

Narrating History in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract: *The Post Colonial intelligence thinks that their history has been distorted and warped by the Western writers with a definite purpose to belittle the achievements of those whom they have conquered. As such, they are against the act of their histories being written by the colonizers. Rohinton Mistry is one such Post Colonial writer. His Such A Long Journey depicts the blows of fate that strike India as tragic calamities and catastrophes in the form of Emergency. The Post Colonial account of the historical facts is presented by this Parsi writer with the social, historical and political events very sincerely. He has emerged as a prominent Parsi political novelist owing to his impressive depiction of history and politics in his novels.*

KEYWORDS: History, Post colonialism, Colonialism, Resistance, Imperialism, Politics.

History is a testimony to the massive European colonialization and imperialism. Like Milton, apologists like Rudyard Kipling and detractors like Joseph Conrad have also talked about the unabashed exploitation of people and resources. History is a very crafty and dangerous mode of scholarship. Everything depends upon, what's known as, the point of view. The perception about the 1857 trouble in India is a highly illuminating instance. While the Indian

historians praise this as the 'War of Independence', the British historians have dubbed it as 'Sepoy Mutiny'. This shows how everything in history depends upon the point of view. The Post Colonial writers- historians as well as non-historians have no kind word for the type of history imposed and foisted upon them by the Western historians. There is a very sharp and acrimonious debate between the apologists of colonialism and the Post Colonial thinkers. The latter derided the Western thinkers' claim of universalism. They denounced how the colonial rulers write the history of the colonised people from their specific angle. The Post Colonial thinkers challenge this bias in the histories written by the western writers. In *Gerontion*, T. S. Eliot has highlighted this typical side of history in a very evocative manner:

After such knowledge, what
forgiveness? Think now

History has many cunning
passages, contrived corridors

And issues, deceives with
whispering ambitions,

Guides us by vanities.
Think now

She gives when our
attention is distracted

And what she gives, gives
with such supple confusions.

That the giving famishes
the craving. Gives too late

What's not believed in, or if
still believed,

In memory only,
reconsidered passion. Gives too soon

Into weak hands, what's
thought can be dispensed with

Till the refusal propagates a
fear. Think

Neither fear nor courage
saves us. (70)

Eliot is trying to highlight a slippery passage that history can be compared with. It is a very dangerous discipline. Anybody and everybody can exploit history for the meanest advantages.

The Post Colonial intelligence is right in thinking that their history has been distorted and warped by the Western writers, with a definite purpose, to belittle the achievements of those whom they have conquered. So, their history contains, what T. S. Eliot described as, 'cunning passages, contrived corridors and issues.' The thinkers from these colonized countries have a valid objection. Views about God, death, birth, salvation, etc. are metaphysical puzzles which are both right and wrong at the same time, depending upon the point of view. The colonizers' history is faulted by the Post Colonial intelligence as something mischievous, designed to destroy the local people's faith. Thus, Post Colonial thinkers have a point in their opposition to their histories written by the colonizers.

In fact, Post Colonial writers and thinkers have an obsession about history. The Western colonizers were conquerors and victors with a difference. Like other subjugators, they had no plan to dig their roots in the inhospitable soils. They were crazy about establishing their all round superiority over the hapless people who got crushed under the juggernaut of western colonialism. Post Colonial thinkers decry and denounce the western thinkers' claim of universalism. They take the stand against universalism because this concept is utilized by the colonizers to justify their right to rule over the backward people. There is a very sharp and acrimonious debate between the apologists of colonialisms and the post colonial thinkers. The colonial rulers wrote the history of the colonized people from a specific angle. About their own early history, the Europeans have very poor perceptions. It comes handy to them for showing that Christ is their great spiritual liberator. They adopt an identical attitude towards the early history of the backward people conquered by them and show that these periods are the epochs of complete darkness. The Post Colonial thinkers challenge this bias in the histories written by the Western writers. They feel that their early history has been vulgarized deliberately to justify the establishment of the colonies.

Rohinton Mistry (1952-) is a well-established Indo-Canadian novelist of the recent times. Mistry's fictional sensibility has been enriched and enlivened by his unique historical background. He hails from the Parsi minority of India, a community whose terrible and traumatic

tryst with history reads like a fascinating and fantastic but heart-breaking and heart-rending romance. The Parsis enjoyed the bliss of happy and high-spirited existence in Persia. In the eighth century, they had the misfortune of suffering the reverses and rebuffs at the hands of the resurgent Islamic invaders and aggressors. The alternatives before them were- conversion to Islam or death. Most Iranians embraced Islam to save their skins, but a sizeable group travelled to India to preserve their culture and faith. These Iranian émigrés finally landed in Sanjan, a Hindu Kingdom on the Western Coast of India. Jadav Rana, the king, allowed them to settle there, imposing the conditions like speaking only Gujarati, marrying in the darkness of the night, wearing sari only, surrendering their weapons, etc. for granting them refuge and asylum. The Parsis could preserve their faith, customs, rites, etc. because of the tolerant outlook of the Hindus. They have prospered in India, which they have adopted as their motherland. Mostly settled in Bombay, they have made solid contribution to the growth and development of India.

Mistry's cultural, historical and religious roots embody romance-like fascinations and excitements. Jung, the psychologist, has asserted that human subconscious preserves some traits and traces of the traumatic experiences that had been suffered and put up by even the remote ancestors in the distant past. So, it is clear that deep down, in the darkest recesses of Mistry's psyche, there must be a sense of the traumatic anguish of some poor wounded name lodging somewhere in his bosom. The calamities that man have faced

at the hands of victors and conquerors will keep on simmering and smouldering to ooze out through a man who suffers the poignancy of nostalgic memories and the analyst who has the gift of the creative talent. In Mistry's case, there is a unique blend of the man who suffers and the mind that creates.

Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991) depicts the blows of fate that strike India as tragic calamities and catastrophes in the form of Emergency. *Such a Long Journey*, the first novel of Mistry, is a tour de force. It is considered to be a wonderful first novel by one of the most prominent writers of fiction belonging to India. The most outstanding fact about this novel is its absolute Indianness. Here, Mistry returns to Bombay and the Parsi world. This novel shows Mistry's diasporic consciousness much more than his short stories. Mistry was born in 1952 and migrated to Canada in 1975. That's why the background of all his novels is the India of the 1960s and 1970s. Mistry is praised all over the world as a brilliant narrator of stories. In his novels, he presents a detailed narrative of the Parsi culture against the backdrop of Bombay which is a sort of mini India. He was awarded the Governor Generals Award for fiction in English in Canada for *Such A Long Journey*. Remarks N.S.Dharan," As a fictionist, he has been likened to such immortals like Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Balzac" (60). Being a Post Colonial Parsi writer, Mistry is also engaged in an effort to repossess his cultural territory. He is involved in creating a unique identity for himself because he is better described as Parsi

‘Diaspora’. The diasporic background of the Parsis is unique. It is a community which is declining very fast. Aditi Kapoor remarks pertinently, “Unless something is done to augment their fast depleting numbers and to revive their religion, the Parsis, after an illustrious past, could well just fade out in oblivion” (*The Times of India*).

Being a Parsi himself, Mistry is concerned about the fate of his community. As such, he has taken upon himself the responsibility to preserve a record of how they lived to some extent when the Parsis become extinct. His novel *Such a Long Journey* not only presents the problems of Parsi Diaspora in the Indian situation, but also brings forward his anti-colonial resistance. Says Charu Chandra Mishra, “Almost all the characters of this novel are chosen from the middle class Parsi background and are shown resisting the snares of power in their idiosyncratic way” (161). Thus, Mistry has skilfully captured a sense of loss and nostalgia in the experience of the immigrants and the alienation of Parsis in India in his very first novel.

According to N.S.Dharan, all the issues related with the Parsis “find expression in the post-independence Parsi writing in English” (101). The most outstanding feature of Rohinton Mistry as a creator of fables, characters and perspectives is that he belongs to the Parsi community. The bitter realities of Parsis in the Post Colonial India find a subtle expression in his novel *Such A Long Journey*. He has emerged as a potent and perceptive historian of this community. Each and every second of the Parsis’

history is an indicator and index of Post Colonialism. The Parsis lost their fine Persian language and had to switch to Gujarati, the local language. Their women had to wear saris. The Hindu psyche, which is claimed to be more tolerant than many other ethnic psyches, permitted the Parsis to carry on their devotional practices away from the public gaze. The Parsis made the best of a bad bargain and set up traditions of loyalty and fidelity. Many Parsis prospered by moving closer to the British and left India with the British. Yet, a majority of them stayed on in Bombay where they had been concentrating for a long time. The Parsis experience many ethnic anxieties because of their minority character. The Parsi population in India is on the decline. Mistry’s fiction is also typical Parsi response to the post-independence India. Dharan describes this decline and its portrayal in Rohinton Mistry’s fiction as “Ethnic Atrophy Syndrome” (100).

Loss of home is one of the gravest tragedies that human beings have suffered all through their history. The Parsis are among those people who had passed through this trauma in all its fury. Their migration to India was a violent transplantation. The Parsis have not been able to forget these tragic events. Their eviction and their loss of home, their disgraceful compromise—all are deeply embedded in their psyche. In the post-independence India, the imposition of the Internal Emergency by Indira Gandhi made the position of the Parsis even more shaky. Those who leave their homes and settle in other countries, even of their own choice, can never forget the smiling fields,

the flowing streams, the blowing winds as they list. In short, nostalgia for the home continues to haunt one and all. All the Indians, who have settled abroad, feel a pinch at their heart whenever the memories of the home strike back. This universal trait is the motive force behind Mistry's looking back at the lot of the Parsis in particular and the other suffering Indians in general in the Post Colonial and historical context.

In *Such a Long Journey* the setting is Bombay where Mistry was born, brought up and educated. Like Mistry himself, the hero belongs to the Parsi community which has its own anxieties and worries in the Post Colonial India. Mistry traces the family history of Gustad Noble, the hero, from the time of his rich grandfather. He narrates how the family falls on evil days because of certain unforeseeable factors. Finally, Gustad Noble has to settle down as a clerk in a bank live in a two-room set in the Khodadad Building. Gustad Noble and his wife are blessed with three children. The eldest one among them is the son named Sohrab and the second child is another son named Darius. The youngest child is a girl named Roshan whose chronic sickness is an ever present anxiety. Sohrab does well in the IIT Entrance Test and is among those who can join this prestigious Engineering Institute. Gustad Noble is elated beyond measure and for many days talks about the calibre of his son non-stop. A party is held to celebrate Roshan's birthday and Sohrab's success. It ends in fiasco because Sohrab categorically puts his foot down and defies his father. He debunks his father for making his success

very cheap. This starts a sort of chain reaction with the perceptions of the father and the son moving poles asunder. Complications follow and the horizons continue to grow darker and sabler for the Noble family. Major Bilimoria, a friend of the family, disappears suddenly and joins Indira Gandhi's spying outfit R.A.W. he robs the bank of a large amount by mimicking Indira Gandhi's voice. He sends ten lakh rupees to Gustad for depositing in the bank under the fake account of Mira Obili, an anagram of Bilimoria. This causes unexpected trouble. Bilimoria is caught and jailed. Dinshawji, a lifelong colleague and friend of Gustad, creates some trouble dies. His funeral provides Mistry a chance to throw light on Parsi obsequies. Tehmul Langara, a young boy with disturbed mind, meets his death when he tries to catch a brick missile thrown by the agitators. Gustad is with the dead body when the estranged son, Sohrab, also comes there. This brings about reconciliation between the estranged duo and the novel comes to an end. *Such a Long Journey* depicts the blows of fate that strike India as tragic calamities and catastrophes in the form of Internal Emergency. M. Mani Meitei observes perceptively that in *Such a Long Journey*, Rohinton Mistry appears as "a critical realist as far as the treatment of social reality is concerned" (84).

Such a Long Journey can be read and interpreted in various other ways. Yet, Post Colonial reading is a very significant interpretation of this novel. Santawna Haldar remarks, "Though the novel is written, apparently, in simple narrative style, the writer has also adopted post

colonial methodology” (11). The whole story revolves around the characters living in an imaginary Parsi enclave, to wit, Khodadad Building, in Bombay. Still, the experiences of the characters are all real. The fact that the backdrop of the story is the Indo-Pak war also helps in making the socio-political scenario look real. Gustad’s fond remembrances of the good old times in his grandfather’s days show the rich past of the Parsis in India. Similarly, his present sorry-state is closely related with the contemporary political crisis. The residents of the Khodadad Building represent the middle-class Parsis who show the worries of a minority group in multi-racial India. They also exhibit their age-old customs and superstitions which have enclosed them and have also alienated them from the conventional groups. According to Santawana Haldar, “The wretched condition of the poor and the middle-class people, tortured under the brutal forces of corrupt rule, offers a criticism of the post colonial government and reveals the writer’s sympathy for the subaltern” (131). She further states that the Nagarwala incident is the basis of the novel. Nagarwala was pronounced guilty by the court. The Parsi community had stuck to integrity and honesty as a matter of principle. The entire Parsi community was shocked at the turn the Nagarwala episode took. It hurt Mistry’s pride and “he decided to take revenge on Indira Gandhi through his fiction” (131). The Nagarwala episode has been fictionalized in *Such a Long Journey* as Major Bilimoria episode. This is a direct reflection or presentation of the post-independence, and hence post colonial, history of India. Bilimoria is treated in the

same way as his counterpart Nagarwala had been treated. He is given a lot of space to justify himself. For this, a meeting is arranged between Gustad and Bilimoria in the hospital. He feels that he has redeemed his honour as well as that of his community, atleast in the eyes of his friend. The history of most of the ex-colonies in Asia, Africa, and other places has been muddled and dirtied by intrigues and counter-intrigues, conspiracies and counter- conspiracies. Post colonial fiction has come to terms with these tragic and traumatic post colonial twists. Mistry’s Parsi psyche is wounded so much that he puts forward Indira Gandhi, one of the most powerful rulers of post-independence India, as a conspiring intriguer. His only aim is to restore and rehabilitate the pride of the Parsi community, a community of good people who had lost much by the misdemeanour of a black sheep among them.

Mistry shows how Bilimoria tells Gustad that he had been more than framed by Indira Gandhi. She promised to use her authority to bail out Bilimoria even if he was convicted. Mistry makes Bilimoria say to Gustad:

She promised...nothing would happen to me. Like a fool I agreed...trusted her.

Then she said, may be...we should make our plan water tight...You can write a few lines just now. A confession. That you imitated my voice...because you wanted to continue helping Mukti Bahini...What can I say Gustad? Even to this...I agreed...I wrote my confession...like an idiot. My respect for

her...grown so much over the months. Such a strong woman. Trusted her completely. (SALJ, 327)

The whole episode is entirely fictional and imaginative. Yet, non fictional characters are invariably employed by writers to give an ideological twist to their creations. The version that Mistry has put across is almost close to history and truth. This episode shows how politics becomes a game for finding scape-goats who can be sacrificed whenever big persons are in trouble. It is a very perceptive and penetrative peep into the psyches of the politicians in the post colonial era almost everywhere. Thus, Mistry has given true reflections on the still continuing colonialism in a decolonized society.

The use of history in Mistry's fiction is both through the direct comments of the characters and through supplying the shadowy faces in the form of imaginary characters. Mistry's historical awareness is such that even after shifting to Canada, he goes on writing about India. He focuses on her recent history. He especially concentrates on the fact that the Indian authors were forced to omit some facts and thereby observe enforced selective silence under the dictatorial regime of Indira Gandhi. Santawana Halder comments on Mistry's treatment of contemporary history very perceptively: "A post colonial writer, Mistry has a clear view of his responsibility to art. He achieves a fusion between fact and fiction that attracts the readers' attention to contemporary history" (131). In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry has tried to reveal the contemporary Indian history, especially those secret parts which

were left out by the other writers. Mistry has shown remarkable daring by projecting history in a transparent manner. Indira Gandhi is mentioned by name. History is also connected with the fictional character of Major Bilimoria. The whole novel is set in 1971, with the Indo-Pak war and Bangladesh war of Independence as the background. Gustad Noble's story is interconnected with the political scenario. This scenario very much affected the lives of the ordinary people. According to Sudha P. Pandya: "It is a novel about contemporary reality, about corruption, authoritarianism, dynastic rule, religious fundamentalism and the insecurities of the minorities as against the tall official claims of power and progress" (184). In fact, the novel presents the scary and shameful time of Emergency which is still regarded a blot on the history of decolonized India. Pandya further avers: "Emanating from the writer's quest for what it means to be Indians in a post colonial situation...the novel gives a voice to the marginalized sections and raises relevant questions about dangers in a democratic society like ours" (187).

There are few Indian English novels that have effectively used the backdrop of the post-independent Indian political context particularly of the crucial period of the sixties and the seventies. Rohinton Mistry portrays the picture of this period in this novel. The novelist offers commentary on the socio-political situation and raises a national debate on corruption in high places. Some characters in the novel make really illuminating comments. For instance, Gustad thinks about the position of the Parsis in Bombay

and comments thus: “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” (SALJ, 55).

The fictional world Mistry creates in *Such a Long Journey* is thus no utopia of any kind. It is a picture of the fallen world in which the call of the Holy World is not heard. Again, it is a world in which all forms of corruption, knavery, hypocrisy, tyranny, ugliness, and decay, have the order of the day. The society which is depicted is completely deprived of resilience. Mistry’s shock at the sight of stinking human condition and rampant corruption turns him into being a realist who is obliged to expose the world around him. The nationalistic fervour in the novelist makes him at times a ruthless critic of the corrupt government at the centre. His nationalism is above petty selfishness. Though he is in favour of a certain change, he cannot think of a political situation under dictatorship and communism. This is shown when Gustad snaps at his son, Sohrab, who speaks of dictatorship or communism as a better alternative to democracy: “Be grateful this is democracy. If that Russiawala was here, he would pack you and your friends to Siberia” (SALJ, 100).

The writers in general and post colonial writers in particular endeavour to postulate their own version of history of their people, and thereby reject the traditional history. Rohinton Mistry too rejects many existing narratives about post- independence historical happenings

and achieves a fusion between fact and fiction. Mistry’s version of history has different dimensions. He focuses on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of what Homi Bhabha calls ‘cultural differences’. Parsis in *Such a Long Journey* offer social articulation of difference from the minority perspective. The novel gains its strength from interplay of fact and fiction. However, the triumph of Mistry’s novel lies in the fact, to borrow Ashley Myles’ term, “that it serves as a window of ‘human possibility’ with particular reference to forgotten microscopic community” (78-79). Through the characters like Gustad, Dinshawji, Bilimoria, Peerbhoy, Dilnawaz and Miss Kutpitia and a happy combination of Standard English and Parsi language, Mistry has incorporated ancient myths with living condition of Parsis as a community. This has made the novel a social document. The novel emerges as a parallel history of modern India. It is history from writer’s point of view that tries to dis/uncover the suppressed or neglected chapters of Indian history; the novelist constructs his story of his community and nation both.

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