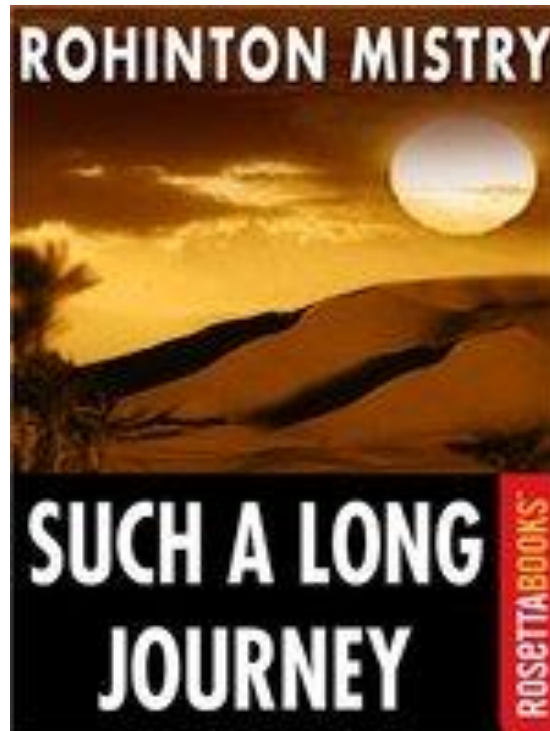


Cultural Ethos in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

A. Devabesli, M.Phil. English



Abstract

Such a Long Journey examines the life of a Parsi community and development of post-colonialism in India. It describes the life style of Parsi people. Mistry is exceptionally individualistic, but he also finds around him a huge web of Parsi Indians and his development as an entity is the result of conscious and unconscious reaction to the Parsi life around him.

Mistry belongs to the Parsi Zoroastrian religious minority. Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), brought him national and international recognition. Mistry's subsequent novels have achieved the same level of recognition as his first.

The Background Setting

Bombay is the setting of Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991). However, the social conditions that provided a distant backdrop to the short stories now bear upon a particular Bombay family. The protagonist, Gustad Noble, finds his life unraveling as his son rejects filial piety, his best friend involves him in political intrigue and his own rationality and morality confront a world in change. In *Such a Long Journey*, the clerk's daughter's illness and his son's refusal to go to college, are events that we are encouraged to read symptomatically. When Gustad receives a parcel and a request to launder money for an old friend, the events ramifications are at once personal and political.

Parsi People in Turbulent Times

Such a Long Journey examines the life of a handful of Parsi Indians in the turbulent early 1940's. When Britain withdrew from the subcontinent in 1948, two states were created. Muslims form one state, Pakistan. Pakistan's two parts are widely separated by its massive southern neighbour, India. In India, Hindus predominate, although society is officially secular. Parsis are a tiny, secretive religious minority.

Pious Gustad Noble and Sohrab

The inhabitants of Khodadad building north of Bombay are all Parsis. The most pious of them is Gustad Noble, the novel's protagonist. He works in a Parsi dominated bank downtown. Gustad intends that his eldest son, Sohrab, who excelled in secondary and college studies, attend the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) and find a career more lucrative and prestigious than his own. Gustad bears many grudges from the past, which have limited his possibilities. Sohrab, an artist at heart, rejects the plan.

The Family and the Parsi Neighbours

The hardheaded father and son clash and turn their backs on each other. Gustad's middle child, a son named Darius, causes only minor problems. Gustad's nine-year old daughter, Roshan, chronically ill, though the illness brings Gustad into contact with a politically active Doctor. Gustad's superstitious wife, Dilnavaz, falls under the sway of an upstairs neighbour who practices black magic. A Parsi mystic advises Gustad's sworn enemy. Another eccentric old Parsi rages out his window at the unfairness of the almighty. A tragic and mentally deficient young man wanders about, delivering messages and playing. His mind was destroyed after falling from the neem tree at the center of the compound.

Although Gustad's war hero best friend, Major Jimmy 'Billi Boy' Billimoria, has vanished from the apartment complex, he writes to Gustad to ask a favour. Gustad follows his friend's instructions and receives a very large amount of cash. Gustad is forced into depositing it gradually into a false bank account. Then he is compelled to withdraw it even more rapidly. It is clear Gustad is dealing with terrorists. Gustad is forced to involve another friend, the cancer-riddled, lecherous Dinshawji. Dinshawji's hospitalization, death and funeral force Gustad to complete on the mysteries of life.

Sordid Political Story

Jimmy Billimoria reveals the sordid political story behind the money laundering, during a heartbreaking visit Gustad makes to his friend's prison hospital bedside. The shadowy lieutenant who serves as intermediary between Jimmy and Gustad makes clear Major Billimoria's natural death in prison was a murder. The novel's climax comes when the denizens of an especially depressed neighbourhood, march to the municipal buildings to demand essential services.

On the way, they pause at the wall outside Gustad's business, which a street artist has covered with depictions of the gods and holy people of all the religions of India. The municipality has decreed it will be demolished to widen the road. In a violent street fight, Tehmul, the tragic cripple into whom Dilnavaz drew her son's evil demons, dies while trying to catch a brick. Gustad's life time of frustrations and anger is felt as he prays over the victim's body. Sohrab and Gustad embrace. Although the sacred wall is demolished, so too is the limiting, bleak past.

Cultural Ethos and Fear of Dim Future

Ethos defines the characteristic spirit or attitudes of a community. When the subject under consideration moves into the realms of the social, cultural and political. There is a set of fixed external truths that increasingly come into play. These objective truths come out of what is called cultural ethos.

This sets the tone of the novel as it tries to express fears and anxieties of Parsi community. As a community, it has not only lived peacefully in the vast sprawling forest of Indian culture but has also accepted the land and contributed to its development in its own way. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled, ever since Indira Gandhi nationalized the banks. Gustad, the Parsi protagonist, feels that minorities have no future in India: "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 men get half as much. How could he make Sohrab understand this?"

Changing Pattern of Communal Relationship – Rohinton Mistry’s Insight

The novel has various other characters belonging to the Parsi community who express their anguish at the changing pattern of communal relationship in society, that simmers beneath the narrative structure of the novel. Parsi culture as depicted by Rohinton Mistry in the novel is intensely conscious of its distinctive identity. They are fully aware of Indian national identity, which is evident from their concerns for and involvement with the national cause in the moments of national crises.

Gustad Noble, the central character in the novel, is an individual depicted as a classical tragic hero, who is passing from “happiness to misery” and is pitted against heavy odds, which he faces in a calm manner. Side by side there are many other things which do not escape the novelist’s serious concern. Here Mistry cherishes the values of friendship, condemns the courage of war, and denounces and unscrupulous, corrupt and hypocritical political leaders who have becoming a political propagandist so that his work does not become a political mouth piece. He frankly exposes the social and political ills of India which is due to that he has no political axe to grind. Furthermore, as in the words of Meitei “Mistry’s strong opposition to social and class distinctions and his anguish over the environmental pollution have widened the spectrum of the contemporary gamut of reality the novel conveys” (102).

At this significant moment, Gustad comes out of himself to be one with death and one with life. He prays for all, cries for all. It is at this moment that he accepts the return of prodigal son, who comes to him; it is incomplete surrender that the father and the son lose their personalities and exercise their hatred of each other. Now they reach out to each other. The novel deals with the Parsi community’s certain customs and rituals. It is as clear from the account of the ceremonies related to the last rites. Of course, this is nothing unexpected in a novelist who himself is a Parsi. The entire novel is steeped in Indian sensibility and flavored with Parsi customs and manners.

Religion and Ritual in the Construction of Human Identity

Mistry is aware of significance of religion and ritual in the construction of human identity. He, therefore uses religion, ritual and the responses to these as a central theme in his fiction. In fact, rituals and religious beliefs become the markers of ethnic, rational and communitarian identities; they highlight difference. Mistry’s fiction can be read within this framework as the predicament of an individual as he/she seeks to cope with the contradictions of the past and the present community and

self, family and community. Each of these ‘contexts’ of individual contradictions and dilemmas is an emotionally charged event in his work.

Changes Forced Upon the Community

At the centre of *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry has described Parsi community’s religious rituals, especially those of death and burial. They are presented from the highly emotional perspective of the otherwise ‘rational’ Gustad, as he buries Dinshawji and Billimoria and later Tehmul-lungraa. Mistry, as a Parsi writer, chooses to tackle religion and rituals in the context of the changes forced upon the community. Here Mistry also addresses the question of the adaptation of the Parsi rituals to contemporary life through the funeral and the debate about disposal of the body. Mistry presents three different approaches in his portrayal of the three funerals.

To Conclude

To conclude, in *Such a Long Journey*, Rohinton Mistry comes out as a critical realist so far as the treatment of social reality is concerned. Through this method his ideology comes out to project the kind of society (parisi) he wants to be a part of. Through this novel Mistry emerges as a progressive writer in his consciousness of the social and political aspects of a particular historical period.

Rohinton Mistry conveys his message for shunning exploitation of people to the world through his novels. He doesn’t stop with attacking the social evils in their respective society. Mistry also conveys better solution to those social inequalities and evils through his works. His novels made some tremendous changes in their respective society. It enables the readers to respect the feeling of other man as they do to their own. It will pave way for the peaceful life on the earth. By affirming his faith in humanity, Mistry has successfully demonstrated that “hope springs eternal in the human heart”. Everyone must feel that the human beings are all equal, liberal, and belong to one fraternity.

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A. Devabesli, M.Phil. English

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A. Devabesli, M.Phil. English
Sri Adi Chunchanagiri Women's College
Cumbum 625 516
Tamilnadu
India
beslideva@gmail.com