Mistry’s Hollow Men: language, lies and the crisis of representation in *Such a Long Journey*

Truly there are two primal Spirits, twins renowned to be in conflict. In thought and word, in act they are two: the better and the bad. And those who act well have chosen rightly between these two, not so the evildoers.

*(The Gathas, Yasna 30, v. 3)*

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats’ feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

*(T. S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*, lines 1–10)*

COMMENTING on the possibilities for narrating the colourful story of India’s historical experiences, Rukmini Nair writes:

It sometimes seems apt to imagine the history of this subcontinent as a palimpsest of literary forms. First a substantial layer of myth and epic, then a burning layer of tragedy, then farce and so forth. Lately, the furious discovery of political scandals we’ve witnessed might suggest that it is now an action thriller, Hindi-film style, which is currently being written out in subcontinental space.
Rohinton Mistry’s first two novels, *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, appear to bear out this suggestion. Both have something of the political thriller about them, although, as always in Mistry’s writing, the operations of history are linked to, and impinge on, humdrum, quotidian life. In the earlier novel, published in 1991, political events put pressure on a family already under strain. Gustad Noble becomes alienated from his disobedient elder son, his precious daughter falls mysteriously ill, and he struggles with memories of a financially secure and emotionally stable past that only serve to highlight his family’s current plight at a time of shortages and rationing. Additionally, the outside world with its political intrigues and threat of war seeps into their flat in the Khodadad Building, a Parsi housing development similar to Firozsha Baag. As a Parsi loyal to Indira Ghandi’s government, Gustad finds himself, along with his friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria, used and duped as part of an apparent plot hatched by the Prime Minister to embezzle money. The Bilimoria sub-plot is based on a true-life financial scandal that engulfed Indira Gandhi’s government at the beginning of the 1970s, and offers a point of entry to one of the texts central concerns, the manipulation and misuse of language. The theme of language versus reality is played out in the propaganda and doublespeak of the government: the Prime Minister’s vocal denial of involvement in a conspiracy bearing the hallmark of her arbitrary power; the renaming of Bombay streets by the Shiv Sena which leads to acute existential anxieties in Gustad’s dying friend, Dinshawji; and a ‘hollowness’ at the heart of communication more generally in this tale of misunderstanding and the limitations of verbal communication. This, in turn, is linked to a wider Platonic investigation into the relationship between shadow and reality operating on a number of levels, and which can also be connected to the Zoroastrian struggle to reconcile the spiritual (*menog*) and material (*getig*) realms. The echoes of T. S. Eliot, begun in *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, redouble in significance and are extended to include ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, ‘The Journey of the Magi’ and ‘The Hollow Men’, as well as ‘The Waste Land’. Many situations and
characters are multi-layered or enigmatic, and there always appears to be a gap between events and the power of language to describe them and encompass their various resonances; there is always a disjuncture between appearance and actuality, intention and outcome, utterance and reception, object and surrogate. One is constantly aware that, on the personal as on the political level, nothing is quite what it seems. Once again the role of stories and storytelling is considered – as with all Mistry’s works the text features emblematic storytelling figures – but this time it is given a dark, political edge too. Gustad’s initial desire to hold the outside world at a safe distance, symbolised by the blackout paper he keeps over his windows even in peace time, is part of the related theme of activity versus withdrawal, again traceable to the Zoroastrian demand that the true devotee be actively engaged in the fight against evil. *Such a Long Journey* is in part the story of Gustad’s battle to confront and overcome the urge to withdraw. After all, it is only through the activity of the righteous that evil may be defeated and good advanced. As always, in this novel about contending evils of various kinds, Mistry gives the Zoroastrian ethical imperative a political dimension. Many paths to truth are charted, some of them spiritual or supernatural, and some of them mundane and material. Yet the important thing is never to be merely passive, always to go on with the journey.

The novel is set in 1971, the turbulent year of the struggle between what were then East and West Pakistan, which eventually drew in India and culminated in a brief, two week war and the creation of Bangladesh. However, it also harks back to the political history of India in the 1960s, the decade that saw the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, who had led India to independence from Britain and become its first Prime Minister, and the accession of his daughter Indira Gandhi. Events in the 1960s – including the Indo-Chinese War, the sudden death of Nehru’s successor Lal Bahadur Shastri, superpower meddling, and the rise of Indira and her tearaway son Sanjay – are all mentioned in the text and seem to be characteristic of a political landscape of decline, deceit and corruption.
However, the most important background feature of all, described in the latter part of the novel, is the Indo-Pakistan War of December 1971. This was triggered by a divided election result in the two ‘wings’ of Pakistan left, predominantly Muslim but geographically and racially separate, after Partition in 1947. The larger force in West Pakistan, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Yahya Khan, refused to accept the election result in the East which had gone against them, ordered the arrest of the East’s victorious candidate and embarked on the suppression of opposition in the territory in an unprecedented clampdown. Brutal repression led to an enormous refugee crisis with, eventually, approximately ten million people fleeing across the border into Indian-controlled Bengal. Of course, such an influx was inevitably a severe strain on India’s resources; one result was the Refugee Tax which pushed up prices, and which characters complain about in the novel. There was also a groundswell of popular opinion supporting the deployment of Indian troops in defence of the Bengalis. Not wanting to appear the aggressor, Indira Gandhi initially rejected such a move, preferring instead to train and equip guerrilla bands based in India but operating across the border. And this is, of course, the point of overlap with the political sub-plot of *Such a Long Journey*.

Major Jimmy Bilimoria, Gustad’s close friend from the Khodadad Building, suddenly disappears, leaving no other explanation than that he has embarked on a covert mission in the interests of national security. Eventually we discover that he is involved in the activities of RAW – the Research and Analysis Wing of India’s secret service. It seems that he is engaged in providing funds for the cross-border guerrilla groups. However, it is soon apparent that Jimmy has become deeply embroiled in an altogether more murky set of events involving the embezzlement of large sums of money. The outline of his story is based on that of a parallel historical figure – also a Parsi and, by all accounts, an agent of RAW – Captain Sohrab Rustom Nagarwala. On 24 May 1971, the chief cashier of the State Bank of India received a telephone call, apparently from the Prime Minister,
instructing him to withdraw six million rupees and hand them over to a person whom he would find waiting on a road, and who would identify himself simply as ‘a man from Bangladesh’. The cashier obeyed these instructions and then went to the Prime Minister’s residence to ask for a receipt. To his surprise, he was told by the Prime Minister’s private secretary that she had made no such telephone call, and advised to contact the police. He did so, and Captain Nagarwala, who had taken delivery of the money, was swiftly arrested. He seemed to have left an easy trail for the police to follow, and confessed that he had impersonated Indira Gandhi’s voice to obtain money to support guerrilla activities in Bangladesh. However, what began to raise suspicions at the time, and what was never adequately explained, was the hasty and highly unorthodox manner in which Captain Nagarwala’s trial was conducted. Three different judges presided over the case in just three days, at the end of which he was sentenced to four years imprisonment. The police failed to produce in court the tape they claimed to have of Nagarwala’s remarkable impersonation of Mrs Gandhi, and contradictions between his story and that of the State Cashier were never investigated. Moreover, after his arrest, Nagarwala appears to have had a change of heart. From prison he appealed for a retrial and tried unsuccessfully to gain an interview with a journalist and fellow Parsi from a Bombay weekly newspaper. A few months later, Nagarwala was removed to hospital, allegedly complaining of chest pains, where he died in March 1972.4

So, was Nagarwala a scapegoat, a ‘patsy’, taking the blame for corruption at the highest level? And did the Prime Minister’s private secretary, unaware of the unorthodox financial arrangement, unwittingly expose it by sending the cashier to the police? Just how was it possible for the Prime Minister simply to telephone the State Bank and demand money from it anyway? And what was the money really intended for? (A further twist to the tale was added when the police officer in charge of investigating the case also died under suspicious circumstances soon afterwards.)5 In Mistry’s fictionalised version of these events, the Nagarwala substitute, Jimmy Bilimoria, tells Gustad
that he has been made a stooge in the interests of Mrs Gandhi and her family who act extra-constitutionally and for their own ends: ‘it is beyond the common man’s imagination, the things being done by those in power’ (SLJ, 280). Mistry partly undercuts these shocking allegations by having Jimmy utter them on what turns out to be his deathbed, in disjointed fashion, and in a drug-addled daze. Yet they do appear to represent more insistent, gnawing malefactions in the body politic as a whole.

Against this, the Parsi world of the Khodadad Building seems something of a haven: the novel commences with Gustad’s morning orisons to Ahura Mazda, while ritually tying and untying his kusti cord, and later he reflects fondly on his elder son’s navjote ceremony, initiating him into Zoroastrianism. As in Tales from Firozsha Baag, ritual is linked to the security of the known and familiar. Such moments are often retrospective, and the narrative works through a shuttling temporal schema that is the formal corollary of the thematic concern with memory and identity. Of course, the locus for the most powerful memories is to be found in the tender minutiae of family life. Gustad’s image of lost perfection arises in the ghostly shape of his mother, seen through a mosquito net on a family holiday before her untimely death, ‘saying goodnight—Godblessyou, smiling, soft and evanescent, floating before my sleepy eyes, floating for ever with her eyes so gentle and kind’ (SLJ, 242). Since then the Noble family – like the noble community they appear to represent – have fallen on hard times. Gustad recalls the halcyon days when the family had servants, but now they cannot even afford to buy milk from the Parsi dairy. He therefore invests his hopes for the future in his elder son, Sohrab. However, rather than appreciate the sacrifices his parents have made to facilitate his education, Sohrab refuses to accept entry into the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, preferring – much to his father’s outrage – to pursue an arts degree elsewhere. The generational split which results, culminates in a series of bitter arguments, after the last of which Gustad disowns Sohrab declaring, ‘he is not my son. My son is dead’ (SLJ, 52): thereby metaphorically recalling the slaying of Sohrab.
by his father, Rustom, on the battlefield in *The Shah-Namah*. In fact, by attempting to impose his personal ambitions on his son, Gustad is at once hoping to reclaim vicariously his own lost opportunities, clinging to the remnants of the old father-child relationship and attempting to perpetuate his role as protector: a role which once saw him seriously injured in a traffic accident while thrusting the young Sohrab to safety. This inability to come to terms with time, change and endings – fundamental to human life – characterises Gustad’s dealings with those around him. He aims to keep everything, family, friendships, his environment, pristine and inviolate. Ironically, he attempts this by surrounding himself with the detritus of the past: old furniture, books and other possessions saved from the bailiffs who ransacked his childhood home after a profligate uncle had run up enormous debts. Beyond this habitat he is much less confident, and recalls Eliot’s Prufrock, diffident, paralysed by doubt and confronted by seemingly hostile forces in the outside world; during one misunderstanding with his wife, Dilnavaz, he even laments, ‘That is not what I meant at all’ (*SLJ*, 292).

An early collision between the private man and the exuberantly public spaces of Bombay comes when he reluctantly visits Crawford Market to buy a chicken. ‘Dirty, smelly, overcrowded,’ Crawford Market represents the chaotic, threatening, and sometimes bloody world, with its ‘wicked-looking meat hooks’ and ‘sight and smell of blood … and bone’ (*SLJ*, 21). The cavernous ‘hall of meat’ proves especially traumatic, and draws our attention to the novel’s preoccupation with bodies. From the flakes of skin which fall from the milk-selling *bhaiya*, Dilnavaz’s repulsion from Tehmul’s begrimed toenails, the body parts sold as tokens of healing at Mount Mary, or the stomach cancer – and its attendant halitosis – that eats away at Dinshawji, bodies are maps of corruption, pain and decay. (This is a theme which will be explored to its agonising limits in *A Fine Balance*.) Additionally, while at Crawford Market Gustad remembers that he once stopped buying meat when militant Hindu *sadhus* began protesting against cow slaughter; ‘offences of the flesh’ also have a communal dimension for minorities in India.
Most redolent of the minority mindset is the physical space of the Khodadad Building itself. It is a Parsi enclave in the heart of Bombay, almost a ghetto, with all the attendant paranoia such an environment suggests. At one point, the complex is likened to a museum, and it is no coincidence that many domestic items in Gustad’s apartment seem to be in a state of atrophy and decay too. In this atmosphere, municipal proposals to demolish the wall surrounding the compound as part of a road-widening programme take on the qualities of a threatened invasion, further underlining the community’s sense of being at siege. The wall keeps the hectic, disordered world out. Yet even this space cannot be maintained in its purity: it is used as a public latrine by passers-by, like dogs marking their territory, and as events unfold, Gustad’s worries start ‘walling him in, threatening to crush him’ (SLJ, 177). In Gitanjali, one of the intertexts that provide epigraph quotations at the start of the novel, Tagore describes a devotional crisis which, nevertheless, mirrors Gustad’s own self-inflicted isolation: ‘I am ever busy building this wall all around; and as this wall goes up into the sky day by day I lose sight of my true being in its dark shadow.’ The dark shadow cast by the wall becomes Stygian gloom within the apartment on account of the blackout paper Gustad has put up at the time of the Indo-Chinese War, and which he has refused to remove ever since. We are told that the paper restricts ‘the ingress of all forms of light, earthly and celestial’, and despite Gustad’s regular dawn prayers, Dilnavaz remarks, ‘In this house, the morning never seems to come’ (SLJ, 11). The blackout answers a psychological need in Gustad in that it keeps out the frightening historical events he reads about in the newspaper every day, as the nation prepares for war and its propaganda machine grinds into action. Moreover, as he has discovered in his dealings with Sohrab – and with his neighbour Jimmy Bilimoria, whose disappearance leaves him baffled and angry – to reach out to others, even members of one’s own family, is to risk betrayal. He increasingly retreats into dreams of the past, and soon stops taking newspapers altogether.

Gustad’s is the predicament of all those characters who
attempt to preserve the things of the past as a bulwark against inevitable mutability. Like Sohrab’s childhood butterfly collection whose contents nevertheless continue to decay, change and development cannot be artificially arrested. One of the most memorable personifications of this attempt to hold on to what must be allowed to pass is the eccentric spinster Miss Kutpitia. A Parsi Miss Havisham, she preserves in a locked room the belongings of her beloved nephew, Farad, killed in a car accident thirty-five years previously, and carries on conversations with the shadows in her dusty flat. Yet, in a lesson Gustad would do well to learn, an accidental fire acts as an emotional purgative, freeing her from the grip of the past by destroying these old things, and allowing her to move on. Such rare moments of cathartic release paradoxically serve to highlight the themes of imprisonment and freedom, every bit as insistent in this text as in Dickens’s Great Expectations or Little Dorrit. There are real prisons, such as that which contains the disgraced Jimmy near the end, and the self-imposed variety, of which Gustad is the most notable inmate, confirming Eliot’s tautological dictum, ‘We think of the key, each in his prison / Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.’

Ironically, it is Major Jimmy Bilimoria, Gustad’s best friend and, in many respects, a surrogate brother for him, who is the ‘agent’ that brings the outside world in and destroys Gustad’s insulated existence. He does so by embroiling his friend and a work colleague, Dinshawji, in the embezzlement scam, sending bulky packages of crisp new banknotes along with a prevaricating letter requiring them to make regular bank deposits on his behalf. As an undercover operative, Jimmy has certain affinities with Verloc in Joseph Conrad’s novel of intrigue and evasion, The Secret Agent. Both novels explore the theme of loyalty, and the respective protagonists keep secrets even from those nearest to them. Secrecy and agency are themes in a more general sense too, as characters are empowered or disempowered to varying degrees according to the amount of knowledge they possess. And, crucially, both texts are concerned with the way language can be used to obscure and disinform as much as to enlighten.
Indeed, *Such a Long Journey* demonstrates an insistent concern with the slippery, manipulable nature of language, and how reality can often be very different from appearance. This is nowhere more evident than in the nature of names and naming. Characters adopt and discard names, give and take nicknames, and find that certain names stick, while others are forgotten: the bank manager, Mr Madon, has a secret first name that no one knows; old Mr Cavasji did have a nickname, ‘the watermelon’, but shed it along with the pounds as he aged; Ghulam Mohammed knows Jimmy as ‘Bili-boy’, while the latter uses the anagram Mira Obili when communicating with Gustad incognito; and Dr Paymaster, who treats Roshan’s unnameable illness, is completely in thrall to nomenclature when he finds that his patients will not allow him to replace the name of the previous doctor on the sign outside his surgery with his own.

As this last example indicates, to name is to exert power. In an interesting essay on the novel, David Williams invokes Jacques Derrida on the appropriative nature of naming: “‘The Battle of Proper Names’ in *Of Grammatology* concludes that what’s in a name is nothing less than the whole coercive network of relations bounding the subject.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the ailing Dinshawji’s lament over the Shiv Sena’s campaign of street renaming in Bombay, designed to expunge signs of the British presence and reassert majority Marathi identity:

> Names are so important. I grew up on Lamington Road. But it has disappeared, in its place is Dadasaheb Bhadkamkar Marg. My school was on Carnac Road. Now suddenly it’s on Lokmanya Tilak Marg. I live at Sleator 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? (*SLJ*, 74)

As Williams observes, ‘What Dinshawji laments in the loss of the old names is the loss of the old logocentric security, that
metaphysical reassurance via language “of the meaning of being in general as presence” … Ultimately, he experiences the rewriting of the map of his neighbourhood as an interruption in his self-presence.’

Unfortunately, Dinshawji fails to take on board the lesson about names and power inherent in his disorientation. His own behaviour when flirting with the alluring new secretary at the bank, Laurie Coutino, is an example of the potential sexual violence involved in language and naming. He tells Laurie that he would like to introduce her to his own ‘little Lorri’, neglecting to mention that lorri is the Parsi slang word for penis. When she finds out, Laurie feels demeaned and insulted, telling Gustad, ‘“If someone speaks my name now … I feel bad. It reminds me of the dirty meaning. Mr Dinshawji has ruined my own name for me”’ (SLJ, 176). Although Dinshawji means no offence, the misalliance between intention and effect here offers a prime example of how, in Eliot’s words, ‘Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / … Between the emotion / And the response / Falls the Shadow.’ As if to compound both the indignity and the linguistic vacillation, Laurie’s complaints about the harassment take place in one of the ‘private’ upstairs rooms at a local restaurant, where illicit sexual encounters take place, and which contains a sign proclaiming, ‘Please Ring Bell For Waiter Under The Table’: ‘“Now why would they put a waiter under the table?” said Gustad’ (SLJ, 174).

From Dinshawji’s crude double entendres, to the damaged Tehmul with his rapid-fire speech, words have a habit of sliding around, of changing meaning between sender and recipient. Throughout the book attempts at communication tend to obscure as much as they reveal. Gustad and Dilnavaz use a special ‘asmai-kasmai’ code when they want to communicate without the children understanding, and a Gujarati child’s rhyme is cryptically deployed as a veiled threat to Gustad as he wavers over the bank deposits. When Jimmy realises that he has been framed he sends an apologetic letter to Gustad, imploring him to undertake a visit to the jail in which he now languishes, as,
you will not believe words on paper, because I sent you words on paper before and could not keep them from turning false … I want you to know and understand, hear from your own lips that you forgive me” (SLJ, 216) [emphasis added]. Yet, despite Jimmy’s faith in the power of direct verbal communication, he is here succumbing to what Derrida would describe as the logocentrism characteristic of western thinking, wherein language itself is seen as a guarantee of presence, and spoken language in particular is viewed as a more authentic mode of communication, giving immediate access to the speaker’s thoughts and intention, whereas writing is a bastardised form, forever divorced from the originating utterance and at best a ‘warmed up’ re-presentation, at worst downright falsehood.14 However, the deceptive characteristics of writing also turn out to hold true for the spoken word. On Gustad’s arrival, Jimmy’s jailor asserts that his charge is suffering from ‘jungle sickness’, despite the clear textual indication that paralysing drugs are being administered. The story of the set-up emerges little by little, stifled and blurred by the injections: Jimmy’s words require patient listening and disentanglement, emerging slowly, ‘As though each one was being sculpted painstakingly, out of stubborn granite’ (SLJ, 272). And during his account he recalls an observation by that ‘Very clever woman’, Indira Gandhi, at a personal briefing: “under the proper conditions, people will believe anything” (SLJ, 277). During a lull in the interview when Jimmy lapses into catalepsy, Gustad emerges, exhausted, to seek refreshment: ‘The policeman said there was tea and snacks in the canteen downstairs. He pronounced it snakes’ (SLJ, 272).

The Janus-faced nature of language is also illustrated by the discrepancy between the propaganda offered by the newspapers at time of war – about evil, baby-bayoneting Pakistani troops confronted by their impossibly heroic and virtuous Indian counterparts – and the reality which seems to involve shady dealings at the highest level. In time of war, when demonstrations of loyalty are de rigueur, no one is immune from the effects of the political uses and abuses of language. Ultimately, some things, such as hope, can be expressed extra-linguistically,
as Gustad discovers when a chance meeting with an old friend, Malcolm Saldanha, heralds memories of the well-being and transcendence their mutual love of music used to provide, arming him for the traumatic yet therapeutic experience of Dinshawji’s funeral. Music here – whether Cesar Franck’s Sonata for violin and piano, or Nat King Cole singing ‘You Will Never Grow Old’ – seems a purer, less equivocal mode of communication. And in a reference to the song from the film Mary Poppins, ‘supercalifragilisticexpialidocious’, that fantastical, arbitrary word signifying nothing (and everything you want it to), becomes the last word Gustad murmurs into Dinshawji’s ear as he awaits the hearse. Under the circumstances, it seems as good as any sacrament.

As suggested above, Gustad offers the main example of how misrecognition and the fundamental gap between appearance and reality are key themes in Such a Long Journey. Initially, this relates to his bewildered and resentful dealings with Jimmy which draw him further into the world of double-dealing and intrigue he seeks to avoid. Baffled by his neighbour’s unexplained disappearance, Gustad no longer knows what to believe about him. His absence allows Gustad to project all manner of sinister motivations onto him and his actions, viewing him as a traitor to the close friendship they have shared. In the first half of the book the Major operates almost as an absurdist ‘absent presence’, an off-stage orchestrator of events, à la Beckett’s Godot or Pinter’s menacing dumb waiter. In this respect, Jimmy is one of several characters who invite their interlocutors – and the reader – to project interpretations onto them. For instance, Dinshawji plays the role of ‘the Casanova of Flora Fountain’, and maintains a façade of good humour and ribaldry despite the fact that he is actually dying. As a result of this discrepancy between appearance and reality, Gustad is shocked by the speed of his decline when, in the interests of discretion, the joking is silenced:

When Gustad came across him later in the day, he was surprised at how authentically Dinshawji projected his new image. Till he remembered that it seemed authentic because Dinshawji was no longer playing a role; reality, at
last, had caught up with him; and Gustad felt awful for confiscating his mask. (SLJ, 181)

Another character onto whom it is even easier to project interpretation is Tehmul-Lungraa. With his swaying gait and impaired mental faculties, Tehmul lurches around chasing butterflies, running simple errands and disconcerting residents by his tendency to follow them around; he becomes particularly attached to Gustad with a childlike loyalty and faith. In the novel as a whole, Tehmul functions as a kind of divine idiot or fool figure. Like Dostoyevsky’s eponymous character, Prince Myshkin, in The Idiot, Tehmul appears too good, too innocent for the duplicitous society in which he is placed. His tumbling, repetitious utterances can be compared to Myshkin’s relapse into idiocy at the end of Dostoyevsky’s novel, symbolising a rejection of that language which has been used throughout for deception and dissembling. Likewise, both Tehmul and the Prince have no knowledge of women, although Tehmul’s beatific innocence is alloyed with a disturbingly adult sexuality: his drooling and crotch-rubbing antics alarm Dilnavaz, particularly when he appears to set his sites on the attractive pink plaster doll Roshan has won in a school raffle.15

Both Gustad and Dilnavaz in their different ways take advantage of Tehmul and project their anxieties onto him: Gustad, by frightening him with the threat of violence when he finds out about the hoard of money; Dilnavaz by conspiring with Miss Kutpitia to displace onto him the ‘evil spirits’ afflicting little Roshan and making her ill. Indeed, the text appears to maintain the possibility that Tehmul has been gifted some extraordinary qualities and powers to compensate for his other disabilities. We are told that he has the ‘ability to ferret out information ahead of others with whole minds and bodies’ (SLJ, 112), and there is enough evidence to support a reading of his urgent desire to ‘touch’ Roshan’s doll as more than simply an urge to sexual self-gratification. Is it some kind of proxy healing gesture, a laying on of hands, to draw the malevolent forces from her and, thus, effect a cure? Like Joseph Conrad’s half-witted Stevie in The Secret Agent, Tehmul is an incoherent
victim of the machinations and intrigues of those around him. However, unlike the hapless Stevie, Tehmul becomes a redemptive figure: he is the receptacle into which the bad spirits plaguing Roshan will be poured, and his death at the end of the novel effects a reunion between the estranged Gustad and Sohrab over his corpse. He is, on one level, a kind of sacrificial lamb – just as, one might say, Major Jimmy Bilimoria is made a sacrificial lamb on the national level (although, in the latter case any redemption is rather more ambiguous and short-lived, as Mistry will show in *A Fine Balance*).

Tehmul, like Jimmy, is one of Mistry’s ‘hollow men’ in *Such a Long Journey*, embodying the text’s insistent concern with shadows and doubles, surrogates and simulacra. For example, at one point Jimmy poses alongside a projection of the crime-fighting superhero the Shadow to entertain Gustad’s children, but is later described on his deathbed as ‘nothing more than a shadow. The shadow of the powerfully-built army man who once lived in Khodadad Building’ (*SLJ*, 267). Similarly, in a last trip to the Noble home before the hospitalisation from which he will not emerge, Dinshawji is little more than a shadow of the ebullient joker Dilnavaz remembers from a previous visit: ‘The man who had laughed and sung that night, drunk beer and recited rhymes … was not the man who stood before her,’ (*SLJ*, 187) shrunken and visibly sick. Meanwhile, Roshan’s doll operates as her double – when he hears of his daughter’s raffle success Gustad exclaims, ‘my doll has won a doll’ (*SLJ*, 84) – but it also serves as a surrogate sexual partner for Tehmul, who has been denied the physical comforts of the ‘painted dolls’ working in the local brothel, the ‘House of Cages’. The image of synthetic supplements for organic entities, begun with the doll, reaches a semi-surrealistic pitch in the plethora of surrogate body parts – torsos, limbs, digits, heads – sold to supplicants at the Church of Mount Mary, hoping for miraculous cures to a variety of ailments; just as the statue of the Virgin, supposedly found under supernatural circumstances, like all icons acts as a receptacle for the hopes and dreams of the faithful.
The line between what one might call the deep structures of these psychic correspondences, and ‘mere’ simulation, is never entirely clear. Dinshawji simulates vitality and cheerfulness for as long as he can; Tehmul simulates sex with Roshan’s doll; Ghulam Mohammed – the contact through whom Jimmy communicates with Gustad – alters his appearance to play the roles of taxi-driver or bookseller as the exigencies of espionage require; and the Government of India simulates openness and accountability while actually being mired in corruption and ruthlessness. Ghulam Mohammad makes a comment about Jimmy’s predicament that might almost stand as a refrain, or a surrogate title for the novel as a whole: ‘things are not what they seem’ (SLJ, 215).

At one point, when Gustad goes to Chor Bazaar for a rendezvous with Ghulam Mohammad, he purchases a copy of Plato’s Dialogues at a bookstall. Probably the most famous of these dialogues is The Republic in which Plato advances his Theory of Ideas or Forms. Here, Plato explains that most people live as if in a darkened cave. We are chained, facing a blank wall, and behind us is a fire. Between the fire and our backs, others move carrying all manner of vessels, statues and figurines of various shapes and materials. All we can see are the flickering shadows of these objects playing on the screen offered by the wall in front of us. It is only by learning to break our shackles and turn away from the wall and its shadows, that we can hope to escape into the true light of day, and view those archetypal Forms – the ideal paradigms, of which all earthly entities are merely imperfect copies. Although Plato is talking about a general philosophical conundrum, it is tempting to apply his ideas to Gustad in Such a Long Journey: trapped in his own dim cave, the earthly and celestial light kept out by the blackout paper and his own fear of change, chasing the shadows that have become threatening only because he cannot face them fully. Throughout the book, the lure of the illusion, of what one wishes to believe, is stronger than that of reality. Examples of the attraction of appearance, or reflection, over reality range from Gustad’s unwillingness to entertain Sohrab’s insights into the
misdemeanours of Indira Gandhi’s government – preferring to keep his patriotic worldview intact – to the mosquitoes which plague him, drawn by the stench of urine emanating from the wall, but which, themselves, can be diverted towards the reflection of an electric light in a bowl of water: ‘abandoning the real bulb, they played, unswervingly suicidal in their attempts to reach the aqueous, insubstantial light’ (SLJ, 123).

These Platonic interests and echoes work not merely to lend intellectual *kudos* to Gustad’s personal tribulations, but to point up the thematic continuity between Plato and the cosmological and theological preoccupations of Zoroastrianism. Correspondences between Platonism and Zoroastrianism include the tendency both systems have to privilege the verbal over the written. In poststructuralism, Derrida’s critique of logocentrism questions that elevation, traceable to Plato, of the spoken over the written in human communication. The comparatively late transcription of the Gathic texts of Zoroastrianism likewise ensured the pre-eminence of oral performance in ritual observance: ‘The sound of the words themselves were thought to convey power and instil religious experience, a power and experience which could not be captured by the written word.’

Susan Stiles Maneck has recounted how the twelfth-century Sufi mystic, Suhrawadi, developed his *Ishraqi* philosophy by integrating Platonic and Zoroastrian elements. Similarly, Platonism, like the revealed religions, of which Zoroastrianism is one, interprets truth as an absolute hidden from humankind, but which can yet be attained by those following the path of light.

Indeed, it is in their mutual recourse to images of light that Platonism and Zoroastrianism seem most apposite as compatible modes of approach to *Such a Long Journey*. In the parable of the cave, light becomes, for Plato, a symbol of the ultimate Good: the nearest we can approach to the Divine Form itself; ‘the good may be said to be not only the author of knowledge to all things known, but of their being and essence’. He continues:

> my opinion is that in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and, when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author
of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and lord of light in this visible world." [emphasis added]

In Zoroastrianism, the Yasna ceremony, the highest of the liturgies, may only be performed at sunrise, ‘since this is said to represent the fire of asha scattering light and heat over creation’. And in the ninth century Pahlavi text, the Bundahishen, Ohrmazd, otherwise known as Ahura Mazda, dwells outside time, ‘in a realm of pure light’, while the evil spirit, Ahriman, exists, ‘in a realm of utter darkness’. Asha, associated with truth, is represented in Zoroastrian ceremonial by fire. It is the opposite of evil or the lie, drug, and represents that ideal form by which the cosmos should be regulated. Considering the battle between truth and lies that is conducted on all levels in Such a Long Journey, Mistry’s novel appears to raise once again one of the central questions from the Yasna hymns: ‘This I ask you, O Ahura, tell me truly: How can I deliver deceit into the hands of truth?’

It has also been suggested that the two planes of existence recognised in Zoroastrianism – the menog, or spiritual, and the getig, material – correspond to Plato’s notions of physical and Ideal realms. The getig plane serves as the battlefield between the forces of good and evil, while the menog has been read as a prototypical stratum, inhabited by the spirits. According to Clark:

Both Plato and Zarathushtra advocated a dualistic view of the universe, though their respective forms of dualism are only superficially related … In Zoroastrianism, unlike Platonism, there is an ethical struggle to make the menog accessible through the getig on the basis that the more good there is in a spatially and temporally finite world the less evil can reside there, whereas the Platonic view tends towards the eventual rejection of the entirety of the mundane, allowing the ‘ideal’ world of forms to be realised and experienced in its totality.

In view of this, Zoroastrianism requires of its devotee a conscious choice to participate in the battle against evil. As a result, asceticism is discouraged as it constitutes a retreat from
that worldly engagement on behalf of truth. (This desire to engage is what Gustad lacks at the beginning of the novel and needs to develop. His horror of contamination and urge to withdraw can be seen as an indulging of an ascetic instinct.) Whether or not final victory is achievable in this world is a moot point. What is important is to be always endeavouring to move, to journey, towards perfection.

Thus, Gustad’s long journey is to a kind of enlightenment on two levels: that of political reality and that of personal affections and mortality. The central image of the journey recalls that paradigmatic journey of the Parsis in their flight from Iran to India in the eighth century, alluded to in the novel and recorded in the talismanic seventeenth-century chronicle known as the *Kisseh-i Sanjan*. Yet it also encompasses a range of experience, resonating outwards to affect all the characters and situations in the novel. As Anjana Desai says, ‘The journey is the journey of a nation, of a city, of an ethnic minority, and of an individual man of this community – and the question it raises is the same one that baffles Eliot’s magi – was it for a birth or a death that they travelled?’ Meditations on this theme are memorably focalised through the figure of the pavement artist, who is persuaded to turn the stinking compound wall into a canvas on which are depicted the sacred personalities and sites of a variety of religions. The peripatetic pavement artist lives and deals in the mutable and transient. In art as in life, permanence is an illusion, a false consolation: the pavement artist works in coloured chalks and crayon that can be rubbed out or washed away. For him existence, the stuff of art, is ‘a cycle of arrival, creation and obliteration … The journey – chanced, unplanned, solitary – was the thing to relish’ (*SLJ*, 184). However, at one point his prime location beside the Khodadad Building begins to awaken his old desire for ‘permanence’, ‘roots’, ‘something immutable’. He becomes protective of his work, wants to build a shelter for himself and plans to start working in oils because they are indelible. This spell is only broken after the climactic riot, during which demolition work on the wall begins. The artist must resume his journey now. By contrast Gustad’s own
fear is of the end of journeys: a paralysing horror of change, termination and death, which does not allow him to yield to the pavement artist’s maxim and start enjoying the journey for its own sake. The acts of betrayal and deception of which he feels himself a victim are experienced as mini-death, confirming him in his isolationist outlook. It is only with the actual deaths of his friends Dinshawji and Jimmy – and his decision to undertake the long journey to the latter’s bedside – that, through the soothing balm of the funeral rites he participates in, Gustad is able to come to terms with those losses which constitute human experience through time.

Despite the conceptual common ground of Zoroastrianism and Platonism, *Such a Long Journey* is not simply an illustrative Platonic tract. Instead, Mistry appears to be offering what one might describe as a Zoroastrian revision of Plato. To begin with, Gustad is not one of the initiates, the philosopher-kings or guardians of his society. Indeed, the novel as a whole shows a nation state whose governance appears predicated on mendacity, and teeters on the brink of a tyranny that will become overt in the 1975 State of Emergency. Likewise, the existence or otherwise of a spiritual realm of ideal forms is not really the issue. Rather, Mistry appears to understand the necessity of some form of idealism to the whole concept of life’s journey: whether it be an ideal of family life, of which the Noble unit inevitably falls short, or the belief that politics ought to be motivated by a sense of social responsibility and altruism instead of self-interest and corruption.

Typical of Mistry’s attitude to human belief systems – that they are a bulwark against contingency and chaos – is the text’s treatment of religion and superstition. For example, Dilnavaz, with her reflex gestures to ward off evil if someone mentions unpleasant possibilities, is a prime candidate for belief in Miss Kutpitia’s magic, which offers the chance, ‘to understand the hidden meaning of mundane events and chance occurrences’ (*SLJ*, 4). In Miss Kutpitia’s cosmology endowments such as health, strength or the ability to see things more clearly are stolen from one person by another. Such a simple explanatory
system attracts Dilnavaz at her lowest ebb – when Roshan is ill and Sohrab has left home – even though it also requires her to concoct a sort of noxious witch’s brew to shift the eviscerating forces. Arun Mukherjee has objected to the portrayal of the female characters as indulging in superstition and black magic, while ‘the men make money, tell tall stories, do adventurous things’. However, this is to overlook the constant juxtaposition of superstition with culturally sanctioned religious ritual and belief throughout the novel. Miss Kutpitia’s belief system is not ridiculed or simply dismissed any more than are the pilgrims to Mount Mary who seek miraculous intercession in their daily affairs. Rather, when first mentioned in the novel’s opening pages, it is surreptitiously bracketed by the introduction of Gustad, engaging in the altogether more ‘respectable’ activity of morning prayers. Similarly, his religious instincts are aroused by the fates that have overtaken Dinshawji and Jimmy, and Roshan’s worrying illness. Where is the line between cultural custom and superstition where religion is concerned? As explanatory metanarratives both aetiologies offer an apparent pattern in the chaos of existence. Moreover, while the material and metaphysical may be opposed as ways of seeing, both medical science and supernatural intervention are maintained as possible explanations for Roshan’s swift recovery. (In this, Such a Long Journey is reminiscent of Amitav Ghosh’s fantastical, ‘subaltern’ account of the discovery of the means of transmission of malaria, The Calcutta Chromosome, where scientific rationalism and indigenous arcana are held together as possible explanatory narratives.) Once more, Mistry’s apparently valorised spokesperson, the pavement artist, takes a pragmatic view of people’s belief in miracle and magic, consonant with the power of the imagination his pictures embrace: not examining phenomena too closely, but accepting the story ‘if it helps’.

Indeed, the proliferation of storytelling, and the power of art more generally, is again celebrated in Such a Long Journey, making a final, decisive distinction from Plato who famously wished to banish artists and storytellers from his republic. For him, not only did the ‘trickery’ involved in art have the potential
to call reality into question, and its examples of flawed personalities and behaviour risked influencing its viewers in negative ways, in imitating the earthly copy of the ideal paradigm, art is a derivative exercise three-times removed from its original. Plato uses the example of a bed. There are, essentially, three beds: ‘one existing in nature, which is made by God … another which is the work of the carpenter … And the work of the painter is a third’.\textsuperscript{29} As such, the imitation inherent in representative art is, for Plato, the mark of a third-rate activity. Likewise, citing the impracticality of art, Plato uses a horse’s saddle as illustration to distinguish between the art which uses (that of the horseman); the art which makes (that of the leatherworker); and the art which imitates them (that of the painter who depicts it).\textsuperscript{30} These, possibly rather reductive, conclusions have of course been reinterpreted and challenged over the centuries, not least by Plato’s own disciple, Aristotle. Certainly, the author of that exuberant celebration of storytelling, \textit{Tales from Firozsha Baag}, might not be expected to agree with such an uncharitable view of his trade. And, indeed, it seems as if Mistry may be taking a subtle sideswipe at Plato’s bed/art parable in the occupations of the Noble patriarchs: Gustad’s grandfather was a furniture maker, some of whose tools have been passed down to Gustad and become sources of comfort and continuity; while his father was a bookseller – a purveyor, no doubt, of just those scurrilous imaginings the ideal republic would do without.

Likewise, this novel is replete with storytellers too. Jimmy is a great storyteller, regaling the children with heroic tales of India’s previous post-partition clashes with Pakistan: Dinshawji is an accomplished story and joke teller; and Dr Paymaster metaphorises the political situation between Pakistan and Bangladesh as a ‘diarrhoea of death’, municipal corruption as gangrene, and, along with his faithful compounder, is likened to Don Quixote with Sancho Panza as he joins the morcha to tilt at the local government’s incompetence and sloth. The doctor’s surgery is near both the cinema, where the unending appetite for stories is temporarily sated, and the House of Cages, where the gaudily
arrayed prostitutes, like fantastically plumed birds, draw punters into a fantasy environment. The latter is presided over by the local paan salesman and raconteur, Peerbhoy Paanwalla, whose racy stories inspire and elevate the sordid and carnal, encouraging clients to think of their sexual prowess and encounters as something grander than they really are. With his centrally placed stall, Peerbhoy is this text’s Tiresias figure, all-seeing with ‘wrinkled, old-woman dugs ... [and] ageless navel that watched the street tirelessly, an unblinking, all-seeing third eye’ (SLJ, 158). His repertoire also includes an erotic satire, attributing the Pakistani leader’s fascination with military hardware to the recent failure to function of his own sexual hardware. Peerbhoy’s stories are multifaceted and difficult to categorise. In another passage, recalling the description of Nariman Hansotia’s storytelling technique in ‘Squatter’, and which might also be said to be applicable to the complex inter-weavings of Mistry’s narrative voice, we learn that:

Peerbhoy Paanwalla had mobilised his talents for the common good, using his skills to weave a tale that defied genre or description. It was not tragedy, comedy or history; not pastoral, tragical-comical, historical-pastoral or tragical-historical. Nor was it epic or mock-heroic. It was not a ballad or an ode, masque or anti-masque, fable or elegy, parody or threnody. Although a careful analysis may have revealed that it possessed a smattering of all these characteristics. But since things such as literary criticism mattered not one jot to the listeners, they were responding to Peerbhoy’s narrative in the only way that made sense: with every fibre of their beings. (SLJ, 306)

Yet, the stories in Such a Long Journey syncretise experience in non-linguistic forms too. For instance, the pavement artist’s polytheistic mural turns the Khodadad building’s perimeter wall from a latrine into a sacred site, enshrining India’s portable notions of the sacred in a synthesis, albeit temporary, of religious iconography. It reconciles the different religious stories so fundamental to the nation’s sense of itself. In figuring the saints and sages, mosques, churches and temples, on the blank canvas
offered by the wall, the artist’s work foregrounds the role of representation in the perception of ‘truths’, whether interpersonal, national or metaphysical. On inspecting the rapidly expanding mural, Gustad notices on one of the panels ‘a painting of the wall featuring a painting of the wall, featuring a …’ (SLJ, 288). The pavement artist explains this by pointing out that the wall itself is now a sacred place, drawing its own share of pilgrims and worshippers. This draws attention once more to the inherently reproductive nature of attempts to give access to ‘the real’, especially in art and literature, in terms that recall the various other simulations which, as we have seen, epitomise this novel. This, in turn, might act as a metaphor for the issue, amplified throughout, of how versions of reality are created through, and dependent on the vagaries of representation, thereby having implications for an understanding of Mistry’s narrative technique which will be examined later. As Michael Ryan has written:

what we take to be real does not exist prior to simulation; rather it is simulated into being and lent ontological reality by virtue of acts of representation, masquerade, and posturing that are themselves more prior, fundamental, generative (of the real). Reality is the successful repression of these processes.31 [emphasis added]

Upon the wall’s destruction, the pavement artist is undeterred. He resumes his travels, responding to Gustad’s enquiry as to where he will go: ‘In a world where roadside latrines becomes temples and shrines, and temples and shrines become dust and ruin, does it matter where?’ (SLJ, 338). The stuff of art can be found everywhere, and the spirit of the artist – like the spirit of God or the gods – is omnipresent and immanent.

Such a Long Journey has been described as ‘both history and fabulation’,32 and there are certainly elements of the text’s treatment of documented national events which appear to propel it towards the category of ‘historiographic metafiction’ described by Linda Hutcheon, where history and fiction are intertwined, and the boundaries between them blurred to allow a new perspective to emerge.33 For instance, gossip opens up the
interpretative possibilities of the whole of post-independence Indian history, anonymously advancing the suggestion that the causes of the unexpected deaths of Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira’s Parsi husband, Feroze Gandhi may not have been natural. Similarly, at their last meeting, Ghulam Mohammad tells Gustad that he is content to wait for revenge on those in power whom he considers responsible for the death of his friend Jimmy, remarking of Indira: “I am a patient man. Her life is as easy to snuff out as Bili Boy’s, let me tell you. Like that,” and he snapped his fingers under Gustad’s nose,’ (SLJ, 323). Reading with a hindsight that encompasses the deaths of both Indira Gandhi – assassinated by a Sikh personal bodyguard in 1984 – and her son, Sanjay, ‘the car manufacturer’ – killed in a plane crash four years earlier – Ghulam’s tirade metafictionally anticipates (perhaps even proleptically participates in) these later reckonings.

In a sense, Rohinton Mistry’s first two novels can be read as a diptych, diagnosing the ills of a nation in the early 1970s. The powerful blend of political chicanery and casual brutality which descends on the fiercely guarded private world of sensitive individuals, intrinsic to Such a Long Journey, also provides the lineaments of Mistry’s novelistic analysis of an even greater constitutional outrage, the 1975 State of Emergency, in his next novel. A Fine Balance pursues further the themes of political decline and personal moral responsibility raised in Such a Long Journey, but it does so on an epic scale, testing out the fabric of the nation through a swatch of characters, both employer and employee, middle-class and peasant, high-caste and untouchable, caught up in the dangerous delirium of a paranoid political regime.