An Analysis of Rohinton Mistry’s 
Such a Long Journey

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Abstract
The novel manages brilliantly to portray Indian culture and family life, setting against the backdrop of the subcontinent’s volatile postcolonial politics. The microcosmic family dimension of the story line is not only played upon a political background: quite the contrary, the story shows to which degree political and personal realities are intertwined and how much the microcosm echoes the macrocosm, since the lives of the characters are deeply affected by local corruption and the government inadequacy. The novel itself is a manifestation of the Indian politics on the domestic life of Gustad Noble, thus Mistry mingles public with the private. This novel is a journey of Gustad through the path of sorrow, death, betrayal, disillusion and disappointment. Above all, Mistry’s novels are focused on community differences. Mistry has unfolded the postcolonial condition that affects the community’s identity. Apart from religious identity, historical awareness forms the collective identity of the community.

Keywords: Identity, Diaspora, Politics, Alienation, Historical Events, Post Colonialism

Rohinton Mistry’s first novel was Such a Long Journey (1991). It had won the Common Wealth Writers Prize for the Best Book, the Governor Generals’ Award and the W.H. Smith or Books First Novel Award in Canada. It was also shortlisted for the Trillium Award and for the Prestigious Booker Prize. It has been translated into German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Japanese, and it has been made into a film in the year 1998. The novel manages brilliantly to portray Indian culture and family life, setting it against the backdrop of the subcontinent’s volatile post colonial politics. The action of the novel takes place in the year 1971 in Bombay at the moment when the war broke between India and Pakistan. This is the Canvas upon that the troubled life of the main character (Protagonist) of the novel Gustad Noble and his family played out. The microcosmic family dimension of the story line is not only played upon a political background: quite the contrary, the story shows to which degree political and personal realities are intertwined and how much the microcosm echoes the macrocosm, since the lives of the characters are deeply affected by local corruption and the government inadequacy.
Such a Long Journey (1991), Mistry’s first novel, is an exploration of late twentieth century Indian history as it is set against the backdrop of some important historical movements. The characterization is set in the early seventies in Mumbai and the novel creates a lucid picture of Indian family life that focuses in general. It also narrates a story rich in subject matter and a close joint Parsi family in specific. The narrative depicts consciousness of anxieties and aspirations, perils and problems of existence of individual communal and national issues. The novel is also a psychological journey of the chief characters.

Mistry explores Gustad Nobel’s modest dreams and aspirations along with his wife Dilnavaz, son Sohrab, friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria, and the other inhabitants of the Khodadad Building like Miss Kuptitia, Inspector Soli Bamji, Mr. Rabadi, Tehmul-Lungraa and Cavasjiin association with their peripheral activities. The microcosm of the Parsis in India focused the life of Parsis living in Khodadad Building, Bombay. This is a tale of the struggle and suffering of middle class people of a marginalized community. They have assembled to preserve the cultural heritage in their own individual ways. Its protagonist Gustad Noble is a humble bank clerk and a family man who is prone to human weaknesses like others. Gustad is a simple and noble-at-heart unheroic hero, who, surprisingly, plunges into severe lessons of life like a true hero of traditional classics and is compelled to kneel down to some inexplicable forces but finally emerges unscathed with all his essential goodness intact. Gustad nurses a silent ache caused by all the deaths he has stoically faced dry-eyed: his mothers, Bilimoria and Dinshawji and Tehmul. The fate of Gustad’s family is intertwined with that of the historical happenings, crisis and turmoil of the subcontinent.

Unlike Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry depicts India by narrowing the canvas. The historical time span is confined to a mere short duration of less than a decade covering from nineteen sixty-five to nineteen seventy-one and the geographic milieu is also restricted to a small area of a vast metropolis, Bombay and to an even smaller segment of the nation’s capital, Delhi. Such A Long Journey captures India through its temporal and spatial dimensions. Mistry exploits significant post-independence historical events to recreate the Indian past through a narrative of intertwined personal and national experience. In this regard Peter More rightly observes: interpretative possibilities of the whole of post-independence Indian history (93) are there in the narrative. The historical framework encompasses three wars involving the nation: the 1948 War with Pakistan (SLJ13), the 1962 War with China (SLJ9) and the 1965 War with Pakistan (SLJ114) and Mistry uses several narrators to portray the three battles in three different perspectives of the nation’s history. Major Jimmy Bilimoria, an officer of the Indian army, whose actual account of the post- Partition conflict with Pakistan is provided by Mistry. The second war involving India’s humiliating defeat at the hands of the Chinese is a layman’s experience and is presented through the personal account of the protagonist Gustad Noble, a resident of Bombay (SLJ 9) and the second and the subsequent war with Pakistan is described by Dr Paymaster whose account praises Nehru’s successor Lal Bahadur Shastri as a more proficient and confident Prime Minister than Nehru.

This novel deals with the Parsi community in Bombay and shows the dichotomy between the ethics and the prevalent corruption in the outside world. The jostling and throbbing life of the Bombay metropolis—the place of his birth, is a common space to all the three novels. It can broadly be said that Mistry has given a literary tribute to his obsession with Bombay through these narratives. ‘Bombay is more than merely a location. It provides what might be described as a habitat in which characters live, breath, and comfort their spiritual land material demons. Indeed, Bombay is a vast treasure house of stories’ (Morey 173-174).

The novel itself is a manifestation of the Indian politics on the domestic life of Gustad Noble, thus Mistry mingles public with the private. This novel is a journey of Gustad through the path of sorrow, death, betrayal, disillusion and disappointment. Gustad assumes the role of becoming
Mistry’s alter ego and acquaints the readers with the nostalgia of the novelist. He ultimately emerges as an experienced man with the realization that the real journey has just begun and this journey must go on. In Such a Long Journey, Gustad is projected as the representative and mouthpiece of the Parsi community. At different times Gustad’s conversations with different characters clearly emphasise the disturbed condition of his mind by the rising tide of communal disharmony in post-independence India. Mistry’s anger is vehemently expressed against Shiv Sena’s attitude to alter the road names of Bombay. Almost all the historical events like political trouble during Indira Gandhi’s regime and the Nagawara incident described in the novel are narrated from the perspective of a member of the marginalized community. So, from the point of view of the Parsi community which is on the verge of marginalization and extinction, these novels of Mistry have wider meanings.

Above all, Mistry’s novels are focused on community differences. Mistry has unfolded the post colonial condition that affects the community’s identity. Apart from religious identity, historical awareness forms the collective identity of the community. The anxiety of identity of an individual and community is vividly presented throughout the novel. For a novelist like Mistry another important aspect apart from the historical and linguistic aspect is the Parsi religion. It is an earnest effort on his part to immortalize the religion through his narratives. In all the novels he emphasized on Zoroastrianism. For Parsis, religion is not a thing to be acquired but an integral part of one’s own heritage. Only the proximity to Zoroastrianism does not hold any meaning to Mistry and he does not keep himself restricted to Zoroastrianism and this is evident from the pavement artist manifesting the essence of poly theistic faith through his drawings.

References
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