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Dichotomies of political and social consciousness in 'Such a Long Journey'

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Abstract

The argument of this paper is that the text of Mistry's novel goes beyond a descriptive rendering of consciousness of social and political level both. 'Such a Long Journey is a critique of the Indian Society and political system of the 1970s, the infamous Emergency from June 25, 1975 to March 21, 1977. This novel of Mistry, like any other important work of art has been created not in vacuum, but is the work of an author who is acutely conscious of his social milieu and responds to its various social and political aspects in an artistic manner. The South-Asian Mistry places his community at the centre and weaves a tale that is both the history and fabulation. Mistry is quite aware of the political contemporaneity and social anxiety of his community which is briefly discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Dichotomies, political, social consciousness, 'Such a Long Journey'

1. Introduction

Rohinton Mistry (1952), an Indian born Canada based Parsi novelist, is an exceptionally brilliant & socio-political commentator who has written about social reality and human situations in the common wealth writers' Prize winner novel 'Such a Long Journey'. This narrative deals with painful family dynamics and difficult social and political constraints. The term 'Social' is considered often vague, but in broader sense 'Social' refers only to society as a system of common life shared by its members. In abstract terms, society refers to a web of social relationships. He responds to the society where an individual has very limited scope to lead a life of satisfaction. In the novel, the main protagonist, Gustad Noble, is a Parsi clerk in State Bank of India. The account of the miseries of Gustad is not always given as direct encounter. It is often in the flashback. Most of the events of his life both in present and past are afflicted in his consciousness. He feels happy for a while to see favorable developments in the life, but soon his consciousness gets a set back by adverse encounters. His son refuses to go to IIT. He feels very disappointed to see the plans for his son's career. He helplessly unlock his heart;

"How to make him realize what he was doing to his father, who had made the success of his son's life the purpose of his own? Soharab had snatched away that purpose, like a crutch from a cripple."

Gustad's sense of crisis is aggravated by the adverse and unfavorable encounters of his life. Governing Gustad's emotions of loneliness, fear, insecurity and skepticism is an all pervading sense of loss of what the past had symbolized. Some of the most evocative passages in the novel are those of acts of remembrance – remembrance that mourns the loss of a social pattern of life associated with childhood and grandparents, making the connection between the past and tradition inseparable, and pitting the past values system of us against that of the 'them' in present. The events of the novel are summed up in Gustad's thoughts, he recited his final prayers over Tehmul's body: "Yatha Ahu Vryo and Ashem Vahoo, and the salt water of his eyes as much for himself as for Tehmul. As much for Tehmul as for Jimmy for Dinshawji, for Papa and Mamma, for Grandpa and Grandma – for all who had waited for so long.....". This prayer reconciles the events of novel by placing them in the eternal cycle of human life and death. Gustad finally learns that the painful dimension of life continues and his consciousness has in no way crystallized into meaningful vision for his community.

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It is impossible for anyone to lead Mistry's fiction and not be aware of the depth to which it is embedded in the political background of post independence India. Political consciousness form an important subtext to the main action of the novel 'Such a Long Journey'. There are two ways to read politic; first, in the sense of state and second, in terms of cultural politics which affect the consciousness of main protagonist and other characters of the novel. Narrative is set against the back drop of Bangladesh – Pakistan wars of the 1970s. The story of Gustad Noble and his family is interwoven with events which are imbricate with national political scene. The Bombay of Such a Long Journey is shaken by the rise of the Shiva Sena, a local party. As Bharucha points out, "the Sena raised the bogey of 'The other' – especially Tamil speakers, and the regional other, those who come from other parts of India". In 'Such a Long Journey', the characters consider it (Shiva Sena) as a real threat. Dinshawji fears that the Parsis might become 'second class citizens in the near future. Gustad Noble, the central protagonist reflects on the community's precarious status. He says:

"What kind of life was Sohrab going to look forward. No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense". (10)

These lines portray the Parsi community's little fear and anxieties about their future as 'others' or minorities. Besides the regional politics national politics also affect the characters and their lives in the narrative. The political events referred to are the Nehruvian Utopia, the dirty power politics, nepotism and faulty system of electorate in 1970s, the vested interests of politicians and its repercussions in the 1980s.

Ministry denounces the corrupt politics of Indira Gandhi's government through Bilimoria's tragic tale and the detailing of a country's political corruption. According to him (Bilimoria) Indira Gandhi was indulged in all types of political corruption. Bilimoria reveals the way the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) was hijacked for her personal use.

.....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.....RAW kept dossiers. (270).

Dinshawji also holds Indira responsible for their present deteriorating role in banking. The characters of the novel condemn Indira and his son –the motorcar fellow–are involved in all kinds of crooked deals. The author shows the guilty of Indira Gandhi in the famous Nagarwala case and also gives place the assumption that the supporter of Indira Gandhi poisoned the Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri to get the chair of Prime Minister for Indira Gandhi. Political crisis of the time have been very beautifully embedded in the narrative. Mistry is exceptionally individualistic but he also finds around him a huge web of relationships and his development as an entity is the result of his conscious & unconscious reactions to these relationships.

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