

Societal Marginalization of the Parsi Community in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract

The present abstract proposes to examine the impact of Societal Marginalization on the Parsi community living in India with reference to the literary text “Such a Long Journey” authored by a Parsi novelist Rohinton Mistry. In the postcolonial era, the marginalized literature focuses on the pangs and sufferings of the marginalized class. Marginalization, as explained by Karl Marx, can be divided into two categories – “Societal Marginalization and Spatial Marginalization”. The Societal Marginalization addresses the issue pertaining to religion, culture, race, gender and politics. It is under such category that the present abstract analyses and explores the novel of Rohinton Mistry. Marginalization can better be understood in Gramscian terminology i.e. the relationship between the ‘oppressor’ and the ‘oppressed’ or the ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, a Marxist analogy of ‘hegemony’ how power is exercised by the affluent class on the weaker section of society. Mistry’s “Such a Long Journey” addresses the issue of Societal Marginalization of the Parsi community through the corrupt politics practised in 1970’s India. The present abstract also foregrounds how power structure turns and twists the truth, and presents his own version of truth in the public domain.

Key Words: Societal Marginalization, the Parsi Community, Centre and Periphery, Hegemony

History of the Parsi Community: An Introduction

The Parsi Community emigrated to the soil of India around 8th century to avoid the Muslim persecution in Iran, and sought a refugee at the coast of Gujrat at the mercy and certain terms and conditions of the then king Jadi Rana after a great negotiation. The process of marginalization/socialization of the Parsi community begins with the conditional grounds by the king for staying in Gujrat. The double-dose of marginalization on the Parsi community alienated them culturally and psychologically from their religion. The psychological burden of learning a new language, adopting attires of a different culture, and restriction of time in performing marriages made them an alienated community on the Indian soil. Mistry’s novels voice this angst, fear and helplessness of the Parsi community caused by marginalization. However, the Parsi community accepted all the terms and conditions of the king, and started

living as an agrarian community thereafter. With the passage of time, the Parsis transformed themselves from agrarian community to industrial community, and flourished and emerged one of the most influential communities in India. The contribution of the Parsis to the Indian industries, science, politics, sports and arts is in abundance. The prominent Parsi industrialists are J.R.D. Tata, Jamsetji Tata and Ardeshir Godrej. Homie Jehangir Bhabha is an eminent Indian scientist known as the 'Father of Indian nuclear programme'. Field Marshal Sam Manecshaw, the former chief of Indian Army, who with his indomitable will and courage, compelled the Pakistani army chief to surrender with his 90,000 soldiers during the Indo-Pak war in 1971. That was a glorious day in the history of Indian army. Dadabhai Naoroji and Madam Cama were the prominent Parsi political figures during the freedom movement in India.

Marginalization of the Parsi Community

Marginalization is a recurring theme in almost all the works of Rohinton Mistry. The term marginalization, in the broadest sense, applies to a group of people who are at the 'periphery' against the 'centre'. According to the latest Census figure, the Parsi community is the fastest diminishing ethnic community in India. This fear of being left out from the mainstream of human civilization is poignantly reflected in Rohinton Mistry's "Such a Long Journey" where all the characters keep struggling for a new identity for survival.

Rohinton Mistry's "Such a Long Journey" (1991) is set against the backdrop of national political events such as Bangladeshi War with Pakistan and a serious case of money laundering. The central issue addressed by Mistry in "Such a Long Journey" is political corruption by the top echelons in power. The novel also reflects the fear of the marginalized Parsi community due to the growing Core Hindutva fundamentalist forces being sponsored by the then congress Party as a counter to the Left ideology.

The novel commences with the allusion of T. S. Eliot's poem "Journey of the Magi" and pre-caps the readers about the bleak journey of human life in a world which is existentially/politically meaningless and absurd. Existentialism, according to M.H. Abrahms, is a philosophy that determines human birth on this planet essentially meaningless and boring. Mistry encapsulates the notion of existentialism in dealing with the experience of the marginalized Parsi community with the world mostly dominated by majority Hindu community. The story sets in Khodadad Building in Bombay which is mostly inhabited by the micro Parsi community.

As the plot of the novel progresses, we have a glimpse of complex national political intrigues which adversely impact the lives of the marginalized Parsi community. In fact, the story of Gustad Noble and his friends reveal the complex web of political corruption and conspiracy during the regime of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The plot of the novel revolves around real national event of the 1971's Bangladesh War with Pakistan. The creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and the unprecedented political events that preceded before the war between India and Pakistan have been realistically portrayed through the story of Gustad Noble and his friends Jimmy Bilimoria in the novel. The novel sheds light on the

‘national politics’ through the lens of the marginalized Parsi communities. In fact, all the Parsi characters feel a sense of fear and uncertainty due to the insensitivity of the political class towards their community. The novel also raises the burning issue of political corruption by the top echelons in power that ruin the life of the marginalized section of India.

Parsi as a Politically Marginalized Community

Rohinton Mistry reserves a trenchant jibe at the nation policy of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In “An Introduction: Rohinton Mistry”, “Mistry, as Dewnarain observes, denounces the corrupt politics of Indira Gandhi’s government” (67). Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s insensitive politics has been criticised by the Parsi community in the novel. It is such ‘self-centered’ politics of Mrs. Indira Gandhi that has economically relegated the Parsi community to the ‘periphery’. Dinshawji explicitly criticises Mrs. Gandhi’s economic policy of the nationalization of banks in 1969. This economic policy deprived the Parsi community from the mainstream of economy because the Parsis were mostly the private bank owners. Dinshawji recalls the glorious past of the Parsis in the banking sectors:

What days those were, yaar. What fun we used to have.’..... ‘Parsis were the kings of banking in those days. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalised the banks. (Mistry, *SLJ* 38)

Dinshawji expresses his angst and fear over the economic policy of Mrs. Indira Gandhi whose decision to nationalise the banks caused the downfall of economic repute of the Parsi community in India. Dinshawji, thus, points out the process of economic marginalization of the Parsi community caused by the policy of nationalisation of banks in India. The basic idea of a secular nation is to ensure social, economic and cultural security to all its citizens. The interest of the marginalized section of society cannot be sacrificed in the interest in the name of the pseudo national interest. Dinshawji further points out the divisive politics of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and holds her responsible to create a fundamentalist political group Shiv Sena in Maharashtra:

She is a shrewd woman, these are vote getting tactics. Showing the poor she is on their side. Saali always upto some mischief.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..... . (Mistry, *SLJ* 39)

Mistry is very much concerned about the contemporary politics in India. The aforementioned observation of Dinshawji reflects the growing fear of the Parsi community of being marginalized by the divisive politics of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Such politics of check and balance links the Gramscian idea of *hegemony* which is illustrated by Shelley Wallia in “Edward Said and the Writing of History”:

Power is maintained by aura and prestige of the dominant fundamental group which constantly manipulates its social and political strategies to maintain the acceptance of class society which otherwise should turn revolutionary in response to such hegemony. (Said qtd. in Wallia, 31)

The observation of Dinshawji appears more serious and factual when he directly criticises Mrs. Indira Gandhi for practising a divisive politics to strengthen her vote banks. The rise of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra is the outcome of the politics of power. In fact, Mrs. Gandhi gave space to the Hindu fundamentalist forces to counter the ideology of the Left. She was an ace politician who appeared to be falsely with the side of the poor, but actually she believed in the politics of exclusion.

The whole narrative of “Such a Long Journey” is based on the social and political exclusion of the Parsi community in India. The exclusion of the Parsi community in India operates at multiple levels. Firstly, the Parsis are the globally marginalized ethnic group. According to the census of 2011, the Parsis are the fastest depleting group in India and across the world. Secondly, they are politically marginalized figures in India due to the politics of power. Gustad Noble expresses this fear of being extinct as he says, “What kind of life was Sohrab going to look forward to? No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense” (Mistry, *SLJ* 55).

Gustad Noble is well aware of the political exclusion of the Parsi community in Bombay due to the growing fundamentalist political group Shiv Sena. The politics of such Hindutva fundamentalist forces is the politics of hate and exclusion in the name of religion and ethnicity. In fact, the rise of Hindutva ideology in India and especially in Bombay is the root cause of the socialization of the Parsi community in India.

Coercive Exercise of Power by the Political Class

The role of contemporary politics is a key-note in *Such a Long Journey* in shaping the socio-political arena of India. Mistry exposes the corrupt politics of Mrs. Indira Gandhi which darkens the future of Indian democracy and sets a wrong cult of misuse of constitutional institutions by top echelons in power. The entire narrative of the novel revolves around the self-personality oriented politics of Mrs. Gandhi. The novel, through its factional characters, exposes the political malpractices of Mrs. Gandhi. The central plot of the novel is based on the serious money laundering case in 1971 involving a sum of sixty lakhs which caused a great political disturbance during the regime of Mrs. Gandhi. Sohrab Nagarwala, a cashier of State Bank of India, was the prime accuse of this scam. According to his statement, he received a phone call from the Prime Minister’s office to hand over a sum of sixty lakh rupees to a messenger. However, his explanation was never accepted, and he was arrested and died a mysterious death in the imprisonment before he could be brought to ‘justice’.

Hegemony of Politics

The psychology of Bilimoria can better be understood in terms of Gramscian view of ‘hegemony’ explained in “Edward Said and the Writing of History” by Shelley Wallia:

Hegemony works best by creating the confusion of contradictory ideas in the minds of the masses as they absorb cultural values and beliefs of the dominating class. It tends

to make the subaltern 'accept inequality and oppression as natural and unchangeable. (Walia, 32-33)

Being blinded by the 'nationalistic idealism' of Mrs. Gandhi, Bilimoria signs his 'death warrant' without realising its dire consequences. He fails to understand the dirty nexus of Mrs. Gandhi while signing the blank paper:

She gave me a blank sheet of paper and her own fountain-pen. I wrote my confession....like an idiot. My respect for her.... grown so much over the months. Such a strong woman. Trusted her completely. (Mistry, *SLJ* 277)

Jimmy Bilimoria reveals how the state power uses its ordinary citizen to its vested interest. Even the worldly-wise and cynical man, Jimmy Bilimoria, fails to read the shrewd and vicious mind of Mrs. Gandhi who is trying to cover-up her foul play through his confession letter.

Symbolical Significance of the Novel

In fact, the journey in the novel is a metaphor which emblemises the ongoing struggle for the survival of the marginalized against 'the centre'. The first epigraph has been taken from Firdausi's "Shah-Nama" which illustrates the glorious past of the Iranian culture and the present degraded state of the Parsis. The history of the Parsi Community mirrors their religious persecution by the Muslims in Iran. Being persecuted by the Muslims, the Parsis immigrated to the coastal land of Gujrat in India around 8th to 10th century. The first epigraph tells the history of suffering and religious persecution of the Parsis by the Muslims in Iran. The religious persecution compelled them to alienate themselves from their soil, hence they became a global religious refugee. This permanent sense of alienation is a recurrent theme in "Such a Long Journey" as its principal character Gustad Noble expresses his concerns of how his community is being alienated from the mainstream of national discourse. In the historical context, the Parsi community is doubly marginalized in India.

Conclusion

To sum up my paper, the Parsis were apprehensive about their social and economic status in the context of post-independent India. Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain illustrates this fear of the Parsi community caused by the end of the British colonial era:

They viewed the issue of independence with mixed feelings, since many of them identified with Western culture. There was regret for the passing of an old way of life (during the Raj) and they linked their changed social fortunes to the departure of the British. (Dewnarain, 24)

The anticipation of fear of the Parsi community seems to be obvious as we see how the Government of India, after the Independence, started intervening in the private industries in the pretext of democratic process. The Parsi community faced the

greatest setback of such decision of the government. The incorporation of 49 per cent capital participation in Tata Airlines from the Government of India infuriated JRD Tata as he believed that such decision of the Government will deteriorate the airline services. Moreover, the nationalisation of Bank in 1969 by Mrs. Gandhi also caused a great sense of regret in the Parsi community as their glorious economic stature was diminished. Mistry reflects this pathos, pity and fear of the Parsi community in his novel. In fact, each of his characters bears the baggage of historical injustice with the Parsi community. In other words, the novels of Mistry swing between the past and present of the Parsi where the characters yearn to live in the world of nostalgia.

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