

**A Post-Colonial Study of Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*
and *A Fine Balance***

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Abstract

The present submission endeavors to put in a succinct and terse form the Post Colonial interpretation of *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*-two outstanding novels by Rohinton Mistry who has emerged as a leading Indo-Canadian novelist of the recent times. As he is a Parsi by faith, his fictional sensibility has been nurtured by a unique historical background. Mistry has made a concerted effort to record some very unhappy and unpalatable episodes which depict the trauma that was faced by the decolonized Indian society when the country was placed under an Internal Emergency. It is natural that Mistry, whose understanding of the Indian society is profound, X-rays the troubles of those who are at the receiving end and represents the after effects of the colonial rule.

Keywords: Colonialism, Post Colonialism, Resistance, Decolonization, Minorities.

Life is a teasing and tiring tale of losses and crosses where the line between the worst and the best is very thin. In the midst of this paradox is situated man, classically diagnosed by Alexander Pope as “the glory, jest and riddle of the world” (110). Man makes friends to let them down and sets up friendly colonies to vanquish and rob his ‘colonized’ friends. Those who are defeated are pursued and slaughtered most mercilessly. Thus, cruelty is the basis of all colonialisms. All colonial set ups are degrading and debasing. In short, colonialism means tales of terrors, especially denoting the meanest and lowest side of man. Yet, it is a timeless phenomenon. As a result of colonizing practices and decolonizing efforts, Post Colonialism eventually developed as a concept and a theory, especially in Cultural Studies.

Colonialism is an ugly scar on the face of humanity. Yet, colonization is followed by decolonization as a matter of historical routine. Colonialism was an anarchic affair for many a millennia. But, as Europe took over, colonialism became a well-oiled machine. The English ruled the roost over colossal junks of the earth so that the sun never set over their empire. India was unlucky to be colonized by the English step by step. In due course of time, the English colonizers had to leave India bag and baggage. This left the vast masses of India at the mercy of

local politicians. This left the vast masses of India at the mercy of local politicians. A lot of literature was published before and after August 15, 1947, which makes the watershed in India's history. This literature has been interpreted with the help of a unique literary concept known as Post-colonial literary theory. Post-colonial situation in India encompasses various vicissitudes. Rohinton Mistry's two novels showcase the post-colonial history of India specifically after the imposition of Internal Emergency. Post-colonial criticism functions like a barometer recording the changes of pressure in the political scenario that are thrown up after the attainment of independence. Rohinton Mistry fixes his ken on the tragic shape that the events take after the imposition of Internal Emergency. The Post-colonial approach is a very meaningful and powerful guideline for the interpretation of the avoidable torturers which were inflicted upon the helpless people. Post-colonial theory, of course, studies the sufferings of the society in the pre-independence as well as post-independence periods. The twist that was taken by the Indian politics after independence is indeed a tragedy too deep for tears, and too provocative for Post-colonial perceptions to analyze and interpret.

Mistry's cultural; historical and religious roots embody romance like fascinations and excitements. Jung, the psychologist, has asserted that human sub-conscious preserves some traits and traces of the traumatic experiences that had been suffered and put up with by even the remote ancestors in the distant past. So, it is clear that deep down in the darkest recesses of Mistry's psyche, there must be a sense of the traumatic anguish of some poor wounded name lodgings somewhere in his bosom. The calamities that men have faced at the hands of victors and conquerors will keep on simmering and smoldering the ooze through a man who suffers the poignancy of nostalgic memories and the analyst who has the gift of the creative talent. In Mistry's case, there is a unique blend of the man who suffers and the mind that creates.

Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* depicts the blows of fate that strike India as tragic calamities and catastrophes in the form of Emergency. *Such a Fine Balance*, the first novel of Mistry, is tour de force. *A Fine Balance*, a very impressive second novel by Mistry, helps the reader to explore a vast sea of experience. Mistry mentions how there was elation and ecstasy when India won freedom after centuries of slavery in 1947. He brings the reader face to face with the traumatic events which ensued with the imposition of Emergency under Indira Gandhi's Congress rule in 1975. "The immensity of the contrast is highlighted by Mistry in his inimitable forthright Indian English presentation of facts with a touch of his irony and humour", remarks Nilufar E. Bharucha (19). The Post Colonial account of the historical facts is presented by this Parsi writer very sincerely. The account of the Parsi community and its travails is the favourite theme of this Indo-Canadian novelist. Mistry never forgets to provide sociological studies of the rites and rituals of the Parsi community. At the same time, he offers a panoramic account of the plight and predicament of the man in the street during the oppressive and dictatorial regime of Indira Gandhi. Nilufar E. Bharucha observes in this regard: "Mistry's

powerful novel makes a brave attempt to achieve a fine balance between the heavy odds pitted against the fragility of life and the ruthlessness of actual happenings at a troubled time in recent Indian history when the Emergency encouraged some politicians to check the rampant high birth rate by forced and unethical vasectomy and other cruel methods” (20).

Such A Long Journey records the agonies and anxieties that Indians had to face after independence. Mistry has selected Gustad Noble as the protagonist to highlight the disabilities which Indians were subjected to most painfully after the imposition of Internal Emergency. He describes the family background of Gustad Noble as a Parsi protagonist which shows how this unlucky character passes from one difficult situation to the other in the course of his life. He enjoyed life as the grandson of a well-to-do Parsi furniture dealer. Later on, he had reasonably good time when his father was at the helm of affairs. When the time came for him to be on his own, the ground beneath his feet began to slip and shake. Mismanagement and dissipation by a wayward uncle drove Gustad Noble and his family into a narrow groove as tenants of a two-room set in the Khodadad building. He hoped that Sohrab, his promising son, would help the family to recover the lost ground in the matter of pelf and prosperity. But, Sohrab, in essence, let him down. Her second son brought him into unnecessary clash with a Parsi neighbor and Roshan, his daughter, was a chronic patient and a constant drain on his purse. Major Bilimoria, a devoted friend, disappeared surfaced only to create unnecessary trouble for Gustad. The Shiv Sainiks began to wage a crusade against the domination of the Parsis. Major Bilimoria was involved in a bank scandal, involving Gustad in his scam unwittingly. Miss Kutpitia, an old hag, involved the family into one superstitious gaffe after another through Dilnavaz, Gustad’s wife. Dinshawji, another loyal friend of Gustad, died of Cancer, leaving Gustad almost a companionless and a friendless character. Tehmul Lungara, another memorable character in the novel, dies in a freak accident which brings about a sort of compromise between the estranged father and the son.

Mistry is praised all over the world as a brilliant narrator of stories. In his novels, he presents a detailed narrative of the Parsi culture against the backdrop of Bombay which is a sort of mini-India. Being a Parsi Post Colonial writer, Mistry is also engaged in an effort to repossess his cultural territory. He is involved in creating a unique identity for himself because he is better described as Parsi ‘Diaspora’. The diasporic background of the Parsis is unique. It is a community which is declining very fast. Aditi Kapoor remarks pertinently: “Unless something is done to augment their fast depleting numbers and to revive their religion, the Parsis, after an illustrious past, could well just fade out into oblivion” (*The Times of India*). Being a Parsi himself, Mistry is concerned about the fate of his community. As such, he has taken upon himself the responsibility to preserve a record of how they lived to some extent when the Parsis become extinct. His novel *Such A Long Journey*, not only presents the problems of Parsi Diaspora in the Indian situation, but also brings forward his anti-colonial resistance. Charu

Chandra Mishra observes in this regard, “Almost all the characters of this novel are chosen from the middle-class Parsi background and are shown resisting the snares of power in their own idiosyncratic way” (101). Thus, Mistry has skillfully captured a sense of loss and nostalgia in the experience of the immigrants and the alienation of Parsis in India in his very first novel. His most outstanding feature as a creator of fables, characters and perspectives is that he belongs to the Parsi community. The bitter realities of the Parsis in the Post Colonial India find a subtle expression in his novel *Such A Long Journey*. He has emerged as a potent and perceptive historian of his community.

Such A Long Journey is a long, but sad journey that symbolizes a sad and sorrowful life. Most of the sufferings of Gustad Noble stem from the decline of the Parsi ambience. The story of Gustad’s friend, Major Bilimoria, is an important sub-plot. He joins the R. A. W. and gets involved in the Mukti Bahini affairs. This situation is the outcome of the devious path that the history and politics of India after independence. Mistry shows the murky politics of India where millions are laundered at will. Such indeed is the history of most of the decolonized colonies in the Post Colonial context. He gives a detailed account of the Parsi superstitions which show that even after centuries of residence in India; the Parsis continue to stick to their centuries-old unscientific beliefs. The Parsi women always play a second fiddle like all Indian women. It is a profound analysis which can be categorized as gender study. The Parsis are a very miniscule, but meaningful, minority in India. Their rites and rituals provide a beautiful introduction to the non-Parsi readers.

Mistry’s second novel, *A Fine Balance*, was published in 1995, four years after his first novel. This novel is a sort of epic in the sense that the story is spread over 752 pages. The novel consists of a lot of characters and a complex plot. However, Mistry artificially maintains a ‘fine balance’ among these two. The story takes the charmed reader across enormous avenues of experience, from the jubilation of independence in 1947 to the nightmarish and sinister Emergency under the regime of Indira Gandhi in 1975. The wide contrast is brought forward by Mistry in his unique and straight-forward manner by presenting facts with ironical and humorous commentary. This novel puts forward a real picture of contemporary India during the Emergency with flashbacks to distant villages and towns before, during and after the partition.

A Fine Balance is essentially a Post Colonial work of fiction. It is natural that many Post Colonial themes seem to stand out prominently in this novel. Most Post Colonial writers in all the ex-colonies are in state of shock when they discover that the sufferings of the people under their own local rulers have increased many folds. The politics in the decolonized India began to move along a disastrously confrontationist road. The constitutional machinery broke down and the masses were divested of their Fundamental Rights. Even petty manipulators became awfully powerful. Dubious reforms were forced down the unwilling throats of the people with a

vengeance. Sterilization of people was taken on a massive scale and all sorts of terrors were let loose to achieve quantitative targets. Poor people were herded and hounded together so that social reformers and vasectomy operators could flaunt the figures that they had achieved. Those who enjoyed some clout under the new dispensation regarded this as the most opportune time to settle their scores with those who had been eye-sores for them for a long time. Mistry's novel captures the degeneration and degradation of history and politics in a dark period of the Post Colonial times of India. The novel is packed with horrible incidents and episodes which show how the people were victimized in the name of high-sounding catch-words.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry shows how the Indians who got jockeyed into position of power; crush the weaker sections most ruthlessly. The callousness of those who vanquish the weaker countries has some rationale behind it. But, the inhuman suppression that local rulers indulge in is like the dagger that Brutus drove into Julius Caesar's heart. Another very vastly meaningful metaphor that has emerged out of Post Colonial literary theory is phrased as 'subaltern'. A subaltern is a junior officer in the army who generally listens and obeys. It is expected that he would never voice his concerns even in the face of most irrational assertions and injunctions. Colonial rulers impose their wills so mercilessly that the local people are no better than the voiceless and speechless subalterns. Mistry shows how in the caste-ridden and tradition bound social set up of India, the Dalit untouchables, the economically weaker people and even women and minorities are degraded and devalued into behaving like subalterns.

The concept of mutual relationship between male characters and female characters show a typical grip over this human association. Dina Dalal enjoyed the blessing of parental affection in her early days. When her brother began to support her, she realized the change in her treatment. Now she is not allowed to complete her studies. The boy selected for her is not approved of by her. Later on, she chooses an eminently suitable boy herself. Her brother does not accept this relationship whole-heartedly. Rustom Dalal meets with a fluke but fatal accident. Dina Dalal wages a relentless struggle to be viable and remain independent. She enters into a contractual agreement with Mrs. Gupta to undertake the stitching of garments for export. Though she is living in the rooms rented by her late husband, yet she is forced to violate the terms of the contract. Finally, she is thrown out of this rented house and has to fall on the goodwill and generosity of her brother. Mistry has traced Dina Dalal's career over a long period of time to show the implications of gender considerations. In the Dalit sub-plot, Dalit women have to oblige the landlord lobby comprising the well-to-do Thakurs. The non-cooperation by a Dalit woman leads to a very bitter reaction. The climax is reached at the time of voting when Narayan insists on casting his vote himself. The Dalit quarters are torched; their women are defiled through gang rapes and most of them are burnt alive. *A Fine Balance* shows that even after years and years of independence, women are still the object of harassment as they were during the

primitive times. The gender study in *A Fine Balance* shows a remarkable sociological understanding and interpretation.

Rohinton Mistry has also felt very strongly for the hard and harsh treatment that the minorities get at the hands of the majority conglomerations. The inhuman treatment of Dalits is also the outcome of these people being a caste minority in the Hindu society. The existence of the minorities becomes even more risky and dangerous when there are communal flare ups. The Parsis are a permanent source of irritation and contempt for the Shiv Sena's hoodlums who are always baying for their blood. Mistry has thrown powerful and meaningful hints to highlight communal tensions in the decolonized Indian society. Post Colonialism signifies an advance, an up gradation in the status of the nation when there is a graduation from a subjugated colony to a surfaced nation. Yet, the new men who step into the shoes of expert colonial administrators fail to deliver the goods. People feel that they suffer more disadvantages than those under the previous regime. Both the novels of Rohinton Mistry bear a testimony to this Post Colonial truth. The two can be read as depicting the nation from Post Colonial perspective. The most tragic and disastrous event recorded by Mistry in both the novels is the imposition of Internal Emergency by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. However, the condemnation of the disastrous ill-effects of Madame Gandhi's misrule in the second novel, to wit, *A Fine Balance*, is more incisive, more fatal and more inhuman.

A deeper assessment of the two novels leads to the inevitable fact that there is a very clear case of evolution and development in the fictional art that Rohinton Mistry displays. *Such A Long Journey* is almost like an epic novel because it is dominated by the main protagonist, viz., Gustad Noble. The novel, in fact, shows that Mistry has depicted the careers of some persons whose vicissitudes he had watched very closely. In literature, themes which portray how dreams fail to get translated with reality are an abiding element. Though both the novels show how high hopes almost end in nothing, yet the second novel is a much more artistic achievement than the first novel. The dramatis personae in the second novel are more broad-based than the first novel. Class and caste divisions play foul in the second novel, though this element does not figure prominently in the first novel. The voluminous nature of the second novel shows that it is much more epical than the first one. The most operative terms in these two novels are 'journey' and 'balance'. Gustad Noble's long journey is so painful that an exclamation has been signified by the use of the determiner 'such' and in the other novel, the determiner is 'fine'. These two determiners serve as pointers to indicate that both the stories end on a sour note. In fact, Post Colonial history is poignantly sour and bitter. Such is life in all the countries which suffered under the colonial rulers and continue to suffer under power hungry people like Indira Gandhi. All this is shown wonderfully by Rohinton Mistry in the context of Post Colonial, decolonized Indian society.

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