# FILLING THE GAP: DISTANCE BETWEEN HEART AND FEET

## Re-reading the Immigrant Experience in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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> You won't find a new country, won't find another shore,
> This city will always pursue you. You will walk the same streets,
> Grow old in the same neighborhoods, will turn gray in these same houses.
> You will always end up in this city. Don't hope for things elsewhere:
> There is no ship for you, there is no road.
>
> —C.P. Cavafy

These lines by Cavafy reflect the predicament of immigrants across the globe. The particular experiences of those who chose to migrate to another land without realizing what they were getting into. The idea of finding a better place to establish them seemed very practical and romantic at the same time. And then began the conflict—whether to attach them to the new or to string along the old. Post-colonial studies have primarily dealt with the question of identity and space. It never was a direct revolt against the imperial forces; rather it was a movement that was initiated to question the hegemony of the established school of literary writing. The struggle for the post-colonial writer was not only external, wherein he had to make inroads into a dominant native culture, but it was also internal where he was constantly contesting his space and identity and facing exclusion. The hegemonic position of the writers belonging to the canon, their supremacy in thought, content and acceptance forced the post-colonial minds to address this problematic of a parallel literature and the only expectation was acceptance.

The very fabric of these writings is woven with threads of the protagonists' past life and his dilemma and the contrast that he draws between what was and what is. This conflict further highlights the cultural clashes both within his memory consciousness and outside. The writer contests a space where he is reduced to being

an individual placed on the margins, living in fragments, always hopping between landscapes and mindscapes that are contradictory and hostile. The smuggled baggages of culture and tradition that they carry with them are hard to shake off. Thus begins a role play where they take upon the roles of being the custodians of their culture and tradition, which they preserve to the extent of freezing them in their mindscapes. M.G.Vassanji, one of the most celebrated writers of the diaspora, states: "This reclamation of the past is the first serious act of writing. Having reclaimed it, having given himself a history, he liberates himself to write about the present."(Citation?)

My paper deals with the problematic of negotiating an identity, dealing with the persistent memories of home and the compulsions of coming to terms with the new home. The heart, which is filled with the memories of Zion (the lost homeland) and the feet, which are now grounded in the new land, are constantly at war with each other.The works of these writers depicts what Kamal Kumar Raul calls the clash of culture, identity, class struggle, and the complexities of colonial hangovers, globalization, migration and hybridization. Thenegotiation of space by these diasporas is both physical and psychological. As Proshansky et al. state:

> "Space in terms of location is a manifestation of solid moorings that a floating immigrant craves. Once the location is determined, identity starts emerging- whether that identity is the smuggled one or acquired one, can be contested. It is associated with mental image, consciousness, physical placement and assimilation."

Rohinton Mistry is a writer who occupies a distinct position among the Indian diaspora for sharing not one but many identities. To begin with, he is a Zoroastrian Parsi whose ancestors were exiled by the Islamic conquest of Iran around 800 A.D., situating the Parsis in diaspora in the Indian subcontinent. Later, in the 1970s, he migrated to Canada in search of a better opening. Jennifer Takhar gives a detailed account of the Parsi displacements:

> "During India's colonized period, the Parsis were particular favourites of the British rulers. Both parties co-operated well together and this entente has often been dubbed 'the psychological diaspora' of the Parsis. After the partition of India in 1947, some Parsis found themselves (literally) toeing 'the line of discontent' between two warring regions. This situation resulted in many departures to England and the US, marking the western diaspora of the Parsis. Mistry's work too, like other Parsi writers, is guided by this experience of double displacements. The movement, despite being voluntary, had its disadvantages. One, thelooking back, the nostalgia and the sense of loss remained and second, the assimilation

was hard to reach in a not so welcoming atmosphere (always looked upon as thieves robbing the opportunities of the native population)."

In his novels, Mistry brings up his associations with India as the predominant motif. His India is the India of the 1970s. Against such a backdrop and the Parsi community as the centre of his narrative, he weaves a story of squalor, suffering and peripheral existence amongst his characters. The characters are the subalterns of the society and the distinct divide among the haves and the have-nots is quite stark in his portrayal.

*Such a Long Journey* depicts loneliness and frustration that is the outcome of modern outlook. It further gives an account of the psychological journey undertaken by the writer through the physical and emotional journey of Gustad which moves from hope to despair and finally to reconciliation. This reconciliation reached at by the protagonist is symbolic of the reconciliation negotiated by the diasporas in the trying situations that they face in their host lands.

The diasporas, when confronted with unsympathetic situations in the alien lands, persist with patience and wait for their dreams to grow and bear fruit. It is only when they are incessantly pressed to the periphery that the nostalgia for the homeland sets in. Moreover, the hope of returning to their homeland someday remains a distant dream, because the road once chosen and travelled upon does not turn back to start all over again. The movement breaks theconnect and their homelands are turned into landscapes painted on the canvas of their reminiscences.

Mistry's critics in general have debated on the absence of Canada, the host country in his novels. Mistry, though living in diaspora, does not conform to the accepted definition of the diaspora. His diaspora is more of a psychological kind. The way he describes India speaks volumes about the experiences that he might have had when he was living in the country, though India has come a long way from the 1970s to the late 1980s, the time span in which his novels are located. What happened back during emergency probably does not hold much ground in the present scenario. However, for Mistry, 1975 is the year and the India of 1970s is the India that he identifies with.

Mistry's other focus is on the fast dwindling Parsi community in India to which he himself belongs. A silent serving community, the Parsis have contributed a great deal in the progress and development of the nation and yet in the 1960s they had to suffer when the knowledge of the regional language was made mandatory in the states. Mistry's narratives are filled with the culture, tradition and lifestyles of the Parsis. In the novels, he seems to be making a definite

effort to chronicle the history of the Parsis, which may acquire the status of a historical document long after the Parsis became non-existent as a community. Another significant writer who concerns herself with the fate of her community is Bapsi Sidhwa, the renowned Parsi writer from Pakistan. Bapsi Sidhwa has addressed her concerns for the Parsis; she also takes up the perspective of the subalterns and explores the ambivalent space of exile just as Mistry does in his fictional works. Mistry too is a writer whose focus sure is the Parsi community, but he simultaneously gives space to other subaltern voices.Avadhesh Kumar Singh believes that Mistry's literature is community specific:

> "Their (diasporas') works exhibit consciousness of their community in such a way that the community emerges as a protagonist from their works though on the surface these works deal with their human protagonists. (66-75)"

Mistry's first novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), short listed for the prestigious Booker prize, manages brilliantly to portray Indian culture and family life, setting it against the backdrop of the sub continent's volatile postcolonial politics. The action takes place in 1971 in Bombay at the time when war broke out between India and Pakistan. This political backdrop is the canvas upon which the troubled life of Gustad Noble and family is played out. The novelist delineates the variable fortunes of Gustad Noble, a genial middle-aged man of unpretentious dreams and aspirations while dealing with the communal life of Parsis in post-independent India. The novel also captures the socio-political-cultural turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s.

The narrative of the novel flows like a stream blending and taking into its fold all the characters and situations. Constantly dealing with and braving adversity, Gustad lives his life looking after the needs of not only his family, but also the half-wit Tehmul Lungraa, a fellow inhabitant of Khodadad building. Tehmul canbe seenas a reflection of Gustad's miseries on the one hand and, on the other hand, he becomes an emotional anchor for the protagonist.

Another character close to the protagonist is Dinshawji. Both these men worry about the social and political situation of the times: Dinshawji bemoans the loss of his familiar world in the changed street names of Bombay. However, Dinshawji remains gravely concerned:

> "There was genuine grief in his soul. Why change the names... He spat out the words disgustedly. 'What is wrong with Flora Fountain?'" (88) Mistry's protagonist asks, "'What's in a name?' 'No, Gustad', Dinshawji

> was very serious. 'You are wrong. Names are so important… My whole life, I have come to work at Flora Fountain. Moreover, one fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living a wrong life with all wrong names…Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me!'" (88)

This quest for keeping one's identity intact runs through the whole fabric of the novel.Gustad's effort to revive the compound wall as a place of reverence instead of being used as a toilet brings to light the character of the pavement artist. The artist takes up Gustad's offer again because of being forced into the situation 'what to do', said the pavement artist. "After the trouble that day, police began harassment. Making me move from here to there, this corner to that corner. So I decided to come and see the place you were talking about." (215)

The restlessness experienced by the artist at the complacent routine is voiced thus—"the agreeable neighbourhood and the solidity of the long, black wall reawakening in him the usual sources of human sorrow; a yearning for permanence, for roots, for something he could call his own, something inimitable. Torn between staying and leaving, he worked on, ill at ease, confused and discontented." (219)

This confusion of the artist is representative of the confusion experienced by the immigrants thinking where they went wrong in choosing their dreamland and the discontentment thereof at not getting a fair deal. The yearning for permanence experienced by the pavement artist is the essence of all diasporic literature and the quest is on, hoping to find solid ground somewhere, someday. The disillusionment encountered on reaching the land of their dreams fills these writers with a bitterness that is hard to lose. Gustad observes, "It's always the same. Always, things look wonderful from afar. When the moment arises, only disappointment." (239)

Mistry, though having drifted away from his homeland remains rooted in the psyche of his mainland. Meenakshi Mukherjee asserts that Mistry's novels reflect his "obsessive concern with roots, nostalgia and finally a mythicization of a lost country."

Mistry's connection with his culture and the Parsi way of life stops him from completely effacing his native roots. His anxieties are regarding the traditions and values amongst the younger Parsis. The confrontation between Gustad and his son Sohrab is an example of this very generation gap where the younger generation is shown as having lost a sense of respect towards older people.

The journey motif in the novel has symbolic implications. Thejourney undertaken by writers like Mistry ended in a dream

gone sour. It did not pay off expected dividends. The apprehension felt at the futility of such a journey is noticed through the narrative when Gustad undertakes the journey to Delhi in order to meet his old friend Jimmy. The apprehension that he voices almost sounds like an echo of the sentiments of all the diasporas who set out for greener pastures:

"Would this journey be worth it? Was any journey ever worth the trouble?" (259)

Gustad experiences (is met with) disillusionment throughout his life. His dreams are shattered, his aims defeated. His son rebels, Jimmy betrays him, Dinshawji dies leaving him to fight his battle alone, Roshan falls ill constantly testing the strength of his spirit. These events result in making Gustad come out even more strong and triumphant. His is the victory of good over evil. It is his will to survive without succumbing to despair that ultimately redeems him.

Mistry portrays the Parsi sensibility characterizing a sense of loss and resultant nostalgia. Mistry migrated to Canada in the early 1970s, but even twenty years later, when his first novel came out, he emerges more Indian than Canadian. So many years of staying away from the country of his birth has not dimmed the memory of India from the memory consciousness of such writers of the Indian Diaspora.

The significant thing about *Such a Long Journey* is its Indianness. It does not exude or display even a trace of whatever Canadian experience the writer might have gone through during his stay in Canada. The contention remains that why does Mistry allow himself to be a prisoner of his memories? Why does he not write about the country that he had willingly chosen to be his home? The argument that can be provided as against these questions is that the baggage of his lost homeland,which he carries with him,is so heavy that it leaves no space for anything else, not even his experiences in the new land.

Mistry's diasporic sensibility cannot be defined within the accepted definitions of the term. He seems to be trapped in a time wrap, exceptionally loyal to the history, events, culture, tradition and ambience that he left behind. It provides a different perspective of displacement as Vijay Mishra asserts:

> "…the idea of India exists in the minds of the diaspora through forms of spatial displacement in which the site is transformed into a word. This form of transference/transformation of space means that India gets internalized and projected on to other geographical space without so much as a hint of dissonance. Where epic textuality requires a fixed point of reference, a past that cannot be duplicated but only extensively rememorated, what we get in the diaspora is a whole series of

displacements that lead to the construction of new spaces as metaphors of India… (67-83)"

In all his novels, be it *A Fine Balance* or *Family Matters*, the milieu doesn't change and neither does the setting. Time and space, apart from a slight deviation in *Family Matters*, remain unchanged. Despite the fact that it has been almost 50 years since Mistry left India, India doesn't seem to leave him. His heart still reverberates with the sounds of the land left behind; his vision is clouded with the colours of his homeland. His feet have found new footing, but his heart still inhabits the spaces left behind. The nostalgia, the void that is left, remains an inseparable part of his being. The socio-political and cultural nostalgia creates a sense of loss and alienation in the new set-up. What is visible is an unending quest for the past and involuntary assimilation into the native culture which is more alien than conforming. The romance with the past and the connect felt with the homeland left behind, is like the umbilical cord that keeps the diasporas alive nourishing them with a life force. The gossamer thread that ties them to their roots is their bridge that they keep crossing; only time stands still during these journeys of the mind. The gap that they so frantically want bridged still remains and the distance between the heart and the feet remains ever so distant.

## Note

All references of the novel are from *A Fine Balance,* New York: Vintage Books, 1997.

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