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Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*: A Journey towards Thematic Exploration

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Abstract:

Parsi novelists have always played a pivotal role in the arena of English literature. Rohinton Mistry is one such prolific Parsi novelist who was born in India but immigrated to Canada. From there he endeavours to map the Parsi cultural space in India in his narratives. Mistry seems to be deeply concerned about the marginalized Parsi existence which is severely threatened under the impact of globalization and modernity and the sharp decline in population made him frightened. The rising communal disharmony has intensified the community consciousness more than ever before. This ethnic anxiety is best exemplified in Mistry's novels. *Family Matters* is the third and the latest novel published in 2002 in the line of unearthing the ethno-religious minority traits. He delineates the domestic upheaval and middle class family matters of a Parsi family of Bombay amid the trouble torn years of post Babri Masjid demolition period in nineteen nineties. *Family Matters* crosses the boundary of nation, ethnicity and times and achieves universality by taking up the thematic issues such as geriatrics and caring, familial bondage and human relationship, cosmopolitan city life, secularism, corruption and communalism, suffering and death, immigration, alienation and sense of belongingness etc. This article explores the thematic possibilities in the novel by which Mistry has woven the plot to achieve his aim.

Keywords: Parsi, Marginalized, Anxiety, Theme, Family, City, Matters.

Rohinton Mistry's third and last novel *Family Matters* was published in 2002. Likewise *A Fine Balance* (1995), his *magnum opus*, this novel *Family Matters* is also highly appreciated and welcomed in the literary arena of home and abroad. *A Fine Balance* has already added a new plume to Mistry's cap by winning several major international literary awards. After the enormous success of his second novel *A Fine Balance* with its essential realism amid the crucial historical phase of Indian Emergency in mid 70s, this *Family Matters* has once again proved him as a great realistic storyteller drenched in the Parsi milieu. In the same vein of *Such a Long Journey*, where Mistry largely confines his narrative in the Parsi world order, again restricts himself entirely to the domestic upheaval and family matters of a Parsi family that he knows best and portrays it with utmost genuineness. This compassionate narrative delineates the story of four generations of a middle class Parsi family of Bombay. This tale is a true representation of the insensitive realities and selfish temperament of the characters who express their individual idiosyncrasy in relation to family, community and society as a whole. The narrative focuses the trouble torn years of Mumbai post Babri Masjid demolition period in nineteen nineties. During this time Hindu- Muslim riots have been spread in Mumbai far away from the epicentre of communal trouble in

northern part of the country at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh by some Hindu extremist organizations.

Bombay remains an obsession for Rohinton Mistry. In all of his writings this locale appears with its various hues. Mistry has portrayed the city of Bombay, now renamed as Mumbai, as a protagonist in *Family Matters* like his earlier two novels. He 'recreates ...close attention to the details of homesick exile' (Jha 155). Mistry unfolds Mumbai as he narrates:

That's how people have lived in Bombay. That's why Bombay has survived floods, disease, plague, water shortage, bursting drains and sewers, all the population pressures. In her heart there is room for everyone who wants to make a home here. (FM 152)

The narrative elaborately delineates the city with its cosmopolitan modernity as a theme. It carves out a small section of the city where the action takes place, focuses on the gloomy and pessimistic aspects of the city existence. But 'Mistry's fictions resonate well beyond their local settings and politics' to gain universality. (Vinodkumar 105) Mistry introduces the character Mr Kapur who personifies the city. Again Mistry's penchant for the old city comes live through the voice of Mr. Kapur:

Bombay endures because it gives and it receives. Within this woven the special texture of its social fabric, the spirit of tolerance, acceptance, generosity. (FM 152)

Like *Such A Long Journey* here in this narrative, only a little extent of the cosmopolitan city finds expression. Peter Moray rightly observes: '*Family Matters* can be difficult, and Mistry doesn't shy away from showing them, in all their disturbing roughness, the real truths about them.' (7) Mistry mentions about the 'city's electric trains (FM 160), the railway stations: Marine Lines (FM 138), the cricket stadiums: Wankhade and Brabourne (FM 213), the road network: Hughes Road (FM 45), Dhobi Talao Junction (FM 153), the Metro Cinema (FM 153), Asiatic Society Library (FM 154), and the Sonapur crematorium (FM 153).' (Sebastian 165) In *Family Matters* too like his earlier novel *Such A Long Journey* Rohinton Mistry paints the gloomy picture of Mumbai with its unsafe roads, dug up footpaths, the colossal traffic (FM 35), the dearth of suitable accommodation in the city, people lives in the gutters and eats and sleeps close to ditches and drains (FM 169), multi member families live in one small room in the slums which are unsuitable even for animals (FM 159) and the exercise of power that landlords exerts over their tenants and their 'determined neglect had reduced it to the state of most buildings in Bombay, with crumbling plaster, perforated water tanks, and broken drain pipes' (FM 98). Bombay is also characterized as 'an uncivilized jungle' (FM 45) where there is eve teasing (FM 45) and gambling.

The novel actually is the representation of the degradation of moral and ethical values in different spheres of cosmopolitan societal life with its growing materialism, corruption and cheap politics. 'Mistry enters the contested yet sacred space of the Parsi family to explore the changes brought within the Parsi family structure through its negotiation of modernity, namely resistance to tradition playing within the family domain and the cynical acceptance of modern ideologies that becomes disruptive of the family tradition.' (Wadhawan 98) Mistry raises his voice for several universal issues in his last two novels; here also *Family Matters* crosses the boundary of nation, ethnicity and times by taking up the thematic issues such as geriatrics, family bondage, human relationships, death and theme of belongingness. Nilufer Bharucha comments:

‘Mistry has transcended both the self and the others .The self being the persona of the writer and also his Parsi self; the being the wider world. Here all three have come together in an epiphanic moment that speaks across the national, ethnic and gender boundaries, with a voice that cannot be denied.’ (209)

The story is the life and living of the protagonist Nariman Vakeel who is a septuagenarian former Professor of English stricken with Parkinson’s disease and haunted by the memories of the past. He is a widower and a decaying patriarch who lives in a large flat named Chateau Felicity with a small but conflicting family consisting of his two middle aged step children, Coomy and Jal. Nariman’s sickness has augmented by his broken ankle which forced him to depend upon Coomy and Jal for the daily necessities. Coomy’s harshness reaches its height when she devises a scheme to send Nariman under the care of Roxana, her sister and Nariman’s real daughter and the complexities of the narrative starts from this point. Roxana lives a peaceful and contented life in a small flat of Pleasant Villa with Yezad and her two children Murad and Jehangir. The inclusion of a new member in a small and already stuffed house proves painful both from emotional and financial point of view. Nariman’s staying with Chenoy’s ‘for the next few months changes the lives of everyone, they struggle, they grow, they learn and they endure’ (Dodiya 87). Despite of this, Roxana’s selfless devotion and an urge to be a dutiful daughter prompts her to shoulder the responsibility of Nariman without any hesitation. But Yezad is quite angry with the mischief done to them by Coomy and Jal for pushing them in an acute economic instability. Nariman’s inclusion has proved to be an additional burden on Yezad’s household. Inundated by the ever increasing financial worries he tempts himself to an idea of theft involving Vikram Kapur, his eccentric employer at Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium. After the death of Mr Kapur, Mrs Kapur announces her intention to wind up the shop. Before doing that she wishes to give Yezad a month’s salary in advance despite ignoring his fourteen years service. With this all the hopes of betterment of monetary circumstances shatter and Yezad plunges into a whirlwind of contemplation about the future that ultimately makes him a Parsi fanatic who seeks solace in the sacred texts and praying at the fire temple. Mistry through this transformation of a confident, resolute and jovial man into a religious dogmatist, tries to prove the necessity of religiosity in this so called modernised world. Jal has shown them a way out from the gloomy future by suggesting reunion in Chateau Felicity and sell the small flat for ensuring a livelihood. *Family Matters* with its narrative strategies show ‘the whole world can be made to inhabit one small place and that the family can become the nexus of the collective and the universal’ (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 38)

Through the domestic crises of one middle class Parsi family, Mistry conveys everything from the dilemmas among Indian Parsis as a marginalized community to the wider concerns of corruption and communalism. This novel like his first one presents Shiv Sena as a Hindu fundamentalist force fully involved in rioting, looting and burning the poor and the innocent people. Hussain, a peon is a tragic victim of the Babri Masjid riot. His wife and children were killed in riot. In Hussain’s own utterance:

The police were behaving like gangsters. In Muslim Mohallas, they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning, neighbours came out to throw water. And the police? Firing bullets like target practice. These guardians of the law were murdering everybody!

And my poor wife and children... I couldn't even recognize them. (FM 148)

These fundamentalist forces used to unleash terror over people's minds. The novelist wails over the ruthless and oppressive measures taken by these religious fanatics. They are responsible for ruining the multicultural and multilingual peaceful coexistence of the nation. It speaks volumes about how a religious minority like Parsis gets trampled under the sense of insecurity. Yezad also sums up the attitude of the Shiv Sena as: 'South Indians are anti-Bombay, Valentine's Day is anti-Hindustani, Film stars born before 1947 in the Pakistani Part of Punjab are traitors to the country.' (FM 32) Mistry seems to put a negative propaganda and the politics of cultural terrorism through the delineation of this communalism. Coomy in the course of the novel also points out the dangers lurking home and abroad. Here she mentions the incident of burning down of an old Parsi couple by Hindu extremist mobs. Bombay burnt for months after the razing of the mosque in Ayodhya. 'How often does a mosque in Ayodhya turn people into savages in Bombay? Once in a blue moon' (FM 5) Jal, in the course of the novel, emphasises the Minority Parsi community's predicament as he says:

Just last week in Firozsha Baag an old lady was beaten and robbed inside her own flat. Poor thing is barely clinging to life at Parsi General. (FM 5)

The prevalent corruption in India has become a theme of this narrative: 'Corruption is in the air we breathe. This nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks'. (FM 30) Political corruption is presented through the activities of the Shiv Sena and the corruption at the individual level through Yezad's Matka endeavours (FM 206), Mr Malpani's attempt to corrupt Yezad (FM 145), the familial corruption is seen in Jal and Coomy's trick to get their father out of the house (FM 86) and Jehangir's acceptance of bribes (FM 220). The narrative delineates how the poor and downtrodden are deprived of food by corrupt officials, the spurious materials are used by the contractor leads to the death of school children and also reference of people burnt alive in a cinema hall because of the false safety certificate of the owner (FM 218). The novel also refers to social evils like teasing and molestation of women in public (FM 43), dowry deaths, alcohol abuse, gambling, torture of women and the evils of communalism (FM 330). Thus Mistry unearths the rampant corruption in the Indian soil in his *Family Matters*.

However, *Family Matters* spreads Indian secularism. In the depiction of the religious milieu of the nation *Family Matters* incorporates people from more religions than the other two Mistrarian fictions. Chenoy family represents Parsis, Mr Kapur is a Hindu, Hussain is the representation of Muslim, Lucy Braganza is a Christian and there are references of Jains in the plot of the novel. The novel also refers to several festivals from different communities like Diwali, Christmas, Id, Navroze, Baisakhi, Buddha Jayanti, and Ganesh Chaturthi which prove the basic foundation of national integrity. We also catch a glimpse of secular India through the character of Mr Kapur who embodies Indian secularism. He promotes secular and accommodative Bombay as his religion (FM 361). He employs a Parsi manager and a Muslim peon. He opens his shop on Christmas Day to promote peace and harmony and offers sweets (FM 368). He decides to celebrate all religious festivities in his shop (FM 159).

Again Mistry has elaborately shown the theme of today's child turning to be tomorrow's father. Jahangir is the child and the father figure is the patriarchal grandfather Nariman Vakeel. The picture of the family life comes through them to the forefront. "Mistry has used the metaphor of the 'jigsaw puzzle' through which the boy tries to solve the quarrels and power politics that stake his family" (Dodiya 83) Yezad resents his children's proximity

to their grandfather: 'First they should learn about fun and happiness, and enjoy their youth. Lots of time to learn about sickness and dying.' (FM 278) But in contrary to Yezad's view Roxana opines that: 'Be glad our children can learn about old age, about caring-it will prepare them for life, make them better human beings.' (FM 278) The novel explores the growing relationship between Jehangir and Nariman. Young Jehangir feeds his grandfather is symbolical manifestation of Indian ethics: 'nine-year-old happily feeding seventy-nine' (FM 113) again Mistry portrays Jehangir reading Enid Blyton to Grandpa's pleasure. 'Mistry himself is in favour of a surrender of the individual self but rather a model of mutual dependence and continuity between the generations.' (Dodiya 89) Mistry has shown Yezad as transformed from moody, resentful and uninvolved husband to sweet and caring son to Nariman after several months' coexistence with his father-in-law. Later on Yezad overcomes his previous notion and shows sympathy towards his father-in-law and trims the nails of him and shaves him. He comments on the beauty of providing help, comfort and solace to the elderly. 'Implicitly, *Family Matters* distinguishes between two kinds of families. The ideal family for Mistry is not a matter of birth but caring, solidarity and humanity.' (Genetsch 188) This change of vision regarding true humanism by helping the aged and the infirm finds expression in Mistry's pen: Strange trip, this journey towards death. No way of knowing... a year, two years? But Roxana was right, helping your elders through it- that was the only way to learn about it. And the trick was to remember it when your own time came... (FM 347)

Another theme we find in the novel is that of immigration. Parsis emigrate to foreign countries for the monetary security. In this regard Narendra Kumar writes:

The Parsees Prefer the West since it offers unlimited scope for growth and prosperity. Dislocation is part of the Parsee psyche. Exiled twelve hundred years ago, they came to India. Now they are migrating to west in search of greener pasture. Thus there is 'double migration' in case of Parsees. (14)

Through Yezad's dream of emigrating to Canada, we find some autobiographical elements of Rohinton Mistry. "Mistry also experiences 'alienation' like all emigrant Indians. Through the character of Yezad, Mistry expresses his wish to come back to India." (Dodiya 84) Mistry in his narrative show the difference of emigration in case of Nariman and Yezad. Nariman's emigration is: 'An enormous mistake. The biggest any man can in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills.' (FM 240) But for Yezad, Mistry's version is:

He wanted clean cities, clean air, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone, where people stood in line at bus stops and said please, after you, thank you. Not just the land of milk and honey, also the land of deodorant and toiletry. (FM 131)

Yezad is rejected by a Canadian-born Japanese immigration official when Yezad fails to answer some stupid and tricky questions relating to ice hockey. "Yezad soon realizes that Canada and Bombay are plagued by similar problems: unemployment, crime, housing problems, language laws, beggars, and separatist issues (FM 137)." (Sebastian 166) His fantasy about the new land is dissolved and he is rather stuck in a retail job. Mistry shows Dr Rangarajan who is also desirous to migrate from the city and sends applications to several foreign countries to find an avenue to improve his financial prospects. (FM 53)

The theme of suffering, a sense of belongingness and the crisis of uprootedness have been treated through the character of Nariman who is the embodiment of Parsi community. 'The subjects of mobility versus immobility, decay and mortality are explored through

Nariman's way of life.' (Vinodkumar 108) He suffers from senile diseases like Parkinsonism, osteoporosis and hypertension. His broken ankle adds more tragedy to his already existing diseases. 'Family Matters provides an intimate and compelling depiction of matters to families in the universal situation of parents' need for home care.' (Vinodkumar 101) He neither finds peace in Chateau Felicity nor in the Pleasant Villa. Mistry with his subtle touch tells Nariman's younger days full of mental agony when he is denied of marriage by his orthodox parents with a non-Parsi lady, Lucy Braganza. He has to lead a miserable life by marrying a Parsi widow Yasmin but cannot forget his unfulfilled love for Lucy in his old age. 'His memory of the past destroys his will power and brings him back to his love for Lucy.' (Dodiya 86) Nariman is suffering from the crisis of belongingness. The crisis takes him back to the roots of his community as well as to the bye gone days and he narrates the stories of Parsi traditions.

The deteriorating health of Nariman, symbolically narrates the sad and the decaying tales of the dwindling Parsi community. Both Coomy and Jal remain unmarried and it also suggests the fixation of the Parsi community. The dilapidated condition of the building in the novel is also symbolic. The fading colour of the building, crumbling plasters of the house, perforated water tanks, broken drain pipes all reveal gradual loss of identity of Parsis and they can hardly revive this faded glory. Nariman, with his broken ankle, is taken to Dr. Fitter who mentions that the Parsi men of today are useless, indecisive and wavering idiots, the race had deteriorated. He pathetically utters:

When you think of our forefathers, who established the foundation of modern India, the philanthropists who gave us our hospitals and schools and libraries and baags, what lustre they brought to our community and the nation. . . . Demographics show we'll be extinct in fifty years. Maybe it's the best thing. What's the use of having spineless weaklings walking around, Parsi in name only. (FM 51)

Again Mistry shows the decaying ethics among the Parsis. Jehangir holds no fascination for his name and thinks it old fashioned and asks his father to alter his name to John, after Enid Blyton. In reply his father suggests him that being a Parsi he has a Persian name and he must 'be proud of it, it's not to be thrown out like an old shoe' (FM 247).

Nariman has to depend on his step children for the smooth functioning of his life. He refuses to stoop down by Coomy's constant naggings and Jal's exaggerated fears regarding dangers of walking on the streets of Bombay. He instead retorts angrily: "In my youth, my parents controlled me and destroyed those years. Thanks to them, I married your mother and wrecked my middle years. Now you want to torment my old age! I won't allow it." (FM 7) Coomy in one hand is fastidious in caring for her stepfather but on the other hand is also cruel and angry for the wrong his stepfather did to her mother, Yasmin. She thinks him responsible for her mother's death and never forgives him. On the other hand Jal is a forty-five year old unmarried and unemployed man with hearing disorder. He is a shadow of his highly frightening younger sister Coomy. She is domineering, bossy and aggressive. She thinks herself as the owner of the Vakeel household. Her behaviour is something like a hysterical headmistress. Mistry narrates: She should have been a headmistress, enacting rules for hapless schoolgirls, making them miserable. (FM 2)

Mistry while mentioning the theme of suffering employs the intertextual references from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. The bad smell in Nariman's room annoys Coomy and she humorously says to Jal: 'All the perfumes of Arabia, all your swabbing and

scrubbing and mopping and scouring will not remove it.' (FM 104) Mistry seems to equate the life of Nariman to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Here Nariman meets the same tragic fate as of Lear. The children he trusts so much proves to be cruel and unkind to him in his old age. But he loves both of his daughters that shows his loyalty and decency towards them. Though, he feels he made many mistakes but he never regrets them. He dumped his agonies and sorrows within himself. At last he feels as foolish as Lear must have felt when he was treated badly by Reagan and Goneril. So Nariman retorts:

'To so many classes I taught *Lear*, learning nothing myself. What kind of teacher is that, as foolish at the end of his life as at the beginning?' again, 'What is *Lear*, asked Jehangir. Nariman swallowed the potato. 'It's the name of a king who made many mistakes.' (FM 197)

Nilufer Bharucha however opines differently regarding Coomy being equated to Lear's unkind daughter. Because she has made an honest effort to take care of her step-father but the helplessness compels her to take the extreme decision.

The theme of generation gap is perfectly shown by Rohinton Mistry through Yezad who curses his sons as they become more secular, Westernized and eager to hug and embrace a non-Parsi girls. Nariman's father blames books for Nariman's so called odd behaviour of falling in love with Lucy Braganza, a Goan. Nariman's father feels, '*Too many books. Modern ideas have filled Nari's head. He never learned to preserve that fine balance between tradition and modernness*' (FM 15) and he also condemns the priest who performed a *Navjyot* ceremony for the son of a Parsi mother and non-Parsi father: '*it was renegades like him who would destroy this three-thousand-year-old religion*' (FM 132).

From the thematic viewpoint, 'Rohinton Mistry's novels seem to resemble those of Thomas Hardy in more way than one. They are all set in Bombay like Hardy's works in Wessex. Another striking feature common to both writers is the importance attributed to destiny or chance in their fictional work.' (Chakravorty 170) Thomas Hardy's philosophy of life is marked with a strong sense of fatalism where man is shown as helpless creature, a mere puppet at the hands of Destiny. Mistry likewise in this narrative warns against fatalism. His characters accept fate as the only graceful alternative. He has shown common man holds his head up high and always emerges from battle, relatively unscathed. 'Mistry seeks to create a family realism and a portrait of community inside larger India. The social and political context is just an instrument of individual change.' (Dodiya 94) Mistry's realism transforms the quotidian into picturesque that brings him closer to the great Victorian novelists. Mistry has a marvellous technique of setting up ordinary lives scarred by tragedy, then illuminating them with moments of generous beauty. 'He writes simply, but by accumulating the small details of his characters' existence, he creates a visceral feel for their loves, humiliations and little victories.' (Dodiya 89) This story has a universal appeal which according to Linda L. Richards: '...many of the challenges the main characters face are universal, the resolutions they come to are sharply and recognizably human: You don't have to be Parsi or Indian to identify with his characters and the dilemmas they face'. (Richards: Interview)

The narrative technique adopted by Mistry successfully applies the flashback narration with fine mingling of the time present and the time past. He has succeeded in maintaining a 'fine balance' between scepticism and affirmation, faith and bigotry, family nurture and control, and 'once again given us something absolutely painfully pleasurable: a bittersweet rendition of life in its most ordinary, intimate setting' (Thomson 6).

Just as in *Such a Long Journey*, here too, Rohinton Mistry crafts a Parsi ambience sympathetically. The title's speaks not only the matter of a family's workings, but also of how much family matters to us. In *Family Matters*, Mistry weaves the lives and memories of one Parsi family into a novel of human dignity, as individuals dribble against decay; the decay of flesh into death, the decay of family into death, the decay of surrounding morality, and the decay around and a head of us in time. Finally Martin Genetsch rightly sums up: '*Family Matters* can be read as a novel partaking of a universalist discourse concerned with the loss of as well as the subsequent struggle for meaning.' (Genetsch 185)

Mistry seems to be deeply concerned about the marginalized Parsi existence which is severely threatened under the impact of modernity and is best exemplified in this narrative through the incidents of late marriages, prohibition of inter caste marriages, low birth rate, high death rate, strict family planning message, generation gap and several other reasons. The novel is an elaborate discussion on the slow but steady decline of the Parsi race. It also plans a strategy that can be executed to prevent the extinction of the Parsi race. The author foregrounds the Parsi community and the Zoroastrian faith. Thus the novel ends with a note of promulgation of the Parsi religion. 'Family matters in a particular way in *Family Matters*. It is not merely a Parsi family that Mistry is ultimately interested in but the family of man.' (Genetsch 187) Mistry's writings will be a perennial source of inspiration for the Parsis to preserve the identity in future. His narratives seem to be a constant battle with the changing time and pace of modernity to preserve the customs, traditions, heritage, rituals, ethics and language which will serve for the coming generations to understand the Parsi ethos. 'The microscopic Parsi community of *Family Matters* is a miniature India and macro humanity rendered artistically into a finely woven tale of universal import by the novelist.' (Myles 123) Thus Rohinton Mistry with his scholarly acumen develops and intermingle various themes through the texture of his three narratives for the readers to satiate.

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