

Journey between Reality and Modernity – Women of *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract

Decades have passed and women still fight for rights, their passion, a little space, and even right to speak in her family. Rohinton Mistry, a modern writer of Indo-Canada, has strong male characters and stereotypical women characters. Masculinity and patriarchy vs. Female and suppression. Mistry set forth a series of women characters who are dominant, submissive, revolting yet surrounded by fear, and strong yet pushed into household affairs. This paper deals with such character in his novel *Such a Long Journey*.

Keywords: Dilnavaz, Alamai, stereotype, Mistry, Long Journey.

We are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses, not suffered to fly abroad. We are shut out of all power and authority, by reason we are never employed either in civil or material affairs, our counsels are despised and laughed at, the best of our actions are Trodden down with scorn, by the overweening conceit men have of themselves and through despisement of us. - Margaret Cavendish Duchess of Newcastle

Rohinton Mistry is a Parsi novelist who migrated from India to Canada at his younger age. He returned to India for themes, ideologies and belief in all of his literary works. His fictional works have the aptness of imagery, grace in the characters, and a command on the language which gives him the calibre to be placed alongside the world's leading novelists.

Rohinton Mistry's novels are pure and simple yet studded with patriarchy; the Parsi community, humanity, tradition, and diasporic elements. It studies the life of parses with a socio-political eye and a sense of prevailing idea of being a minority. Mistry has written three novels: *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995) and *Family Matters* (2002). Mistry has a mysterious way of playing with domestic life and existence in his novels. Home for Mistry is twofold, the familial space and nationality. Though his characters share a sense of nationality, integration and compassions, they have a growing "microaggression" (Delgado 2) of their diasporic culture.

The novels have a significant shared vein, the relationship between an individual and society. Though Mistry is praised for his exceptional protagonist man characters, he is found to lack in expressing a woman's space at home or society. His male characters have the 'socially accepted masculinity' and women have 'socially accepted 'passiveness'.

Habib in his work *A History of Literary Criticism* talks about Simon de Beauvoir, she points out that the identity of women is never regarded completely without men.

. . . Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him, she is not regarded as an autonomous being . . . she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute - she is the other. (Habib 683)

Parsis traditions are rooted patriarchal society from ancient Iran, though they are not subjected to rigorous dress code of the Muslim women, they still share a restrictive and limited world. In Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey*, he dwells upon

two types of women; one is emotional, submissive, caring, and confined to home/kitchen while another with ill-manner, superstitious, crude and manipulative.

Such a Long Journey (SALJ), a novel which established him into a world of writers have no strong women character. The recurring female character is Dilnavaz is introduced as 'wife' of Gustad, 'mother' of his children. The male is central figure which she revolves around, her identity, her hobbies, her life remains ignorant to the eyes of the reader. Dilnavaz's life has deteriorated to filling water, fetching milk, making tea and gravy where even her opinions on family issues are considered unimportant.

At water-tap time, Dilnavaz awake automatically and her first thoughts were about Gustad and Sohrab . . . Exhausted, she stumbled sleepily to the bathroom. Water, water. Drums to fill. Hurry. Kitchen tank to fill. That big bucket. And milk to buy . . . (SALJ 62)

Dilnavaz is surrounded by male figures in her home with exemption to her daughter (Roshan), who is again under the shadow of her father and brothers. Sohrab (son) announced to his father the unwillingness in joining IIT and to pursue in education in arts. Gustad immediately saw this as a humiliation as it was not a male oriented subject, as arts is considered as passive and feminine. When Dilnavaz intervened the unpleasant fight, she was shunned and humiliated. The reaction of Dilnavaz is how the society wants it to be, passive, vague and humiliated. This directly relates to what Harriet Martineau in 1858 wrote,

We live in a new commercial and industrial economy, but our ideas, our language and our arrangements have not altered in any corresponding degree. We go on talking as if it were still true that

every woman is, or ought to be, supported by father, brother or husband. (Walters 60)

Even after a century and half later, Dilnavaz, a character of a novel set in 1971 relied on her husband and his approval to speak in her own family issue.

Roshan, daughter of Dilnavaz was nothing like her brothers. She was fragile, submissive, scared, shadowed and weak. While her brothers Sohrab and Darius went to meet their friends, she was confined in her home. During her birthday party when Dinshawji (guest) saw her, he impulsively blessed her, not for good education, not a self-appreciating job or to be an independent strong woman, but “gold in store” (SALJ 52). This hints at the affinity that women has towards gold or may be to dowry the parents must give to get her married. Gustad, her father, who became exceedingly happy about his son going to IIT, never looked back twice in blessing Roshan while she was ill, for heir and a spare in her lifetime. Gustad said,

. . . you are not very sick, you are much better. First you will grow up and get married, have children. Then they will marry and have their children, and you will be an old, old dossi before Dadaji is interested in calling you to heaven. (SALJ 274)

In the absence of Gustad, the responsibility of the family is not passed over to the next adult figure, the mother; but to the youngest of the lot, Darius. The stereotypical belief of any society that a male, be it the elder most, who is unable to walk or the younger most, who barely knows the society, will be in charge for a woman, be it mother, daughter or sister.

When Gustad had left early in the morning, he put his hand on Darius's shoulder and said, half-joking and half-serious, 'Listen, my Sandow. You are in charge, look after your mother and sister.' (SALJ 302)

Miss Kutputia, a woman who could have be portrayed as an independent unmarried woman, is portrayed as an irrational woman with superstitious belief "mean and cranky and abusive" (SALJ 7). The children of the building ran away whenever she was spotted "To children, Miss Kutpitia was the ubiquitous witch of their fairy stories come to life. They would flee past her door, screaming, 'Run from the daaken! Run from the daaken!' . . ." (SALJ 7). The only person who regarded Ms.Kutputia with kindness was Dilnavaz, not because she had affection towards her but ". . . Her childhood training to show unconditional respect for elders made it easy for her . . ." (SALJ 9) while "Gustad wanted to have as little as possible to do with Miss Kutpitia. He said her crazy rubbish could make even a sane brain somersault permanently" (SALJ 8-9). This shows that even as young children, the life and values for a boy and a girl was different, taught different, established differently and grew up indifferently.

Miss Kutputia becomes a rather stereotypical figure for an unmarried Parsi woman. Her involvement in black magic, coldness towards people in the building and constant interference in other's affairs makes her a symbol of emotionless woman. In reality Ms.Kutputia's decision to not marry was the result of witnessing her brother's wife's death during child birth. Following which her brother and nephew were killed in an accident. When Roshan fell ill, Miss Kutputia was the only one apart from family who tried to cure her, though her ways were unconventional, her intentions were real.

Laurie Coutino, a Christian typist in a bank where Gustad and Dinshawji worked is an important character. She symbolizes every woman who aspires to work and come out of the stereotype. Is she strong and secure in a male oriented workspace? NO. She was constantly harassed by Dinshawji, an older man who was close to retirement. Dinshawji makes lewd jokes about Laurie's body and her parts and nobody raises their voice to support her, on the contrary they call him "Casanova of Flora Fountain" (SALJ 82). He uses sleazy innuendos such as "Cannot bear this agony, yaar,' whispered Dinshawji. 'What a body! Ahahaha! Sugar and cream! What fun it would be to give her a mutton injection.'" (SALJ 87) "Laurie is such a brave girl! Not scared of my big, naughty snake!" (SALJ 111) "He stopped singing, and said, panting, 'Laurie, Laurie, one day I must introduce you to my little lorri.'" (SALJ 168)

Laurie never reacts to such filthy comments, she ignores them and replies with a polite smile. Gustad is not seen participating in this action, he also doesn't stop Gustad openly. We find him hinting Dinshawji to stay away from her but he backs off when Dinshawji becomes indignant. Laurie decides to talk to Gustad about his elderly friend's behaviour before going to the manager Mr.Madon. She lacks the confidence to stand up for herself, her own self-respect and protest to what the men in her office was doing to her. She is the important portrayal for what happened to a woman who is suppressed under patriarchy in workspace.

The only character in the novel who stood up against her husband/ male was Alamai, wife of Dinshawji. He always referred her as "domestic vulture" (SALJ 42). Dinshawji never cease to complain about his stand still sex life with his wife, he made this an excuse for his inappropriate behaviour in the workspace with female employees'. He is portrayed as a husband whose wife puts him through mindless

miseries. Gustad, unintentionally develops a hatred towards Alamai, even though he doesn't care about her side of the truth. This is very clear when he meets her after Dinshu's death. Alamai and Dinshawji were not blessed with a child, which could have been the cause of her detachment towards making fresh food every day for her husband and their personal detachment as well.

After Dinshawji's hospitalisation the readers are not aware of how Alamai nurses him and how often she visits him. It is again after his death we get a glimpse of her, she comes along with Nusli, their nephew. She does not want to prolong the prayers after Dinshawji was gone. More than Dinshawji, her concern was towards Nusli, When Gustad asks, "Do you want four-day prayers? At upper bungalee? Or one-day at lower bungalee?" She replied with "One-day, four-day, what does it matter? He is gone! . . . 'A-ra-ra-ra! Are you crazy? Four days? Who will look after my little Nusli? Who will cook his dinner, hunh?" (SALJ 285) She is portrayed as emotionless, selfish and a bad homemaker, while on the other hand, she misses her husband after his death, she sobbed on the way to the Fire temple. She wanted to take care of the little boy who was put in her care.

In many countries, especially in India, women are considered as domestic and sexual slaves, fragile, meek and emotional. Their opinion, interest and passion are ignored or ridiculed. Nilufer Bharucha aptly wrote in his book *Writers of Indian Diaspora: Rohinton Mistry: Ethnic Enclosures and Transcultural Space* about the novel *Such a Long Journey*,

. . . there is a static universe where they are denied knowledge of even their own stultification and oppression by their creator. This text which

is a fictional account of recent Indian history as „written by men, from a male perspective. (Bharucha, 134)

Mistry's women character are powerless, and marginalised. They never grown throughout the novel. Dilnavaz is confined to the daily remote activities of the household while her daughter Roshan is confined to the compound. Miss Kutputia though independent, she is a resounding image of witchcraft. It is preconceived that women cannot live without marriage. Two women break the boundaries, Laurie and Alamai, which the former is in question for her character and is harassed, the latter is disregarded for her aspects of love and are and is portrayed as emotionless, selfish wife. Mistry has left women remain confined even in his novels, with a rare few exceptions in this latter works, but we can't fail but notice the patriarchy which is prevailing in India, after years and years of modernity.

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