



## The Tragic Status of the Parsis in Post-Independence India as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*.

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**Citation:** Dr. Syed Amina Begum (2024). The Tragic Status of the Parsis in Post-Independence India as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*., *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 8162-8165  
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.11270

### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT

In this paper, an attempt is made to discuss the traumatized lives of the Parsis and their struggles to overcome the challenges they face in independent India as revealed in Rohinton Mistry's novel, *Such a Long Journey*. Set in Bombay against the backdrop of the 1971 Indo-Pak war, the novel delves into portraying the fear, anger, frustration, and sense of loss experienced by the minority Parsi community amidst the chaotic socio-political and economic conditions of post-independence India. As an Indian expatriate Parsi writer, he can feel the pain and anger of his community in India and the West, and his works foreground the deep-rooted mental trauma of the Parsis in independent India. Due to their Western lifestyles and exalted positions they enjoyed during the colonial era, they suffer a lot in independent India, unable to adjust to the much-reduced status as a marginalised minority community. Parsis' contributions in developing India and especially Bombay city, are underestimated in independent India, and they are neglected and suppressed by the successive governments. Unable to cope with the current scenarios, many of the Parsis opted for migration to seek greater opportunities. Apart from these external challenges, the community is facing a lot of internal conflicts that affect the community's progress. All these issues and challenges encountered by the Parsi community are realistically explored in the novel.

**Keywords:** Parsis, expatriate, marginalised, trauma, alienation, migration.

In this paper, an attempt is made to discuss the tragic status of Parsis in post-independence India as presented in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*. Rohinton Mistry is a prominent Parsi writer, and his writings foreground the social, political, and economic turmoils of post-independence India by focusing on the fear, anger, anxieties, alienation, and *insecurities experienced by the Parsi community during this era*. Mistry's debut novel, *Such a Long Journey*, was published in 1991, and just like his other works, the novel has provided a vivid and graphic description of middle-class Parsi life in Bombay, detailing the issues and suffering experienced by the Parsi community in the context of India's evolving socio-political structure after independence.

The novel recounts the life, expectations, and struggles of Gustad Noble, a Parsi bank clerk during the troubled period of the 1970s. He lives in Khodabad Building, a Parsi residential complex in Bombay, along with his wife Dilnavaj and his three children: Sohrab, Darius, and Roshan. As a responsible father, he is struggling to set up a bright future for his children. At the beginning of the story, he is seen offering "orisons to Ahura Mazda" (1). The secluded life of the Parsis is clearly revealed. The Khodabad building is surrounded by the compound wall, which sets it apart from other communities. They have least contacts with the members of other communities. However, they are constantly threatened by the changing socio-political conditions of India. Everything worsened during the regime of Indira Gandhi. Besides, the Parsis feel that they are being swallowed by the Hindu raj. The story does a good job of fabricating both the nation's attitude towards the Parsis and their disappointment at being treated like a less-privileged group. Rohinton Mistry emphasises the sad fact of how the Parsis are having to live with their current reduced status, as do other Parsi writers. Vibhuti Wadhawan asserts that:

The nostalgia for the glorious Parsi Past is often voiced. In postcolonial India, the Parsi minority community dejectedly witnessed their prominence ebb and was beset by an outspoken fear, when they saw the Indian society shape itself after apparently secular but actually Hindu paradigms. Overtaken by the majority Hindu population who now acted as a hegemonic group, the Parsi community felt threatened by the rise of the Hindutva and radical extremism of other communities. 2014:63

Nostalgia for the past is a human condition where individuals remember those happy days and often try to reclaim their loss and Mistry's characters have similar tendencies. Sohrab's insensitive nature annoys Gustad and completely shatters. Unable to understand his life, he turns to Dada Ormuzd as a faithful Parsi:

O Dada Ormuzd, what kind of joke is this? In me, when I was young, you put the desire to study, get ahead, be a success. Then you took away my father's money, left me rotting in the bank. And for my son? You let me arrange everything, put it within reach, but you take away his appetite for IIT. What are you telling me? Have I become too deaf to hear you? 55

The conflict between father and son shows the generation gap. According to Narendra Kumar, Mistry in the novel "makes a 'conscious' use of the celebrated Sohrab-Rustom myth. If the confrontation between father and son in the myth ends on a tragic note, Mistry's narrative ends on a note of reconciliation. Gustad views Sohrab's rebellious gesture as a symptom of the loss of respect for tradition and values" (2002: 80).

Further, Mistry consciously depicts the Sohrab Nagarwala Scandal of 1971, which offers him a chance to reveal the vicissitudes of Parsi life in modern India. Along the narrative, "the Parsi world gradually moves out of its self-imposed isolation and interacts at the highest levels of finance and politics with the postcolonial Indian world." (Bharucha 2003: 120). Bilimoria is victimised by the higher authorities after being used by them. Mistry's grasp of the community's abhorrence of the Congress Party for their exploitation of the minority is effectively outlined in the novel by revealing Mrs. Indira Gandhi's hand in the scandal. Mistry explores the well-known rivalry between Nehru and Feroze Gandhi as well as how Nehru exploited Feroze Gandhi for personal enmity. The Parsis were enraged at Nehru's conflict with Feroze Gandhi and his mistreatment of his son-in-law. Dilnavaj voices the community's feeling, "...when her father was still alive, there was poor Feroze Gandhi. Nehru never liked him from the beginning." Dinshawji also comments, "Even today, people say Feroze's heart attack was not really a heart attack" (197).

As an expatriate Parsi, Mistry is conscious of this changing mindset of the educated middle-class Parsi youths. Here in the novel, Gustad Noble wants to send Sohrab to America after completing his degree at IIT. He is not satisfied with his living and often dreams of reclaiming his lost fortune and glory. Parsis' love for success and grandeur is revealed through Gustad's tireless efforts for the education of his children. His daughter Roshan's ill health due to chronic diarrhoea also makes him restless. Unable to afford the medical bills, he sells his camera, and Dilnavaj also sells her two wedding bangles to help relieve the family's financial burdens. Despite his hard work, Gustad cannot manage his family's basic needs. The poverty-stricken middle-class Parsi lives in the Khodabad building represent the frustrated lives of the Bombay Parsis. Mistry uses Kavasji, an old eccentric Parsi, to voice the frustration and agony of the middle-class Parsis, "To the Tatas you give so much! And nothing for me? To the Wadias, you give, you keep on giving! You cannot hear my prayers? The pockets of the Camas you will fill! We others don't need it, You think?" (87).

The marginal existence of the Parsis is always asserted in the novel. Gustad's fear and anxieties when he happened to buy beef from the Crawford Market indicate his minority status. As the dominant Hindu community venerates the cow, he tried to hide from the members of the majority community whenever he brought home beef: "Gustad alone, with his meagre wallet and worn basket lined with newspaper to soak up meat juices that could start dripping in the bus, causing embarrassment or, worse still, angry protests from vegetarian passengers. Throughout the trip, tragic he felt anxious and guilty – felt that in his basket was something deadlier than a bomb"(21). He even quit buying beef to avoid any serious consequences. Although, Parsis could live a secure life during the colonial period, they are living a painful and marginal existence as a minority community in independent India. The insecurities and identity crisis of the Parsis are well recorded in the text. Jameela Begum rightly says, "Gustad's bitterness and cynicism of the political scenario run parallel to the personal losses and suffering of his community. Mistry sees through Gustad's eyes the economic deprivation and personal suffering that his community had to undergo in 1970s" (2007: 149).

The novel also provides a brief overview of the Parsi community's history, from their early days in India to the present. The narrative frequently expresses the Parsis' steadfast conviction in the Zoroastrian religion and their sense of religious superiority. Despite accompanying Malcolm Saldana to church on Sundays, Gustad was unable to be seduced by other religions as for him "All religions were equal, he was taught; nevertheless, one had to remain true to one's own because religions were not like garment styles that could be changed at whim or to follow fashion" (24). During their deep conversation on the uniqueness of their respective religions, Gustad defends his religion: "but our prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred years before your Son of God was even born; a thousand years before the Budha; two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?" (24). The three epigraphs that preface the novel also offer a glimpse of the history of the Parsis in India. The first epigraph, taken from Firdausi's *Shah Nama*, speaks of the glorious and mighty Persian Empire, its subsequent defeat at the hands of Arab invaders, and its present miserable existence. The second epigraph is from, T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" from which the title of the novel is also taken from, speaks of the journey undertaken by the Parsis after the fall of the Persian empire to seek shelter in India and the third epigraph taken from Tagore's *Gitanjali* refers to the confusion and crises of the Parsis in the modern world and the need for the community to adjust and adapt to the mainstream Indian culture. A. K Singh comments: the novel, as a cluster of narratives, centralises his community as a protagonist. There is a constant dialogical interaction between stories about the past and the present of the Parsi community, and Mistry, like his other

counterparts informs the past of his community, comments on its present, and anticipates flow of events to follow through his characters. 1997: 69

Like other Parsi writers, Mistry speaks of his religious identity in his works through the graphical description of certain rites and rituals associated with the Parsi community. Here in this novel, the elaborate description of Gustad's morning prayer and the *Kusti* ritual shows the importance of these rituals on the life a Parsi, "Gustad finished retying the *Kusti* round his waist and noted with satisfaction that the two ends, as usual, were of equal length. He raised and lowered his shoulders to let his *Sudra* settle comfortable around him" (15). Mistry has also described in detail the unique funeral system of the Parsis and conflicting views of the reformist and the traditionalist regarding the efficiency of their age-old practice of disposing the bodies on the Tower of Silence. Gustad's life is governed by the religious tenets of Zoroastrianism and he is indicated as a faithful Parsi. He attends the funeral ceremony of his friend Dinshawji from the beginning till the end. He surrenders himself to attend the death body in the Hearse on the way to the Tower of Silence. The rituals and prayers to be performed on the prayer bungalow are described in the novel. After cleansing, the body is wrapped with white cloth and is laid on a Marble platform. Then, the priest lights a lamp near Dinshawji's head. The soothing power of Parsi prayers is elegantly described: "The *dustoorji* prayed beautifully. Each word emerged clear and full-toned, pure, as if shaped for the first time by human lips. And Gustad lost in his thoughts, began to listen. It sounded so soothing. Such a wonderful voice... . Soft, smooth, rich as velvet" (247).

During the funeral, Gustad finds Dinshawji's wife, Alamai's snarky and eccentric personality annoying. She even objected to the usage of gomez as a sacred water to purify Dinshawji's body. "All this nonsense with bull's urine is not for us, she said. We are modern people. Use water only, nothing else" (246). Alamai's confusion due to lack of proper religious knowledge has again resurfaced during the Sagdid. She cries loudly when the dog walks away silently after circling the bier, "O dog! Make some little sound at least!" (251). The Parsis' rich religious and cultural history has been slowly undermined by a lack of basic religious education and the influence of contemporary beliefs and values. Through the satirical portrayal of Alamai, Mistry expresses this grave concern. Vibhuti Wadhawan observes:

The confusion surrounding the literal translation of traditional rituals often clashes with modern precepts since rituals are often seen in terms of their literal interpretation, than for their symbolic value and therefore carry a greater chance of being misinterpreted by ignorance. This is because there is often a lack of clarity regarding orthodox ideas that springs from modern distortions which take tradition in its literal sense without acknowledging its deeper meaning. 2014: 71

The novel explicitly discusses the contentious Parsi argument over their funeral system between orthodox and reformist Parsis. The Orthodox Parsis disagree with the reformists' beliefs and favour cremation instead of the customary method of burying the dead on the Tower of Silence to be eaten by vultures. By making Gustad attend the funeral service for Major Bilimoria, Mistry paints a clear image of the ongoing controversy between the reformists and the Orthodox. The controversial rumour of Vultures scattering the morsels of bodies on the balconies of buildings is made to discuss among the Parsis in the narrative. The rumour frightens the Parsis and attracts the attention of the reformists and the Orthodox Parsis, and both parties express their contrasting views:

The Orthodox defence was the age-old wisdom that it was a pure method, defiling none of God's good creations: earth, water, air, and fire. Every scientist, local or foreign, who had taken the trouble to examine the procedure, using modern hygienic standard sang its praises. But the reformists, who favoured cremation, insisted that the way of the ancients was unsuitable for the twentieth century. Such a ghoulish system, they said, ill became a community with a progressive reputation and a forward-thinking attitude. 317

The debate continues, and the mystery behind the scandal remains unresolved. Mistry's concern for the bleak future of his community is stressed in the novel. Gustad's self-realization and the discovery of life's true purpose at the novel's conclusion serve as an argument for the community's need to come together and move forward to prevent further decline. With grace, he accepts his fate and makes an effort to go on. His effort in turning the compound wall into the wall of all religions reveals his secular spirit. The destruction of the compound wall by the municipal authorities and the tragic death of Tehmul towards the end of the novel are turning points in Gustad's life. The removal of blackout papers which Gustad has been keeping for so many years symbolises the need for the Parsi community to adapt to mainstream Indian life rather than living a segregated life. Madhumalati Adhikari, in an article "Mirroring the Parsi Psyche" states that:

Rohinton Mistry successfully attempts to present not the alienation but the assimilation of the Parsis into the mainstream. The most significant metaphor in the novel highlighted the unity and continuity of Indian ethos, is the paintings of Shiva, Saraswati, Gurunanak, Budha, Sai Baba, Zarathustra, and many others, on the same wall. 1977: 44

Gustad's journey is full of confusion and difficulties, but as a true Zoroastrian, he never quits and faces all the trials and tribulations of life with dignity. Narendra Kumar asserts that: "His long journey in a malevolent world in which all forms of happiness are woven inseparably is the journey of an ethnic, a community which is on the verge of extinction...his long journey is a manifestation of the universal phenomenon – the conflict between Good and Evil and his survival is the triumph of the Zoroastrian faith" ( 2002: 85).

Mistry has portrayed the core aspects of Parsi lives and their struggle to maintain their ethnic identity through the life and struggles of Gustad Noble. Mistry's portrayal of Miss Kutpitia, an old, irrational lady, and

her separate world informs another aspect of the community where the women are caught in superstitious beliefs and practices. Thus, the novel can be read as a Parsi fiction covering all the diverse facets of Parsi life, centering round the customs, traditions, beliefs, superstitions, and other practices as observed by the community as an integral aspect of Parsi life and culture. As a Parsi Writer, Mistry is trying to give a realistic portrayal of the tragic status of the Parsis in independent India through his novel.

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