

## **A Community in Transition: Parsi Culture and Identity in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey***

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### **Abstract**

Rohinton Mistry is a critically acclaimed Indo-Canadian Parsi novelist. As a Parsi and immigrant in Canada, he looks at him as a double displacement and this sense of displacement is a recurrent theme in his literary works. He presents the realistic conditions and political history of the Indian society in his debut novel *Such a Long Journey*. His book portrays diverse facets of Indian socio – economic life as well as Parsi Zoroastrian life, customs and religion. His characters represent the Parsi community, whose identity is historically problematic. It is a progressive community with a glorious past and a dismal future.

*Such a Long Journey* is a unique attempt novel based on truth Indian fiction in English. The story is set in India in 1971, at the time of the war with Pakistan which ended with the independence of East Pakistan (Bangladesh). A moral man, the head of a loving family, in his fifties Gustad Noble has to experience a complete upheaval of his life, owing to the sudden blowing up of politics in his smooth everyday routine. The adventures of this bank clerk, whose life is devastated by history are linked both to the situation of the Parsi community of Bombay in the seventies and to a larger horizon of Indian politics, at the same time characterized by a huge return of nationalism. In his journey, Gustad meets sorrow and death, and disillusion for his son's betrayal. Finally at the end of his journey Gustad realizes that for him the real journey has just started or that the certain journeys never end and must go on in any case, even without hope, even without knowing their goal.

**Keywords:** Cultural Hybridity, Parsi Community, Politics, Identity.

Indian literature in English has carved out a distinct identity of its own as the artistically mature articulation of a distinctively flavored sensibility which despite its rootedness in a specific socio-cultural milieu has wider ramifications with regard to the vision it enshrines as well as the form where in it is projected.) As a distinct literary form the novel is undoubtedly of recent forms to be evolved and the most dominant in twentieth century. Rohinton Mistry is an important contemporary novelist. He is a social-political novelist who has emerged as a formidable writer on the world literary scene. He occupies a significant place as an Indian diasporic writer who has written 'back' from his place of migration critically about India, Indian political scenario, minorities, regional identities, history, environment, cultural pluralism. He was born and brought up in the cosmopolitan Bombay, a melting point of competing cultures and communities he belonged to the Parsi cultural and religious 'enclosure', from which he could never really separate himself, emotionally and psychologically.

Mistry depicts the Parsi experience in the metropolitan, multicultural, multi-ethnic Bombay. His characters' represent the Parsi Community, whose identity been historically problematized. It is a progressive community with a glorious past and a dismal future. Mistry attempts at giving details about the lifestyles and culture of the Parsis wherever he gets an opportunity his fiction. He is keenly aware of his Community predicament. In the recent years, a large numbers of young Parsis have chosen to migrate to the West, Mistry who belongs to them and also hopes to, recover a life of comfort and pride.

The Parsis are a very small ethno-religious minority in India, living in the west coast of the subcontinent, especially in Bombay. In spite of their small number, Parsis occupy a pivotal position in India's Social, Cultural, Political and Economic history. The name "Parsis" or "Parsees" refers to one of their origin in Persian province called "Fars" which their left over about 1200 years ago to escape from the persecution of the invading Arabs and to save the teaching of Zoroaster from being Islamized by the Arabians (Kulke 13). (It is during the period of sassanians rule religion for the first time in history). This Iranian-Zoroastrian empire came to an end with the conquest of Iran by the Islamic Arabians in the 7th century; this led to the exodus of the Parsees. The migrations of Parsee from Persia are mostly based on the chronicle "Kissah-i-sanjan" written by a Parsee priest, Bahaman Kaikobad Sanjana in Nausai. The king of Sanjan, Jadi Rana allowed Parsees to settle in Sanjan and imposed them certain conditions like, they have to explain their religion to the king; they have to give up their native language and take on the languages of India; their men should wear the traditional dress of India; the men should lay down their weapons, and they should hold their wedding processions only in the dark (Kulke 28). Hence Gujarat becomes the native language of the community and sari, the traditional garment of Parsees women. Anyhow, the (parsees) managed to "Clothe their cultural concessions to their Indian environment" (Kulke 29). The Parsees began to settle in other parts of Gujarat

towards the end of 10th century. Later they moved to the other parts of the country especially in Bombay.

All the works of Mistry foregrounds the heterogeneity of identity within Parsi Community and the dynamic nature of Parsi community itself. Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* is the first major work, in which he explores indepth the various complex attributes of Parsi life, History, Culture and Character. The protagonist has the feelings of loss and insecurity with several chastening experiences. The Protagonist, Gustad noble is a middle class man working as a clerk in a bank. His devotion to his family, his faith in Zoroastrianism and his love for his friends and his community are continually tested through a series of adverse circumstances. The sad predicament of Gustad evokes pity in the readers as the experience, fears, traumas and frustrations that he undergoes are those of minority community, and in wider sense, of all ethnic minority communities. Gustad's dreams and aspirations are quiet, modest and when circumstances conspire to deny him even these modest expectations finds it hard to accept the fact that things are beyond his control.

*Such a Long Journey* creates a vivid picture of family life in general and that of a close knit Paris family in particular. It tells a story rich in subject matter and characterization set in the years around early seventies in Mumbai. It deals with the problem of India during India's second war with Pakistan. It takes up the conflict between political and personal realities. Mistry strikes the opposition between the values of family and tradition and the corruption of the outside world. The plot is drawn on the political canvas where Gustad Noble, a citizen of Bombay, the protagonist is striving to become a responsible husband and father amidst his rebellious son Shorab, superstitious wife Dilnawaz, friend Jimmy Bilimoria and death of good friend Dinshawji. The disappearance of his friend Bilimoria from the Khodadad building was the first blow that Gustad felt. He considered him as his friend, philosopher and guide, Only Dilnawaz can sense the depth of his pain because of abrupt departure of his dear friends. Gustad comments upon his friend's manner:

To leave like this, after being neighbours for so many Years, is a shameful way of behaving. Bloody bad manners.(14)

Mistry's character develops gradually from particular to general by depicting their idiosyncrasies, follies and foibles, from individual to family and gradually widening into the social, cultural and political world. The characters change and develop subtly and totally engross the reader. The second tragic blow that deeply affected his mind was his eldest son Shorab. Gustad had full hope on his eldest son. He was very much excited that Shorab has got admission in the IIT, but when he refuses him to enrol his name, Gustad heart breaks Gustad has a great

expectation for his son's future prosperity. But this leads Gustad to anger and bitterness and a break in the relationship between the father and son. At the dinner Shorab states that:

I'm sick and tired of IIT, IIT, and IIT all the time. I'm not interested in it. I'm not a jolly good fellow about it, and I'm not going there. (48)

Gustad was sad and angry because of his son's betrayal. As things rush towards a climax, the arrest of Major Bilimoria on charges of corruption is published in the paper. The heavens fall; Gustad's horizon is completely darkened with fear. Meanwhile Dr. Paymaster reports to Gustad about Roshan's prolonged illness. Monetary crisis entraps Gustad. Further, in this critical juncture, Dinshawji is also hospitalized after a sudden collapse in the office. His prayer for the lives and recovery of both Roshan's and Dinshawji doesn't work. Shortly after, Gustad makes a trip to Delhi to meet major Bilimoria. It tells Gustad that Prime minister's office is involved in money scandal. Major Bilimoria is arrested and tortured, when Gustad sees his pitiable condition, it makes him to weep. Major Bilimoria is imprisoned for four years. He dies of heart attack before the period of imprisonment. The inhabitants in Khodadad building are all a good representatives of cross-section middle class Parsis depicting the angularities of dwindling community. There are a few Indian English novelist who have projected the post-Independence dilemma of the minorities like the Parsis community as Mistry. The Parsis feel insecure because of growing political power in Bombay.

The loyalty to his own community can also be traced in *Such a Long Journey* when Rohinton Mistry condemns the contemporary government and then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, alleging her culprit of the famous the Nagarwala incident which took place during internal emergency. In the postcolonial days, the Parsis lost the importance at the national level and it was one more disgrace for the whole Parsi community. This case was sternly outraged by the Parsi community as "the Nagarwala incident that involved a Parsi, jolted the self – image of the community" (Haldar 14). Rohinton Mistry, belonging to the same community, exposes his anguish and strong reaction at this incident by laying bare the corrupt practice at the highest level of the political milieu.

*Such a Long Journey* is believed to be based on the incident of Mr. Nagarwala. Rohinton Mistry has tried to unveil the secret of corrupt system of political supremacy by portraying the fictionalized version of Mr. Nagarwala, being characterized as Major Jimmy Bilimoria. Mr. Bilimoria in the novel was trapped by the highest authorities of the centre who got him arrested on the charge of misappropriating sixty lakh rupees from a nationalized bank by imitating the

voice of the Prime Minister. It can be noted that “Jimmy is none other than the fictional counterpart of Nagarwala who was arrested and exterminated during Indira Gandhi’s regime” (Selvam 52). This incident was a political scandal of the time and it shocked the whole Parsi Community. Through the enactment of this case, Rohinton Mistry has given a political statement in this novel. The Parsis were badly perturbed and had been completely shocked which can be sensed through the following lines:

The Nagarwala incident, because it involved a Parsi, jolted the self image of the community no less. Having long ago lost their literature to the vandalism of Alexander the Accursed, and their dance, music, art, poetry and even their language to the process of adapting to a new home in India the Parsis have developed a particularized culture called from a mixture of ancient myth and legend overlaid by a life sustaining sense of recent achievement. Gratified to have earned an honorable place in the country of their adoption through their contribution to every field of Endeavour and proud of having retained a strong ethical tradition the Parsis were deeply anguished by the ambivalent role Nagarwala had played in the sordid story (Dodiya 72).

*Such a Long Journey* is not only the expression of the author’s feeling about his community but moreover it is an endeavour to regain and retrieve the loss of dignity and grace that the Parsis lost in this case. Mistry voices for his community and vindicates the repugnance of his community vehemently when he demands the answers of some questions in the novel as follows:

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 what so ever? If yes, does that mean that Mrs. Gandhi’s has done this sort of thing frequently? (SLJ 195)

The expose of the political corruption at the national level in his narration presents or indicates the ethnic or identical representation of Parsi community. Through the description of this incident, Mistry shows the margin of a community in minority. Showing the fundamentalism and lack of political and social dominance, he shows his community is in periphery. Illustrating

the incident through his art of narrative he displays the clear idea of the Parsis' condition in the margin. Thus he is turning out a voice of the Parsis locating in an alien land or place.

The centuries of sufferings, segregation and loneliness have developed a vision of life whose nothing is amiss and they are ready for their extinction. The variegated experiences and the hard grind of the Parsis' lives have made them realize that they have to toughen themselves according to life's requirements.

Mistry makes his ink more darken when he keeps going on Indira Gandhi who has been inimical to the interest of the Parsis and who thought she destroyed the hegemony of the Parsis by bringing the system of nationalization in banking system. In *Such a Long Journey* Dinshawji deploras;

What days those were, yaar. What fun we used to have... Parsees were the kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled, ever since that Indira nationalized the banks (SLJ 38).

As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the margins of Indian society and hence his writing challenges and resists absorption by the dominating and Hindu-glorifying culture of India. He has experimented with linguistic hybridity and celebrates the use of Parsi language. He focuses on the human condition, location in time and space, the Parsi middle class in suburban Bombay and rural migrants. The feeling of being left out of the cultural mainstream is uniquely reflected in the way Mistry's character are displaced and search for new identity, through emigration or reinventing themselves through enlightenment.

The central motif of journey sets the tone of the novel right from the beginning in the use of three epigraphs. A significant aspect of this text is the metaphor of journey. In fact journey is a central and most favored motif in diasporic writing. The title *Such a Long Journey* proclaims this motif and is rein-forced by the three epigraphs of that preface the novel. The three epigraphs of the novel together re-erect a universal journey which is a human one from past to present. The first epigraph is taken from Firdausi's *Shah-Nama*. *Shah-Nama* is an Iranian epic. The epigraph recalls both the glorious Iranian heritage and the downgraded condition of the Parsis today. The second epigraph is from T.S.Eliot's *The Journey of Magi* which reminds that Parsi is the ancient Zoroastrian religion and the Magi who were attended the birth of Jesus Christ were Zoroastrian priests. The journey is not merely a physical journey but it is a spiritual one. For the quest of

spirituality, man has to undergo numerous hardships. The poem emphasizes on the motto “know thyself” because it is essential to attain higher and nobler values of life by knowing one’s own self.

A cold coming we had of it, Just the worst time of the year For a  
journey, and such a long journey.(SALJ-i)

The last epigraph is extracted from Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gitanjali*:

And when old words die out on the tongue, new Melodies break  
forth from the heart; and where The old tracks are lost, new country  
is revealed With its wonder. (SALJ-I)

These lines depict the way Parsis moved from one country to another and how they settled down in a new environment and practice their faith. Thus the journey from Firdausi’s *Shah-Nama* to Tagore’s *Gitanjali* is a long journey which is in a cold and hostile world. The long journey is already taken by Dinshawji, Bilimoria and Tehmul and is a journey from hopelessness to hope. The hard times are over in the life of Gustad and he learnt that the everyday life is bound up with some uncontrolled forces over which man has no control. At the end of the novel, Gustad tears off the black paper from windows which symbolizes new beginning and new birth.

To conclude, the novel *Such A Long Journey* describes the different idiosyncrasies and ethno centricities of Parsi community. It also celebrates metaphorically the journey of the richness of life and the indestructibility of the human spirit.

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