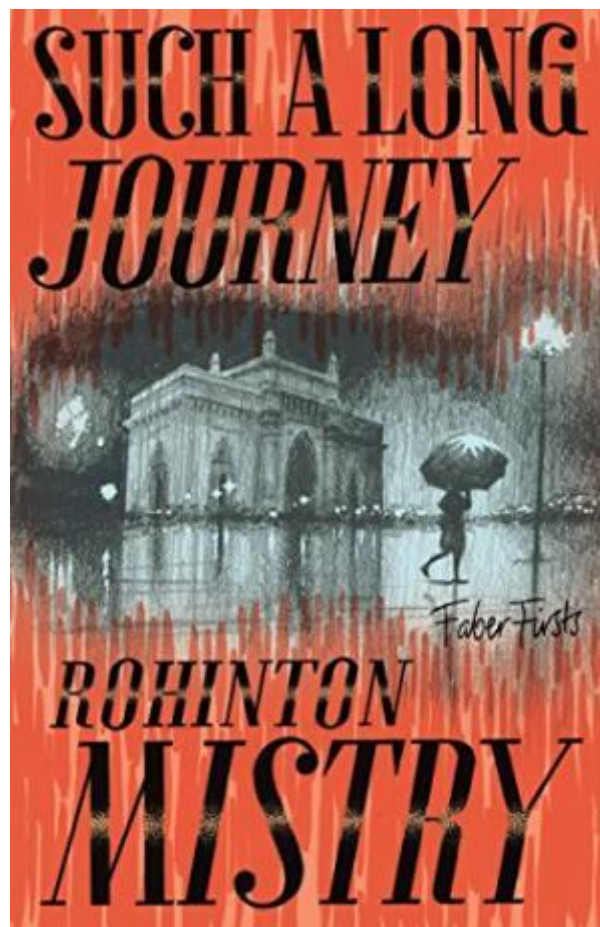


Corruption: "A Crime Against Humanity"
A Study of Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract

The paper figures out the concerns of the Parsis- the dwindling community living in a secular country. By centralizing the minority Parsi community, Mistry depicts the consciousness of the community, its anxieties and aspirations, perils and problems of existence at the individual and community level and the complex issues a minority ethnic community has to negotiate in a secular

country. The volatile political situation which strangled the country, highlighting the famous Nagerwala case, during the regime of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi forms the backdrop. Gustad Nobel who challenges the hegemony of the state stands for the marginalized in the narrative. His life showcases how the rights of an individual are violated in the form of corruption that is widespread in the society and how the characters are denied their basic rights more so because they belong to an ethnic community.

Keywords: Parsi, Marginalised, minority, ethnic community, corruption & rights

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* showcases how personal history is intrinsically linked to the history of a nation. The novel provides the reader an authentic insight into the Parsi culture while throwing up several tricky issues that determine the mis/fortunes of a doubly displaced man pitted against ill-fated political events of a country which throw his life off-guard. The novel captures the socio-political-economic turmoil of the 70s in the history of one of the world's largest democracies, India. The general tenor of the society projected in the novel is ridden with corruption in high places resulting in a fast fragmenting social order. The novel also deals with the problems of polarization of groups in spite of the fact that these groups, in this case the Parsi community, have been living in India since the 8th century.

The Parsi community is presented through different characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the changes that affect it. As A. K. Singh (1994) aptly puts it:

Mistry's novel, as a cluster of narratives, deals with the Parsi community and its identity, with its national consciousness and then 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. The novel traces the history of the Parsi community in India through Malcolm Saldana's bid to establish historical superiority of his religion over his friend's (Gustad's) as his Christianity came to India. Over 1900 years ago when Apostle Thomas landed on the Malabar coast long before the Parsis came in the Seventh century from Persia, running away from the Muslims. But Saldana is forced to give up Gustad's rejoinder when he said, "This may be, but our prophet Zarathustra lived more than 1500 years before your Son of God was even born; a thousand years before the

Buddha; two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity and Islam?" (24).

This sets the tone of the novel as it tries to sum up the fears and anxieties of an otherwise passive community, though quite active in articulation in their characteristic manner. As observed by A. K. Singh (1994), the Parsi as a community, has not only lived peacefully in the vast sprawling forest of Indian culture but has accepted the land and contributed to its development in its own way. Indian politics became an object of their verbal assault, as the system seemed to have pinched the community somewhere. They run down Pandit Nehru and Indira Gandhi because neither Nehru nor Indira Gandhi ever treated one among their clan, Feroz Gandhi well. (A. K. Singh, 1994)

Such a Long Journey prominently figures out the concerns of the Parsi community living in the middle-class habitat of Khodadad building. The inhabitants express all the angularities of the dwindling community living in a secular country.

Rights of Minorities – Issues Faced in Maharashtra

The Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic-Religious or Linguistic Minorities-Articles 1,2,3,and 4 assert that, States shall protect the existence and the national or ethnic, cultural religious and linguistic identity of minorities within their respective territories—persons belonging to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities--have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, and to use their own language—freely and without interference or any form of discrimination—persons belonging to minorities may exercise their rights – individually as well as in community with other members of their group, without any discrimination—states shall-ensure that persons belonging to minorities may exercise fully and effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedom without any discrimination and in full equality before law.

There is no country in the world where everyone speaks the same language, belongs to the same race, and shares the same cultural beliefs and traditions. All countries present a mosaic, with large number-majority sharing a common history and cultural background and many smaller groups-minority-each with its own characteristics.

Parsis and Linguistic Agitations

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The Parsi mind feels that the agitating tactics of the Marathas would upset the social harmony in Mumbai and there would be chaos all around them. The central importance to the Shiv Sena's agitations pertain to the issue of language. The party advocates the translation of English road names into Marathi overlooking how such a step may affect the former colonial elite of the Parsis. Dinshawji voices his fear and grief over the loss of familiar names. To Gustad's remark "what's in a name" (74), he counters that renaming is an infliction of linguistic violence on social identity, the erasure of familiar names connected with the colonial past is as an erasure of a personal-historical connectedness. Dinshawji argues:

Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared in its place is Dada Saheb Bhadkhamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it's on Lokamanya 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 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? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me! (74)

Psychological Consequences

Dinshawji severely attacks the Shiv Sena re-appropriation of street names and takes the issue with its psychological consequences. The change of names does not only lead to the problems of spatial orientation but also refers to the troublesome implications that the building of the Indian nation-state has for a distinct Parsi identity as the names of the streets and places change the place of the community in contemporary India to the extent that the old names of places vanish, indirectly lending them feel displaced. Dinshawji according to David Williams (1995), "experiences the rewriting of the map of his neighbourhood as an interruption in his self-presence," (David, 217). To have a life by another name would mean acquiescence to 'cultural alienation' 'otherness and marginalization.'

Problems of the Creative Writer

In recent times, perhaps more than ever in human history observes Sitakant Mahapatra (1996), "the creative writer faces the challenge of how to protect his integrity....in this task there is a growing sense of "extra territoriality" even when he lives within national boundaries." (Sitakant, 35) Like the Shiv Sens, the Parsis realise that the struggle for language is important because it is tied up with issues of identity. While Dinshawji discusses language to express his worries for the future of the Parsi community, the

novel's protagonist, Gustad Noble, reflects on the community's precarious status, because of the rising communal forces:

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. (55)

Analogous to the Situation of the Black American

Gustad sees the threat to his minority community as analogous to the situation of that of the black American. If the Shiv Sena manages to achieve its goals and puts its plan into practice, Sohrab's future in Bombay might become insecure. This reveals that Sohrab's situation is characterised by a dilemma and that his position might become dangerous if he remains in Bombay. To Gustad, the openly racist attitude towards the Parsis implies that the only way out for Sohrab is emigration. No wonder, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi is seen as detrimental to the Parsis' interests. The Parsis suspicion about the so-called natural death of Feroz Gandhi, a member of their community, who was never liked by his father-in-law Nehru, is revealed in the words of Dilnavaz, wife of Gustad Noble:

That was tragic

Even today, people say Feroze's heart attack was not really a heart attack. (197)

Scared of Politicians

Like Gustad, other members of the community are scared of politicians like Mrs. Gandhi whom they consider responsible for encouraging the demand for a separate Maharashtra, "How much bloodshed, how much rioting she caused," (39). As a minority community, the Parsis have their little fears and anxieties. The anguish and the angular lives of the Parsis are wrapped up in thick coverings of Parsi ethnicity which is visible in the essence of the Parsi spirit, 'for no mosaic and no multiculturalism can cut off from the roots he sprouts and sucks sustenance from.' (N.P. Sharma, 1998) Dinshawji's scathing attack on Indira Gandhi and the Shiv Sena shows his ire against their minority hunting politics and racism:

Remember when her pappy was Prime Minister and he made her President of Congress party? At once she began encouraging the demands for a separate Maharashtra. How much bloodshed, how much rioting she caused and today we have that boldly Shiv Sena

waiting to make the rest of us into second class citizens. Don't forget, she started it all by supporting the racist buggers. (39)

Depiction of Political Crime

The Parsi world in the novel is very much interrelated to political corruption at the national level as well with national issues. Focussing on the Parsi community the novel shows how these wars have adversely affected the lives of the middle class in the country. Thus, in *Such a Long Journey* the fate of Gustad's family is yoked to that of the community and the country at large.

India's war with China in 1962 was a nightmare for both the nation and for Gustad. The days of the protagonist were made dreadful with "riots, in the city- curfew and lathi charges and burning buses" (9) when he was confined to bed after having met with an accident. The same year, the country faced humiliation and defeat in the betrayal of the yellow-skinned neighbours. It was as if Nehru who believed that the two countries are great friends and who had immense faith in 'Hindi-Chinese bhai-bhai' (9) had been back-stabbed by the neighbour. It was the time when the politicians and the fund-raisers within the country proved themselves much worse than the external enemy. The generous donations pooled by the responsible citizens for the country's 'jawans' were later found for sale at Chor-Bazaar in the capital. Commenting on the attitude of the ruling party who took advantage of the peoples' patriotic sentimentalism, the novelist says:

The fund-raisers shouted themselves hoarse through megaphones, exhorting people to be as selfless as the jawans who were reddening the Himalayan snow with their precious blood to defend Bharat Matha. (10)

Family Controversy

The war left an ugly scar on the face of the nation and very soon, Nehru was entangled in family controversy with his son-in-law, Feroz Gandhi. To the disappointment of his supporters and admirers, Nehru ceased to be the defender of the downtrodden and it is interesting to note the novelist's comment on Nehru's interest in securing a place for his daughter, Indira as his successor:

This monomaniacal fixation occupied his days and nights, which the treachery of Chou-en-Lai had blighted forever, darkened permanently, unlike the blacked-out cities, which

returned to light after the conflict ended and people uncovered their doors and windows.

(11)

The congress party, which they led, is alleged to comprise crooks. (68)

The middle-class existence of Gustad and his family gets jolted and he gets involved in the political scandal: the sensational event known as the Nagarwala scam that rocked the Indira Gandhi Government in the wake of the Bangladesh Liberation Struggle. Gustad's friend Major Jimmy Bilmoria who 'had been like a loving brother' and almost 'a second father to [Gustad's] children' (14) is trapped by the snares of political power and corruption at higher levels. It may be noted here that Jimmy is none other than the fictional counter part of Nagarwala, (supposed to be real life Parsiman) who was arrested and exterminated during the regime of Indira Gandhi.

Corruption

As defined by a *Nongovernmental organization in Transparency International*, "Corruption is the abuse of entrusted power for private gains." (Julio Bacio Terracino, 2008) By the sudden and mysterious disappearance of his intimate friend Jimmy Bilmoria, Gustad is forcibly drawn into the concatenation of events which follow. Jimmy Bilmoria is arrested on the charge of extorting sixty million rupees from the bank by impersonating Prime Minister's voice. Jimmy who works for Indira Gandhi's secret police – Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) is "entrapped in an intricate and apparently inextricable snare of difficulties," (24). On receiving a letter from Jimmy, Gustad is unwittingly drawn into a dangerous network of deception. Jimmy gets vast sums of money deposited in the bank where Gustad works under a false name, with the help of Ghulam Mohammad. But the plot thickens, and Jimmy gets arrested. It turns out he is either a sort of Oliver North, officially transferring funds to guerrillas in East Pakistan or a crook. Gustad's horizon is completely darkened with fear and uncertainty that his complicity may be established.

Gustad, when drawn into the political scandal surrounding Bilmoria, the emphasis is at least as much on feelings of betrayal as it is on the marginalisation of the Parsi community and the stores of Indian history they circulate. Gustad's friendship to Bilmoria, who "killed, trust, love respect, everything" (178) is strained because solidarity appears unreliable. Gustad feels,

that some vital part of him had been crushed to nothingness. Years of friendship swam before his eyes and filled the piece of paper; it taunted him, mocked him, and turned him

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into a gigantic canvas of lies and deceit. What kind of world is this and what kind of men, who can behave in such a fashion? Jimmy Bilmoria had trapped him, robbed him of volition. If I could let the rotten world go by, spend the rest of life in this chair. (14)

In Gustad's opinion, Jimmy has violated a universal code of behaviour that confronts Gustad with a decay of values. These values, epitomised by the eponymously named Noble, are solidarity, faith, loyalty and justice. The fact that Gustad's neighbours, the Municipality of Bombay and the Government of India do not seem to share these values is bad enough; worse, however and almost unbearable for Gustad is that Jimmy, who almost counts as a member of the Noble family causes an erosion of meaning by subscribing to lies and deceit.

Bad Name for the Community

The implication of a member of the Parsi community in this crime not only brings ignominy to the community but also a sense of fear about attempted wiping out the Parsis from this hemisphere. The incident had jolted the image of the whole community. Mistry vindicates the repugnance of his community, as well as every politically conscious citizen vehemently:

... assuming that Mr. Bilmoria 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 has done this sort of thing frequently? (195)

Prime Minister's Alleged Corruption

Gustad's trip to Delhi on the request of Major Bilmoria brings to light the then Prime Minister's alleged corruption. Jimmy narrates how he was assigned by the Prime Minister herself the duty of training the guerrillas of the Mukti Bahini, the freedom fighters of Bangladesh and to supply them with arms and money.

Bilmoria, who becomes a victim to the hegemony of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, confesses that he was used as an agent without any second thought. Much before he realises the scandal, he is arrested and kept under detention and is subjected to police torture.

The Convention against Torture and other cruel, inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment defines torture as,

... any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted upon a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. (Article 1)

Torture is a serious violation of human rights which is interwoven with human rights like detention, arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearances. (Shah Giriraj, 2001)

The plight of Major Bilmoria is seen in the following lines:

On the bed lay nothing more than a shadow. The shadow of the powerful built army man who once live in Khodadad Building. His hair line had receded, and sunken checks made the bones just sharp and grotesque. The regal handle bar moustache was no more. His eyes had disappeared within their sockets. The neck...was as scrawny as poor behest. (267)

The Major's statement before his death comes as a grim reminder of the colossal wastage of dreams that the people have inherited. "It is beyond the common man's imagination, the things being done by those in power," (280). Major Bilomoria like his real counterpart, Nagarwala dies behind the bars under obscure circumstances. Mrs. Gandhi's connection with money scandal also gets reflected through Sohrab's, Gustad's son whose voice is representative of the angst of the youth, "Our wonderful Prime Minister uses RAW like a private police force to all her dirty work." (93)

Parsi Consciousness

By centralizing the minority Parsi community, Mistry depicts the consciousness of the community, its anxieties and aspirations, perils and problems of existence at the individual and community level and the complex issues a minority ethnic community has to negotiate in a secular country. Gustad who challenges the hegemony of the state stands for the marginalized in the narrative. Gustad's long journey in a cold and malevolent world in which all forms of happiness and misery are inseparably woven is the journey of an ethnic group on the verge of extinction still fighting for their rights.

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