

## Socio-Political Realism and the Ethics of Care in the Fiction of Rohinton Mistry

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### Abstracts

Rohinton Mistry, an exceptional writer, is also a prominent member of the Indian diaspora. He has earned worldwide acclaim. His art addresses Indian sensibility. His reality and straightforward manner are constantly admired. Literature of the Indian Diaspora is a prominent subset of Indian English literature that grows in importance. Understanding the origins of Indian diaspora is crucial for understanding diasporic literature in general. The postcolonial and intellectual diaspora has its own representative writer in North America, like Rohinton Mistry. Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* expertly navigates many layers of Parsi family life as well as the larger difficulties of contemporary Indian culture. The novel provides a complex and multidimensional reading experience by delving deeply into family relationships, ageing and senility, religion and faith, class and social conflict, Mumbai as a character, secularism and tolerance and mortality and legacy. Mistry's storytelling explores the complexities of human existence while also reflecting on the problems and opportunities of modern living. The present study will analyze Parsi community, family relationships, religion and faith, class and social conflict.

**Keywords:** politics, history, community, religion, conflict and economic hardships

### Introduction

Rohinton Mistry's literary contributions include exposing the challenges and complexity of the Parsi community, capturing the social and political instability of post-independence India and exploring universal issues of alienation and family life through the lens of diaspora. He is known for his nuanced realism, detailed symbolism and ability to capture the "ordinary" to expose deeper truths, cementing his position as an important voice in Indian and diasporic literature.

In 1983, he started his literary career. Encouraged by his wife, he set out to win a university literary competition by penning his first short story, *One Sunday*. He worked on the narrative for several days before submitting it to the University of Toronto's Hart House Literary Contest, where it won first place. He became the first individual to receive two such awards. He still worked for the bank. Despite his relative inexperience, his literary reputation grew when he received The Canadian Fiction Magazine's Annual Contributor's Prize in 1985. He then resigned his employment to pursue a full-time writing career with the help of a Canada Council grant.

Mistry's *Family Matters*, follows the life of an old Parsi widower living in Bombay with his stepchildren. It was considered for the 2002 Man Booker Prize for Fiction. His work garnered the most attention, however, when

Oprah Winfrey chose *Family Matters* as her Book Club pick in December 2001. Mistry was a nominee for the 2011 Man Booker International Prize, which honours a writer's complete body of work. In October 2011, he received the 2012 Neustadt International Prize for Literature. He has a remarkable accomplishment to his credit. He is the only author to have had all of his works shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. Mistry has achieved significant literary reputation with only four novels.

### Objective

The objective of this research is to examine realism and cultural identity, to discover religious differences and economic hardships, to investigate the interactions between Parsi characters and India's broader religious landscape, highlighting themes of secularism and tolerance and to depict how financial pressures and a loss of identity can lead to religious extremism, as seen in Yezad's transformation.

### Review of Literature

Chandras Kumar observes that Mistry's novels are major cultural works, not just for their portrayal of the Parsi community but also for their critical examination of Indian society and history. His thorough depictions of Parsi traditions assist to conserve the cultural history of a diminishing community, while his critique of caste-based discrimination and political authoritarianism is consistent with the experiences of other marginalized groups. Mistry's works contribute to a better understanding of cultural identities, minority experiences and the human condition by connecting personal stories to political realities.

Pranjali Hazarika points out that Mistry's *Family Matters* is an exceptional work that discusses Nariman and his Parsi family, as well as their problems with belonging and the preservation of family values. Mistry explores the concerns among Parsis over improvements required in several topics. Mistry's work explores the life of an Indian Parsi and his quest to save the community from extinction. As a result, he is particularly concerned with the preservation of Parsi heritage and culture. *Family Matters* is regarded as a rich novel with mild humor and a narrative style that has gained Mistry the most popularity.

### Discussion

*Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry's third novel, is set against a backdrop of communalist politics and corruption. The novelist's skillfully crafted tale of universal importance depicts the microscopic Parsi society in *Family Matters* as miniature India and gigantic humanity. *Family Matters*' main themes include family and its claustrophobia, faith and fundamentalism, memory, caring, compassion and humanism. The novel highlights minority communities' concerns about India's "secular" multicultural image. It also emphasizes the role of government agencies in committing atrocities against innocent civilians from minority communities, as well as the Parsi community's struggle to care for its ageing patriarch. *Family Matters* tells the narrative of how a Parsi family strives to care for its elderly and infirm patriarch, Nariman Vakeel and, like its predecessors, it emphasizes the blurring of the public and private worlds. Peter Morey says:

... caught in a complex web of actions and reactions in their dealings with each other and with the wider world they inhabit. Physical corruption and the inevitable change and loss accompanying mortality are linked with the social and political corruption characteristic of modern Bombay and with the moral corruption of characters who often for laudable reasons perpetrate deceptions and engage in subterfuge. (126)

Mr. Rangarajan is a minor character in *Family Matters*. He is a hospital technician, seeks Nariman for assistance on immigrating to the United States or Canada. The same idea of migration pervades Yezad's psyche in *Family Matters*, where he aspires to go to Canada as a sign of success. Yezad wants to emigrate for clean cities, abundance of water and trains with seats for all. Nariman Vakeel, on the other hand, believes thus: "Emigration is an enormous mistake. The biggest anyone can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills" (240).

Yezad's ambitions of emigrating are then dashed when the officer in charge asks merciless questions, humiliating and shattering Yezad's dreams. And Yezad decides against migrating; he tears up all the papers relating to emigration and tells Roxanna, "Getting rid of garbage" (240). The researcher believes that emigration is not simply the aspiration of Parsis, but also of educated middle-class Indians who want to leave increasingly corrupt India for more liberal Western countries. However, Rohinton Mistry appears to argue that migration and diaspora are not opportunities for a decent life because none of the characters emigrate, despite believing it is a better life and affluence. The Shiv Sena paradigm appears again in *Family Matters*. Parsis are sensitive to both the Indian political system and the religious bigotry that exists in India. The aftermath of violence in Bombay following the demolition of the Babri Masjid caused communal strife, resulting in the deaths of almost 800 people and left many more stranded and homeless. In *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry is sorry for Mumbai because "it is being raped by politicians" (151).

In the narrative, the Shiv Sena changes the name of Bombay to Mumbai and insists on doing so in all places. Even after the Shiv Sena's request, Mr. Kapoor, Yezad's boss, refuses to change the name of his shop from Bombay to Mumbai Sports Good Emporium, attracting the attention of Shiv Sena goondas. Eventually, Mr. Kapoor's attitude proves fatal. Shiv Sena has used adaptable tactics and a posse of young, ferocious activists trained to see political work as part of a larger struggle that sometimes has necessitated unscrupulous methods and direct physical violence. It is involved in such heinous activities as protection rackets, illegal land deals, drugs and contraband trafficking. Parsis are sensitive to the religious intolerance that exists in India. Husain describes the incident in which Shiv Sena goondas have burned his wife and three children:

In those riots the police were behaving like gangsters. In Muslim Mohallas, they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning, neighbours came out to throw water. And the police? Firing bullets like target practice. These guardians of the law were murdering everybody! And my poor wife and children ... I couldn't even recognize them. (FM 148)

The Parsi community is on the verge of extinction, thus we discover in them both dread of extinction and a desire to survive. In *Family Matters*, the effect of the Babri Masjid demolition is shown immediately in the lives of Mr. Kapoor and Husain, as well as indirectly in the life of Yezad Chenoy. Yezad, who is financially constrained, first attempts gaming and then devises a clever strategy to extract money from his employer, Mr. Kapoor, to cover the extra expenses incurred as a result of the arrival of Nariman Vakeel, his father-in-law, who is bedridden by Parkinson.

However, Mr. Kapoor is slain in an unexpected turn of circumstances, making Yezad responsible. Even if the domestic sphere is more evident and protective in *Family Matters*, public and impersonal events do intrude on and influence human lives. Despite Nariman's personal problem, greater external events such as the growth of the Shiv Sena and the Bombay Hindu-Muslim riots continue to have an indirect impact on his family. The Parsi worldview and the minority point of view dominate the question of human existence in a world rife with strife, vengeance and violence.

Parsi writing, like any diasporic writing, incorporates feelings of loss, nostalgia and difficulty identifying with one's homeland. Rohinton Mistry's position as a member of the group pushed into exile by the Arab

invasion of its homeland, along with his status as a migrant to Canada, informs his writing about the experience of twofold displacement. One of the key topics in Rohinton Mistry's novel is loss. He is preoccupied and concerned with the challenge of creating meaning in a world where meaning is scarce. *Family Matters* can be read as a novel about losing something and then struggling to find meaning. The basic plot exposes a number of worrisome undercurrents in which all types of values individual, familial, social and spiritual - are undermined and problematic.

Despite the fact that there is less tyranny in *Family Matters*, the politically weak are still on the receiving end. Nariman is forced to live a life of dependence, while Yezad attempts various methods to keep his family financially intact. Lucy, Nariman's ex-girlfriend, has been reduced to poverty and dependence. Rohinton Mistry's characters reflect his genuine concern for the impoverished, helpless, politically exploited, economically reliant and generally powerless sections of society. This also reveals, directly and indirectly, the villainy, depravity, corruption and predatory activities of those in authority who dominate and oppress regular people based on caste-religion and political superiority.

Nayar points out: "In *Family Matters*, the relationship between Yezad and Murad deteriorates as the novel proceeds. Rohinton Mistry points to the difference in moral values between the two generations as the prime cause of such conflicts" (Nayar xi). Sohrab does not follow his father's wishes. When Sohrab insisted on taking an undergraduate Physics course rather than attending the prestigious IIT, Gustad's ambitions were dashed. Gustad is even more saddened when his second son, Darius has flirted with their neighbor's daughter, causing neighborhood tensions.

In *Family Matters*, Yezad is not like his father, Mr. Chenoy the Senior. Mr. Chenoy has brought a substantial amount of money safely to the bank amidst commotion and panic. He is rewarded for it with a clock and while Yezad treasures the clock, he has compromised his integrity. This moral ambiguity lies at the heart of *Family Matters*.

In addition to politics and alterity, Rohinton Mistry explores tradition and memory, the public sphere, age, women, family and society. Nostalgia is another recurring element in Rohinton Mistry's writings, particularly in the main character. Bhautoo-Dewnarain points out: "It also takes the form of reminiscing about childhood which is seen as a more stable and reassuring world than the present" (84). The reminiscences of various characters are related to the changing circumstances of the Parsi community in post Indian independence era. "This politico-cultural nostalgia helps to create a sense of loss about the changed circumstances of the characters in both domestic and public spheres" (84). Villie Cardmaster, the matka-queen from *Family Matters*, is likewise nostalgic for her past. When Yezad goes to borrow plastic sheets for his terrace, she suddenly starts thinking about all the happy family events that the plastic tablecloth has observed.

In *Family Matters*, Nariman is forcibly separated from his Goan Christian girlfriend, Lucy Braganza. Mr. Vakeel to his son Nariman says: "No happiness is more lasting than the happiness that you get from fulfilling your parents' wishes" (13). Coomy has inherited Nariman's parents' violently conservative outlook, as well as her own mother, Yasmin, who believe that individual will and desire must be curtailed for the greater welfare of the family. She despises her stepfather for neglecting his mother and failing to perform her commitments, while he focuses more on his ex-girlfriend Lucy. Jal finally breaks free from Coomy's grasp after her death.

Family is a vital institution in any society. As families grow, change is unavoidable, resulting in the flourishing of some branches while others die. Families are both hard-working and overprotective. Family serves as a protective barrier against external threats. In Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*, family can have both positive and negative implications. Rohinton Mistry considers an ideal family to be one that values care,

togetherness and humanity. Family provides significance in a chaotic and orderless world. However, individual characters can make or break it.

Parsis live a westernized lifestyle and take pleasure in their “Englishness.” This is mirrored in Mistry’s writings, which also demonstrate that Parsis live in a world that differs from the traditional Indian way of life. Batra observes: “The birthday celebrations in pucca English style in *Family Matters*, the handling of love-sick Lucy by a married professor Nariman or the way of addressing his father-in-law as “chief” by Yezad in *Family Matters*, alcohol consumption is common not only among menfolk but also among women and young boys” (119). Their Anglophilic nature leads them to enjoy musical instruments such as the piano and violin. Nariman enjoys music and when he is ill, his neighbor Daisy performs his favorite song on her violin. He takes his last breath after hearing this song, which was his and Lucy’s favorite.

## Conclusion

In *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry also emphasizes on Parsi religious customs and ceremonies. Yezad, who is not religious at first, eventually visits the fire temple, which he sees as a true oasis in the midst of the vast, mad metropolis. Roxanna is impressed with Yezad’s spiritual faith: “Faith in prayer that has descended like a blessing upon him and their house … Belief is not essential. The prayer sound itself will bring him peace and tranquility” (FM 445). The researcher notices that politics, history and community are central to the lives of Rohinton Mistry’s characters. The public sphere is the ordinary citizen’s world, made up of friends, acquaintances and the professional workplace where these adult interactions are formed.

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