

# A Journey from Despair to Hope in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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## Abstract

This research article entitled “A Journey from Despair to Hope” aims the modes of resistance exhibited by Mistry’s characters in *Such a Long Journey* whenever they are confronted with any contestation of power. Mistry’s first novel appeared in 1991 and won a string of awards. *Such a Long Journey*, which revolves around a Parsi family in Bombay, was short-listed for the Booker Prize and for the Trillium Award. It also won the Governor General’s Award, the Smith Books/Books in Canada First Novel Award. Mistry delineates the fluctuating fortunes of Gustad Noble, an affable middle-aged man of modest dreams and aspirations. While dealing with the communal life of the Parsis in post-Independent India, the novel also captures

the socio-political-cultural turmoil the sixties and early seventies witnessed.

**Keywords:** Fears of Parsi Community, Socio-Political and Cultural Turmoil’s.

The novel is set in Bombay against the backdrop of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 and the emergence of Bangladesh as a separate independent nation. The novel courses through a series of political events touching on various issues such as corruption in high places, minority complexes, and majority adventurism increasing fragmentation of the social order and the advent of a personality oriented political scenario. Thus, history provides an effective backdrop for the novel. The novel *Such a Long Journey* is Mistry’s recreation of the life and times of Gustad Noble, an ageing Parsi-the

protagonist of the novel. Mistry has presented various narratives with the central narrative of Gustad. The novel depicts life-style of Parsis living in Khodaded Building, the microcosm of the Parsis in India. It encompasses various issues and is woven around the background of various upheavals in the subcontinent, like the partition of the subcontinent and ensuing violence, the wars between India and Pakistan and India and China, the emergence of Bangladesh, and how the community of the Indian Parsis responded to all these occurrences.

At the beginning of the novel, Gustad is shown as a god fearing man, the envy of all: “Tall and broad-shouldered, Gustad was the envy and admiration of friends and relatives whenever health or sickness was being discussed” (Such a Long Journey 17) and although he had met with “a serious accident just a few years ago” even that left him with “nothing graver than a slight limp” (18). Gustad, a happy man in his early fifties, is a bank employee. His wife Dilnavaz, their two sons Sohrab and Darius and daughter Roshan live in a Parsi residential colony of Khodaded Building in Bombay. The inhabitants of Khodadad Building are representatives of a cross-section of middle-class Parsis expressing all the

angularities of dwindling community. All the characters in the novel are individualized and memorably drawn with humour and compassion. Gustad, as an ordinary man, had to face many trials in life. But he had his own dreams about the future. He also had plans for his eldest son, Sohrab. But one by one the aspirations crumble down like a pack of cards. Traditional family ties are witnessed loosening. The reticent attitude of his life is explicit when she re-assuring says to him, “we must be patient.” However, Gustad has borne this for too long and it seems that his patience has been tested to the last string: “What have we been all these years if not patient? Is this how it will end? Sorrow, nothing but sorrow” (52)

The family gets more and more involved with sufferings as Darius, the second son, falls in love with Mr. Rabadi's daughter and the sudden illness of Gustad's daughter Roshan Yet all these do not deter Gustad from facing life stoically. Gustad Noble's dreams and expectations are modest indeed, but circumstances prevailing in the India of his times conspire to deny him even these. It is very hard on him that he cannot make things happen in such a way as to fulfill his aspirations. Forces stronger than him,

prevents Gustad from achieving his ambitions. His elder son does not join the IIT and Roshan, his favourite child, suffers from a prolonged illness. Gustad has a few good and understanding friends like Major Jimmy Bilimoria and Dinshawji, the latter working with him in the bank.

One day Bilimoria suddenly leaves Khodadad Building, where he lived, without a word even to Gustad, which upsets him. Gustad is already disillusioned with the indifferent behaviour of Sohrab and now the disappearance of his close friend makes matters worse. After sometime, Gustad gets a letter from Bilimoria, who wants Gustad to receive a parcel from him. Gustad readily does so in the name of friendship. However, on opening the parcel, he finds himself entrapped in an intricate and apparently inextricable snare of difficulties. The parcel contains ten lakh rupees to be deposited in the bank in an account held under the name of a non-existent woman, Mira obili. Gustad seeks the help of Dinsjawji for accomplishing this task. As soon as the work is done, Bilimoria wants the money back. This is another uphill task. Then Gustad has to go to New Delhi to meet the ailing Bilimoria. Gustad feels utterly lonely as both of his friends depart from this world one after the other.

Dinshawji dies of cancer as the years roll by, Gustad Noble modifies his dreams and trims his expectations in life. Experiences make him stronger and more enduring. He firmly resolves to face life stoically and not to be crushed by the forces of destiny. This is his greatest triumph in life. Mistry reminds us how foods donated by people to support the war effort at the time of the Chinese invasion later turned up for sale in the Chor Bazaar.

Mistry makes critical references to Indira Gandhi's handling of the Bangladesh war. The episode of Nagarwala, cheating the State Bank of India of several lakhs of rupees by impersonating the Prime Minister on the phone, is woven onto the fabric of the novel and intermingled with fate of Major Bilimoria. A notable concern in the novel is the raw deal that Bilimoria gets from the Government out of working for the RAW. Gustad gets involved in the shady deal and draws his friend, Dinshawji, too into it. The death of Dinshawji from cancer is a high point in the novel, as it reveals the truly noble side of Gustad, who is the sole male mourner at the Parsi funeral rites that follow. It is a kind of cleansing process that pushes Gustad very close to an intense spiritual experience. In Such a Long Journey, the Zoroastrian worldview

overtly constitutes the controlling point. Gustad's eventual acceptance of his lot with dignity is the triumph of the Zoroastrian faith. His journey is from uncertainty to certitude, from apprehension to affirmation, and from perplexity to perspicacity. Thus the progression of the Parsi mind in Gustad becomes central to the narrative. To this extent, *Such a Long Journey* is a "novel of character".

Although there are four major thematic strands in the narrative, the one portraying the mystery, which shrouds Jimmy Bilimoria, the fictional counterpart of the infamous Sohrab Nagarwala, is central to Mistry's narrative. This other three, Sohrab's rebellion, Roshan's protracted illness and Tehmul's tragedy exist only in relation to this chief thematic purpose. The novel extends actual historical events beyond the curtain of silence in which the official discourses have tried to enshroud them. Since Nagarwala was a Parsi, a victim of the hegemony of the State, the tale could only have been told by a Parsi.

In his review of the novel, Tarun Tejpal points out that Mistry's first novel lays claim to being the first book of fact-based fiction in the Indian literary tradition (140). However, novel is certainly not the 'first book of fact-based fiction' since

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, published in 1985, is even more fact-based than this work. The insertion of popular, though mostly apocryphal, stories that were in circulation is typical of a postcolonial text. The actual event that Mistry has focused on is known in India as the Nagarwala case. In the winter of 1971 it was reported in the papers that the Head Cashier of the State Bank of India in Delhi had given six million rupees to Mr. Nagarwala on the basis of a phone call from Mrs. Gandhi who, he claimed, had asked him to take this great risk in the name of Mother India. After he had delivered the cash to Mr. Nagarwala in a preassinged place, the Head Clerk had doubts about his act and went to the police. Mrs. Gandhi denied that she had made any such telephone call and the Head Clerk was suspended. Nagarwala was arrested a few days later and confessed that he had mimicked Mrs. Gandhi's voice.

The story has remained alive in the popular imagination because Nagarwala died in prison under suspicious circumstances, without ever coming to trial. Also, the high-ranking civil servant who was investigating the bank's withdrawal and accounting practices met his death in a traffic accident on an isolated New Delhi road, giving rise to

allegations of foul play. The mystery, thus, has never been satisfactorily resolved and Indians often allude to the incident and fit in their own versions to the missing parts of the tale. While dealing with the Nagarwala case, Mistry uses Gustad to plug the holes in the case. *Such a Long Journey* holds a mirror to the apprehensions, fears and doubts of the Parsi community.

A.K.Singh argues that Mistry centralizes Bilimoria's story in the narrative. The novel radically questions the basis of the 'official' version, which polarizes the center and the periphery. It is a significant attempt at self-assertion, which is typical of all postcolonial literatures (199). The title *Such a Long Journey* has been taken from T.S. Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi*.

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a  
long Journey...(103)

The title has a symbolic significance. The journey of the three wise men to the birthplace of Jesus Christ is not an ordinary physical journey; it is symbolic of man's spiritual quest in which

he has to undergo numerous hardships. Later, one of the Magi gives an account of his toilsome journey for the benefit of a listener. He distinctly reveals how he was impelled to proceed merely because of his faith. He succeeded in overcoming all the impediments that befell his way. The end of the journey was rewarding and satisfying, for he had reached his destination and found that the prophecy of the birth of Christ was true. "The Journey of the Magi" is also symbolic of the re-orientation, which is absolutely essential to attain higher and nobler values in life. Gustad's journey of life is so close to the journey of the Magi. Gustad was keenly desirous of the fulfillment of his dreams and aspirations.

At every stage of his life's journey, he met with unprecedented obstacles and the working of inexplicable forces. However, he is not the one to give in; he is like the wise man that very subtly pushed aside the hindrances of life, did not allow them to overpower him and went ahead with faith that the journey well surely end at a particular destination. Explicit references to the concept of journeying are made on quite a few occasions in the novel testifying to its perennial appeal for a sensitive writer. However, there are moments when the protagonist wonders:

Would this long journey be worth of it?

Was any journey ever worth the trouble? (SLLJ 250)

The skepticism voiced here recalls to our minds an identical situation in *The Journey of the Magi* where Eliot hints at the “folly” of it all and Ezekeil’s *Enterprise*. Which tells us of the “trip” that had “darkened every face”. But Mistry’s distinction lies in making his hero’s Long journey ultimately worthwhile for both character and reader. If the level of participation is the measure of success of work of art, then this is indeed a highly successful novel.

*Such a Long Journey* is an accomplished first novel, weaving elements of myth and history into an intricate and vital narrative tapestry. It is a demanding work, as critic Ajay Heble has noted, forcing us to broaden our cultural horizons “to make sense of it all” (65-67). Indeed, Mistry’s great asset as a narrator lies in his ability to guide us on this literary journey into the streets of Bombay, the Parsi community and Indian politics, inviting us to discover shared values and a common humanity as we explore the “lay of the land.” There are no significant literal journeys in the novel apart from the

journey uphill for Dinshawjo’s funeral, followed by Gustad’s train journey to Delhi to see the ailing Major Bilimoria. Dinshawji’s death brings to Gustad’s realization the true heroism of Dinshawji who had maintained a mask of outward boisterousness in spite of the pain of cancer, as well as the imperative needed for a philosophical acceptance of finality of life. Seated in the train, Gustad wonders, “And what a long journey for Dinshawji too. But certainly worth it”. Gustad returns to Bombay with a sense of absolution and forgiveness. What the reader witnesses is a certain inward journey travelled by Gustad Noble towards an awareness of a distance that will ultimately have to be covered-that long journey of life-to be endured with stoic resilience. At the end of the book is the beginning of the real journey, of a consciousness that the search is without end and entails countless such journeys. Thus, the journey motif is a recurrent one in their world immigrant fiction, wherein the journey metaphorically entails the transition from one state of inner experience to another.

The journey is in fact the human one from past to present, from innocence to experience, a universal journey that the three epigraphs to the novel together re-



create. The first epigraph is from Firdausi's Iranian epic, *Shah-Nama*, and recalls both the glorious Iranian heritage of a mighty Empire, as well as hints at the downgraded condition of present-day Parsis. The second one is from T.S. Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi* and reminds readers of the ancient Zoroastrian religion and the belief that the Magi who attended the birth of Christ were Zoroastrian priests. Finally, Tagore's lines from *Gitanjali* sum up the way in which the Parsis have moved from one country to another and how that have had to adopt themselves to be realities. Thus, the old story of the archetypal Parsi journey from forcible assimilation to security and identity in a strange land is a recurrent motif in Parsi writings.

On the one hand, the journey from Firdausi's *Shah-Nama* to Tagore's *Gitanjali* proved to be a long journey in a cold and hostile world. Gustad's friends, Dinshawji, Bilimoria and Tehmul, have already undertaken such a long journey, on the others it is also a long journey from hopelessness to hope, and from despondency to millennium. For Gustad the hard times are over, no matter how badly he has been battered. As Gustad Noble experiences everyday life is inextricably bound up with larger forces

over which the ordinary man has no control. But in reaching out to others, he finds hopes and salvation, understands the meaning of heroes, in the world that denies its existence, and becomes an universal symbol of human survival and human triumph. The Parsi community is on a long journey to growing and knowing in Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*. Written somewhat in the manner of fiction or non-fiction, and based on the Nagarwala conspiracy case of 1971, *Such a Long Journey* attains significance and even controversiality through its discourse on political issues built around questions of identity, religion, culture, community and country. On the surface the novelist seems to have dovetailed various narratives along with the central narrative of the Gustads. But the novel, as a cluster of narratives, centralizes his community as a protagonist.

There is constant dialogical interaction between stories about the past and the present of the Parsi Community and Mistry like his other counterparts informs the past of his community, comments on its present and anticipates the flow of events to follow through his characters. Like Bharucha's, Mistry's 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 Gustad's: 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 gives up when Gustad retorts,

This may be but our prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred 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 influence Judaism, Christianity and Islam? (24).

This sets the tone of the novel, as it tries to sum up the fears and anxieties of the vocal but otherwise passive Parsi community. As a community, it has not only lived peacefully in the vast sprawling forest of Indian culture but it has accepted the land and contributed to it even while maintaining its own cultural and communal specificity. Indian politicians became an object of their verbal assault, as they seem to have pinched them somewhere they run down politicians like

Pandit Nehru and Indira Gandhi because neither Nehru nor Indira treated Feroz Gandhi, a member of their community, with respect, Mrs. Gandhi in particular has been inimical to their interests because she trapped and prosecuted another member of their community, and destroyed their hegemony over the banking system by nationalizing banks in 1969. As Dinshawji ruminates:

What days those were, Yaar, What fun we used to have... Parsi were the kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get, now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled, ever since that Indira nationalized the banks. (37)

Gustad too adds: "Nowhere in the world has nationalization worked. What can you say to idiots?"(39). Like Gustad the 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, they have their little fears and anxieties. Dinshawji voices his concern about the rising communal forces:



“And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second class citizens... Don't forget, she started it all by supporting the racist beggars” (40). Various characters belonging to the minority community in the novel express their anguish a changing pattern of communal relationship in society that breathes beneath the narrative structure of the novel.

In her study of the major themes and techniques in Indian Novel in English, Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that Indian novelists in English employ myths in two ways: conscious and unconscious. In *Such a Long Journey* Mistry makes a ‘conscious’ use of the celebrated Sohrab-Rustom myth. If the confrontation between father and son in the myth ends on a tragic note, Mistry's narrative ends on a note of reconciliation. Gustad views Sohrab's rebellious gesture as a symptom of the loss of respect for tradition and values. What brings back Sohrab in the narrative is the strength of spirit demonstrated by Gustad after Tehmul's tragic death. Thus while using a Zoroastrian myth in the narrative; Mistry highlights the generation gap, which seems to threaten the very existence of Parsi family life. Roshan's protracted illness and the deteriorating economic

condition test Gustad's strength of mind (132-133).

Geeta points out that the fastidious preoccupation with the body is peculiarly a Parsi trait. She observes that it “reflects the preoccupation with illness that a community that knows that it is on the decline both fears and accepts. The awareness of the Parsi community of the ‘impermanence of flesh,’ bodily suffering and decay thus are part of the Zoroastrian ethos which Mistry successfully integrates into the story.” It is true that Mistry's reputation as an outstanding storyteller rests on his appeal to a world-wide readership. Nevertheless, set against the backdrop of the socio-communal-religious ambience of an atrophying minuscule minority community, Mistry's fiction, with all its fictional brilliance, still remains a disturbing expression of ethnic atrophy syndrome. This fact is borne out by the fact that Parsis all over the world find in him a spokesperson of their anxieties, fears, and frustrations. Many people in the West enjoy his books because their locale is the exotic India. At the same time, they are also aware that Mistry offers them a glimpse of a culture that might have otherwise been overlooked (46). Given to nostalgia, Gustad Noble, in *Such a Long Journey*, expresses his desire to get back to

Iran, the Parsis' 'primary space.' Commenting on the predicament of the Parsis in Bombay, he says:

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 a white man to get half as much. (SLJ 55)

Similarly, the renaming of streets threatens Dinshawji with displacement:

Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new names?

Tell me. What happens to my life-Rubbed out, just like that?

Tell me! (74)

Notwithstanding the notion that Parsis and poverty is a contradictory pair, Cavasji Calinger in *Such a Long Journey* cries out in anguish to God:

Your floods are washing away poor people's huts. Where is your fairness? Have you got any brains or not? Flood the Tatas this

year Flood the Birlas, flood The Mafias. (127)

Gustad, throughout the novel, feeds for his identity and he is aware of retaining it. His friend Dinshawji is also seeking his own identity. He shows his objection when roads are changed its names. Gustad says that there is nothing in name and though we call a rose by any other name it will smell pleasantly as ever. But Dinshawji cannot go up with the change of names of some roads, which he has been seeing from his childhood. Lamington Road is changed to Dadasaheb Bhadkamkar marg. And another one, Carnac road is changed to Lokmanya Tilak marg. Dinshawji feels that the change of old names is like changing one's own heritage.

No, Gustad" Dinshawji was very serious. "You are wrong. Names are so important I grew upon Lamington Road. But it has disappeared; in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkamkar marg. My school was on carnac Road. Now suddenly it's on Lokmanya Tilak marg. I live at Sleater Road, Soon which will also disappear, my whole life I have come to work at Hora

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 names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? (76)

Dinshawji thinks that he has lost this connection with his fellow men, society and even with the world. He laments for the loss of his social identity and his personal history. Dinshawji feels that the removal of old names actually removes what should really be present from his world. According to him one could not lead life with any other name. The social and moral consciousness of the author is shown through Dinshawji's character. According to Dinshawji, people want to lead life with the seal of self-identity. The sign of identity is needed always by middle class people.

Gustad thinks that he has no identity with the present situation to that he once lived. He has really lost his happiest childhood during the course of his long journey of life. Still he remembers the wonderful moments with his mother.

Gustad's family used to go for hill stations during vocations. Even under mosquito net Gustad was given protection by his mother. Gustad recalls:

That picture of my mother-locked away forever in my mind. My mother through the white, diaphanous mosquito net, saying good night God bless you, smiling, soft and evanescent, floating before my sleeping eyes, floating forever with her eyes so gentle and kind. (242)

Gustad, whenever finds a pen in between his fingers, thinks of his school days. Immediately he goes back to his childhood.

This was the bloody problem with modern education. In the name of programs they discarded seemingly unimportant things, without knowing that what they were checking out the window of modernity was tradition. And if tradition was last then respect for those who respected and loved

tradition always followed.  
(61)

Gustad is not happy with his son's behaviour. His son Sohrab does not give him respect Sohrab always fights with his father's opinions. This attitude of Sohrab seems to disturb the traditional values of Gustad. The desertion of Sohrab further makes him shattered and he expresses his view as. "He will have to come to me. When he learns respect Till then, he is not my son, my son is dead"(52). Gustad separates himself from the world by putting imaginary screens around him. He is never an open book and none can understand him well. Gustad's feelings are justified by the author. He cannot easily forget his childhood home. It is a great loss to him, and Mistry says that Gustad's whole feelings cannot be brought textually. The change of names in several places denotes certain loss of identity. It is shown through Dinshawji who never protests for it. Though Gustad suffers all through the novel, the novelist gives him some sort of painkiller and not pain curer. Towards the end the deserted son Sohrab changes his mind and returns home to join with his father. The recovery of Roshan from her illness is another instance. This might be considered as a forcible end to a long moving journey still sees some great

loses. Gustad loses his dearest friends one by one. Dinshawji, Major Billimoria and Rehmul Lungraa so the novel ends leaving emptiness around Gustad

Mistry, through the character of Gustad, wants to show a society in which he wants to live. He describes that happiness and misery are interlinked and they are woven tightly in everyone's life. He also presents some social, political and religious aspects of particular historical period. The pictures painted on the wall by a payment artist save the wall from pollution. But the inmates do not like the pictures in all religions. They start to criticize a saint facing the mosque etc., thus the religious intolerance of the people is identified here. Further, individual traits of Parsi personality, its characteristics, idiosyncrasies, language, and rituals and customs are generously spread over *Such a Long Journey*. The members of the Parsi community, as depicted in these novels, are intensely conscious of their distinctive identity. That is why they try to maintain their specificity and resist attempts of encroachment by the other communities. However, this consciousness does not clash with the national interests, because, for them rootedness involves preservation of their communal identity and national identity as well. That is why stories about

the individual, the community and the country remain distinct and yet interrelated. The concern and involvement of the community with the national cause in the moments of crises may be witnessed in Kanga, Dhondy, and in Mistry in particular.

In *Such a Long Journey* almost all characters, from Gustad to Peerbhoy Paanwala whose narratives fail Mistry's critical vocabulary in naming them because his stories "defied genre or description" (306), are unanimous in articulating their fierce disapproval of the forces inimical to Indian interests. The Parsi community with its members from various strata of the society measures itself in terms of the unfortunate wars that India had to fight with its neighbors. It participates in its own way through stories about promotion of Indian interests and calumny of its enemies. "The wicked Chino" of 1962 war becomes "The number one bogeyman"(9), and the members of Parsi community use unalloyed abusive language against the American and Pakistani leaders responsible for the Indo-Pak wars of 1965 and 1971. The Parsis' counter stories about the American leaders Nixon as "the scowling one with rats eyes" and Kissinger "with the face of a constipated ox" (298) punctures

laboriously and financially propagated stories about America as a kind, friendly champion of justice, liberty and democracy (299). They Indian politicians like Nehru and Indira for their weaknesses in their "I-Witness accounts." On the other hand Shastri is praised and "the big little man" (130) because "(a) pukka purgative he gave to Pakistanis" (114) in 1965.

Even Mrs. Gandhi whom they do not appreciate due to her alleged role in the lives of some members of their community, is commended "as a very strong woman...Very intelligent woman" (273) for her successful leadership in the 1971 war. Some of these stories may be creation of popular mind, as Gustad calls his son's stories about Sanjay and his car manufacturing company as 'idiotic lunatic talk' or just 'a way of talking' (60).

In the process, the stories of these ordinary characters deflate some of the major protagonists of post-Independent India because their actions harmed interests of their community or of their country. They have picked these stories, which do not form art of pages of history, from the margins of the society and history where they are waiting to be told. Mistry might have come across them in the early part of his life and later wove them snugly together to the thematic structure of his

novel and thus proved that the mind of the community never remains passive even when it does not participate directly in the events, which are too big for them to do so. Its members in no way lag behind in reception of various events that have taken place at a considerable distance from them.

Tehmul's suffering throws light on a hitherto unknown dimension of Gustad's personality-love for humanity. Tehmul is an innocent soul trapped in the world of corruption. The moment of Tehmul's death is a moment of Gustad's realization of futility of life. Though Mistry employs irony as many postcolonial novelists do, he lacks Kanga's penchant for the ridiculous. It is truly ironic that Tehmul's tragic death reunites Gustad and Sohrab. Sohrab realizes the strength of his father only after Gustad lifts the body of Tehmul and climbs the stairs. His prayer at the body of Tehmul is suggestive of a fresh beginning. Though a minor character in the novel Tehmul plays a significant role in the transformation of Gustad's consciousness

Viney Kirpal observes that Tehmul, like Ekalavya in *The Great Indian Novel*, is the 'conscience pricker' of an 'unequal' society (26). Tehmul is a significant character whose presence is a painful reminder of the inequalities in the existing system. The sub-plot woven

around Kuptitia-Dilnavaz also reaffirms this conviction. This theme that seemingly goes out of proportion may look like something disjointed or mechanical in the total structure of the novel like the Clarissa and Septimus parts in *Mrs. Dalloway* at the first glance. But at a closer look, its structural function cannot be ruled out because it is this thematic development by way of a sub-plot that integrates the novel's central disintegrating and conflicting human elements. It is Dilnavaz and not Gustad who tries to make Sohrab come to terms with his father. It is ultimately her triumph her brings order in the midst of chaos. Gustad's epic struggle against a hostile and indifferent world would not have had a profound meaning without the final reconciliation. When Dilnavaz comes out with the benign qualities of a mother in these words, "He is your father (67). He will always love you and want the best for you," (321) the barrier between the father and the son gives way and dissolves. The fictional world Mistry creates in *Such a Long Journey* is thus no utopia of any kind. It is picture of the fallen world in which the call of the Holy Word is not heard. Again, it is a world in which all forms of corruption, knavery, hypocrisy, tyranny, ugliness and decay, have become 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. At times he looks like a naturalist reporting the human condition as in itself it is. Wars between nations, the complete lack of commitment on the part of the big powers and so on show the degenerating political scenario in the international politics. The nationalistic fervor in the novelist makes him at times a ruthless critic of the corrupt government at the center. His nationalism is above petty selfishness. He keeps aside such things as turning up and selling of clothes and gold ornaments collected by a way of donation during the Indo-Chinese war by politicians and fund-raisers in Chor Bazaar and Nul Bazaar without attaching much importance as long as "the glow of national unity was still warm and comforting" (10). Though Mistry is in favour of 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 off to Siberia" (69) so when looked a closely, Rohinton Mistry is not a political anarchist, nor does he favour the blueprint of a new society based on radical change. But the most important thing, politics apart that the novelist wants to emphasize is the question of life, i.e., the problem of human loneliness in the modern world. Gustad's sufferings and struggle with fortitude and humility in life re-echo the classical tragic hero's life and sufferings. One of the significant features of this narrative is Mistry's use of images and symbols. In this novel, the image of the bookcase recurs so often that it almost becomes a metaphor for Gustad's unfulfilled aspiration in life as revealed in his outburst:

And my plans for the books  
turned to dust.

Like everything else. (129)

Similarly some of the events and situations in the narrative have symbolic significance. The central symbol in the novel is the 'journey'. Gustad's visit to Delhi is an act invested with symbolic significance and he is a little apprehensive. Jimmy's tragic death marks the regeneration of Gustad symbolizing his rebirth. Likewise, the demolition of the wall by the Municipal workers is



suggestive of Gustad's shattered dream since it is he who transforms the malodorous wall into a 'sacred wall of miracles.' It is also symbolic of the indifference of the world to the suffering of individuals. Gustad's tearing down of the black paper covering the ventilators is a symbolic gesture. At last reality catches up with him. Since *Such a Long Journey* deals with Parsis and Parsi life, certain customs and rituals related to the microscopic community are graphically described as is clear from the account of the ceremonies related to the last rites. This is natural in novelist who himself is a Parsi.

There is a wide reference to the conflict and adaptability of the Parsis with the demands of modern life, like the Tower of Silence. Parsis still follow the ancient method of disposal of dead bodies. A Parsi's last act on earth is the donation of his dead body to hungry birds that are nature's appointed scavengers. Mistry refers to the controversy raging in the Zoroastrian community regarding the disposal system. The conservative Parsi community prefers this system whereas modernists are in favour of burial or cremation. For Gustad, no God appears at the end of his trepidation to explain or to dispense justice, no God to reassure him

that he has passed the test and all will be well. Worry, sorrow, and frustration threaten to crush him. Yet he survives without succumbing to any prolonged bitterness, still in possession of his essential human dignity. Gustad's long journey in a cold and malevolent world in which all forms of happiness and misery are woven inseparably is the journey of an ethnic group, a community that is on the verge of extinction. From a purely subjective plane of self-indulgence, he moves on to a much deeper and complex level to examine truths of life. Myopic at the beginning of his journey, he attains full vision towards the end. His long journey is a manifestation of the universal phenomenon-the conflict between Good and Evil and his survival is the triumph of the Zoroastrian faith.

There are a few novelists like Mistry whose works centralize their community. He exhibits the consciousness of his community and demonstrates the existing threat to the Parsi family and community. In *Such a Long Journey* Mistry comes out as a critical realist and projects the kind of society he wants to be a part of. Mistry, thus, records in his fiction the ethnic atrophy that has set in his community. He is sensitive to the threats

to his society. The fate of his characters is interwoven with the fate of his community.

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