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Concern for the Community in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters: From Colonial Elitist to Decolonized Marginal

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Abstract

The idea of "Identity", predominantly associated to the sense of belongingness, is a relatively new concern in Sociology. The idea is partly encouraged by postmodernist arguments about the changing nature of cultural/ personal identities in postmodern societies. The spotlight has been on two specific areas. First, there is a deep-seated attempt to understand the importance of personal forms of identity including what individuals feel about their own identity and the impact this idea of self-identity bears on lifestyles, consumption patterns and social relationships; second, the attempt to recognize and comprehend the impact on cultural life of changing forms of identity. Here the need is, to understand the idea of the fragmentation of various types of (modernist) identity— class and gender. The fragmentation of identities in the postmodern society whether personal or cultural is such that we can no longer talk in terms of specific identities. Because of the transgression of such categories and the way in which new and different forms of identity have evolved out of such transgressions, 'identity' has become a subject of vital interest and the sphere of serious contemplation. In postmodern society, under the influence of globalization, both social and personal identities become more fluid and less rigid than in the past. People are able to develop a greater range of choices relating to their identity. This in current forms is frequently expressed in terms of people embracing various cultural elements to create new, highly individualised, forms of identity. Creating new and individualized identities in a cosmopolitan world like ours is essential as this, too, is like the process of adaptation. To survive in a 'new' environment adaptation is must. Those who fail to adapt, fail to survive. This is not only true about individuals but also for races, communities, nation-states, etc.

One of the prominent undercurrents of Rohinton Mistry's fiction is his concern for his community, its people and their survival which shall be discussed in detail in the paper.

Concern for the Community in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters: From Colonial Elitist to Decolonized Marginal

> Any decent society must generate a feeling of community. Community offsets loneliness. It gives people a vitally necessary sense of belonging. Yet today the institutions on which community depends are crumbling in all the techno-societies. The result is a spreading plague of loneliness.

Alvin Toffler, The Third Wave

The idea of "Identity", predominantly associated to the sense of belongingness, is a relatively new concern in Sociology. The idea is partly encouraged by postmodernist arguments about the changing nature of cultural/ personal identities in postmodern societies. The spotlight has been on two specific areas. First, there is a deep-seated attempt to understand the importance of personal forms of identity including what individuals feel about their own identity and the impact this idea of self-identity bears on lifestyles, consumption patterns and social relationships; second, the attempt to recognize and comprehend the impact on cultural life of changing forms of identity. Here the need is, to understand the idea of the fragmentation of various types of (modernist) identity— class and gender. The fragmentation of identities in the postmodern society whether personal or cultural is such that we can no longer talk in terms of specific identities. Because of the transgression of such categories and the way in which new and different forms of identity have evolved out of such transgressions, 'identity' has become a subject of vital interest and the sphere of serious contemplation. In postmodern society, under the influence of globalization, both social and personal identities become more fluid and less rigid than in the past. People are able to develop a greater range of choices relating to their identity. This in current forms is frequently expressed in terms of people embracing various cultural elements to create new, highly individualised, forms of identity. Creating new and individualized identities in a cosmopolitan world like ours is essential as this, too, is like the process of adaptation. To survive in a 'new' environment adaptation is must. Those who fail to adapt, fail to survive. This is not only true about individuals but also for races, communities, nation-states, etc. One of the prominent undercurrents of Rohinton Mistry's fiction is his concern for his community, its people and their survival. Parsees are the descendants of the natives of the

ancient and mighty empire of Persia that prevailed centuries before the Christian era. The range of this empire in its prosperous days extended as far as the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean in the South, the rivers Indus and Oxus on the East, the Caspian Sea and Caucasian Mountains on the north, and the deserts of Lybia and the Mediterranean on the west. The grandeur and glory of this ancient empire was unparalleled in those times. Yet, the empire came to an abrupt end during the reign of its forty-fifth king, Yezdezird, a descendant of the race of Kaimurs, due to the Arab invasion under Caliph Omar. In a battle fought at the village of Nahavand, about fifty miles from the ancient city of Ecbatana, the Persian army was defeated and the king fled away. The Persians were now left at the mercy of the Mahomedan (Muslim- followers of Mohamed) conquerors that were intolerant towards their religion, offered them the choice between death and acceptance of Koran. Under such tyranny most of the Persians adopted new religion. Their fire temples and other sacred places were destroyed by the Arab soldiers and thus a great empire fell down and an ancient religion saw its decadence. There were some followers of the religion who preferred to flee to some safe place rather than stay in Persia and accede to the demands of the conquerors. They took shelter in the mountainous districts of Khorassan where they practiced their religion in peace for over a hundred years. But their relief was cut short when they were forced to leave the place for fear of execution and again they took shelter in the little island called Ormus at the mouth of the Persian Gulf. They lived here for a short while as their prosecutors were able to reach them. At last, they decided to relinquish the land of their forefathers for good and migrate to a faraway land where they could peacefully practice their religion and lead their lives free from the shadow of terror.

> Acting upon this determination, they sought an asylum in the country of the Hindoos, and are said to have engaged at Ormus several vessels for their transport, and placing their wives and children on board they set sail towards the distant shores of India. (Framjee, 7)

According to the information available in the book titled Kissah-i-Sanjan compiled in the year 1599 by Behram, a Zoroastrian resident of Nowsaree in Surat, the earliest Parsee refugees arrived at the small island called Div or Diew, where they spent nineteen peaceful years. At the end of these nineteen years, it is believed, one of the priests whom they call Dastoor, predicted that it was time for them to move to some other place and so they all set sail towards what is now Gujarat. About the year 717 A.D., the ships carrying these Parsees reached the shores of Sanjan

which was in those times under the rule of a liberal king, Jadao Rana. On learning about the sufferings and vicissitudes of these men, the king readily allowed them not only to settle down in Sanjan but also indulge in trade and agricultural pursuits. The Parsees then also sought permission from the king to build a fire temple and by 721 A.D., the first fire temple was built in Sanjan, India. Ever since the Parsees have lived a rather comfortable life in various parts of Gujarat including Surat, Nowsari, Broach, Variao, Ukleser and Cambay. By the sixteenth century people of this community had recognized themselves in trade and other professions and probably were the first ones to establish trade relations with the British merchants. Some of the Parsees then, viewing better prospects in trade settled down in Bombay, the city which was a few years later was ceded to the British by the Crown of Portugal, as the dowry of Catherine, Princess of Portugal, who became the wife of Charles the Second of England in 1668 A.D.

With the advent of the colonial era in India, the Parsees quickly moved to the port cities and became the first "economic mediating community between Europeans and the Indian hinterland." (Morey, 10) The Indian society dominated by the Hindus, was a caste-ridden society and hence was encumbered by their castes from performing various occupations. They lost this opportunity to the hardworking and enterprising Parsees who then rapidly climbed the ladder of success in the 18th and 19th centuries. Peter Morey notices that,

> The rise to power and wealth of a number of Parsis in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was, perhaps unsurprisingly, accompanied by an increasing cultural and political identification with their British colonial masters, with whom they worked so closely, and in whose imperial grandeur they saw both echoes of their own lost Persian greatness, and a model for the future of their own community. (10)

Soon, under direct influence of the British, the Parsees became the heart and soul of the city of Bombay. They brought wealth not only to themselves but also to the city. By the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the Parsees had established themselves masters of various trades including, ship-building, railway contractors, banking, textiles, steel, jute, cotton, tea, chemicals etc. One of them, Sir Jamsetjee Tata, employed himself into various pursuits and soon became a multimillionaire whose name still persists through the family empire set up by his future generations. There have been many other Parsees who brought wealth to the city through their enterprises and it should be noted that the community as a whole believed in charity and

benevolence. Apart from establishing mills, factories and business houses, they indulged in philanthropy by building hospitals, schools, etc and also worked for reforming the society. Despite all these works by the Parsees that benefited the country as well as the society, the Parsees have been looked down upon by the people especially after independence, because of the unswerving loyalty they showed to the British. In fact, one of the main reasons, the Parsees find themselves at the receiving end in the post-colonial India or find themselves isolated in a country where they have lived for more than thirteen centuries, is, their refusal to disown their erstwhile status of the colonial elitist. This consciously contradictory behavior of the Parsees is evident from a reading of the book, The Parsees: Their History, Manners, Customs and Religion by Dosabhoy Framjee published in the year 1858. In the first chapter of the book in which the writer describes the exodus of the Parsees from their native land to Sanjan, he mentions the Parsi priests preparing 16 schlokes or distiches to explain the salient features of their religion to King Jadhao Rana. These schlokes were prepared keeping in mind, the similar aspects of their religion to that of Hindu religion in order to show to the king that their religion had many similarities with the Hindu practices. In the Preface to the same book, the writer especially addresses the European reader and tries to convince him that they are a race completely different from the other Indian races and their religion, customs, manners bear no similarity with the latter. He writes,

> …the Parsees are a distinct race, and that neither in their religion nor in their habits of life, do they assimilate with either the Mahomedans or the Hindoos. The Parsees are endeavouring to follow the example which the British have set them. Western civilization has had great influence on their characters, and they are now eagerly embracing the opportunities for improvement and advancement that are offered to them. (Framjee, x)

Due to such erratic behavior of most of the members of its community, the Parsees saw a decline in their importance in post-colonial India. Also, a dwindling population of the Parsees due to several reasons and the shift in the social culture of Bombay from that of secular to a dominantly Hindu culture resulted in loss of opportunities for the young Parsees. Hence, many of them during the 1980s found migration to Western countries a better prospect and such is the case of Rohinton Mistry who migrated to Canada in 1975. But migration to west was no solution and as a result these young men were once again displaced from their land of origin and this led them to a sense of ‘double displacement’. Also, “…at the heart of Parsi group identity are still the same

elements that have historically given them a feeling of difference from the surrounding cultures: religious uniqueness; ethnic identity; a shared history and a sense of elite status." (Kulke qtd in Morey, 12) This has become the essence of Mistry's fiction. Born and brought up in the city of Bombay, writing from Canada makes him yearn for a place where he could belong to. The characters of his fictional world also share the same feeling and often become nostalgic for the lost pristine glory of their race. With this nostalgia comes a sense of aloofness from their present surroundings and hence, the setting of his stories and novels is always some dilapidated Parsi residential building symbolic of the degenerating community except for his novel, A Fine Balance, where he shifts his setting from Bombay to the mountains of Kashmir, the house of Maneck Kohlah and then to a small village of Ishvar and Om, divided to the core by caste system. Through his works, Mistry has tried to show a Parsi community struggling to strike a balance between the past dignity and the present circumstances depicting the tension arising out of an overlapping culture and its contexts. Amin Malak in his essay 'From Margin to Main', contests that:

> The immigrant imagination is dichotomous by nature, locked on the horns of a dilemma, neither affiliated with the old root culture, nor fully fitting with the new adopted one. Accordingly, writers negotiating and articulating such an experience have to inhabit an alternative world, a third world: a world of their imagination, their memory, their nostalgia. (Morey, 19-20)

Through his characters and events, Mistry centralizes the Parsi community and the work displays the author's consciousness of his community. Thus, the daily rituals of the Parsis, their life different from other communities, their agony at the changing pattern of communal relationship and their nostalgia and longing for the departed glory of their community's past are exhibited on personal as well as more universal and broader level by Mistry.

The later works of Mistry including his novels A Fine Balance and Family Matters as well as The Scream are broader in concept and canvas. Though his concern for the community still exists in his works, the definition and the extent of community have taken a new format. One of the prime reasons for this change is growing globalization. Advancement in travel and communication technologies has certainly made the world a global village and all of us have become inhabitants of a space without borders of nation, place, community, religion et al.The

process of migration and exile are two factors that have always led man with destabilization of the fixities of space, place and nation. If mass migration within the West was the defining feature of modernity, large scale migrations from the East to the West, not only of the elite but also of subaltern cosmopolitans mark the postmodern era. Migrations in the past were mostly forced pertaining to natural (famine or flood), economic (in search of resources) or religious (the exodus of the Jews) reasons. But in the modern day world most of the migrations are voluntary. Yet, what binds the two is the fact that whatever the reason of migration, man always yearns to return to his roots. His immigration or exile excommunicates him from his community and his identity is dislocated from its human centre. This sense of dispossessed, dislocation when turned into writing becomes an anguished cry and often these narratives are nostalgic in nature. Sense of the past is overbearing in these narratives. Though, colonialism does not involve a physical displacement of the subject race yet there is a sense of displacement, culturally, one is dispossessed of his culture, language, tradition and even identity. Hence, it is perhaps most natural for man and especially the post-colonial writers to return to their past because it is past that holds the meaning of their present. Mark Day in The Philosophy of History stresses the need of our understanding of past in the following words:

> In questioning the present world, we learn about the past and so answer our questions about the present. By such questioning we make explicit our understanding of the dependence of present upon past, and thus permit a more critical history. (Day, 4)

The inter-dependence of past and present, thus, needs re-interpretation of community and globalization has brought together people from different religions, castes and creed, strata and created new communities bonded by need rather by force. Anderson explains the shaping of new communities,

> Both human mobility and the growth of communications networks have the effect of reducing the predominance of geography as a force in shaping community. It is still an important fact, but many communities are much more fluid, and some are placeless. (Roy & Pillai, 182)

Family Matters brings the reader into the midst of a Parsi household and its family members. Apparently the story of a down-at-heel Parsi family struggling to bear social and moral pressures is actually the story of the everlasting fight of man with his destiny, in which destiny prevails.

Nariman Vakeel, a retired professor of English, is bed-ridden due to an accident in which he fractures his leg. He also suffers from Parkinson's disease. His two step-children, Coomy and Jal Contractor, look after him.

> …the novel, like its predecessors, also offers a consideration of how, despite all efforts to keep them separate, the public world impinges on the private space, and how the taint of corruption can mark even the most insular and apparently upright of communities. (Morey, 126)

The novel, though revolves around the life of Parsee characters and the problems faced by them, brings forward Mistry's concept of community that began in his earlier novel, A Fine Balance. This concept is similar to that of Anderson's 'imagined communities' which is different from the actual community. The term was originally coined to talk about nationalism but in the present century its use has become wider almost blurring it with "community of interest". Most of the characters in the novel are related to one another and are therefore members of a particular religious community but moving into the broader sphere of "community of interest" we find a different community being shaped by Yezad Chenoy, Vikram Kapur, Husain and VasantRane. This community is similar to the one formed by Dina, Om, Ishvar and Maneck in the previous novel, A Fine Balance. Yezad belongs to an orthodox Parsee family, shares the partition experiences recalled by a Punjabi migrant and his owner Vikram Kapur. Migration is a common experience for the two and both share a sense of displacement and nostalgia and an effort to belong to the land of migration. Husain is a victim of the Babri Mosque riots and again shares a bond with Vikram Kapur who has similar memories of riots. Vasant Rane has no such displacement or nostalgia, yet is finding it difficult to survive in a communally oppressive atmosphere of the city. The trio of Yezad, Vikram and Husain are members of an imagined community brought together by interest.

Another concern for the community evident in this novel is the dwindling population of Parsees in India. Mistry highlights some of the reasons for the same. One, very important reason is inter-caste marriages among Parsee men and women. If a Parsee girl marries a boy of another religion/ community, the boy or the girl is excommunicated from the community and their children, too, are not introduced into the community. They will forever lose the Parsee status. This concern is evident in Nariman Vakeel's parents' objection to the marriage of Nari and his love, Lucy, a

Catholic from Goa. Similarly, at the end of the novel, Yezad, embittered by his circumstances turns into a fanatic Parsee fundamentalist, threatens his son Murad, from seeing any girl outside his community and refuses to entertain his non-Parsee friends in his house. This fear is evident in the discussion between Inspector Masalavala and Jal Contractor. Inspector Masalavala says,

> "Just before you came, Jal, we were chatting about the future of the Parsi community."
>
> "Yes? The orthodox and reform argument?"
>
> "That's part of it. The more crucial point is our dwindling birth rate, our men and women marrying non-Parsis, and heavy migration to the west."
>
> "Vultures and crematoriums both will be redundant… if there are no Parsis to feed them."
>
> "We've been a small community right from the beginning. But we've survived, and prospered."
>
> "The experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left." (FM, 412)

The event of Yezad returning to the sanctity and security of the fire temple is a touching moment. Yezad who has not been to the fire temple for a long time and has forgotten how to untie his kusti for prayer or which side to face to offer his prayers, finds the sanctum extremely restful and quiet. He observes the entire ceremony for the changing geh at sunset, the ritual cleansing of the sanctum, the pedestal and the afargaan, the tending of fire by dustoorji, the sounding of boi and the clanging of bells in the sanctum. After this visit, Yezad's visits to the fire temple become more frequent and slowly his faith turns into passion and his initial zeal gets converted into bigotry. In the epilogue, Yezad has become intolerant towards other religions and this brings him into direct and regular confrontation with his elder son, Murad who is now a young man. He shouts at Murad for having relationship with a Maharashtrian girl,

> The rules, the laws of our religion are absolute, this Maharashtrian cannot be your girlfriend… You can have any friends you like, any race or religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage, the rules are different… Because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet, and mixed marriages will destroy that. (482)

It is this bigotry, Mistry is concerned about. He wishes the race to prosper while maintaining the dignity of its followers but at the same time a sense of adaptation and little flexibility in attitude

is required for the sustenance of the race. Mistry, being a conscientious writer, performs his task dutifully by writing for and about his community and thus shows his undiminished concern and faith in the positivity of his religion.

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