



POLITICAL ISSUES IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

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ABSTRACT

*Rohinton Mistry is a formidable writer in English Literature. He is an Indo Canadian Novelist born in Mumbai in 1952 of Parsi Origin. He immigrated to Canada in 1975. Although Mistry lives in Canada but prefers to write about India, which engages his imagination. Living in Canada and writing about India Mistry is fully aware of several drawbacks of India's social, political life, as is discernible in his novel. The political changes and ups and downs are beautifully painted with all the reality by him. **Such a Long Journey** was published in 1991, it was the first full-fledged novel by Mistry; before this novel Mistry has written a collection of short stories. This novel is set against the backdrop of the Bangladesh-Pakistan wars of 1970s.*

*In **Such a Long Journey**, public events have direct repercussions on the life of the ordinary citizen, Gustad Noble, the main protagonist of the novel, a Parsi man, who is a bank clerk; Mistry successfully paints the side effects of political issues on common man's life. The backdrop set helps to understand the socio cultural scenario of that time.*

Key Words: Repercussions, prestigious, imprecated, nationalization, entangled, disappointment, downtrodden, implicated, nationalism.

Introduction:

Rohinton Mistry is the recipient of several prestigious awards. His First Novel *Such a Long Journey* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Governor Generals Award, the Commonwealth writers Prize for the Best Book, and the Smith Books First Novel Award which is given to Canadian novelists on the basis of the merit of their very first publication.

Politics is a major part of the theme of *Such a Long Journey*. The novel deals with the life of the ordinary citizens and explores the manner in which it is imprecated with the national political scene. It is impossible for us to read Mistry's fiction and not be aware of the depth to which it is embedded in the political background of post-Independence India. One can even say that his novels constitute rare fictional explorations of important political events that contributed to the shaping of the nation after it attained independence in 1947. This preoccupation more increasingly is closer to contemporary times as Mistry tackles first in *Such a Long Journey* the Bangladeshi war with Pakistan.

In early 19th century, the Parsis were well established as bankers and were in a position to help the Government of India in hard times. The nationalization of banks was a great setback to the community as before nationalization of banks the Parsis had total control over the most of private Banks. Commenting upon the economic interests of the Parsis, V.L.V.N Narendra Kumar says:

The status of the Parsee community in Indian society is determined to a large extent by its economic interests and activities. Despite their infinitesimally smaller number, the Parsees made a mark upon the economic development of India. They were the first in India to produce the type of the modern entrepreneur. They pursued a policy of dynamic economic ethics. Among them, J.N. Tata advocated an early economic nationalism to a much greater degree than any other Parsee entrepreneur. In the Zoroastrianism world view there is no room for sloth.

[V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar, Parsee Novel (New Delhi : Pestige Book, 2002) P.P. 17-18]

But suddenly Mrs. Gandhi's bold decision to nationalize the banks displeased those Parsis of India who were the owners of private banks. The man who revolutionised Indian banking was

Sir Sorabji N. Pochkhanawala (1881-1937) Gustad the protagonist of *Such a Long Journey*, also works in a bank. He thinks that nationalization of the banks has not worked anywhere. But it has been done so as a part of Mrs. Gandhi's strategy to get political mileage at the cost of the interest of the Parsi bankers. In fact nationalization of the banks was at that time inevitable in the larger interest of downtrodden masses of India. On Mrs. Gandhi's bold decision, Dinshawji, Gustad's friend, says to him, **'what days those were, yaar. What fun we used to have.... Parsis 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.'**[38]

Mistry throws light on a sense of insecurity among Parsis during Indira's government. Growing fundamentalism is another factor of their insecurity. Dilanvaz and Dinshawji suspect the natural death of Feroze Gandhi. They think that Nehru never liked Feroze Gandhi from the beginning Dinshawji says:

That was tragic

Even today, people say Feroze's heart attack was not really a heart attack.[147]

Above conversation clearly shows how Parsi men and women express their feelings of insecurity in *Such a Long Journey*.

The story of Gustad Noble and his family is interwoven with events in the national scene. From the beginning of the novel, one sees Gustad suffering from the consequences of India's support for the Bangladeshi wars. These daily struggles to make ends meet form the main tapestry of the novel. Gustad and his family, in their worries and their struggles against the consequences of irrational legislation, become the embodiment of the average middle class Indian family constantly battling to maintain a reasonable standard of living. The war has direct consequences on the availability of goods and the Price of essential commodities shoot up.

She purchased milk and remembered the days when ration cards were only for the servants, the days when she and Gustad could afford to buy the fine creamy products of Parsi Dairy Farm before the Prices started to go up, up, up and never came down.[3]

In *Such a Long Journey*, there are many references to the war or the events related to war against the neighbouring countries, which serve as historical backdrop. Events like the 1948 Pakistan invasion on Kashmir, Indo-China war in 1962, Indo-Pakistan war in 1965 and 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh are woven in the texture of the novel. Gustad thinks of the year 1962 as:

Such a humiliating defeat, everywhere people talking of nothing but the way Chinese had advanced, as though the Indian Army consisted of tin soldiers. [9]

Gustad Noble thinks also on Government failure on war.

The Government's incompetency for sending brave Indian soldiers with outdated weapon and summer clothing, to die in the Himalayas at Chinese hand.[10]

Mistry has here provided an insider-outsider view of the city at a time with its ways witnessing the slow erosion of the idealism that had marked the beginning of the end of the Nehruvian dream of a secular India. Nehru's faith in Hindi Chinese bhai-bhai was shaken and betrayed by the Yellow skinned neighbours. The Chinese attack was seen as a betrayal by Nehru of the Indo-Chinese friendship that Nehru had fostered with that country since India's independence. He never recovered from that shock of seeing his vision of Asian socialism and regional co-operation crumble. Since the wars are a narrative excuse for the exploration of both political ethics and the problems of individual ethical moral responsibility, an explanatory note on the historical events is in order. The year of war with China was like a nightmare for both the nation and Gustad. Gustad met with an accident in an attempt to rescue his son, while he was confined to bed, rioting curfew, lathi Charge and burning of buses made his days dreadful.

The country faced humiliation and defeat. Not only that the flow of generous donations by the countrymen was mishandled, some of the things for sale at Chor Bazar, a betrayal far worse than that from the enemy. The agent of the ruling party took disadvantage of people's patriotic sentimentalism. Mistry comments:

The fund-raisers shouted themselves hoarse through megaphone exhorting people to be as selfless as the Jawans who were reddening the Himalayan snow with their precious blood to defend Bharat Mata. [10]

The mass of common people who are poor, disabled, middle class and ordinary are marginalized in the political process. Their homes are in danger of being pulled down and their artistic efforts can be ruthlessly demolished any time, the central authority wishes to broaden roads. The novel is one of the main novels of Mistry. It is about life and career of the migrant writer belonging to a people who had wandered a long way a long time ago. Mistry's concept of nationalism is characterized as fragmentation and dissolution. He is fully conscious of the breaking of walls. There was a fence in Parsis community from the outside world or political boundaries. So the nationalism is redrawn as is evident in partition of India and later evident in the partition of Pakistan into another nation as Bangladesh.

Politics interferes and intrudes into the life of common men. It plays havoc and even kills the like Major Bilimoria. When the common people want to protest against bad civic amenities they organize a Morcha or Rallies, it turns violent and innocent people were killed like Tehmul. The disabled boy is innocent of what is happening around him and of the politics of social intercourse. He is a citizen yet not an accepted member of society like Major Bilimoria, he is an unfortunate victim of political manipulation.

The life of the protagonist is interspersed with social and political upheavals. During the rule of Indira Gandhi, Gustad's fortune kept on fluctuating. Windows have to be blacked out for fear of a Pakistani attack. Gustad had put up the blackout paper during the war against China in 1962 to make the room dark and gloomy.

In a semi-comic episode involving Gustad's younger son Darius and neighbor's daughter Rabadi friendship is the accusation of the two families leading Gustad angrily dumping all the carefully collected newspapers at the neighbor's door. Dilnavaz worries about this wastage because it is the result of newspapers that stretches the household finances till the end of the month. Beyond seriously affecting the national pride of the honest citizen, the Indo-China war also provides the perfect occasion to show how political greed and opportunism come in:

'No Chinese soldiers approached khodadad Building. Instead, team of fund-raising politicians toured the neighborhood. Depending on which party they

belonged to, they made speeches praising the congress government's heroic stance or denouncing its incompetency'. [10]

The war has left an ugly scar on everyone's hearts. Mistry seems to have great admiration for Nehru. This admiration for Jawaharlal Nehru, who, as an idealist, genuinely in the secular dream of India, is occasionally reflected in the opinions of main protagonist of the novel. Gustad thinks of Nehru as, **'The country's beloved Panditji, everyone's Chacha Nehru, the unflinching humanist, the great visionary, turned bitter and rancorous'. [11]**

Their beloved Chacha Nehru was entangled in family controversy with his son-in-law Feroze Gandhi. Moreover, to the disappointment of his supporters and admirers, he ceased to be a defender or champion of the downtrodden. Instead, he was more interested in securing a place for his worthy daughter as his successor:

'This monomaniacal fixation occupied his days and nights which the treachery of Chou-En-lai had blighted forever, darkened permanently, unlike the blacked out cities, which returned to light after the conflict ended and people uncovered their doors and windows'. [11]

On the other end of the spectrum, the country is disenchanted once again, with the rumour of Mrs. Gandhi's connection with money scandal. Gustad's son Sobrab voices against modern time and youth **'Our wonderful Prime minister uses RAW like private police force, to do all her dirty work'** and he also alleged her sending men from RAW **'to spy on opposition parties, create trouble, start violence so the police can interfere....What about the chemical election? Only RAW could have done that. She made real mockery of democracy'. [93]**

Gustad is still smarting from what he considers his friend's treachery. Bilimoria's heroic stature is called into question by the startling revelation that he is implicated in dirty politics and serious criminal frauds. Mistry's politics can perhaps best be glimpsed through Bilimoria's tragic tale and the detailing of a country's political corruption. Bilimoria's fate also reveals the facade of nationalism and the corruption behind patriotic rhetoric.

Mistry's version of history presents two different dimensions. Gustad and Dinshawaji belong to an older generation who still have a little faith left in them for the ruling party to improve future. Sohrab and his friends, representing the younger generation, are quick to scrutinize the foulness of politicians with their youthful vigour. They suggest that there are only two alternatives in the present condition of our country, **‘Only two choices: communism or military dictatorship, if you want to get rid of these congress party crooks. Forget democracy for a few years, not meant for a starving country’**. [68]. Though Mistry is ruthless in satirizing the Nehru family, he, however praises Lal Bhadur Shastri, who became India's prime minister after the death of Nehru, because with his rule, **‘the stagnant waters of government would at last be freshed and vitalized’**. [114]. Most of the characters of the novel thought that Shastri could do in the Indo Pak war of 1965 better than what Nehru did in the war with China. Dr. Paymaster rightly says of him: **‘Short in height but tall in brain is our Lal Bahadur’**. [114]

In this sudden death of their beloved Shastri at Tashkent, less than eighteen months after he became Prime Minister, some said he had been killed by the Pakistanis, and some suspected a Russian plot. Some even claimed it was the new Prime Minister supporters who poisoned Shastri, the role of Indira Gandhi is suspected: **‘So that her father's dynastic-democratic dream could finally come true’**. [114]

There are direct attacks on Indira Gandhi for her nationalization of banks, for her encouragement to make a separate Maharashtra state that caused bloodshed and riot, and for her creation of Shiv Sena to divide people on class basis as Dinshawaji remarks, **‘wanting to make the rest of us into second class citizens’**. [39]. and for her narrow political gains, to get votes of the poor by showing that she is on the side of the poor. Dr. Paymaster, In fact, is so much tired of this politics that he compares this country to a patient of gangrene:

‘Our beloved country is a patient with gangrene at an advanced stage. Dressing the wound or sprinkling rose water over it to hide the stink of rotting tissue is useless. Fine words and promises will not cure the patient. The decaying part must be excised. You see, the municipal corruption is merely the bad smell, which will disappear as soon as the gangrenous government at the centre is removed’. [313]

This is what a medical man Dr. Paymaster thinks of the contemporary politics. He states the fact categorically that the government at the centre is the root-cause of all evils. Once such people are thrown away from the centre, it becomes quite easy to blow them out of state assembly level or at the municipal level. Mistry exposes the historical truth behind the glorified image of the congress by blowing the lid off the party's misdeeds. He uses imaginary names for real events or persons in this novel. Bilimoria is the fictional equivalent of the Nagarwala case. He claimed to have impersonated the voice of Indira Gandhi to withdraw money from the bank. The congress party is reprehensible for feeding into the Parsi anxiety as many of them believe Gandhi's Parsi husband Feroze Gandhi a mere cog in political mill. The act of nationalization of banks in 1969 brought an abrupt halt to whatever remained of the Parsi rule. Besides the nationalization and dethroning Parsis from their elite status Indira's fans the communal politics in Maharashtra, proves to be a ban for the Parsi community. All these real incidents are drawn by Mistry in *Such a Long Journey* with his imaginary names and characters.

The distortion of secularism as a modern principle is all too apparent when Parsi Tehmul is recruited to distribute racist pamphlets against minorities, telling of Shiv Sena's rule of barbarity and lawlessness against minorities. Gustad calls the Shiv Sena leader a '**Worshiper of Hitler and Mussolini**'. [73]. He identifies the Sena's anti-minority fascist politics that uses religion as an instrument to tear the body politics a part by practicing the modern politics of divide and rule. The Parsi recognizes the double face of an anarchist Sena that comprises thugs who burgle houses to take advantage of the Indo-Pak war imposed blackout. Displaced in his search of reconciliation as a marginal Zoroastrian, Gustad uncovers the truth behind the glorified image of the congress and Sena by resisting absorption and sharing revulsion against the Hindu-glorifying regional groups like the Shiv Sena.

War and its immediate consequences form the background to *Such a Long Journey*. The war continues through the duration of the entire narrative. The refusal of West Pakistan to give up the East even after the electoral verdict which gave a clear majority to the Awami League headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had resulted in bloodshed and a horrendous deprivation of human values. When Roshan comes to Gustad

with a request from her school for money to help the refugees, she disarmingly asks her father why West Pakistan is killing East Pakistan, Gustad gives her a simplified explanation of the war:

‘Because it is wicked and selfish. East Pakistan is poor, they said to the West we are always hungry, please give us fair share. But West said no. Then east said, in that case we don't want to work with you. So, as punishment, West Pakistan is killing and burning East Pakistan’.[81]

The lives of all the characters in the novel are steeped in the realities of a wartime situation. Although the real war with Pakistan is at the frontiers, the scarcity of food supplies and the rationing affect the ordinary citizens. A sense of insecurity and a fear of attack are permanent, indicated not only through Gustad's dark covered windows but also through the air raid sirens. We are told that the air raid siren sounds every day at ten, keeping the threat of Pakistani bombing ever present, so much so that it has become a routine affair for the inhabitants of the city, who even set their clock by it: **‘Ten O'clock already thinks, Gustad as he hears the siren sounding on his way to work, should have been at my desk by now’.**[143]

War is the subject of discussion between colleagues during their lunch break and there is endless speculation about which side the US will ally-with-India or Pakistan. Denying the perception that the ordinary citizen is ignorant and uninterested in national and international politics, the text shows this political awareness permeating to all levels of society.

Mistry also introduced the wall that surrounds the Khodadad Building and is an important symbol that runs throughout the book. The Bombay Municipal Corporation wants to tear it down to widen the road. It is also under threat from passersby who use it as an open-air urinal. The wall both includes and excludes. It is protective as well as reductive. It protects the Parsi minority from the ingress of the engulfing India world. However, it also makes this world isolationist. After the fall of the wall he and his family are almost in a hell. The protection of his house from external dirt disturbances has been demolished forever.

Mistry describes the political issues in very realistic way in his very first novel. M. Mani Meitei observes that Mistry, **‘Wields the weapon of satire’**. Therefore, he is **‘a stern political satirist and a devout critic of war. His attack on Nehru and Indira Gandhi is unprecedented. Describing the humiliating defeat of India of the hands of the Chinese in the indo-Chinese war of 1962, he does not spare even Nehru for fighting a war of defeat, a ‘humiliating defeat’**. Mistry goes on describing Nehru's frustration, ill temper, political intrigues that surrounded him, his feud with Feroze Gandhi for the latter's exposure of scandals in the Government, his obsession with his **‘darling daughter Indira’** who left her husband in order to live with him, whose monomaniacal fixation occupied his days and nights’.

[M. Mani Meitei - *‘Such a Long Journey and its Critical Acclaim’*.82)]

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