Urban Disillusionment And Political Betrayal In Rohinton Mistry's Such A Long Journey

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's Such a Long Journey (1991) is a seminal work in Indian English literature, narrating the plight of the middle-class Parsi protagonist Gustad Noble amidst the socio-political turbulence of 1970s Bombay. The novel is a rich interplay of private loss and public betrayal, examining how personal lives are deeply impacted by the larger forces of history and politics. This paper investigates how Mistry portrays the decay of urban life, the erosion of moral and political ideals, and the spiritual crisis faced by the individual. It also situates the novel within the broader framework of postcolonial literature, exploring its thematic complexity, historical consciousness, and literary craftsmanship. Through a close reading of the text and engagement with secondary scholarship, the paper offers a comprehensive understanding of Such a Long Journey as both a historical document and a humanist narrative.

I. Introduction: Mistry and the Postcolonial Imagination

Rohinton Mistry, a Canadian author of Indian origin, is widely celebrated for his poignant portrayals of Parsi life in post-independence India. His debut novel, Such a Long Journey, offers a meticulous depiction of Bombay in the early 1970s, a period marked by political unrest, civic decay, and moral ambiguity. Mistry's fiction is deeply humanistic, often concerned with how larger socio-political structures affect ordinary people. In this context, Such a Long Journey functions as both a historical chronicle and a narrative of existential struggle.

Mistry's writing is often associated with realism, but his realism is not merely mimetic; it is charged with emotional depth, narrative irony, and subtle critique. According to Peter Morey, "Mistry's realism goes beyond description; it operates as a moral framework through which the postcolonial subject confronts disillusionment" (Morey 89). This dual function of realism—as a narrative strategy and an ethical stance—defines much of Mistry's oeuvre.

II. Bombay as a Character of Urban Disillusionment

Bombay in Such a Long Journey is more than a setting—it is an organism in crisis. The city's dilapidated infrastructure, uncollected garbage, and unreliable water supply form a backdrop of urban decay that reflects the inner turmoil of its residents. The Khodadad Building, where Gustad Noble lives, is described in a state of disrepair. What was once a respectable residential building for the middle class has now become "blackened by exhaust and grime, as though every year the city had painted it with another coat of soot". This description sets the tone for the rest of the novel, where the environment reflects emotional and moral corrosion.

The urban environment directly affects the psyche of the characters. Gustad's daily walk past beggars, foul-smelling gutters, and crippled children becomes a metaphor for his journey through disillusionment and moral ambiguity. As Elleke Boehmer notes, "In postcolonial cities, space is inscribed with anxiety, and the body of the city becomes a site of contestation" (Boehmer 119).

Mistry's Bombay is not a passive setting; it is an intrusive, almost sentient force that interacts with the characters. From the very beginning, the novel introduces the city not as an abstract location but as an oppressive presence. The physical decline of the building is mirrored in the psychological state of its residents. Gustad, once an optimistic and loyal citizen, becomes increasingly embittered and alienated as the city he once loved begins to betray his values. The deteriorating urban landscape is not only symbolic of failed governance but also indicative of the shrinking spaces—both literal and metaphorical—available to individuals like Gustad who attempt to live by principles. The claustrophobia of Khodadad Building's limited physical space mirrors Gustad's sense of entrapment within his socio-political reality, a recurring motif that resonates through the novel.

Mistry's depiction of public infrastructure further accentuates the city's degeneration. The streets are chaotic and violent, the hospitals are poorly managed, and the sewer systems are broken—evident in the vivid imagery of open drains and stinking gutters. Gustad's daily walk to work through congested streets filled with beggars, stray animals, and traffic becomes an ordeal, representing the city's growing hostility toward its own people. The chaos of Bombay is contrasted with Gustad's nostalgic memories of a cleaner, more orderly city.

This collapse of civic order is not merely the result of population growth or economic mismanagement—it represents a deeper moral decline. The once idealized Nehruvian vision of a secular, modern India lies in tatters, and the decaying urban infrastructure becomes its physical manifestation. The inability of institutions to protect and serve citizens fuels alienation, resentment, and disillusionment. Mistry uses everyday frustrations—lack of public hygiene, rising costs of living, and civic indifference—to show how small systemic failures culminate in a larger narrative of national decay.

The sensory overload of Bombay—its unbearable noise, pungent smells, and overcrowding—has a profound psychological impact on the characters. Gustad suffers from headaches, digestive troubles, and insomnia, which can be read as psychosomatic responses to the city's constant pressure. The public space offers no reprieve; instead, it becomes a theater of surveillance, noise, and fear.

Mistry frequently draws attention to the ever-present din of traffic, construction, and shouting, using auditory imagery to underscore the characters' loss of peace and privacy. When Gustad attempts to find solace in prayer or in tending to his garden, the surrounding environment intrudes, making spiritual or emotional recovery nearly impossible. This tension between inner and outer space is central to the novel's exploration of urban disillusionment. The inescapable assault on the senses also stands as a metaphor for the inescapability of political oppression and social disintegration.

III. The Parsi Community: Fragile Identity and Cultural Survival

The Parsi community in Such a Long Journey is portrayed with both empathy and critical distance. Historically privileged and deeply Anglicized, the Parsis in Mistry's novel are shown to be grappling with declining numbers and eroding influence. Gustad Noble embodies the contradictions of his community: he is traditional yet rational, religious yet skeptical, proud yet vulnerable.

Religious rituals are central to Gustad's life. His interactions with the prayer room and his recitations from the Avesta provide comfort but also reflect his spiritual uncertainty. This tension is echoed in his wife Dilnavaz, who seeks solace in black magic and superstition, thereby exposing the fissures between reason and belief.

According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Mistry's portrayal of the Parsis is devoid of nostalgia. He does not elevate them to moral exemplars but presents them as microcosms of a fragmented nation" (Mukherjee 142). This nuanced depiction resists the binary of victim/villain and instead focuses on the complexity of identity in a postcolonial context.

IV. The Political Landscape: Betrayal, Surveillance, and Scandal

A central narrative arc in the novel involves Major Jimmy Bilimoria's entanglement in a clandestine government operation. Bilimoria's fall from grace mirrors the corruption of the Indian state. The novel critiques Indira Gandhi's leadership during the Bangladesh Liberation War and references the misuse of the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) to siphon funds for covert operations.

Gustad's involvement in transporting black money under the illusion of patriotic service becomes an allegory for how ordinary citizens are exploited by the political elite. The betrayal he feels upon learning the truth is both personal and national. As Boehmer suggests, "Postcolonial literature often dramatizes the betrayal of nationalist ideals through intimate, individualized experiences" (Boehmer 123).

Mistry's portrayal of political figures, though indirect, is biting. The unnamed "Prime Minister" is described as manipulative and morally compromised, echoing public sentiments about Gandhi's regime. The political becomes personal, as Gustad's values are repeatedly undermined by a state that thrives on secrecy and deception.

V. The Personal Is Political: Gustad Noble's Emotional Crisis

Gustad Noble's emotional world is defined by loss—his estrangement from his son Sohrab, the death of his friend Bilimoria, the illness of his daughter Roshan, and the general disintegration of his surroundings. His journey is not merely physical but deeply psychological.

Sohrab's refusal to join IIT, a dream that Gustad cherishes, is symbolic of generational conflict. It represents the breakdown of patriarchal authority and the failure of aspiration in a corrupt society. Gustad's anger is rooted in fear: fear of irrelevance, of losing control, and of being left behind in a changing world.

Bilimoria's confession from the hospital bed acts as the emotional climax of the novel. His transformation—from a confident army man to a broken, guilt-ridden patient—underscores the toll of political compromise. For Gustad, this revelation is devastating, as it shatters his last illusion of heroism and nobility.

VI. Symbolism and Narrative Devices

Mistry's use of symbolism and narrative layering enhances the novel's thematic richness. Key symbols include:

- **The Wall**: A mutable space that transforms from a private boundary to a public message board. It symbolizes the fluidity of truth and the inevitability of change.
- **The Prayer Room**: Represents both sanctuary and entrapment, faith and fragility.
- **Money**: The envelope of black money represents moral compromise, political corruption, and personal guilt.

Additionally, the use of letters and interspersed dreams allows for introspection and memory. Mistry's structure mirrors Gustad's disoriented mental state, as he attempts to make sense of a collapsing moral universe.

VII. Language, Humor, and Irony

Mistry's prose is understated but powerful. His use of Indian English, Parsi idioms, and street slang creates an authentic narrative voice. Characters like Dinshawji inject humor into the text, often using sexual innuendo and irreverent commentary to critique authority and social pretension.

Irony permeates the novel. Gustad's attempts to preserve order only result in chaos. The man who values honesty becomes an unwitting accomplice to corruption. This irony is not cynical but profoundly tragic, emphasizing the distance between ideals and reality.

As Pramod Nayar observes, "Mistry's irony is not meant to mock but to mourn. It captures the dissonance of living ethically in an unethical world" (Nayar 76).

VIII. Reception, Censorship, and Legacy

Upon publication, Such a Long Journey was met with critical acclaim. It won the **Commonwealth Writers' Prize** and was shortlisted for the **Booker Prize**. However, the novel also faced political backlash. In 2010, it was withdrawn from Mumbai University's syllabus following objections from political groups regarding its portrayal of Indira Gandhi and Marathi politicians.

This act of censorship reveals the enduring power of literature to unsettle authority. Mistry, who later issued a strong protest, defended the freedom of expression and the right to critique historical figures through fiction.

Today, the novel is widely taught in literature and postcolonial studies courses and is considered a cornerstone of modern Indian English fiction.

IX. Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry's Such a Long Journey is a poignant exploration of human dignity under siege. Through the lens of Gustad Noble's life, Mistry examines how history intrudes upon the domestic, how politics disrupts personal ethics, and how urban life grinds down individual resilience. The novel's power lies in its quiet observation, its refusal to sensationalize, and its deep empathy for flawed individuals trying to survive in a broken world.

In an era of rising authoritarianism and public apathy, Such a Long Journey remains a relevant and necessary text. It urges readers to reflect, question, and endure—to undertake their own "long journeys" toward truth, compassion, and justice.

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