

PARSI CULTURE ETHOS IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*

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Abstract

The purpose of present paper is to study Parsi culture ethos in the light of Multiculturalism and Diaspora literature in Such a Long Journey (1991), first novel by Rohinton Mistry. Being Diaspora writer he deals with migrant experiences and his works depicts Parsi culture ethos, dilemma of migration and love for the homeland and culture, hybridity and quest for identity. Though it was published sixteen years after Mistry had settled in Toronto, Canada but it has no trace of Canada. Rather it reveals Mistry's deep concern for his Parsi community in India and the development of post-colonial India in general. Ethos can simply mean the disposition, character, or fundamental values particular to a specific person, people, corporation, culture, or movement. The Ethos refers to the spirit which motivates the ideas and customs. The Story of Such a Long Journey aptly communicates the feelings and apprehensions of minority community and exploited history to explore into broader concerns of Parsi community. It describes life style of Parsis living in Khodadad Building, a Parsi enclave of Bombay which is a kind of microcosm of the Parsis in India expressing all the angularities of a declining Parsi community. Mistry's graphic description presents a pellucid picture of the anguish, the apprehension, the insecurity, the sense of alienation and the sense of displacement that is strongly felt by the Parsis.

Keywords: *Multiculturalism, diaspora literature, Parsi minority community, dilemma of migration, displacement*

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Such a Long Journey (1991) is the first novel written by Rohinton Mistry. Though it was published sixteen years after Mistry had settled in Toronto, Canada but it has no trace of Canada. Rather it reveals Mistry's deep concern for his Parsi community in India and the development of post-colonial India in general. The Story of *Such a Long Journey* aptly communicates the feelings and apprehensions of minority community and exploited history to explore into broader concerns of Parsi community. It describes life style of Parsis living in Khodadad Building, a Parsi enclave of Bombay which is a kind of microcosm of the Parsis in India expressing all the angularities of a declining Parsi community. Mistry's graphic description presents a pellucid picture of the anguish, the apprehension, the insecurity, the sense of alienation and the sense of displacement that is strongly felt by the Parsis. "In such a Long Journey, the experience of the ancient Parsi displacement is implied given that Parsi Community has a long history in India" (qtd. in Deshmane).

It is a novel of epic ambitions of the Parsi protagonist Gustad Noble, a virtuous Bombay clerk; at the same time the story depicts Parsi community and its fears, anxieties and sense of powerlessness. The setting is of 1971, a period of Political upheavals in the history of India. The story also has a reference of infamous Nagarwala Conspiracy in 1971 in which Sohrab Nagarwala, the chief cashier of the State Bank of India was involved. Because of his conspiracy with the iron lady Indira Gandhi he was thrown behind the bars and ultimately died in imprisonment. In this respect, the novel is Mistry's attempt to catch the attention of Western readers by representing Indian socio-political and cultural ethos in negative tone. When a writer portrays a picture of his homeland he often tends to be anachronistic, out dated in terms of over idealization or condemnation without substantiating any concrete evidence to misrepresent factual reality. "Such a Long Journey through an alien land and culture is board defeat the

expatriate writer's efforts to represent a true picture of what he abandoned on the native shores and what it has evolved into present in a relatively changed context of time-frame" (qtd. in Haldar).

Rohinton Mistry is sensitive to the various anxieties felt by his own Parsi community. He represents his community and also to the country in general through different narratives of his characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the charges that affect them in their life "Mistry's novel, as a cluster of narratives, deals with the Parsi community and its identity with its national consciousness and them with the third dimension too, viz its identity with the world and the novel is to be studied in this context if we wish to know the Parsi community as perceived by the novelist" (qtd. in Pathak 194).

Rohinton Mistry reflects the dilemma of his minority community and its identity crisis in the story. This Parsi community finds extremely difficult to identify with other Indian communities. The plot involves a Parsi, Gustad and his family interwoven with events in the national scene. Gustad's suffering is presented at the backdrop of India and Bangladesh war. The war has direct consequences of irrational legislation and becomes the embodiment of the average middle-class. The picture of the poor struggling for maintaining the daily expenses in the corrupt political set up during Indira Gandhi's government is described realistically by the author. Indian family constantly struggled to manage a reasonable standard of living. "She (Dilnavaz) purchased milk and remembered the days when ration cards were only for the poor or the servants, the days when she and Gustad could afford to buy fine creamy products of Parsi Dairy Farm... before the prices started to go up, up, up and never came down" (*Such a Long Journey* 3).

Gustad is portrayed as a self made man who had to shoulder the hardship and humiliation to stand on his own feet after his father had been declared a bankrupt. Gustad suffers at the hands of self-centred politicians and callous officials. Being member of a minority Parsi community he has to ensure the survival of his family. His son Sohrab adds to his misery since he rebels against him and acts against his ambition of joining Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). Gustad once was the grandson of a prosperous and highly reputed furniture dealer and a son of famous book

seller who met to his doom because of bankruptcy by an irresponsible brother. Thus Gustad is reduced to poor and cramped existence in the Parsi community living in wretched condition with his wife and three children with his dreams of bright future for Sohrab, his eldest son. He expects Sohrab to Join Indian Institute of Technology (I.I.T.) and become successful Engineer. But Sohrab refuses to join I.I.T. that separates the father from his son. Sohrab's outburst against I.I.T. reveals his dislike, "I am sick and tired of IIT, IIT, IIT. All the Time, I am not interested in it. I'm not a Jolly good fellow assort it, and I'm not going there..... Fool yourself if you want to" (*Such a Long Journey* 48). The refusal to Join I.I.T. by Sohrab gives a great shock to Gustad and he experiences the shattering of his dream which was cherished from the very childhood of his children.

Gustad's sufferings of betrayal from his son Sohrab disturb him. He feels Sohrab is challenging his authority as a father in the institution of the family. He suffers from nostalgia and expresses his sorrow. "Every year at exam-time we fed him seven almonds at daybreak. With holes in my shoes I went to work, so we could buy almonds to sharpen his brain at two hundred rupees a kilo. And all wasted. All's gone in gutter-water" (*Such a Long Journey* 122). Gustad's dreams and aspirations are shattered not only by his son but also by his friend, Jimmy Bilimoria's from his neighbouring apartment of Khodadad Building. Jimmy disappears suddenly without telling a word to anybody. He was a friend, philosopher and guide to him but his shameful disappearance hurts Gustad. It is Jimmy who provides the political context to the novel and through whom Gustad's Parsi world becomes involved with the wider Indian world. Gustad is also acquainted with Tehmul Langra, a lame, physically handicapped and mentally slow man who also lives in the Khodadad building. His fall from a tree had injured his head and also his head resulting in a severe damage. Other people do not like Tehmul but Gustad sympathize with him and helps him. Later Gustad comes to know that his friend Jimmy Bilimoria has gone to join RAW, a wing of Indian Intelligence Service. Thus the residents of Khodadad building are representatives of the middle class Parsis and they depict the angularities of declining Parsi community.

Mistry depicts the Parsis feeling insecure in the influence of the political power of Bombay. Dinshawji's remarks are suggestive of the insecurity, "Wait till the Marathas (Martha community people) take over, then we will have the real Gandoo Raj..... All they know is to

have rallies at Shivaji Park, shout slogans, and make threats and change Road names” (*Such a Long Journey* 75). The novel describes Parsi way of life. It captures relationships and practices at the heart of the community like death, celebrations, ceremonies and festivals, worship of God, rituals and culinary practices. Parsis are presented as preserving their identity within the dominant Hindu culture of India. The dialogue between Gustad and his friend Malcolm, who is a catholic community member, aptly describes their attitude towards Hindus. “We are minorities in a nation of Hindus. Let them eat pulses and grams and beans..... But we will get our protein from sacred cow... which is healthier because it is holier” (*Such a Long Journey* 68). The comment expresses antagonism between minorities and the dominant Hindu majority. At the same time it also hints at the solidarity between the members of two different minorities. “Such a Long Journey suggests the possibility of dismantling cultural separation by foregrounding values that unite individuals from different backgrounds. The friendship between Gustad and Malcolm who are people belonging to different cultural traditions is very illustrative in this respect” (qtd. in Deshmane 117).

The metaphor of journey can be applied to the life of Gustad. This journey is represented in the title ‘Such a Long Journey’. Just as ‘journey’ in Eliot’s ‘Journey of the Magi’ is not physical journey but the journey of man’s spiritual quest so also journey for Gustad who is bound to the wheel of destiny, is also in journey of his nonstop struggle for gaining the value of life at the back drop of his cultural displacement belonging to minority community among the majority Hindus. The three epigraphs that preface the novel set the tone of journey and displacement. The first is Firdausi’s Iranic epic, *Shah-Nama*, which recalls the glorious Iranian heritage of a mighty Empire, also presents the downgraded condition of present day Parsis. The second epigraph from T. S. Eliot’s ‘The Journey of the Magi’ provides the little as well as central metaphor of journey in the novel. The third one is Rabindranath Tagore’s *Geetanjali* that presents a long journey in a cold and hostile world. As Desai rightly interprets it as, “the journey is the journey of a nation, of a city, of an ethnic minority and of an individual man and his Community” (134).

Canada is paradoxically present though it is directly absent in the novel. The tone of Mistry is allegorical in presenting multiculturalism. It presents Mistry’s vision of multicultural

society and the place of minorities in it. The description of the life style of people of Parsi community helps the reader to develop a better understanding and appreciation of their culture. It also presents to readers a model of multiculturalism in its delineation of the Parsi community in India and their struggle for integration into the Indian Society without losing their cultural and religious identity Mistry proposes to highlight that this can act as a model for Canadian society and it will go a long way in depicting the fabric of multiculturalism in Canada.

Mistry, with his graphic description successfully provides a pellucid picture of the anguish, the apprehension, the insecurity, the sense of alienation and the sense of displacement that is strongly felt by the Parsis. The centuries of suffering, segregation and loneliness have brought the Parsis to understanding of life where nothing is amiss and perhaps this is how they are ready even for their extinction. For example Gustad thinks about the position of Parsis in Bombay and comments, “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. It was going to be like the black people in America twice as good as the white man to get half as much. How could he make Sohrab understand this?” (*Such a Long Journey* 55).

The nation of displacement is voiced through the character of Dinshawji, when he comments on the change of the street names in Bombay. “Names of are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared; in its place is Dada sahib Bhadkhamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it’s on Lokmanya Tilak Marg. I live at Sleater Road soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And on fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me” (*Such a Long Journey* 74).

Thus a close reading of the novel reveals that the protagonist Gustad struggles hard to survive in the majority Hindu society being member of minority Parsi community. He lives in strained circumstances in the Khodadad building of Bombay with his wife Dilhara, two sons Sohrab and Darius and a daughter Roshan. He fails to fulfil his quite modest and ordinary dreams of successful life. His dreams slowly crumble and his hopes die a slow death as he has one frustrating experience after the other. He finds it hard to accept the fact that things are

beyond his control. Life for him seems to be endless series of trials and tribulations. Mistry has portrayed the feelings and apprehensions of minority-Parsi community to ascertain some historical events. The life style of Parsis living in Khodadad Building is the microcosm of the Parsis in India. Mistry has exploited history to probe into broader concerns of Parsis and their National identity with fate and war as two major themes of the novel. Mistry has taken much pain to reflect on these themes at personal, social and national levels.

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