

Revisiting Rohinton Mistry

Review by Ramlal Agarwal

ROHINTON MISTRY has been shortlisted twice for the Booker Prize. He won the Commonwealth Prize for Best Book twice, as well as other prestigious literary prizes. He made it to the Oprah Winfrey Show and the celluloid world, yet he hardly figures in literary discussions these days.

The present paper attempts to discuss his remarkable novel, *Such a Long Journey*, and restore him to his rightful place.

Such a Long Journey is remarkable not because of its narrative technique, nor for its linguistic virtuosity or its intellectual insights, but for its depiction of an ordinary man's fads and foibles, his aspirations, his trials and tribulations, and his daily grind. It is remarkable for its grasp of the life of an ordinary man and how his life is impinged on by the social and political greed of his time. It is remarkable because it highlights how the common man's life is suffused with humanity and human values, notwithstanding his various constraints.

Gustad Noble, a clerk in a bank, lives in an apartment in the Khodadad building with his wife, Dilnavaz, and three children: Sohrab, Roshan, and Daris. The Khodadad building is protected by a wall. However, the pedestrians used it as a cover for peeing and shitting. Gustad is very intimate with Major Jimmy Bilimoria, who lives in the same building, and Dinshawji, who works with him in the bank. The Khodadad building also houses other Parsis; notable among them is a Parsi woman called Miss. Kutpitia, the Dustoorji, and a few other Parsis with whom he is not on very friendly terms. Gustad is fully devoted to his family and friends and treats Major Jimmy and Dinshawji as members of his family. Jimmy and Dinshawji reciprocate Gustad's love for them.

Once, when Gustad jumped out of a moving bus to save the life of his eldest son Sohrab and broke his hip bone, Major Jimmy took him to the hospital and later to Dr. Madhiwalla Bonesetter, who was unflinchingly by his bedside during his convalescence. Dinshawji is an extraordinary character. Though he suffered from a fatal disease, he never showed his pain and always regaled people with his pranks and ribald jokes.

Gustad was overjoyed when his eldest son qualified for admission to IIT, the ultimate goal of all science students. He decides to celebrate the event, buys a live chicken, and invites Dinshawji.

The idea of plucking chicken at home does not go well with his children, and the party is spoiled. Gustad receives another rude shock when Sohrab declares that he is not going to join the IIT. Another blow is dealt to him when he learns that Roshan is suffering from chronic diarrhea. Another blow is dealt to Gustad when Jimmy disappears suddenly without leaving a word. Gustad begins to get cynical. One day, he receives a letter from Jimmy asking him for a favor. He wants him to deposit Rs. 100,000/- in the bank. Gustad wonders how he can deposit such a huge amount without any questions being raised and whether it would cost him his job.

But he decides to undertake the job because it is about helping his dear friend. He collects the money in the weird manner in which such dodgy transactions are handled. His wife, Dilnavaz, is strictly against the whole affair, and hence the money is kept in the house. One day, Gustad found a cat and a rat completely mauled up in his garden. There was also a chit with the poem "Bilimoria chaval choriya.". It becomes clear to Gustad that the act was done by Ghulam Mohammad, a colleague of Jimmy and a very rough character. He takes Dinshawji into confidence and deposits the money in instalments. A few days later, a story appears in papers that Jimmy swindled Rs. 6000000/- out of the bank by faking Indira Gandhi's voice. He is currently held by the police for further inquiries. Gustad and Dinshawji decide that the best way to get out of the tangle would be to take the money and refund it to Gulam Mohammad. Dinshawji assures Gustad that he will manage everything and wipe out the matter from the records of the bank.

Though the problem is solved, there is no let-up in the couple's worries. The estrangement of her son and Roshan's diarrhea force Dilnavaz to adopt black magic under the guidance of Miss Kutpitia. At the same time, Dinshawji's sickness becomes severe. Gustad remains by his side all the time, but Dinshawji succumbs to it. Gustad attends his last rites. At the same time, he receives another request from Mohammad to visit Jimmy in jail, who wants to see him and gives him a return ticket. Gustad feels obliged to see his friend and find out why he did such a nefarious act. Jimmy tells him that he did it at the behest of Indira Gandhi. Thinking that it was all to help Mukti Vahini, Jimmy agreed to carry out the plan. Soon he came to know that it was all for her personal use. He thought, why should he not claim his share in the loot and share it with Gustad and Ibrahim? After his return from Delhi, again, news appeared that the man arrested for swindling the bank had died of a heart attack. When Gustad is again at the Tower of Silence, a hearse arrives. It contained Jimmy's body. It was escorted by Ghulam Mohammad. Back home, Gustad finds a large gathering near the wall, which he had commissioned an artist to paint with gods of all religions to ward off people using it as a public toilet. The municipal authorities had deputed a squad to demolish the wall, and the local people were opposed to the demolition. A riot ensues between municipal authorities and local people, and Tehmul, a moron loved by Gustad, is hit with a brick, and Tehmul succumbs to the injury. Gustad is once again at the Tower of Silence.

The novel brims over with other characters and their activities. Dinshaw's jokes, Paanwala's Palang Tod Paan, activities at House of Cages, Miss Kutpitia's black magic practices, and Tahmul's pranks cry for fuller detail. They make the novel an authentic picture of a society driven by essential humanity and the heroic efforts of common people to fight all odds, notwithstanding their difficulties.

Reviewing the novel for The London Review of Books (Volume 13 No. 7, April 1991), Amit Chaudhuri said, "Like most post-colonial writers in English, he is something of an accident, the most fortuitous meeting place of a local sensibility and a foreign language." He says that the plot becomes more and more improbable, but fascinating in its complete abstention from credibility.

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Amit Chaudhuri overlooks the fact that the engagement between local sensibilities and a foreign language can also yield wonderful results. There are millions and millions of copies of novels born of such engagement sold all over the world, and connoisseurs of literature are never tired of singing paeans in their praise. Notwithstanding such sharp comments as Chaudhuri's, the readers know that of many kinds of novels, *Such a Long Journey* is of its kind.