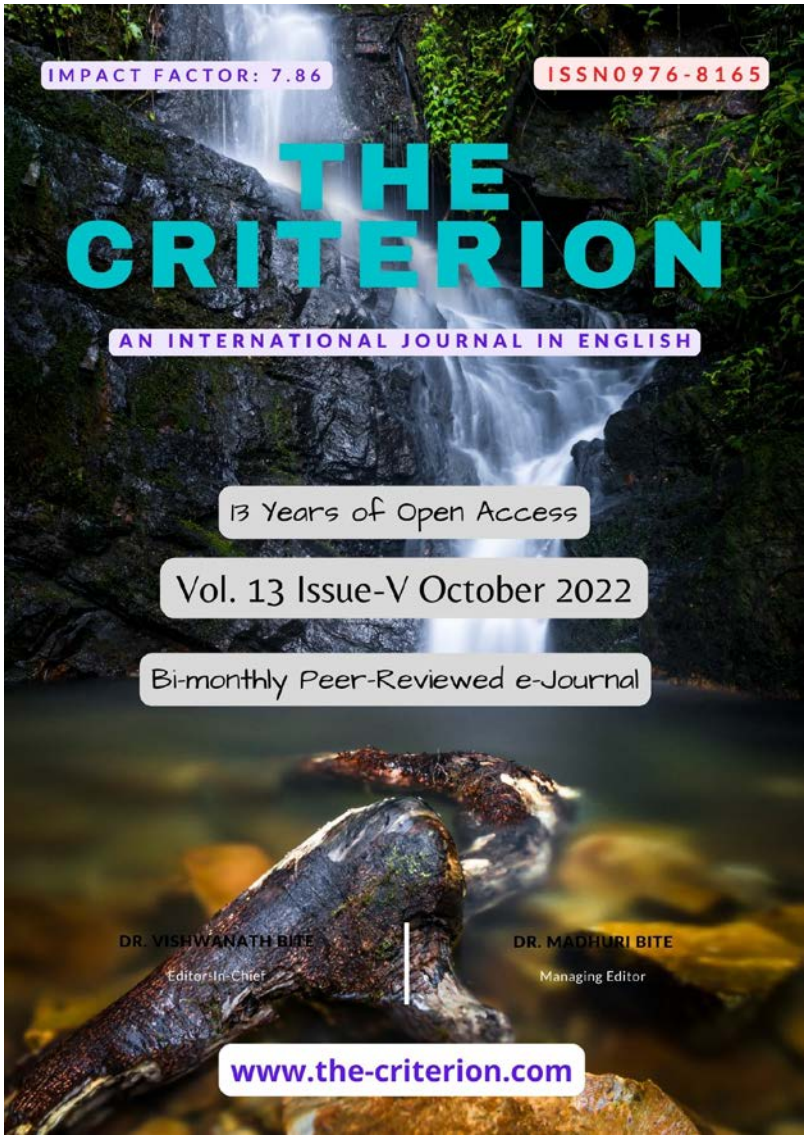

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Communalism and Religious Fundamentalism in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*

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Abstract:

The present paper explores the discourse of communalism and communal politics of the Hindu majority elite which, by accentuating the religious differences, has created the non-Hindu minorities as the 'religious other', therefore, subject to violence and hatred. It further examines the rise of fundamentalism in minorities which they use as a line of defense against their anxiety and feelings of insecurity in the wake of communal political pronouncements. By way of giving a reading to Rohinton Mistry's novel *Family Matters*, the focus of the paper is to present how communalism has come to represent an ideology of self-aggrandizement that exploits the communal base for its political benefits by way of counter-posing one's religious community against other religious communities in an "antagonistic and belligerent equation" that ultimately fractures and destroys secular national identity and unity (Khan 195).

Keywords: Communalism, Fundamentalism, Communal Politics, Riots, Violence.

Communalism, as a political ideology, projects solidarity that is based on religious identity and foresees religious community as the only valid category in politics and state affairs, as well as being a relevant factor in the analysis and reconstruction of the socio-cultural environment. Rather than being associated with the fundamentals of religion, communalism is interlinked with religious fundamentalism that orients towards 'using' religion and religious tenets, values, and traditions to suit the demands of political life and the strategic interests that culminate into the communalization of politics. It does not hesitate to use violence and atrocity in the name of religion, thereby breaching the universally accepted principles of morality prevailing in all religions of the world. In this sense, communalism can be explained as an "irreligious use of religion, perversion and exploitation of religions", or "rationalisation of irrationals" (Roy 440). The major reason behind

the promotion of communalism is a real or imaginary threat conceived from other religious communities whose existence is perceived as inimical to its own community within a polity or nation. To create community consciousness in its own community, communalism uses aspects of religion, ritualism, or conservative values in social life while emphasizing the dubious and controversial belief of the supremacy of one's religion that restricts one's sympathy and help only to the community of one's birth. In this sense, the fundamental principle of communalism is the "politicization of religious community opposed to other communities and the nation" for the aggrandizement of power, position, and wealth (Khan 205). As a political strategy, it promotes "segmentary nationalism" counter-posed to secularist patterns of political integration and socio-cultural co-existence (Khan 204).

Communalism as a modern phenomenon finds its origin in the 19th century British colonial period ascribed to the British imperialist policy of divide and rule that treated religious communities as political entities for their governance purposes. They used religion and religious communities as representatives of Indian people in British Provinces that made communal identification or representation as the only inscriptive factor in all the areas of imperial administration whether it was local bodies, provincial and central legislatures, municipalities, magistracy, etc. By way of emphasizing the importance of religious communities in politics, they "transformed religious cleavages into political cleavages, and established an integral organic relation between religious community and political opportunity" (Khan 194-95). With the introduction of elected representation in public institutions by the British, communalism has become a vital part of Indian politics and a means to exploit communal identities for electoral purposes.

In an independent India, it has assumed a gruesome proportion by marking its presence in all levels of Indian polity and state apparatuses. It has become an influential operative tool for bourgeois politics to gain political power and control. The communal parties, use religion as an organizing principle to structure their communal ideology and policies and define their goals in religious terms. The consequence of such right-wing politics is an awareness of the religious 'other' as it sees human beings merely as representatives of groups rather than individual beings.

In India, the most violent expression of communalism has come to appear in the form of the ideology of Hindutva — a call for Hindu unity that argues forcefully in favor of the defense of the indigenous Hindu culture, and against any foreign influences, both Christian and Muslim.

Rasheeduddin Khan defines the ideology of Hindutva as based on a fascist mould, "Hindutva . . . is the ideology of a fascist state based on the narrow and aggressive nationalism, whose paradigm rests on the glorification of the majority to the exclusion of the equal rights and interests of the minority segments" (263). It denies religious minorities their rights and liberties, attacks the representation and recognition of individuals, as well as the creation and institutionalization of diverse communities. The hegemonic ideological role of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) generally known as *Sangh Parivar* has become more prominent in the spread of communal hatred and violence against religious minorities in India. They adhere to the ideology of *Hindutva,* or Hindu nationalism, and thrive on the consolidation of Hindu communal sentiment against the Muslim community in India. Their Hindutva ideology aims at "awakening the Hindu nation" and their rhetoric of democracy, rights, and nation is "based on a simplistic majoritarian principle and runs along the following lines: since Hindus are the majority, it is 'natural' and 'democratic' that their 'rights' should be promoted by the Indian state which hitherto has been 'pseudo-secular' because of its appeasement of the minorities!" (Anand 289). The fundamental objective of their ideology is the assimilation and dissolution of all religious pluralism to constitute India as a religiously homogenous Hindu nation. In various Hindu-oriented campaigns launched by this family of organizations, they have portrayed non-Hindu religious communities, especially Muslims as a hindrance in the achievement of their national aspirations. While disparaging the Muslims and Christians as inimical to the Hindu domination in polity, culture, and society, Hindutva discourse portrays them as outsiders, "a foreign element" in Indian culture, and renders them as inveterate enemies of the Hindus (Chatterjee 74). The Ayodhya episode emerged as an inevitable demonstration of their anti-Muslim campaign and formed the ideological foundation of *Sangh Parivar* in their pursuit of Hindutva or Hindu Rashtra as the dominant political ethos in India.

The setting of the novel *Family Matters* in post-1992 India— the year of the Babri Musjid riots— projects the communal activities that RSS and Shiv Sena directed towards the evident Hinduisation of the polity and militarization of Hinduism that has threatened the existence of minorities and the secularity of the nation. This growing ideology of Hindutva in the form of communal riots and its repercussions on the lives of ordinary citizens has altered the very social structure in such a way that even common people— dissociated from politics— are left scared and affected. The novel introduces the horrors of the Babri Masjid riots through the agony of Hussain,

a Muslim peon working with Yezad— a Parsi, at a sports shop, who witnessed the burning bodies of his wife and children in the communal violence. He represents the victims of the Babri Mosque riots and the human trauma that followed. As a Muslim, he and his community are victims of 'otherness' and have a formidable existence in the wake of the fundamental Hindu majority. CÂMPU puts Hussain's trauma in words while explaining the nature of communal politics, "What he has witnessed is the ultimate act of denial— of his very right to existence— the burning of his wife, children and home. Such communal hatred can be blind as it fails to see individuals as human beings but only as representatives of groups" (69). In this sense, the communal politics of Hindutva negating all other marks of identity reduces an individual to only a signifier of their religion or community. Sunil Khilnani, pointing toward the Hindutva's pursuit of a religiously and culturally homogenous Hindu nation, comments that theirs is a project, "designed to efface all the signs of non-Hinduness that are in fact so integral to India" (189). For them, the presence of Babri Masjid, a Muslim structure of religion, symbolized the "contaminative presence of the non-Hindu other" that stood in violation of the Hindu nation; therefore, its demolition was seen as imperative for the purification of the Indian nation (Hansen 175). The destruction of the mosque can be seen as an attempt to expunge the cultural and architectural signs of non-Hindu existence in order to reclaim India as a pure Hindu territory. The communal riots that followed the destruction of the mosque were a disastrous attack and infringement on the Indian secular ethos. Corbridge and Harriss remark that the "destruction of the Babri Masjid was more than just an assault on a mosque, important though that was: it was also an attack upon the secular principles of the Indian state" (190). The demolition of the mosque, therefore, draws attention to the tangible results of the ideological and imaginative construction of a nation that is translated into material actions affecting everyday life.

An integral part of the communal agenda is violence and riots as they have functional utility for the perpetuation of communal discourse, political ideology, and interests of the communal elite. Instead of being spontaneous reactions of the mob, they are well-planned propaganda used by communal parties to win the support of their ethnic community or group. Roshni Sengupta quotes Wilkinson's argument, "Ethnic riots are far from being spontaneous eruptions of anger. Instead, they are often planned by politicians for a clear electoral purpose. These violent conflagrations are, therefore, caused by political elites who play on existing communal tensions to advance a political agenda" (2046). Paul Brass calls riots "a form of collective action", "a form of dramatic

production" because the base of their production is a political one and largely associated with extreme interparty competition and mass political mobilization (12). The direct link between riots and political electoral competitions makes the Hindu-Muslim riots "a product of actions designed to consolidate one community or the other or both at the local, regional, and national levels into a cohesive political bloc" (Brass 33-4). Brass argues that these riots are organized in "institutionalized riot systems" that involve three phases for their production. The first phase is that of preparation and rehearsal of riots in which "conversion specialists" play a central role in exaggerating a trivial incident to place it into "the communal system of talk, the communal discourse, and . . . escalate [it] into communal violence" (32). The second stage involves "activation" or "enactment" of large-scale riots that take place "under particular circumstances, most notably in the case of competitive political systems in a context of intense political mobilization or electoral competition in which riots are precipitated as a device to consolidate the support of ethnic, religious, or other culturally marked groups by emphasizing the need for solidarity in face of the rival communal group" (15). The last phase is the "explanation" or "interpretation" of the riots, which is marked by "a process of blame displacement . . . that does not isolate effectively those most responsible for the production of violence, but diffuse blame widely, blurring responsibility, . . . in such a way as to free all from blame and allow the principal perpetrators to go scot-free" (Brass 15-16).

Due to the illegitimacy of riotous violence, the "elements of preplanning in it are disguised, the struggle that takes place afterward to explain it—that is, to control its interpretation—is crucial" (Brass 14). The explanation of riots is contextualized according to the interests of political leaders and authorities. Brass emphasizes that the struggle over meaning and explanation of riotous violence necessitates attention to the existence of "hegemonic discourse" that he calls the "communal discourse" which pervades Indian politics (24). This discourse accounts for the power relations and communal antagonism between Hindus and Muslims by emphasizing their differences and hostilities and provides the framework for explaining riotous violence in India. In the communal discourse of Hindutva, Muslims have been demonized "as a separate people, a foreign body implanted in the heart of Hindu India", and ". . . the "memory" of Muslim violence in Indian history has been kept vivid by the militant Hindu demand to recapture and restore temples allegedly destroyed by Muslim conquerors and replaced by mosques, a movement that led to the destruction of the mosque at Ayodhya" (Brass 35). Muslims became an easy target of such

communal hysteria for they were projected as "descendants of Babar who was an invader . . . [and] demolished their temples, particularly the Ram temple at Ayodhya"; the mosque was interpreted as "the mark of an earlier "slavery" . . . of Hindu subjection to Muslim Rule" (Engineer 38-39 Brass 8). This communal game played by political parties like BJP and Shiv Sena resulted in communal violence and riots between Hindus and Muslims and increased insecurity among Muslim minorities.

Dibyesh Anand argues that the Hindu nationalism or the Hindu Right's politics of hate against the minorities is based on the conception of security and insecurity and they use the discourse of security to normalize and systematize the violence exercised against the minority. The minority 'Other' is seen as a threat to the security of the Hindu 'self' and the communal violence against them, particularly the Muslim minority, is justified in the name of attaining security for the Hindus at the individual, community, and national levels. He conceptualizes the discourse of security as a "productive discourse that produces insecurities to be operated upon as well as define the identity of the object to be secured. . . . it foregrounds the process through which something or someone (the Other) is discursively produced as a source of insecurity against which the self needs to be secured. Thus, discourses of insecurity are about 'representations of danger'" (291). In this sense, the objects of security and insecurities are produced through the representations of the 'other'; the representation of the 'other', in turn, depends on how we 'secure' ourselves against the 'other'. In Anand's view, "Representations of the Other as a source of danger to the security of the Self in conventional understandings of security is accompanied by an abstraction, dehumanization, depersonalization, and the stereotyping of the Other" (292). He furthers this by quoting Foucault, "the Other gets reduced to being a danger and hence, an object that is fit for surveillance, control, policing, and possibly extermination" (292). Thus, the discourse of security underpins the demand and use of violence and policing against the 'other' for the security of the self.

The Hindutva's politics of representation has exemplified and legitimized this use of anti-Muslim violence to secure Hindu body politics. They present communal conflicts which victimize minorities in terms of loss of dignity, life, and livelihood, as an "unintended by-product of Hindu national self-assertion that results from the Indian state" (Anand 296). The concept of security, thereby, is constitutive of danger and violence. It masks killing in the name of protection: "The will to secure the Self has as its corollary the will to insecure the Other, the desire to control and

use violence" (Anand 300). The politicization of the differences between heterogeneous Hindu and Muslim groups is deeply connected with "the striving for control over the modern state apparatus, involving a claim to rightful inheritance on the part of Hindu and to self-determination on the part of Muslim leaders" (Brass 25). Rustum Bharucha, quoting Gyanendra Pandey, comments upon the communal frenzy of the Hindutva and its implications:

> Within the communalised culture of our times, when the Indian state is actually implementing the agenda of Hindutva instead of merely rhetoricising its anti-minoritarian principles, 'Hindus' are 'the nation': 'their culture is the nation's culture, their history its history'. With an almost panopticon invisibility, the Hindus (as conceived by the votaries of Hindutva) constitute 'the 'we' who demand cooperation from the minorities, the 'us' that the Muslims have to learn to live with'. (4241)

By exercising these measures against religious minorities, the Hindutva power-seekers not only pose a threat to the existence of Muslims and other minorities but also assault the parapets of the Indian federal structure, cultural pluralism, and its republican character and the democratic egalitarian political system.

The novel *Family Matters* depicts the fundamental ideology of Shiv Sena and their anti-secularist activities, such as imposing cultural censorship on certain activities like Valentine's Day by calling out it as anti-Indian values; censoring certain famous art-works of Indian artists that they consider disrespectful towards Hindu gods and goddesses; censoring men's magazines, deeming them corrupting of Indian morals; opposition to women working in bars and discos after eight o'clock, stating that such work is contrary to Indian family values, etc. As well as this, the novel shows the grim state of affairs in Bombay with Shiv Sena coming to power. There is evidence of a politician-criminal-police nexus and Shiv Sena's involvement in the corruption prevailing in the city that has resulted in the "criminalisation of politics and politicisation of crime" (Kapadiya 132). The Shiv-Sena makes a free show of religious intolerance and communal ideology through its activities, such as the campaign of renaming Bombay as Mumbai. It considered this a significant step towards the removal of all non-Hindu names from the streets and roads of Bombay and their replacement with the 'proper' Hindu names. For them, it was a "battle to expunge all "non-Hindu" place names from a "purified" Hindu homeland" (Morey 240). In the novel, these communal activities of Shiv Sena significantly affect Mr. Vikram Kapur's life as his refusal to

change the name of his shop from 'Bombay Sporting Goods' to 'Mumbai Sporting Goods' leads to his murder by Shiv Sena goons.

Whereas, the Shiv-Sena is representative of the extremist forces in the city, the idealist Mr. Kapur has his dream of reforming the city of Bombay, making it safer for ordinary citizens. His intention of celebrating every festival in his shop reflects the secular outlook of India. Through his memory of old Bombay and old photographs of the city, Bombay metonymically is presented as India with its tolerant and secular outlook — a land of opportunities that has given shelter to each and every community, religion, and culture — but now fundamentalism and communal forces are posing a threat to its integrity and secular nature. Mr. Kapur, a Hindu, ultimately fell victim to sectarian forces because his liberal views do not fit the exclusivist demands of the Hindu fundamentalists. Such communal conditions affect the dignity and self-respect of other religious minority groups and create terror in their hearts that lead to the growth of their own religious fundamentalism as a defense against the majority communal politics. They use their religion and religious ideals for the construction and maintenance of their identity and to attain "a positive sense of self-esteem" (Hogg & Abrams 9).

According to Seul, "Religion frequently serves the identity impulse more powerfully and comprehensively than other repositories of cultural meaning can or do", therefore, it remains a predominant source of individual and group identity (567). It satisfies the minority group's needs for self-esteem, belonging, psychological security, and self-actualization that have been invaded by the communal politics of the majority in a nation-state. Through their identification with their religious group and ideology, they strive to "promote and protect their positive distinctiveness" from the dominant group and "secure a relatively favourable social identity" (Hogg & Abrams 9).

Whereas the majority communalism is dominant and pervasive with deeper historical roots, therefore, can be passed off as nationalism, on the other hand, the fundamentalism of the minority presents itself in forms such as 'separatism', 'withdrawal', and 'exclusivism'. It thrives on a wide range of differences and dichotomies from the majority community and concentrates on the specific and divisive traditions and symbols that lead to the formation of religious fundamentalism in communities. B.P.R. Vithal makes this point: "Fundamentalism arises out of insecurity and not assurance. There is an outburst of fundamentalism in all religions today because we have entered an age of a new insecurity" (337). Marty and Appleby define religious fundamentalism as a "set of strategies, by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a

people or group" against a real or imagined threat from other dominant groups who, it appears, want to draw the religious believers into "syncretistic, areligious, or irreligious cultural milieu" (3).

The novel presents how the characters belonging to the minority religious sections establish their self-worth and protect their religious identity by empowering themselves through their ideology of religious fundamentalism in the wake of communal violence. It is not only the Muslim community but the Parsi minority community's life that is also adversely affected by the majority communal politics. Such a communal socio-political environment gives rise to the nostalgia of the Parsi community for the past way of life that has been manifested in the idealization of religious rituals that are used as a tool to preserve the past and tradition in order to avert the crumbling of the community and identity.

One of the most important characteristics of fundamentalism as a religious movement is its nostalgia for a mythic time of goodness that demands strict adherence to ancient or fundamental doctrines of its particular religion in order to re-acquire that code of earlier tradition. Shupe and Hadden define fundamentalism "as a proclamation of reclaimed authority over a sacred tradition which is to be reinstated as an antidote for a society that has strayed from its cultural moorings" and "searches for ultimate meaning, values, and *resacralization* of social institutions" in the search for meaningful community identity (110-111, 116). Hobsbawm writes, "The 'fundamentals' that fundamentalism stresses always come from some earlier, presumably primal and pure . . . stage in one's own sacred history. They are used for setting boundaries, for attracting one's kind and alienating other kinds, for demarcating" (167). The claim of religious fundamentalists as the guardians of the tradition leads to unquestioning conformity and rigidity in following the traditions and conventions of the sacred past. To ensure the strict following of tradition, they use coercive methods and sometimes violence to prevent people from any deviation and suppress their opponents outside as well as within the community. Girja Kumar in his discussion of fundamentalism states, "There is an excessive emphasis on the purity of doctrine minus skepticism, which is the very foundation of secular rationality" (19).

In the novel, Nariman Vakeel's father, obsessed with the idea of racial purity, exhibits a fundamentalist attitude in matters of religion and community. He criticizes a priest by calling him a "*renegade*" for performing a Parsi ritual on a half-Parsi child—an absolute taboo for the conservative group (*FM* 132). The conservative religious notions of Nariman Vakeel's father never

allowed his son Nariman to marry his Christian girlfriend, Lucy, because marriage is one area among others where religious orthodoxy is followed earnestly. Fundamentalist Parsis consider the western liberal ideas and values adopted by new-generation Parsis, such as the inter-faith marriages, responsible for the depleting numbers of Parsis worldwide because the population is one of the crucial factors in the viability of ethnic identity. Therefore, in their mind, their strict adherence to religion and tradition is their only savior in the face of a much-feared extinction of their community. This Parsi hostility against alliance with the outside community is further indicated by the fundamentalist attitude of Yezad towards his son Murad's friendship with a non-Parsi Marathi girl. To justify his prejudice and intolerance, he interprets his hostility towards his son's love affair not as a subject of prejudice but as racial purity. He declares, ". . . we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet and mixed marriages will destroy that. . . . Purity is a virtue worth preserving" (*FM* 482). The apparent reason behind such attitudes is a fear of other communities and the hegemonic culture that would result in their mixing, as well as the hybridization of their culture eroding their distinctive ethnic identity.

Nevertheless, the religious orthodoxy and notion of purity exhibited by the characters lead to religious bigotry similar to the fundamentalist forces of the state. Yezad, a Parsi, once a liberal and happy man, turns to religion to escape the adverse social and communal conditions after the killing of Mr. Kapur, his employer. His lately-developed extreme religiosity acquired fundamentalist and orthodox attitude and throws him into the dimness of religious intolerance that is followed by the darkness of bigotry. Yezad's transformation from a liberal and secular human being into a religious bigot obsessed with ritual purity and dogmatic ultra-orthodoxy makes him a kind of Zoroastrian fundamentalist who imposes his racial and cultural obsessions on everyone around him. Ironically, his hidebound orthodoxy echoes the purist agendas of the very Hindu fundamentalism that threatens minority communities like his own.

Carol Schick in *Contesting Fundamentalisms* argues that "Fundamentalism is produced, on the one hand, through eschewing universalism and human rights norms and on the other hand, through a construction of otherness and alterity against which the insider fundamentalist can know herself" (153). In order to recognize itself, an exclusive fundamentalist identity needs the presence of a highly visible excluded outsider. Nariman Vakeel's father and Yezad's rejection of the girls from other communities amounts to the glorification of the self and alienation of the 'Other'— the one who is not born in the group or an outsider in the hallowed circle. Yezad's obsession with

purity and fanaticism culminates in his feeling of being sick and disturbed at the presence of a non-Parsi in his home; he declares, that he "will vomit on the dining table" if he has to dine with any non-Parsi like Anjali (*FM* 486). Murad compares his father's fanatic attitude towards non-Parsis with that Hitler's attitude towards Jews and calls him a religious bigot. His orthodox stance towards religion and its strict observation escalate into a heightened conflict and differences in his family and erects an invisible wall around Yezad that no one may transgress.

Yezad's insistence on traditional rituals can also be seen as a weapon to embrace his ethnic identity against the common national identity imposed on him and his Parsi community in the Indian context. He uses religion as a tool to construct his distinctive identity and mark his difference and, thereby, his superiority over others. His notion of religion as a marker of difference is characterized by his belief in impenetrable boundaries and borders that in actuality, prove a barrier to attaining wisdom and arriving at a higher self. His fundamentalist and separatist approach toward religion fails him; he is unable to perceive the necessity of inclusion and openness as a more fertile way to cope with the postcolonial condition of his community. He is unable to realize that his obsession with purity over hybridity will inevitably result in paralysis and sterility, and therefore, the extinction of the community. Peter Morey pinpoints Yezad's insecurity behind his fundamentalist approach towards religion, "As he feels increasingly disempowered by events he falls back on his reawakened faith more and more, recoiling from the mongrelisation and mixing inherent in urban life, to a space of 'purity' that is, of course, at the same time one of fantasy" *(*250). Such narrow communal and orthodox attitudes towards religion symbolize the death of tolerance in society. Yezad's religion, rather than giving him salvation, erects barriers, and obstacles around his relationship with his family and society.

Yezad becomes a metaphor for his community at large. His liberal and tolerant attitude at the beginning of the novel symbolizes the liberal and progressive attitude of the Parsi community during the initial days of their contact with the British when they advanced their community to the maximum extent by adopting a doctrine of inter-cultural exchange of values. Yezad's retreat into religion and adoption of a narrow fundamentalist attitude in line with the rise of communal forces in postcolonial India is suggestive of the Parsi community's growing insecurity in decolonized India and their attempts to preserve their religious and cultural life in an increasingly hostile world. Nevertheless, Mistry refuses to idealize religious rituals and expresses his criticism of religious bigotry and fundamentalism within all communities. His portrayal of both orthodox and skeptical

Parsis put a question mark on the religious dogmas and fundamentalist attitudes that stifle the humane concerns in life. Nariman Vakeel and Murad's humane and liberal attitudes are juxtaposed with that the intolerant attitudes of Nariman Vakeel's parents and Yezad. Murad's love affair with the Maharashtrian girl and his grandfather's with the Christian girl not only signify their desire to find meaning in their lives by striking relationships with people outside of their own religion and race but also suggests that their acceptance of the 'Other' transcends all the boundaries and differences without succumbing to blind prejudices of any sort. Murad's open defiance of Yezad's religious dogma illustrates a clash between the traditional outlook of the Parsi community and modern ways of life. It simultaneously hopes for a new beginning of a changed attitude towards the inter-communal relationship and a spirit of harmony among the new generation.

Mistry articulates his own viewpoint through Jahangir who, as a narrator of the epilogue in the novel and inside member of the family and religion, is bestowed with the objective outlook of an uninvolved spectator. This enables him to appreciate the religious tradition of the family while criticizing the excesses that accompany unquestionable faith. His comment, "Why must prayer and religion lead to so many fights" brings home the theme of the novel: the gradual accentuation of communal politics and communal division, religious dogmas, and violence against the powerless people perched on the margins of the society. To counter the communal forces of disruption and disunity, there is a need for a dynamic campaign that will mobilize all the sectors— social, political, cultural, and professional— in their own spheres in defense of a harmonious, sensible, and just polity in India and a powerful secular republic.

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