

Moral Concerns in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

- Sandeep Kr. Sheoran

Abstract: Abstract: With *Such a Long Journey*, Rohinton Mistry has focused on the hopes and aspiration, anxieties and frustrations, strengths and weaknesses, customs and beliefs of the people of Parsi community. Mistry has set his first novel *Such a Long Journey*, in Bombay, a city of great past. He reviews the decades of 1960's and 1970's and marks the slow erosion of idealism in the Nehruvian dream of a secular India. This novel is set against the backdrop of Indo-Pak war of 1971 and delves into the human predicament meted out to the central character, Gustad Nobel, ruining all his hopes by circumstances. He, as a typical Parsi, is quite charitable, benevolent and imbibes the good words and deeds of Zoroastrian values. As the novel progresses, it becomes quite clear that it is not only a saga of a Parsi family, but it also serves as a metaphor for the national and international scenario.

Keywords: Moral issues, Parsi Literature, Zoroastrian, human predicament.

In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry's view of fiction has a close resemblance with Conrad's idea that the object of art is "purely spectacular: a spectacle for awe, love, adoration, or hate, if you like, but in this view – and in this view alone – never for despair! Those vision, delicious or poignant, are a moral end in themselves" (qtd. in Berthoud 08). The novelist highlights many moral dilemmas in this novel and his central moral concern is deeply rooted in history and sociology. Infact, the political undercurrents of post-colonial India have triggered his imagination. As far as *Such a Long Journey* is concerned, Mistry tries to answer the query "How to live?" Mistry seems to suggest that modern life and uncertainty have become synonymous. An epigraph from Eliot's poem also highlights this feeling:

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For Journey, and such a long journey.

This epigraph suggests that this suffering is essential if one tries to attain higher and nobler values of life. Another epigraph from Tagor's *Gitanjali*, sums up the way in which the Parsis have moved from one place to another and how they have adapted themselves to the new realities. The epigraph says, "And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed with its wonders". The epigraph suggests that life is ever changing and along with it changes man's language and the scenario of his surroundings. The impact of Tagore's imagination is clearly visible on the writings of Mistry. In *Such a Long Journey*, many situation and characters are multi-layered or enigmatic and there always appears to be gap between events and the power of language to describe them. Gustad's

initial desire to hold the outside world at a safe distance by trying “to construct a cocoon of security against the disruption and turbulence of the outside world” (Myers 162) is symbolised by the blackout paper over his windows. The distance between the Parsis and non-Parsis is symbolised by the wall surrounding the Khodadad enclave. This symbol shows the distance between activity and withdrawal. This theme is traceable to the Zoroastrian tenet that the true devotee should be actively engaged in the fight against evil. Radhakrishnan has a point when he says:

The dualism is within one's own nature. The evil forces are within man and not outside... The Zarathustra overcame the Evil one means that he did not succumb to these forces. His conduct demonstrates that man's own self determines his destiny (Radhakrishnan 112).

Such a Long Journey is human being's battle to confront and overcome the urge to withdraw culminates in his spiritual growth and moral triumph. It is only because of this way that the evil can be defeated and good advanced. Peter Morey rightly opines:

As always in this novel about contending evils of various kinds, Mistry gives the Zoroastrian ethical imperative a political dimension. Many paths to truth are charted, some of them spiritual or supernatural and some of them mundane and material. Yet the important thing is never to be merely passive, always to go on with the journey (Morey 177).

The novel opens with the dawn of a typical day when Gustad offers “his orisons to Ahur Mazda” and listens to the chirping of sparrows “while reciting his *Kusti* prayers” (*Such a Long Journey* 01). Gustad is a God-fearing affable man and always glorifies the past by indulging in dreams, reveries and reminiscences. The new day brings the good news of his son, Sohrab's selection for admission at the prestigious IIT. It can be a dream-come-true situation for any middle-class parents. Gustad expresses his feelings to his wife Dilnavaz; “Sohrab will make a name for himself. . . . At last our sacrifices will prove worthwhile” (03). Now, Gustad recalls how nine years back he had met with an accident in his struggle to save Sohrab's life and was left with limp. That was also the year, 1962, in which the Indo-China war had broken out and the unprepared Indian army had met with a “humiliating defeat” (09). This is the first time in the novel when the personal and political elements are interwoven. In the beginning of the novel, Mistry says Gustad had put the blackout paper on the glass pane of the paper even after a period of nine years. This paper restricts, “the ingress of all forms of light, earthly and celestial” and despite Gustad's regular dawn prayers, his wife remarks, “In this house, the morning never seems to come” (11). Thus, the blackout answers historical events that Gustad reads everyday in national newspapers. During the novel Gustad increasingly retreats into dreams of the past and soon stops taking newspapers altogether. K.R.S Mani regularly observes that *Such a Long Journey* is concerned with “memory of loss and betrayal” (45). The extremely kind nature of Gustad's father towards his younger brother made him very alone and resulted in his mother's untimely death. It was ignominy for husband not to be able to afford even for “four days of prayer at the Tower of silence” (102). Gustad sees his former self in his son Sohrab, and desires compensation for his own earlier losses and disillusionments. His son's success in IIT examination offers hope in an

The dream of IIT took shape, then took hold of their imagination. And 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. And all things would be given and all things would be possible and all things would come to pass for he who journeyed there and emerged with the sacred chalice (66-67).

Gustad celebrates the happy news of his son's birthday on the ninth birthday of his daughter Roshan. He is so pleased and comments, "You would think he has been handling chickens all his life. Look at the expert way he holds it. I'm telling you, our son will do wonderfully at IIT, he will be the best engineer ever to graduate from there" (27). Hearing it, Sohrab retaliates, "How does a chicken have anything to do with engineering?... Ever since the exam result came, you are driving me crazy with your talk of IIT" (27). When everyone toasts to his future in the prestigious college:

I'm sick and tired of IIT, IIT, IIT all the time. I'm not interested in it, I'm not a jolly good fellow about it, and "I'm not going there... Fool yourself, if you want to. I'm not going to IIT. IIT does not interest me. It was never my idea, you made all the plans. I told you I am going to change to the arts programme; I like my college and my friends here (48).

Over this Gustad replies: "If you have good reason I will listen. But don't say friends!" for Gustad has himself experienced that friendship is "worthless and meaningless" (49). Through this incident Mistry highlights the gulf between the old generation and new generation. Though Dilnavaz tries to fill this gulf but the behaviour of Sohrab is enough to shatter the dream of a middle class father. He bursts out in emotions:

What have I not done for him, tell me? I even threw myself in front of a car. Kicked him aside, saved his life, and got this (the limp) to suffer all my life . . . but that's what a father is for. And if he can't show respect at least, I can kick him again. Out of my house, out of my life (52).

Sohrab thinks his father cruel same as Gustad used to think about his father, "One proud man's stubbornness" (101). In the midst of the father-son relationship, who suffers the most is Dilnavaz. Her utmost concern is to see her son reunited to his father and family reunited. In an attempt to make Sohrab amenable to his father's dream she surrenders to the irrational and superstitious counsel of her neighbour Miss Kutpitia, an elderly eccentric spinster in the Khodadad building who preserves in a locked room the belongings of her beloved nephew, Farad and carries on conversations with the shadows in her dusty flat. Miss kutpitia tells Dilnavaz that Sohrab "reminds me so much of my Farad" (62). In order to get her son back the high morals of Dilnavaz go to grounds. The reason of Dilnavaz's faith in Kutpita's evil process is that she has cured Dilnavaz's youngest son Darius from the curse of keeping an aquarium and numerous birds. But very cleverly Mistry adds, "Whether the birds and fish decided to forgive Dirus, or whether Dr. Paymaster's medicine overcome the illness was uncertain" (43). As the novel progresses, Kutpitia's method of exorcising the black spell becomes more intense. The lime circled around Sohrab's head in order to vanish all the evil, should not be thrown into the sea but squeezed to extract its juice that should be

consumed by some person in order "to put the spell out of Sofrab" (109) and the medium which is identified to solve this problem is Tehmul Lungraa, the idiot. The reason behind the choice is that the sacrifice of retarded brain Tehmul is not at all a problem for Dilnavaz. Mistry writes,

... She watched anxiously to see if he was behaving more brainlessly than usual. She both dreaded and wished Tehmul's deterioration: the erosion without which it would be impossible to redeem Sohrab (147).

Later in the novel Dilnavaz doesn't hesitate to cut the nail of Tehmul, burn his hair and making him burn the tail of a lizard to save her children. Analysing this part of the novel, David Williams rightly observes:

Tehmul, it seems has been made a scapegoat by Gustad's wife Dilnavaz, by a mother who is willing to sacrifice one of the "Children of God" for the sake of her own estranged son. For Dilnavaz employs a witch in the person of Kutpitia to cast a spell on Tehmul in hope of purging the evil from Sohrab; coincidentally or not, the idiot dies because his life means less to her than her own child's life (William 288).

Mistry wants to show the selfishness and inhumanity of the society in its worst form. But in the shape of Gustad, Mistry paints a true Zoroastrian who is always guided by religion. Even at the church he doesn't pray for his family but for ailing Dinshawji. The man who has promised his father that over the death of his mother that he will not shed even a single tear not even in the worst sufferings, gets broken at the sight of Tehmul's tragic end:

His voice was soft and steady, and his hand steady and light upon Tehmul's head, as the tears ran down his cheeks. He started another cycle, and yet another, and he could not stop tears... the salt water of his eyes, as much for himself as for Tehmul. As much for Tehmul as for Jimmy. And for Dinshawji, for Pappa and Mamma, for Grandpa and Grandma, all who had had to wait for so long... (Mistry 337).

Thus, Mistry shows that Gustad is a winner in the test of his strength of mind and moral growth. He is the only one who sees Tehmul as "A child's mind and a man's urges". Through Gustad and Tehmul relation we come to conclude that each human being has his own share of goodness and that humanity should be honored. Mistry's moralism is deeply rooted in human-bounding and human relations. Explaining his view on writing novels based on his own experience, V.S. Naipaul writes that for every kind of experience there is a proper form. He opines:

Fiction works best in a confined moral and cultural area, where the rulers are generally known and in that area, it deals best with things – emotions, impulses, moral anxieties – that would be unseizable or incomplete in other literary forms (Naipaul 24).

This is the unique quality of Mistry to blend the prevalent political conditions in to personal emotions and impulses. He is actually aware of the importance of morality in shaping the socio-cultural and political history of the time. Peter Morey has aptly remarked that for Mistry "morality is political and politics is morality" (Morey 151). In this novel, he has clearly describes the description of "humiliating defeat" (Mistry 09) of India at the hands of Chinese because of "the treacherous nature of the yellow race" (09). The treachery of China froze Nehru's heart:

The country's beloved Panditji, everyone's Chacha Nehru, the unflinching humanist, the great visionary, turned bitter and rancorous. From now on, he would break no criticism, take no advice. With his appetite for philosophy and dreams lost forever, he resigned himself to political intrigues and internal squabbles ... (11).

In addition to this, Mistry has highlighted the disgust of Parsi community for Nehru. Nehru is further accused for his monomaniacal fixation to see his darling daughter as his successor. He further raises question on Nehru's intention for "sending brave Indian Jawans, with outdated weapons and summer clothing, to die out in Himalayas at Chinese hands" (10). Through the mouth of Dinshawji, Mistry indicts India and her politics. The nationalism of banks by Indira comes under scathing attack, "Parsis were the Kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalised the banks" (38). Thus, Mistry has highlights the trauma in the relations not only on political and grand level but also on personal and emotional level. He is deeply disturbed with the behavior of Billimoria, a RAW agent who was once his dearest friend. He is trapped by one who is like a brother to him. He tells Dilnavaz, "I don't understand this world anymore. First, your son destroys our hopes. Now, this rascal. Like a brother I looked upon him. What a world of wickedness it has become" (142). The writer also hints towards the notorious Nagarwala case that has rocked the country. Mistry uses this incident to bring together the corruption among the politics elite reach out menacingly into the private world of ordinary citizens. Jhon Ball's comments about *A Fine Balance* seem quite true even for this novel:

What galvanizes this novel is the way the intersection of the politics and the personal is given such moral resonance and the political positions are inevitably moral ones, and engagement with the political dimension of life may lead to a strengthening and clarifying or to a weakening and corrupting of moral view (Ball 87).

The novel reveals Mistry's deep concern not only for Parsis in India but also for the development of postcolonial India in general. He has tried to restore the honor of Parsi community through a realistic portrayal of their condition in India. Major Billimoria is no other than Mr. Nagarwala as he was also accused the way Mr. Nagarwala was accused. Though the entire world thinks him guilty, yet Billimoria feels relaxed that his friend Gustad has learnt the truth:

She (Indira Gandhi) said, I arranged for money... because Mukti Bahini must be helped... Having second thought. She said, I have enemies everywhere. If they find out about this money, they will use the information against me... our country will suffer if Government destabilized. ...that you imitated my voice ...because you wanted to continue helping Mukti Bahini ... What can I say, Gustad? Even to this ...I agreed ... I wrote my confession... Like an idiot my respect for her. Such a strong woman (Mistry 277).

Mistry has tried to communicate the goings-on in the corridor of power. In this world evil is rife. The so-called authorities have fallen very low. Billimoria further adds, "Everything in their control... courts in their pockets... It is beyond in common man's imagination" (280). The last

public ac in the novel is the demolition of the wall as a part of a superfluous road-widening scheme coinciding with an ineffectual demonstration against municipal corruption. Upon the destruction of the wall, the pavement artist is undeterred and asserts, "In a world where roadside latrines becomes temples and shrines, and temple and shrines become dust and ruin" (338). Gustad returns to his flat after the artist's departure and is now prepared to start a new life, "He stood upon the chair and pulled at the paper covering the ventilators. As the first sheet tore away, a frightened moth flew out and circled the room" (339).

Thus, with such a long Journey Mistry provides a utopian world and artistically brings out the realities of life. This novel becomes a telling comment on the socio-political life and morality and suggests that one can't wish that a miracle would solve all the problems. It is a story of a man's education that doesn't have control over destiny but with the harsh learning of life he realises the real meaning of oneself. The novel reveals the stark realism and positive commitment to justice and humanitarian concern. The following lines by Pandurang reveal the whole crux of the novel:

A certain inward journey traveled by Gustad Nobel towards an awareness of a distance that will ultimately have to be covered – that long journey of life – to be endured with stoic resilience. In the end of the book is the beginning of the real journey, of a consciousness that the search is without end and entails countless such journeys" (Pandurang 163).

References :

- Ball, Jhon Clement. (1996) "Taking the Measure of India's Emergency". *Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad* 14.2 83-87. Print.
- Berthoud, Jacques. (1978). *Joseph Conrad: The Major Phase*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P., Print.
- Eliot, T.S. (1961). *Selected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Mishra, Ramesh K. (1998). "Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* – A Critique." *Recent Indian English Literature: A Study since Independence*. Ed. S.D Sharma. Karnal: Natraj., 183-198. Print.
- Mistry, Rohinton. (2002). *Such a Long Journey*. Noida: Penguin in assn. with Faber & Faber.
- Morey, Peter. (2004). *Rohinton Mistry: Contemporary World Writers*. Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Myers, David. "Menace to the Cocoon of Petit Bourgeois Security: *Such a Long Journey* as Domestic Melodrama, Tragic Farce and Religious Parable." *Halder*. 10.3. (1994) 162-174. Print.
- Naipaul, V.S. (2004). *Literary Occasions*. London: Picador.
- Pandurang, Mala. "Gustad Nobel: "Parentheses around his entire life, The Sentinels of his Sanity" in *Such a Long Journey*." *Rohinton Mistry : An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Eds. Anjali Gera Roy and Meena T. Pillai. N. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2007. 154-165. Print.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (1967). *Recovery of Faith*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks., Print.
- Williams, David. (1995). "What's in a Name?: The Changing Boundaries of Identity in *Such a Long Journey* and *The Puppeteer*." *Postmodernism and Feminism*. Ed. Shiin Kudchedkar. Delhi: Pencraft., 212-232.

