

Examining Middle Class Mindset in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract

The paper examines how the middle class mindset is reflected in Rohinton Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey*, by viewing the pleasures and problems, worries and anxieties of a middle class Parsi family portrayed by Mistry in the novel. The Indian middle class composed of people who are educated, but neither rich nor poor, emerges during the British rule in the mid-nineteenth century and has been offering significant contributions in many fields including nation building. This class of people is enormously swelling with the progress of time and is shaping the society itself. The examination of the mindset of this class of people includes their way of thinking and their opinions, their responses to and interpretations of particular situations, their mental attitude or disposition, and their inclinations or habits. It appears that these people always prefer to take the middle path – they are neither too extravagant nor too miserly, neither too optimistic nor too pessimistic, their hopes and aspirations are neither too high nor too low. They attach importance to moral values and ideals, they are very much conscious of their image and prestige in the society. But it also appears that their idealism or ideology of adhering strictly to some values sometimes puts them in trouble and creates problems seemingly artificial and avoidable.

Keywords- *Middle Class, Upper Class, Middle Class Mindset, Middle Class Values*

Introduction

The famous *Minute on Education* (1835) by Thomas Babington Macaulay, British historian and Whig politician, paved the way for expansion of English education in India in the mid-19th century. The chief objective of Macaulay's proposal contained in the *Minute* was to produce a class of English knowing Indians to man partially the British administration, particularly in low-ranking posts, in India, and accordingly make the Indians reconcile to the British rule. But a subsidiary objective of the proposal was to create a class of 'Indians by blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, in intellect.' (Macaulay, Clause 34) All these objectives were fulfilled to a large extent, and consequently a new class of Indians, subsequently called the middle class, emerged as a privileged class of the society. The middle class is a class of people, educated, moderately affluent having their voice heard, and enjoying a special status, in the society, above the vast majority of the poor but still far below the elite or the upper class comprising the rich and the very rich with enormous economic and social power. During this period of British rule the conventional class system known hitherto changes structurally:

Whereas previous sets of class identities were overwhelmingly dichotomous (for example, the rich and the poor, or the 'big people' and 'those who have nothing'), the middle class has now become a highly elaborated component of local class structures and identities. (Dickey 559)

With the progress of time this class begins swelling enormously, and it no longer remains a single enlarged or fattened class but becomes a spectrum or cluster of classes with varying degree of affluence and social power:

Over the years a new (middle) class emerged in India. Apart from those employed in the administrative jobs of the British government, they included professionals such as lawyers, doctors, teachers and journalists. They came from relatively privileged backgrounds, mostly upper caste, and 'from families which were financially comfortable, but not rich enough to not have to earn a living. This was one factor which distinguished them from the richest stratum of Indian society, such as the large hereditary landlords or the remnants of an indigenous aristocracy. It also put them above the vast majority of India's poor'. (Joshi 91, quoted in Jodhka et al, 45)

The above remarks give an idea of the relative position of the middle class with respect to the other social classes.

During the last phase of British rule, acquiring modern education in India and abroad and developing a broader outlook, the middle class gets influenced by and attracted to the new wave of liberalism and democracy in the western world after the French revolution and gets impetus to build a

fruitful nationalist movement under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, which ultimately brings independence to India. With change of Government and India attaining freedom, the middle class, in the initial years, offers significant contribution to nation building. But the charisma of the middle class gradually fades away over the years in independent India and it changes in nature. Jodhka and Prakash describe the nature of the middle class in post-independence India in these words:

The nature of the middle class during the decades following independence was typically that of a salaried and professional class, without any direct creative involvement in trade, commerce and industry ... It derived its power primarily from the relative autonomy that the state enjoyed during this period. Through its control over the bureaucratic system, the middle class often hijacked the state apparatus and policies for its own benefits. (Jodhka et al 46)

Analysis of *Such A Long Journey*

Rohinton Mistry chooses to focus on a middle class Parsi family, the family of Gustad Noble, in his novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) set in the city of Mumbai during the early 1970s when the raging Bangladesh war involves a major part of south Asian countries including India. Gustad's family experiences all the middle class problems, worries and anxieties, and of course occasional pleasures as well. All these middle class experiences of Gustad's family are brilliantly captured in Mistry's novel. Mistry's brilliance in fictionalizing Gustad's family is partly because of his first-hand knowledge of Parsi middle class as he himself has a Parsi middle class background which Angela Lambert describes thus:

At that time (during his childhood) most middle class boys still attended schools run by Christian Missionaries. Mistry went to St. Xavier's High School, a Jesuit Foundation. Its curriculum was based on that of the English Public Schools and his teachers revered and taught the great British Playwrights and novelists. (Lambert 3)

Rohinton Mistry was ... the middle son of three, with one younger sister. His father worked in advertising, first as a copywriter then as an accountant executive, while his mother supported her husband and nurtured the family. 'She was happy in the role', Mistry remembers, 'doing the miracle that all mothers perform of making what was barely enough seem like abundance. We did not have new clothes and shoes as often as we might have liked but we were certainly better off than half the population'. (Lambert 2)

Born in Mumbai on 3 July, 1952 in a middle class Parsi family Rohinton completes high school education in St. Xavier's High School, Mumbai, graduates with a degree in Mathematics from the University of Bombay in 1974, then a year later he emigrates to Toronto, Canada, with his wife to

work there as a bank clerk. As a part-time student he secures a second degree from the University of Toronto with English and Philosophy in 1984. Though he is now permanently based in Canada, his literary roots are in India, in particular Mumbai. He has earned many a laurel for his brilliantly perceptive literary creation which includes novels as well as short stories. His first literary publication is *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), a collection of short stories, while *Such a Long Journey* is his first novel.

The Parsis are descendents of a community that migrated to India from Persia more than a thousand years ago, almost synchronizing with the advent of Islam to the Indian subcontinent, and their religion, Zoroastrianism, is even older than Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These Parsis who settled in India permanently are now an integral part of the broader Indian society with complete amalgamation.

Gustad Noble, the protagonist of the novel, is a hardworking bank clerk and a devoted family man who is too preoccupied with financial and personal problems to take interest in the country's ongoing political developments. The Gustad family – his wife Dilnavaz, their two sons, nineteen year old Sohrab and fifteen year old Darius, and a daughter, nine year old Roshan – lives in the Khodadad building, a favourite and affordable living place for the middle class Parsi community. The fortune of the Gustads has declined significantly over two generations making them professional middle class from elite trading class. Reminiscence of the childhood days at the home of his grandfather who was an elite trader with his furniture house, 'Noble & Sons, Makers of Fine Furniture', displaying high quality attractive furniture inside it, casts a shadow over Gustad's mind. Gustad frequently remembers how in his grandfather's home every occasion was celebrated with pomp and splendour. Such reminiscences are so deeply imprinted in his mind that one night he has a dream of such a celebration:

It was a day of great gaiety and celebration, of laughter ringing through the house, flowers filling up the rooms – in vases, in strands of *tohran* over doorways – and music, music all day long ... playing non-stop on the gramophone, playing in his dream while his grandmother sent the servants out repeatedly to buy special herbs and *masala* for the feast cooking under her supervision. There was such excitement and happiness filling his beloved childhood home, the sadness in his heart was acute when he awoke. (Such a Long Journey 19)

The acute sadness Gustad feels in his heart when he awakes after the dream speaks of his own aspirations, longings and craze, typical of the middle class. Sara Dickey observes that the middle class people are always conscious of their image in the society, and try to protect their image with undeclared competition which causes anxiety to the middle class people. Exactly this happens to Gustad, and he plans to host a combined celebration of Roshan's birth day and Sohrab's success in

the IIT entrance examination by throwing a party with chicken as the main item in the menu. But middle class financial limitations make Gustad go through a lot of planning and budgeting even for such a small party, especially because the Bangladesh war makes food items scarce and very costly in the market. The Gustad family confirms Sara Dickey's observation: The middle class people often censor and curtail their aspirations and necessities, they are not wasteful or extravagant, and they resort to careful planning and deliberate spending to acquire necessary commodities, and apply restraint making choices. Although they are not as unable as the poor to acquire the desirable goods regardless of their aspirations or strategic planning, but, at the same time, not able to enjoy the gratification like the rich, the middle class people are more likely to make 'simple' choices than to display the thoughtless excess of the wealthy. (Dickey 576)

It is a trait of middle class people that they are inordinately and disproportionately concerned for the future of their children. They like to see their children more well-placed in life than they are and lead a more comfortable and hassle-free life than they do. Accordingly they leave nothing undone within their capacity to build a firm and safe base so that their children can stand on it and shape their careers for a smoother, happier and more prosperous life than theirs. Sohrab's brilliance throughout his student career is indeed a source of immense pleasure for the Gustads, and his success in winning admission in the IIT (Indian Institute of Technology), a top class technical institute in the country, is an appropriate occasion for jubilation and celebration, for a IIT degree would guarantee a good job to make their son's life, to a great extent, free from economic problems from which they themselves suffer badly. Gustad's pleasure seems to be transient, for Sohrab refuses to join IIT because he does not share the values of his father as he belongs to a new generation with new ideas and new ideology. Sohrab believes that a IIT degree is not the end of the career of a person. He lays more importance on his personal likings and dislikings to decide on the path of his life, for him there are ample avenues to choose from to establish one in life. Sohrab's decision seems like a bolt from the blue to Gustad, makes him heart-broken, and feel betrayed:

O Dada Ormuzd, what kind of joke is this? In me, when I was young, You put the desire to study, get ahead, be a success. Then You took away my father's money, left me rotting in the bank. And for my son? You let me arrange everything, put it within reach, but You take away his appetite for IIT. (Mistry 55)

Gustad recalls with anger and disappointment how he and Dilnavas smilingly sacrifice their comfort and face hardship to build their son's future:

Every year at exam-time we fed him seven almonds at day break. ... With holes in my shoes I went to work, so that we could buy almonds to sharpen his brain. At two hundred rupees a kilo. And all wasted. All gone in the gutter-water. (122)

Gustad considers Sohrab's refusal to join IIT a calamity, a disaster for the whole family with his middle class values, for Gustad believes that without a good degree Sohrab's future is going to be doomed making him unable to get out of middle class bondage. Gustad's hope of raising the class status of the family at least in the next generation has been dumped in the cold storage. On the other hand, Sohrab is still unaccustomed with the class complexities in the society, and he develops his own view and ideology regarding a successful life. He becomes 'sick and tired' (48) of hearing the word IIT all the time; he is not at all interested in it. He blurts to his father at the celebration party for his success in clearing the entrance test:

Why can't you just accept it? IIT does not interest me. It was never my idea, you made the plans. I told you I am going to change to the arts programme, I like my college, and all my friends here. (48)

Gustad's middle class attitude makes him boil and he retorts:

For the last time, take my advice ... Forget your friends, forget your college and its useless degree. Think of your future. Every bloody peon or two-paisa clerk is a B.A. these days. (69)

Gustad is deeply hurt when he thinks of his son's ignorance of how deep is his father's concern for his future, how anxious is his father to free him from the middle class stigma when he enters into the material world after completing his studies. It pains Gustad to think of his son's ignorance of how his father manages to run the family with a meager income of a bank clerk and take good care to provide modern education to all his three children, although he fails to provide some of the comforts he had as a child in his grandfather's home. Gustad's agony is typical of that of a middle class father regarding how his children's attitude is very different from that of his own. Gustad is unable to see beyond the values he attaches importance to.

Gustad is also disturbed by the government policy, gross mismanagement and corruption because of which there is a steady decline in the standard of living of the ordinary middle class people making Gustad aware that 'more and more people had to draw on their savings.' (230) And this results in growing resentment among the middle class, ironically not against the government but against God, as Cavasji, an eighty year old resident of Khodadad building develops the habit of leaning his head out of the window to 'reprimand the sky' (and to express his displeasure loudly for 'Almighty's grossly inequitable way of running the universe' (87): 'To the Tatas You give so much! And nothing for me? To the Wadias You give, You keep on giving! You cannot hear my prayers? To pocket of the Camas only You fill! We others don't need it. You think?' (87) Cavasji's umbrage is typical of that of a helpless middle class old man.

Middle class temperament makes Gustad and other tenants irked and anguished even for the proposed alteration to the premises of the Khodadad building:

The compound would shrink to less than half its present width and the black stone wall would loom like a mountain before the ground-floor tenants. More a prison camp than a building all cooped up like sheep or chickens. With the road noise and nuisance so much closer. The flies, the mosquitoes, the horrible stink, with bloody shameless people pissing, squatting alongside the wall. Late at night it became like a wholesale public latrine. (16)

Gustad can only express his anguish, but is unable to do anything to stall the proposal or even to raise a voice of protest, and he has no alternative other than reconcile with the situation.

Towards the end of the novel Mistry effectively narrates how basic simplicity makes the middle class people vulnerable of being cajoled to do something wrong because of the intricacies of the political system infected by corruption. Gustad, as a bank official, gets entangled in his friend Major Bilimoria's scheme for siphoning a huge amount of money with instruction from the highest level into an illegal account, ostensibly to aid the Bangladesh Mukti Bahini (revolutionary army) in its war for liberation of erstwhile East Pakistan from West Pakistan, to create an independent Bangladesh. When Bilimoria comes to know that the real reason for siphoning the money is camouflaged and the money is actually going to finance the car factory of the son of one at the highest position in the political hierarchy and that the whole scheme is a fraud he takes an amount of ten lakhs out of sixty and sends the money to Gustad to deposit it in an account of his bank so that it can be later used for the welfare of the people living in the Khodadad Building. Gustad obliges Bilimoria thinking plainly about welfare of his fellow-dwellers of the Khodadad Building. On the other hand Bilimoria thinks if the major chunk of money reaches the Prime Minister's office which instructs Bilimoria to do all this, no one will bother about the missing ten lakhs. But Bilimoria is mistaken. The fraud is detected, the real culprits go unnoticed, Bilimoria is compelled to make a confession and punished with a four-year prison sentence. An honest and naïve man cherishing deep moral values like all middle class people, Gustad is thrown into a dirty world hitherto unknown to him. When Gustad goes to see Bilimoria in prison, he says to him: 'Gustad, it is beyond common man's imagination, the things being done by those in power.' (280) This is the last meeting Gustad has with Bilimoria before he returns to Bombay. By this time India is openly at war with Pakistan in support of the liberation movement of Bangladesh. News of India's victory makes front page stories of the newspapers, and the whole nation is immersed in jubilation. Gustad is also beguiled by the 'moving stories of how Bangladeshis had cheered the arrival of the first Indian troops in Dacca.' (310) As he

pores over the news papers, 'like everyone else, Gustad had begun to feel the glow of national pride.' (311) Then one morning the glow of national pride in Gustad vanishes abruptly when he discovers in an obscure corner of a newspaper a news item which 'stated that Mr. J. Bilimoria, a former officer with RAW, had died of a heart attack while serving his four-year prison sentence in New Delhi.' (311) Gustad knows Bilimoria's innocence in the sense that he is made a victim by political high-ups to conceal their own wrong-doings. Middle class values Gustad cherishes all his life disturb him very much while pondering over the Bilimoria episode, and it remains a nightmare for him all throughout his life.

Conclusion

Rohinton Mistry depicts in his novel middle class problems, emotions, egos and pathos, worries and anxieties through the character of Gustad. The novel brings to focus middle class tensions due to prevailing economic, political and social conditions in post-independence India. Impact of the Bangladesh war, fought on emotions rather than reasons, on the common masses including the middle class is succinctly described in the novel indicating the effect of the war on the economy of the country.

The novel depicts the three things that cause stress to honest and naïve Gustad: Firstly, the degradation of the family to the middle class leaving behind the days of abundance at the grandfather's home has been a constant source of discontentment to Gustad. Gustad's dream of celebration at his grandfather's home is a manifestation of this discontentment. He is always in tension in his effort to ensure comfort and respectability of his family, the main reason for his tension being economic. His struggle is even made harder to fight by an unwanted war, the Bangladesh war embarked upon by his country. Gustad's realization that honesty and integrity, the two ideals he cherishes most in his life, do not pay, pains him and makes him frustrated. Secondly, Gustad's middle class dream of building a solid foundation of his son's future life gets the severest jolt when his son refuses to avail himself the opportunity of getting admitted into IIT to secure a degree that can ensure his safe and comfortable future. Gustad considers this refusal his son's greatest blunder, and the greatest misfortune of his own. Gustad is so much upset by his son's decision because of his deep concern, as a middle class father, for his son's future life. Gustad is deeply hurt to know how his son's attitude has a gulf of difference with that of his own and how his son fails to feel his concern for his future life. Thirdly, another disturbing factor in Gustad's life is the prevailing corruption in the existing political system. He is surprised to find how a person like him, who hates corruption of any kind to the core of his heart, gets entangled in corruption of other people. Gustad realizes that the people like him, and of his class, are vulnerable to the complexities and convolutions of the world they have to live in.

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