



Cultural Nuances and Parsi Life in Mistry's novel *Such A Long Journey* (1991)

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Introduction

Mistry won the Commonwealth Literary Prize and the Governor General's Award in Canada for his debut book, *Such A Long Journey* (1991). Both the Booker Prize and the Trillium Prize have it on their short lists. Sturla Gunnarsson adapted the book into a movie, which he published in March 1988. The background of the narrative is the Indo-China and Indo-Pak Wars and the creation of Bangladesh. An upper middle class Parsi family in Mumbai is the focus of the narrative. The main character, middle-class man Gustad Nobel, works in a bank in this pitiful tale.

Keywords: Indo-Pak War, post-colonial, Parsi existence, the Wall, Identity Crises

In this novel, Parsis are more at ease with Indian lifestyles and the Indo-Pakistan War which led to the formation of Bangladesh, facilitated high-level economic and political interactions between the two nations. Nilufer Bharucha aptly remarks: "the plot is based on real-life Rs. 60 lakhs scam which had rocked the Indira Gandhi government in 1971".¹

Sohrab Nagarwala, the Parsi cashier at the State Bank of India who claimed to have withdrawn that considerable quantity of money on the basis of a telephone instruction from the Prime Minister herself, was at the centre of this incident. Around this episode, Mistry has developed his narrative. His fictional characters, the Noble Family exhibit various Parsi characteristics but are generally quite content in their post-colonial Indian existence. However,



they are drawn into the financial and political turmoil surrounding the disappearance of this enormous sum of money from the government-owned bank through their friend, Dinshawji.

Mistry's Noble, a middle-class clerk, is troubled by his father's bankruptcy, which destroyed his dreams for higher education. Through flashbacks, we study about his struggles with his son Sohrab, who chooses the arts over a degree from the University of Technology, highlighting the father's disappointment in his son's future and the impact his father's unfortunate fate has had on his life.

Noble's peace is disrupted by Major Bilimoria's request for a favor involving risky financial transactions, which are linked to Indira Gandhi's hidden plan to fund paramilitaries in Bangladesh while deceitfully misusing money for her family, as revealed later in the story.

Such A Long Journey by Rohinton Mistry is a clear and compassionate reflection of all the shards of Parsi existence. Mistry, a Bombay Parsi who has been in Canada since 1975, is an expert in his field. His short story collection consisted of several snapshots of life in a Baag. In a way, Gustad Noble's life, the main character in *Such A Long Journey*, is depicted in an extended retelling of incidences that have been skillfully connected. He never avoided life's difficulties and wasn't in the least uncomfortable by his experiences. As in an epic or heroic tragedy, everything that happens in book seems to be predetermined to oppose human activity.

Gustad works for a bank and is the father of three children: a girl, Roshan, nine years old, and two boys, Sohrab, nineteen and Darius, fifteen. The people who live in the Khodadad building constitute a cross-section of middle-class Parsis who portray all the angles of their shrinking group.

This book features characters like Dinshawji, Gustad's bank employee, Malcolm Saldhana, Dr. Paymaster, and Peerbhoy Paanwala, who entertain passersby with their puns and comic masks, introduce Gustad to Western music and the miracles of the Church of Mount Mary, Dr. Paymaster struggles to remove his predecessor's nameplate and Peerbhoy Paanwala.

Mistry opens the story with Gustad's usual morning. The milkman, known to Bombay wallahs as the Bhaiya, is busy in distributing milk to the women in line who are waiting for this watery good because it is his custom to make impure it with water as he prays to God in other



flats in the building. The everyday worry over the restricted water supply replaces the customary quarrel over this vice with Bhaiya as Mistry brings up yet another enduring Bombay issue—poor water supplies and a constantly expanding population.

The Khodadad building's surrounding wall, a key motif that continues throughout the novel, is also presented in the opening chapter. To enlarge the road, the Bombay Municipal Council plans to demolish it. Also, it is in danger from bystanders who use it as an outdoor urinal. The wall both admit and rejects, both reductive and protective. The community of Parsis is protected from the encroaching Indian World by it. That also makes this planet isolationist.

One significant character, Lame Tehmul, Tehmul Langra is portrayed by Mistry in the narrative. The physical flaws of the body that manifest throughout the care of Tehmul are quite fascinating. The weak, threatened Parsi race itself may be symbolized by this mentally and physically challenged man. He was a resident of the Khodadad apartment to suffer a hip fracture.

Tehmul was never the same. The majority of people, especially ladies, did not like him since he was always itching like a demon, primarily in his crotch and armpits. Tehmul had a more evil side as well. He was the building's unofficial rat-catcher and the majority of residents hired him to get rid of the rats as they had trapped in their apartments. So, the book portrays Parsi culture in Mumbai. Yet it's not a story of a regular man and his family. The author is more interested in recounting some of the significant moments in India's post-independence history.

The most overt, elaborate and extensive aspect of the story in *Such A Long Journey* is the conflict between India and Pakistan in 1971 over the creation of Bangladesh. When Major Billimoria again writes to Gustad, this time instructing him to go to a specific stall in Chor Bazar (the old thieves' market in Bombay), which would have displayed the Complete Works of Shakespeare, and collect the parcel the stall owner would give him, the war has an impact on Gustad's family when his young daughter, Roshan donates a rupee to a raffle.

The taxi driver who intervened in Gustad's accident was Ghulam Mohammed, the owner of the stall. He disguises as an undercover agent, working with Major Billimoria and a member of RAW, the Research and Analyzing Wing of the Indian Secret Service. He is now required to take the note home and follow the instructions.



The address Ghulam Mohammed provides Gustad is in a red-light district, where Gustad's family doctor, Dr. Paymaster maintains a practice. This mention of the doctor connects the story to the disease that is currently afflicting his daughter Roshan. Diarrhea is the relatively innocent beginning, but it quickly gets serious. Further packages from Major Billimoria arrive at the same time the sickness does, and he asks his buddy to hold them for him. The first is a book by Shakespeare, while the second is a work by Plato. A significant amount of cash in the form of brown paper-wrapped notes was also included in the second package.

A letter from Billimoria reassures Gustad that this is official government money and instructs him to create an account in his bank and deposit it there in the name of Mira Obili (a Billimoria anagram discovered by Sohrab), with either his home address or his Delhi post office number as the address.

Gustad and Dilnavaz conclude that when he decided to help Billimoria, he did not know how much risk he had to face or how much money he had to pay. Gustad could not have invested that much money in his own or someone else's account as it would have been too risky.

Billimoria contact in Bombay. Ghulam Mohammed tells Gustad that the Major has been used as a scapegoat, as he had expected by those at the top to mask their wrong doings. Jimmy's life is now in danger as a result. Gustad is instructed to remove every penny from the fictitious account since it needs to be repaid. Gustad is instructed to take out the entire amount two bundles at a time. Jimmy and Ghulam will both be in danger if the money is not returned by the due day. Gustad agrees only half-willingly to oblige.

So, they resolve to hide the funds in any account, including their own. So, they resolve to keep the money hidden within the home till that moment comes. Gustad and Dinshawji try to be normally interested while their coworkers discuss the scandalous event in the canteen over lunch. In addition to thanking Gustad for returning the money, Ghulam warns him that Jimmy's life is in great danger since those in power are determined to get him. So, he asks Gustad to meet up Major at the New Delhi Jail. Once more half unwillingly, Gustad consents to fulfill.

Gustad's interaction with Billimoria sheds light on Mrs. Gandhi's shocking involvement in high-level corruption inside the Indian government and the way she misused the person like



Billimoria for her own political purposes. Gustad returns to Bombay when the conflict with Pakistan eventually breaks out as he is departing from his worried friend. In this regard, we want to be reminded of two crucial aspects. In the beginning, India was getting ready for a potential attack from Pakistan. Gustad then encounters a street artist who is painting images of gods and saints as he makes his way to his bank. In a society when corruption and its odor were everywhere, there was the artist whose portraits briefly stopped time and forced people to bow down to them. As Roshan becomes seriously ill, Gustad hires a street artist to paint religious pictures on the building wall to prevent people from using it as an outdoor urinal. In response to rising fanaticism and violence, a wall of all religious people is created, reinforcing Bombay's reputation for tolerance. The second issue concerns the performance of Parsi rituals following Dinshawji and Billimoria's passing. After the former passes away, the Parsis' distinctive death rituals come into play: the corpse is sent to the Towers of Death, where vultures and other scavengers consume it. In his role as the last witness, Mistry devotes many pages to these dying ceremonies. In 1971, India and Pakistan end their conflict. During this triumph joy, Gustad notices a short newspaper article on Billimoria's death in Delhi. He tears off the page and folds it small to put it in his pocket. Gustad determines to attend the burial to find out who planned it when Billimoria's body is mysteriously taken to Mumbai for a funeral at the Towers of Silence. He is unsuccessful in his mission, but Mistry uses the occasion of his second funeral to write with sharp humour about the scavengers that eat Parsi corpses and the conflict in the neighborhood between what he terms the vulturists and the opposing group that objects to such funeral disposition practices.

In addition to these issues, Mistry also touches on a topic like superstition which is common in all ethnic and racial groups. In *Such A Long Journey*, Mistry introduces us to Miss. Kutpitia. She is the omnipresent witch from fairy tales brought to life. Because she is a spinster and a little mad. She is entitled to write about her spells and witchcraft. Dilnavaz, the contented mother and happily married lady is criticized for having fallen for the charms of the spinster. While Dilnavaz is not busy preparing meals or filling water, she is seen working with Miss. Kutpitia to make spells for the welfare of her family. A lizard's tail is used in a spell that aims to make Sohrab less disturbing.



Gustad, the logical man never participates in such issues as he was preoccupied with vital issues of a national level. The area around Dilnavaz's house is the extent of her world. Mistry doesn't delve too deeply into the contracting lives of Dilnavaz and Miss Kutpitia. Kutpitia's determined and apparently out-of-control conduct may have also been a result of her repressed sexuality.

Gustad's friend Malcolm, acting in his official position as an employee of the Municipal Corporation has the hilarious chore of knocking down Gustad's Wall of All Religions to enlarge the road outside. Malcolm doesn't recognize the name of the structure instantly as belonging to the one where Gustad resides.

Malcolm arrives at the Khodadad building where Gustad lived. He learns about the destruction of the Wall of All Religions. A procession opposing the Municipal Corporation's tyrannical actions, known as the morcha, approaches the street. The morcha temporarily stops to honor the gods but learns the wall will soon be destroyed for more traffic. Their mood turns foul and they moan causing a storm and a storm threatening. Gustad returns to ask Malcolm for help but he realizes the morcha is made up of old associates including Dr. Paymaster, the Paanwallah, who sells aphrodisiac paans and even prostitutes. The storm threatens as Gustad realizes the situation.

The ranges of connections within the family and community have been defined by cordialness in the changing situation and they have remained mostly intact. Nonetheless, the youthful Parsi generation rebels against the ideas of racial purity held by the older generations with their idealistic and occasionally rationalist. In addition to that the younger generation of Parsis is more skeptical than their older counterparts when it comes to challenging the legitimacy of the actions of different political parties. They also speak out strongly against the malicious corruption and wrongdoing that are pervasive in society which is still beyond the understanding of the older generation in *Such A Long Journey*. As K. V. George remarks: "The geographical distance of the writer from his/her community also plays its role in sharpening the community consciousness. It is true regarding of Mistry based in Toronto(101)" .²

Conclusion



Gustad's fate is comparable to the fate of a country in several ways. Like Gustad, who experienced war and its aftermath, India is traumatized and walks uneasily. On a different level, many individuals illustrate the author's compassion for his town. The voyage of the Parsis who travelled all the way from Persia to India in the seventh century A.D. is described in the book. Gustad takes great pride in his ancestry. Several Parsi personalities highlight the distinctive characteristics of his community.

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