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## **Time as Duration in Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey***

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### ***Abstract***

*The notion of time as flux and its corollary, the eternal issue of transience and permanence have engaged all the minds, philosophers and artists alike since time immemorial. Time is integral to realizing the pulse of Rohinton Mistry's Such A Long Journey. However, it is not the fretfulness over the fleeting moment which forms the core of the issue in the novel. Rather the brooding concern here is to strike a fine balance in order to form a synthesis of fixity and flux, motion and motionlessness as equally strong impulses. The purpose of this present study is to look into and explore this aspect of the work. I have drawn extensively on the works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Henry-Louis Bergson as part of an analytical approach to throw light on the paradox that lies at the heart of the novel: that transmutation and immutability do not only co-exist together but co-mingle into forming the truest identity of our psychical life.*

***Key words Fixity, Flux, Duration, Journey, Continuation, Growth***

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Many of the woes in the novel *Such A Long Journey* arise from nothing but the distorted perception of time on the part of the protagonist. So, once the veil of this misperception is lifted and the true nature of time is realized every problem gets resolved, everything seems to fall into place almost seamlessly. The flaw in perception lies in counting time. Counting time is a hazard, for human time, time as realized by the psyche is uncountable. From this perspective, to single out a moment as time is as much a perversion of it as the division of it into segments mutually exclusive. Unlike space time is cohesion as Immanuel Kant in his *Metaphysical Exposition of the Concept of Time* in *Transcendental Aesthetic* remarks:

‘Time has only one dimension’, ‘Different times are not co-existent but successive’ (as different spaces are not successive but co-existent). (Critique of Pure Reason, 54)

Different times are merely part of one and the same time. (Critique of Pure Reason, 55)

The same notion finds its resonance in the words of Henry-Louis Bergson:

Now externality is the distinguishing mark of things which occupy space, while states of consciousness are not essentially external to one another. (Time and Free Will, 28)

Within our ego there is succession without mutual externality; outside the ego, in pure space mutual externality without succession. (Time and Free Will, 30)

Thus time as perceived by our psyche is nothing but duration. And we vouch for it as we know, in all our moments of intuition, that deep within us, in all the quiet, disparate and away from all the palpable externality there flows another life, a perpetual stream as the moments rain in, permeate one another and coalesce into an ever-expanding, indivisible whole. *Such A Long Journey*, more than anything else, chronicles this other life, the true life.

Set against the backdrop of Indo-Pakistani war and the birth of a new nation in the form of Bangladesh, *Such A long Journey* is essentially a subjective history, a self-revelatory journey embarked on by the protagonist Gustad Noble, a Parsi gentleman who works as a clerk in Central Bank of India in Bombay during this time period. It is about aspirations and dreams that Gustad like any other loving father nurtures for his children and the set-back that he suffers as these dreams keep crumbling one after another leaving him helpless. It also depicts Gustad's relationships with Major General Jimmy Bilimoria, Dinshawji, a colleague, and Malcolm, his college friend, how each one of these relationships has a distinct equation of its own, its share of pain and pleasure, sacrifices and claims. But above all it is about Gustad's journey, his realization of life as it is.

If there is a single occasion in the novel *Such A Long Journey* which comes to unravel in all its vividness the dichotomy that constantly gnaws at the core of it, it is when Gustad Noble, sick and tired of the filth near the wall surrounding Khodadad building, hires a pavement artist to paint it with images of gods and saints as part of an idea to cleanse the area. Here is how the artist feels as he takes up his new assignment:

But the artist began to have misgivings as the wall underwent its transformation. Bigger than any pavement project he had ever undertaken, it made him restless. Over the years, a precise cycle has entered the rhythm of his life, the cycle of arrival, creation and obliteration. Like sleeping, waking and stretching, or eating, digesting and excreting, the cycle sang in harmony with the blood in his veins and the breath in his lungs. He learned to disdain the overlong sojourn and the procrastinated departure, for they were the progenitors of complacent routine, to be shunned at all costs. The journey - chanced, unplanned, and solitary - was the thing to relish. Now, however, his old way of life was being threatened. The agreeable neighbourhood and the solidity of the long, black wall were reawakening in him the usual sources of human sorrow: a yearning for permanence, for roots, for something he could call his own, something immutable. Torn between staying and leaving, he worked on, ill at ease, confused and discontented. (*Such A Long Journey* 184)

What tortures the artist here is not the eternal issue of permanency and transience, of fixity in flux, rather the paradoxical longings for changelessness and change, constancy and continuity. It is in this sense *Such A Long Journey* comes to represent a world which is more Bergsonian than Keatsian. Here the pursuit is not to spend eternity in a fleeting second but to make it abiding in the sea of change which is both enduring and desirable. And so danger lies not in the utterance of a word like the tolling of a bell as death knell to disrupt the momentum as in Keats' *Ode To A N*

*ightingale* but in dwelling too long in a single moment so as to shut oneself in the cocoon of it at the expense of the continuation that life is. As Henry- Louis Bergson asserts life is a flow and time, a duration where-in our past, without a shadow of doubt, endures, however, not in itself but as it is fused into our present in a perpetual design to shape our future similar to a musical rhythm which has a beginning, a middle, and an end, all synthesized into a whole. It is this that Gustad Noble, the protagonist of the novel, is destined to learn in such a long journey of his life.

But the beginning is not auspicious. Leading a life in Bombay as a banker belonging to the minority Parsi community, Gustad constantly feels being pushed, getting constricted whether it is the place where he lives in, Khodadad Building which is enclosed by the sky-scrapers all around it, with a surrounding wall meant for privacy but soon turning out to be the source of stench, stinking always as it is made into a public lavatory with the mosquitoes invading houses day and night, a constant hazard to the health of the inhabitants, his once in a while expedition to market always performed under the fear psychosis of the possibility of affronting remarks coming his way from the majority who don't share his food culture, or in the street, in buses where things can take a wrong turn, one such occasion leading to his own accident. And as he is thus pushed to the brink spatially, there grows within him a fierce propensity to unwind in the temporal zone. He indulges in, ransacks the past, plucks a moment here, a moment there and not only lives in them but goes onto imposing them on the present moment as he dares to shove them into existence in all their details. A case in point is that occasion when Gustad tries to replicate in all its nuances a happy feast day from the past to celebrate the present moment, his son Sohrab's IIT success and daughter Roshan's birthday, all inevitably ending in disaster. Unceremonious departure of Jimmy Bilimoria, his trusted friend, without any prior notice which Gustad considers to be no less than stabbing at the back and Sohrab's sudden loss of appetite for IIT do not help his cause either as he seeks more and more comfort in the relics of the past, in lost times.

Gustad's ailment, however, lies in his clutching at the past, in his desperate attempt to force it upon the present to exclude the present and not in his reminiscence of lost times for lost times are not insubstantial as Bergson says:

What are we; in fact what is our character if not the condensation of the history that we have lived from our birth. Doubtless we think with only a small part of our past but it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul that we desire, will and act. Our past then as a whole is made manifest to us in its impulse; it is felt in the form of tendency. (*Creative Evolution*, 12)

This is what Gustad's close friend Dinshawji probably wanted to say when he saw the renaming of the streets and places associated with his past, his lived life. Traumatized by the sabotage of his past, he remarks in all helplessness:

No, Gustad. You are wrong. Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared; in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkhmar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it's on Lokmanya Tilak Marg. I live at Sleater Road. Soon that will also disappear. My whole life I have come to work at Flora Fountain. And one fine day the name changes. So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living the wrong life, with all the wrong names? Will I get a second chance to live it all again, with these new

names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like that? Tell me!  
(*Such A Long Journey*, 74)

It is again sabotage of his past as he suffers from memory loss inflicted upon him as a wretched consequence of conspiracy hatched by the state authority that reduces Jimmy, Gustad's friend, into a tortured soul. Jimmy's life becomes a virtual hell as he lives on each and every moment in the prison cell in affliction. He gropes around in the dim memory lane of his, trying to pour from it some substance into the empty husk that his present has become. Gustad, helpless, watches in silence as life continues. As he moves on, he slowly, gradually comes to realize the truth that is beginning to dawn on him: that life is a flow.

All this gets encapsulated in that symbolic moment when Gustad looks with longing at the pristine sea, its steady, continuous stream and makes a wish with tears in his eyes "If a person cried here by the sea, he thought, than the tears would mix with the waves. Salt water from the eyes mixing with salt water from the ocean." (*Such A Long Journey* 231) Gustad realizes that life is a duration as time is so. We are not to be choked in the past. However, it does not mean the erosion of lost times for our past endures as the very concept of duration entails the continuation of the past as Bergson remarks:

Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself live, when it refrains from separating its present states from its former states. For this purpose it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; for then it would not endure. Nor need it forget its former states. It is enough that in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tone melting, so to speak, into one another. (*Time And Free Will* 28)

Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. (*Creative Evolution* 11)

Our past, because it throws light on our present, blends with it to shape our future. As Bergson says, "for a conscious being to exist is to change, to change is to mature, to mature is to go on creating one's self endlessly (*Creative Evolution* 13). To live is to endure, to carry on, to sustain our past into the present and to become and change.

So, when after an altercation with his father Sohrab leaves home, he does not die, does not get effaced from Gustad's life. He endures in his memory and just as he continues to exist in him in this way, it changes Gustad's way of looking at life; what he failed to see in Sohrab's case being blindfolded by his own egoistic desires, he now comes to realize: that every life flutters like his own, every breathing thing has its own wings of desire. It is this understanding that makes Gustad look at Tehmul with fatherly affection as the entire world goes in its worldly way jeering at Tehmul's abnormality, his deformity. When Tehmul is dealt a fatal blow, it is Gustad who carries this orphan in his arms and performs the last rites. And as he goes through the ritual, prays for Tehmul, he prays, at the same time, for all the lost lives, his grandfather, his father and mother, Jimmy, his soul mate and Dinshawji, his endearing companion. In one sweep, in one single moment of intuition all the past gets merged into the present. And there is almost a sense of preordained justice in the fact that Sohrab's return should coincide with Tehmul's departure. As Sohrab stands at the threshold Gustad simply nods at him, says 'Yes' almost as if with the anticipation of his whole being, his heart and soul. And as he caresses Sohrab's head with his hand

still stained with Tehmul's blood, it, in a way, completes a cycle: of past meeting the present to swell into future. It is this sense of rhythm that reverberates in the novel. And all this brings home the realization that life is neither a perpetual unfolding of disjointed moments nor fixity of select few occasions but simply a duration which harmonizes both changelessness and change.

*Such A Long Journey* comes to uphold the very essence of journey which simply says we should live our moments, live them, bear them within us and move on, Continue. And it is in this sense every journey is worth it. Every journey is growth and accumulation just as Gustad's is.

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