

## **Trauma of War in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey***

*Such a Long Journey* is Rohinton Mistry's first novel that earned him fame and acclaim all over the world. This novel, dealing with the trials and tribulations of Gustad Noble, a Parsee and a bank clerk, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, won the Governor General's Award, the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the Best Book and the Smith Books First Novel Award given to Canadian novelists. Rohinton Mistry has the rare distinction of having won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize twice for his second novel *A Fine Balance*. Having won such significant literary laurels for his contribution to fiction, Mistry has strengthened the hold of Indian Writing in English. His novels can be analyzed through various critical angles and perspectives like the portrayal of history, political trends during the Emergency, the caste system and its repercussions, middle class life and its predicaments, and the changing socio-economic, cultural fabric of Bombay. The protagonists and characters that inhabit the world of Mistry's novels cover a microcosm of society. Mistry's keen eye for detail and observation of characters and situations offer a cinematographic glimpse into the Parsee community and the nation as a whole.

Mistry's characters are heroes of contemporary India, and his characters revel in their ordinariness. At times they seem to resemble the 'Common Man' of R.K. Laxman's cartoons - quick in their wit, acerbic in their comments, and heroic in their tragedies. Mistry's fiction moves between the concentric worlds of the family, the neighbourhood, the community and the nation. It is amazing that Mistry, having settled in Canada, would write about the political and historical situation of India with such clarity and cohesion, giving us an insider's view of events.

The history - political interface as developed by Mistry is what challenges the novel *Such a Long Journey* to be distinct in its treatment.

Unlike other Indian literature that were published in the aftermath of Partition, Mistry is concerned with the politics that emerged after Independence. Gustad Noble, a bank clerk going about the humdrum of his life, finds himself pulled into the vortex of emotions and political maneuvering over which he has little control. *Such a Long Journey* is ultimately a novel that describes middle class life in contemporary India. The problem with Gustad is that his happiness is derived from and centered on people who are important to him and who desert him as well. As a result he appears to be quite miserable, although he does give into occasional flights of fancy and happiness. Gustad, in the course of the novel, gives in to aspirations and expectations from two important characters in the novel namely Sohrab, his son and Major Billimoria. Gustad has high expectations from Sohrab to crack the IIT, the mecca of education, and when Sohrab does crack the examination, Gustad is highly elated. He makes a big fuss about it much to the consternation of Sohrab who wants to pursue Arts and is least interested in the IIT.

The other important character in the novel is Major Jimmy Billimoria who is like a friend, philosopher and guide to Gustad, but who suddenly disappears without any indication. Gustad feels cheated but is unable to shake the good moments shared with the Major. Through the character and backdrop of Major Billimoria, Mistry is able to project the political history interface and the trauma of war that haunts the Major and Gustad. *Such a Long Journey* is set against the background of war in the Indian subcontinent and the birth of Bangladesh. The novel reflects how war and political circumstances have deeply affected the routine of the common man's life.

War produces inexplicable situations. Along with bitterly fighting enemies with military prowess, the civilian also suffers the realities of war. The trauma of war can be quite far reaching and disastrous in the long

run. Several psychological studies have discussed the implication of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in soldiers and veterans participating in wars such as the Second World War, the Vietnam War and so on. Major Billimoria is also under extreme duress for having to carry out extremely dangerous and volatile operations that eventually eat up his life. Mistry describes the effect of war on the Noble household: “The room was dark like the others in the flat, with blackout paper taped over the glass panes of the windows and ventilators. Gustad had put it up nine years ago, the year of war with China...” (Mistry 9). Mistry further describes how the Chinese soldiers invaded India in hordes, and the residents of Khodadad building donated various items to the army. Dilnavaz, Gustad’s wife appears to be irritated by the black paper and nags him to remove it. But it comes as a handy relief when three years later Pakistan decides to get a piece of Kashmir and blackout was declared once again. Mistry describes the paraphernalia associated with war in many places in the novel:

The air-raid siren started its keening lament as Gustad got off the bus at Flora Fountain. Like some gigantic bird of mourning in the skies above the city, circling, diving and wheeling, it drowned the traffic noises...For several weeks the threnodic siren had been wailing every morning at exactly ten o’ clock: a full three minute warning, followed by the monotonic all-clear. There had never been any official announcement, so the public assumed that in preparation for war with Pakistan, the government was checking to see if the air-raid sirens were working in order. (Mistry 143)

At a later point in the novel, Mistry describes the infiltration by Pakistani soldiers into India by bombing air fields across India.

The wars discussed in the novel affect the lives of the middle class in the country very seriously. The fate of the family is yoked to that of the community and the country. The war with China was a tough time

for Gustad and the nation. Gustad met with an accident while saving his elder son Sohrab. Nehru's trust in the Chinese was betrayed. The donations given by the common man for the army were mishandled describing rampant corruption.

Mistry touches upon a poignant topic that is of the friendship between Jimmy Billimoria and Gustad Noble. It is a friendship that has witnessed many ups and downs, trials and various recourses. Gustad has a fondness for Major Billimoria and has shared many wonderful moments with him. Major Billimoria too has a great camaraderie with Gustad and his family especially his children. Gustad always gives the example of uprightness exhibited by the Major to his children. Gustad's second son, Darius is especially fond of the Major, and dreams of becoming like him some day. Unfortunately, due to a certain political turn of events and the onset of the Indo- Pak war, Major Billimoria has to leave suddenly to join the RAW much to the disappointment of Gustad. This is how the Major is introduced in the novel: "The last name made Gustad shake his head. That bloody Billimoria. After the shameless way he behaved, he had a nerve, writing now to ask for a favour, as though nothing had happened. He could wait till his dying day for a reply...." (Mistry 6)

Mistry projects Major Billimoria as the representative of war and also presents first hand information about the brutality of war through Jimmy in *Such a Long Journey*. Jimmy was a hero for Gustad's children and a loving brother to Gustad: "...Jimmy Billimoria had been more than just a neighbor. At the very least, he had been like a loving brother. Almost one of family, a second father to the children..." (Mistry 14). The Major would regale the children with stories of the Indo – Pak war of 1948 in which Kashmir was saved and India emerged victorious in this battle. After the manner in which Major Billimoria had to leave Khodadad Building, Dilnavaz reassures Gustad about the motive behind

Major's disappearance: "...But I still believe that without a good reason he would not have left like that. One day we will find out why. He was a good man..." (*Mistry* 14) When Gustad meets with an accident, it was Jimmy who rushed to Gustad's rescue by taking him to Madhiwala Bonesetter:

Then Jimmy picked Gustad up in his arms like a baby and carried him inside. Jimmy was one of the few who was his equal in strength, as they had found out over the years during their bouts of arm-wrestling... What I would have done that day without Jimmy, he wondered. But then, that was the amazing thing about him, he was always there when needed-call it coincidence, call it friendship, that was Jimmy's way. (*Mistry* 60)

The point of contact between Jimmy and Gustad in the novel is largely through letters. In one of the letters, the Major writes about his involvement with the RAW and the rough situation he faces there. He also confirms the kinds of atrocities committed in war as authentic as reported in the newspapers. Later in the novel, it is Ghulam Mohammed, a trusted aide of Jimmy who is in contact with Gustad and the financial transactions that take place between them. Major Billimoria's portrayal in the novel is based on the infamous Nagarwala case, where he allegedly received sixty lakh rupees from a bank manager in Delhi on the strength of a phone call made by then the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Nagarwala was found dead after a few months and nobody had any idea about where the money went. Later in the novel, a newspaper article carries information about Major Billimoria helping the Mukti Bahini liberation movement in Bangladesh. This news upsets Gustad very much and reinstates his anger and hatred towards him. Gustad shares all this information about the Major and the transactions with Dinshawji who is Gustad's colleague at the bank. Dinshawji is also quite vociferous about the political turmoil in India and feels very strongly about the Major.

Major Billimoria gets an opportunity to make amends with Gustad when he implores Gustad to visit him in Delhi. After some misgivings, Gustad departs for Delhi and is shocked to see Jimmy's pathetic condition. Gustad breaks down at the horrible sight of the Major, and Mistry describes this scene poignantly.

On the bed lay nothing more than a shadow. The shadow of the powerfully-built army man who once lived in Khodadad Building, His hairline had receded, and sunken cheeks made the bones jut sharp and grotesque. The regal handlebar moustache was no more. His eyes had disappeared inside their sockets... All this in a year and a half? (*Mistry* 267)

The Major is seriously ill and talks incoherently at times but explains everything about the use of RAW for the private purposes of the Prime Minister. The Major also describes the birth of Bangladesh and the role of the Mukti Bahini in it. Towards the end of *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry continues to interweave the history of Bangladesh with the main story. He describes the occupation of Bangladesh by Pakistan. The name Mukti Bahini was a generic term that comprised a large group and various categories of freedom fighters fighting for Bangladesh. The terror tactics and the strategies adopted by Pakistan over Bengalis in Bangladesh was responsible for the formation of the Mukti Bahini. Volunteers ranging from young and old, husbands separated from their wives, sons from their parents, and young boys joined the Mukti Bahini as new recruits to give an appropriate response to the Pakistani occupation of Bangladesh. India was ready to support the democratic formation of Bangladesh by Mujibur Rehman as many Bengalis and kith and kin of people living in the North East states were living in East Pakistan. The Prime Minister of India welcomed the democratic action of the East Bengalis and offered support towards the struggle of the East Bengalis. Following this, a steady influx of refugees from East Bengal came to India and stated living illegally

on the streets. India was put under enormous strain to provide food, clothing and shelter to these refugees. Since India realized that providing shelter to these refugees could pose a huge socio-political, economic and communal tension, it looked to Pakistan for help. However, the Pakistan government was totally disinclined to reconcile with the leaders of East Bengal and arrive at a closure on this burning issue. The Indian government maintained their stance by providing military and financial assistance to Mukti Bahini to put pressure on Pakistan.

Major Billimoria is sucked into the whirlpool of military politics and war. He is, on the one hand, torn between love for his country, while on the other hand, disgusted with the corruption and political motives of the Indian government. Mistry describes how, in the name of oppression, innocent civilians were targeted by the Pakistan military and brutally massacred. These events leave the Major completely disturbed. He regains some semblance of order when he comes clean about his involvement to Gustad amidst periods of amnesia and slurring of speech due to heavy medications and injections. Major Billimoria is imprisoned for four years. He dies of a heart attack before the period of imprisonment is over. His funeral takes place at the Tower of Silence. As Gustad comes out after the funeral, he is met by Ghulam Mohammed, Major's aide and they share their grief over the Major's death. Gustad is taken aback by Ghulam Mohammed's desire for revenge against the Major's death.

Thus one can conclude that in Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* war is an important motif closely connected to politics, history, the emergence of a new nation and the death of a friend. The wars fought after the independence have disturbed the writer deeply. Events like the 1948 Pak invasion on Kashmir, the Indo-China war of 1962, the Indo-Pak war during 1965 and 1971, and the birth of Bangladesh are weaved into the tapestry of the novel. Like Gustad, who struggles to retain his dignity amidst obstacles, the nation is also waiting to be safe and secure amidst the warring circumstances.

## References

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