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TRYING TO SAVOUR THE BITTER-SWEET MEMORIES: ROHINTON MISTRY AND HIS NOVELS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*

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Abstract:

Rohinton Mistry, as a writer is much concerned with the motif of journey since being a Zoroastrian, he deeply understands the significance of journey and displacement. The novels of Mistry deal with the lives of people who are in minority and hence live a marginalized life. Living in a big country like India and trying to find one's roots can sometimes be complex for those sections of people whose forefathers left their native land to find home in India about thousands of years ago. So the writings of Mistry who migrated to Canada at a young age, deal with his bitter sweet memories of India. These memories are reflected in the characters of his various works: in their anger, insecurity, frustrations and sometimes attachments. The diverse emotions of the characters clearly bring out their dilemma in post independent India. This creates an atmosphere of interest and engrossment in the minds of the readers.

Keywords: *Journey, Displacement, Minority, Subaltern, Zoroastrian, etc.*

Rohinton Mistry stands at the crossroads of or merging point of the inside and the outside in the sense of being a voice of the subaltern striving to assert his place among the prominent writers of not only South –Asia but Commonwealth and diasporic writers also. Speaking from a marginalized position can be tedious and tricky since a very close line is drawn between what a writer can give away and what he wants to keep under veil. The tide of being blown away by the wind of memories and sentiments can sometimes distort the events rendering them seeped in exaggeration. But like an expert trapeze artist, Mistry knows how to walk skillfully on a tightrope without the fear of falling down.

Journey is a very significant motif in the lives of the Parsis who are the followers of Zoroastrianism since their expulsion from Iran in the wake of Arab conquest many centuries ago. After that, they sought refuge in Gujarat, India wherein they had to suffer a blow on the question of their identities because the Raja of Gujarat at that time gave them refuge on the condition of a taboo on their usage of native dress and language. This was a forceful setback for those who had already fled being converted into Islam. During the Mughal rule, relief came to them in the form of the declaration of Farsi as the official language but they enjoyed the maximum privileges during the British rule when they were treated in a superior manner by the Britishers as compared to the other communities. But there were renowned Parsi



freedom fighters also like Ferozshah Mehta, Dadabhai Naoroji and Madam Cama during the Indian Freedom Movement. Undoubtedly, Mistry has experienced double displacement in the context of the historical journey of his community. Nilufer Bharucha aptly writes:

As an Indian who now lives in and writes from Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the diaspora. However Mistry is also a Parsi Zoroastrian and as a person whose ancestors were forced to exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in diaspora even in India. Like other Parsi writers his writing is informed by this experience of double displacement (Bharucha, 23).

It is pertinent that a community which has gone through so many upheavals should exude shades of insecurity and fear about the prominent question of its identity. This same apprehension is imbued in the majority of Mistry's characters regarding their future in Post-Colonial India. The Period of post-colonialism in India is of much significance since it was falling in the category of "neo-colonialism" a term used by Homi Bhabha. Much of the power, to the amazement of common masses, was vested in the family of Nehrus and Mistry has very vividly talked about the dire consequences of this type of imbalanced power in *Such a Long Journey*. His unhappiness over the issue of increasing Maratha domination in Bombay is exemplified in the abusive language that has been used for the Maharashtrians in the novel which has also entangled Mistry in the matrix of controversies.

The most remarkable aspect of Rohinton Mistry's novels is the depiction of socio-political scenario in its utmost sincerity. Though Mistry left India in 1970 and does not visit his native India often, it is commendable that his novels leave behind the fragrance of bitter-sweet memories depicted faithfully and a peculiar need to relive those days. Even the thematic concerns are so true to the real burning issues of those times. Jaydipsinh. K. Dodiya writes in this context:

If one studies his novels from a political point of view, one realizes that Rohinton Mistry's knowledge of Indian politics is not at all far removed from reality though he left India 26 years back to settle in Canada. The type of episodes we come across in Mistry's novels are certainly observed day to day in our Indian politics. For instance, the problems of corruption, politically motivated schemes, caste problems, domination of zamindars over the downtrodden masses occupy considerable space in his novels (Dodiya, 3).

In the novel *A Fine Balance*, there is the madness of violence and communal hatred prevalent in India after the assassination of Indira Gandhi and anti-Sikh riots were sweeping throughout the nation. Mistry tries to show the weakness of the country in this respect and how even the post- colonial India was not free from the menace of violence in one form or the other.

The story of Ishvar and Dina is set against this backdrop. Both are homeless and are made victims of the central government's plan for a city beautification project endorsed by middle-class people like Nusswan Shroff and Mrs.Gupta, the manager of Au Revoir Exports -- -- people who have least concern about the problems of the under - privileged and



downtrodden people. Dina Dalal is a victim of oppressive society wherein after being left alone by her friends of adversity--- Om, Ishvar and Maneck, she accepts the life of a servant of Nusswan's family. Maneck leaves for Dubai but returns after eight years during the anti-Sikh riots occurring throughout the nation. He is saddened to see the fate of Dina and the tailors--- Om had been castrated and Ishvar had developed gangrene in the legs during their stay at the village. He declares, "I prefer to think that God is a giant quilt maker. With an infinite variety of designs. And the quilt has grown so big and confusing, the pattern is impossible to see, the squares and diamonds and triangles don't fit well together anymore, and it's all become meaningless. So he has abandoned it" (Mistry, 418).

In *Family Matters*, Mistry traces the withering of familial bonds with the increasing technological advancement. Yezad is adversely affected by the communal politics and harmful political scenario. Mistry seems to articulate through the characters that political changes do affect a common man even though he may not be directly linked with politics.

Nariman Vakeel is not allowed by his parents to marry a Christian girl due to differences in religion. Mistry writes about this situation, "They had been ground down by their families, exhausted by the strain of it (Mistry, 13). Thus, religious staunchness is attacked by Mistry bringing to light one of the major problems pervading the country.

Such a Long Journey, the second novel of Mistry set the tone of a great writer that he is and brought him recognition from all over the world. His first work—*Tales from Firozsha Baag: A Collection of Short Stories* did project him in the light of a promising writer but he found a footing in the domain of acclaimed writers with *Such a Long Journey*. This novel is set against the backdrop of Bangladesh, a major issue of those times and the Pakistan wars of the 1970s. This political scenario helped Mistry in depicting its consequences on ordinary men and women who were nurturing hopes of a better life in free India with their expectations poised on the government. But the ever increasing corruption in all the spheres of life was already tormenting the lives of common people who were severely affected by this.

Gustad Noble, a middle aged Parsi bank employee living at Khodadad building with some dreams for future and certain convictions in his life finds that the simple desire to see the well-being of his family is crushed due to the impediments posed by the socio-political set-up. A man trying to see a colorful future for his children is deeply disillusioned by the turn of events in his life which make him ponder over the question of the future of minorities in post-colonial India. There is the nursing of pain in his heart due to the disappearance of his close friend Jimmy Billimoria, which he considers to be a betrayal. The silent pain gnawing in Gustad's heart can only be understood by his wife Dilnavaz because she knows that Major Billimoria has been more of a family member for him than anything else. Gustad comments on this behavior of Billimoria, "To leave like this, after being neighbours for so many years, is a shameful way of behaving. Bloody bad manners" (Mistry, 6).

One day, a message from Billimoria appeals to him to transfer some money to some new account. Gustad is in a dilemma whether to follow his friend's request or return the money to Gul Mohommad at Chor Bazaar. He is also fearful of getting caught by the police if Billimoria does not reach out to help him. Thus he is in a fix and seeks the help of his close friend and colleague Dinshawji. Since Dinshawji had the deposit section of the bank under his supervision, he was able to deposit huge sums of money without inciting anybody's suspicion.



But as fate would have it Major Billimoria got involved in a national plot with political manipulations and hence was used as a pawn in the hands of the government. On getting insisted by Ghulam Mohommad to visit his wronged friend for one last time, Gustad makes another significant journey to Delhi to meet Billimoria and know the truth from him.

Gustad is surprised to see the pathetic condition of Billimoria who had been very lively and robust when he used to live in Khodadad building as a neighbor of Billimoria. The chilling descent of his health brought tears to the eyes of Gustad for whom Billimoria had been more of a brother than a friend. His condition is described as:

On the bed lay nothing more than a shadow; the shadow of the powerfully built army man who once lived in Khodadad Building. His hairline had receded, and sunken cheeks made the bones just sharp and grotesque. The regal handlebar mustache was no more. His eyes had disappeared within their sockets. The neck what he could see of it, was as scrawny as poor behest Dinshawji's while under the sheet there seemed barely a trace of those strong shoulders and deep chest which Gustad and Dilnawaz used to point out as a good example to their sons, reminding them always to walk erect with chest out and stomach in, like Major Uncle (Mistry, 267).

Due to the malicious maneuvering of the then Prime Minister, Billimoria is targeted in such a manner that he dies in prison of heart attack without having been able to prove his innocence to people because each and everything was under the control of the Prime Minister--- whether it was RAW or it was the media. The Prime Minister had asked Billimoria to write a confession letter of having impersonated his voice and asking the cashier to give 60 lakhs from an account of State Bank to a Bangladeshi Babu. Billimoria was asked to take the money in the guise of that Babu and send it to Mukti Bahini – the liberation fighters of Bangladesh. But to the horror of Billimoria, the money was not sent to them but was deposited in the personal account of the Prime Minister. Billimoria was aghast at this policy of the government and he was tortured and declared guilty of fraud and imprisoned so that he could not unveil the inner secrets of the government. Here Mistry is questioning the future of the Parsis in India because this community has rarely been stigmatized as belonging to the section of criminals. The case of Billimoria is based on the reality of Nagarwala case that created sensation in the seventies. Mistry has also resentment with the projection of image of the Parsis in connection with this case because they are otherwise peace loving people with a progressive outlook towards life. The cruel end of Billimoria symbolizes the fate of those who want to fight against the nepotism prevalent in India. There is again the question that keeps lurking in the background of the novel is what is the future of common people in an independent era or what is the future of democracy in a country marked by accumulation of power in one single family.

There is also the touching upon the issue of the peripheral position ascribed to Firoze Gandhi, the husband of Indira Gandhi with Indira Gandhi given the central place in politics by Nehru. While talking about the disadvantageous stance forced on Firoze Gandhi, Dilnawaz says, “And before that, when her father was still alive, there was poor Firoze Gandhi. Nehru never liked him from the beginning. That was tragic”, said Dinshawji. “Even today, people say Feroz's heart attack was not really a heart attack” (Mistry, 197).



With these types of political developments taking place, it is not amazing that Parsis were facing some sort of threat to their identities as they were being negated from making representations actively in the political field.

There are other instances in the novel where it can be felt that Parsis were going through the phase of insecurity. Gustad is flabbergasted when his son Sohrab refuses to join IIT because he is drawn more towards the stream of Arts than Science. The reason for Gustad's fury is the bleak future for those pursuing Arts and the future is even dimmer for a minority community. He says, "Such brainless talk from such a brainy boy. How is it possible I ask you. And why after studying so hard for it?" (Mistry, 205).

He cannot let his son pursue the career of his choice because he feels that the marginalized have fewer choices of career. He thinks of the time when in the reflective moment he had kicked his son aside to save him and himself had got his hip bone fractured when he and his son had fallen while climbing down the bus. He also goes on a journey of memories when he thinks about the sacrifices he had to make regarding his own needs just in order to feed his son with almonds which had become extraordinarily dear. His hopes that he had put on his son were slowly crumpling under the weight of unpleasant circumstances. Moreover the rising inflation was always hovering about his head like a threatening storm. On the one hand, the middle class was getting ground in the mortar of new developments; on the other hand there was an incessant increase in corruption in almost every field of life.

Dr. Paymaster, the family doctor of the Nobles, felt that religious problems, politics, economics, domestic quarrels, all could be solved in a methodical manner: one only needed to observe the symptoms and then make the diagnosis and prescribe the medicine. His thesis was that just as some maladies were incurable, similarly the diseases of countries and theological dogmas had fatal results. About the burning problem of Bangladesh during those times, Dr. Paymaster says, "East Pakistan is suffering from a diarrhoea of death. Death is flowing there unchecked, and the patient will soon be dehydrated" (Mistry, 164).

Dinshawji, another significant character in the novel, is locked in a loveless marriage with Alamai without any child of his own. He has the adopted nephew Nusli of Alamai living with them but hardly ever discloses to anyone about the adoption. The death of Dinshawji who is suffering from cancer is a great blow for Gustad who had already been left by Billimoria. Dinshawji dons the garb of a humorist to hide the painful truth of his illness. He does not let his inner problematic life overshadow his lively spirit. Talking about the increasing domination of the Marathas which had made low-class people like dabbawalas feel very important, Dinshawji remarks, "What to do with such low-class people? No manners, no sense, nothing. And you know who is responsible for this attitude? --- that bastard Shiv Sena leader who worships Hitler and Mussolini. He and his 'Maharashtra for Maharashtrians ' nonsense'. They won't stop till they have complete Maratha Raj" (Mistry, 73). Dinshawji also makes a statement, "Wait till the Marathas take over, then we will have real Gandoo Raj" (Mistry, 73). Elsewhere in the novel, Dinshawji also comments about the degradation of Parsis in the banking system because earlier they were the kings of the banks but after the nationalization of banks by Indira Gandhi, their status had fallen considerably.

Mistry has left little hope even for the growth in number of the Parsis. Major Billimoria has no family, Dinshawji has no issue, Miss Kutpitia and Tehmul Langraa are doubly



marginalized since the former is a confirmed maid and the latter is mentally retarded who also becomes a victim in the riots between municipality and common people. Only Gustad is left in the end with his family realizing the bitter-sweet truths of life that this life is a long journey which has to be made with acceptance and faith in the presence of the Divine, otherwise one can succumb to the pressures and frustrations imbued in it.

Whether it is Nariman Vakeel, Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Gustad Noble or other characters---all possess the stamp of beautifully portrayed characters who are as real as the native land of Mistry. It seems that the major thematic thrusts of the writer are the matrix of problems cropping up in the wake of post-colonialism. Sometimes he remembers certain things with fondness like the comfort offered to Gustad by the pavement artist giving shape to Gustad's or for that matter Mistry's dream of a secular India even though the dream is broken with the breaking of the wall by the municipality. The need for familial bonds is there in Mistry perhaps to ward off the sense of alienation that sometimes pervades the diasporic writers. It is true that despite his status as an expatriate writer, Mistry manages to capture the soul of India woven beautifully in the novel. While sitting in another country, he writes about the significant problems engulfing India which testifies his deep connection with his native country whose bitter-sweet memories still fill his heart with pains of nostalgia and at the same time an increased sense of connection with it like the nuptial chord of the mother.

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