



The Social Realism and Diasporic Aspects as Revealed in Rohinton Mistry's Novel *Family Matters*

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian writer who is famous for his short stories and novels. Born in a Parsi community, his writings are heavily influenced by his religious, social, and cultural views. Though he is settled in Canada, his upbringing in Mumbai reflects in all of his writings. The Mumbai culture, particularly the Parsi way of life and the politics of India are the major themes in his novels. His novels Family Matters, A Fine Balance, and Such a Long Journey were shortlisted for the prominent Booker Prize award. His novels and short stories have been widely appreciated and were also honoured with numerous awards and recognition. Mistry's writings deal with the themes of immigration but have also experimented with the various Indian languages. In all his fiction the pain and grief of leaving his motherland can be easily observed. We can find a strong influence of Indianness in his novels. His fictional world is characterized by a sense of crisis of identity, nostalgic memories, and a sense of alienation. This article focuses on the quest for identity of the novel Family Matters and tries to find out Mistry's craftsmanship in achieving his aim.

Keywords: Identity, Immigration, Relationship, Difference, Belonging.

Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* is concentrated on the problems of the Parsi community people, who lived in Mumbai. Through this novel, the novelist laments the degradation of moral and ethical values in different spheres of multicultural social life with its rising materialism, corruption, and cheap politics. He also speaks about the boundary of nation, ethnicity, and times by dealing with the issues such as geriatrics, family bondage, human relationships, death, and possessions. In this novel, Mistry connects this community problem with the middle-class Parsi family that lives in Mumbai. The entire story revolves around Nariman Vakeel, a former professor. He is struck with Parkinson's disease and is often haunted by the memories of his past life. When the novel begins Nariman is known as a widower who has been fighting with his thoughts about his unsuccessful love of the past.



Through this character, Mistry examines the domestic crisis of worldly people such as old age and sickness, which is unavoidable to all earthly beings. To humans it's like an upgrade level; it emotionally affects the entire structure of a family. Nariman's old age is connected with Parkinson's disease and the heritage of an unhappy marriage. He enjoys an independent life in his apartment with his stepchildren until he falls into a ditch and becomes bedridden. This crisis is rooted in different changes which help to identify the selfishness of his step children.

The novelist connects this present crisis of the new generation with the earlier crisis of the elders of the family. At a young age, Nariman was in love with a non-Parsi woman Lucy. After that, he was engaged to a widow Yasmin Contractor, a Parsi-woman as well as the mother of Coomy and Jal. Under the family compulsion, he sacrifices his love for Lucy Braganza, a non-Parsi woman, and unwillingly yields to the marriage with Yasmin Contractor. Though they don't have a mutual understanding they lead a family life under the circumstances that society has planned. Soon Nariman and Yasmin have a daughter named Roxana. Through this unjust marriage of Nariman and Yasmin, Mistry expresses the parents' inflexibility about religion and the troubles of the next generation. Their father dies, and their mother seeks security and society for her children. She remarries Nariman and the young Jal and Coomy are unwillingly forced into a new domestic arrangement and a new environment as they will not further die.

The sudden death of Yasmin makes drastic changes in the stepchildren's behaviour. They have a grudge against Nariman for the death of their mother and his love affair with Lucy 30 years ago. Coomy is not attached to Nariman as she loves his father, her misconception leads to all the trouble in both Nariman and her life. She utilizes the period of Nariman's illness to take vengeance on him for the mistreatment of her mother. Coomy's stubborn selfishness makes Nariman's life miserable, he is helpless and seeking the mercy of his children. When Nariman becomes bedridden his stepchildren think of him as a burden even though they lead their life through Nariman's pension. Moreover, they are not kind enough to take care of their step-father. They forced Nariman to shift into Roxana's small flat, the own daughter of Nariman. The costs of this situation are serious for her half-sister Coomy who attempts to stop her stepfather's return. Coomy has planned to damage the plaster ceiling of her apartment purposefully which results in an outburst from her brother, "Family does not matter to you! You keep nursing your bitterness instead of nursing Pappa. I've begged you for thirty years to let it go, to forgive, to look for peace." (*Family Matters* 193)

Roxana decides to take care of her father but her family faces a financial crisis to nurse Nariman. Additionally, her family routine also changes after the arrival of Nariman. Mistry explains these serious problematic economical struggles, as the financial condition of the family is more essential to take care of the old age people for their medical expenses. In *Family Matters*, ethical ambiguities expand in every relationship and situation that coils up from a range of concerns. Certainly, Roxana's family has to face the everyday expenses of the



old man. Mistry writes, “When the medication ran out and Roxana went to purchase the next lot, she discovered that what Coomy had given her as her father’s pension did not cover even the cost of the pills.” (*Family Matters* 187)

To increase the family’s economic status Yezad takes a step forward. The need for money lets him enter into gambling by using his family's money, which destroys his moral character. Here Mistry portrays Yezad as a family man rather than a nobleman. On the other side, Jahangir also supports his family to manage the economical situation. Coomy’s idea to shift her stepfather is done according to her plan. Coomy insists that Roxana should take care of Nariman in this miserable emergency. Roxana accepts her request and she needs some financial support from Coomy and Jal from the pension of her father. But they refuse by saying that they have spent his entire pension amount for the repairing work. Mistry analyzes this critical situation clearly, and he keeps an eye on every character of the novel. He is never ready to blame his characters for their misdeed and he never encourages their heartless act.

He describes the situation clearly the unjust done to Nariman by their family is unacceptable such as Nariman’s roughness toward his wife and Coomy’s roughness toward his father all are made of misunderstanding, which destroys humanity as well as human relationship in a family. Mistry advises that Humanity is essential for human quality which creates healthy relationships in a family circle and it can lead to a perfect harmless society. Nariman was unable to show her love for Yasmin due to the love he is having for Lucy and the same way Coomy has no love for Nariman for her affection for her father. She can't blame Nariman for his father’s death but she isolated herself from Nariman’s family. Despite this, Roxana's altruistic commitment and an urge to be a devoted daughter prompt her to accept the responsibility of Nariman without any hesitation. In the meantime, Nariman recollects his youth and Lucy's love for Nariman. Lucy tries to commit suicide when Nariman’s family does not accept a non-Parsi woman as their bride. Nariman realizes the truth that by giving more concern to his former lover he has hurt his wife and children. Nariman’s psychological misconception makes him a selfish man, he feels that his marriage with Yazmin is the cause of all his mental agony. He generously forgives the behaviour of Coomy and Jal. Mistry’s *Family Matters* is the reflection of the entire society’s problem, in which he made the whole world can be made to inhabit one small place where the family can become the nexus of the collective and the universal reflection.

Yezad is rather angry with the trouble given to them by Coomy and Jal for pushing them into severe economic imbalance; he indulged himself in the business of illegal lottery to manage the financial issues, which is owned by Vikram Kapur. To him, Yezad is an eccentric employer at Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium. Desperate, Texas hatches a scheme to con his boss of a large amount of money by falsely reporting a threat from Shiv Sainik, a far-right Indian political party, but the plan is botched and Vikram Kapur is killed. Mrs Kapur decides to wind up the emporium, leaving Yezad unemployed. These unexpected drastic changes in the life of Yezad, initiate him to be a Parsi man for his remaining life to lead his family on the right path. He seeks out consolation in the holy texts and prays at the fire temple. With the



family crisis of one middle-class Parsi family, Mistry analyses everything from the predicament of Indian Parsis as a marginalized community to the wider concerns of corruption and communalism.

Mistry's imaginative characters Shiv Sena as a Hindu fundamentalist are vehemently involved in riots, looting, and burning of the poor and innocent people. Hussain, a peon by profession, is a tragic victim of the Babri Masjid riot who lost his family in the riot. Cheney family represents the Parsis, Mr Kapur is a representation of a Hindu, Hussian is the representation of a Muslim and Lucy Braganza is a Christian and there are ample references to the Jains in the novel. The character of Mr Kapur embodies Indian Secularism in the novel. He prompts secular accommodative ideology as his religion. Mistry connects this Indian secularism with the patriarchal society which encourages these customs of religious beliefs and principles with genetic authorization.

In *Family Matters* Mistry touches on the problem of four generations, the injustice, and uncivilized behaviour emerges from Nariman's parents and now the same situation occupies the life of Nariman's grandson, Jahangir who is now the resemblance of his patriarchal grandfather. When Nariman was a teenage boy he was in love with a non-Parsi woman, but he married a Parsi woman after the rejection of his father. Mistry's way of expressing this matter is too interesting through Nairman's remembrance of his glorious memories of the past. Moreover, the novelist initially claimed that Nariman married the Parsi woman whom he had no love for. Mistry opposes the view of his communal ideology for this incident. What makes the serious attempt of this novel is that Jahangir also follows his grandfather's way by making love with the non-Parsi woman but this is also strongly rejected by his family, Mistry disagrees with the Indian view of secularism, he expresses the mental state of the Indian communal society which is no longer voiced up against this issues, what deed the civilization made in it, is nothing other than handicapped the mind of the people. Mistry examines this matter in another way, Yezad has recently adopted the religious belief but he too advises the same customs to his son. Mistry describes why the people maintain this structure, is to secure their families from the threat they will have to face after any of these serious attempts, to avoid the bloodshed and live a peaceful life in the alienated city where the Parsi community has moved from their native. These immigrants have been facing numerous difficulties to live a normal middle-class life. All the issues discussed by Mistry in this novel happen due to alienation; all the characters who are immigrants from their homeland are unsuspectingly facing these problems without any exception. Mistry's argument in *Family Matters* should be considered as a universal problem, not of an individual or a family.

The clash between a traditionalist, authoritarian father and a son wanting independence and self-determination is a feature of Mistry's writing. Here is the same thing the writer presents in the flashbacks of Nariman, his youth, and his relationship with his father. But the clash with tradition takes another turn in *Family Matters* as the next generation returns to a newfound respect for tradition and religion. Early in the novel, Yezad, like his



father-in-law, is not very sentimental about traditions of the past but by the end, not only does he find solace there but he is determined to instruct his two sons in their traditions as well.

Nariman is an embodiment of the Parsi community and shows the theme of suffering, a sense of belonging, and the crises of alienation have been treated. Mistry's *Family Matters* not only speaks about the problems of an individual family but it discusses the problems of all the families which come under any social structure. Mistry takes the responsibility to voice up about his community's problems and religious beliefs. Through Nariman's family, he discusses many things such as the problem of politics, community, religion, alienation, and tradition. But all the things are looking as generally but the problem should be examined as individually these. Because it affects their liberal status and they fail to get their individuality by connecting themselves to society but the society has no responsibility for the freedom of its people.

In the end, they are satisfied with one thing: an identity given by the community to the Parsi in their immigrant place. In the alienated city, they lost everything like freedom, happiness, peace, justice also relationships to lead a normal life. Their only longing is to get their identity but at last, it is created by their society itself. So they are ready to sacrifice everything for that identity, in between this they maintain their cultural beliefs and traditional values strictly. Mistry somewhere resembles Yezad's character; there is something common between them. Mistry has given an account of his own life through Yezad's character. Mistry, himself being an emigrant to Canada, could well depict Yezad's dream of immigrating to Canada. Mistry narrates:

His dream for an end to this apeman commute had led him to apply for immigration to Canada. 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. (*Family Matters 2*)

The dedication to the set traditions and sense of belonging to their motherland comes in opposition to the new environment resulting in a desolate environment and feeling of insecurity. The immigrant faces two questions: "Who am I?" and "Where is here?" The latter question is due to the geographical and historical past of the country. Atwood's remark explicates the above proposition:

"Who am I?" is a question appropriate in countries where the environment the 'here' is already well-defined, so well defined in fact that it may threaten to overwhelm the individual. In societies where everyone and everything has its place, a person may have to struggle to separate himself from his social background, to keep from being just a function of the structure. 'Where is here?' is a different kind of question. It is what a man asks when he finds himself in unknown territory, and it implies several other questions. Where is this place in relation to other places? How do I find way around it? (*Family Matters 3*)



Mistry expresses his desire to return to India, to Mumbai even though he has now assimilated into the new land.

Family Matters' every shift seems with danger either to oneself or to others. Coomy behaves roughly towards Nariman because she fears the trouble of her warily ordered survival. She doubts her ability to manage and perhaps subconscious acts of revenge for the way Nariman treated her mother. But in every incident, Mistry is longing to preserve his tradition and race amidst the fast-changing multicultural society. He focused on the Parsi community and the Zoroastrian faith. Such moral complexity gives a new twist to Mistry's repeated concern with the idea of goodness as understood in Zoroastrianism. He concludes that this Myth supports the basic Zoroastrian belief of the eternal battle between good and evil that rages within the soul of all men. Thus human beings need to remember their origins through such devices. Shattered dreams of immigration also trouble the pages of *Family Matters*.

The immigration story used to have two parts: dream and reality. But over the years the dream-of prosperity, house, car, CD player, computer, clean air, snow, lakes, mountains, abundance-had been renounced since it was not going to come true (*Family Matters* 240).

Mistry seems to put down negative propaganda and the dirty politics of cultural terrorism through the description of this communalism. *Family Matters* portrays the events as locally and familial to the core. Mistry views that Communal politics disturbed the common man though he had no participation in the sectarian strife. It is inevitable for the community people to stay away from the troubles though they completely avoid the support and its part in their alienated city. It affects the community people physically and mentally. Beyond this entire struggle, they respect the traditional value which is the main thing the author strongly discussed in this novel.

The former incident in the tragic story of Nariman Vakeel separates him from his lady love Lucy whom he had much love for, who sacrifices her life, studies, and comfort zone for him. But he has forcefully bent himself to the general demand of the community and what's the better thing he achieved by this nothing rather than self-damaging and destroying his happiness and peaceful life? His decision affects his wife Yasmin Contractor and his stepchildren without mercy, his rude behaviour towards his wife and children. Why people face this much struggle without any valuable reason or any betterment of their life, is nothing more than maintaining the traditional value. Like Nariman Vakeel, Yasmin Contractor married him by force of communal circumstances.

To think about the life of Jal and Coomy they are kids and they do not know how to make decisions but they also adapted to the strange circumstances for the need to survive. But what the drastic tragic path Mistry has planned at the climax, is he ties up the same tragic elements of Nariman's life with Jahangir, who is presently in love with the non-Parsi woman following his grandfather's way. Mistry explains how fundamentalism and skewed political thinking have altered the very social structure. Mistry also questions individual identity



which is explored through the conflict between individual desire and duties towards the family of the community. Nariman is a man who leads the race in searching for identity and individuality at one stage and when he gets it he dies. So, the novel *Family Matters* progressively depicts Parsis' plight to get an identity as the example of all who seek identity by losing their natives to survive.

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