



Travel as a Metaphor: Transformation in Tabish Khair's *The Bus Stopped*, Chaucer's General Prologue, and Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*

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Abstract

*This paper explores travel as a metaphor for transformation in three literary texts: Tabish Khair's *The Bus Stopped* (2004), Geoffrey Chaucer's General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* (14th century), and Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* (1991). Across postcolonial India, medieval England, and post-Independence Bombay, the act of travel reveals human diversity, moral complexity, and the fragility of identity. Through narrative structures and character portraits, travel emerges as a powerful site of self-discovery, societal critique, and transformation.*

Key Words

Postcolonial, post-Independence, human diversity, moral complexity, fragility of identity

Introduction

Travel in literature often operates as a symbolic

framework for exploring deeper questions of identity, memory, and societal structures. In *The Bus Stopped*, *The General Prologue*, and *Such a Long Journey*, the journey motif extends beyond literal movement to become a metaphor for human transformation revealing inner truths, exposing social hierarchies, and confronting the tensions of belonging and alienation, (Said xxii). From ancient epics to modern novels, the theme of travel has served as a powerful metaphor in literature. While journeys often unfold in physical terms across landscapes, countries, or time periods they more profoundly reflect the internal transformations of characters and the shifting contours of the societies they inhabit. Travel, in this sense, is never just about getting from one place to another. It becomes a lens through which writers explore identity, memory, morality, and cultural change. This paper examines how three distinct works use travel as a metaphor to chart not only physical movement but also deep, often unsettling transformation. This paper argues that in Khair, Chaucer, and Mistry, travel is used as a transformative metaphor a literary vehicle through which characters and readers alike encounter the fragile boundaries between the known and the unknown, the remembered and the forgotten, the stable and the uncertain. By analyzing how each author shapes this metaphor through form, language, and context, the study highlights the enduring power of travel in literature to illuminate not just external journeys, but the inner landscapes of the human condition.

Travel and Social Cross-Sections

Both Khair's *The Bus Stopped* and Chaucer's General Prologue present travel as a microcosm of society. Khair's inter-city bus carries passengers marked by caste, gender, and class divisions, yet they share a common, if temporary, space, (Khair 5). A long-distance bus journey in contemporary India represents a microcosm of Indian society: people from various castes, religions, classes, and regions. The bus becomes a social space where traditional hierarchies are questioned, resisted, or reinforced. Tensions around gender, communalism, and urban vs. rural identity emerge. Mobility here is both physical and symbolic: people are not just moving from place to place, but confronting internal and societal boundaries. This echoes Chaucer's pilgrimage, which gathers figures like the Knight, the Prioress, the Miller, and the Wife of Bath forming a cross-section of medieval English society, (Chaucer 3-4). Travel is an equalizer. Pilgrims from vastly different classes share the same road. Yet, social satire reveals underlying class, gender, and moral tensions. The journey is a frame narrative and Chaucer, the narrator describes the setting in the month of spring, the best season when people are naturally inclined to travel. Insidentally there are 29 pilgrims from diverse sections of the society gather at the Tabard Inn in Southwark, where the Host, Herry Bailly, proposes a story telling competition - two tells on the way to Canterbury on two on the way back. In the beginning of the Prologue Chaucer beautiful presents the picture of the whole plan taking place at the Tabard:

Bifil that in that seson on a day,
In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay,
Redy to wenden on my pilgrymage
To Caunterbury with ful devout corage,
At nyght were come into that hostelrye
Wel nyne and twenty in a compaignye
Of sondry folk, by aventure y-falle

In felaweshipe, and pilgrimes were they alle, (Chaucer 23-30)

Each character tells a tale, exposing values, hypocrisy, and social commentary. Although *The Canterbury Tales* is framed around a physical pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket, the journey itself functions less as a literal event and more as a metaphor for a moral and social cross-section of humanity. The road to Canterbury becomes a stage on which Chaucer explores the contradictions, hypocrisies, and complexities of his characters each pilgrim not just traveling to a holy site, but revealing their inner selves through their words, tales, and behaviors. Rather than progressing toward spiritual enlightenment, the journey exposes the moral disarray and social tensions of the time. In this sense, Chaucer's pilgrimage is not about religious salvation, but about revealing the state of the human soul and the society it inhabits. The path becomes a mirror, reflecting the truth behind public virtue, private vice, and the shifting values of medieval England. In both texts, travel exposes hidden prejudices and shared human desires: the bus journey is not just physical movement but a metaphor for societal flux, (Khair 157). Khair observes, 'A journey is never just a journey in this country—it is always a little more', (Khair 2004).

Nostalgia, Memory, and the Loss of Home

In *The Bus Stopped*, nostalgia for ancestral homes Ammi Ke Yaha and Ghar is palpable: Khair recalls houses built with 'a compound of lime and earth... the mix favoured by the Mughals', (Khair 5). In Tabish Khair's "The Bus Stopped", the speaker reflects on a transitory moment in a landscape that is both literal and symbolic. The halted bus becomes a metaphor for memory a pause in the forward momentum of life, a chance to look back at what has been left behind. The poem evokes a world that is no longer accessible: the remembered town, the familiar faces, and the innocent rhythms of life that time has erased or transformed. Here, nostalgia is not simply sentimental longing, but a kind of quiet grief for a home that cannot be returned to, either because it has changed or because the self that once inhabited it no longer exists. The tone is

reflective, elegiac, and restrained capturing the emotional weight of memory without overstatement. Similarly, Chaucer's pilgrims, though ostensibly on a religious quest, often tell stories that circle back to earthly concerns like love, greed, and deception, (Chaucer 7-12). Chaucer's General Prologue, though structurally different, also deals with a form of loss and longing, albeit more subtly. The pilgrimage is not merely a religious journey but a symbolic departure from everyday life. The characters are in motion physically, socially, and morally. The variety of backgrounds and social classes suggests a society in transition, moving away from traditional feudal structures toward a more fluid and unstable identity. Beneath the satire and irony, there is an undercurrent of cultural displacement: the Church is no longer a reliable moral center, women like the Wife of Bath seek agency in a patriarchal world, and figures such as the Knight or the Miller represent either the fading ideal of chivalry or the crudeness of emerging urban life. Though Chaucer does not express nostalgia in the emotional tone of Khair or Mistry, his work reflects a society on the cusp of change a subtle mourning for order, rootedness, and clarity that is slipping away. In contrast, Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* centers memory and the loss of home in deeply personal and political ways. The protagonist, Gustad Noble, is an aging Parsi man living in 1970s Bombay. His daily life is steeped in memories of a better past not only his own youthful days but a time when Bombay was safer, cleaner, and more orderly. This personal nostalgia is tied to larger historical disillusionment: the breakdown of community life, political corruption under Indira Gandhi, and the uncertain future for minority communities like the Parsis. Gustad's physical home becomes a contested space — both a refuge and a site of tension reflecting the erosion of stability. Mistry uses memory not just to evoke sentiment, but to critique the betrayal of ideals, both political and cultural. The loss of home here is multi-layered: it is the loss of a physical space, a cultural identity, and a moral world. Mistry's Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey* navigates a Bombay marked by loss, political turmoil, and personal grief each small movement (to the bank, to the wall to pray) becomes a metaphorical journey through emotional landscapes, (Mistry 14). His reflection *Such a long journey, he thought, for such a small parcel*, (Mistry 226) underscores how even the smallest acts can carry profound significance.

The Metaphor of Travel as Transformation

Across the three texts, travel serves as a liminal space for transformation. In "The Bus Stopped", Tabish Khair presents a seemingly simple image: a bus halting in a dusty town. Yet this momentary pause becomes a portal to memory, identity, and longing. The journey is both literal and symbolic a movement through space and simultaneously through the speaker's interior world. As the bus stops, so does time; and within that stillness, the speaker is flooded by the past images of people, childhood, familiar streets, and lost innocence. Here, travel becomes a confrontation with change, as the speaker realizes that home is no longer what it was. The transformation is not dramatic but quiet and deeply felt: a shift in how the self relates to place and time. The return, even imagined, is no return at all. Khair uses travel to underscore the irreversibility of time and the slow erosion of the familiar. Khair's bus passengers confront grief (the tribal woman with the dead child), gender transitions (the Hijra who becomes Parvati), and cultural dissonance (the Danish businessman Rasmus), (Khair 109, 157). Chaucer's General Prologue similarly uses a pilgrimage a journey toward a sacred destination as a metaphor for social and moral examination. The thirty pilgrims who gather at the Tabard Inn represent a cross-section of 14th-century English society: knights and merchants, clergy and peasants, women and men, corrupt officials and holy figures. While the stated goal is spiritual to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket the journey quickly becomes a stage for storytelling, performance, and exposure. Through the tales and interactions, Chaucer reveals the disparity between public virtue and private behavior, between appearance and truth. Chaucer's pilgrims reveal moral contradictions the Pardoner preaches against greed even as he admits to avarice, (Chaucer 241-242). As the journey unfolds, what transforms is the reader's understanding of each character and, more broadly, of medieval society itself. Travel, in Chaucer, is less about physical distance and more about moral revelation a symbolic movement from illusion to insight. As Hicks argues, 'the journey allegorizes how the present is only a preliminary stop on the continuous travel of

our life, from the past through the fleeting present into the future', (Hicks 19). In Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*, travel takes on a deeply political and psychological dimension. The novel follows Gustad Noble, a Parsi bank clerk in Bombay, whose life is disrupted by personal loss, political unrest, and a dangerous errand tied to the corrupt world of espionage. While the title implies a literal and emotional journey, it is ultimately a metaphor for endurance, self-confrontation, and transformation under pressure. As Gustad moves through the city from his home to the hospital, to government offices, and into memories of the past we witness his inner evolution. The novel shows how travel through an unstable social landscape (marked by communal tensions, political betrayal, and physical decay) forces the protagonist to revise his understanding of morality, family, and belonging. Mistry's travel is not heroic or exotic, but grounded in the ordinary movements of survival and self-questioning. Mistry emphasizes internal travel Gustad's small acts reflect larger emotional transitions, from faith to doubt, loyalty to disillusionment. The city of Bombay, both familiar and alien, becomes the emotional and national landscape where Gustad's identity is tested, (Mistry 199).

Travel, Identity, and Postcolonial Contexts

Edward Said's assertion that 'one of imperialism's achievements was to bring the world closer together' despite its injustices, (Said xxii) resonates with Khair's narrative of hybrid identities the bus conductor's sarcastic commentary, the intermingling of Hindi and English, and the echoes of colonial hierarchies, (Khair 196). Chaucer's pilgrimage similarly crosses boundaries of social class from the Knight to the Ploughman blurring fixed identities through storytelling, (Chaucer 3-4). Mistry's Gustad traverses postcolonial uncertainties, confronting corruption, family strife, and political disillusionment in Bombay. His journey is both deeply personal and emblematic of national anxieties, (Mistry 143). Across these works, travel is a contact zone a place where cultures clash, identities evolve, and societies reflect on themselves.

Conclusion

Khair's *The Bus Stopped*, Chaucer's *General Prologue*, and Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* illuminate how travel functions as a metaphor for transformation. Whether on a literal bus journey, a sacred pilgrimage, or the streets of Bombay, characters navigate personal and societal complexities exposing the fluidity of identity, the tensions of community, and the paradoxes of human nature. Each narrative uses movement to explore the fragility of belonging and the inevitability of change. The metaphor of travel, then, becomes a tool through which writers probe the deepest questions of human experience who we are, where we come from, and how we carry our losses forward. Through the motif of travel, these authors reveal that the journey is rarely simple—it is a continuous process of becoming.

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