



## ROHINTON MISTRY'S *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY: A JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF HOME AND IDENTITY*

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**Abstract:** Rohinton Mistry is an eminent writer of Indian Diaspora. He was born in India in a Parsee family and migrated to Canada after completing his graduation. He tries to recreate his lost homeland in fictive world. He lives in Canada but writes about India. The canvas of his novels is replete with the stories of his country, culture and community. A quest for home and identity pervades through all his novels. As a member of Parsi community, he uses his fictive art to provide his readers a glimpse of Parsee religion, ritual and traditions. He has also presented the socio-political conditions of India particularly of the city of his birth-Bombay (Mumbai). The present paper tries to analyse Mistry's longing for home and identity quest as the pivotal theme of his first novel, *Such A Long Journey*. The novel brilliantly portrays the facts related with the religio-ethnic minority of Bombay Parsi life, the political scenario of India during India Pakistan war in 1971 culminating in the liberation of East Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh and the burning issues of social injustice, poverty, unemployment, corruption, casteism, population explosion etc. Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey* is a testimony of his sense of attachment with his own community and the country of his origin.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Parsee, nostalgia, alienation, migration, identity, Zoroastrian, amalgamation, communalism.

Rohinton Mistry has emerged as a formidable writer in contemporary Indian English fiction. He was born in Mumbai but is presently settled in Toronto in Canada. Although Mistry is regarded as one of Canada's most successful writers, his writings focus little on Canada. Rohinton Mistry presents a vivid nostalgic account of India, particularly Bombay (Mumbai) in his books to give some of the finest accounts in fiction. His writings mainly focus on the relation between life and literature. In his writings, Mistry paints a lively picture of the state of Bombay Parsi community. His novels are a valuable document of the Parsi history entwined intricately with the post-colonial reality of India as well as his own experience as a member of Indian Diaspora.

Mistry displays all the major characteristics of diaspora fiction. Diaspora is the term used to describe any population which has originated in a land other than that in which it currently resides. G.S. Jha points out the main themes of diaspora writings, "Normally diaspora fiction lingers over alienation, loneliness, homelessness, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, questioning, protest and assertions and quest of identity; it also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of

cultures, discriminating margins of two different social milieus, internalizing nostalgia and suffering a forced amnesia." (Jha.97-98) Rohinton Mistry's novels are a living record of his sense of attachment with his own community and the country of his origin. He derives inspiration from his memories of his youth spent in India. He was born in 1952 and left India in 1975 for Canada. So the India he evokes is that of the 1960s and 1970s. Mistry's fiction provides him an opportunity to strengthen the bonds he shares with India. His novels truly mirror the cultural clashes faced by the migrants. His sense of homesickness and longing for communal identity finds a loud echo in the pages of his books.

Rohinton Mistry is a member of the Parsi community and in his works he is concerned with the preservation of ethnic identity of his community, a recurrent theme in Parsi literature as "both the Parsis who sought greener pastures in the West and those who stayed all in India have experienced identity crisis and confusion" (Kapadia 16) Mistry opens a completely new world of Parsi life before his readers. Mistry is more at home depicting the life and culture of Parsis, particularly of Bombay. His novels are remarkable for the

presentation of the ancient beliefs of the Parsi community. His main characters are Parsis who follow the faith as laid down by the Prophet Zoroaster. Rohinton Mistry has also celebrated the use of Parsi language in his writings, Mistry deals with the various elements associated with Parsi culture such as Zoroastrian faith, common history of emigration of Parsis from Iran, their search for shelter in India, the colonial attitude of the Parsis and their efforts to preserve their ethnic identity in post independent India. As a novelist Mistry aims to maintain the dwindling world of Bombay Parsi community.

His first novel, *Such A Long Journey*, is a nostalgic return to Bombay and his Parsi world. According to Nilufer Bharucha "Even more than the short stories, this novel is Diasporic discourse." (Bharucha 27) The novel opens the new world of Parsi customs from birth to death before the readers. The protagonist, Gustad Noble belongs to Parsi community and through him, Mistry explores the relationship at the heart of the community. He lives by the rules of his religion and is well respected by the residents of the Khodabad apartment building. Gustad Noble is an epitome of Parsi values of life and his portrayal is closely associated with Parsi identity. "The grandeur the book attains is the creation of the central character; Gustad Noble, in whose life and suffering a large rhythm of universal pattern is carved out. In spite of everything, it is destiny that Gustad finds at the helms of affairs. Like Oedipus, he bows to the will of providence, and not unlike Job, he finds in compassion and endurance a dignity and greatness withstanding whatever fortune keeps in store for him" (Selvam 37).

Mistry portrays the rich and varied cultural life of Parsis ranging from religious prayers to modern issues, controversies, and problems faced by the community in the novel. The Fire Temples, Kusti prayers, Towers of Silence, Navjote ceremony, wedding ceremonies birthday celebrations of Parsis, reasons for the decline in the number of Parsis in India, controversies related with the mode of the disposal of the dead, and inter-religious marriage all find their due representation in his narrative.

The opening lines of his very first novel *Such A Long Journey*, suggest his interest in the presentation of Parsi culture. He writes, "The first light of morning barely illumined the sky as Gustad Noble faced eastward to offer his orisons to Abura Mazda." (SALJ.1) The very beginning of the novel, prepares the reader to explore the unknown and unexplored world of Parsi heritage. Mistry has highlighted the importance of the daily custom of reciting of the kusti prayers by the Parsee males in the first few pages of the book. Mistry gives the details about the performance of kusti prayers and writes, "He (Gustad Noble) recited the appropriate sections and unknotted the kusti from around his waist. When he had unwound all nine feet of its slim, sacred, hand-woven length, he cracked it, whip like: once, twice, thrice. And thus was Abriman, the evil one driven away with that expert flip of the wrist, possessed only by those who performed their kusti regularly." (SALJ.4)

After a few pages, Mistry again gives the reader his valuable insight regarding the rituals of performing kusti, "Gustad finished retying the kusti round his waist and noted with satisfaction that the two ends, as usual were of equal length. He raised and lowered his shoulders to let his sudra settle comfortably around him. The vest slid from under the kusti in response to the movement, providing the slack he liked to feel around his stomach." He further writes, "He [Gustad Noble] turned his face to the sky, eyes closed and began reciting the Sarosh Baaj, silently ..." (SALJ.15)

In the novel *Such A Long Journey*, Mistry has presented a vivid description of the special dinner served to mark the birthday of Roshan, the daughter of the protagonist, Gustad Noble, "Besides chicken, there was a vegetable stew made of carrots, peas, potatoes and yam liberally spiced with coriander, cumin, ginger, garlic, turmeric and whole green chillies. And there was rice, studded with cloves and cinnamon sticks: fragrant basmati rice that Dilnavaz had obtained from the black-market fellow for this special day, trading one week's quota of fat, tasteless ration-shop rice for the four cups of the slender delicious grain." (SALJ.45)

In *Such A Long Journey*, Rohinton Mistry reiterates the importance of Navjote ceremony when he writes, "The ice-cream was Dilnavaz's idea. It was

expensive, Sobrab had had it just once before: to celebrate his Navjote, after the ceremony at the fire temple.”(SALJ.56) The whole spectrum of Parsi social and religious life is brilliantly reconstructed by Rohinton Mistry. The funeral ceremonies of the Parsees and Tower of Silence are an integral part of Mistry’s fictive world. In the novel *Such A Long Journey*, the funeral ceremony of Dinshawji, is described in detail. The body of the Dinshawji was handed over to two *Khandbias* after the hospital formalities were completed. According to the Parsee customs the dead body is touched only by the special corpse-bearers. These *Khandbias* have their own bier of iron and carry away the dead body to the *Doongerwadi*. Mistry’s pen picture gives the minutest detail of the ceremony to the readers. “*The priest picked up a sliver of sandalwood, dipped it in oil and held it to the flame. He transferred it to the thurible and sprinkled loban upon it. The fragrance of frankincense filled the room. The priest started to pray.*”(SALJ.247) and further he gives a vivid account of the final ritual, “... *At the Tower, the chief nassasaler clapped three times: the signal to start the prayer for Dinshawji’s ascending soul. While they prayed, the vultures descended in great numbers, so graceful in flight but transforming into black hunched forms upon perching, grim and silent.*”(SALJ.255)

Rohinton Mistry’s novels are a well observed critical comment on the social and political conditions of India. One of the dominant themes in Mistry’s novels is that of India’s overwhelming problems. There is a distinct sense of frustration at the social injustice and corruption prevailing in India. He writes about the issues of poverty, unemployment, casteism, communalism, population explosion etc. with deep understanding and compassion.

The novels also project the disgust of the people of Bombay with the religious fanaticism of Shiv Sena. Dinshawji in *Such A Long Journey*, expresses his anger to Gustad Noble, “*Wait till the Marathas take over, then we will have real Gandoo raj... ‘All they know is to have rallies at Shivaji Park, shout slogans, make threats, and change road names’...*, there was genuine grief in his soul *Why change the names?... Hutatma*

*Chowk.*’ He spat out the words disgustedly.’ *What is wrong with Flora Fountain?*(SALJ.73-74) The anger of Dinshawji is associated with the feeling of loss of identity resulting from the change in the names of the places. He explains his agony to his friend Gustad, “*I grew up on Lamington Road, but it has disappeared, in its place Dadasaheb Bhadkamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly its 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 one fine day the name changes. So what happened 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?*”(SALJ.74)

*Such A Long Journey* is set in 1971 during the war between India and Pakistan. The war is an integral part of the plot. Mistry weaves the idea of the intervention of the Indian Secret Service’s RAW to provide military and financial aid to the Mukti Bahini force for the liberation of East Pakistan and formation of Bangladesh. The novel gives a detailed account of the Indo-China war and its consequences. Mistry writes, “*But everyone knew that the war with China froze Jawaharlal Nehru’s heart, and then broke it. He never recovered from what he perceived to be Chou Enlai’s betrayal. The country’s beloved Panditji, everyone’s Chacha Nehru, the unflinching humanist, the great visionary, turned bitter and rancorous. From now on, he would brook no criticism, take no advice. With his appetite for philosophy and dreams lost for ever, he resigned himself to political intrigues and internal squabbles.....Nehru never forgave Feroze Gandhi for exposing scandals in the government.....His one overwhelming obsession now was how to ensure that his darling daughter Indira, the only one, he claimed, who loved him truly, who had even abandoned her worthless husband in order to be with her father-how to ensure that she would become Prime Minister after him.*”(SALJ.10-11) The political relations of India and Pakistan and the freedom struggle of the East Pakistan are frequently discussed in the novel. Gustad tells his wife Dilnavaz about the headlines of the paper, “*It says that the Republic of Bangladesh has been proclaimed by Awami League.....They were saying that General Yahya should allow Sheikh Mujibur Rehman to form the*

government.”(SALJ.12). Commenting on the wide spread corruption all over, he points out that “*Like everything else about the government, foreign exchange regulations involved convoluted rules and tortuous procedures*” (SALJ 114). Mistry has openly expressed his disgust with the rule of contemporary government of congress party. Mistry has directly blamed the congress party for all the corruption prevalent in the country. He criticizes the failure of democracy in India and suggests the change of regime as the only solution. “...our beloved country is a patient with gangrene at an advance stage. Dressing the wound or sprinkling rose water over it to hide the stink of rotting tissue is useless. Fine words and promises will not cure the patient. The decaying part must be excised. You see, the municipal corruption is merely the bad smell, which will disappear as soon as the gangrenous government at the centre is removed (SLAJ 313). The novel also highlights Mistry’s sense of loyalty to his own community when he condemns the unjust treatment of Feroze Gandhi, a Parsi by Nehru and Indira Gandhi. The novelist holds Indira Gandhi and her policy of nationalization of banking system responsible for the sorry plight of Parsis in the post independence era as Dinshawji laments, “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 (SALJ 38).

Thus, *Such A Long Journey* by Rohinton Mistry is deeply rooted in his own past. The Parsi life and culture is portrayed with complete honesty in his novels. He has dealt with the reality of Parsi lifestyle without making any attempt of glorifying it. The novel is an earnest attempt on the part of the author to preserve the identity and express the concerns of their own Parsi community. A.K.Singh remarks, “Mistry’s novel, as a cluster of narratives, deals with the *parisi community and its identity; with its national consciousness and then with the third dimension, too, its identity with the world.*” (Singh.194) Mistry’s bond with his native land, culture, traditions and his concern for the deteriorating social and political conditions are beautifully presented in the novel, *Such A Long Journey*. The novel reflects his sincere love and concern for the world that gave him an identity of his own.

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