

## A Study of Parsi Selfhood in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

Deepak Kumar Singh

The anguish of migrant writing often arises not from what it includes but from that which it excludes or is excluded from. In immigration or exile the essence of individual identity is dislocated from its human centres and is placed in a cultural context where the context itself assumes a disproportionately larger significance than the particular texts situated within it. With many unspeakable experiences and feelings, these are narratives that struggle to express their own epistemological basis. The twin onslaughts of global capitalism and travel technologies have transformed the world in a manner that we have all become denizens of a space without borders irrespective of whether we remain at home or move.

Like most diasporic writers, the Parsis too are obliged to 'deal in broken mirrors some of whose fragments have been lost.' (*Imaginary Homelands* 10-11) In their case however, the lost fragments are very large indeed, as vast quantities of historical manuscripts and scriptural material were irrevocably lost when Alexander the Greek burnt the library at Persepolis, the seat of the ancient Persian Empire, in 331 B.C. This had happened centuries before the fall of the Persian Empire to the Arabs. So even the later Persian dynasties were deprived of a considerable section of their heritage. Rohinton Mistry, a Parsi Gujarati of Indian origin, who migrated to Canada at the age of twenty-three but returns to India for themes and subject matter in all his works, embodies the displaced subject of postmodernity. Mistry's life and writing not only challenge all attempts to categorize but also highlight the futility of categories. The title of his own novels, *Such a Long Journey*, sums up the life and career of the migrant writer belonging to a people who had wandered a long way a long time ago. The multiple spaces he inhabits - Parsi, Indian, and Canadian - raise important questions about belonging, identity, ethnicity, migrancy, diaspora, nation and multiculturalism. One can witness in Mistry's writing a profound sense of this migrant sublime, a writing informed by the double vision acquired partially through his Canadian sojourn but also from his particular location in the Indian nation. However, Mistry himself came to recognize the advantages of the double vision through an acute awareness of his outsider status. Having identified with Western culture as a Westernized Indian, his arrival in Canada made him sharply aware of his outsider status.

Twice displaced, an Indian migrant in Canada who belongs to an ethnic group that migrated to India in the thirteenth century AD, Mistry is the natural heir to the borderland, the margin, the periphery who complicates the contemporary narrative of migration. His writings and life, compelling a comparison between the present narratives of migration with earlier ones, cautions us against viewing the present phase of migration as an entirely new phenomenon. The history of Parsis that Mistry reinscribed in his fiction shows that people did move in the past though their reasons for moving might have been different. For Mistry the Parsi Gujarati writer in Canada and his Parsi community embody the contemporary and older discourses of migration respectively. The Parsi experience that Mistry documents so authentically and vividly

in his fiction, locates Parsis as outsiders on the Indian subcontinent, even though they might have lived peacefully with other Indian ethnicities for centuries. On the other hand, Mistry, the cosmopolitan outsider, is appropriated in the metropolitan discourse of migrancy and hybridity as the in-between subject.

Like Muslims, Parsis were settlers in India who came from elsewhere. However, unlike Muslims, Parsis negotiated with the dominant majority in a grateful tone while declining politely to assimilate through the preservation of a centuries old ethnos. It is for this reason that the Parsis have been represented as benign others. The stereotype of the Parsis in the Indian imaginary is that of the amusing but harmless, whose eccentricities the larger majority is willing to indulge with typical Indian tolerance. Through his examination of the everyday lives of ordinary Parsi individuals whom he locates in a complex web of filial and social obligations, he guides the reader into the unique determinants of Parsi identity. More than formal rituals and structures, it is the practices of everyday life including food, attire, home, etiquette and behaviour that Mistry regards as essential to the making of Parsi difference.

In view of the problematic relationship of the Parsi 'ethnic' identity to the larger 'Indian' context, Mistry addresses questions of belonging of a group of people sharply distinct from the plurality now caught in the tentacles of accelerating socio-economic-cultural changes, and facing the dangers of their identity being subsumed by the mainstream Hindu/Muslim populace. The novelist, therefore, stops short of offering a vision for the future to his community. Further, in blending the personal with broader communal concerns and situations, Mistry lends significance to his protagonist as a social being. Rohinton Mistry immigrated to Canada in 1975. The act of emigration transported Mistry, whose identity was already both plural and partial, from the periphery of the mainstream in India, to the peripheral position of the immigrant writer in Canada. However any attempt to consider Mistry as a novelist who writes about the concerns and situations of a group of people who are distinct from the plurality validates our considering Mistry as a minority writer. Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey*, published in 1991, foregrounds the authentic vignettes of day-to-day life, the engrossing ordinariness of the characters that fill the canvas, and the throbbing portrayals of the streets of Bombay. Mistry's Bombay in *Such a Long Journey* is not the city of his absence but rather the remembered Bombay of his past. His decision to set the novel in Bombay was autobiographical and not allegorical. Through Noble, his protagonist who is neither elitist nor overtly westernized, whose life is a continuous act of resistance to step in from the periphery, and who is gripped by the fear of a threat to his identity from an already truncated society, the popular myth of Bombay as a 'microcosm of Indian secularity' is deconstructed.

Structurally the novel opens with the home of Gustad Noble, an ordinary bank clerk who shares the social invisibility and anonymity of the average low middle class Indian. Once the grandson of a prosperous and highly esteemed furniture dealer, and son of a reputed bookseller who allowed himself to be betrayed into bankruptcy by an irresponsible brother, Gustad despairs at being reduced to a cramped existence in his Khodadad Building apartment with his wife and three children. The reader immediately enters into the drudgery and tension of the everyday middle class routine from the first page itself. Black paper stuck to cover the windows during the Indo-

China war "nine years ago darken the interior of Gustad's home, making it dark and depressing" (*Such a Long Journey* 11). His wife Dilnavaz struggles all day - haggling with the milk seller over the "sickly watered down fluid" (*Such a Long Journey* 4), collecting water that trickles down the tap, and battling with spiders and dust, all the while aware of the silent presence of those poor people in slum shacks and jhopadpatties in and around Bombay who "looked at you sometimes as if they wanted to throw you out of your home and move in with their own families" (*Such a Long Journey* 4). A notice from the Municipality announces a proposal to demolish the 300 feet compound wall that offers a protective shield to their building from the rest of the city. The reader follows Gustad's excitement at his elder son Sohrab's admission to the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology and subsequent demoralization at Sohrab's rejection of his father's life-long dream; Gustad's frequent visits to and from Paymaster's clinic in the red-light locality of the House of Cages in search of a remedy for his fragile daughter Roshan's chronic dysentery; Dilnavaz's visits to the necromantic Miss Kutpitia's flat in the hope of finding a spell to restore Sohrab to the family; and the tragi-comic clowning of Dinshawji, Gustad's best friend. The novel ends with an anti-municipality morcha that turns in a riot, the anticipated demolition of the wall, the tragic death of the dim-wit Tehmul, and the reconciliation of father and son. The final act in "the novel is that of Gustad removing the black paper from the windows, thus symbolically letting in the light, and into his hitherto cocooned existence a frightened moth flew out and circled the room." (*Such a Long Journey* 339)

The novel is set during the months leading to the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 over the 'liberation' of Bangladesh, Gustad receives a letter from an old friend, Major Jimmy Billimoria, who has joined RAW, a wing of the Indian Intelligence Service, requesting him to receive a parcel on his behalf. Subsequently, Gustad is coerced by Bilimoria's 'man' Ghulam Mohammed to illegally deposit the amount of Rs. 10 lakh that the parcel contains into a bank account. Conspiring with Dinshawji, Gustad becomes an unwilling accomplice and duly acts so, beginning from early August until Bilimoria's arrest a few months later. In his review of the novel, Tarun Tejpal cites Mistry's source of the story of Major Billimoria as the bizarre Nagarwala scandal. In May 1971, the chief cashier of the State Bank of India, received instructions reportedly from the Prime Minister's Office to hand over Rs. 60 lakh to a courier called Sohrab Nagarwala, in order to fund a secret guerrilla operation in Bangladesh. This was done but in the events that followed. Nagarwala was arrested and prosecuted in a dubious fashion. He was sentenced to four years imprisonment but died the following year (*Such a Long Journey* 140). Mistry's interpretation of the conspiracy story implicates the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and in a sense vindicates Bilimoria's own role.

The plot, which involves a series of coincidences culminating in Gustad's meeting with Billimoria in the prison hospital, is used as a narrative link to interconnect the various episodes in the life of Gustad Noble. While Tejpal describes the novel as the first "fact based fiction" in the Indian tradition (*Such a Long Journey* 140), a close examination of the number of interruptions in the narrative suggests an intrusive urge on Mistry's part to deliberately weave into the story certain historical facts such that the novel becomes a medium for the expression of betrayed hope and loss of faith as experienced by the Parsi community at the national level. Issues that pervaded Indian

politics in the 70s, the nationalist rhetoric that was a result of the Indo-Pakistan conflict, the turbulent politics of Indira Gandhi, the ascendancy of Sanjay Gandhi, the corruption of the Congress and a strong emotional anti-Nehruism seep into the story at frequent intervals, often suppressing the reader's aesthetic response and resulting in a "forced literature".

Historically, the early 1970s also witnessed the growth of the Shiv Sena with its ethnic demand for a Maratha Raj, angrily dismissed by Gustad as "Maharashtra for Maharashtrian' nonsense." (*Such a Long Journey* 73) Gustad sees the threat to his minority community as analogous to the situation of the black American:

What kind of life was Sohrab going to look forward to? 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. (*Such a Long Journey* 55)

Gustad's sense of crisis is aggravated by Sohrab's act of defiance in refusing to join the I.I.T. leading to anger and bitterness and a breach in the relationship between son and the father who had made the success of his son's life the purpose of his own (*Such a Long Journey* 55). Admission nothing fertile in the text (*Such a Long Journey* 137): Nothing rejuvenates. The fishes, finches and squirrels that Darius attempts to keep as pets all succumb to illness (*Such a Long Journey* 24), Sohrab's entomological project comes to a nauseating end (*Such a Long Journey* 65), Miss Kutpitia's black-magic spell involves the burning of a live lizard (*Such a Long Journey* 285), and Dinshawji, with his permanently stinking breath emanating from his "chronically carious mouth", is ultimately admitted to the Parsi General Hospital with his insides rotting away. The cumulative effect of the network of depressive details is a bleak vision of an "injured India", Dr. Paymaster offers a medical analogy on the internal sickness of the nation, and rampant moral corruption, in terms of "the pus of putrefaction" and "gangrene at an advanced stage" (*Such a Long Journey* 313).

The morcha organized by Dr. Paymaster and Peerbhoy against the municipality, regarded as a "microcosmic manifestation of the greed, dishonesty, and moral turpitude that flourished at the country's center" (*Such a Long Journey* 313), is the closest to social action that the novel produces. The proletarian uprising of artisans and workmen wearing their work clothes, marching with their work implements and armed with handcarts loaded with slime and filth proceed on their demonstration until they come to the "sacred wall of miracles" (*Such a Long Journey* 326) where they pause to pay obeisance to their various gods and goddesses. The 6 feet high and 300 feet long black wall is an important symbol throughout the novel. It acts as a border, a social partition sheltering the residents of Khodadad Building from non--Parsi eyes, and protecting them from the "threat of otherness itself". Irritated by passersby who use the wall as a public urinal, Gustad strikes upon the 'brilliant' idea of inviting a (nameless) commercial pavement artist to paint the urine soaked wall "made copious by malodorous deposits by outsiders" (*Such a Long Journey* 156) and therefore marked by the odor of counter territoriality. The artist (with a BA in World Religions, and specialty in Comparative studies) produces an extensive mural of the gods of India. Any attempt to interpret the wall as an ecumenical symbol that reflects the idea of an

India based on multiplicity and pluralism must keep in mind the fact that Gustad's original intention was to maintain the divisive function of the wall, and was not based on any secular intention. The idea of the picture within a picture is analogous to the idea of cultures within cultures, reflecting the multifaceted aspects of India's confusing socio-religious cultural make up. The artist however retains a 'bit' of the original wall as a reminder of the authentic reality. The wall only temporarily creates a communal experience. The confrontation between the morcha members and the municipal workers results in further violence and the tragic death of Tehmul caught in the cross-fighting. Gustad realizes that the collapse of the wall would wreck the past and the future" (*Such a Long Journey*329) and would inevitably speed up the process of dismantling the boundaries around the Parsi's world.

In the act of carrying the body of the dead man-child Tehmul, Gustad rediscovers certain strength within himself (the earlier rescue of Sohrab from a road accident, which had caused him to fracture his hip, had also been heroic in its own right). Gustad also re-discovers the emotional strength to cry. The catharsis that he under-goes ("Tears began to well in his closed eyes. His voice was soft and steady, and his hand steady and light upon Tehmul's head, as the tears ran down his cheeks ... As much for Tehmul as for Jimmy. And for Dinshawji, for Papa and Mamma, for Grandpa and Grandma, all who had had to wait" (*Such a Long Journey* 337) for so long results in a movement away from the memory of grandfather, and a letting-go', to the reconciliation with Sohrab.

There are no significant literal journeys in the novel apart from the journey uphill for Dinshawji's funeral, followed by Gustad's train journey to Delhi to see the ailing Major Billimoria. 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 need for a philosophical acceptance of the finality of life. Seated in the train Gustad wonders: "Would this long journey be worth it? Was any journey ever worth the trouble? ... And what a long journey for Dinshawji too. But certainly worth it" (*Such a Long Journey*260). 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. In 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.

*Such a Long Journey* deals with its protagonist, Gustad Noble's modest dreams and aspirations. The novelist has dovetailed various narratives with the central narrative of Gustad. The novel is set in Mumbai, depicting life-style of Parsis in the city. However, it is not about an ordinary man and his family. The novelist is more concerned about narration of some of the major events of the history of post-independent India. Mistry has competently deployed the feelings and apprehensions of a minority community to ascertain some of the historical events. The life-style of Parsis living in Khodadad Building is the microcosm of the Parsis in India, Mistry has exploited history to probe into broader concerns of Parsis and of national identity with fate and war as two major themes of the novel. He has taken much pain to reflect on these themes at personal, social and national levels.

Though the novel seems extremely simple in its structure, history of a community and that of a certain period of a country pulsates within the story. At one level Gustad's fate resembles fate of a nation. India, like Gustad - confronted with wars and the aftermath - is under trauma, and limps awkwardly. On the other level, the writer's concern for his community is depicted through various characters. The novel recounts the journey of Parsis who came to this land all the way from Iran in the 7th century A.D. Gustad is proud of his ancient roots when talking to Malcolm, "but our prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred years before your Son of God was ever born." (*Such a Long Journey* 24) Various characters belonging to Parsi community bring to the fore peculiar traits of their community. More often than not, together with their traditions, fears and anxieties are the focal points. For instance, Gustad voices his concerns, "No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena Politics and Marathi language nonsense." (*Such a Long Journey* 55) Besides this, the frequent references to the war against the neighbouring countries serve as historical backdrop to events that the novel unfolds. The 1948 Pak invasion on Kashmir, Indo-China war in 1962, Indo-Pak wars during 1965 and 1971 and birth of Bangladesh are some of the events around which the novel rotates.

Similarly, Major Bilimoria's story is successfully woven around pre-Bangladesh war of 1971. His letter to Gustad promulgating that he has joined RAW initiates a wave of rumour, gossip and allegations with Sohrab playing his significant role in it. He alleges that "our wonderful Prime Minister uses RAW like a private police force to do all her dirty work." (*Such a Long Journey* 93) or to "spy on opposition parties, create troubles, start violence so the police can interfere," or "to treat ballot papers chemically to win election." (*Such a Long Journey* 93) Bilimoria's alleged role in Mukti Bahini Movement and subsequent implication in an imaginative crime provides another side of the story. Bilimoria's story is fictionalization of a fact, because it is based on the 'Nagarwala Case' of the 1960s. Mistry feels, this story 'waiting to be told' by the side of historiographical account which might have been just peripheral or must have excluded it deliberately to please the centre of power, and centralizes it in his narrative.

Mistry's version of history has different dimensions. Parsis in *Such a Long Journey* offer social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective. This proliferation of 'alternative histories of the excluded' produces a pluralist anarchy on one hand and recreates the nation it belongs to on the other. The novel gains its effective strength from an interplay of fact and fiction. Through the characters like Gustad, Dinshawji, Bilimoria, Peerbhoy, Dilnavaz 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 a writer's point of view that tries to discover the suppressed or neglected chapters of Indian history. By re-narration of history, the novelist constructs his story of his community and nation both.

Perhaps Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, is a novel which reevaluates Indian history of the post-independence period. Mistry appears to be influenced by recent trends in postmodern thought, even though he himself suggests a fidelity to the

traditions of realism. *Such a Long Journey* offers post-independence history as a history of the reception. Thus, the dilemma over the issue of community that has been in place in India since the birth of the nation but which has escalated in recent years, shares features with the dilemma as it is expressed in the nations of Europe and North America, based as it appears to be on the same, albeit transplanted, notion of nation as a distinct and identifiable community.

### Works Cited

Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, London: Granta Books, 1991.

Mistry, Rohinton. *Such a Long Journey*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991.