

Negotiating Power and Resistance in *Such a Long Journey*: A Postcolonial Reading

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Abstract

Postcolonial literature frequently engages with the task of unravelling the inherited association between state power and individual agency. This research paper examines the interplay of power, resistance, and minority issues in postcolonial India through the thought-provoking journey of Gustad Noble in Such a Long Journey (1991) by Rohinton Mistry. The novel serves as a biting critique of the state apparatus under Indira Gandhi's tenure during the national crisis of the 1971 war. Drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of power and discourse, it investigates the dwindling position of the Parsi community in postcolonial India and how they navigate and resist dominant ideologies. The study also explores how the authoritarian powers try to legitimize their corrupt tactics by intervening in the domestic sphere of ordinary citizens. Due to his Parsi roots, Mistry's fiction explicitly represents the anxieties of the minority community related to political insecurity and cultural marginalization amid political conspiracies.

Keywords: political power, resistance, postcolonial, minority, marginalisation

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is a contemporary novelist in Indian English whose fiction vehemently articulates the multifaceted portrayal of the Parsi community in post-independence India. Deepika Bahri has bestowed him as a 'highly canonical postcolonial' (Bahri 26) writer, and praised by Peter Morey as 'one of the most important contemporary writers of postcolonial literature' (Morey 4). His oeuvre, including *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002), elucidates Parsi nostalgia for the homeland with an acute awareness of its socio-political milieu. Critics often laud the dignity of his fiction by describing him as "a chronicler of the ordinary" whose prose "restores moral complexity to the lives of marginalized individuals" (Morey 22). Similarly, Bruce King appreciates Mistry for his "capacity to turn private suffering into a moral vision of community and endurance" (King 197).

In the multicultural landscape of postcolonial India, the Parsi community has often been revered as an ideal minority that is literate, laborious, resolute, and unswerving to the nation. Though underneath, there lies a profound apprehension regarding cultural preservation, survival, and inclusion. His inaugural novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), set in Bombay during the early

1970s, delineates the anxieties, insecurities, and common lifestyle of the Parsi community through the thought-provoking journey of Gustad Noble. Amid the political turmoil and state authority during the two historically significant events, Indira Gandhi's political stratagem and the Bangladesh War, the narrative sheds light on the everyday struggles of commoners and how they navigate acute economic adversity, familial liabilities, and unscrupulous tactics.

Existing scholarship primarily explores *Such a Long Journey* through marginalization, identity crisis, nationalism, and postcolonial Indian politics. Peter Morey, a literary critic, posits that Mistry's fiction highlights the 'moral responsibilities' faced by individuals in the wake of political venality by observing, "Mistry's narratives are deeply concerned with the moral responsibilities of individuals living within flawed political systems" (Morey 12). Highlighting the diasporic nostalgia and present identity crisis, Dr Varshika Srivastava states, "Rohinton Mistry deals with the happy past of Parsis as well as the rising anxiety over being appropriated, controlled, disempowered, humiliated, devalued, discriminated, and dislocated" (Srivastava 172). Similarly, Mani Meitei lauds the novel for its depiction of the socio-political milieu by saying, "his awareness of the contemporary social and political situation of India, particularly the period of the 1971 Indo-Pak war, is extremely exciting" (Meitei 9). Taking into consideration previous studies, this article contends that Mistry's fiction illustrates the rise of postcolonial governmentality, in which minority individuals internalize official discourses and self-regulate through quotidian activities.

It describes the ordeal of the Parsi minority community within the state apparatus, raising an ethical conundrum about identity, cultural belonging, and marginality in the postcolonial nation-state, as they often occupy ambiguous positions within the socio-political panorama of societies influenced by colonial histories and nationalist projects. Besides, the article's investigation of the themes of power, resistance, and minority identity examines how the novel reveals the subtle ways power operates in everyday life.

Power and Political Discourse: One of the key frictions in *Such a Long Journey* is the ongoing flux between ordinary citizens and the mechanisms of state power. Through Gustad Noble's involvement in Major Bilimoria's financial scheme, Mistry tries to divulge the spurious nature of political authority, where people feel "betrayed by the political leaders and no longer willing to believe political discourse" (Sharma and Kumar 158). This disposition perfectly synchronises with Michel Foucault's understanding of "power", which is deeply embedded in day-to-day acts rather than located solely in institutions. The key term of power in the title of this research paper invokes Michel Foucault's concept of biopower in modern society, where power is not solely exerted through coercion but through the pervasive hold of state authority on the everyday lives of populations. In *The History of Sexuality*, he postulates that "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault 93). In postcolonial societies, "governmentality" is not merely a physical force; rather, it is "the conduct of conduct" (Foucault 193) which shapes norms, behaviours, and truths. Government functions when the masses internalise these societal expectations without direct enforcement through everyday institutions, surveillance, and internalized obedience, as Gustad states, "Nothing is beyond the government. Ordinary people like us are helpless against them" (Mistry 338).

One of the key highlights of this novel is the institution of the hospital, which reflects how modern postcolonial societies manage their poor populations with utter negligence. It acts as a state apparatus where human life is treated in an undignified manner: "the stench of sickness and antiseptic, of old urine and carbolic, was overwhelming...human beings reduced to numbers and charts, waiting in lines that never seemed to move" (Mistry 80).

In a socio-political context, power is generally considered a tool used to oppress less powerful

groups. It is exercised to marginalize, humiliate, and exploit the less powerful masses. Furthermore, it is widely acknowledged that power must be perpetually enacted rather than only performed. Complementing this, French scholar Louis Althusser implies that power is not localised, but rather it is exercised through repressive forces like law courts, prisons, the police force, the army, etc. He posits:

“Whereas the unity of the (Repressive) State Apparatus is secured by its unified and centralized organization under the leadership of the representatives of the classes in power, the unity of the different Ideological State Apparatuses is secured, usually in contradictory forms, by the ruling ideology, the ideology of the ruling class” (Althusser 149).

Instead of punishment, these institutions impose the ideology of dominant groups. Political parties, educational institutes, broadcast houses, family, belief systems, art, and literature are all examples of this ideological infrastructure. As in the novel, the government uses media houses to generate nationalistic consciousness to suppress dissent through controlled panic: “the news on All India Radio was always the same: triumphs at the front, brave jawans, and the perfidy of the enemy. But under the triumphs lay the creeping fear of what was left unsaid” (Mistry 338). By generating systematic uncertainty, these processes erode the foundations of individual ethical fortitude. Critics have often studied *Such a Long Journey* as a political novel that questions the incompetence of postcolonial governance.

In the novel, power is exercised through the administrative apparatus, the monetary system, and the administrative opacity of Indira Gandhi’s reign in 1971. It also demonstrates how power is exercised through political discourse. In a broader critical context, discourse encompasses broader systems of perspectives, institutions, and practices that shape the formation of knowledge and social reality. In his review of the novel, Tarun Tejpal contends that Mistry took the source for Major Bilimoria’s story from the bizarre Nagarwala scandal. He also claims it to be a “fact-based-fiction”. The actual case revolves around Sohrab Nagarwala, a Parsi, during the winter of 1971, when he allegedly took six million Indian rupees from the Head Clerk of the State Bank of India. The case also alleged that the dubious act of money transaction was performed unintentionally by the Clerk on the pretext of a call by Mrs Gandhi. Later on, Mr Nagarwala was held captive by the police and died in police custody under suspicious circumstances (Tejpal).

A similar act is performed by Jimmy Bilimoria in the novel, which initially seems to him a patriotic deed. Through Gustad Noble’s involvement in the case, Mistry tries to connect the dots of the case to showcase the anxieties, apprehensions, and uncertainties of the Parsi community. Shedding light on the corrupt state apparatus which weaponizes intelligence and financial forces for personal profit, Bilimoria says, “She was using RAW like her own private agency. Spying on opposition parties, ministers...Bribes, thievery...so much going on” (Mistry 270). Jimmy reflects on how he was trapped under the guise of “national duty” by being put in charge of training and supplying fighters to Mukti Bahini by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. To make it operational, he was even funded with sixty lakhs of monetary aid.

Reflecting on the betrayal, Jimmy states, “Very clever woman...she said, if my enemies try to make trouble, all you have to say is...you imitated my voice” (Mistry 277). It demonstrates how dominant groups divert the discourse for their own benefit. In the novel, the money was rerouted to the prime minister’s private account “to finance her son’s car factory. Or could be for election fund” (Mistry 278). All the state amenities, from banks to media houses, intelligence, police, health sector, everything is centrally controlled and disseminated. And if anyone tries to raise their voice against the atrocities of the state apparatus, they are eroded with the corrupt tactics of blackmail, treason, bribery, and traffic accident. As the narrative stipulates, “No effort

was spared to inform the country of its invincibility, unity, and high morale” (Mistry 298) which demystifies how state power channelise through propaganda and ideological control.

Marginalized Bodies and Social Exclusion

The novel foregrounds the spirit of alienation, helplessness, and the marginalized position of the Parsi minority in India at the Khodadad building in general and Gustad Noble in particular. The process of marginalization “indicated the cornering of a particular group of people by depriving them of their identity” (Arora 178). The Parsi community in India has their roots in the Zoroastrian Persian Empire. Islamic tendencies replaced their religion, and those who did not agree to the foreign pressure had to take shelter in other countries. Due to its geographical proximity, India emerged as a site of security for the Parsi community. When the British colonised India, the Parsis enjoyed good ties with them and gradually emerged to become the most westernised of all Indian communities. In the wake of independent India, they lost their past glory and were alienated from their Parsi roots (Bharucha 74) and now they have been marginalized as a minority group.

In the post-colonial nation-building procedure, basic demands from micro-minority groups are turned a deaf ear by the state powers. It insidiously undermines their social status, from an influential group during colonial times to a vulnerable, anxious citizen in a majoritarian Hindu state, as illustrated by Gustad: “No future for minorities, with all these fascist Shiv Sena politics and Marathi language nonsense” (Mistry 55). The hostility towards the government further accelerates due to Sohrab Nagarwala’s involvement in a money laundering case during Indira Gandhi’s tenure. The Parsi community viewed it as a conspiracy to tarnish their image and believed him to be innocent. Dodiya posits, “The Nagarwala incident, because it involved a Parsi, jolted the self-image of the community no less” (Dodiya 46).

The site of Bombay is also used metaphorically to illustrate the emotional and ethical upheavals of its residents, especially minorities. The process of changing names from English to Marathi has been viewed as a threat by Dinshawji as he rebuffed Gustad when he said, “what’s in a name” by arguing, “Names are important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared... My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And one fine day the name changes... Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names?” (Mistry 74). The reference to ‘kusti’, a form of religious Parsi prayer, provides Gustad with a sense of spiritual protection amidst political and personal chaos by highlighting his Parsi roots.

Mistry represents the anxieties of minority communities related to political insecurity and cultural marginalization, which is shown when Malcolm Saldanha says, “We are minorities in a nation of Hindus” (Mistry 23). Once historically influential in commerce and industry, the community is suffering from demographic decline and cultural preservation in a radically changing society. When the government decides to nationalize banks, this has adversely affected the Parsi community as it renders them mere employees instead of masters in the banking sector. Though this move reflects nationhood, it works as a deadly blow to the Parsi way of life as Dinshawji states, “Parsis were the Kings of banking in those days. Such a respect we used to get. Now the whole atmosphere only has been spoiled. Ever since that Indira nationalized the bank” (Mistry 38). He further expresses his anxiety for the future in the wake of Shiv Sena and recalls derogatory remarks, “Parsi crow eaters, we will show you who is the boss” (Mistry 39). They are Indian yet culturally distinct, inhabiting the notion of liminality where the minority identities in postcolonial societies find themselves trapped ‘in-between’ two stages of development where “the location of culture is neither the one nor the other but something else besides” (Bhabha 41). This mixture of identities creates an utterly new, fluid, and subversive space, the Third Space, which not only challenges conventional aspects of culture and identity

but also offers new dimensions of cultural significance and thereby substantially transcends the confines of the boundaries.

Mistry posits that Parsi identity is not a static minority status but rather a continually negotiated subjectivity shaped by interactions with official authority, nationalist rhetoric, and urban development.

Micro-Resistance to Subvert State Power: Rather than being involved in a substantial political protest, the characters partake in what political anthropologist James C. Scott suggests is “infrapolitics” - regular, minimal defiance against systemic oppression to retain their agency. He argues that public demonstrations of dissent are rare. While scrutinising historical events of slavery and colonialism, he figures out that “hidden transcript” is an everyday contrasting form of political discourse which enables the subordinate groups to “speak the words of anger, revenge, self-assertion” that they cannot normally utter in the presence of their masters (Scott 18).

Linguistic mockery and individualistic moral grounds function as an indispensable aid of micro-resistance, enabling minorities to safeguard their sanity and identity rights in the wake of overwhelming national discourse. The characters in the Khodadad Building showcase their linguistic defiance by turning down the state’s demand to incorporate respectful and patriotic language during wartime. Instead, Dinshawji and other neighbours take on vulgar and acerbic nicknames to describe Indira Gandhi: “She is a shrewd woman...Saali always up to some mischief” (Mistry 38). It functions as a psychological safety valve for marginalized citizens to show their subversion toward the ruling regime by laughing at its dictator.

The compound wall outside the Khodadad Building acts as an essential symbol of geographical and cultural resistance against urban encroachment and civic decay. Initially representing a sense of security and stability which provides “privacy from non-Parsi eyes” (Mistry 81) to the Parsi residents, the wall gradually floods with “the flies, the mosquitoes, the horrible stink, with bloody shameless people pissing, squatting” (Mistry 16), transforming it into a dumping yard and a public urinal spot due to the negligence of the Municipal Corporation. Later on, it is pasted with slogans and advertisements to propagate the state agenda, which reflects how the state authority is meddling in the personal lives of community people. To get rid of this filthiness, a pavement artist has been hired to refurbish the wall into something breathable. He paints the wall with multi-faith religious murals ranging from Zoroastrian to Hindu and Islamic beliefs. The transfiguration is consecrated yet creative, which elucidates “the productive hybridity of the interstitial space” (Bhabha 2). The artist is lauded as having a “BA in World Religions” (Mistry 181). This form of creative resistance temporarily discontinues the process of demolition by the municipality, echoing how religious and cultural symbols can be weaponised to retain agency by the marginalized population.

The terminal conflict between authoritarian discourse and individual resistance is portrayed through the character of Major Jimmy Bilimoria. Once assumed to be on a patriotic mission under the state’s intelligence apparatus (RAW), Major Bilimoria was held responsible for serious charges of treason and branded as a traitor. He has been used as a scapegoat by the Prime Minister to carry out her shadowy tactics involving monetary transactions. Bilimoria’s heroic past has been erased by utilizing media houses and tagged him as a villain of the nation. Gustad initially feels betrayed, which demonstrates the fragile line between personal ethics and public corruption in postcolonial India. However, the air of frustration finally clears when he meets Bilimoria in the prison hospital. Bilimoria unveils the sordid political conspiracy behind the monetary transactions. Nonetheless, he finally decides to aid the dying Bilimoria and smuggle out his remaining money to safeguard his family. Bilimoria’s death has been confirmed as a political murder by Ghulam Mohammed, an intermediary between Jimmy and

Gustad. Gustad's bold step of prioritising individual moral loyalty over state loyalty is viewed as an oppositional political act in an authoritarian regime. By considering humanitarian notions and ethics over the law, Gustad fervently discards the state-mandated narratives of "patriotism" and "treason" in the wake of moral agency. The incident also fosters the narrative imagination of Mistry's fiction through ethical reflection and compassion, defined as "the recognition that another person...has suffered some significant pain or misfortune in a way for which that person is not, or not fully, to blame" (Nussbaum 90-91).

Amid the 1971 geopolitical crisis, the state authority used media broadcasts and newspapers to channelise a singular narrative of patriotism, unity, and absolute governance, but the reality is conflicting: a lack of basic amenities like food, severe inflation "when ration cards were only for the poor or the servants...afford to buy the fine creamy product...before the prices started to go up, up, up, and never came down" (Mistry 3). The characters refuse to feed on the preconceived state-mandated consciousness by cross-checking and questioning state media. The sense of community solidarity profoundly helps them in dodging oppressive conditions by igniting resilience and survival instincts. The symbolic use of the vinca plant represents resistance, which survives despite the hostility of passersby, as reflected by Gustad when he "never ceased to wonder at the vinca's endurance...despite the fenders of cars that ripped and clawed at its stems" (Mistry 125).

Another minuscule yet significant act of resistance revolves around the domestic sphere, which is meticulously portrayed by Mistry as a shielding fortress to keep the malicious political tactics at a distance, as observed by critic Peter Morey that Mistry "renders the middle-class Parsi household as a microcosm of national anxieties and unease" (Morey 46). For example, Gustad's constant hustle to cordon his residence off from outward turmoil and wartime shenanigans "with blackout paper taped over the glass panes of the window and ventilators" (Mistry 9) depicts his anxiety. Even after nine years of war, Gustad "left his blackout paper undisturbed", and gradually his family "grew accustomed to living in less light, as if blackout paper had always covered the windows" (Mistry 11). Once the powerless individuals legitimize their situation by believing that they deserve it, then it is very difficult to escape from it. Though the novel suggests that complete detachment from the external political forces is impossible. State corruption steadily creeps in the form of Jimmy Bilimoria's letters, which demonstrate the failure of postcolonial nationalism to secure ordinary people. However, the Parsi rituals and ablutions, morning prayers, and familial reconciliations work as stimuli to provide a sense of survival and sanctity amid the corrupted public sphere.

Although Mistry's narrative commemorates discreet resistance, he somehow remains watchful regarding the catastrophic results of confronting state power. For instance, the ultimate destruction of the community wall by the municipal crew reinforces the notion of symbolic violence, which defines the "status quo as obvious and appropriate, even when it is hurtful to them, individuals position themselves within the structure of society, further legitimizing and solidifying it" (Wiegmann 98). Another instance is the untimely death of the subaltern figure Tehmul Lungraa, in the heart-wrenching climax of the novel. This comes when the residents of another depressed neighbourhood decide to confront authority to meet their basic demands. They decide to take a sojourn near the refurbished wall, which will be demolished for the sake of urban modernization. During a violent commotion, Tehmul dies while trying to catch a falling brick. His death serves as a significant turning point in Gustad's life as he ends the long-standing feud with his son over Tehmul's lifeless body. It also paves the path to the spiritual renewal of Gustad as he ultimately musters the courage to cast off the blackout papers from his windows, marking a sense of liberation by brushing off state-induced fear.

Conclusion

Mistry's fiction presents an acerbic critique of corruption-driven democratic ideals in postcolonial societies. The analysis foresaw current discussions in postcolonial democracies regarding minority citizenship, belonging, and state surveillance. Through the lucid yet intricate journey of Gustad Noble, the novel explores how ordinary citizens traverse a rigid power mechanism while striving to sustain moral integrity. The narrative demonstrates how power functions not just through overt repression but also through routine behaviours that mould minority subjectivities, according to Foucault's theory of governmentality. At the same time, it also explores how resistance emerges, not in the form of revolution or protest, but steadily out of community solidarity, everyday minuscule ventures, and courage. Thus, the novel exudes a complex interplay of power, resistance, and identity in the wake of postcolonial governance. The vulnerability of social, political, and religious structures hints at the disintegration of fixed authority, where moral and ethical integrity can be used as powerful resistance tools to uproot oppressive systems.

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