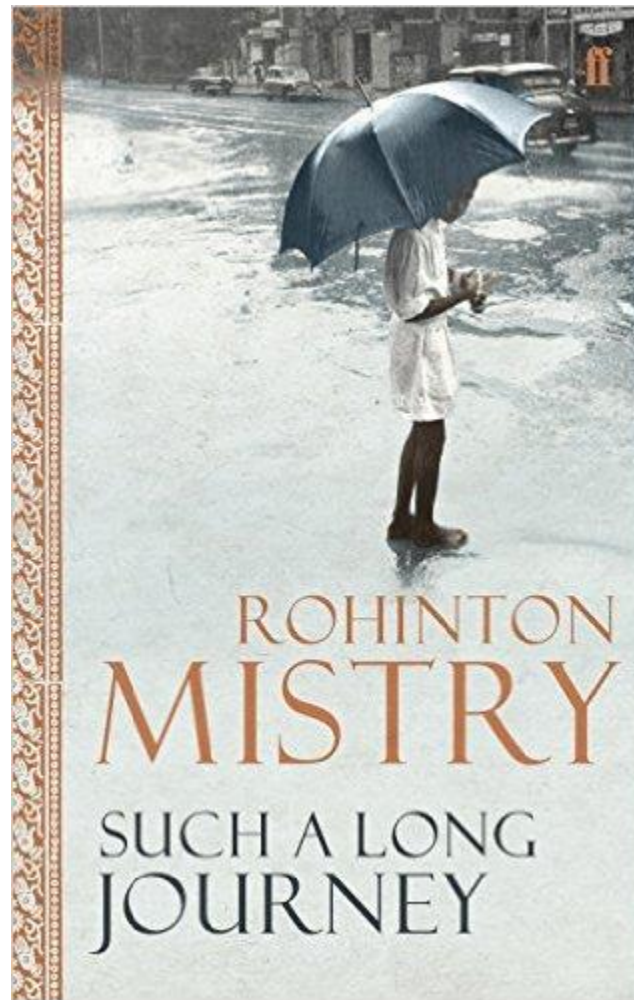


Aspects of Gender Conflict in English Literature

**Exploration of Bombay Life in Rohinton Mistry's Novel
*Such a Long Journey***

S. Vijayalakshmi, M.A., M.Phil.



Abstract

Rohinton Mistry, a noted post- independence Parsi writer in English was born in Bombay, India in 1952. Mistry's fiction is rooted in the streets of Bombay, the city he left behind for Canada at the age of twenty-three. In his debut novel *Such a Long Journey*, he presents the

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Bombay life during the year 1971 with the combination of reality and his imaginative powers. Mistry portrayed the city of Bombay and the Bombay life very realistically in different aspects. He brings out both dirty, corruption, poverty, ugliness of Bombay life on one hand and the fragrance, happiness on the other hand. He has depicted Bombay life in an impressive way. This novel is truly a journey of Gustad and Mistry takes the reader into the unfamiliar cultural landscape of India along with Gustad and his family as they struggle with all the assaults of being human.

Key Words: Corruption, Ugliness, Unfamiliar landscape, Fragrance, Happiness.



Rohinton Mistry

Courtesy: <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/rohinton-mistry/>

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay in 1952 and after few years, he migrated to Canada. Many critics compared his portrayal of the city of Bombay to Charles Dicken's portrayal of the city of London. Mistry's novels are clearly set in Bombay. Rohinton Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) was short listed for the Booker prize in 1991. The novel *Such a Long Journey* is Mistry's debut novel. It is about a middle class Parsi family in Bombay, India in the early 1970s from the perspective of Gustad Noble, of ordinary life in Bombay, at a

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time of economic difficulties due to rationing, corrupt leadership, and instability spurred by the war between West and East Pakistan. Mistry had presented various aspects of the city in this novel. He gave a beautiful description of the places of Bombay like Crawford Market, Chor Bazaar, Khodadad Building, and Dr. Paymaster's dispensary, House of Cages, Tower of Silence and Mount Mary. <https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/rohinton-mistry>

Crawford Market

The Crawford Market was described as dirty, smelly and overcrowded place, where the protagonist of this novel buys live chicken for his daughter's birthday party. The place was always noisy; the appearance of the butchers in the Crawford Market was so disgusting with their sweat streaming down their faces and their blood-stained vests. Mistry pictures the Crawford Market through Gustad. According to Gustad, "Crawford Market held no charms" (*Such a Long Journey*, 21)

Parsi Enclave

In the opening chapter, the author gave the description of the Parsi enclave called Khodadad building where the protagonist of this novel resides, which lies in the north of Bombay. Khodadad Building is three stories high. Each floor holds ten apartments. Tehmul was an orphan idiot who lived with his brother in the Khodadad Building. His brother had to go out of station for his work and Tehmul remained alone most of the time. He was lame as his hip was fractured in an accident. In his middle thirties, he still preferred the company of children to adults, except Gustad. Mr. Rabadi, an inspector and the rival of Gustad and Bamji, were the Parsi people residing inside the Khodadad Building. Mistry presented the city of Bombay especially where the minority community Parsi resides.

The Story of Two Types of Bombay

Such a Long Journey tells the story of two types of Bombay. Although the book is full of realistic descriptions of different parts and neighbourhoods of the city that convey an impression of completeness, and the author was describing two different cities: vital old Bombay and unstable modern Bombay. In fact, the segregation of the postcolonial city that seems to have

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disintegrated into mutually exclusive fragments is central to the novel. He also conveyed dualistic character of the city with the help of his protagonist, the inclusion of his view from within is a major accomplishment in the novel.

As various flashbacks illustrate, Gustad grew up in the days of old Bombay when the island was still secular, cosmopolitan city and the Noble family had not lost their fortune yet. Mistry focused on the Parsi community which was the minority group in Bombay. The Parsi played an important role in colonial Bombay as they strongly contributed to the construction of the city. Like Mistry, Gustad is by ethnicity as Parsi that is a member of a small minority group in Bombay. The sufferings of Parsi community in Bombay are depicted in *Such a Long Journey*. The city Bombay was under transition which was portrayed through the flash backs of the protagonist. Gustad recalled the past days.

“when the water supply was generous and the milk from Parsi Dairy farm was both creamy and affordable, there had been a surge of construction activity everywhere in the city” (*Such a Long Journey*, 82).

New Structures and Consequent Life Style Changes

After the tall structures around the Khodadad building rose up, six feet high, around the building was the role provider of privacy particularly for those who do Kusti prayer in the early morning. But the wall turned to be an open -air toilet, due to increase in population and became hellish for the residents of the building.

Gustad’s wife bought milk from the milkman who sold adulterated milk, as the Nobles could not collect much coveted milk ration card from the government office even after a long waiting. She remembered the days when ration cards were only for the poor and the servants, and that time the Nobles could afford to buy the fine creamy product of Parsi Dairy Farm. The minority complex started brewing up in the minds of a Parsi house wives in the city of Bombay. As a Parsi, Mistry examines the city of Bombay from the view point of an insecure minority. In fact, not only Gustad, but all the main characters in *Such a Long Journey* are members of the

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Bombay Parsi Community. The Parsis left Iran in the eighth century and settled in India. They had to adjust themselves to the new surroundings; they adopted Gujarati Language, their women began to put on saris and their men surrendered their weapons (*Such a Long Journey: A Critical Study*, 26)

Dilnavaz was also trying to reach the same unattainable goal, namely to live in peace and harmony with her environment. However, her small world was represented mainly by Khodadad Building and its immediate security outside the wall. Infuriated by the excrement and wire that are deposited nightly at its base and leave an unpleasant smell in the morning Gustad hired a pavement artist to draw the pictures of gods, prophets, saints and mosques of all the world's religions on the wall. The artist's job had an enormous effect. As he filled up the wall with holy pictures, the mosquitoes and the flies disappeared.

The pavement artist gradually turns the dirty wall into a sacred wall of miracles. He likes to mix the gods, saints and prophets of all religions because it makes him feel that he is doing something to promote tolerance and understanding in the world. His message sounds like an echo of Rushdie's Vision of Bombay as a model for a secular, democratic society. Unfortunately, in the cynical, increasingly intolerant city of Bombay, the wall is not meant to last. The secular monument is demolished as part of a road-widening scheme of the Municipal Corporation. Dr. Paymaster's neighborhood has changed quite significantly in recent years, turning from a place of dusty to overcrowded and commercial place. Here is the reality of modern Bombay, where transistors, toasters, tires, auto parts, and plastic crockery are offered for sale.

Many buildings in the neighborhood had been changed in recent years. Earlier, the locality had a poor look with its abundance of dust; it was still dusty but was changed into an overcrowded, bustling city. Gleaming new signboards featuring everything that is needed in household and in factories changed the appearance of the locality altogether. The enterprising individuals who are ready for servicing motor cars, repairing refrigerators, fans changed the activity of the place which no longer retained its previous look. The first two were the cinema houses, located at the crossroads not far from the beach.

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The arrival of the new film it roused the neighborhood; the black-marketers and scalpers began buzzing around the halls, like the mosquitoes in the Khodadad building. Price ratios could keep soaring, depending on the stars and number of songs on the sound track. The black-market usually slowed after the first mad rush. The third establishment in the locality, a brother house called House of Cages, did not change and continued its basic business. The author takes a long diversion this time, taking the readers through Gustad's memory, describing the grotesque stories which Gustad had once heard from Peerbhoy Paanwalla who had his stall outside the House of Cages.

The House of Cages

The House of Cages was a meeting point for Gustad and Ghulam, where Gustad saw so many girls standing in front of each room in order to attract the customers. When Gustad entered the building hesitantly to meet Ghulam the place was filled up with cheap perfume smells.

Discarding the romantic descriptions, Mistry presents the harsh reality of the profession. It is the poverty that leads so many women towards this profession. A radio or record player somewhere was playing an old film song. The women were waiting for customers. Gustad glanced quickly at them while passing. The rooms that came in his view were sordid. The luxuries that are found in the stories about such places were missing. It was the intermediary location for Gustad and Ghulam and the rallying point for a march on the municipality to demand improvement to the sewer system. (Such a Long Journey: A Critical Study, 54)

The Dispensary

The dispensary was the fourth establishments in the locality that had never altered its function. Dr. Paymaster had well-adjusted himself to his locality. The patients and their ailment fall into four distinct groups. The House of Cages provided group of patients who needed periodic check-ups as required by the municipal licensing authorities and another group was made up of families like the Nobles.

Dr. Paymaster purchased a closed down dispensary when he started practice, but he did not bother to change the board outside that read the name of one Dr. R.C. Lord. He did not mind if the patients referred to him a Dr. Lord. As his practice grew and he made some money he changed the board outside, displaying his own name. This change proved to be a blunder, as the patients did not like to be treated by some unknown Paymaster and insisted on the return of the good old Dr. Lord. They refused to any explanation or be examined b the new doctor. And a few patients, who were treated by Dr. Paymaster, claimed that the medicine did not cure as before. Dr. Paymaster sorrowfully realized something which he was not taught in medical college. The doctor's name was more important than his skills. So he did not change the name board. Yet the politics of naming has also played an important role in the city of Bombay.

Life during War Times

Mistry tells many upheavals afflicting Bombay and all of India in the 1960s and 1970s, culminating in violence and war: riots, social unrest, the Indo-Chinese war and the reign of terror in East Pakistan that ended in the proclamation of the Republic of Bangladesh. During war time people were asked to paste windows with blackout. Gustad's personal life is interlocked with the outer world of politics and the role of the government. Gustad always wished that his children's lives would be filled with peace and tranquility. He hummed the wartime song which he had adapted to sing the children to sleep when they were little.

The wartime song along with the blackout paper taped over the glass panes of the windows and the ventilators reminded Gustad of the war with China. The year 1962- the year of India's war with China-was also a dreadful year for the Nobles, Gustad re-called. The discrimination between the rich and the poor is revealed though the crazy remarks of Cavasji, an old resident of Khodadad Building. Mistry reflected economic, political, cultural and ideological struggle in the city of Bombay in the novel *Such a Long Journey*. The economic struggle in Bombay is portrayed through Gustad, who sell his camera to provide the treatment for his daughter Roshan and through the wanton in the House of Cages, who took up that profession due to poverty.

The Tower of Silence

The Tower of Silence was the place in Bombay where the dead bodies of the Parsi community would be taken over there and after the prayer, the dead bodies would be left inside the wall, where vultures would come and devour it. Dinshawji's dead body was carried to the Tower of Silence. Only men were allowed to the well of vultures. The four men carried the bier again and climbed the stone steps to the door leading inside the Tower. They entered and pulled it shut behind them. The mourners could see no more, but they knew that the four men would now place the body on a 'Pavi', and without touching his flesh they would tear off the white cloth using their special hooked rods so that he could be exposed to the creatures of the air. The chief of the carriers clapped three times as a signal to start the prayer of Dinshawji's ascending soul. While they prayed, the vultures came in great numbers. The high stone wall was lined with them. The ritual came to its end when the mourners made their Last stop for washing their hands and faces and performed 'Kusti' prayer.

Mount Mary

Gustad and Malcolm visit Mount Mary. On the way to Mount Mary, there were many shops and the shopkeepers were engaged in pushing sale. Gustad was surprised to see the wax products-fingers, hands, elbows, arms, legs and other parts of two sizes, child and adult, along with complete male and female figures, which were displayed in neat rows for sale. Malcolm explained that the suffering people would offer up those parts of the body, which troubled them and Mount Mary would heal the people's suffering.

Bombay: A Religious Place

It showed that the Bombay city was also known for religious place. Malcolm picked out a female child's wax product and gave it to Gustad for Roshan; for Dinshawji he selected the full male body of wax, in case the cancer had spread all over the body. A male head was also taken for Sohrab. And Malcolm insisted the offerings would not work. They also purchased four candles and went inside the hot crowded church. The candles were lit and Gustad sincerely prayed for all except himself. Gustad realized the peaceful Bombay when he sat on the rock near

the sea. He stayed there for a while, gazing at the horizon. He amazed at the beauty of the nature and felt peace inwardly.

Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry has portrayed the city of Bombay and the life style of the people in the city especially the Parsi community. Mistry led the readers into the streets of Bombay, the houses of the Parsi community and their rituals. He had presented the unfamiliar landscape of Bombay like Tower of Silence, House of Cages, and Mount Mary and gave excellent descriptions. Mistry described the city of Bombay and Bombay life in the year 1970 presenting the facts with his imaginary fiction which makes this novel as an impressive and interesting one. He used simple language to communicate his views.

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