Loss Of Identity And Agony Of Alienation: An Evaluation of Rohinton Mistry’s *Such A Long Journey*


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Abstract: The themes of Mistry’s novels centre on empowering patterns in a society that silences individual voices. Superstitions and mental or physical limits are also depicted in his fiction. He is more concerned in exposing the issues facing the untouchables, the underprivileged members of society, and their oppressed status. Indian-diasporic author Rohinton Mistry explores themes of immigration and self-identity crises in his works. The present paper addresses alienation as a worldwide issue with regard to English-language writing by Indian authors. The term primarily refers to English-language works written by writers who are Indian by birth, ancestry, or nationality and which evoke the essence of Indian culture, ethos, homeland, and geography. These works are populated by men who identify as Indian or of Indian descent and who reside in India or any other country in the world. Specifically, Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey* is the subject of this paper.

Keywords: Loss of Identity, Betrayal, Frustration, Memory, and alienation.

Indian-born author Rohinton Mistry, who is well-known throughout the world, currently resides in Canada and works from there. As a writer, Mistry primarily writes on India from her home country of Canada. Similar to several foreign authors, he maintains a connection with his homeland through his works, which has enhanced his readers’ comprehension of it. In his novels, corruption, political supremacy, personal treachery, parental authority, and social hierarchies are all exposed. He also went into great detail about the issues facing untouchables, the underprivileged members of society. Mistry has won a number of important honors. His debut book, *Such a Long Journey*, for example, was nominated for Britain’s famous Booker Prize, won the Governor General’s Award, the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for the best book in 1991, and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

Mistry exhibits empathy for his Parsi people. He is fully aware of the different concerns his community has regarding their worsening circumstances in the nation. He addressed this worry in his fiction by using Parsi characters and narration. Parsi writers highlight Parsi identity and the issues it faces by emphasizing their community in their narratives. His writings basically deal with the social and political situation of India which he observed during his stay in Bombay. When one goes through the novels of Rohinton Mistry it will be clear that mostly his novels capture the various prevailing problems of India, political and social chaos. In Mistry’s novels, though there are no references to Canada. But as a writer of Diaspora, Mistry has carved a remarkable
place for himself. R.S Pathak in his article “The Alienated Protagonist in the Indo-English Novel” has rightly said:

The Indian writers in English lose their sense of identity -both personal and national-and feel alienated in their making frantic efforts to seek, organize and affirm that identity. In many cases not only the novelists but also the characters in their novels face what psychologists call identity crisis. (68)

Mistry’s first book, Such a Long Journey, is among the most notable and captivating books ever. The relationships between the ego, community, geography, and identity are explored throughout his works. One of the most amazing things about Rohinton Mistry’s literature is how well it depicts the hectic, vibrant life of India. The novel’s plot is based on a number of actual incidents that happened in 1971, during the Indo-Pak War. It tells the detailed tale of a few middle-class Indian folks in the present day. It addresses both important and fundamental life topics. The main character is not a traditional hero. The novel concerns a Parsi man, Gustad Noble, a family man who works at a bank and becomes enmeshed by an old friend in a scandal to secretly set aside money from the bank into a government account allegedly created to assist in the war effort.

The sociopolitical and cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s is portrayed in the novel. In the Parsi residential community of Khodadad building in Bombay, Gustad, his wife Dilnavaz, their two sons Sohrab and Darius, and their daughter Roshan dwell with family members. Gustad, a nice man who always struggles and endures difficult circumstances, is good to everyone in his neighborhood and dedicates his life to providing for his family as well as the requirements of TehmulLungraa, a halfwit who lives in the Khodadad building. Such a Long Journey is a journey of all the characters in the novel that in their own ways get self-educated and mature in the wake of circumstances and experiences they gather in the course of their individual ordeals.

The title Such a Long Journey is taken from T.S. Eliot’s poem Journey of the Magi which provides one of the three epigraphs to the novel:

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
for a journey and such a Long journey.

The title has a symbolic significance and refers to the life of Gustad Noble, the central character of the story. In T.S.Eliot’s poem, the journey is undertaken by three wise men to pay their homage to the divinely baby. The star guided them towards their destination. In the case of Gustad, life itself is a long journey with a lot of undulations’. The guiding star in his life is the deep faith in God and the stoic spirituality with which he approaches life. The concern for Parsi community figures prominently in Such a Long Journey. The inhabitants of Khodadad building are representatives of a cross-section of middle class Parsis expressing all the angularities of the dwindling community. The protagonist Gustad Noble has to face a number of problems during his life.

Gustad is a father of three children and a bank employee. His boys are Sohrab and Darius, while his daughter, Roshan, is nine years old. Two highly important incidents in Gustad’s life are the bankruptcy of his father and the bowl-breaking incident he experienced as a young child in Matheran. Gustad connects the memories of his father’s insolvency with sensuous attributes. Due to the bankruptcy, Gustad’s family is left at the mercy of the vagaries of fate. Such a Long Journey illustrates how the vagaries of life can invert position of control. The broken of the bowl as well as the bankruptcy signifies a boy’s first encounter with destruction and life’s complexity.

Gustad is a victim-figure whose fall on the thorns of life is the work of conspiring circumstances. His father’s failure in life and the resultant bankruptcy, his brother’s betrayal and the loss of his mother give him thoughts that do often life too deep for tears. Poverty’s finger moves quickly, infecting and harming his life. He makes the unfocused, furious decision to never cry, not in front of others or in private, regardless of the pain or grief that befalls him. He feels that sobbing is the last resort for both men and women who allow themselves to be broken, and that tears are futile. He is kept whole and sane by his toughness and sincerity. The result of a bloody struggle between the forces of Evil and the operatives of Good is his self-actualization.

The narrative has four main strands. The first deals with the betrayal of Gustad’s dream by his son Sohrab. The second dramatizes a sorry state of affairs which arises out of his daughter Roshan’s protracted illness. The third portrays the mystery that shrouds Jimmy Billimoria, the fictional counterpart of the infamous-Sohrab Nagarwala. The fourth strand concerns the tragic situation in which Tehmul, a mentally retarded young
neighbour of Gustad, is placed. Mistry’s triumph lies in weaving the four strands into an expert pattern and a unified vision emerges in the narrative.

Sohrab is the eldest son of Gustad. He is very intelligent. He gets admission in I.I.T. but he refuses to go to I.I.T. because he was interested in Arts. He fails to fulfill the desires of his father who have done much the success of his son. His son’s betrayal of his dream comes as a major blow in Gustad’s life. The success of his son in the entrance examination of I.I.T. offers hope in an otherwise bleak existence. Mistry writes in his book *Such a Long Journey*:

To him ...the Indian Institute of Technology became the promised land. It was El Dorado and Shangri-La, it Was Atlantis and Camelot, it was Xanadu and Oz. It was the home of the Holy Grail. And all things would be given and all things would be possible and all things would come to pass for he who journeyed, there and emerged with the sacred chalice. (66)

Sohrab’s refusal to join I.I.T. shatters Gustad’s euphoria. He is selfish in some way. He thinks only about himself. His apprehension and disappointment at his son’s rebuff are justified. Mistry writes:

Throwing away his future without reason. What have I not done for him, tell me? I even threw myself in front of a car. Kicked him aside, saved his life, and got this to suffer all my life (slapping his hip). But that’s what a father is. For. And if he cannot show respect at least, I can kick him again. Out of my home, out of my life. (52)

Gustad is sincerely worried about his son’s future in India’s pluralistic society. He worries that the younger generation doesn’t understand the risk of losing tradition. And when custom disappears, respect for those who preserve and cherish tradition always follows. Sohrab’s life’s aim becomes ensuring his success. It offers his lifeless existence purpose. Ahrab He feels hurt by his son’s senselessness. This is taken as a personal offence by Gustad and he responds, Mistry writes:

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. All gone in the gutter water… I kicked him once to save his life, and I can kick him again. Out of my house, out of my life! (122)

Loss is one of Mistry’s novel’s main themes, as many critics have noted. Such a Long Journey investigates the symbolic and literal ramifications of loss. The spectrum of loss examined in Such a Long Journey includes both the death of individuals and the loss of material belongings. The prolonged illness of his daughter Roshan adds to his grief. He is plagued by poverty and finds it difficult to make ends meet. To cover the growing costs, he sells his wife’s gold bracelets and his camera. He learns that a number of centrifugal forces are working against him. Nevertheless, he launches an epic struggle against the inimical circumstances. His friend Malcolm suggests a visit to the church of St.Mary.

Gustad meets his close friend Dinshawji every day. Gustad is grieving in silence over Jimmy Bilimoria’s disappearance, his old friend. Jimmy, Gustad’s close buddy, mysteriously and suddenly vanishes, setting off Gustad’s protracted voyage into the unknown. Jimmy isn’t just your neighbor. He is considered by the kids to be a “second father,” nearly one of the family. In case of an unforeseen incident involving himself and Dilnawaz, Gustad even contemplates designating him as their guardian in his will. Jimmy is a true friend in need, and his selfless deed rescues Gustad from certain death. The sudden disappearance of his friend wounds him deeply. To him, it is a treachery and Jimmy is ‘another kind of Cain’. Only his wife could sense the depth of his pain. Her perception is far sharper than Gustad’s. She is optimistic that his friend would certainly return one day and explain. However, Gustad remains sullen and nurses rancor against his friend. Mistry writes:

‘Everyone is fine. We were very worried when you disappeared, that’s all. Then your letter came, and we were happy that you were all right.’ Gustad chose his words carefully: nothing must sound like an accusation. He remembered the decapitated rat and cat; the rhyme: *Bilimoriachaavalchorya*; the vinca, rose and *subjo* slashed to bits. (269)

After a protracted pause, Jimmy writes to him. Gustad’s shattered psyche feels some relief. Jimmy asks him to accept a package for him. After much thought—he is too confused to think clearly—he carries the package home. To his dismay, he discovers that it contains ten lakhs. Gustad’s life becomes less peaceful as money arrives. A tumultuous period of fear and uncertainty begins. He hides his pain since he is a stoic. His inability to connect the two worlds—the corrupt and malevolent one, and the one where innocence and joy
rule—leads to complications. His static hut serene existence is threatened by the constant intrusion of external forces.

Jimmy’s carefree life is upended by his arrest on fraud and extortion accusations. His trust in his friend is undermined by the fabricated story of the government. He feels as though someone has betrayed him. As requested by Jimmy’s devoted buddy Ghulam Mohammed, he agrees to return the money. Dinshawji’s moral support saves him from having a nervous breakdown. Mistry writes:

Jimmy fell silent, and Gustad sensed he wanted to hear his reaction. ‘What shall I say Jimmy? All this suffering. But can you not still talk to lawyers, or newspapers, tell them the truth about your ten lakh, and about the whole bloody crooked—’ Gustad, it has been tried. Everything is in their control...courts in their pockets. Only one way...quietly do my four years... then forget about it. (280)

Gustad’s departure from the Khodabad Building is a symbolic act that marks the beginning of his journey toward self-actualization. Gustad had an apocalyptic experience in Delhi. His eyes well up with tears at what he sees. Mistry writes:

On the bed lay nothing more than a shadow. The shadow of the powerfully built army man who once lived in Khodabad Building. His hairline had receded and sunken cheeks made the bones jut”, sharp and grotesque. The regal handlebar moustache was no more. His eyes had disappeared within their sockets. (267)

Gustad is shocked by Jimmy’s revelation and realizes that his friend has been humiliated. This is a major sixty-lakh swindle, with the prime minister personally implicated. Jimmy is requested to pose as the prime minister over the phone in order to obtain funds from State Bank of India to support the guerilla training program in East Pakistan. Jimmy is then requested to write and sign a confession. He’s been really deftly framed. He is taken into custody, subjected to severe torture, and only released when the money is given back. He is later moved to a hospital where he receives the necessary medical care. Jimmy’s suffering is the result of a betrayal by the ‘people at the very top’. Jimmy’s revelation alters Gustad’s perception. It is not only a moment of illumination but also a point of forgiveness. He perceives the reality, not in the red light of emotion but in the white light of truth. His altered perception, however, does not bring solace; it brings pain which is accompanied by knowledge. His return to Bombay is charged with great significance. It brings his tormenting dilemma to an end. Jimmy’s death is a traumatic experience for Gustad as it modifies his perspective of life.

Jimmy is mostly absent from the text, yet he serves as a constant reminder of the myth of national unity, which is more harmful than beneficial. Being a devoted citizen, he leaves his village to work for RAW in Delhi, which essentially serves as a spy organization to keep an eye on the rebellious deeds of Indira Gandhi’s opponents. Because he has unquestioning faith in the Prime Minister and obeys her directions, he is a victim of nationalistic fervor. However, betrayal and death are the price of patriotism. When Gustad pays him a visit in the hospital, he is momentarily reconnected with his community. Major Bilimoria’s narrative has been rewritten from the original Nagarwala case. According to newspaper reports in 1971, the Head Cashier of State Bank of India (Delhi) was called by someone who gave his name as Mrs. Gandhi and told him to give 6 million rupees to Mr. Nagarwala. The cashier followed the instructions and handed the money to Mr. Nagarwala. Later, he went to the police as he was beset with doubts. Upon investigation, Mrs. Gandhi claimed that she had not made any call. The cashier was suspended and Mr. Nagarwala arrested. The latter confessed later that he had mimicked her voice and taken the money. He died under suspicious circumstances.

Jimmy and Gustad have an odd yet affectionate friendship. The latter is his favorite, and he will stop at nothing to please him. However, Gustad is the only prisoner in Khodabad Building who treats the crippled youngster with kindness and patience. Tehmul is practically seen as a son by him. Gustad scoops up the boy’s lifeless corpse after he is struck by a flying brick, making sure the head is correctly supported to prevent it from rolling around lifelessly. He transports the body to the boy’s apartment and offers the funeral prayers according to Parsi custom.

The fourth strand of the narrative concerns the predicament of Tehmul and his tragic death. In Gustad’s case, compassion becomes a clue towards finding his own way out of the forest. He alone treats Tehmul with love. Tehmul is an innocent soul trapped in the world of corruption. He has nothing to look forward to but a life of pain. Hence Gustad’s sympathy for him. Once he rescues Tehmul In a brothel. Tehmul has the mind of a child but the biological urge makes him restless. Gustad infers that Tehmul’s picture would fit right in among other saints of the - compound wall, a public urinal transformed into a shrine by Gustad. Mistry writes:
Gustad wished he had the power of miracles, the power to cure Tehmul’s ills, restore to him all the rights and virtues of mortals. And as Tehmul stood there, shamefaced, tears running down his cheeks, Gustad realized he could not take away the doll. Somehow, the loss to Roshan would not be as great as it would to Tehmul. One day, when she was old enough, perhaps he would tell her what had happened. (303)

The book addresses the difficulties, annoyances, fears, and melancholy that come with being a middle-class person. This class makes up the majority of Khodadad Building’s occupants, and this novel depicts their attempts to exist in a decent manner. Gustad’s life is a perfect illustration of this. The wall around the housing complex, which doubles as an outdoor urinal, the little apartment with nowhere to store his books, and the thin, watery milk they must purchase are all emblematic of middle-class living. They have economical, moral, social, and political concerns.

The wall image is conveyed by conflicting and numerous concepts. The prisoners at Khodadad Building are somewhat protected by the wall surrounding it. However, it stands in the way of modernity for the state. Thus, it is destroyed to make room for the wider road. On the other hand, because people use the wall to relieve themselves, its existence irritates the building’s occupants. This results in the proliferation of innumerable mosquitoes and an intolerable stink. The wall takes on a positive connotation when Gustad has the bright idea to hire a pavement artist to paint it. The artist is able to convert the wall into a secular yet religious place where deities of different religions converge in amicable harmony. The black paper put up by Gustad on the windows during the previous war symbolize the barriers that he has built in his mind. These walls have to be pulled down to make way for openness, new ideas and changes. The wall then becomes a matter of perspective and attitude. Mistry writes:

‘The wall is getting more and more popular,’ said Gustad. ‘But what about money, you are getting enough?’ ‘Oh yes,’ said the artist. This is a very good location.’ He showed off his new clothes. ‘Terylene pant—latest fashion, bell-bottoms, with seven belt loops. (212)

But after the success of the wall, he begins to think of it as “my wall” (329) and decides to paint in oil and enamel only as he can then achieve permanence in his art. It seems certain that his social aspirations and “complacent routine” will soon come to an end as the work on the wall was “reawakening in him the usual sources of human sorrow: a yearning for permanence, for roots, for something he could call his own, something immutable” (184). The abrupt end of his short journey to glory reminds him that he has a long way to go. The sacred wall has, in this sense, become a motif of unpredictability.

The socio-cultural life of the Parsis is strongly related to Mistry’s novels, which highlight marginalized groups and offer a typical form of resistance to social oppression and hegemony. While he concentrates on the struggles faced by the Bombay Parsi community, he has not ignored the mistreatment of other marginalized and lower-class populations by members of the upper caste and upper class. Along with the marginalized Parsi community, Mistry pays equal importance to the other minority communities like the Muslims and the Sikhs and the subalterns like the chamars who become mute victims to the atrocities of the strong and fanatic communities.

Mistry assesses the political and historical events and facts from a Parsi viewpoint. The sensation of uneasiness experienced by the Parsi community is a result of both the identity crisis issue and the instability itself. Mistry is a symbol of the Parsis’ marginalization in contemporary Indian society. In the vastly multicultural and multi-religious country of India, the Parsis feel dehumanized since they can no longer enjoy the dominant status they had prior to independence. The portrayal of Parsi life in this kind of setting deals with their fight to survive. Moreover, the dwindling number of Parsis all over the world in general and in India in particular has added to gravity of the situation. Gustad voices his concerns about the rising communal forces, Mistry writes:

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 men to get half as much. How could he make Sohrab understand this? (55).

_Such a Long Journey_ is based on the literary canon of classical literature. The story is tense in a dramatic way. Not only is the course of action reasonable, but it is also free. It possesses life’s flow. Although Mistry’s first book lacks technical excellence, it does provide a realistic picture of Indian middle-class Parsee life. In other words, the story so effectively dramatizes life in all its complexity, diversity, and freshness.
extensive rhythm of global pattern is etched in Gustad’s life and suffering. Mistry has a comprehensive yet wide-ranging vision. Gustad has humble aspirations and modest dreams but when circumstances conspire to deny him happiness and peace, he rebels. He slowly modifies his dreams and trims down his expectations of life. He comes to accept that he is not in control of events. At the end of his terrifying journey, he accepts his limitations.

In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry raises the essential question of life, the problem of human loneliness in the modern world. Gustad’s suffering and struggle with fortitude and humility have a Promethian quality. His journey is from hopelessness to hope, and from despondency to millennium. Referring to Gustad’s struggle, Michael Thorpe in his article *Such a Long Journey* (A Review) observes:

Gustad’s journey, like that of Magi, is entangled with memory and desire: hope and tenderness, anxious care for his family but also a stubborn, patriarchal breach with his first-born son Sohrab, for whom he dreams too selfishly, desiring compensation for his own losses and disillusion.

For Gustad, there is no God who shows up at the conclusion of his fears to give justice or an explanation, or to tell him that he has passed the test and everything will be okay. Anxiety, sadness, and letdown pose a threat to his well-being. Gustad, however, manages to live without giving in to a protracted sense of hopelessness or resentment, maintaining his fundamental human dignity. His arduous voyage through a harsh and frigid world where every aspect of human joy and sorrow is intricately intertwined represents the voyage of an ethnic group, a society on the brink of extinction. From a purely subjective plane of self-indulgence, he moves on to a much deeper and complex level to examine the truths of life. He who is myopic at the beginning attains full vision towards the end of his odyssey. His journey is a manifestation of the cosmic phenomenon - the conflict between good and evil and his survival is the triumph of the Zoroastrian faith.

Mistry has skillfully and tastefully portrayed a galactic array of characters. The author paints an accurate picture of India by showcasing a diverse range of Indian society, including the so-called riff-raff. Similar to how history may be said to be imperfect, Mistry’s book only partially and inconsistently depicts reality, leaving many gaps. Guy Lawson rightfully parts, “Mistry and Dickens are interested in those to whom history happen those with little control over their circumstances.” (1998: 22)

Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey* offers a bleak vision in which the journey of the fast-disappearing Parsee community is dramatized. For Gustad, Zoroaster is the paradigm. His humble but cheerless life is governed by humata, hukhta and hvarshta. His experiential realisation that human nature is dualistic brings his journey to a nostalgic end. Symbolically, it is a journey from myopia to full vision.

References