

Between Private Grief and Public Crisis: The Dialectic of Trauma in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

Mrs. S. Muthulakshmi¹

Research Scholar, Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College, Erode.

Dr. A. Suganya²

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College, Erode.

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's debut novel, *Such a Long Journey* (1991), presents a critical examination of post-independence India through the dialectic of micro-historical individual experience and macro-historical political volatility. Set primarily in Bombay during the tumultuous year of 1971 against the backdrop of the Bangladesh Liberation War and the Nagarwala bank fraud the novel traces the lived experiences of Gustad Noble, an ordinary Parsi bank clerk. This paper explores how Mistry constructs trauma not as an isolated clinical state, but as a dual force: a personal landscape marked by familial alienation, bodily decay, and communal marginalization, interwoven with a state apparatus characterized by corruption, political deception, and postcolonial instability. By analyzing the spatial dynamics of the Khodadad Building, the symbolic significance of the blacked-out windows, and the moral disintegration of state institutions, this article demonstrates how Mistry frames trauma as an unavoidable condition of postcolonial citizenship.

Keywords: Parsi Identity, Postcolonial Trauma, State Corruption, Spatial Politics.

Introduction: The Intersection of Private Life and Public History

In postcolonial Indian English fiction, the private sphere frequently serves as the stage upon which political events unfold. Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991) exemplifies this narrative strategy by mapping the geopolitical anxieties of 1971 India directly onto the domestic space of a Parsi family living in Bombay.

The protagonist, Gustad Noble, is an ordinary bank clerk navigating the compounding pressures of mid-twentieth-century urban India. However, Mistry refuses to isolate Gustad's story within the realm of personal drama. Instead, domestic crises such as his son Sohrab's refusal to attend the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), his daughter Roshan's persistent and mysterious illness, and his wife Dilnavaz's resort to folk rituals and occult remedies are systematically linked to broader political realities.

The black paper Gustad stuck over his apartment windows originally meant as protection against potential air raids during the 1962 Sino-Indian War and retained through subsequent conflicts serves as a visual metaphor for his psychological state: a deliberate blinding to keep out a hostile external reality, forcing his family to live 'accustomed to living in less light' (p. 11).

By embedding the state-sponsored corruption of the Indira Gandhi administration into Gustad's personal life through his clandestine dealings with his friend Major Bilimoria, Mistry illustrates that the postcolonial subject cannot escape state politics. Trauma in *Such a Long Journey* is dual-layered: it manifests as psychological distress within the individual and as structural violence enacted by a corrupt, predatory state.

Personal Trauma – Domestic Fragmentation and Minoritarian Anxiety

Personal trauma in *Such a Long Journey* operates across three primary, mutually reinforcing dimensions: economic precarity, intergenerational conflict, and communal marginalization.

1. Economic Decline and Loss of Status

Gustad Noble's identity is profoundly shaped by the historic fall of his family's fortunes. Having inherited the fallout of his father's bankruptcy, Gustad's life is defined by austerity and a defensive pursuit of stability. His near-obsessive focus on his eldest son Sohrab's admission into the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) represents an attempt to reclaim lost middle-class security. When Sohrab explicitly rejects this path to pursue a general arts degree, the conflict extends beyond standard generational dispute, it shatters Gustad's desperate attempt to heal his inherited economic trauma.

Throughout Such a Long Journey, domestic safety is not a guaranteed refuge, but a fragile sanctuary continually compromised by physical degradation, economic powerlessness, and external political violence. Mistry utilizes the physical decay of the human body to reflect the precarity of the middle-class postcolonial household.

Roshan's Chronic Illness: Roshan's prolonged, debilitating illness acts as a primary locus of domestic anxiety, exposing the family's acute financial vulnerability and the inadequacy of the state's public healthcare infrastructure. As standard medical treatments fail due to cost constraints and systemic scarcity, the household descends into desperate measures. This stress forces Gustad's wife, Dilnavaz, to abandon rational agency and turn to superstitious, despair-driven occult rituals guided by their neighbor, Miss Kutpitia. Dilnavaz's reliance on clandestine spells and animal sacrifices demonstrates how domestic trauma erodes intellectual certainty, forcing individuals to seek control over bodily decay through mystical compensation.

Tehmul Minimalist: The physically disabled and neurodivergent neighbor, Tehmul, functions as the ultimate embodiment of bodily fragility and societal neglect within the Khodadad Building. Tehmul's innocence and vulnerability expose the absence of institutional safety nets for marginalized individuals. His sudden, tragic death—caused by a stray brick during a municipal street riot—serves as the climax of physical trauma in the novel. Tehmul's violent demise starkly demonstrates how macro-level political unrest and state-sanctioned violence inevitably claim society's most defenseless subjects, turning innocent civilian bodies into collateral damage of political upheaval.

Together, Roshan's wasting body and Tehmul's violent end emphasize that domestic walls offer no real shelter against bodily decay or political violence. Physical vulnerability inside the home directly mirrors the structural instability of the nation outside.

2. Parsi Identity and Postcolonial Marginalization

As Parsis, the Noble family belongs to an ethno-religious minority navigating post-independence India. Historically favored under British colonial rule for their commercial prominence and administrative adaptability, the Parsi community in Mistry's narrative faces shrinking influence in a Hindu-majority nation. This collective minoritarian anxiety deepens Gustad's personal defensiveness, turning his domestic home into a physical fortress against an unpredictable outside world.

Political Trauma: State Corruption and the Illusion of Nationhood

While personal trauma shapes the domestic narrative, political trauma forms the structural foundation of Mistry's critique of the postcolonial nation-state.

The Nagarwala Scandal and State Betrayal

The political backbone of the novel draws directly from the real-life 1971 Nagarwala bank scandal. Major Jimmy Bilimoria, Gustad's trusted friend and former neighbor who mysteriously vanished to join the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), re-enters Gustad's life with a covert request: to deposit and process a massive sum of illegal funds through his bank.

Gustad's compliance stems from deep personal loyalty, but he quickly finds himself entrapped in a high-level state conspiracy involving government intelligence agencies and illicit funding operations during the East Pakistan conflict. Bilimoria's eventual imprisonment, torture, and death in state custody reveal the government's readiness to sacrifice loyal citizens to protect political elites. This betrayal completely destroys Gustad's belief in civic duty, institutional justice, and lifelong friendship.

Disillusionment with Post-Independence Nationalism

For Gustad's generation, the idealist promises of post-independence India have given way to widespread institutional decay, systemic bribery, and state-sanctioned violence. The state is no longer a protective guardian, but a predatory authority. The blackout paper covering the apartment windows functions as both a physical shield against war and an emblem of deliberate emotional enclosure.

Spatiality and Metaphor: The Compound Wall and Blacked-Out Windows

Mistry utilizes distinct spatial metaphors to map the constant tension between personal survival and political intrusion.

1. The Khodadad Building Wall

The exterior wall enclosing the Khodadad Building compound initially serves as an unsightly site of municipal neglect and public nuisance. To counter this, Gustad hires a local street artist to cover the wall with sacred figures from diverse world traditions including Hinduism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Buddhism. The wall rapidly transforms

into a vibrant, communal sanctuary, fostering organic cross-cultural harmony among residents.

However, near the novel's climax, municipal workers ruthlessly demolish the wall under the guise of a road-widening project. The sudden destruction of this multi-faith monument by municipal authorities highlights the extreme fragility of grassroots, community-built solidarity when confronted by violent state expansion.

2. The Blacked-Out Windows

The black paper taped across the windows of the Noble residence serves as a powerful physical and psychological emblem of defensive withdrawal. Originally applied to protect the household from potential air raids during wartime, Gustad maintains this barrier long after the immediate threat has passed, reflecting a subconscious attempt to seal his family off from the unpredictability and violence of the outside world. However, this defensive isolation carries a heavy cost: by shutting out external dangers, Gustad unintentionally locks his household in perpetual darkness and emotional stagnation. The darkened interior illustrates how traumatic retreat, while intended to preserve domestic safety, ultimately stifles the living space, suffocating domestic intimacy and isolating the family from meaningful engagement with the broader community.

Despite the pervasive presence of personal grief, systemic decay, and political disintegration, *Such a Long Journey* avoids culminating in unmitigated nihilism. The novel's climax weaves tragic loss together with quiet, powerful emotional renewal, demonstrating that personal healing requires confronting rather than hiding from reality.

Reconciliation with Sohrab: The tragic catalyst of Tehmul's sudden death during a local municipal riot breaks through the family's long-standing emotional stagnation. In the raw aftermath of this violence, Gustad and Sohrab embrace in shared grief, finally dismantling the rigid walls of resentment and failed expectations that had separated them. This emotional breakdown dissolves their intergenerational feud and restores domestic unity, grounding their reconciliation in mutual empathy.

Tearing Down the Black Paper: In the novel's cathartic final gesture, Gustad climbs onto a chair and systematically tears away the decaying blackout paper from the window frames. As the paper flutters down and sunlight floods the apartment, Gustad symbolically relinquishes his need for defensive isolation.

As Gustad tears away the paper, 'a flurry of black paper fluttered down to the floor, like the wings of night-moths'. This cathartic act signifies his ultimate acceptance of vulnerability choosing to face the postcolonial world as it is, flawed and volatile, rather than hiding behind self-protective isolation. (p. 339)

Structural Analysis: The Mechanics of Dual Trauma:

In Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, trauma operates through a interconnected hierarchy that spans the domestic, socio-communal, and national spheres. At the Domestic and Personal level, the narrative focuses on intimate crises, specifically Sohrab's refusal to attend IIT and Roshan's persistent, debilitating illness. Driven by intergenerational rupture and severe economic precarity, this layer results in the ultimate breakdown of the home as a safe sanctuary.

On the Socio-Communal level, the destruction of the painted compound wall serves as the primary motif. Fueled by state encroachment and urban municipal displacement, this layer illustrates the erasure of organic interfaith community solidarity.

Finally, at the National and Political level, the narrative addresses macro-historical betrayal through the Nagarwala scandal and Major Bilimoria's tragic demise. Perpetrated by state corruption, the misuse of intelligence agencies, and geopolitical conflict, this layer causes a complete disillusionment with national integrity, proving that the subject's private vulnerability is inextricably linked to the corruption of the state.

Conclusion

In *Such a Long Journey*, Rohinton Mistry demonstrates that personal trauma and political reality are inextricably linked. Gustad Noble's trajectory illustrates how macro-level political maneuvering, state corruption, and historical conflicts directly penetrate the everyday lives of ordinary citizens.

By charting Gustad's transformation from defensive isolation to active emotional engagement with his surroundings, Mistry suggests that surviving postcolonial trauma requires acknowledging harsh historical realities rather than retreating behind physical or emotional barriers. The novel stands as both a trenchant critique of postcolonial state power and a deeply compassionate portrait of human resilience amid systemic decay.

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