

**The Dark Sides of Indian Politics –
As Reflected in Rohinton Mistry’s
*Such a Long Journey and A Fine Balance***

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:7 July 2013



Rohinton Mistry
Courtesy: www.cbc.ca

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry, born in Mumbai 1952, went to Canada in 1975 and since then lived there near Toronto. After migrating to Canada, he worked in a bank as well as studied at the University of Toronto. He is the recipient of several prestigious awards. His first novel ‘Such A Long Journey’ was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Governor General’s Award, the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for the Best Book. His second novel ‘A Fine Balance’ (1995) won the Prestigious Giller Prize. In (1995), he got the prestigious Canada Australia Literary Prize.

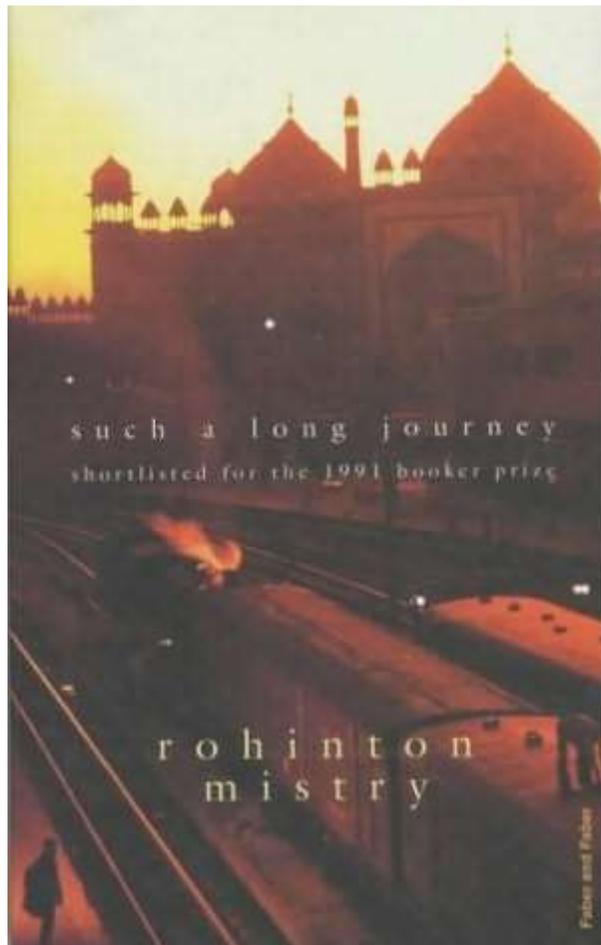
Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

The Dark Sides of Indian Politics as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey and A Fine Balance*

One of the most remarkable features of Rohinton Mistry's fiction is that it brilliantly captures the crowded, throbbing life of India. His novels are closely linked with social and political background. If one studies his novels from a political point of view, one realizes that Mistry's knowledge of Indian politics is not at all far from reality, though he left India three decades ago to settle in Canada. His novels capture corruption, politically motivated schemes, political decisions, layman's sufferings, caste problems, dominance of Zamindars, and inhuman condition of untouchable people in India. Mistry likes to write about India. Living in Canada and writing about India, Mistry is fully aware of several drawbacks of India's social and political life, as discerned in his novels.

Such a Long Journey



Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

The Dark Sides of Indian Politics as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*

Such a Long Journey is an important contribution to the corpus of Parsi fiction in English. The narrative is set against the milieu of India during the Seventies, particularly at the time of the birth of Bangladesh. The concern for the Parsi community figures prominently in this novel. The inhabitants of Khodadad Building are the representatives of a dwindling Parsi community.

Place of Zoroastrian Faith

In this novel the main protagonist Gustad's eventual acceptance of his lot with dignity is the triumph of Zoroastrian faith. His journey is from uncertainty to certitude, from apprehension to affirmation and from perplexity to perspicacity. The main interest of the novel lies in the real life scandal involving Sohrab Nagarwala, the State Bank Cashier who was at the centre of 60 lakh rupees scam, which had shaken the government of Indira Gandhi. In *Such A Long Journey* Jimmy Billimoria is the fictional counterpart of the infamous Sohrab Nagarwala. Since Nagarwala was a Parsi, a victim of the hegemony of the state, the tale could only have been told by a Parsi. Tarun Tejpal points out,

“Mistry's first novel lays claim to being the first book of fact-based fiction in the Indian literary tradition.”

Gustad's Journey

Gustad's long journey into the unknown commences with the abrupt and mysterious disappearance of his intimate friend Jimmy Billimoria. He is forcibly drawn into the concatenation of events which follow the trail of the Nagarwala case. Mistry's narrative also puts on the appearance of credibility. A Parsi critic comment-

“The Nagarwala incident, because it involved a Parsi, jolted the self-image of the community no less. Having long ago lost their literature, to the vandalism of Alexander, the accursed and their dance, music, art, poetry, and even their language to the process of adapting to a new home in India, the Parsis have developed a particularized culture culled from a mixture of

ancient myth and legend overlaid by a life-sustaining sense of recent achievement.”

Life in a Dominant Political Situation

Here Mistry attempts to seek an answer to the query ‘How do we live in a dominant political situation?’ The world in a sorry state is a mystery to Mistry. Billimoria is a victim figure who is exploited by the ‘people at the very top’. Mistry does not offer an ‘apology’ for a fellow Parsi; his attempt is to depict the Parsi predicament in the corrupt Indian society in the Post-Independence era.

The Parsis also feel insecure because of growing political power of the Maratha parties in Mumbai as they would upset the power structure. Gustad’s closest friend Dinshawji tells Gustad, ‘wait till the Marathas take over, then we will have real Gandoo Raj... All they know is to have rallies at Shivaji Park, shout slogans, make threats and change road names’. Dinshawji is of the view that all these agitating tactics of the Marathas will upset the social harmony in Mumbai and there will be chaos all around him.

Conspiracy Theory and Attack on Nehru

Gustad’s wife Dilnavaz in fact has a conspiracy theory about the death of Feroze Gandhi as Nehru never liked him as his son-in-law from the beginning. Agreeing with this, Dinshawji remarks ‘that was tragic..... Even today people say Feroze heart attack was not really a heart attack.’ M Mani Meiti observes that Mistry is a stern political satirist and a devout critic of war. His attack on Nehru and Indira Gandhi is unprecedented.

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 occupies his days and nights.

Praise for Lal Bahadur Shastri and Great Expectations

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

The Dark Sides of Indian Politics as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*

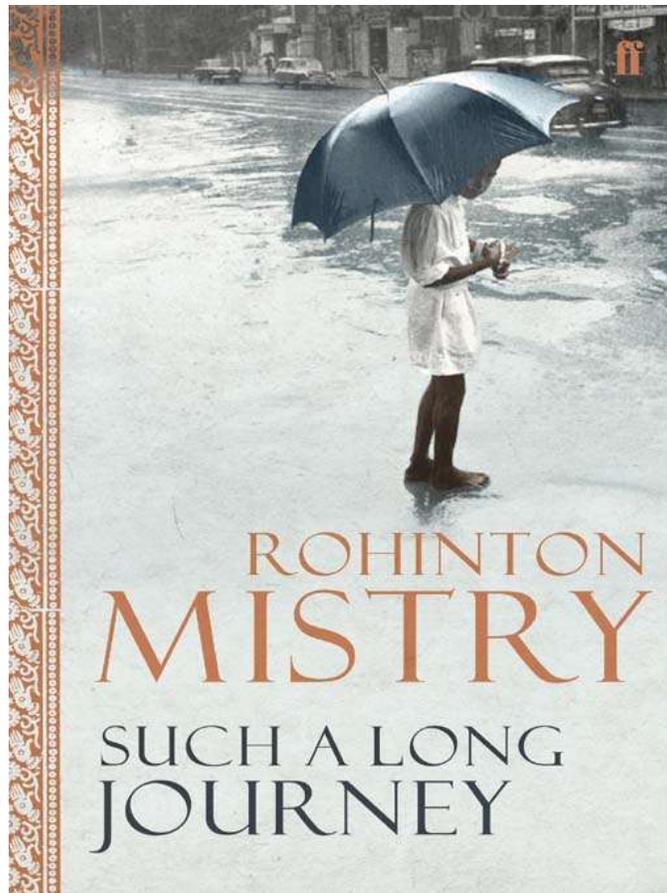
Though Mistry is ruthless in satirizing the Nehru family, he, however, praises Lal Bahadur Shastri who became India's Prime Minister upon the death of Nehru because with his rule 'the stagnant waters of Government would at last be freshed and vitalized.' Shastri could do in the Indo-Pak war of 1965 far better than what Nehru did in the war with China. In his sudden death at Tashkent, besides the possibility of a Pakistani or Russian plot, the role of Indira Gandhi is suspected: "so that her father's dynastic democratic dream could finally come true."

Hope in Sohrab

Gustad, who sees his former younger self in his son Sohrab, desires compensation for his own earlier losses and disillusion. Sohrab's success in I.I.T. entrance examination offers hope in an otherwise bleak existence to him.

"The Indian Institute of Technology became the Promised Land. It was El Dorado and Shangri-La, it was Atlantis and Camelot, it was Xanadu, and Oz, it was the home of the Holy Grail."

But Gustad's Promised Land is no more than a "luxurious prison". It is an extended adult version of a juvenile tale. The success of Sohrab offers, at least initially, a meaning to his cheerless existence. But Sohrab ruthlessly snatches away that purpose 'like a crutch from a cripple'. Success and social distinction which are essential Zoroastrian Values remain a distant dream for Gustad.



Attack on Indira Gandhi and Peace with the World

In *Such a Long Journey* there is direct attack on Indira Gandhi for nationalization of banks, for her encouragement to make a separate Maharashtra state that caused bloodshed and riot, as Dinshawji remarks 'wanting to make the rest of us into second class citizens'. Dr. Paymaster, in fact, is so much tired of this politics that he compares this country to a patient of gangrene and said 'Our beloved country is a patient with gangrene at an advanced stage. Fine words and promises will not cure the patient. The decaying part must be excised.'

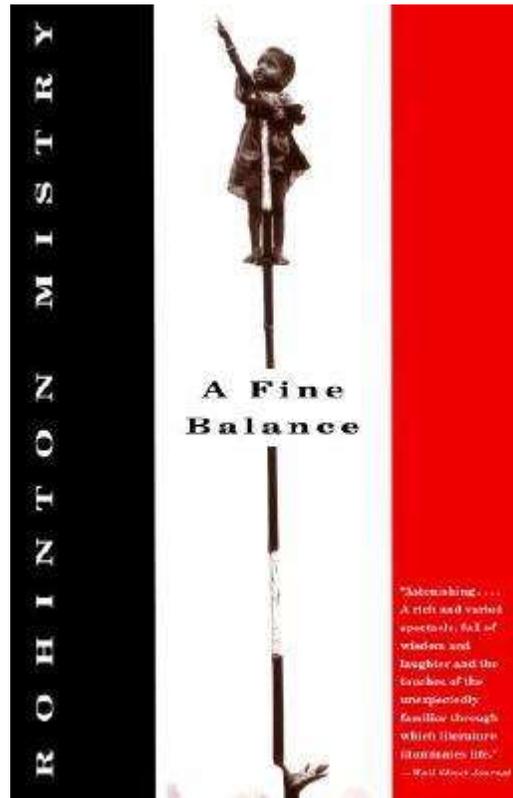
Though Gustad has to face many difficulties, he survives without succumbing to any prolonged despair or bitterness. Gustad is a pious Parsi whose life is governed by *humata*, *hukhta* and *hvarshta*. His quest for order and security in a corrupt society is a heroic but futile exercise. But he is highly optimistic. Like other Parsi people who always dream of a new India with new hopes.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

The Dark Sides of Indian Politics as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*

A Fine Balance – National Emergency Context



Mistry's *A Fine Balance* presents an authentic portrait of contemporary India during the Emergency era imposed by Indira Gandhi. Zai Whitaker calls it 'wise and wonderful'. It is India with its timeless chain of caste exploitation; male chauvinism, linguistic strives and communal disharmony. In India, power-hungry politicians control the strings of administration like a puppeteer. Mistry has depicted the humiliating condition of people living in Jhopadpattis, deaths on railway tracks, demolition of shacks on the pretext of beautification, violence on the campuses in the name of ragging, deaths in police custody, lathi charges and murders in the pretext of enforcing Family Planning, which are all part of India's nasty politics.

Reality of Politics and Life in India

As a social critic he is authentic in his portrayal of India. He measures the pros and cons of Indian politics that are engraved in his memory. The novel reflects the reality of India, the politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence and bloodshed. The novel also provides an

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

The Dark Sides of Indian Politics as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*

intimate insight into rural India focusing on the injustice, the cruelty and the horror of deprivation and exposes the trauma of India's millions along communal, religious and linguistic lines.

Heroic Struggle of a Parsi Widow

The novel is also a story of the heroic struggle of a Parsi widow, Dina Shroff and her two tailors trying to survive in a world of segregation, corruption and oppression in which honest work was denied and punished by a totalitarian system. For the beautification of the city, the Government deployed officials in the guise of Safety Inspectors to check the colony. The bulldozers went in and the illegal slums were removed making the poor people homeless. During the 'Emergency' the Family Planning Programme was allegedly used to eliminate the enemies of the establishment. This incident had become a nightmare in the life of Om. As a result both Ishvar and Om have become cripples and turn to begging only to fall into the nightmare anonymity of the city – a “world of sudden police swoops, forced labour, goonda gangs, protection money, and casual street murders.”

The new rules of Emergency made it obligatory for every officer to encourage people to get sterilized to complete his quota; otherwise, there would be no promotion for him. Thus the Family Planning Programme was pressed into service allegedly to eliminate one's enemies by confusing sterilization with castration. Deaths during the 'Emergency' were called 'accidental'. The death of Ashraf Chacha at the market square is described as an accident, by the police.

Election Promises

There was also a huge corruption in the legal system. The speeches made during the parliamentary elections were crammed with promises of every shape and size: “promises of new schools, clean water and health care, promises of land for landless peasants through redistribution and stricter enforcement of Land Ceiling Act; promises of powerful laws to punish any discrimination against the harassment of backward castes by upper castes, promises to abolish bonded labour, child labour, sati, dowry system, child marriage. However, these empty promises turned out to be nothing but campaigning antics, assuring lively entertainment for the villagers. Some of these were indeed got done!

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

The Dark Sides of Indian Politics as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*

Compassionate Parsi Widow

Elections here were-master-minded by the landlords like Thakur Dharamsi. Narayan's attempt at voting to make his mark himself results in the ruin of his family by being burnt alive by the goondas of Thakur Dharamsi. Exploitation of the low castes by upper caste continues unabated. But the Parsi widow Dina, is capable of feeling for the untouchables by giving shelter to Ishvar and Om, the two *chamaars* (*sweepers*). Freedom remained a cherished yet unattainable goal to Dina because of the social tyranny imposed by her brother and father guarding the patriarchal structure of the Parsi society. Under 'Emergency' she simply could not approach the law courts, because of the powers given to corrupt officials like sergeant Kesar. Hence, she had to live by striking a balance between despair and hope. Mr. Valmiki made an observation to Dina Dalal,

‘There is always hope- hope enough to balance our despair or we would be lost.’

Continued Exploitation of the Untouchable and Valiant Defiance

Despite new laws regarding untouchability passed by the government, nothing had changed. It was deeply rooted in the village community. The two *chamaars*, Ishvar and Narayana received terrible beating from the teacher for touching the tools of learning and knowledge. It was a forbidden world for the low caste. However, Dukhi's defiance of the caste system is openly shown by his sending his little sons Ishvar and Narayan to Ashraf, the Muslim tailor who would also sew for an untouchable. So it is clear that the curse of untouchability is deeply ingrained in Hinduism.

Changing Caste Politics

The caste background of the members elected to the Lok Sabha in the last four decades reveals the changing political scenario of India. For instance, in the 1st General Elections in 1952, there were 15 Brahmins out of the 48 members of Parliament elected from Maharashtra. In the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

The Dark Sides of Indian Politics as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*

11th Lok Sabha in 1996, there were no Brahmins among the 48 elected from Maharashtra. Mistry who wrote the novel is well aware of this political change in India. He aptly shows that the callous behavior of the upper caste Landlords like Thakur Dharamsi, led to other backward castes getting united and asserting their political and social rights. The rise of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1979 won in the U.P. Assembly seats and formed the Government along with BJP in India's most populous state is an indication of the rise of the Dalits. The social tensions in the villages, the changing aspirations of the lower castes and caste based violence, is so well delineated, so well woven into the flow of the narrative that it makes Rohinton Mistry a very astute political novelist.

Begging as a Profession

India is a country of a huge population and surely a country of hunger and beggars. Beggarmaster is the leader of the beggar association. Om and Ishvar are also members of this community and beggars ask for membership. This “underworld insurance agency is efficient and effective, certainly more so than the garrulous lawyer Dina finds in court”. It is a matter of surprise, how the begging community is also used by the government. There is lathi charge at the beggar, Shankar's funeral due to faulty intelligence, through the mistaking of beggars for political activists.

Powerful Narration of Indian Society in Three Different Backgrounds

In *A Fine Balance* Mistry narrated and re-narrated several stories of India's history, culture and caste based society and has set this novel in three different backgrounds. While Dina Dalal lives in the City by Sea, the tailors, Ishvar and Om, represent rural India and Maneck Kohlah is from north India. The narratives go on shifting from rural life to city life in case of Ishvar, Om and that of Maneck Kohlah. Real India pulsates in all the narratives in *A Fine Balance*. The “truth” of India, asserts Vinita D. Bhatnagar, is “incomplete” like the multi-layered and multifarious truth about fiction.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

The Dark Sides of Indian Politics as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*

Comparing India with Canada

A Fine Balance and *Such A Long Journey* represent the microcosm of life in general and political disturbances in particular, which Mistry experienced when he was in India. As a creative writer, his expatriate experiences lead him to compare India and Canada. Being a multi-cultural person, he finds something very peculiar about his native land, when it is compared with a multi-cultural nation like Canada. Rohinton starts his long journey by keeping a fine balance between hope and despair, good and evil to revive the ethnic identity of his marginalized community.

Works Cited

Charu Chandra Misra, "Modes of Resistance in Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey*". In Novy Kapadia, Jaydipsinh Dodiya, R.K. Dhawan (Eds), *Parsi Fiction*. (New Delhi: Prestige, 2001), pp.160.

Jaydipsinh Dodiya, *Parsi English Novel*. (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2006), pp 42-63.

Kumar, Gajendra, "Rohinton Mistry's 'A Fine Balance'- A Slice of Middle Class Life". New Delhi: Swarup and Sons, 2001.

Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Twice-Born Fiction* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heimann, 1972), pp 132-33.

Mistry, Rohinton, '*Such A Long Journey*'. New Delhi; Rupa & Co., 1991.

Mistry, Rohinton. '*A Fine Balance*'. New Delhi; Rupa, 1996.

Purvi N. Upadhyay, "The Journey as Motif and Metaphor in *Such A Long Journey*", In Novy Kapadia, Jaydipsinh Dodiya, R.K. Dhawan (Eds), *Parsi Fiction*. (New Delhi : Prestige, 2001), pp.173.

Ragini Ramchandra, "Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey*: Some First Impressions", *The Literary Criterion*, Vol. XXIX, No. 4, 1994, p.26.

Tarun Tejpal, "Fiction Finer than Facts", *India Today*, March 15, 1991, p.140.

Twinkle B. Manavar, "Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey* :A Thematic Study" , In Novy Kapadia, Jaydipsinh Dodiya, R.K. Dhawan (Eds), *Parsi Fiction*. (New Delhi : Prestige, 2001), pp.168.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:7 July 2013

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

The Dark Sides of Indian Politics as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*

Vinita P. Bhatnagar, "A Reading of A Fine Balance," *The Fiction of Rohinton Mistry*' Critical Studies.

V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar, *Parsee Novel*. (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2002), pp 76-86.

=====

Papiya Bhattacharjee, M.A. (English), UGC-NET

rabinbdn@gmail.com