

# Representation of Contemporary Politics in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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**Abstract –** The present paper attempts to highlight the horrible political conditions existing in India at the time of the reign of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Representation of contemporary politics has been a major theme for Contemporary Indian Writing in English. A number of eminent novelists such as Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Amitav Ghosh, Khushwant Singh, Nayantara Sahgal and Kiran Desai have tried to bring the hidden truth and facts on the surface by the representation of contemporary politics. In their writings, the novelists blend facts and fiction to recreate and re-examine the earlier happenings, events, views and assumptions. The main objective of Rohinton Mistry is to show how politics is used to manipulate the common masses to just safeguard their vested interests to remain in power.

**Keywords:** - Politics, Corruption, Domination, Nationalism, Banks, Divide and Rule, Hindu Fundamentalism etc.

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Rohinton Mistry is a well-known writer for depicting the post-independence India. Having analysed Indian Politics minutely, he presents each and every detail of Indian politics through his literary writings. Indian politics influences and controls the narratives in his all works such as *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002). He not only presents the corrupt political system prevalent in contemporary India, but also expresses the horrific and brutal consequences of political conditions on the lives of common people. All his novels painfully capture corruption, politically motivated schemes, caste issues, plight of minority including the Parsi, and inhuman conditions of common masses. Tarun Tejpal writes about Mistry's fiction by saying that "Mistry's first novel lays claim to being the first book of fact based fiction in the Indian literary tradition" (Tejpal, 140).

Before understanding the representation of politics in Mistry's novels, it is imperative to fathom the real meaning of politics in details. The word 'politics' has its origin in Greek word *politicos*, which relates to citizen. In this context, politics is a process of governance to govern a country with the various organs of a government. In other words, politics is a wide term which explains how to gain power through the tools of political means. It is politics which shapes the history of any country by presentation and interpretation of events, incidents, movements, social struggles and changes, contemporary socio-political crisis, politics of gaining votes, governments politics, diplomacy, and so on. The term contemporary politics is not only limited

or confined to political events of a particular government or a system but can be applied to any sphere of life where politics is used to dominate such as economic system, political system, social struggles, banking system and so on.

Mistry's first novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991), a controversial one, deals with the life of ordinary citizen and exploits the manner in which how national political scene in India causes a lot of confusion and disturbance for the common people. The title of the novel has been taken from T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Journey of Magi'. The novel tells the incidents of the Bangladesh-Pakistan wars of 1970s. Gustad Noble, a major character in the novel, is a bank employee. He has friends named Lungraa, Dinshawji and Jimmy Bilimoria who live with him in the Parsi compound. One day Gustad gets a message from Bilimoria to transfer some money to a new account. Bilimoria is involved in a 'national plot' with political ramifications and dies soon. After this another misfortune befalls on Gustad Noble when his friend Lungraa dies. Bilimoria's tragic tale details country's political corruption. Jimmy Bilimoria is the fictional counterpart of the infamous Sohrab Nagarwala who was involved in 60 lakh rupees scam at the time of Indira Gandhi government. Rohinton Mistry also expresses the real life of the Parsis in a dominant political situation as the Parsis are in minority in India. Mistry wants to present the Parsi predicament in the corrupt Indian society in the post-independence era. The dominated group feels

insecure because of the growing political power of the Marathas in Mumbai.

Rohinton Mistry has represented the actual picture of politics at the time of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's government in India and it can be studied in two ways. Firstly, one can understand the state and national politics in the novel. Secondly, it reflects the cultural politics which stresses the role of individual within the family, the community and the nation. As far as the national politics is concerned, the novel presents the Bangladesh-Pakistan wars of the 1970s which changed the future of India in relation to its neighboring countries ranging from Bangladesh and Pakistan. In order to enhance and enlarge her international image as an influential and powerful politician, she had taken the decision to intervene in the internal conflict and politics of East Pakistan (Bangladesh). She knew well that by ousting the Muslim government, she would have the opportunity to increase Indian political presence in the Bangladesh. Her intervention in Bangladesh is not limited just to politics but also to bilateral trades ranging from investment in developmental project, economic growth, selling of arms to Bangladesh and so. To end this, India government needed to oust the Muslim government in Hindu-Bangali dominated country.

Rohinton Mistry deftly denounces the corrupt description of the Congress government by some flatterers during 1970s. The protagonist of the novel, Gustad Noble, recalls the horrific experiences of Indo-China war. He had to put up the blackout paper during the war against China in 1962. He still remembers the defeat of national army. Instead of accepting the defeat by China, the government of the time was glorified. Mistry has criticized also the political greed and opportunism of the political leaders who can take up any kind of step to ensure their power:

No Chinese soldiers approached Khodadad Building. Instead, teams fund-raising Politicians toured the neighbourhood. Depending on which party they belonged to, they made speeches praising the Congress governments's heroic stance or denouncing its incompetency... (10).

The statement highlights the consequences of Indo-China war which made Nehru upset and his breakdown can be analysed. After the defeat, there followed the turmoil in the Congress government over the issues of policy, succession and corruption. Though Mistry criticises Indira government throughout the novel, but he has an admiration for Jawaharlal Nehru who is an idealist. The admiration for Nehru is reflected in the opinions of the protagonist when he thinks Nehru as "The country's beloved Panditji, everyone's Chacha Nehru, the unflinching humanist, the great visionary" (11).

Politics is believed to be the dirtiest game in the world and its dark effects can be traced in case of two

characters named Gustad Noble and Major Jimmy Bilimoria in the novel *Such a Long Journey*. Both the characters have been manipulated as pawns in the novel. Bilimoria, in fact, represents Sohrab Nagarwala who was the cashier at State Bank of India in New Delhi branch. He is scandalized in a 60 lakh rupees scam. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, having used him, orders his arrest warrant and causes him sentence. In the end, Bilimoria comes to know about the truth and he is tortured even in imprisonment. When Gustad visits him in the hospital, he reveals the truth about Indira Gandhi's vested interests. Thus, Major Bilimoria's life is a representation of an authoritative state which uses its citizens as dispensable and exploitable pawns to further its own interests. The novel comments blind nationalistic patriotism of common people of India. Furthermore, the novel clearly reflects that Mrs. Gandhi herself favours the corruption in the highest political circles. She deliberately misuses her power and position to divert money from training Bangladeshi freedom fighters to the car business of her loving son. Her use of Jimmy Bilimoria exposes the hollowness of the government system especially in a democratic country. The common people cannot see the hidden truth and they worship their leaders. Indira Gandhi's false and fake reputation is exposed when she gets the title Mother India:

There was report after report of the ordinary citizenry's generous for the fighting men: about an eighth-year-old peasant who travelled to New Delhi, clutching her two gold wedding bangles, which she presented to her Mother India for the war effort (some newspapers reported it as Mother India, which really did not matter—the line between the two was fact being blurred by the Prime Minister's far-sighted propagandists saw its value for future election campaigns). (297-298)

People are always made fools by the corrupt politicians of India. They fall easy prey to the fake promises and idealism of the political leaders. One can notice the exploitation of common people when teams of fund-raising politicians tour neighbourhood. They make motivational speeches about the heroic stances of the present government or some criticise the ruling government. Innocent people of India provide a lot of funds to the political parties. Women remove their ornaments including gold bangles, earrings and finger rings and hand them over to the politicians. The fund-raisers put all the money and ornaments into their vehicles and go away. Unfortunately, all these donated goods are turned up for sale in *Chor Bazaar* and *Nul Bazaar*. The novelist strongly criticizes the innocence of common people of India how they are manipulated by political leaders to satisfy their selfish needs. Everyone knows that it is a scam but nobody cares because the glow of national unity is still warm and comforting.

Secondly, the novel deals with the nuisances created by the dominant political party of the times in

Maharashtra. The Shiv Sena Party always threatens the people of the Khodadad Building throughout the novel. The Parsis of the compound are badly tortured by the Shiv Sena Leaders of the times. They use every trick to dominate the people of minority community. For instance, the wall of all religions is destroyed by the municipal members of the city. It is the political leaders who don't want common man to live peacefully. They divide people on the basis of creed, caste and religion. They know the fact that division among people is an easy task for them. If the people are divided, they are able to rule the people of the country. The plight of common man is clearly visible when people are forced to leave the Khodadad Building. The people of the compound protest against the members of the municipality. However, their protest fails and Gustad Noble's friend dies in the end of the novel.

The ironical situation is presented through the selfish act taken by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Though she is known as the mother of India, but she does not care for the people of India. She has only concern for her offsprings and power. Her sole God is power. The idea of welfare for the country hardly strikes in the mind of Indira Gandhi. The misuse of political power and money can be seen when Sohrab tells Gustad about his opinions for future. His anger as well as resentment reveals the abuse of power at the government level:

But what about the leaders who do wrong? Like the car manufacturing licence going to Indira's son? He said Mummy, I want to make motorcars. And right away he got the licence. He has already made a fortune from it, without producing a single Maruti. Hidden in Swiss bank accounts.' Dilnavaz listened intently as Sohrab described how the prototype had crashed in a ditch during his trial, yet was approved because of orders from the very top. (68)

Mistry shows the Parsi predicament in the corrupt Indian society in the post- Independence India. The lives of the Parsi seem to be horrible and pitiable in India. The people of the Parsi community are exploited at every stage in the society. Thus, Mistry expresses his query 'How do we live in a dominant political situation?' Mistry, through his character, Bilimoria highlights the indifference of the Indian government towards the minority people. Politics interferes and intrudes into the life of common people. Whenever the oppressed try to protest the oppressor, they are victimized and murdered as such in case of Tehmul Lungraa. Lungraa is a resident of Khodadad Building but lives on fringes as he has never accepted as an equal by the other residents. He has "nothing to look forward to but a life of pain" (30). Having ignored everywhere, he is even rejected by the prostitutes. His tale reflects the harsh attitude of the state towards the disabled and marginalised people. Gustad Noble also

lives a painful and tragic life. Indian history accounts for the incidents how minority people have been manipulated and victimized. The Parsis in the novel feel insecure because of the growing political power of the Maratha parties in Mumbai. It is the political party which believes in dictatorship and upsets the whole social structure. The hatred towards Maratha parties can be observed when Gustad's friend, Dinshawji tells Gustad that "wait till the Marathas take over, then we will have real gandoo Raj...All they know is to have rallies at Shivaji Park, shout slogans, make threats and change road names" (73). The painful conditions and brutal experiences make the Parsis aware of their future. Gustad knows well about the ways to live in the community and he expresses his agony which is quite relevant even today:

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. How could Sohrab understand this? 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? Sohrab had snatched away that purpose, like a crutch from a cripple. (55)

Rohinton Mistry has presented the policy of nationalisation of banks in a different way through the novel. It is a well-known fact that the banks were nationalized in 1969 by the government of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Indira Gandhi suggested that banks should be under control of the government and the money. She estimated that it would make available Rs.200 crores for the public sector. She offered the amount to be utilized for quick-yielding schemes, such as minor irrigation programmes, rural electrification and fisheries. It caused a lot of bloodshed and riots. The primary purpose behind nationalization of banks was to attract the common man as voters so that Mrs. Indira Gandhi could use them in elections. The bank accounts of common people were opened. This was the only vote-getting tactics. Now the conditions of the Parsis were made miserable. As in the novel, one can see Dinshawji criticizes Gandhi's policy by saying, "Parsis were the kingdom of banking in those days. Such respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira has nationalized the banks" (38). The new banking system changes the daily lives of the common masses and Gustad Noble is also disturbed by the policy and takes the side of Dinshawji and says, "Nowhere in the world has nationalization worked" (38).

The novel, *Such a Long Journey*, exposes the divide and rule policy of corrupt and cheat politicians of the contemporary period. If people are united, they will

not rule the people. Keeping this idea in their mind, they make the people fight with one another. They divide people on the basis of castes, religions and communities. The pavement artist symbolizes the unity in diversity in Indian culture. He paints the wall having figures of most religious faiths that exist in India. The wall has paintings of Hindu, Muslim, Parsi, Christian, and Buddhist. Thus, it shows mutual understanding among the people of various religions. The politicians cannot bear with the peace in the community and Municipal Council is ordered to destroy the wall immediately.

Gustad Noble's dream of ideal community is shattered when Municipal Council destroys the wall of all religions. The selfish politicians destroy not only the wall, but also the harmony and peace among people.

Rohinton Mistry fearlessly denounces the Hindu fundamentalism in India. According to him, the Hindu fundamentalist intervene the public life of the people and create a lot of disturbance in the society. They claim Hindu religion to be superior to the rest of the religions in the world. As cultural hegemony is dangerous for any country, it is difficult for minorities to survive in a state of such crisis. Gustad's eating of beef annoys some agents of Hindu Fundamentalists and it soon becomes the burning issue of the time. 'Swimming Lessons' also reflects the same issue when the mother does not chide the postman as it will be harmful for common people to revolt against the Shiv Sena leaders. The novelist wants to say that everything is decided by the ruling government. They decide what to eat and what to wear. It is because of the Hindu fundamentalism that Gustad gives up eating beef. In this way, the government directly or indirectly interferes in the private lives of common masses. Though India has been a secular nation since the enactment of 42th Amendment of the Constitution of India in 1976, but it has now remained just as a historical fact for minorities because secularism has no meaning for them.

It can be clearly said that Rohinton Mistry has deftly presented the horrific effects of contemporary politics in India. While using politics as a major theme, he cleverly exposes the hollowness of Indian political leaders of the time of Indira Gandhi Government. He has brought the hidden aspects of Indian history to light. Various burning issues of time such as nationalisation of banks, Nagarwala case, fake nationalism, corruption created by politicians, misuses of power, fanaticism, divide and rule policy, use of common people by the political leaders, fake secularism, plight of the Parsis have been beautifully represented in a new way by Rohinton Mistry in the novel.

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