

### **Conflicts in Interpersonal Relations in Family in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters**

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Family Matters (2002) is the second novel of Mistry, which hinges on the effects of religious bigotry and rigid traditionalism leading to conflicts between the old and the young of a Parsi family. Nariman Vakeel was forced by his orthodox parents and other Parsi members of the society to give up his relations with the woman he loved so dearly just because she happened to be a non-Parsi Goan. Not just this, he was forced to get married to Yasmin, a widow with two children, Jal and Coomy. Society's argument and justification are simple, unequivocally voiced by a family friend: "No happiness is more lasting than the happiness that you get from fulfilling your parents' wishes" (Family Matters 78). Nariman continues to believe this lie and pulls on his marriage sans love with Yasmeen, which blights the family and the relations for decades.

The hideous religious impulse acts as an instrument of prejudice and exclusion in Mistry's novels, setting the narrative and propelling his characters on the complex journey of life. However, in Mistry's books, there

is a retreat into a ritual which sometimes indicates that his characters lack spirituality. Family Matters depicts how Parsi fundamentalism destroys the conducive atmosphere of the Nariman family and infects the very air of his flat, which is ironically located in the Chateau Felicity apartment building. As Wadhawan puts it succinctly in his article 'Parsi Community and the Challenges of Modernity: A Reading of Rohinton Mistry's Fiction':

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 become disruptive of the family tradition. (98)

The novel represents the erosion of moral and ethical values in the various spheres of international society through its growing materialism, corruption, and cheap politics. Mistry points out some

cosmic issues in his many novels. *Family Matters* transcends national boundaries, race, and timing by capturing thematic topics such as geriatrics, family slavery, human relationships, death, and the theme of participation. Nilufer Bharucha has said:

Mistry has surpassed both himself and others. The man himself is the author's personality, and his Persians; the earth is vast. Here the three have met at a critical juncture addressing national, national, and gender boundaries in an unmistakable voice. (209)

The story revolves around the life and way of living of the main character, Nariman Vakeel, an English professor in the seventies who once had Parkinson's disease and was plagued by memories of the past. A widower as he is, a rotting patriarch who lives in a large apartment called Chateau Felicity with a small but controversial family made up of her middle-aged adopted children, Coomy and Jal. Nariman's illness is compounded by his fractured ankle, which compelled him to rely on Coomy and Jal to provide for his daily needs. Coomy's brutality reaches a climax when she plots to send Nariman under the care of Roxana, his single-parent sister and Nariman's real daughter. The difficulty of acceptance begins from this point. Roxana lives a peaceful and contented life in a small

apartment in Pleasant Villa with Yezad and her two children, Murad and Jehangir. Adding a new person to a small and overcrowded house proves emotionally and financially agonizing. Nariman and Chenoy's stay "in the next few months changes everyone's lives, they struggle, they grow, they learn, and they persevere" (Dodiya 87).

Despite this, Roxana's self-sacrificing spirit and desire to be a loyal daughter motivates her to take on the care of Nariman without hesitation. But Yezad is outraged by the atrocities committed against Coomy and Jal by placing them in a state of economic stagnation. The addition of Nariman burdened the Yezad household more. He was faced with growing financial worries; he was tempted by the idea of stealing involving Vikram Kapur, his anonymous employer at Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium. Following Mr. Kapur's death, Ms. Kapur declares her intention to close the store. Before doing so, she wishes to give Yezad a salary of one month in advance regardless of his fourteen years of service. With this, all the hopes for financial security are dashed, and Yezad enters a whirlwind of speculation about the future, ultimately leading him to become a Persian fanatic who seeks comfort from the scriptures and prayers in the fire temple. Through this transformation of a confident, strong, and humorous man into a religious

educator, Mistry is trying to prove the need for religion in this so-called modern world. Jal showed them the way out of a dark future by proposing a reunion at Chateau Felicity and selling a small apartment to secure a living. Family Stories and its narrative strategies show that "the whole world can be made to live in one small place and that the family can be a combination of the whole and the whole world" (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 38)

With the domestic problems of one middle-class Parsi family, Mistry conveys everything from problems within Indian Parsis as a neglected society to widespread concern for corruption and communism. This novel, similar to his first, introduces Shiv Sena as a real Hindu powerfully involved in the rebellion, take, and burning of the poor and innocent. Hussain, the peon, is a vicious victim of Babri Masjid's violence. His wife and children were killed in the riots. In Hussain's speech:

The police were behaving like gangsters. In Muslim Mohallas, they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning; neighbors came out to throw water. And the police? Firing bullets is 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)

Mistry has showcased the core of the present-day child becoming the father in the future... Jahangir here represents a child, while the grandfather of Nariman Vakeel is the father. The image of family life comes through them. "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 does not like his children getting to their grandfather: "First they should learn about fun and happiness, and enjoy their youth. Lots of time to learn about the sickness and death." (FM 278) Juxtaposed to Yezad's view, Roxana opines: "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 depicts how the relationship between Jehangir and Nariman evolves. Jehangir nurtures the needs of his grandfather, which is the true manifestation of Indian ethics: "nine-year-old happily feeding seventy-nine" (FM 113).

Similarly, Mistry portrays Grand fathers exhilaration in being read Enid Blyton by Jehangir, "Mistry himself is in favor of a surrender of the individual self but rather a model of mutual dependence and continuity between the generations" (Dodiya 89). Mistry very effectively depicts how a moody, angry, unattached husband, Yezad, transforms into a loving and affectionate son to Nariman after a bit

of time and coexists with his father-in-law. After some time, Yezad even trims the nails and shaves the beard of his father-in-law by overcoming previous anguish. He tells about the satisfaction he gets by providing help to the elderly. "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). Mistry has a unique ability to project the transformation of a man into the one who helps the old and the infirm: "Strange trip, this journey towards death. No way of knowing... a year, two years? But Roxana was right; helping your elders through it was the only way to learn about it. And the trick was to remember it when your own time came..." (FM 347).

The theme of suffering, the feeling of belonging to others, and the problem of root removal have been dealt with by the character of Nariman, who is the epitome of the Parisian society. "The subjects of mobility versus immobility, decay and mortality are explored through Nariman's way of life." (Vinodkumar 108). He suffers from clinical depression, such as Parkinsonism, osteoporosis, and high blood pressure. His fractured ankle added to the pain of her already existing ailments. "Family Matters provides an intimate and compelling depiction of matters to families in the universal situation of

parents' need for home care" (Vinod Kumar 101). He does not find peace in Chateau Felicity or Pleasant Villa. Through her subtle touch, Mistry tells of Nariman's short days filled with mental anguish when he was rejected by his orthodox parents and a non-Persian woman, Lucy Braganza. He should live a miserable life by marrying a Parisian widow Yasmin, but he cannot forget his unfulfilled love for Lucy in her old age. "His memory of the past destroys his willpower and brings him back to his love for Lucy" (Dodiya 86). Nariman suffers from the problem of being a participant.

This problem takes him back to the roots of his community and the past and tells stories of Persian culture. Nariman has to rely on his adopted children for his health to work. He refuses to bow to Coomy's constant insistence and Jal's exaggerated fears about the dangers of walking the streets of Bombay. Instead, he angrily replies: "He retorts: "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, on the one hand, is quick to take care of his stepfather; on the other hand, he is cruel and unjustly angry with his stepfather for his mother, Yasmin. He blames her for her mother's death and never forgives her. Jal is a 45-year-

old unmarried and unemployed man with a hearing problem. She is the shadow of her terrifying little sister Coomy. He is dominant, controlling, and aggressive. He considers himself the owner of Vakeel's house. His behavior is like that of a noisy principal. The novel says: "She should have been a headmistress, enacting rules for hapless schoolgirls, making them miserable" (FM 2).

She is often compared with Lear's ungrateful daughters. However, Nilufer Bharucha opines differently, "she has made an honest effort to take care of her stepfather, but the helplessness compels her to take the extreme decision."

Rohinton Mistry illustrates the generation gap team by Yezad, who curses his sons as he continues to love the country, Western, and is eager to kiss and welcome non-Parsi girls. Nariman's father blames the books for Nariman's alleged behavior in a bizarre affair with Lucy Braganza, a Goan. Nariman's father feels, "Too many books. Modern ideas have filled Nari's head. He did not learn to maintain such a fine balance between culture and modernity" (FM 15). He also criticized the priest who performed the Navjyot ceremony for the son of Parsi's mother and non-Parisian father: "it was renegades like him who would destroy this religion for three thousand years" (FM 132).

Mistry uses flashback narration in his narrative and effectively mingles the past and the present. He maintains a super 'fine balance' between distrust and certitude, belief and suspicion, the family looks after and control, and "has once again given us something painfully pleasurable: a bittersweet rendition of life in its most ordinary, intimate setting" (Thomson 6).

Rohinton Mistry creates the panorama of the Parsi sympathetically. Family Matter is not just a title exploring the matters of a family but delves deeper to investigate to what extent a family matter. It is a novel of human dignity which encompasses the lives, past and present, of a Parsi family within the ever-growing hatred, stench of death, and the decay of personal lives and morality. Martin Genetsch concludes: "Family Matters can be read like a novel partaking of a universalist discourse concerned with the loss of as well as the subsequent struggle for meaning" (Genetsch 185).

The Parsi community's marginalization and dwindling existence is Mistry's primary concern. Modernization infringes upon the Parsi community, and the basic traditions are brushed under the carpet. The narrative of Mistry has elaborated on the old age marriages, non-recognition of inter-religious marriages, the low birth ratio



compared to the death rate, and religiously following family planning. Family Matters is almost a study of the gradual decline of the Parsi Community leading to its foreseeable extinction. However, Mistry does not stop here but elaborates on how to check this decline in the Parsi community. Mistry has the Zoroastrian faith in the front to emphasize his concern about the racial decimation of the Parsis. The novel concludes with a note on the propagation of the Parsi religion. "Family Matters in a particular way is Family Matters. It is not merely a Parsi family that Mistry is ultimately interested in but the family of man" (Genetsch 187). Works of Mistry will continue to inspire the Parsi community for times immemorial. And will help Parsis to regain their lost identity. The writings of Mistry appear to be a common struggle with the constantly changing times and the speed with which modernization is taking place and with all this around to nurture the traditional and cultural values of the Parsis. "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). In this way, Rohinton Mistry deals with various themes at the same time and cleverly intermingles with the skill of his narrative technique.

Family Matters deals with the life of simple civilians of Bombay metropolitan city. The patriarch Nariman Vakeel, in his seventies, has Parkinson's disease. It is natural for people of that age to expect love and care from the youngsters. Nariman's life in Chateau Felicity is not filled with sweet memories. Belonging to a traditional Parsi family, he was not allowed to marry his girlfriend, Lucy. Torn between love and tradition, he suffers from his marriage to a widow, Yasmin added with her two children, Coomy and Jal. Mistry portrays the genuine love between Lucy and Nariman. Lucy becomes an ayah to the Arjani, who live in the same Chateau Felicity. Unable to forget Nariman, she becomes crazy and sings songs standing on the edges of the terrace. Nariman rescues her after falling from the balcony. Like most wives, Yasmin doesn't tolerate her husband meeting his ex-girlfriend. They even have Roxana added to Coomy and Jal. She is caught between two extremes. Nariman doesn't know how to deal with the two women. As usual, when Lucy goes to the ledge, Yasmin takes up on her how to handle the mentally disabled. Nariman hurries to intervene but cannot, and resultantly both are lost.

In a pathetic situation, in one way, he loses his wife and love at the same time, and in the other way, he is left alone to take care of three motherless kids. The tragic effect

makes one arrogant, the other to be submissive, and the third one to be docile. Coomy and Jal are not married, but Roxana marries Yezad and shifts to a small flat in Pleasant Villa, which is gifted to her by her father. She is blessed with two kids, Murad and Jehangir. Despite their indifferences, Coomy and Jal love their little sister and always welcome her to spend some time with them. On the eve of Nariman's birthday, the family has a get-together. Coomy shows how she was suffering from her father's behavior. Nariman argues to have dinner in the China set, whereas Coomy has her problems with them. "He tried to leave the table amid general protest, while Coomy, close to tears, appealed to others. She said this kind of cranky behavior was what she had to put with all the time" ( Family Matters, 37). Maybe it is true, as said by Saki, Reginald; "The young have aspirations that never come to pass, the old have reminiscences of what never happened" (59). Every individual grows from a child to an older man. The cycle repeats. Shel Silverstein quotes beautiful lines:

"The Little Boy and the Old Man

Said the little boy, "Sometimes I drop my spoon."

Said the old man, "I do that too."

The little boy whispered, "I wet my pants."

"I do that too," laughed the little old man.

Said the little boy, "I often cry."

The old man nodded, "So do I."

"But worst of all," said the boy,

"it seems grown-ups don't pay attention to me."

And he felt the warmth of a wrinkled old hand.

"I know what you mean," said the little old man."

Though the younger generations love their parents and grandparents, unfortunately, they are more entangled in other things under the pressures of a changed life. Much of the time is not devoted to grandparents. Maybe this could be one of the reasons for the mushrooming nursing homes and old-age communities. Mistry clearly shows the anguish of the older adults suffering from diseases and lack of attention. Despite Jal and Coomy's care, Nariman fractures his leg and is advised on bed rest. For a few days, Coomy manages but added to his broken ankle; he develops Parkinson's disease, on account of which she plans to send her father to her sister's house. Roxana cares about her father a lot. Though Yezad is not supported due to increasing financial burdens, she dutifully nurses her father. Yezad worries about his financial status,

which further increases due to his father-in-law's medical bills. Like every middle-class family living in a metropolitan city, they count each penny before spending it. The internal clashes between the wife and husband naturally grow but are soon subsided as they are an understanding couple. When Nariman is taken to Pleasant Villa, he understands how many sacrifices the family makes for his sake. He confesses to Yezad, "That huge flat is empty as a Himalayan cave for me, this feels like a Palace. But it will be difficult for you" (122).

For older adults, old age becomes a curse. The present generation needs to remember that they are the roots of our foundation. Nariman is happy in his daughter's house as he has a good time with his grandsons, added to his lovely daughter's care. Things become worse for Yezad. He loses his peace and finds ways to supplement his family income. A lower-status employee from a Sports Emporium cannot be expected to do wonders to get rid of his financial crisis. He motivates his owner Mr. Kapur to contest in the Municipal elections. Kapur, who is interested in politics, drops the idea at the advice of his intelligent wife. Read hopes to get a promotion, and in his owner's absence, he plans to take charge of the shop, which remains a pipe dream. The proper attitude of a person comes to the surface when the reality is to be faced. Yezad hires two

drama artists to threaten his owner to change the shop's name from 'Bombay to Mumbai'. He intends to make his owner move to politics. But Kapur prepares to give bribes to them instead of fighting with them. He hands over the amount to Yezad. Circumstances make Yezad take the money home. But his genuine attitude, which reflects his upbringing by his exemplary father, makes him return the money. He also tries to earn money in illegal activity Matka but loses the entire amount Roxana saves for the month's expenditure. Jehangir, imbibed with the same principles, is caught collecting money from their fellow students to help his parents. As the homework monitor, he is frank but unable to bear his mother's problems at home; he thinks of assisting her in the way he can. A simple family living peacefully with fewer hopes and good aspirations changes its way as the economic crisis is more bitter than anything else in life.

On the other hand, Coomy decides not to bring her father back. Though Jal warns her, she damages the ceiling and makes her father stay back at her sister's house. Meanwhile, Yezad, tired of the turmoil, starts visiting the Fire temple. He is an atheist and slowly transforms into a believer. Roxana decides to send her father to the Chateau Felicity as the troubles increase. She enquires Coomy and Jal about the repairs. She meets Edul in the lift, who though not



a professional, claims so and starts repairing the ceiling. Destiny has its role. None can imagine what happens the next minute. Two tragedies occur on the same day, the auspicious day of Christmas. Edul leaves the steel rod he inserts in the ceiling, killing Coomy and him.

Mistry shows how relations make life happy. Roxana gets vexed with her husband's excessive religious activities and constant fight with his elder son Murad. Read always fails to understand that one should change according to the circumstances. He suffers and makes his family suffer. Roxana knows that she is very cautious about her father in her tiny flat, but once she comes to the big apartment, she leaves her father in the care of the nurse, who doesn't take care of him. She recalls how her father was happy with Daisy's music and her family's caring. Maybe he could have lived for long if she could personally care for him. She advises her son, "Learn from this Jehangoo. Listen to the advice of elders. When we grow up, we think we know everything. We assume older adults are not right in their heads. Too much pride we acquire with our years, And then it brings us down" (494).

Mistry wants the younger generations to learn from experience because experience is the best teacher. Be proud to have older adults to teach, adore and make you a complete man.

The novel is well planned. Each character has its importance. To show the culture of the Parsi people, he shows how Dr. Fitter and Inspector Masalavala helped Nariman's family. He never fails to show his love for his hometown, Bombay. Family Matters indicates to the reader that family makes life meaningful. It is not family matters but what family matters. The comment by Independent describes the novel most appropriately "It is rare to discover a novel in which the characters are so well drawn that you feel wrapped up in their problems, rather than just privy to them"(76).

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