who vanished without a word had betrayed him.

This sense of betrayal also works in the larger Indian context- of the betrayal of the country by the then Prime Minister and at the international level of the country by China, all of which is revealed through the conversations between the characters. Gustad Noble thus ensconces himself within the compound wall of Parsi culture and still more within the four walls of his flat which is covered with black out paper, and tries to inure himself from the Indian reality. By thus keeping the Indian reality at bay and having exclusively Parsi friends except for the childhood friend Malcolm, what emerges is Gustad's alienation from the larger Indian populace- the Hindu majority. The maneuvering politics in the highest offices of the country offsets his sense of justice and fair play. His conversation with his son on an earlier occasion saw Gustad in sympathy with the ruling party and refusal to believe that corruption existed at the top most hierarchy in politics. The later revelation by Major Billimoria about the working of RAW- the Research and Analysis Wing of the secret service and the corruption of the Prime Minister disappoint and disillusion him and awaken him to the larger political reality. The revelation is of central importance in the growth of Gustad. The retreat into the past becomes a constant while wearily treading the present.

Gustad's fear of mutability and extinction brought out through recollections of his father's bankruptcy, his mother's death and the breaking of the sugar bowl in Matheran, is countered by the pavement artist who unlike Gustad reiterates the necessity of journeying.

"The journey – chanced, unplanned, solitary – was the thing to relish...The cycle of arrival, creation and obliteration" (184)

is what the artist looked forward to. Gustad however cannot enjoy the journey of life and constantly harps about the wrongs in the personal, social and political spheres of life. **Peter Morey** in *Mistry's Hollow Men* writes,

"The acts of betrayal and deception of which he feels himself a victim are experienced as mini deaths, confirming him in his isolationist outlook. It is only with the actual deaths of his friends Dinshawji and Jimmy - and his decision to undertake the long journey to the latter's bedside - that, through the soothing balm of the funeral rites he participates in, Gustad is able to come to terms with those losses which constitute human experience through time." (Haldar 190)

As Gustad treads the path of 'Asha', in the spirit of a true Zoroastrian it is inevitable that he confronts and fights evil. Disappointed by the lack of values in people around including his friend Billimoria, Gustad shows his own on the death of Tehmul, lifting him and single-handedly carrying him upstairs, reciting the prayers, revealing in the process a respect for others, an ethical character, goodwill and benevolence, which was also revealed during Dinshawji's last days in the hospital and his journey to the capital to meet Billimoria who he later realized was falsely implicated.

The death of Tehmul and the final breaking of the compound wall find Gustad at peace, having come to terms with mutability and destruction and removing the blackout paper, allowing light to come into the house, signifying an acceptance of the larger world and reality and allowing it to

penetrate inside. His transformation is subtle yet steady, with his ethical nature proving dominant and paving the way for the final reconciliation between father and son and a hope for solidarity and final restoration of family bonding. As the artist picks up his crayons and sets out on his new journey, the journey motif is reiterated and reflects Gustad's own journey towards self-fulfillment and breaking of all inner barriers as he lets his heart and mind open out to the outside world and accepts his son back into the fold. It is also suggestive of the paradigmatic journey of the Parsis from their homeland to India centuries ago.

Gustad's journey of life and the problems he encounters run parallel to the political problems that the nation encounters. The problem of money that he faces is a direct consequence of the Bangladesh war and his later direct involvement in political corruption gets his friend Billimoria into trouble. It also awakens him to the political reality of the rampant corruption in the highest office in the country and the Pakistan Bangladesh situation as well as the involvement of the superpowers.

But it is not only Gustad and the pavement artist who journey. Major Billimoria also journey's far. Leaving the friendly environs of the sanctuary that was Khodadad building; he ventures on the path of adventure and exposes himself to political maneuvering. Gustad's visit to him in jail, gives him an opportunity to clarify his role in the money laundering and getting Gustad involved in the racket. Knowing then that his friend was 'innocent' of the charges levelled against him, Gustad returns, at peace with himself and with his faith in friendship restored.

Sohrab, the prodigal son who had ventured away from home ultimately also returns into the fold as he notices the ethical nature of his father, while another journey comes to an end as Tehmul dies just as the compound wall crumbles, thus signifying the end of innocence.

The three epigraphs thus encapsulate the 'long journey' of Gustad's life. Commencing with Firdausi's Shah - Nama, where an unknown 'he' gathers all the aged priests and asks them how the ancient kings who had once ruled the world, "hold the world in the beginning, and why is it that it has been left to us in such a sorry state? And how was it that they were able to live free of care during the days of their heroic labours?"

The lament reflects the sorry state of affairs in Gustad's own life, whose comparatively comfortable childhood contrasted with the distressing youth and adulthood make him nostalgic for the past. The hope expressed through the lines from *Gitanjali* is reflected in Gustad's own hope that the future would be all right once his elder son Sorab gets admission to the IIT with its associated promise of a job abroad. But the journey seems to be never ending (the title being plucked out from T.S.Eliot's Journey of the Magi) with his son refusing to go to the IIT. As Gustad comes to terms with reality and opens out to the wider world the lines from *Gitanjali* make sense, with "new tracks" and "new music" unfolding before the traveller. The past and the future thus span the 'cold' present, as brought out by the three epigraphs.

The writer is able to show that the journeys of the mind are equally important as the protagonist, Gustad, retreads into the past and as memory peels off taking a leap from the present to the past at the sight of old books or a Meccano set which also illustrate the shifting fortunes of time

through such things as the destruction of the wall, the change in the artists life and the dilapidation of businesses signified through the procession towards the end. The final scene where Gustad removes the blackout paper from his flat thus represents acceptance of this reality where the Parsis no longer hold an elitist status nor can they remain alienated from the Hindu majority. It symbolizes the final self integration and integration with society.

Works cited