
New Historicism and Mistry's Such A Long Journey : A Critique

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Histories are more time specific than cultures; they are more deeply rooted in political structures than memories and myths. They also have a tendency to be subjective by the degree of articulation of the individual. Thus their relationship to new locations can be fairly problematic. It is history which records discriminatory practices, unfair laws and animosities. The remembering of history is not without its problems. It is this which intervenes in the process of belonging. (1)

Histories have always been borrowed in its micro form to enhance the credibility of plot by writers of different ilk. Charles Dickens made use of the history and the politics of French Revolution in his magnificent novel "*A Tale of Two Cities*". The dramatic lives of few individuals are interwoven with major historical events. Many great historical novels of the twentieth century like Margaret Mitchell's "*Gone with the Wind*" have its entire backdrop the American Civil War and Leo Tolstoy's "*War and Peace*" are set against Napoleon's invasion of Russia". (2)

In Indian English books like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, ChamanNahal's *Azadi*, Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, Manohar Mangolkar's *Bend in the Ganges* have historical settings. Rohinton Mistry also stands in the same queue. "The term history, in the narrow sense, is the science of the human past. In the wider sense, it studies the development of the earth, of the heavens and of the species as well as of civilization. It is often used to designate the sum total of human activities in the past. A more common usage looks upon history as the record of event rather than events themselves. In this latter and objective sense, history is all we know about everything man has ever done or thought or hoped or felt". (3)

However, New Historicists have defied the assumed concept of history to be casual, closed and liner Friedrich Nietzsche writes, "the historical sense in our time forms a sixth sense, pervading the philosophy, history and culture of modern era". Ezra Pound says, "Our knowledge of the past is marred by 'omissions' of the most vital facts". (4)

It is difficult for us to read Rohinton Mistry's novels if we are not aware of the depth to which extent it is intact to the Indian history. However, we can say that his novels are the fictional explorations of historical events that contributed from India's independence in 1947. The historical narration of the fiction is culturally significant. His novels bring forth the relationships among self, community. It embraces both local history as well as universal. Another important characteristic of his novels is that it marvellously captures the lives of Indians. His novels are closely knitted around social history. Though he migrated to Canada decades ago, but if we go through his novels, we cannot claim that he does not live in India, because his novels are so realistic and equipped with historical events. His novels include points like corruption, politically motivated schemes, practical decisions, caste-problems and the dominance of haves and have not's.

It is *Such a Long Journey* with which Mistry foregrounds the history of national and international importance. The novel deals with the Pakistan and Bangladesh war of 1970. It also includes the lives of ordinary people. War becomes major morsel for the writer to analyse the history of India.

It's not the case that ordinary men are unharmed or uninfluenced by the national history. Gustad Noble is the chief protagonist of the novel. His family becomes the part of the national historical events. Gustad has two sons and a daughter. He is a clerk in a bank. He leads a happy life. But he has only one regret that his friend Bilimoria left the khodad building without informing him. Though Bilimoria was a friend but he was like a family member. Gustad used to say his morning prayer with him. Though he lives in a small building but he is not detached from the national history. From the very beginning of the novel, we find that Gustad and his family members are suffering the pain of India's support for Bangladeshi War. Gustad belongs to a lower middle class family and works as a clerk in a bank. He and his wife are battling to maintain the common standard of an average family. The war has directly influenced the availability of goods and the price of groceries and common things. The influence of war on the daily use things can be easily perceived when she ruminates:

She (Dilnavaz) purchased milk and remembered the days when ration card were only for the poor or the servants, the days when she and Gustad could afford to buy the creamy products of Parsi Dairy Farm ... before the prices started to go up, up, up and never came down". (5) We find description in the novel that during the Indo-China war in 1962, windows should be blacked out; and khodad building of Parsis is not an exception to this. The blackening of windows also symbolises the sorrow and despair of the common people. It also symbolises the inherent corruption in society. When the novel opens, Gustad blackens the window, and we find that he is circumscribed with various problems as India is facing both—external as well as internal threat. In the end of the novel, he removes the black paper that shows a ray of hope for him and India too. It brings back the memory of the defeat of the Indians in the war in which Chinese cheated Indians with the slogan: 'Hindi Chinese bhai, bhai'. It does not only affect the national pride but also provides the chance to show the personal greed and opportunism:

No Chinese soldier approached khodad building. Instead, terms of fund raising politicians tortured the neighbourhood. Depending on which party they belonged to, they made speeches praising the congress government's heroic stance or denouncing its incompetency. (6) However, we find that the blackout of papers symbolises the continuous threat of war and emergency and how the families are confined to their homes. We are told that three years after the Indo-China War, Pakistan once again attacked on Kashmir to get a piece of it as it has done right after partition. Throughout the whole narrative of the novel, we are told about the air raid sirens' sound every day at ten. The inhabitants of the building have acclimatized themselves according to the situation. They blow the light at ten o'clock; the threat of hurling the bomb is ever present. The inhabitants of the building have consciously or unconsciously set their clock by it: 'Ten o'clock already', thinks Gustad, as he hears the siren sounding on his way to work, 'should have been at my desk by now'. (7)

The historical background of the 1971 India-Pakistan War in Bangladesh and its atrocities can be easily perceived in the answer of Gustad when Roshan asks ‘why is West Pakistan? Gustad replies:

Because it is wicked and selfish. East Pakistan is poor; they said to West, we are always hungry and selfish, please give us a fair share. But West said no. Then East said, in that case we don’t want to work with you. So as punishment, West Pakistan is killing and burning East Pakistan. (8)

The other historical atrocities can be founded in further description:

Reign of Terror in East Pakistan. ‘It says that the Republic of Bangladesh has been proclaimed by the Awami League... They were saying that general yahya would allow Sheikh Mujibur Rehman to form the government. My right hand of will cut off and give you, I said, if those fanatics and dictators respect the election results’...what will happen now? He ignored her question and read silently about Bengali refuses streaming over the border with tales of terror and bestiality, of torture and killings and mutilations; of women in ditches with their breads sliced off, babies impaled on bayonets, charred bodies everywhere, whole villages razed. (9)

Gustad further narrates that after the partition, the wicked and greedy Pakistan wanted to take a part of Kashmir in India. At the time of India and Pakistan partition, there was a large number of murder, bloodshed and mutilations genocide in which Hindus and Muslims perished. Pakistan continued to create problems in Kashmir:

But three years later, the Pakistani’s attacked to try to get a piece of Kashmir as they have done right after partition, and blackout was declared once again. Then Gustad triumphantly pointed out to her the wisdom of decision.

However, once again we find that the fictional character of Jimmy Bilimoria is based upon a real story. In 1971, a serious case of money laundering involving a sum of sixty lakhs rocked Indira Gandhi’s government. Sohrab Nagarwala, a cashier in State Bank of India, was the prime accused. According to his confession, he had received a phone call from the Prime Minister’s office, instructing him to hand over the large sum of money to a messenger. The explanation he provided was never officially accepted. He was charged with embezzlement and arrested. Synonymously, Mistry’s Bilimoria, Nagarwala died in a mysterious way before he could be brought to ‘justice’. The echoes of Nagarwala’s real life are perceived in the figure of Major Jimmy Bilimoria.

Since this event involved a member of the Parsi community, the Parsis were considerably perturbed and the death of Nagarwala itself raised many eyebrows. Here is how a Parsi critic comments in a review of this book:

The Nagarwala incident, because it involved a Parsi, jolted the self-image of the community no less. Having long ago lost their literature to the vandalism of Alexander, the Accursed and their dance, music, art, poetry even their language to the process of adapting to a new home in India, the culture, culled from a mixture of ancient myth and legend overlaid by a life sustaining sense of recent achievement. Gratified to have earned an honourable place in the country of their adoption, through their contribution to every field of their endeavour and

proud of having retained a strong ethical tradition, the Parsees were deeply anguished by the ambivalent role Nagarwala had played in the sordid story. (10)

To conclude, writing about the novels of Rohinton Mistry, Nila Shah comments that, “The novel emerges as a parallel history of modern India. It is a history from a writer’s point of view that tries to discover/uncover suppressed or neglected chapter of Indian history”. (11)

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