

## In Search of Homeland: A Study of Parsi Experience in Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey*

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### Abstract

The Indian born contemporary Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry hailing from the Parsi community chose the course of his forefathers migrated to Toronto and writes his first novel *Such A Long Journey*, published in 1991, brought him in to limelight. This paper is an attempt to explore the psychological experiences of the Parsi community through the central figure of the novel, Gustad Noble and various symbols and Metaphors used by Rohinton Mistry to point out the fate and nature of the minor Parsi community. The Parsi's, an ethno-religious minority living especially in Bombay contributed immensely to the development of India but their contribution was not duly recognized, as a result of their lack of assimilation into the mainstream they are migrating in search of new homeland.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, journey, minority, community

The term 'diaspora' is found in the Greek translation of the Bible meaning 'to spread' or 'to disperse'. Diaspora has a long history with its roots in the fields of religion and politics in the form of Jewish Diaspora and African Diaspora. In the contemporary period it has become the center of attention to understand the agony of displaced person from his homeland Kim Knott and Sean McLoughin writes in the "Introduction" of *Diasporas : Concepts, intersections, identities* about the popularity of the term and concept that:

Moreover, the use of plural form, 'diasporas', has become common only in the last couples of decades. Admittedly an imprecise measure, an all-sites Google search on 11 January 2010 listed some ten millions results for the term 'diaspora' globally. Certainly, 'diaspora' continues to have meaning beyond the academy, for diasporans themselves, with copious formal and informal connections being maintained with homelands and with relatives and friends scattered globally.(2)

Robin Cohen has discussed in his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* four phases of diasporas. Parsi Diaspora is also the part of the first phase of diaspora. Like Jews, Parsis were also scattered from their paradise Iran because of Arab invasion that crumbled Persian Empire. To save their lives they had to leave their homeland in search of new homes. They entered into India with their good will and whole heartedly accepted it as their country. As Parsi is an ethno-religious minority contributed a lot to develop India but their contribution could not gain due recognition by the majority and always considered as a 'periphery' or 'margins'. Rohinton

Mistry, a Parsi Gujrati writer of Indian origin chose the course of his forefathers and migrated to Toronto (Canada), who bears the burden of ‘double marginalization’ and ‘double displacement’ first in India then in Canada. Rohinton Mistry’s first novel, *Such a Long Journey* brought instant fame for its author. The main action of the story revolves around the Parsi Community of Khodabad Building living in Bombay. Rohinton Mistry delineates with ordinary, middle class Parsi man as the central figure of the novel, to depict the struggles and complexities of Parsis life for the sake of survival in the distressed social, cultural and political atmosphere. Novel is set against the backdrop of India’s war with China and Pakistan also the Bangladesh Revolution for a separate identity.

Gustad Noble, a genial, moral and religious man in his fifties is the central figure of the novel. He is forced to live in a small flat and works as a bank clerk. His life is surrounded by many struggles and annoyances that are a part of middle class existence. He is striving to become a responsible husband, father, friend and countryman. Gustad Noble is the representative of all the Parsi community living in India and their struggles as a minority group. Rohinton Mistry is keenly aware about the predicament of a minority community and presents the agony through the mouth of Malcolm Saldana in a conversation with Gustad that, “We are minorities in a nation of Hindus”(Mistry, *SLJ* 23). Gustad normally reminisces his days of prosperity and cherishes past days when “excitement and happiness filling his beloved childhood home”(Mistry, *SLJ* 19). Gustad’s father was a prosperous businessman who has a furniture shop, Noble & Sons, Makers of Fine Furniture but due to the carelessness of alcoholic uncle his family became helpless and witnessed the days of severe crisis. With the help of his friend Malcolm Saldana helped he could secure some pieces of furniture which are “The pieces stood like parantheses around his entire life, the sentinels of his sanity”(Mistry, *SLJ* 6). In his childhood he loved to go Crawford Market with his father but now when situations has turned he feels awkward while carrying meat amongst the vegetarian passenger travelling in the bus. He realizes the degrading condition of his present from his glorious past:

Perhaps it was due to their different circumstances: his father always accompanied by at least one servant, arriving and leaving by taxi; Gustad alone, with his meagre wallet and worn basket lined with newspaper to soak up meat juices that could start dripping in the bus, causing embarrassment or, worse still, angry protest from vegetarian passengers.(Mistry, *SLJ* 21)

Sudden disappearance of Major Jimmy Bilimoria without any information was the first blow for Gustad who considered him as “a second father”(Mistry, *SLJ* 14) to his children and the second blow was from his eldest son Sohrab, who refuses to join IIT and says in anger at on Roshan’s birthday, “Why can’t you just accept it? IIT does not interest me. It was never my idea, you made all the plans. I told you I am going to change to the arts programme, I like my college, and all my friends here”(Mistry, *SLJ* 48). Gustad was so hurt at sudden refusal of Sohrab and his hurt soul remembers the day he lost his leg to save his son from an accident when Sohrab was only five year old and since then he is carrying limp. He bitterly says, “With holes in my shoes I went to work, so we could buy almonds to sharpen his brain. At two hundred a kilo. And all wasted”(Mistry, *SLJ* 122).

In the midst of personal worries and problems Gustad feels totally helpless and more troubled when he thinks about the position of minorities of India. As a conscientious Parsi, he was aware of the insecure future of the minorities living in Bombay in the reign of Marathi in general and Parsis in particular in these words, “No future for the 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”(Mistry, *SLJ* 55). It was all the game of politicians who were in power. Gustad and Dinshawji who were fully aware of the notions and policies of Shiv Sena and Indira Gandhi which were the real threat that his community had to deal with for the existence. Dinshawji recalls those golden days when Parsis were the kings of banking sector and says bitterly it is the policy of Indira Gandhi that she nationalized the banks which affected Parsis hold on the banking industry. Both Congress and Shiv Sena together become trouble for the Parsi community. So Dinshawji makes a very bitter and abusive remark on the Indira Gandhi and Shiv Sena in these words:

Showing the poor she is on their side. *Saali* always up to some mischief. Remember When her pappy was Prime Minister and he made her president of Congress Party? At once she began encouraging the demands for a separate Maharashtra. How much bloodshed, how much rioting she caused. And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens. Don't forget, she started it all by supporting racist buggers'.(Mistry, *SLJ* 39)

So it was the condition of minorities living in India, particularly in Bombay who are struggling hard to survive in all the circumstances who has no relief from the society and policies of the present government. They find themselves as minority who has no future, no security and day by day their condition is being worst. Rohinton Mistry has dealt realistically the problems faced by the community through several metaphors and symbols as Wall, Limpness, Vinca plant, Major Jimmy Bilimoria, Blackout paper and Journey to show the present fear and psychological trauma realized by Parsi community .

The compound's wall, that runs in front of the entire length of the Khodabad Building is a predominant metaphor serves both as a protection and a problem for the community as it gives a sense of security to the inhabitants while it converted to a public urinal by the passerby so becomes the reason of mosquitoes and the smell. Gustad invites the pavement artist to use the wall as his canvas and adorn it with the pictures of various gods, goddess, prophet and saints. The wall transforms into a holy place of worship where the devotees offer flower and incense. In this way the wall symbolizes the assimilative spirit of the Parsi community, which has solidarity for every religion of the world like their heart but in spite of their mixing nature the municipality decides to demolish the wall for widening the road it signifies the danger hovering over the Parsi community security and existence. In the violent confrontation between the demonstrators and workers Themul, one of the Parsi of that building loses his life.

Secondly, there are two characters Gustad Noble and Tehmul Langra in the novel who suffer from the problem of limping. They were not limp by birth but the accident made them limp. Gustad in order to save the life of his eldest son Sohrab met an accident and now is carrying the limp ever since. Tehmul Langra who is another important character of the novel suffer from the limp after falling from the Neem tree in order to catch the tangled kite. It was so

tragic that due to the jolt of that accident Tehmul not only got limp but also he became physically and mentally handicapped. Both major character symbolize the fragile, endangered, staggering and limping condition of the Parsi race.

Thirdly, Gustad planted the Vinca plant in his garden was the source of joy and very dear to him. It becomes the symbol of threat when Ghulam Mohammed leaves a reminder for Gustad regarding the money in the form of uprooted Vinca plant. The plant becomes the symbol of insults and threat the Parsi community has to face as a minority community: In the end of the novel we find that, “A shrunken shadow of the solitary tree crouched to one side. Two men were working on its trunk with a cross-cut saw”(Mistry, *SLJ* 339).

Fourthly, Major Jimmy Bilimoria, ‘second father’(Mistry, *SLJ* 14) to the children of Gustad, reveals corruption at the highest level. Bilimoria’s blind faith in Indira Gandhi leads to his arrest and hospitalization where he breaths last. K. Damodar Rao writes in his article “Ordinariness of Dreams, Longevity of the Journey: Story, Statement and Allegory in Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey*” that, “Billimoria was used as pawn in the games that the highest authorities could play”(134). It represents that how a common man like Gustad and Bilimoria becomes the victim of the authorities.

Fifthly, the Blackout paper which Gustad had put up during 1962 war with China symbolizes the blackout in the life of Nehru as PM that treachery done by Chou En lai collapsed the dreams and philosophy of Nehru and filled his life with the darkness for forever and uprooted its root. His whole political journey was covered by the blackout of 1962 war. In case of Gustad blackout paper darkened the darkness of already congested apartment. It is only Gustad who did not pulled off the blackout paper ever after war was over and this paper witnessed even two more war as it was there for nine years (1962-1971). In the beginning family members find it irritating because of the dim light and darkness but soon they become habitual of it still sometimes Dilnavaz complains, “In this house, the morning never seems to come ... Occasionally, though, when Dilnavaz was feeling particularly harassed by quotidian matters, the paper became the target of her frustration: ‘Very nice this is. Son collects butterflies and moths, father collects spiders and cockroaches. Soon Khodabad Building will become one big insect museum’” (Mistry, *SLJ* 12). It symbolizes the hardships of a minority community within their boundaries and for this they do not complain also and another aspect is that every ventilator was closed that not a single ray of sun could enter or peep what is going in the family. It gives the sense of security to them. In the end of the novel we find that Gustad pulled down the blackout paper. Nilufer E. Bharucha opines this activity in her book *Rohinton Mistry: Ethnic Enclosures and Transcultural Spaces* as:

The novel thus ends on the dual note of journeying and staying rooted – Gustad having chosen to stay. However, even this staying back has changed as it now is in the context of Gustad having pulled down the blackout papers and letting in light, allowing the moths of the past to fly out of his life. At another level this could also signal the letting in of the wider Indian reality into the enclosed Parsi space.(141)

Finally, the last metaphor Journey, which is a part of the title of the novel in real sense shows that journey was really long for the Parsis who left their country to be part India but still their journey is not over they are migrating to other countries in search of identity and solace because they are not given due recognition for the contribution they contributed for the country and always considered as marginalized. We can relate this long journey of the Parsis with the journey Gustad makes to Delhi and ponders over whether, “Would this long journey be worth it? Was any journey worth the trouble?”(Mistry, *SLJ* 259) Here we can find that Parsis after the loss of their first home, Iran they migrated to Bombay and still this migration is in process in search of real homeland.

Rohinton Mistry’s *Such A Long Journey* is a direct, real commentary on the socio-political situation of India. It raises the issues of corruption in high authorities and day to day problems faced by Indians and especially by Parsi minority who It depicts the psychological experiences of middle class Parsi family being a minority among the majority. Jose Verghese truly writes in his article, “Home as a Cultural Construct in Rohinton Mistry’s Short Stories” that, “The entire business of understanding the Parsi situation in India lies in a broad minded approach to Parsi discourse. In comprehending the plight of the Parsis as presented in Mistry’s works, one does not have to be a Parsi her/himself”(97).

While summing up, it is really pathetic that the number of Parsis are really degrading day by day for several reasons and this community existence is really in danger.

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