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## **The Merger of Private and Public Domains in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters***

**Ritu Gupta**

Each person finds identity, meaning and purpose in life through connection to the society. Traditionally, there have been two spheres recognized: public and private. According to a critic, "The public sphere covers our public interactions, education, business, government, community interactions. The private sphere longs to the individual and the family".(www.csudh)

Although the concept of individual's right to privacy can be linked to -the : 1215 Magna Carta of England which granted citizens right to property and freedom from encroachment by soldiers, the steady rise of individualism in the twentieth century is largely responsible for the almost hallowed status of privacy in contemporary times. And yet, private sphere cannot totally delinked from the public sphere because individuals must live in society. The need for defining the private versus the public spheres arose in the united States in dealing with child and spousal abuse. Within the patriarchal scheme that informs the legal system in America, there has been a tenacious respect for the right of the "male head of household" to rule within the private sphere of the family. Government has hesitated to intrude. In fact, there is often disagreement on the most effective ways to intrude , since intrusion often involves harmful consequences to the family, breaking the family apart, when the Americans still believe in the family's importance to the social system. Similarly, since many U.S. citizens are firmly committed to individual responsibility and freedom, they view taking care of unsuccessful or disabled members of a family as the family's responsibility. That places responsibility firmly in the private sphere. U.S. government agencies, however, are squarely located in the public sphere. This produces many anomalies. Intrusion into personal lives hurts family pride, family self esteem.

Despite the reverential importance attached to private spaces attempts are normally made to upset the balance between the public and private space. Craig Calhoun, President of the Social Science Research Council of America, while making a presentation at the Ford Foundation stated, Nothing is more basic to present day social change and social problems than unsettling of the relationship between public and private. This is so whether we ask in which realm religion belongs or ask about the relationship between public health and private provision of health care. The issue is manifest when we speak of the public good vs. private good, Public finances vs. private property, public security and the surveillance of private life, or public culture, creativity and communication and the private control of knowledge as intellectual property rights. In all these arenas, and others, a tacit consensus about what is public and what is Private has come unstuck. " While Calhoun is worried about the erosion of public space in America, there being too much of privatization there, in India things might be found in reverse order.

According to a critic," A common thread that runs through all his works is Mistry's concern for society. His works have been moulded by social reality and he too, in turn has realized the situation like a sociologist and pointed out, within boundaries set for an artist, the inadequacies and weaknesses of our social and political order"(Batra 12). A key feature of this engagement with society is Mistry's portrayal of the merger of the private and the public domains.

The present paper is an effort to understand the conflict of personal and public domains and its hazardous effect on an individual with special reference to 'Family Matters' by Rohinton Mistry. The story revolves around Prof. Nariman Vakeel and his son-in-law Yezad. Nariman lives with his step-children Jal and Coomy, who could never accept him as their father. The responsibility to look after him, when he breaks his ankle, falls on them but they create a make-believe situation which warrants shifting the professor to his real daughter Roxana's house, which is much smaller as compared to the step-children's house. Surprisingly, even Roxana, under pressure from her husband and beset with financial crunch, is not willing to accommodate her father in her flat. They had just One "BHK" flat, meaning One Bedroom, hall and kitchen flat. This unwillingness may be justified on these grounds but the fact remains that in modern age, people are becoming more and more touchy about the concept of privacy and would forsake their parents for the sake of maintaining privacy. The professor's life took a turn when in his youth, he was not allowed by his parents under pressure from the Parsi public domain to marry a Christian girl whom he loved and forced to marry a girl of their choice. The social norms compel a person at the age of forty-two in compromising in choosing the life partner. "Either this widow or a defective woman – the choice is his... Could be cock-eyed or deaf, or one leg shorter than the other... it depends on who was available." (15-16)

The result was a life-long scar on his psyche that revealed itself in the form of delirious outbursts as he lay in bed. Not only that, his beloved Lucy chose to stay in the neighborhood and made a public display of her feelings for the professor even now that he was married and living with his wife and children. She would climb on to the roof of the apartment block and sing passionate songs there. One day, in order to bully her out of this habit, the professor's wife went up, had scuffle with her with the result that both of them fell down and lost their lives.

Yezad's story too throws in bold relief the evil influence of the public domain when it overshadows the personal domain. Beset with financial problems, ostensibly due to the upkeep of his father-in-law in his home, he tried to find out some way to overcome the problem. The city of Bombay was generally tense due to the agitation of the parochial Shiv Sena. The activists of the party would generally go from shop to shop to demand changing the language of the sign boards from English to Marathi. "We are simply stating the rule, your signboard must change. If this is not taking place in one week, it will be very bad." (385) Yezad falsely reported to his employer Mr. Kapoor that two Shiv Sena workers had demanded twenty thousand rupees in case he did not want to change the signboard as desired by them. Mr. Kapoor, a self-respecting idealist would rather pay up than change the language and thereby change the cosmopolitan character of the city of Bombay. But the plan misfired and real Shiv Sena men showed up one day. Mr. Kapoor easily worked up to a confrontation and lost his life at their hands. Thus, the public domain was responsible for Yezad's temptation and murder of Mr. Kapoor. After this incident, Yezad's life changed. He had guilt sitting heavy on his heart to escape which he took to the path of a fanatic Parsi, mumbling prayer all the time. Nilufer Bharucha comments, "Now suddenly unemployed, religion becomes a full-time solace and he retreats into it to lick his wounds. However, instead of turning him into a stronger and a better person, this agiary-going turns him into a bigot, the sort of man he used to despise" (193).

The public domain not only affects the grown-up people, it also has impact on young minds. When the young Jehangir, starts accepting bribe from his class-mates in return for glossing over their homework, a task assigned to him by the class teacher. This is the impact of an overall atmosphere of corruption and extortion prevalent in

society."School is the world in miniature". So, here Jheangir's classroom takes an metonymic relationship to society and nation. Thus, in this novel the public domain demands adherence to caste system, vitiates social atmosphere, spreads corruption and leads to the death of Mr. Kapoor. It is clear that the writer very deftly deals with the issue of merger of the private and public domains and forcefully articulates against the violation of private domain by public domain.

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