

A STUDY ON INDIAN FAMILY SETUP THROUGH THE EYES OF A CANADIAN WRITER THROUGH HIS NOVEL *FAMILY MATTERS*

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Abstract:

Family Matters is Mistry's third novel, shortlisted for Booker Prize. Mistry has been described as a genius by a leading British newspaper The Independent and a "true literary Man Maker" (Guardian Newspaper). Living in Toronto for the last 27 years, Mistry has remained deeply rooted to his native place India. All his four books are set in Bombay that he "recreates and agonizes over with the close attention to detail of a homesick exile." (Syed: Coast Reporter, 19,2002). *Family Matters* has a wonderfully quiet opening in which the age of the central protagonist Nariman Vakeel is stressed as much as is the author's own love of words. Hence we have one magnificently crafted sentence after another. Even in a wider context, in India where health care and state support for the care of the elderly and sick is almost non-existent, this responsibility falls squarely on the younger generation within families. Late marriages and / or a rampant individualism that does not brook the adjustments required within marriage, have led to most Parsi not marrying at all, or if married, either opting not to have children or being forced into a childless state by infertility caused by the advanced age of one or both spouses at the time of marriage.

Key words: *Family, India, Parsi, Old age and children*

Introduction

“How can you force people? Can caring and concern be made compulsory? Either it resides in the heart, or nowhere” (121)

The story centres round a 79 year old Parsi widower, Nariman. A former Professor of English, Nariman suffers from Parkinson and a number of other debilitating diseases of age. He lives in a 7-room apartment in the complex called Chateau Felicity, with his two grown-up stepchildren: Coomy a bitter woman who seems intent on plaguing Nariman with rules ‘to govern every aspect of his shrunken life (FM, 2) and her brother Jal, a mild-mannered good-for-nothing fellow.

Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters*

It is a moving account of the helplessness, misery, suffering, and travails of parents in old age and heartlessness and callousness of children. The left motif of the problems of parents in old age is elaborated through the protagonist Seventy–nine year old Professor Nariman Vakeel. A widower Nariman Vakeel lives in seven-room old flat with his step children Coomy and Jal. Despite suffering from Parkinson’s disease and protestations of his step-children Nariman Vakeel insists on going for vesperal walk. They are afraid that due to the Parkinson’s disease he would lose his balance and fall down. In utter disregard of the injunctions laid on his movements, Nariman uncurls his ageing and frail limbs and leaves the apartment. When Coomy asks him, “How many people with Parkinson’s do what you do?” (FM 3), he shrugs off her fears by saying, “I’m not going trekking in Nepal. A little stroll down the lane, that’s all” (FM 3). Nariman retorts that dangers lurk indoors as well as outdoors. While Jal and Coomy debate among themselves as to what really constitutes a danger to Parsis in Bombay. Nariman Vakeel really slips out their building, ironically named Chateau Felicity and the “stale emptiness of the flat” (FM 5) into the bustling life of the city. Nariman’s longing for fresh air and life outside the ambit of his step-children, is symbolized by the picture of an old Parsi, in a trade-mark Sola Toppee, standing with his back to the camera, gazing out at the sea. Nariman’s bravado is a bit dented though when on the eve of his seventy-ninth birthday, he returns home “with abrasions on

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his elbow and forearm, and a limp. He had fallen while crossing the lane outside Chateau Felicity” (FM 6). This fall results in angry accusations from Coomy who accuses Nariman of behaving irresponsibly. Irritated by Coomy’s scolding, Nariman 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). At this Coomy flares up and retaliates with, “You ruined Mama’s life, and mine and Jal’s. I will not tolerate a word against her” (FM 7). While Coomy is presented as a termagant, her brother Jal is the compassionate voice of reason.

Mistry clearly underlines the fact that parents are seen as burden. Coomy’s resentment is heightened by the fact that it is the ‘second class’ children like her and Jal who have to bear this responsibility while the ‘flesh and blood’ daughter Roxana, has escaped hers by virtue of her married status. However, Mistry does give Coomy her due and tells us that she loves her ‘little Roxana’ who rescues them from their swamp of rancor and “unhappiness was thwarted for the time being” (FM 9). When Nariman became bedridden, in a clever move, Coomy and Jal unceremoniously and without any warning dump the old man at Roxana’s doorstep and leave him there till he is mobile enough to return to their flat. Nariman is nominally consulted on this move but he knows that he did not have the right to refuse or even say: “This flat is my home, and I put it in your names because I did not differentiate between you and Roxana. Would you now throw me out in my helplessness? They would probably laugh that I was getting dramatic” (FM 87). So that all that Nariman says is, “Lying in bed, here or there, is all the same to me. But it will be difficult for them, in such a small flat” (FM 87). Here Mistry underlines one of the major themes of the novel that paucity of accommodation is the bane of the majority of family units in the congested city of Bombay and has ruined the happiness of many families. Nariman reconciles himself to his helpless situation. “Poor children, thought Nariman, it was difficult for them to disguise their eagerness.

Roxana’s little world in Pleasant Villa is hit by the catastrophe of Nariman’s sudden arrival. “She bent down to kiss him. His pungent odour repelled her, but she fought the impulse to move away. She wondered how well they had been looking after him” (FM 105-6). Here

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Mistry also shows Roxana's obsessive solitude for her sons' health, which means keeping them at home at the slightest sign of a cold. On such days the son Jehangir would keep himself busy with jigsaw puzzles and the reading of Enid Blyton books. The jigsaw puzzle has been used by Mistry as a leit motif of *Family Matters*. Jehangir's act of fitting together the jigsaw puzzle symbolizes his attempt to work out the quarrel and power politics that rocks his family which he wishes would live together in happiness and harmony.

Despite the fact that Roxana loves her father and though she is adored by her sons, the problem is that they live in a small one bedroom flat. While Roxana and Yezad occupy the only bedroom, the hall serves as their sons' bedroom at night and as their sitting-cum-dining room during the day. There is also a small balcony where Roxana dries her clothes. When Nariman is dumped on them without any prior notice, they have to improvise further to adjust the old man in their home.

Thus, Nariman becomes a part of the cramped but happy little family of his daughter. Murad, the older boy, is shifted to the balcony under a plastic sheet provided by Villie Cardmaster and the old man is settled on the couch in the sitting room which also serves as his bed. Jehangir, the younger boy, sleeps at night on the little pull-out bed that remains under the bed during the day. Roxana feels happy in the fact that her younger son, who had been at home with an upset stomach when his grandfather was brought in, insists on hand feeding grandfather while his mother goes to hang up the clothes on the balcony. From that vantage point Roxana was able to watch the scene, "nine year old happily feeding seventy-nineshe felt she was witnessing something almost sacred, and her eyes refused to relinquish the precious moment, for she knew instinctively that it would become a memory to cherish to recall in difficult times when she needed strength" (FM 113).

The difficult times do arrive as Nariman's presence begins to irritate his son-in-law Yezad who has to eat his breakfast in the midst of the smells and sounds of his father-in-law's morning evacuations. It is a very realistic and moving situation which may be experienced by many families in Bombay. As the Chenoy family struggles on to care for Nariman and as the monthly budget gets more and more strained, Roxana's husband and sons, each in his own way,

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tries to supplement the dwindling notes in the envelopes she has so painstakingly marked with different items of daily use and through which she tries desperately to manage her monthly budget. Her elder son Murad in an honest, straightforward manner, takes to walking home from school and slips the saved bus fare into his mother's envelopes. Yezad and Jehangir are more adventurous and go in for big money. Yezad with the help of Villie, the Matka Queen, places at first small and later big bets on the daily lottery. Jehangir as the Homework Monitor strikes deals with rich and not so intelligent boys in his class, whose unsatisfactory or even non-existent homework he marks as satisfactory, in return for a monetary consideration. So Roxana's little envelopes mysteriously become plump again. But because they live in a moral universe, nemesis has to catch up with all of them. Eventhough their misdemeanours were for a deserving cause.

So far as Nariman is concerned, in spite of the hardships in the tiny flat and his son-in-law's at times justified grumpiness, life is better than it was in his spacious flat where he had to contend with Coomy's sourness and Jal's helplessness. Here, he has his grandson's company and when he talks in his sleep. Roxana and Yezad rush out of their bedroom to stand by and watch till he settles back into sleep.

To what extent children can stoop to avoid the responsibility of parents is revealed through the behaviour of Coomy who has been busy creating a situation in which it would be impossible for Roxana and Yezad to insist that she keep her side of the bargain and take her step-father back after the stipulated three weeks. In a desperate move she deliberately gets her brother to break open the plaster of the ceiling in Nariman's bedroom and so that it would not look suspicious, they also damage other rooms in the flat. She attributes the damage to water seepage from the overhead tanks on the terrace. In cunning move Coomy engages her neighbour, Edul Munshi, a rather inapt craftsman to repair the flat. She knows that Edul would take an inordinately long time to do the repairs and this would give Nariman's ankle time to be fully healed before he would return to them. At one level it might seem implausible as Nariman had turned his flat over to his step children and they were damaging their own property, but if viewed in the context of Coomy's earlier behaviour, it would only reveal the desperation with which she wanted to avoid becoming her stepfather's nurse again.

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So Coomy refuses to take her father back until the flat is in perfect shape again. She also turns down Roxana's appeal to let her have a part of her father's savings to enable her to balance their monthly budget. The bitter quarrel with Roxana and Yezad over money finally strains Jal's patience and he accuses Coomy of not caring for the family, "Family does not matter to you! You keep nursing your bitterness instead of nursing Pappa"(FM 193). Pointing to the mutilated ceiling Jal says to Coomy, "Don't turn away! Feast your eyes! Happy? Ruined house and ruined relations with our one and only sister" (FM 193-4). Coomy weeps at this but does not change her stand. At this point in the novel several hearts and relationships are on the verge of breaking. Physical and financial strain of keeping Nariman in their flat adversely affects the relationship of Yezad cannot disguise his eagerness to get rid of his father-in-law. "If they play this game, so will we. They kick him into our house, we find a way to kick him back into theirs". Roxana protects, "Papa is not a footballif you force papa out, you may as well throw me out at the same time" (FM 195). Yezad asks, "So that's it? That is all I mean to you, your family means to you?" Roxana replies, "And what is Papa if not family?" (FM 196). Here Roxana proves that she is a good daughter and cares more for her father.

Later, Coomy dies along with her not so handyman. Edul, under the same plaster which she had got damaged to delay the return of Nariman to Chateau Felicity. In an ironical turn of events, Yezad's idealistic employer Mr. Kapur is killed by Shiv Sena goons and his pragmatic widow dispenses with the services of Yezad. With the loss of Yezad's regular income and his Matka earnings, the Chenoy family is on the verge of real poverty. They are, however, saved by Jal who suggests that with Coomy, they should sell the Chenoy's flat and all move in together into Nariman's much larger flat. The Chenoy flat, though much smaller, is centrally located and would fetch a handsome price. So they would even after using the money from the sales to get larger flat professionally repaired, still have enough left over to live on and is what ultimately happens.

Mistry, is in many ways bearing witness to the last grand of the Parsi Zoroastrians in India. He had noted their rites and rituals and their eccentricities in his earlier texts. In *Family Matters* he extends this to writing about the old myths and legends of ancient Iran using the

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device of oral narrative, Nariman Vakeel becomes the story-teller in this book and the audience who listens to his tales about ancient Iran is his young grandsons. With them the reader shares the story of the evil king Zuhak's unnatural appetites every day. Finally this depredation is put to an end by the brave Farideon who in a terrible fight defeats, Zuhak but is unable to kill him. So chains him and buries him deep within a mountain. Thus, evil is overcome by good. This myth reinforces the basic Zoroastrian tenets of the eternal battle between good and evil that rages within the soul of all men. Interwoven into this myth is the role of nature in the salvation of human souls. The evil Zuhak deep within the bowels of the mountain sucks on his chains all night and weakens them to the extent that he would be able to break them apart and thus let loose terror on the world again. However, the cock, who crows every morning to herald the dawn, also signals the end of Zuhak's aspirations and the chains grow strong again at the behest of the good angel Sarosh, who sends his messenger the spider to weave them whole again. This is archetypal myth making and Mistry appears to be making the point that it is important for human beings to remember their origin through such devices.

In a sub-plot of the novel, Yezad's life at the sports-goods store and his coffee shop friends, give Mistry the opportunity to berate the religious fundamentalists and indulge in secular speak. Mistry's own problems with a time-wrap, common to most diasporic writers, and occasional lapse into nostalgia, surfaces in the chapters dealing with Jehangir's School-St. Xavier's – not coincidentally also Mistry's own alma-mater. Yet more images and memories and Mistry's old concerns with naming, already detailed vis-a vis *Such a Long Journey*, appear here too in form of Yezad's boss, Mr. Kapur's concern with the renaming of streets and buildings in Bombay and his collection of prints of colonial Bombay: "From three pictures, so many memories. And this can happen with every single photo-each one conceals volumes. All you need is the right pair of eyes.....to unlock the magic"(FM 221).

Nariman's discomfiting memories make strong comebacks and his rational, till then almost agnostic son-in-law is increasingly drawn to religion as a mode of comfort from the hopelessness of his domestic and professional situation. He takes to slipping into the

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neighbouring aviary, the fire temple, on his way home from work; Mistry seizes the chance then to expound once again on the structure of an agiary-once more acting as a "witness".

Much of the novel charts family conflicts over caring for Nariman: the cost of medicine; lack of space and privacy; the daily routine of bedpans and urinals, sponge baths and bedsores. But as the perspective shifts between family members, there is sympathy for the revulsion, pity, anger and bewilderment of Coomy and Jal at the "excretions and secretions of their stepfather's body", described in insistent detail, from the fetid smells pervading living quarters, to "little gobs of mucus" floating in Nariman's washbowl. It is stressed that all human beings become "candidates for compassion, all of us, without exception".

How we treat the elderly, the novel insists, is not only a measure of our humanity, but a means of grasping it. A hospital orderly bears a "smile of enlightenment" like "Voltaire's in old age". How, Nariman wonders, did one acquire such enlightenment, "here in a grim ward, collecting faces and urine from the beds of the lame and the halt and the diseased? Or were these the necessary conditions? For learning that young or old, rich or poor, we all stank at the other end?"

When Nariman's needs cause friction between Roxana and her husband, she reminds him of Gandhi's teachings, "that there was nothing nobler than the service of the weak, the old, the unfortunate". Stealthily, even movingly, Mistry reveals small triumphs of humanity over distaste, minute shifts that signal leaps of compassion. Roxana exults that "our children can learn about old age, about caring - it will prepare them for life, make them better human beings", and Yezad comes to realise that, with death, helping one's elders through it is the only way to learn to face one's own. As Roxana watches her nine-year-old son feeding his grandfather, the boy wiping a stray grain of rice from the 80-year-old's lips, "she felt she was witnessing something almost sacred".

Subplots revealing the encroachments of a corrupting world are less successful. There are parallel struggles against temptation for Yezad, with mafia-run gambling and "black money" deals, and his son Jehangir, who takes bribes as "homework monitor" to help his parents. The "sleeping snake" of the Hindu fundamentalist Shiv Sena fuels a subplot involving Yezad's

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employer, a Punjabi shop owner who insists all faiths be celebrated in his shop. The novel is not least a lament for Bombay (or Mumbai), a "miracle of tolerance" threatened by "goonda raj and mafia dons".

Sectarian intolerance finds an echo in orthodox Parsis' obsession with purity, fearing "extinction" through intermarriage or migration. The novel both affirms Zoroastrian ritual and derides bigotry. Though the sceptic Yezad returns to the fold, his insistence that his sons marry Parsis threatens to replicate Nariman's tragedy. Yet while his family is baffled by this "non-stop praying stranger", the reader is aware that Yezad's fundamentalism is born of guilt - yet another response to a corrupting world encouraged children to grow up without attachment to the place where they belonged". Were they to taste the muffins and kippers they crave, they would better appreciate their mother's "curry-rice and khichri-saas and pumpkin buryani and dhansak".

The result can veer towards sentimentality or didacticism, and Jehangir's child's-eye view is occasionally cloying. Yet the novel steers clear of closure with a far from harmonious epilogue. With deceptive simplicity, Mistry draws his fine balance between scepticism and affirmation, faith and bigotry, family nurture and control. His pared-down language has an almost spartan plainness, yielding illuminating epiphanies amid the dirt and stench.

The Maharashtra state elections of 1995 took place against a background of anti-Muslim sentiment consequent on the civil unrest which had followed the destruction of the Babri Mosque two and a half years earlier. (Kalpana Sharma,67). At the polls the Shiv Sena depicting itself as the "defender of Hindus", won enough support to form a coalition government with the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). This success represented the culmination of thirty years of activism by the Shiv Sena in Bombay, fuelled by its charismatic and ruthless leader, the *Senapati*, Bal Thackeray, which had seen the organization develop from a cadre concerned with employment opportunities for Maharashtra speakers to a major player in the Hindu nationalist movement on the metropolitan, and hence national, stage. (Salman Rushdie: *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 85)

Drawing on its appeal to a broad spectrum of the Bombay population, and raising the banner of Hindu majoritarianism or *Hindutva*, the Shiv Sena exploited the inevitable consequences, in terms of inequality, fostered by capitalist development in the city. It employed

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flexible tactics and a posse of young, vigorous activists trained to see political work as part of larger struggle sometimes requiring unscrupulous methods and direct physical violence, and was involved in such nefarious activities as protection rackets, illegal land deals and drugs and contraband smuggling. The movement of the Shiv Sena from fringe-player to main actor in the unfolding drama of Bombay politics both indicates, and is a symptom of, what Novy Kapadia has described as the “criminalization of politics and the politicization of crime, so rampant in India in the last decade of the twentieth century”. (Novy, Kapadia. “The Politics of Survival and Domination in *A Fine Balance*, 1998, p.132)

Family in the novel comes to have both positive and negative connotations. The Chenoy-Vakeel-Contractor family unit is already fractured by loss: Coomy and Jal Contractor’s own father dies young and they are unwillingly swept into a new domestic arrangement when their mother seeks the security of a marriage to Nariman Vakeel, who, in turn carries with him the whiff of scandal and divided loyalties owing to his liaison with a non-Parsi, Lucy Braganza. When his father refuses to countenance his exogamous intentions, Nariman reluctantly yields to the marriage with Yasmin Contractor. Nariman soon adds a daughter of his own. Roxana, to his newly acquired stepchildren, leading to longstanding jealousies and resentment about favouritism.

There are trying situations, there are trials and ordeals but the ties of the family ultimately survive. The novel does have some overtones of a morality tale. Trifling peccadilloes like a class monitor taking money or Yezad getting two stage actors to pose as people from the Shiv Sena and frighten his boss bring about a terrible nemesis.

A critic Vincent B. Leitch describes the Art as “Art derives from the community for the community” (Leitch, B Vincent 86). By the same token Florence Howe remarks, “Art is neither anonymous nor universal, it springs from the particulars of gender as well as class, race and cultural experience” (Howe, Florence 93). While attributing this view to literature, C. R. Reddy in his Foreword to *Indo-Anglian Literature* says that true literature is “the expression of one’s own individual or racial personality” (qtd. By Aswathnarayana Reddy 71).

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Parents-children relationship starts even before the birth of children and continues even after the death of parents. Parents start thinking and dreaming of their child much before its birth and continue to influence its life even after their death. In a simple but lucid and moving manner Mistry shows the different perspectives and attitudes of parents and children. A mother keeps her unborn child in her womb for nine months. After the birth of the child, Parents bear all the hardships of bringing it up with pleasure. A mother would gladly lie in a wet bed so that the child can sleep comfortably. But the world undergoes a sea change when the children have to look after their aged parents.

In India where health care and state support for the care of the elderly and sick is almost non-existent and so, this responsibility falls squarely on the younger generation within families. This is well shown in the novel 'Family Matters' Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* is a moving account of the helplessness, misery, suffering, and travails of parents in old age and heartlessness and callousness of children. Mistry clearly underlines the fact that parents are seen as burden. Coomy's resentment is heightened by the fact that it is the 'second class' children like her and Jal who have to bear this responsibility while the 'flesh and blood' daughter Roxana, has escaped hers by virtue of her married status.

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Conclusion

Everyone would have the experience of being with old-age people at their home. It is a common scene in all families that the old age people are neglected by youngsters. This is because of the gap between the generations. The life lead by them is entirely different from the period of the youngsters. Therefore, the author wants to spread awareness among youngsters that this kind of situation are to be eradicated. The youngsters should take care of their parents. Only this will teach the lessons their children.

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