

# Between Private and Public Spheres: The Politics of Realism in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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ONE OF THE TRENDS UNDERLYING some of the most spectacular political events in recent times — including the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, the rise of right-wing populism, and authoritarian (and largely unanswered) demonstrations of power, along with crises and protests occurring in places from Chile to Hong Kong — seems to be a steadily growing distance between the so-called “people” and the “state.” Without delving further into a discussion of contemporary political issues, I want to develop some ideas about realism as a style that stages a political debate about this increasing polarization between the people and the state (or between the private and the public) in connection with a discussion of Rohinton Mistry’s first novel, *Such a Long Journey*. For various reasons, realism is a literary style that often has been marginalized in contemporary literary studies, an issue I wish to address via a reading of Mistry’s novel. Furthermore, by focusing on *Such a Long Journey*, written by one of the most-read writers in what one might call the postcolonial canon, I want to contribute to a growing body of critical work that seeks to re-evaluate the meaning of realism within a postcolonial perspective. A renewed engagement with realism, I argue, may open up new ways to engage the postcolonial at a time when the field of postcolonial studies seems to have lost some of its critical energy.

To many postcolonial critics, literary realism seems to fit poorly with the established theoretical concepts engaged in an orthodox analysis of postcolonial texts. On the one hand, the theoretical vocabulary derived mainly from poststructuralist theory has been crucial in terms of the formation of postcolonial studies as an academic field (see, in particular, Syrotinski 11-25). On the other hand, the sometimes exaggerated use of distinctly anti-realist concepts — something allegedly connoting radical politics, radical critique, emancipation, subversion, resistance, polyphony, plurality, hybridity, pastiche, parody, catachresis, irony, carnival, the writ-

erly, and so on — has meant that many postcolonial literary readings have tended to say more about postcolonial studies as an academic institution and as a theoretical orientation than about the texts themselves.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, realism typically is associated with anachronism, naive humanism, bad faith, ideology (capitalist/imperialist/racist, etc.), commodified culture, false consciousness, totality and totalitarianism, illusion, delusion, essentialism, spurious epistemology, and so on. For a long time, we have been stuck with this unfortunate dichotomy, which is mechanically (and endlessly) repeated within postcolonial studies in particular and within literary studies in general. Realism as a literary form constitutes a critical *blind spot* despite the fact that a considerable amount of postcolonial literature belonged (and still belongs) to this tradition — testifying, as I have suggested, to a problematic relationship between the theoretical assumptions of the field and its literary texts.

Within the last decade, perhaps in conjunction with the general feeling of a decline in popularity within postcolonial studies or of the perception of the field having been surpassed by other, adjacent fields such as globalization studies, race studies, world literature, and diaspora studies, literary realism has made a sort of qualified comeback, not only in postcolonial studies but also perhaps more widely in literary studies.<sup>2</sup> Thus, special issues of *Journal of Narrative Theory* (edited by Audrey Jaffe and Abby Coykendall), *Modern Language Quarterly* (edited by Joe Cleary, Jed Esty, and Colleen Lye), and *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (edited by Lauren M.E. Goodlad) have approached the issue of literary realism within a postcolonial context. Furthermore, a number of books and scholarly articles have considered the issue of postcolonial realism, addressing both the paradox of the previous resistance to realism within a postcolonial perspective (in spite of the fact that a large part of postcolonial literature could be categorized as realist) and offering more productive and more sophisticated ways of understanding the potential of realism within a postcolonial context. The renewed interest in literary realism offers new ways of reconceptualizing this mode within a postcolonial perspective, and the argument I want to develop in this article should be seen as an extension of this line of work.

As J. Hillis Miller observes, literary realism has always had difficulty recognizing its own boundaries and those of history (455).<sup>3</sup> In Mistry's oeuvre, this seems particularly to be the case. Peter Morey refers approvingly to Linda Hutcheon's notion of "historiographic metafiction" to de-

scribe Mistry's realist mode in which "history and fiction are intertwined, and the boundaries between them blurred to allow a new perspective to emerge" (92; see also Hutcheon 105-23). At the same time, several critics have been eager to point out that, while Mistry *seems* to be using traditional realism, his works in fact engage in a more sophisticated *critique* of realism. Thus, David Williams views Mistry's realism as a "postcolonial resistance to a form of realism which would naturalize the status quo" and situates Mistry's style within what he calls "the postrealist ideology of postcolonial writing" (67), while Morey observes further that Mistry's work is not simply "perpetuating the traditions of the nineteenth-century European realist novel" but should instead be seen as an example of "post-colonial 'metarealism'" (*Fictions* 183, 184).<sup>4</sup> Deepika Bahri looks at the novel's mimetic-epistemological discourse, arguing that traditionally this discourse is problematic "because it is associated with such terms as 'copy,' 'reproduction,' and 'imitation,' and so in danger of contributing to rather than challenging the problems of fixed identity that postcolonial discourse has consistently struggled against" (123). To Bahri, however, Mistry's style at the same time draws attention to the *artificiality* of realism and hence transcends this problematic.

One could argue that these critical positions to some extent eliminate the specificity of realism, a kind of modernist "overwriting" of realism's aesthetic style. What seems to be needed here, I would argue, is a non-apologetic approach to Mistry's realist style. *Such a Long Journey* flirts with the "real" in a challenging and often revisionary way, something evidently provoking both literary critics and Shiv Sena supporters alike.<sup>5</sup> The novel refers frequently to significant historical figures and events such as Indira Gandhi, Jawarhalal Nehru, and the notorious and mysterious event central to the novel's plot: the case of Captain Sohrab Rustom Nagarwala. These fictional appropriations, I would argue, do not lead away from realism, as Morey and others suggest; on the contrary, they push us further into the distinct workings of Mistry's realism.

As Georg Lukács argues in *The Historical Novel*, historical realism enters literary history as a significant genre when fiction becomes historically self-conscious — in other words, self-conscious of being part of political discourse (31). It is when "the personal, private, egoistic activity of individual human beings" enters the orbit of the public that these non-narratable, individual activities lend themselves to narrative significance (39). My overall argument in this article is that *Such a Long Journey's*

historical realism is intimately connected to the *political* in the sense that realism, as J.P. Stern puts it, is based on “the premise of a single, undivided reality” (50), or what Ayelet Ben-Yishai refers to more recently as “the reality of what is commonly accepted as real” (15). The key notion here is the idea of the common as a collectively negotiated and hence political reality, as opposed to a private, individual reality. My notion of literary realism in particular builds on recently published works that move away from the more traditional epistemological definition of realism in order to explore notions of realism centred on ideas of consensus, commonality, common identity, collectivities, and communities (see Ermath; Shaw; Duncan; Greiner). While realism has often been discussed as an epistemological style, I would argue that in Mistry’s oeuvre it is primarily related to the *political* or to the collectively imagined social world. Mistry’s collectively and hence politically imagined world essentially addresses the relationship between private and public spheres. My argument is that realism as an aesthetic style emerges in connection with a *troubled* relation between the private and the public when this relation turns into an ironic experience. In Mistry’s novel, we witness a plethora of impressionistic everyday scenes, a private realm concentrated on domestic family concerns. At the same time, we see an ever-intensifying narrative impulse in the form of digressive, minor, and extraneous stories that proliferate in multiple directions, as if to mitigate the experience of the ironic. However, they remain formulated largely within the private sphere. Ultimately, once the novel has correlated the private and the public spheres — that is, the point at which they engage in a direct relation and together form a whole narrative — we see the workings of Mistry’s realist style. Mistry’s realism is thus an attempt to overcome irony by synchronizing the proliferating, private narratives that emerge as symptoms of a fractured relationship between private and public spheres within a collective, hence political, framework.

### The Public versus the Private

In *Such a Long Journey*, we follow a small and relatively isolated Parsi community in and around the Khodadad Building, more specifically the Noble family. The novel begins with a scene in which the novel’s main character, Gustad Noble, prepares for his morning prayer. Alone and embittered, Gustad reminisces about the mornings when he used to carry out this ritual with Bilimoria, his close friend for many years. Bilimoria left the Khodadad Building without any notice shortly before the novel

begins. Only later in the novel do we learn that Gustad at this point is already in possession of a letter from Bilimoria, in which the latter explains he had to leave so abruptly due to being sent on a secret government mission. Thus, from the beginning of the novel, we find the contours of an encounter between two essentially separate realms: the private sphere of Gustad and the public discourse to which the character of Bilimoria essentially belongs.

It is of course important to acknowledge the extent to which the story unfolds within a specifically Parsi context. As Nilufer Bharucha rightly points out, Mistry's oeuvre looks particularly at "the detailing of Parsi identity. It also reveals how Parsis are learning to cope with the reality of post-colonial India and how they are coming to terms with their new lives in the West" ("When" 59). Although Parsis have resided in India for hundreds of years, contributing to all areas of Indian culture and society, today the ethnic minority consists of sixty thousand people in a total Indian population of around 1.3 billion people. Aspects of marginality are obviously present in *Such a Long Journey*, a novel that demonstrates a keen awareness of the problems involved in identifying with a homogenizing and totalizing idea of national identity formation. More generally, in all of Mistry's novels, the author portrays Parsi characters as Jagdish Batra observes: "They have Parsi names, they pray and observe rituals the way Parsis are expected to do. Also they eat and dress in a particular way" (115) — albeit not without conflict or undivided enthusiasm, especially among members of the younger generation (such as Sohrab in *Such a Long Journey* and Murad in *Family Matters*). However, I would argue that unlike *Family Matters* in particular, Mistry's first novel is less centred on the Parsi community per se (even though this aspect evidently plays an important role) and is more focused on the interrelationships between citizens and the state in a general sense. In the novel's opening scene, Gustad reminisces about how he used to perform the Parsi morning ritual with his friend Major Bilimoria; the point is, of course, that this activity takes place within the private, intimate sphere; Gustad is disappointed with Bilimoria because the latter has chosen to prioritize the state's affairs over the values of the family and, from a wider perspective, of the Parsi community.

To Gustad, Bilimoria has always been "a good example" for the children, a "legendary hero" (13), "a loving brother," and "a second father to the children" (14). Bilimoria was very much a part of Gustad's inner

sanctuary of the private realm. In the letter, which is rendered in full only later in the novel (after it has been referred to enigmatically several times), Bilimoria discloses that he felt compelled to prioritize his duty to the country over familial loyalties, something that Gustad, fanatically devoted to the private sphere, sees as a kind of betrayal. At the same time, the letter worries Gustad because, while addressed to him as a trusted friend (*Journey* 54-55), it nonetheless implores him likewise to prioritize public duty over family life, an act that would greatly endanger his safety. The favour Bilimoria asks of Gustad involves the illegal and highly risky enterprise of channelling the huge sum of ten lakh rupees (whose origins Gustad knows nothing about) into a secret bank account.<sup>6</sup>

While reading Bilimoria's letter, Gustad remembers an accident that happened nine years earlier when he jumped in front of a bus to save his son Sohrab. On that occasion, Bilimoria had taken the badly injured Gustad in his strong arms and carried him to a clinic, where he received a miraculous treatment: "For the thousandth time, his heart filled with gratitude for Jimmy Bilimoria. If it hadn't been for Jimmy's taking him to Madhiwalla Bonesetter, he would be a complete cripple today" (60-61). Gustad finds some paper, remembers his father's bookstore fondly, and finally writes the letter to Bilimoria. In the end, what makes Gustad write back to Bilimoria is the affective landscape of the private in which the latter still plays a vital role.<sup>7</sup>

But writing back to Bilimoria and, in a further sense, accepting his request is at the same time an act that breaks the carefully constructed protective shield around Gustad's private realm. From this moment in the novel, the relationship between private and public trajectories intersecting Gustad's life becomes increasingly problematic and unstable. The irony here, which is revealed only much later in the novel, is of course that Bilimoria originally took the corrupt government money in order to distribute it to his friends, to transfer the money from the public realm to that of the private.

As a bank employee, Gustad earns a modest salary, while Dilvanaz works at home looking after their three children, Roshan, Darius, and Sohrab. Dominating this sphere are primarily private problems and worries, such as quarrels with neighbours and other minor squabbles. The overall historical backdrop relates to the time before, during, and after the Indo-Pakistani war in December 1971. In several scenes, Mistry describes how this distant historical sphere affects people's everyday lives in

direct and indirect ways. The government's war preparation is an aspect that always simmers in the background (see Shaw 108-09; Malieckal 75-88), sometimes through newspapers and rumours, other times through norms, prohibitions, or decrees such as the blackout law. Since the bitter war with China in 1965, Gustad has kept newspapers covering all the apartment's windows, which again underlines how Gustad's private experience is closely, albeit never directly, tied to the (abstract) events of public discourse. Gustad's personal memories, the birth of his daughter, and his accident are intimately dotted along a line interwoven with events like burning buses and riots whose remote causes are located elsewhere. When Dinshawji, Gustad's friend and colleague, visits the Noble family to celebrate Roshan's birthday and Sohrab's admission into the India Institute of Technology, he wonders why all the windows are covered with black paper. Gustad responds: "You remember the war with China" (40). However, the children interrupt them when he is about to explain further. At this stage, the largely non-narrativized discourse of private everyday life as such prevents any further development of the relation to the public. Why Gustad still covers his windows with the newspaper so long after the war is thus a question that is never answered directly. The novel suggests, however, that the black paper functions as a protective darkness surrounding the private sphere, parentheses around Gustad's domestic life, like the furniture from his childhood home and the wall around the Khodadad Building, objects that keep the private sphere separate from politics and history, the external world's contingency, indifference, and violence.

Throughout the novel, Gustad is portrayed as a character zealously devoted to the private sphere, the *non-political* existence. Further emphasizing this desire for non-political existence are numerous scenes during which Gustad reminisces about the past: memories of his grandfather's furniture workshop, his grandmother's cooking, his father's bookstore, the family's happy holidays, the day he saved Sohrab's life, the blissful moments with Bilimoria doing the morning rites in front of the Khodadad Building. These nostalgic memories typically are stitched together with descriptions of a more prosaic present time — or, rather, they appear mostly in the form of *interruptions* within an otherwise densely prosaic everydayness that fills many of the novel's pages. The novel's scenes always seem on the verge of disintegrating into a quotidian realm of radical inconspicuousness, a certain kind of historical invisibility, lethargy, or *blankness*.

Mistry's realist style is haunted by what Georg W.F. Hegel would call

the blank pages of history (33) — that is, a style of repetition or redundancy, an expression of *satisfaction* or of the lack of desire for change, movement, progress.<sup>8</sup> It is one that veers toward the static, transparent, descriptive mode that Lukács saw as the articulation of the ideology of the complacent post-1848 bourgeoisie (*Historical* 206). Mistry's realism, however, only becomes *realism*, I would argue, insofar as it steps out of this blankness and into the realm of collective or transindividual history, a historical reality that encompasses potentially everyone within the community the moment these multitudinous impressions of spontaneous, immediate everyday life are moulded into a narrative chain of events of historical — and not simply of private — significance.

As the basic unit of the narrative, the event is, however, always potentially threatened by disintegration into smaller events; there is a lack of naturalness about the proper delimitation of the event (Walsh 596). To Lukács, this is the condition of modernity, a world in which “the natural principle of epic selection is lost” (*Writer* 130). In this world, Lukács muses wistfully that a genuinely *narratable* sequence, a chain of proper events selected and organized out of a mass of indistinguishable matter, becomes fundamentally problematic. I argue that this tension constitutes, albeit in a rather different context, one of the driving forces of Mistry's realist style. On page after page, *Such a Long Journey* patiently describes a plethora of routine activities like meals, morning prayers, tea drinking, newspaper reading, work habits, and so on, all of which tend to merge into an atmosphere of *indistinguishability*, a discourse of temporal simultaneity. It is as if the many repetitive, quotidian activities swallow up time itself, preventing any sense of narrative dynamic. When this quotidian and fundamentally non-narratable realm is situated within a *problematic* relationship to the public, we see the emergence of irony and, as a response to irony, a proliferation of private narratives that, however, fail to overcome irony.

Mistry's style essentially captures the transitional moment when the private realm becomes irreversibly entangled in public discourse. This moment is, however, one that is potentially fraught with irony. The latter emerges because of a prevailing sense of unreality — that is, the moment one at an individual level becomes aware of being part of the public is the moment one becomes aware of the *unreality* of (the nation-state's distorted version of) history, of history's constructedness and relativity, its manipulations, and hence its potential falsity. The figure of irony is



precisely increased during those moments when the experience of national consciousness is intensified — that is, during moments when the nation is under pressure, in crisis, or at war.

### **Ironic Distance**

In several of the novel's scenes, Mistry describes how the event of war affects people's everyday life, such as when the government initiates an emergency program in which a siren sounds at a specific time every day across the country: "For several weeks the threnodic siren had been wailing every morning at exactly ten o'clock. . . . There had never been any official announcement, so the public assumed that in preparation for war with Pakistan, the government was checking to see if the air-raid sirens were in working order" (143). This ironic distance — the war never being fully manifest yet never entirely absent either — generally characterizes the individual characters' relation to the government and, in a further sense, to the public; it is an *abstract* relation. In *Such a Long Journey*, the local municipality (and, more generally, the state) represents a kind of abstract, anonymous, and subterranean force. In the beginning, it makes everyday life increasingly difficult for the local citizens around the Khodadad Building due to a barrage of constantly changing rules, regulations, protocols, and prohibitions. People initially complain about the lack of milk ration cards (3), the fact that people are allowed to use only a limited amount of public water (5), and the fact that incomprehensible public decrees are posted around the Khodadad Building (16, 90, 216, 325).<sup>9</sup> As the novel progresses, this anonymous public force gradually becomes considerably more harassing in nature, which in the end leads to a brutal confrontation between people and the authorities. The only time a representative of the local municipality shows up in the novel occurs near the end, when a wall is about to be demolished to the distress of the local people. Ironically, the person in charge of the crew is a friend of Gustad's (328).

As part of the government's plans for urban renewal, the local municipality has made the unpopular decision to expand the road adjacent to the Khodadad Building, which means that a wall covered with divine images is to be torn down. The culminating clash between locals and the authorities near the end of the story offers perhaps the novel's most concrete and direct manifestation of individuals' troubled relation to the public. Thus, throughout the novel, the state (or representatives of the state) is portrayed as one that acts either with indifference to citizens' needs (access to water,

for example) or in an irrational, violent way (through authoritarian and militaristic initiatives) or simply *as another private individual*, in the case of Indira Gandhi withdrawing money from the State Bank of India for what the novel suggests are her own private purposes. In contrast, the citizens are to a lesser extent bound by a national community or ethos; their relation, focus, and commitment are articulated through narrower domestic structures or, indeed, through the local community in and around the Khodadad Building. Public discourse never quite seems to attain a real presence in people's lives. It remains, as it were, abstract, fictional, or unreal — ambiguous, mysterious, and random. The abstract or problematic relation between public discourse and the private realm is thus above all articulated through the novel's shifting perspectives, veering between the too close (the quotidian descriptions) and the too abstract (the official historical trajectory). A key object illustrating this troubled, unresolved relation between the small, non-narratable dramas of everyday life and abstract public discourse is the newspaper. At a private level, the novel continuously orchestrates conjectures, hints, and suggestions, often through newspapers or rumours; at the same time, the text undermines any notion of absolute certainty. While Gustad reads newspapers and thus follows public life attentively, the gap between private and public discourse is not narrowed but deepened. In numerous scenes in the novel, we find people reading newspapers, especially stories about the escalating conflict with Pakistan, as well as scenes in which the newspaper is used for more practical purposes — for wrapping up meat, for recycling, and, of course, for covering windows. It is in the newspaper that Gustad reads about the disturbing events unfolding in Pakistan: "He ignored the grim headlines about Pakistan [and] turned to the inside page, the one which listed the Indian Institute of Technology's entrance exam results" (6-7). Here again, the novel offers a concrete example of how public discourse and the individual realm meet briefly, albeit only peripherally and in a fundamentally abstract-ironic way; between distressing stories of war and dreadful photos of suffering and death, Gustad learns to his great relief that Sohrab has been admitted into the Indian Institute of Technology.

It is through the newspaper that Gustad at a distance follows the case against Bilimoria, who at this stage in the novel has been accused of embezzlement. As Ghulam, Bilimoria's trusted comrade in India's Research and Analysis Wing, observes at one point, "[E]verything that appears in newspapers is not the truth" (202). Moreover, Gustad does become more

skeptical of what he reads in the papers as the case against Bilimoria unfolds: “I read the papers and I know what goes on. Rumours and allegations all the time, and no proof!” (93). What Gustad confronts here is essentially the choice between the official version (conveyed through the newspapers) and the unofficial version related to him by Bilimoria when Gustad visits his friend in the hospital one last time.

According to Bilimoria, Indira Gandhi’s accusations (that Bilimoria imitated her voice and took the money for himself) are false; when Gustad naively suggests that they tell the truth to the newspapers, Bilimoria rejects the idea: “Gustad, it has been tried. Everything is in their control . . . courts in their pockets. Only one way . . . quietly do my four years . . . then forget about it” (280; ellipses in original). “They” refers here not merely to the government and to corrupt journalists but also to official history as such: history not as neutral, universal, or transparent but as a *politicized* history. The historical awareness of being in or part of history, generated through the character of Gustad, is one that exposes the public relation as political manipulation — that is, an ironic experience.

The truth nonetheless reveals itself, indirectly or ironically, in the newspaper; near the end of the novel, some time after Gustad has come home from his visit to Bilimoria, he reads two adjacent stories in the newspaper, one about India’s victory celebrations, which fills Gustad with national pride, and the other about Major Bilimoria’s death in prison under suspicious circumstances: “It was barely an inch of column space. And when he read it, the glow of national pride dropped from him like a wet raincoat” (311). In Gustad’s mind, the obituary seems to confirm that Bilimoria was right after all.<sup>10</sup> Here, we find the novel’s perhaps most arresting example of a meaningful correlation of the individual’s experience of the public (in other words, the relation between state and individual), which at the same time is a fundamentally disillusioning and ironic experience.<sup>11</sup>

### Narrative and Rhetoric

A common situation that we find in different variations in all of Mistry’s novels involves a minor character indulging in some high-flown rhetoric while the main character is torn between listening and thinking about the practicalities of life. In *A Fine Balance*, protagonist Dina Dalal reluctantly seeks advice from the pseudo-lawyer Mr. Valmik but soon wishes that “Mr. Valmik would stop talking in this high-flown manner. It had been entertaining for a while but was rapidly becoming wearisome. . . . Bom-

bast and rhetoric infected the nation” (652). In *Family Matters*, amateur actors Bhaskar and Gautam pompously discuss the art of acting, while the main character Yezad “grew impatient, wishing they would stop sounding their own theatrical trumpets” (309). And in *Such a Long Journey*, Gustad Noble at one point listens to street seller Peerbhoy Paanwalla spinning a patriotic yarn about the history of the nation. A little later, “Gustad looked at his watch and reluctantly tore himself away from the group” (309).

The ironic scenes taken together draw the contours of one of the main motifs in Mistry’s oeuvre: the rifts between rhetoric and reality, between the abstract and the concrete, between the public and the private, or between storytelling and life. These are rifts that are never quite overcome, in that they point to some deeper, more profound structure, a grand pattern, but also to the very opposite; the confusing, quotidian experiences of everyday life are unredeemed by the ineffective ramblings of rhetoric. What is demonstrated in this recurrent tableau, one could argue, is the *need* for narration in a world submerged in an increasingly politicized world. Narrative becomes necessary as an attempt to overcome irony, the experience of the discrepancy between the quotidian and public discourse.

Although I have chosen to focus narrowly on literary realism in connection with Mistry’s *Such a Long Journey*, partly because this aspect has been ignored in the critical reception of the novel and more generally within the field of postcolonial studies, it goes without saying that this does not mean that the novel contains no other literary styles than realism. On the contrary, I would argue that this binary modulation between pure realism and anti-realism builds on a mistaken assumption, given that even the most traditional realists — from Balzac to Dickens — frequently use anti-realist styles in their works. Often, however, one comes across arguments like Bharucha’s: “In common with other post-colonial writing, Mistry’s fiction is fashioned in the form of alternative narratives and employs anti-realist modes of narration. This not only challenges elitist Master Narratives but privileges the marginal and provides resistance to Western hegemony” (“When” 59). It would be more accurate, I believe, to make the argument that Mistry’s literary style seeks to create a collective perspective, which at times struggles alongside other narrative forms, each depicting sides and aspects of a society that can never find a final and absolute form of representation.<sup>12</sup>

*Such a Long Journey* delves into a multitude of minor, digressive narrative lines, some connected, others simply tangential. The common

denominator for all these digressive narratives is that they are largely enacted within the realm of the private; they fail to achieve larger, collective significance. One of the longer narratives relates to Mrs. Kutpitia's superstitious activities and the illness of Roshan, Gustad and Dilvanaz's daughter. Interpreting the hidden meanings behind random occurrences, Mrs. Kutpitia tries hard to convince Dilvanaz that Roshan's illness is caused by evil forces. Here, superstition serves the purpose of illustrating a kind of alternative (private) explanatory framework to science and narrative. However, Mrs. Kutpitia is not the only superstitious character. In fact, most of the novel's figures show to varying degrees some receptivity to superstition. The characters are immersed in the modern world yet occasionally are prone to revert to the superstitious, especially in those situations when other narratives have failed to provide plausible explanations. Overall, however, *Such a Long Journey* remains ambiguous on the issue of superstition as to whether it works, which more generally is characteristic of all the novel's alternative explanatory models.

Thus, *Such a Long Journey* is likewise critical of medicine's explanatory power. Dr. Paymaster, who represents the scientific approach, cannot find the cause of Roshan's disease. Gustad goes from having absolute faith in Dr. Paymaster to being deeply skeptical (191, 193). At one point, Dr. Paymaster delivers a grandiose allegorical analysis of the country's political situation, according to which the important thing is to treat root causes rather than symptoms. While comparing the country to "a patient with gangrene at an advanced stage," Dr. Paymaster becomes "overpowered by the contagion of enthusiasm" (313). Here, we find yet another example of the juxtaposition between abstract word flow versus practical circumstances of lived life. As a rival to Dr. Paymaster's abstract medical metaphors on politics, we find Peerbhoy Paanwalla, who spins yarns with great artistic conviction and with which people strongly identify: "They could see and smell and taste and feel the words that filled the dusk and conjured the tale; and it was no wonder they were oblivious to the gutter stink" (306). The difference between Dr. Paymaster and Peerbhoy Paanwalla is that whereas the former's story is abstract, the latter's is spontaneous and emotional. Furthermore, one could say that the novel gradually presents a multitude of non-narrativized, spontaneous forms of experience in the process of being converted into small, private narratives that emerge as explanatory responses to an increasingly ironic everyday existence. In contrast to *both* the abstract and the spontaneous, the novel's realism at-

tempts to negotiate a kind of balance between the two, thereby correlating or synchronizing the private realm and public discourse.

The pavement artist is another important character whose story illuminates this problematic. When Gustad finally has had enough of people urinating by the wall behind the Khodadad Building, he asks a pavement artist to paint a series of religious portraits on the foul-smelling concrete surface. The pavement artist enthusiastically paints all the world's holy figures, and soon, the wall has miraculously been transformed into a local attraction. One day, Gustad and the pavement artist talk about one of the illustrations, and the conversation develops into a discussion about the nature of human imagination. Here, the novel almost seems to break into a metafictional dialogue, one that is both part of the diegetic story and a reflection on the novel's compositional principles. The pavement artist observes: "You see, I don't like to weaken anyone's faith. Miracle, magic, mechanical trick, coincidence — does it matter what it is, as long as it helps? Why analyse the strength of the imagination . . . ? Looking too closely is destructive, makes everything disintegrate." Gustad agrees with the pavement artist and adds that whereas the wall earlier was a foul-smelling disgrace, it has become a "beautiful, fragrant place which makes everyone feel good" (289). But even if Gustad thus seems to agree with the pavement artist's semi-metafictional reflections — that is, the argument that seeing too closely can be destructive, just as one may analyze a literary text too much — one of the novel's great themes is ironically that Gustad in the end does look a little too closely at the illusion, in this case the illusion of history, of the nation, and of the individual's relation to these. In the last paragraph of the novel, Gustad removes the newspapers that have covered his windows since the war with China, long after the blackout has been lifted (339). The symbolism here is obvious: by covering the windows with old newspapers, containing all the misleading news about the war, Gustad attempted to keep the abstract reality of history at a distance from himself and his family. Yet despite this symbolic gesture, the novel is essentially about the ways in which Gustad involuntarily is caught up in the mess of concrete history via Bilimoria — that is, how he comes too close to history as such. When Gustad thus listens to Bilimoria's ill-fated story, he is disgusted by the government and its lies. Whether Bilimoria's version of historical events is true or not is never confirmed in the novel. How he really dies remains another unanswered question.

### Improbable Connections

Ultimately, it is the story of Bilimoria that creates a correlating perspective within the ironic and fractured relationship between the public discourse and the private realm and that thus prevents the disintegration of the latter into a myriad of proliferating narratives while at the same time transforming the abstract nature of the former public discourse into a concrete, personal experience. In the novel, the character of Major Jimmy Bilimoria is a fictionalization of Captain Sohrab Rustom Nagarwala, a real historical figure, and the plot involving him overlaps to a large extent with the story of Nagarwala, albeit with the difference that Mistry creates a fictional background out of many of those rumours and conjectures surrounding the mysterious Nagarwala incident. Nagarwala was allegedly an agent in India's Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), a foreign intelligence agency whose mission was to provide support for the guerillas fighting behind enemy lines. In 1971, he was accused of having withdrawn illegally a very large sum of money from the State Bank of India. The bank accountant, however, insisted on having spoken on the phone with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi about this matter. Nagarwala confessed to having imitated Gandhi's voice and was arrested immediately. Subsequently, Nagarwala changed his story and claimed that he was innocent and had been set up by people in government. Later, after a period of illness, Nagarwala died under mysterious circumstances in a military hospital. Although there were indications of foul play with traces leading all the way to the top of the government, no one apart from Nagarwala was ever indicted officially. During and after the event, several people close to the incident died or disappeared, and the case was marred by a series of unanswered questions. Was Nagarwala innocent? How was it possible he could imitate the prime minister's voice successfully? Was the prime minister involved? What was the money supposed to be used for? Was it a secret government plot that had been inadvertently disclosed by the bank accountant, after which Nagarwala was used as a scapegoat? And how was it possible that the bank accountant in any case could simply approve and transfer such a huge sum of money following a single phone call from the prime minister?<sup>13</sup> Many of these (still unanswered) questions are recounted in *Such a Long Journey*. The novel offers a fictional account of what actually happened; thus, if we are to believe Bilimoria (and the novel encourages us to do so), he was indeed set up as a scapegoat taking the blame for Indira Gandhi's misdeeds.

Located diegetically within the main plot, the Bilimoria plot seems almost unreal or unrealistic, even exotic, like a hole in an otherwise strictly realist surface; a “political thriller,” as Morey calls it (*Rohinton* 70), that surrealistically breaks into a realistic frame. It constitutes a disruptive moment within Gustad’s world both at the thematic level and, regarding the text’s genre discourse, at the formal level. The irony here is, of course, that while the Bilimoria plot draws on a real historical source, it becomes fictionalized within the novel’s realist frame, which is entirely fictional. The latter is realistic in the sense of being credible and plausible, whereas the former is not. Adhering to the genre conventions of the spy thriller, the character of Bilimoria is portrayed as a mysteriously elusive figure. In fact, he appears in the novel only through rumours and through other people’s accounts, memories, and letters, except for the scene during which Gustad visits him in the hospital, at which point Bilimoria has changed almost beyond recognition: “On the bed lay nothing more than a shadow. The shadow of the powerfully-built army man who once lived in Khodadad Building” (267).

Also coming straight out of a spy thriller is the shady character of Ghulam, who acts as a contact between Gustad and Bilimoria. The mystique surrounding Ghulam is reinforced particularly by the fact that he figures often in connection with strange coincidences and inexplicable events in the novel. A key scene here is the accident that occurred nine years before the novel begins, when Gustad was seriously injured while saving his son’s life; as Gustad lay bleeding, helpless, and semi-unconscious, a taxi driver, in an act of what then seemed to be sheer compassion toward a stranger, took him home to the Khodadad Building. It is a scene referred to numerous times throughout the novel, thus perhaps underlining its traumatic nature. Gustad never got the chance to thank the taxi driver, something he still deeply regrets when the novel begins nine years later. However, shortly before the Bilimoria plot begins in the novel’s present time, Gustad and Dinshawji watch a man being hit by a car, and suddenly Gustad realizes that it is indeed the taxi driver: “It was a great shock. I know that man on the Lambretta. He helped me when I fell from the bus. You remember my accident? . . . This man was the taxi-driver, who took care of me and Sohrab, brought us home. . . . For nine years I have waited to thank him. Then I see him flying through the air and smashing his head” (75). Arguably, this coincidence — that is, Gustad waiting nine years to find and thank the man who helped him back then, only finally



to encounter this person in the very moment the latter is involved in a traffic incident of his own — would still be feasible within a strictly realist framework. However, what seems to undermine the realist imagination is the subsequent plot development. When Gustad goes to collect Bilimoria's mysterious package (the contents of which Gustad at this point has no clue) in Chor Bazaar, it turns out that the man whose head was crushed in the accident not only is still alive, but also was supposed to meet Gustad: "And as the man approached, he recognized him despite the bound head. What a coincidence!" (104).<sup>14</sup> What is more, the man turns out to be Bilimoria's comrade Ghulam, a fact that changes retroactively the circumstances of the accident nine years earlier, at least potentially: was it simply a coincidence that the taxi driver happened to be there at the moment when Gustad was hit by a bus? The character of Ghulam introduces an element of radical uncertainty that threatens to destabilize the realist frame; the moment he enters the plot, it becomes complicated by a series of secretive, mysterious, almost conspiratorial elements that question the plausibility of the realist narrative. Thus, it is never fully resolved whether Ghulam was implicated in one of the more curious incidents in the novel, one that involves beheaded animals and that apparently was intended to intimidate someone in the Khodadad Building. Although Ghulam denies any involvement, the suspicion remains, especially since it seems to be clear that he is behind the sinister nursery rhyme that Gustad finds on a piece of paper in the same place on the third day: "Stole the rice of Bilimoria, we'll take a stick and then we'll beat ya." Reading the piece of paper, Gustad concludes: "There was no doubt now. No doubt at all about the meaning of the two decapitated carcasses. The message was clear" (140).

Underneath this certainty, however, is the fact that Gustad at this point is genuinely confused about what to do with the money: should he do what Bilimoria asks of him, return the package to Ghulam, or even burn all of it? The Bilimoria plot introduces uncertainty into Gustad's life, and the elusive character of Ghulam is the embodiment of this uncertainty. Disguises are part of Ghulam's job: "Oh, that's normal when working in RAW. Sometimes bookseller, sometimes butcher; even gardener. Whatever is necessary to get the job done" (322). After Bilimoria's death, near the end of the novel, Ghulam is once again connected to the notion of the coincidental when Gustad discovers by chance a small note in the newspaper about the funeral of Bilimoria in the Tower of Silence. Ghulam has taken care of the funeral arrangements and the expenses (something that

adds a sympathetic dimension to an otherwise unsympathetic, even dangerous, character). Much to his surprise, Gustad encounters Ghulam one last time after the ritual.<sup>15</sup> As Ghulam explains, “I had to take a chance. When I gave you the train ticket, I promised it was the last time I would bother you” (322). Gustad knows instinctively that this is the last time they will meet, and after Ghulam disappears from the plot, accidents no longer occur in the novel.

Accidents, coincidences, and the inexplicable are generally problematic in realistic narratives. Lukács argues that the realistic novel seeks to reduce the accidental and mystifying or bring it to a level of necessity (*Writer* 112). *Such a Long Journey* generally constructs a plausible narrative framework, *except* in relation to the Bilimoria plot. The latter constitutes an example of what Eleni Coundouriotis has labelled “the improbable,” a discursive interruption that brings us into confrontation with the real (236). Following Coundouriotis, one could argue that the disruptive subplot of *Such a Long Journey* is not so much a deviation from the main plot’s realism but rather a constitutive part of it; stylistically and thematically, the subplot indicates that something in Gustad’s carefully protected private world is problematic and unresolved and that it was unresolved from the very beginning. What Mistry’s characters, particularly Gustad, tend to discover is that this desire for a carefully protected private realm was always going to be unsuccessful. The relationship with Bilimoria (via Ghulam) constitutes a disruptive element that brings the realist, everyday life of Gustad into a confrontational engagement with the public — a confrontation initially articulated through the unwanted, the mysterious, and the accidental, underneath which lies the problematic, the illegal, and the disillusioning.

## Conclusion

As the novel proceeds, Gustad realizes that the public narrative, which early in the novel is articulated through newspaper stories and rumours — a discourse at the same time juxtaposed with letters from Bilimoria and other personal sources — does not correlate with the private sphere. *Such a Long Journey* explores the way in which the abstract, impersonal public narrative is not transformed into a personal story but rather is shown to be radically different when seen through the perspective of the latter.

Much of the texture in *Such a Long Journey* consists of small, indistinguishable, and largely non-narrativized scenes of everyday life. At the

same time, we have a great number of characters attempting *individually* to establish some form of meaning among this constant stream of impressionistic moments, the world's heterogeneity. However, superstition, medicine, rhetoric, small allegorical narratives, and the pavement artist's religious motives provide no credible, alternative explanatory models. The novel remains finally skeptical of all of them; their explanatory power is at best ambiguous. The proliferation of private, non-political narratives indicates the presence of something troubling and haunting, something that suggests precisely the need for supplementary explanations. In Mistry's novel, narratives are essentially an attempt to explain, often pseudo-causally, something unresolved or mysterious. These narratives, however, remain fundamentally futile, excessive, or random, reverting often to rhetorical escapades that explain very little. Narrative is needed in those ironic moments when there is no longer a "natural" or "unproblematic" correlation between private and public. It is when the relationship between the private realm and public discourse becomes problematic that narratives proliferate uncontrollably. Via the Bilimoria plot, *Such a Long Journey* correlates the two trajectories of public and private — a disjointed relationship, like two antithetical genres cancelling each other out or chiasmatically inverting each other so that the realistic becomes unrealistic and the unrealistic becomes realistic. Mistry's historical realism thus ultimately overcomes irony by reaching a higher sense of the real or reality, one that encompasses both the realities of the private and the public.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The institutional narrowness of postcolonial studies has led to a disturbing sameness regarding theoretical inquiries and methodological approaches. As Neil Lazarus points out, one finds, "to an extraordinary degree, the same questions asked, the same methods, techniques, and conventions used, the same concepts mobilized, the same conclusions drawn" (424).

<sup>2</sup> Several recent studies have turned to the term "realism," although often within theoretical contexts that are quite different from the literary critical traditions in which realism has been usually discussed, such as realism and finance capitalism (Shonkwiler and La Berge) and speculative realism (Harman). Above all, the renewed interest in the term "realism" reflects, I believe, a diminishing enthusiasm for poststructuralist and deconstructive dynamics that dominated literary studies for decades.

<sup>3</sup> For a similar argument, see Zimmerman 43-44.

<sup>4</sup> For one of the few exceptions to this tendency, see Moss.

<sup>5</sup> In 2010, the vice-chancellor of Mumbai University, Dr. Rajan M. Welukar, decided officially to ban *Such a Long Journey* from the university's syllabuses. Aditya Thackeray, the grandson of Bal Thackeray, had filed a complaint to the university's administration, claiming

that the book contained a series of offensive remarks about the right-wing party Shiv Sena. For critical comments on the Shiv Sena party, see Mistry, *Journey* 39, 73, 86, 298; for a discussion of Shiv Sena and Mistry's novel, see Malieckal 81-82.

<sup>6</sup> The novel's opening portrays a conflict between loyalty to the Parsi community and loyalty to the nation, which may be seen as referring to the historically precarious situation of the Parsis, playing an important intermediary role during British colonial rule that was subsequently lost in the post-independence era — hence, perhaps, the nostalgic, anxious tone throughout the novel. The novel takes place at a time (the 1960s to the early 1970s) during which the nation is engaged in major territorial wars, such as the war against Pakistan, which eventually, thanks to the Indian army led by Parsi field marshal Sam Manekshaw, led to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. Major Bilimoria, much to Gustad's disappointment, prioritizes the nation's affairs over his religious commitments but ends up disillusioned by corruption and eventually destroyed by the state. For more on this issue, see Batra 13-47; Luhrmann 1-26; and Bharucha, *Rohinton* 19-46.

<sup>7</sup> In her article, Anna Lidstone explores the private-public theme and the shifts between first- and third-person narratorial perspectives in the novel. I largely agree with this analysis, although I argue that the two spheres (the private and the public) become blurred as soon as this relationship is *politicized*.

<sup>8</sup> In his essay "The Reality Effect," Roland Barthes captures a crucial dimension of realism with the concept of the "reality effect," the articulation of a contingent, non-idealized world — a "thereness" — unsupported by a metaphysical order. Realism is a textuality of impurity: its absorption of elements (for example, familiar everyday objects) whose independent realities are preserved within the realist diegesis but nonetheless at the same time become integrated in the latter — creates a "reality effect" that always undermines the realistic aspect at least potentially, threatening to undermine its fictional diegesis by way of molestation, that is, by elevating it to allegory, irony, or metafiction.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of public space, communalism, and urban identity in Mistry's novel, see Minerva.

<sup>10</sup> As Bilimoria reveals late in the novel, he was misled by his own prime minister, Indira Gandhi, and accused of having imitated her voice in order to withdraw a very large sum of money. Bilimoria indicates further that Gandhi needed him as a cover-up, while she used the money for private purposes.

<sup>11</sup> Within a historical perspective, Gustad's disillusionment also reflects a wider national sentiment spreading through the 1960s. As Bharucha observes: "These were decades that witnessed the slow erosion of the idealism which had marked the beginning of the end of the Nehruvian dream of a secular India. . . . The end of the Nehruvian Utopia also marked the beginning of sordid power-politicking, corruption at the highest levels, nepotism and cynical manoeuvring of the electorate" ("When" 62).

<sup>12</sup> For discussions of other narrative styles in Mistry's oeuvre, see, in particular, Gabriel; Malak; and Morey, *Rohinton* 69-93.

<sup>13</sup> On the Nagarwala case, see Morey, *Rohinton* 71-74; Batra 81-82.

<sup>14</sup> Later, at the hospital, Bilimoria tells Gustad that Ghulam's accident was in fact an assassination attempt (278).

<sup>15</sup> As a Muslim, Ghulam is not allowed to enter the Tower of Silence, and it is only when Gustad leaves the funeral site that they encounter each other. This aspect once again underlines the novel's keen awareness of issues such as loyalties across communal boundaries, national as well as religious.

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