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## **Diasporic Discourse in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey***

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### **Abstract**

In this paper an attempt has been made to delineate diasporic discourse in the course of the novel. In Mistry's writings there are little traces of Canada, the place where he lives presently. Rather he is obsessed with the colonial and postcolonial experiences in India. He recollects the memories of his place of origin that is Bombay and also portrays his own religious community-the Parsi community. While analysing the diasporic discourse in the novel, the issues like the construction of cultural hybridity, linguistic hybridity and the leitmotif of journey have been examined closely.

**Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural hybridity, Parsi community, Linguistic hybridity, Journey, Identity, Marginalization, Mistry.**

### **Introduction**

*Such a Long Journey* is a 1991 novel by Rohinton Mistry, who is an important figure in contemporary commonwealth literature and occupies a significant position among the writers of Indian Diaspora. Rohinton Mistry is a Diasporic writer and it is, therefore imperative to throw light on the term Diaspora. "Diaspora", a well known and the most talked about term in the recent times, is not a recent phenomenon. The history of the Diaspora can be dated from the Babylonian Exile (586 BC) when a large part of the population of Judah was sent to Babylonia. It was a mass exodus which resulted in scattering and dispersion of Jews outside of Israel due to religious persecution. Thus, Diaspora referred to the dispersion or scattering of Jews. In the modern context, the word is used more broadly for any movement of a population sharing common national and/or ethnic identity. It also refers to the cultural connections maintained by a group of people who have been dispersed or have migrated around the globe. Unlike the forced migrations of the past that were compelled by natural, religious or economic reasons, migrations in the present are largely voluntary. The reason behind such voluntary migrations is materialistic, in search of better living conditions and from the less economically developed countries to the more developed countries.

The Indian Diaspora in many parts of the world also evolved in the similar way. It came into being during the colonial period when the Indian labourers and the then entrepreneurs followed the Union Jack from the Caribbean Island to Fiji and from Canada to South Africa. Thus, the Indian Diaspora has been formed by a scattering of population and not in the Jewish sense, an exodus of population at a particular point of time. It was in the form of sporadic migration which

only changed its form from the indentured labourers of the past to the IT Professionals of the present. Sudesh Mishra in his essay “From Sugar to Masala: Writing by the Indian Diaspora” divides the Indian Diaspora into two categories- the old and the new. He writes:

The distinction is between, on the one hand, the semi-voluntary flight of indentured peasants to non-metropolitan plantation colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia, Surinam and Guyana, roughly between the years 1830 and 1971; and other the late capital or postmodern dispersal of new migrants of all classes to thriving metropolitan centres such as Australia, the United States, Canada and Britain. (56)

Nilufer E. Bharucha traces the history of Indian Diaspora, which she says had begun “in the nineteenth century with the first group of indentured labourers who were being transported to Mauritius in the 1830 and is now over a hundred and seventy years old” (21). She further adds:

The Indian Diaspora could be broadly classified as colonial and postcolonial with subcategories within each of these broad divisions. In the colonial category there was first the labour and then the entrepreneur diaspora. In the postcolonial category the trajectory of migrations takes in education as well as employment opportunities. Those seeking employment include skilled, semi-skilled labour and professionals. (21)

All these Diasporas have been well-depicted in the literary and creative writings: for example the Caribbean diaspora in the writings of V.S. Naipaul, the African diaspora in the writings of M.G. Vassanji, Fiji as in the writings of Sudesh Mishra, Satendra Nandan and Subramani. Writers like Neil Bissoondath, Rohinton Mistry, Uma Parameswaran, Himani Banerjee through their literature have projected the dilemmas and the struggles of the South Asian Diaspora. The Indian Diasporic writers have been divided into two distinct groups- the first group comprises of those who have spent a part of their life and have “carried the baggage of their native land off shore.” In the words of Devika Khanna Narula:

They are split into a complex space between two worlds and two cultures; they can neither forget the world/culture they have come out of and which would be different if they returned to it now; nor can they fully assimilate into and be acculturated by the world/culture they have adopted because they cannot subvert their own identities totally. (35)

The other group comprises of those who have been bred since childhood outside India. They have had a view of their country only from the outside as an ‘exotic place of their origin’ and thus find themselves rootless.

Rohinton Mistry belongs to the former group of Diasporic writers. As an Indian who now lives and writes from Canada, he is a writer of Indian Diaspora. Priyambda Singh explains the major reasons of Mistry’s expatriation:

Mistry confesses in the Literary Journal Rungh (1993) that his departure from India was partly

encouraged by the expectations of his peers, especially of his generations. After finishing college in Bombay or elsewhere in India, one had to go to abroad for higher studies. If possible one had to find a job after finishing a Masters or a PhD in the states or in England, find a job and settle in the country. That's how success is defined by Indians, so that is why I say that coming to Canada was in some ways decided for me. (2)

But being a Parsi Zoroastrian whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Muslims who conquered Iran, he was in a diaspora even in India. Thus he is categorized among those group of Indian writers "who have to grapple with not just one Diasporic displacement but multiple displacements" (Bharucha 14). Having been born in a Parsi community, a minority community in India and having recorded the complex tradition of Parsi history and culture in his writings, Mistry is also famous as a Parsi writer. Parsi community is the core of his fiction. Every work of his is a reflection of Parsi culture, their customs, rituals, struggles, their dilemmas, etc and all these are well communicated through the fine portrayal of Parsi characters. Mistry's fiction is rooted in the streets of Bombay, the city he abandoned for Canada at the age of twenty three. Starting from his first writing i.e. *Tales from Firozshah Baag* to his latest work *The Scream*, all his writings are set in Bombay. He is more concerned with the tribulations and the idiosyncrasies of Bombay Parsis. In an interview for *Canadian Fiction Magazine* in 1989, Mistry elucidates his philosophy of composition:

One must write for the sake of writing to create good literature. The other things follow in a very natural way. I grew up in Bombay. Now I am here. I'm a writer. I am determined to write good literature. That is my primary concern. But to write well, I must write about what I know best. In a way I automatically speak for my tribe. (quoted in Sampath 224)

### **Analysis**

Diasporic literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and recounts narratives of painful journey which is undertaken on account of economic, social and political compulsions by the Diasporic community because of spatial or temporal dislocation. It seeks to recall and re-centre the lost and de-historicised human world, which due to imperial-colonial intervention stood uprooted and violated. At the same time as Manjit Inder Singh states:

Diasporic writing necessitates one's location in a new environment and both an identification with and alienation of the writer from his old and new homelands. As V.S. Naipaul remarks in *Finding the Centre* where he states that "a writer after a time carries the world with him, his own burden of experience, human experience and literary experience (one deepening the other) - that I would have found equivalent connections with my past wherever I had gone. (2)

In this sense, the situation of a writer necessitates a forging of ethnic identity and a sense of a self which in turn lend the Diasporic writing its peculiar qualities of loss and nostalgia. Thus the Diasporic writing has the quest for a buried cultural identity. It is the desire

of decolonised communities for an identity, and naturally an authentic space for existence and positive re-assertion of their cultural mores.

Rohinton Mistry's works mark a new kind of writing, resulting from a fragmented, splintered world. As a Diasporic Parsi writer, very sensitively he has recalled his community's journey through time and history with a sense of loss and nostalgia. The position of Parsis in the post-colonial India gives way to a new kind of psychological and collective trauma, which Mistry figures through an oppositional mode of interrogation, irony, satire and symbolic imagery. As Manjit Inder Singh says:

Mistry draws a human world of sounds and smells, locations and dislocations, colourful speech and cultural mores for reading as resistance in the post-colonial paradigm. Mistry's writing thus also becomes a kind of 'writing back' to a dominant community's culture and practices that necessitate a writer's commitment and responsibility. Much in the postmodern vein, Mistry seeks to reinvent buried and alternate meanings hagemonised by India's master-narratives, to impose a narrative mode of historical and political re-structuring of experience. (238-39)

Rohinton Mistry is a writer of Indian diaspora. He left India in 1975 and does not often go back; even then he has beautifully portrayed the experience of immigration, the immense pain of not being with his own people. Even as a writer of diaspora, he has carved a niche for himself. About his diaspora status, Nilufer Bharucha says:

As an Indian who now lives in and writes from Canada, Rohinton Mistry is a writer of the Indian Diaspora. However Mistry is also a Parsi Zoroastrian and as a person whose ancestors were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Iran, he was in Diaspora even in India. Like other Parsi writers, his writing is informed by this experience of double displacement. (quoted in Dodiya 3)

Thus Rohinton Mistry, a Parsi writer, was in diaspora in India as he is now in Canada. India is the adopted land for him and his community for protection because of the religious persecution of their community in Iran. India with its tremendous diversities figures a lot in his fiction. Having lived in Canada since 1975, Mistry preserves the memory of his early days in India alive. In an interview with Veena Gokhale, he tells her how he has kept the memory of India alive and vivid enough to work in the minute details that his novels contain in abundance:

In general, I don't think there is much one can do to keep memory alive, memory lives and dies on its own. Memory is a strange thing: when assumed to be dead, it can surprise one by returning to life. I am speaking of course, not of memory that is concerned with things like street, names, film songs, etc. These things can be found in Maps and books. I refer to those moments which at the time of actual occurrence may have seemed banal, but which given the gift of remembrance become moments of revelation. My novels as not 'researched' in the formal sense of the word. Newspapers, Magazines, chats with visitors from India, chats with people on my infrequent visits to India- these are the things I rely on. Having said that I will add that, all these would be

worthless without the two main ingredients: memory and imagination. (quoted. in Dodiya 4)

Such a Long Journey is a squarely Diasporic discourse in which Mistry has openly tried to deconstruct and repossess his Indian past. Here in this novel there is greater engagement with India than there was in the Tales from Firozshah Baag. Here the Parsi world interacts at the highest level with the post-colonial Indian world. Mistry prefers to write about India, which engages his imagination.

Rohinton Mistry seems to indulge in the memories of his childhood and youth in Bombay in order to bring back to life recollections close to him. Bombay becomes to Mistry what Dublin was to James Joyce, the famous writer of the twentieth century who spent his artistic career as expatriate painstakingly portraying the place of his origin. Bombay is a place of recollections for Mistry which he has described with affection and regretful yearning. It is a peaceful and balanced bucolic paradise confined to the past. While describing these recollections the focus of Mistry is on his own community - the Parsi community. Bombay is the city that is the home to the Parsi community. It is well known that a considerably large section of their community lives in Bombay. Nila Shah in her article, "Re-narration of History in Such a Long Journey and A Fine Balance", states that:

The ethnocentric nature of Mistry's work discerns the assertion of difference and fragmentation of identity, creating its own space within the national and the Diasporic context. The author's own expatriate position makes him aware of the element of alienation. He is an existential outsider on one hand and on the other is on the periphery even in India, as Nilufer Bharucha puts it: "so his discourse challenges and resists the entanglement of the dominant culture within India itself." (Dodiya 67)

Homi Bhabha, an eminent theorist of postcolonial studies states that the process of evolving a colonial identity involves both the identification with the colonial other and a disavowal of the same. Such identity thus can be considered a site of hybridity that lies between the colonizer and colonized. Hybridity, as defined by Homi Bhabha, refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization. In his article entitled "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Difference", Bhabha stresses the interdependence of colonizer and colonized. He argues that all cultural systems and statements are constructed in what he calls the 'Third space of Enunciation.' In accepting this argument, we begin to understand why claims to the inherent purity and originality of cultures are 'untenable.' Bhabha urges us on to this space in an effort to open up the notion of an international culture "not based on exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity (Bhabha)

The Parsi community is an apt example of this cultural hybridity with its filial affection for India's former Lords and Masters juxtaposed with a deep-rooted desire to have an identity of its own. The desire to be considered Indian while maintaining a cultural distance is manifested as a



sort of cultural hybridity within the Parsi community; if we examine this fact in context of Such a Long Journey. We have observed in the novel that the characters torn by an insatiable desire to be true to their native culture want to honour and cherish their own distinct cultural identity. They manifest alienation, cultural loss and the politics of marginalization. Mistry has well depicted his community's response to a changed politically and racially hostile post-colonial scenario. They feel regret over the passing of an old way of life during the British rule and they link their changed social fortune to the departure of the British. The Parsis in pre-colonial India, although had not been an elite community but they were a respected community. In colonial India of course, they had enjoyed special status. Though that prime status is not enjoyed by the whole community, as the division of high and low class exists among the Parsis also. In the present novel itself we witness one of the characters Cavasji, a man in his eighties, who leaning his head outside the window reprimands the sky and shows his displeasure with the Almighty for blessing the Tatas, Wadias and Camas with more wealth. But Mistry's focus is more upon the privileged position experienced by his community in the colonial time. He says in postcolonial India his community's status was downgraded and they were marginalized. Such deplorable condition of the Parsis is criticized by Dinshawji as he complains: "What days those were.....Parsis were the kings of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get" (38). What Rohinton Mistry has depicted in Such a Long Journey is similar to Boman Desai's The Memory of Elephants, which deals with the relationship the Parsis developed with the British during the colonial period and traces back to this special closeness with their colonial masters the problems that post colonial Parsis have in assimilating to the postcolonial Indian milieu.

Bombay of Such a Long Journey is shaken by the rise of the Shiv Sena with its considerable influence in Maharashtra. The Shiv Sena is a right-wing Hindu organization that openly advocates racist goals. As Nilufer Bharucha points out: "the Sena raised the bogey of 'the other' – the religious other, the Muslim; the linguistic other, especially Tamil speakers; and the regional other, all who came to Bombay from other parts of India and who according to the Sena snatched the bread out of the mouths of the sons of the soil" (121). It threatens and victimises the Parsis with their strategy of Othering. The party is a big real threat to a distinct Parsi identity and is therefore resented by all the characters in the novel. Dinshawji fears that the Shiv Sena "won't stop till they have complete Maratha Raj" (73). He complains: "All they know is to have rallies at Shivaji Park, shout slogans, make threats" (73). Dinshawji remembers how the followers of the Shiv Sena abused members of the Parsi community as "Parsi crow-eaters", thereby mocking the community's burial rites. He complains that Shiv Sena wants to make this community "second-class citizens." To gain more space in the power structure, it advocates changing of English road names into Marathi without considering the fact what effects would it bring to the former colonialprominents among the Parsis. Responding to Gustad's remark "what's in a name", Dinshawji argues:

Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared, in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it's on

Lokmanya Marg. I live at Sleater Road. Soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And one fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again with these new? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me! (74)

Thus with a motive of constructing a postcolonial identity, the Indian administration altered the British street names. Such incidents make the Parsis lament the departure of the colonizers. Thus Dinshawji, raised within an anglophil tradition severely attacks the Shiv Sena's re-appropriation of street names and takes issue with its psychological consequences. Gustad consoles him by saying, "you shouldn't let it bother you so much Dinshu" (74). But Dinshawji feels as the old names are changed, his community will be displaced. Thus, "Dinshawji", according to David Williams, "experiences the rewriting of the map of his neighbourhood as an interruption in his self-presence" (quoted in Morey 79). Language is significant both for the Shiv Sena and the Parsis because it is tied up with issues of identity. Subsequently they both struggle for it to preserve their respective identities.

On the other side Gustad ruminates on the community's precarious status in his own way. He also complains about the right-wing politics of Shiv Sena. In fact, his concern for Sohrab arises out of this fear and anxiety. The rise of the fascist Shiv Sena and their demand for Marathi as the only language to be used has increased Gustad's impatience. He believes that if the Shiv Sena manages to achieve its goals and puts its plans into practice, Sohrab's future in Bombay will become surely insecure. Thus he complains: "What kind of life was Sohrab going to look forward to? No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense. It was going to be like the black people in America – twice as good as the white man to get half as much" (55).

In addition to cultural hybridity, Mistry has also talked about the linguistic hybridity. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin dwell upon how postcoloniality poses a challenge to the norms of language. In the context of English language they say: "the most interesting feature of its use in postcolonial literature may be the way in which it also constructs difference, separation and absence from the metropolitan norm" (quoted. in Morey 40). Mistry in *Such a Long Journey* blends English with dashes of Gujrati, Hindi and Marathi at times in order to achieve the hybridity. One of Gustad's conversations with Dinshawji is an example of it. When he says: "Toba, Toba! I began to feel something wet on my shirt. And guess what it was. Adubbawalla standing over me, holding the railing. I said nicely, "please move...my shirt is getting wet, meherbani. But no kothaa, as if I was not there" (73). Mistry does not shy away from Indian regional dialect, and he feels the objects and emotions those words referred to are necessary, enlightening some element of plot. At the same time they attribute an Indian fervour to the English language used by Mistry.

As a diasporic text, *Such a Long Journey* retains many features from the 'homeland'. In a sense



of alienation, Rohinton Mistry has given a detailed description of his community. While history and language play an important part in the construction of the community's self-image, the novel also pays close attention to another pillar of Parsi identity i.e. religion. Zoroastrianism is the religion of the Parsi community, which in the course of the novel has been described in detail. The novel starts with Gustad Noble performing 'kusti' prayer – the most important ritual in Zoroastrianism. And later the burial rites of the religion at Tower of Silence are described in a detailed manner. Thus we see religion is an important marker of identity that Mistry inscribes into the novel in order to underline a concern with cultural difference.

Such a Long Journey being a diasporic text exhibits the leitmotif of 'journeying' also which is central to most diasporic writing. The three epigraphs which preface the novel set the tone. The first is from Firdausi's Iranian epic Shah Nama, and recalls both the glorious Iranian heritage of a mighty empire as well as hints at the downgraded condition of the present-day Parsis. The second is from T.S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" and reminds the readers of the ancient Zoroastrian religion and the belief that the magi who attended the birth of Christ were Zoroastrian priests. This epigraph also provides the title as well as the central metaphor of the novel: "A cold coming we had of it, /Just the worse time of the year/For a journey, and such a long journey." Finally, Tagore's lines from the Gitanjali sum up the way in which the Parsis have moved from one country to another and how they have had to adapt themselves to new realities.

The 'journey' in the title on one level suggests the journey of the Parsis who left Iran in the eighth century and settled in India and adjusted themselves to the new surroundings. On the other hand, the metaphor of 'journey' is applied to the life of Gustad Noble, the protagonist of the novel. The journey for Gustad is the continuous struggle for gaining the values of life. As Anjana Desai says, "The journey is the journey of a nation, of a city, of an ethnic minority, and of an individual man of this community and the question it raises is the same one that baffles Eliot's Magi, was it for a birth or a death that they travelled?" (quoted in Bharucha 134). In the novel we have seen that Gustad's journey of life is so close to the journey of the Magi and it also corresponds well with epigraph quoted from Tagore's Gitanjali. The journey of the three wise men to the birthplace of Jesus Christ is not merely an ordinary physical journey. It is symbolic of man's spiritual quest in which he has to undergo numerous hardships. The journey of the Magi is also emblematic of the re-orientation which is absolutely essential to attain higher and nobler values of life. The lines from Rabindranath Tagore's Gitanjali, quoted as another epigraph, also suggest the motif of journey. Tagore accepted life on earth as journey ahead and he also conceived of God as the fellow traveller, suffering with men and yet consoling them and encouraging them for undertaking further journey. The epigraph is "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 lines suggest that life is always changing and along with it changes man's language and the scenario of his surroundings. Man's embarking on new land, as is suggested in the lines, does not imply his adventurous nature, but his inner journey,

his urge to develop a broader consciousness. Gustad's journey refers both to his physical journey i.e. his financial troubles after his father became bankrupt and his continuous struggle since then and to his spiritual journey. Gustad is keenly desirous of the fulfilment of his dreams and aspirations. At every stage of his life's journey, he encounters unprecedented obstacles and the inexplicable forces. The way Gustad suffers and the way his hopes are denied show that the epigraphs symbolize the essence of the novel. It is implied that life has to get going. Whatever happens in Gustad's life, it all enriches his experience and broadens his sensibility. Purvi N. Upadhyay explains the concluding lines of the novel in terms of Gustad's spiritual journey:

At the end of the novel, Gustad tears off the black paper covering the ventilators of his flat that had for years "restricted the ingress of all forms of light, earthly and celestial," and a moth, a symbol of past, flies out, a sign of new beginning, a new birth, that emerges from death. Like the journey of the Magi, Gustad's arduous trek through pain, heart break and loss have brought him to a new awakening and the promise of the ultimate victory of human spirit. Ultimately the novel *Such a Long Journey* celebrates through the metaphor of the journey all inclusiveness of life and indestructibility of the human spirit. (qtd. in Kapadia 175-76)

In many respects, Gustad's quest resembles a semi-allegorical journey that ends nowhere. As Alberto Manguel reminds us in his afterword:

[R]unning through the novel like a blue thread is the idea of impermanence, the realization that nothing will last, that everything, human beings and societies have in the universal computation the life span of a moth, the novel's final image. But throughout the novel, at the same time a pattern is drawn, "the notion that life is a journey and that journey....is its own purpose. (qtd. in Anderson 196)

In the case of Gustad, however the journey is worth it, because he loses his innocence and illusions on his way and gains strength and understanding and most importantly he does not give up his quest.

The motif of 'journey' is further exemplified through the pavement artist who is always on his way. He thought of settling near the Khodadad building after the compound wall is fully decorated with the portraits of Gods and Saints, and people begin to offer flowers, incense sticks and money. The pavement artist even replaces the crayon paintings with oil paintings which are permanent. After the wall is broken by the municipality, the pavement artist realizes how he was mistaken with the idea of permanence. There is no place of permanence on his way, there is only journey ahead. When the wall is broken, he could decipher the causes of sorrow: "a yearning for permanence, for roots, for something he could call his own, something immutable" (184). 'Journey' in the title is therefore, not mere physical journey, but a journey of the spirit, one that requires non-attachment. That is why the pavement artist takes only the material for crayon painting and leaves those for oil painting when he starts his journey again. When Gustad wishes

him good luck, he replies: "Luck is the spit of gods and goddesses" (338). He reveals the author's message that man must carry on whatever may come in his way. "He learned to disdain the overlong sojourn and the procrastinated departure, for they were the progenitors of complacent routine, to be shunned at all costs. The journey - chanced, unplanned, solitary - was the thing to relish" (184).

## Conclusion

Thus, we can say that Rohinton Mistry through his Diasporic discourse has well depicted his ancestral background, his community's encaged situation in a metropolis like Bombay and his deep attachment with and nostalgia for a world gone by. He is well aware of his community's efforts to maintain their cultural identity in the face of the ethnic and religio-cultural attacks in the post-imperial and post-independent India and hence he has meticulously presented it. The politico-cultural nostalgia helps Mistry to create a sense of loss about the changed circumstances of the characters in both domestic and public spheres. Through skilful blending of the characters' personal affairs with communal and political matters related to Bombay and India he lends them significance as social beings. Mistry's meticulous description makes the readers feel as if they are walking into the streets of Bombay, visiting the houses of Parsi community and experiencing the muddled affairs of Indian politics in postcolonial India.

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