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Editors
Harpreet Bahri
Deepinder Bahri



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CONTENTS

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Modern Dalit Consciousness JYOTI SHARMA	5-13
Race, Rancour and Reconciliation in Post Apartheid South Africa: A Reading of J. M. Coetzee's <i>Disgrace</i> SIMMI GURWARA	15-23
The Narrative Point of View in Raja Rao's <i>The Serpent and the Rope</i> K. RATNA SHIELA MANI	25-36
Silence to Eloquence: Emerging Trends in Dalit Literature PAPIYA LAHIRI	37-45
The Aloofness of Expatriation: The Expatriate Woman in <i>The Tiger's Daughter</i> DEBADRITA CHAKRABORTY	47-61
Bonds and Bondages: A Study of Anita Desai's <i>Fasting, Feasting</i> RASHMI GUPTA	63-77
Father-Son Relationship in Rohinton Mistry's <i>Such a Long Journey</i> C. BHARATHI S.KALAMANI	79-83
Social Criticism in Aravind Adiga's <i>The White Tiger</i> RADIKA CHOPRA	85-96
Chetan Bhagat: A Libertarian R.A. VATS RAKHI SHARMA	97-103

Father-Son Relationship in Rohinton Mistry's
Such a Long Journey

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Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay in 1952, immigrated to Canada in 1975 and was employed in a Toronto bank. His *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a collection of short stories and is known as Mistry's "Malgudi." *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* are important novels of Mistry which create a vivid picture of Indian family life and culture. The Indian social set-up in twentieth century India comprises the middle class family and the pattern of the family is nuclear. It consists of parents and children. After marriage, the sons still live with parents, unless their jobs take them to other places. The daughters, however, leave the parental home and live with the husband and in-laws. Their relations with the parental unit of the family remains cordial. The relationship between the parents and the children is based, mostly, on conventional practices and ties. The twentieth century, however, has given rise to a greater number of nuclear families, mainly because of the nature of the jobs held, education of children, women's employment, etc.

Such a Long Journey centres around the family of a Parsi gentleman called Gustad Noble, his wife Dilnavaz, their two sons Sohrab and Darius and daughter Roshan live in the Parsi residential colony of Khodadad Building in Bombay. Gustad is the grandson of a prosperous furniture dealer, a lover of books and tasteful living, whose fortunes were squandered by an alcoholic son, Gustad's uncle. Gustad nurtures a daydream of building a book case, in collaboration with his son Sohrab, to house his decimated collection of books. His father's goodness and compassion inform all of Gustad's actions and relationships which constitute the novel. He works as a bank clerk. He is deeply devoted to his family of wife, two sons and a daughter. To trace the family genealogy briefly, Gustad's grand-father was a maker of furniture, a man who made it as "stout-hearted as his own being" (Mistry 1991: 254) in the belief that "when a piece of furniture was handed down, the family was enriched by

much more than just wood and dowels" (p. 254). The relics of his childhood days stood like "parantheses" around Gustad's entire life.

In twentieth century India, sons are educated for life outside the household and fathers want their sons to join socially respectable professions like engineering, while the children wish to adopt vocations of their own choice. The fathers expect the children to fulfil their dreams and debts. Education affects the father-son relationship in one respect: the adult sons begin to challenge parental authority in regard to the choice of marriage partners and profession.

Gustad's dream comes true when Sohrab passes the IIT entrance. To celebrate this along with his daughter's ninth birthday, he invites only his bank colleague Dinshawji. The initial atmosphere of gaiety, humour, songs, jokes and fun contributed by Dinshawji is followed by a nice dinner. The vegetable stew and chicken curry end disastrously when Soharb turns violent, uttering volleys of freakish remarks to his father and announcing his decision not to join IIT and instead, pursue Arts Programme with his friends. Sohrab thwarts his father's plans that had completely taken hold of his imagination:

And the Indian Institute of Technology became the promised land. It was El Dorado and Shangri-La, it was Atlantis and Camelot, it was Xanadu and Oz. It was the home of the Holy Grail. And all things would be given and all things would be possible and all things would come to pass for he who journeyed there and emerged with the sacred chalice. (Mistry 1991: 66-67)

At the dinner party Sohrab bursts out: "It's not suddenly. I'm sick and tired of IIT, IIT, IIT all the time. I'm not interested in it, I'm not a jolly good fellow about it, and I'm not going there" (Mistry 1991: 48). Gustad is sad and angered by his son's betrayal as he jumps back into the past in a bid to escape from being a co-traveller. He recollects with bitterness:

With holes in my shoes I went to work, so we could buy almonds to sharpen his brain. At two hundred rupees a kilo. And all wasted. All gone in the gutter-water [. . .] Remember, I kicked him once to save his life, and I can kick him again. Out of my house, this time! Out of my life! (Mistry 1991: 122)

Gustad's thoughts and vocabulary, however, in spite of his attempts, clearly establish an axis of tension, for he locks himself in the past refusing to be "bound" by present developments. That Sohrab leaves the house of his own accord is only a natural outcome of this tension. Whenever Sohrab comes up with a suggestion or a comment, Gustad lets his aversion speak out. For instance, when Sohrab explains how democracy was

mocked by chemical elections, Gustad cannot control himself and shouts that he is pretending to be an expert on law and politics and RAW. He lifts a finger and points out: "Better that the genius shuts his mouth before I shut it for him. Before he falls off that high roof he has climbed" (Mistry 1991: 93).

Again, when Sohrab explains the anagram Mira Obili and Bilimoria and suggests ways of spending the money received from Jimmy, Gustad springs from his chair without warning and aims a powerful slap at his face – "Shameless!" Sohrab manages to deflect the blow. "Talks like a crazy rabid dog! My own son!" (Mistry 1991: 121). Gustad's integrity is such that he cannot even imagine spending any of the money. But he is also a hostage of his belief in authority – his faith in Indira Gandhi and the institutions of power. These, reinforce his own authority as a father in the institution of the family.

Gustad experiences the same sense of betrayal regarding his friend Major Bilimoria, his neighbour for many years in the Khodadad Building, when he left the house without a word of information to him. Gustad considered him a brother and referred to him as a possible model of excellence in physical and mental culture to his children. Major Bilimoria was very affectionate towards the children and they were all admiration for him, having listened to the stories of his valour on the war-front.

The Major's abrupt departure wounds Gustad "more than he allowed anyone to see" (Mistry 1991: 14). These two events together have a disconcerting effect on him. He tells his wife: "I don't understand this world any more. First, your son destroys our hopes. Now this rascal. Like a brother I looked upon him. What a world of wickedness it has become" (p. 142).

Sohrab foresees a fight between him and his father because he knows he is responsible for the latter's unhappiness. He reacts: "It's no use. I spoilt all his dreams, he is not interested in me any more" (Mistry 1991: 321). But the mother rules out any untoward happening: "So much has happened since you left. Daddy has changed. It will be different now" (p. 321).

Tehmul Lungra, a mentally retarded person is injured during the heated debate which culminates in stone throwing. Gustad prays for him and cries for all, for Bilimoria, for Dinshawji, for his papa and mama, for grandpa and grandma, "all who had to wait for so long" (Mistry 1991: 337). It is at this moment that he accepts the return of his prodigal son, who comes to him. It is in complete surrender that the father and the son lose their personalities and excise their hatred of each other. They reach out to each other:

Gustad turned around. He saw his son standing in the doorway, and each held the others' eyes. Still he sat, gazing upon his son, and Sohrab waited motionless in the doorway, till at last Gustad got to his feet slowly. Then he went up and put his arms around him. 'Yes', said Gustad running his bloodstained fingers once through Sohrab's hair. 'Yes', he said 'yes', and hugged him tightly once more. (Mistry 1991: 337)

Mistry's novel revolves around the themes of family and friendship, which become metonyms of the society and the nation. The focus throughout is on the struggles of the family; their binding ties, and the trials they have to suffer. Mistry's humanism reveals itself in the depiction of a family who are closer and loving, in spite of all their differences.

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