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Such a Long Journey: A Domestic Tragi-Comedy

By Dr. Rupam Kumari

Abstract- Such a Long Journey is Rohinton Mistry's first novel. It was published in 1991. It is "a highly poised and accomplished work." (SLJ Cover Page) This creation of Mistry won many awards e.g Governor General Award, Common wealth Writer's Prize for best book etc. It was also Shortlisted for the Booker Prize. This Novel has been translated into German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Japanese. It has also been made into a movie named Such a Long Journey Which was released in 1998. As commented in Spectator, It is "a rich, humane work, undoubtedly one of the best novels about india in recent Years" (SLJ Cover Page).

Rohinton Mistry is considered to be one of the famous authors who have gone out of India and are writing in English. He uses 'ordinary' men and women as his protagonists in his novels. He fills his novels with the sights, sounds, smells and colour of India. His characters are neither saints nor sinners; he involves the readers in their lives as they try to survive the complexities of their culture.

Keywords: *bombay, indo-pakistan war, independent- nation, parsi community, diasporic writing and india.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Such a Long Journey (1991) is a brilliant novel by one of the most remarkable writers of fiction who have emerged from India in recent years. It is set in Bombay against the backdrop of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 and the emergence of Bangladesh as a separate independent nation.

Though the novel was published sixteen years after Rohinton Mistry had settled in Toronto, it has no trace of the Canadian immigrant. The remarkable thing about the novel is that it is absolute Indian. It reveals the author's concern, particularly for Parsi community in India. Mistry shows an Indian's knowledge about corruption being an ingrained part of life at all levels in India. Mistry's feeling for India is not only longing for the past but also a mixed feeling of unpleasant jolt when the Parsi community felt hurt at the Nagarwala incident. By writing this novel he tries to restore the honour of the Parsi community.

It would not be an exaggeration to observe that the Nagarwala incident was the basis of the novel. During the regime of Indira Gandhi in India, one Parsi gentleman Mr. Nagarwala was accused of imitating Indira Gandhi's voice while talking over the phone to the Chief Cashier of a nationalized bank. However, the fact was that the Chief Cashier of the State Bank of India had received instructions from 'the Prime Minister's office to hand over Rs. 60 lakh in order to fund a secret guerrilla operation in Bangladesh. Mr. Nagarwala was arrested

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and pronounced guilty by the court. He was sentenced to four years imprisonment. The entire Parsi community felt shocked and disgraced at this incident. Mistry's pride for his community which had been maintaining a high moral standard and which had secured a prestigious position in the past, got hurt and he decided to take revenge on Indira Gandhi through his novel, *Such a Long Journey*. There cannot be any doubt that Major Bilimoria in the novel, the Parsi gentleman working for the RAW is none but Mr. Nagarwala. Major Bilimoria is accused in the same way as was Mr. Nagarwala.

According to a critic "Mistry manages to convey a vivid picture of India through sharp affectionate sketches of Indian family life and a gift for erotic satire." (SLJ cover page) In this novel, Mistry returns to Bombay and the Parsi world. Here Mistry has very overtly attempted to deconstruct and repossess his past. He was born in 1952 and left India in 1975 for Canada so the India he has evoked is that of the 1960 and 1970s. More especially it is Bombay of that era he has recreated in this novel. The Bombay evoked by Mistry in this text is the city of 1960s and 70s — a city which he had then just begun his journey towards regional parochialism. The right wing political party called Shiv Sena had for the first time engineered unrest in the city and threatened the cosmopolitan.

Another significant aspect of this discourse is the leitmotif of 'journeying' which is also central to the most Diasporic writings. The three epigraphs which preface the novel set the tone. The second epigraph taken from T.S. Eliot's poem, "Journey of the Magi" is very significant:

"A cold coming we had of it,

Just the worst time of the year

For a journey, and such a long journey."(SLJ Preface)

The title of the novel has a symbolic significance; it refers to the spiritual progress in the life of the protagonist Gustad Noble. In the beginning of the novel we find that Gustad was God-fearing and without any greed. He was much concerned with his family with his eldest son's enrolment in I.I.T. and with his daughter's illness. Yet he immediately agreed to Bilimoria's proposal of taking the packet sent by him from the Chor Bazar, as he stuck to the point that a friend should not be let down. Whatever happened in his life enriched his experiences and at the end of the novel his sensibilities were broadened so much that he could trace the blissful face of a saint on the face of Tehmul,

the idiot. Gustad's agony at the death of his friend and colleague, Dinshawji and after some days of Major Bilimoria who had once been like his brother and who had confessed his sin and suffering to him in jail, changed him altogether.

Such a Long Journey refers both to his physical journey - his financial troubles after his father became bankrupt and his continuous struggle since then - and to his spiritual journey; the latter is highlighted by the title and the epigraph.

T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" reminds the readers of the ancient Zoroastrian religion and the belief that the Magi who attended the birth of Christ were Zoroastrian priests. The wise men from the east came to see the new-born Jesus in His birth place. They also had both physical suffering and spiritual suffering. The lines,

"Just the worst. time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey...
The ways deep and the weather sharp
The very dead of winter."

refer to the physical sufferings of the Magi, but the conflict in their mind when they could not get themselves adjusted to the old ways of life after gaining the new experience refers to their spiritual suffering:

"I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different, this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death."

II. JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

This suffering is essential when one tries to attain higher and nobler values of life. The experience they gathered made them spiritual foreigners in their own land. Gustad also became a spiritual foreigner in his own surroundings; he alone came forward to carry the dead body of Tehmul. Inspector Bamji asked him not to carry Tehmul's heavy body alone, but he did not listen to him. The novelist writes,

"Gustad ignored him and began walking down the compound, away from them all, towards the stairway to Tehmul's flat. They looked in silence now, too ashamed to follow. Sohrab gazed after his father with fear and admiration." (SLJ335)

The other epigraph is taken from Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali. It also suggests the motif of journey. Tagore accepted life on earth as journey ahead and he also conceived God as the fellow traveller, suffering with men and encouraging yet consoling them and encouraging them for undertaking further journey. The words are as follows: "And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where the old tracks are lost, new country is

revealed with its wonders." (SLJ Preface) These lines suggest that life is always changing and along with it changes men's behaviour and language and also the scenario of his surroundings. Man's embarking on new land, as hidden in the lines does not imply his adventurous nature, but his inward journey, his urge to develop a broader consciousness.

Rohinton Mistry also used words from Firdausi's *Shah-Nama* in the preface which runs as follows: "He assembled the aged priests and put questions to them concerning the kings who had once possessed the world, 'How did they', he inquired, 'hold the world in the beginning and why is it that it has been left to us in such a sorry state? And how was it that they were able to live free of care during the days of their heroic labours?'" (SLJ preface)

These words which form the part of Firdausi's Iranian epic, *ShahNama* also suggest the journey of mankind from the ancient time to the present age. The question is about the beginning of the journey when the kings were famous for their heroism. It recalls both the glorious heritage of a mighty empire, as well as hints at the downgraded condition of present day Parsis. It is a saying that the heroes of the past had not been able to remove the sufferings of mankind. It is man's fate that they will have to accept suffering as long as they continue their journey. The way Gustad suffered and the way his hopes were denied show that the epigraph symbolizes the essence of the novel. It is implied here that life is a continuous process of learning from the moment of birth to death. The novelist's message is best expressed through the activities of the pavement artist:

"Over the years, a precise cycle had entered the rhythm, of his life, the cycle of arrival, creation and obliteration. Like sleeping, waking and stretching, or eating, digesting and excreting, the cycle sang in harmony with the blood in his veins and the breath in his lungs. He learned to disdain the overlong sojourn and the procrastinated departure, for they were the progenitors of complacent routine, to be shunned at all costs. The journey - chanced unplanned, solitary - was the thing to relish." (SLJ184)

Thus, the 'journey' in the title is not mere physical journey but a journey of the spirit, one that requires non attachment. Puri N. Upadhyay explains the concluding lines of the novel in terms of Gustad's spiritual journey:

"At the end of the novel, Gustad tears off the black paper covering the ventilators of his flat that had for years 'restricted the ingress of all forms of light, earthly and celestial,' and a moth, a symbol of past, flies out, a sign of new beginning, a new birth, that emerges from death. Like the journey of the Magi, Gustad's arduous trek through pain, heart break and loss has brought him to a new awakening and the promise of

the ultimate victory of human spirit. Ultimately the novel, *Such a Long Journey* celebrates through the metaphor of the journey the all inclusiveness of life and the indestructibility of the human spirit.” (Kapadia, Dodia 175-76)

Thus *Such a Long Journey* views and reviews a vast canvas of Indian life. It discusses minutely and realistically the ups and downs of an average Indian and also touches certain explosive chapters of the Indian politics and the three wars that took place between 1962 and 1971.

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