



Interrogating Mistry's *Such A Long Journey* from the Perspective of the Margin

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Abstract:

Contemporary Literary Theories play an important role in interrogating texts, and thus provide multiple perspectives through which a text can be examined and interpreted. The present abstract endeavours to interrogate Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* from the perspective of the Marginalized Parsi community living in India. Marginalization is a recurring theme in almost all the works of Rohinton Mistry. The term Marginalization, in the broadest sense, refers to a group of people who are at the 'periphery' against the 'centre'. According to the 2011 Census conducted by the Government of India, the Parsi community is the fastest diminishing group in India. This fear of being left out from the mainstream of civilization is poignantly reflected in almost all the novels of Rohinton Mistry, in which his characters keep searching for a new identity for survival, either through emigration or by reinventing themselves through religious enlightenment. While interrogating *Such a Long Journey*, Bakhtin's Dialogism and Said's concept of otherness have been incorporated to reach at the connotative/political meaning of the text.

Keywords: Margin, the Parsi, Dialogism, and Hegemony.

Introduction to the Parsi Community

The history of the Parsi Community mirrors their religious persecution by the Muslims in Iran. Being persecuted by the Muslims, the Parsis migrated to the coastal region of Gujarat in India between the 8th to 10th centuries. The first epigraph tells the history of suffering and religious persecution of the Parsis by the Muslims in Iran. The religious persecution compelled them to alienate themselves from their soil, and hence they became a global religious refugee. This permanent sense of alienation is a recurrent theme in *Such a Long Journey* as its principal character, Gustad Noble, expresses concern about how his community is being alienated from the mainstream of national discourse. In the historical context, the Parsi community is doubly marginalized in India.

Political Marginalization of the Parsi Community

Rohinton Mistry offers a trenchant critique of Mrs Gandhi's national policy. In "An Introduction: Rohinton Mistry", "Mistry, as Dewnarain observes, denounces the corrupt politics of Indira Gandhi's government" (67). Mrs Indira Gandhi's insensitive politics has been criticised by the Parsi community in the novel. It was such "self-centered" politics of Mrs Indira Gandhi that economically relegated the Parsi community to the "periphery". Dinshawji explicitly criticises Mrs Gandhi's economic policy of nationalising the banks in 1969. This economic policy deprived the Parsi community of its place in the mainstream economy, as many Parsis were private bank owners. Dinshawji recalls the glorious past of the Parsis in the banking sector:

What days those were, yaar. What fun we used to have.'... 'Parsis were the kings of banking in those days. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalised the banks. (Mistry, *SLJ* 38)

Dinshawji expresses his anguish and fear over Mrs Indira Gandhi's economic policies, particularly her decision to nationalise the banks, which ruined the economic reputation of the Parsi community in India. Dinshawji, thus, points out the process of economic Marginalization of the Parsi community caused by the policy of nationalisation of banks in India. The basic idea of a secular nation is to ensure social, economic and cultural security to all its citizens. The interest of the Marginalized section of society cannot be sacrificed in the name of the pseudo-national interest. Dinshawji further points out the divisive politics of Mrs Indira Gandhi and holds her responsible for creating a fundamentalist political group the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra:

She is a shrewd woman, these are vote getting tactics. Showing the poor she is on their side. Saali always upto some mischief...How much bloodshed, how much rioting she caused. And today we have that bloody Shiv Sena, wanting to make the rest of us into second-class citizens...
(Mistry, *SLJ* 39)

Mistry is very much concerned about the contemporary politics in India. The aforementioned observation of Dinshawji reflects the growing fear of the Parsi community of being marginalized by the divisive politics of Mrs Indira Gandhi. Such politics of checks and balances links to the Gramscian idea of *hegemony*, which Shelley Walia illustrates in "Edward Said and the Writing of History":

Power is maintained by aura and prestige of the dominant fundamental group which constantly manipulates its social and political strategies to maintain the acceptance of class society which otherwise should turn revolutionary in response to such hegemony. (Said qtd. in Walia 31)

The observation of Dinshawji appears more serious and factual when he directly criticises Mrs Indira Gandhi for pursuing divisive politics to consolidate her vote banks. The rise of Shiv Sena in Maharashtra is the outcome of the politics of power. In fact, Mrs Gandhi gave space to the Hindu fundamentalist forces to counter the ideology of the Left. She was an astute politician who appeared to be falsely on the side of the poor, but actually she believed in a politics of exclusion.

The entire narrative of *Such a Long Journey* is based on the social and political exclusion of the Parsi community in India. The exclusion of the Parsi community in India operates at multiple levels. Firstly, the Parsis are a globally marginalized ethnic group. According to the census of 2011, the Parsis are the fastest-depleting group in India and across the world (Government of India). Secondly, they are politically marginalized figures in India due to the politics of power. Gustad Noble expresses this fear of being extinct as he says, "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" (Mistry, *SLJ* 55). Gustad Noble is well aware of the political exclusion of the Parsi community in Bombay due to the growing fundamentalist political group Shiv Sena.

Interrogating *Such a Long Journey* from the Perspective of Dialogism

The school of Dialogism, as conceptualised by Mikhail Bakhtin, Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Voloshinov, is interested in interrogating language/discourse/text as a social phenomenon. Bakhtin's idea of dialogism perceives the text as polyphonic, allowing multiple voices and perspectives to coexist and engage in dialogue with one another. Interrogating *Such a Long Journey* from the perspective of dialogism enables readers to explore the multiple possible interpretations and competing versions of 'truth' embedded within the narrative. Unlike writers of magic realism, Mistry foregrounds the perspectives of the

marginalized, giving voice to their versions of truth and challenging dominant narratives. As Dostoevsky's "Bobok" (1873) mentioned by N. Krishnaswamy & et al, in "Contemporary Literary Theory", in which Baron Klinevich, 'king' of the corpses, urges all to speak the truth:

I just want everyone to tell the truth. On earth it is impossible to live without lying, because life and lie are synonyms; but here we will tell the truth just for fun. (qtd. in Krishnaswamy et al 60)

Mistry, like Baron Klinevich, presents all the possible versions of truth to bring the margin to the centre at least in his fiction. The novelist, through the character of Jimmy Bilimoria, gives a voice to the politically marginalized figure, and hence we have the fictional version of Rustom Sohrab Nagarwala in the novel. *Such a Long Journey* exposes the nexus of political corruption through the story of Jimmy Bilimoria. As a RAW agent, Bilimoria works for his government. He reveals the 'national politics' of Mrs Gandhi by sending a mysterious letter to his friend, Gustad Noble. In the letter, he ironically convinces his friend to receive a parcel of sixty lakh rupees and deposit the money into a fictitious account. He convinces Gustad that the matter is of national security. However, the plan ultimately fails, as the money, ostensibly intended to provide financial assistance to Bangladeshi militants, is actually intended to fund Mrs Gandhi's political activities. When the scam came into the public domain, Bilimoria was made a scapegoat for this money laundering scandal. The officials stated that he had impersonated Mrs Gandhi's voice and instructed the cashier to hand over a sum of sixty lakh rupees to a Bangladeshi babu. The 'footnote' description in the novel shows how the political class in power plays upon the versions of 'truth':

A Footnote: While the alleged facts of this case are certainly unique, what strikes this reporter as even more unusual are the circumstances

surrounding this highly imaginative crime. For example, assuming that Mr Bilimoria has the talent of voice impersonation, is it routine for our national banks to hand over vast sums of money if the Prime Minister telephones? How high up does one have to be in the government or the Congress Party to be able to make such a call? And was the Chief Cashier so familiar with Mrs Gandhi's voice that he accepted the instructions without any verification whatsoever? If yes, does that mean that Mrs Gandhi has done this sort of thing frequently? These questions cry out for answers, and till the answers are heard, clearly and completely, the public's already eroded confidence in our leaders cannot be restored.

(Mistry, *SLJ* 195 – 6)

The 'footnote' serves as a literary strategy through which Mistry exposes the ugly conspiracy of the political class and reveals how those in power manipulate and misuse their authority for political ends. The manner in which Bilimoria is implicated in money-laundering case raises serious questions about the political ethics of Mrs Gandhi. In fact, we witness a string of lies in the official version regarding Jimmy Bilimoria. Jimmy Bilimoria is arrested on charges of money laundering, but the officials never reveal the actual details of the incident. Even Jimmy is not given a proper chance to defend himself before the court. However, Mistry brings Bilimoria's perspective to the 'centre' through his confession to his close friend, Gustad Noble.

Ghulam Mohammed rejects the official version that Jimmy Bilimoria is guilty of the crime of which he has been accused. In fact, it is Ghulam Mohammed who unfolds the bigger political conspiracy behind this money-laundering scam, stating “ ‘This whole story was cooked up by people at the very top to cover their wrongdoings’ ” (Mistry, *SLJ* 202). The confession of Ghulam Mohammed clearly shows how those in power get away with their

crime by making a marginalized person a scapegoat. The description exposes the political corruption that flourished during the regime of Mrs Indira Gandhi.

Eventually, *Such a Long Journey* ends up with the tragic demise of Jimmy Bilimoria, who became an innocent victim of the corrupt political system. The 'death' of Jimmy Bilimoria signifies the death of a marginalized voice that could not be brought into the public domain. However, Gustad Noble's meeting with Jimmy Bilimoria in the final section of the novel reveals the authoritarian tendencies of Mrs Gandhi's regime and her misuse of constitutional institutions for personal and political gain. It is Jimmy Bilimoria who unravels the ugly beauty of her personality in the following observation:

Big surprise...she was using RAW like her own private agency. Spying on opposition parties, ministers...anyone. For blackmail. Made me sick. Even spying on her own cabinet. One of them...prefers little boys. Another takes pictures of himself...doing it with women. Bribes, thievery...so much going on. (Mistry, *SLJ* 270)

Bilimoria's idealistic patriotism is shattered when he experiences the nasty politics of Mrs Gandhi. Through Bilimoria's revelations, Mistry unsettles the conventional image of Mrs Gandhi and foregrounds her less visible political persona. She is as ordinary as a street woman. She blackmails her political opponents by using 'secret photographs' snapped by her spies.

Lying in a hospital bed, Bilimoria recounts to Gustad Noble the sequence of political events in chronological order. Initially, Bilimoria was convinced by 'nationalistic plan' proposed by Mrs Gandhi. She wanted to help the insurgent group "Mukti Bahini" with financial aid, which was demanding a free Bangladesh state in East Pakistan. This mission

has to be carried out secretly under the supervision of Jimmy Bilimoria. Bilimoria, in conversation with Gustad Noble, admits the 'secret mission' of the RAW:

Money. Money was the main thing for Mukti Vahini. Without money, no supplies, no explosives, no guns...nothing. We needed a regular allocation, a budget. I told her at next meeting...operation would shut down...We were alone, but she not attentive...as if dreaming of something else. Strange woman...very strong woman... (Mistry, *SLJ* 272)

The torture in the cell of Jimmy Bilimoria reveals the cruel practice of an authoritarian state by the political class in power. Bilimoria, who was a stout and healthy person, is reduced to a helpless and paralysed figure lying on the hospital bed. It is at this point in his life that Bilimoria experiences 'peripeteia', a term coined by Aristotle to signify a sudden reversal accompanied by the recognition of the truth: " 'Protect herself...yes...trap me' " (Mistry, *SLJ* 277). Mrs Gandhi's dirty politics traps Bilimoria. She convinces him to sign a blank paper, stating that he had impersonated Mrs Gandhi's voice to withdraw the money. The psychology of Bilimoria can better be understood in terms of Gramscian view of 'hegemony' explained in "Edward Said and the Writing of History" by Shelley Walia:

Hegemony works best by creating the confusion of contradictory ideas in the minds of the masses as they absorb cultural values and beliefs of the dominating class. It tends to make the subaltern 'accept inequality and oppression as natural and unchangeable. (Walia 32-33)

Being blinded by the 'nationalistic idealism' of Mrs Gandhi, Bilimoria signs his 'death warrant' without realising its dire consequences. He fails to understand the dirty nexus of Mrs Gandhi while signing the blank paper:

She gave me a blank sheet of paper and her own fountain-pen. I wrote my confession...like an idiot. My respect for her... grown so much over the months. Such a strong woman. Trusted her completely. (Mistry, *SLJ* 277)

Bilimoria's conjecture is not merely a fabrication of his mind, as it becomes evident that Mrs Gandhi exploited her political power for personal gain. She misused the constitutional institutions to dismantle her political opponents. But the level of corruption which she did as a Prime Minister is beyond the perception of an ordinary man, "Everyone knows there's corruption...But to this level? Hard to believe...it is beyond the common man's imagination, the things being done those in power' " (Mistry, *SLJ* 280).

Bilimoria's story reveals the dark and ugly face of Mrs Gandhi and how ruthlessly she uses her men to seek her personal interests. The incident correlates with Louis Althusser's concept of *Ideological State Apparatuses*, illustrating how Mrs Gandhi maintains her power by becoming personally involved in the sixty-lakh-rupee scam, while Mr Bilimoria becomes a pawn in her fraudulent scheme. This is how she practises corruption in Indian politics and marginalizes the voice of dissent through the constitutional agency. The suffering and torture of Jimmy Bilimoria in the prison reveal the ugly truth of Indian democracy where those in power get away with their crimes by trapping the marginalized as a scapegoat. Jimmy Bilimoria is denied the right to legal representation in court. He is sentenced to four years in prison. However, before completing his sentence, he meets a mysterious death in prison. His death is reported in a small paragraph in a newspaper, "Mr J Bilimoria, a former officer with RAW, had died of a heart attack while serving his four-year prison sentence in New Delhi" (Mistry, *SLJ* 311).

Conclusion

Thus, interrogating *Such a Long Journey* from the perspective of the margin helps us reach at the connotative meaning of the text. The text incorporates the central idea of dialogism by foregrounding the real political incident from the perspective of the marginalized. The 'small paragraph' denotes the peripheral significance of Mr Bilimoria's existence, both as a RAW officer and as a human being, to those in power. This also shows how Mrs Gandhi exercised extensive control over the press during her tenure. The death of Jimmy Bilimoria is the 'death' of Article 15, which ensures equal status to all citizens. The novel foregrounds the darker shades of Mrs Gandhi's personality and reveals how she herself favours corruption in politics in order to remain in power. She stoops too 'low' for a statesman. The story of Jimmy Bilimoria clearly illustrates Louis Althusser's viewpoint on how the 'state apparatus' is used by the ruling elite to maintain the power structure in society. Mistry, by making national politics the central plot of *Such a Long Journey*, revisits the political history of India during the regime of Mrs Gandhi, thus presenting a new perspective to the readers.

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