

Religious Fundamentalism Deprives Human Dreams in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters

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ABSTRACT'

Mistry has become one of the prominent writers of the post colonial writing movement. He sets his novels primarily in his native Bombay. With attention to the details of his characters everyday lives, his book often explore the tragic circumstances of India's desperate poor, then he explores the loss of innocence of the protagonist. Mistry skillfully manipulates a diverse cast of characters seething together in the pot of history. His special stance is as a chronicler of the Parsi community, proud of its Persian inheritance and the Zoroastrian creed of manashni, gavashni and kunashni (good thoughts, good words and good deeds) but threatened by intermarriage, a declining birth-rate and secularism. He celebrates the rituals that mark the stepping stones of life, at home and in the fire-temples, while revealing at the same time what is lost by adhering to the group.

In *Family Matters*, two preliminary remarks. The first one is there have been many huge, mesmerizing books – *War and Peace*, *Gone with the Wind*, *A Suitable Boy*, *A Fine Balance*. The core of these novels is the documentation of a period. Mistry writes of times we have lived through, thus in his novels, it is a remembered time, not one created purely out of research. This gives the novels a special feel, such as his light, glancing looks at contemporary events, the recreation of which is inevitably more essay-like in strictly historical novels. The second one is writers like Vikram Seth do something new in every book they write. Others repeat successful formulae. Names and places change in Hercule Poirot or Sherlock Holmes stories, for instance, but their action and characters have a TV-serial-like effect of remaining the same and causing exactly the same pleasure each time. In the matter of style, Rushdie is in this category, as is Mistry, though their styles are antipodal.

Some admirers of Mistry, like the father in that story, may hope that he will eventually write a novel about Canada, but he has in Mumbai an inexhaustible inspiration, as Joyce found with Dublin. Like other recent storytellers of India, including Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth, Mistry skillfully manipulates a diverse cast of characters seething together in the pot of history. His special stance is as a chronicler of the Parsi community, proud of its Persian inheritance and the Zoroastrian creed of manashni, gavashni and kunashni (good thoughts, good words and good deeds) but threatened by intermarriage, a declining birth-rate and secularism. He celebrates the rituals that mark the stepping stones of life, at home and in the fire-temples, while revealing at the same time what is lost by adhering to the group.

The plot of *Family Matters* consists of the story of Nariman Vakeel, who suffers from Parkinson's disease. He lives with his stepchildren, Jal and Coomy, children of his wife's first marriage. Coomy resents having to look after Nariman, whom she considers the cause of her mother's suffering and death. When he breaks his leg and is restricted to his bed for a month, she devises a scheme to send him to the small two-room flat he had bought for his daughter and her family. Despite the difficult situation, the love of the grandchildren – Murad and Jehangir - for the old man and his daughter Roxana's selfless devotion to both her father and her family make his suffering and their plight bearable. It is only Roxana's husband Yezad who fumes against the villainy of Coomy and the helpless Jal for having landed them in this uncomfortable situation. Yezad is specially troubled by financial problems. Nariman is an additional burden on his family budget and he toys fleetingly with the idea of the theft. But, in a terrible conjunction of fate, Coomy dies from the very treachery through which she had kept her stepfather out of his house. Mr. Kapur, Yezad's employer, is killed by a horrendous materialization of the Hindutva lie through which Yezad had hoped to divert him from his earlier political plans. After his death, Mrs. Kapur announces her intention of closing shop and gives Yezad one month's salary in advance, ignoring his service of fourteen years. All hopes for the betterment of material circumstances end and Yezad, plagued by domestic troubles such as his boy's future, his overworked wife and his unemployment, finally resorts to seeking peace of mind at the fire-temple. This marks the gradual transformation of a cheerful, optimistic, determined young man who used to challenge the beliefs of the Parsi community into a religious bigot of the worst kind. By the time Jal has shown them a way out of a gloomy future – by reuniting the family in Chateau Felicity and allowing the proceeds from the sale of the small flat to go towards ensuring their livelihood – Yezad's transformation is complete. He recreates for his son the hell which had made the

young Nariman's life plunge into a cycle of near-endless misery until his death. The sense of a cycle forever doomed to repeat itself is complete. By the time Nariman dies, his death appears 'natural' and timely, both in terms of the people around him and the narrative. His is a life lived fully, having traversed love, rejection, grief, guilt, generosity, disease, desertion and redemption.

Family Matters shows the events at the level of the local and the familial. Communal politics and disturbances affect the common man (in this case, Yezad) though he is in no way involved in sectarian strife, or even local politics. Mistry shows how fundamentalism and skewed political thinking have altered the very social structure in such a way that even the common man – dissociated from politics – is scared and affected. In *Family Matters* the question of the private space of individual identity is fully explored through the many instances of conflict between individual desires and duties towards the family or community. The foremost of these is the tragic story of Nariman Vakeel. He is forcefully separated from his Christian girlfriend by his parents and their well-wishers and forced to bend to the general demand of the community. This is presented as a submission of his will to the higher good: "No happiness is more lasting than the happiness that you get from fulfilling your parents' wishes". But Nariman accepts the separation from Lucy out of weariness and a sense of the futility of the unequal struggle: "They had been ground down by their families. Exhausted by the strain of it". Nariman's parents see education as the cause of sorrow: "Modern ideas have filled Nari's head. He never learned to preserve that fine balance between tradition and modernness".

This theme of coercion exercised by the family is repeated in a different context with Jal, Nariman's stepson. We are given to understand that Nariman's liberal nature has provided for his daughter and stepchildren alike without constraining them in any way. But the legacy of Nariman's parents lives on through the daughter of Yasmin Contractor, the widowed bride they had chosen for their son. Coomy inherits the ferociously traditional outlook of Nariman's parents and her own mother which demands that individual will and desires be curbed for the greater family good. This has been further imprinted on her mind because she has not been able to understand why her stepfather never fulfilled his proper obligations towards her mother, causing the married woman to feel left out and misunderstood while he seemingly paid more attention to the former girlfriend. Nariman never played by the rules of traditional behavior except in the single instance of accepting his

parent's choice of bride. Coomy's traditionalistic orientation is directed at her weak-willed brother Jal.

Jal can only break away from Coomy's grip after her death. It is only then that he can express his absolute disagreement with her views and offer to remedy the ills she has caused by reversing her decisions. It may be significant that the author decides to suggest a growing attraction between Daisy Ichaporia, the violin player, an unconventional woman who lives by the force of her passion for music and the hitherto mild Jal, cowering under the force of female tyranny. However, the space of the family inevitably creates its peripheral identities. In a repetition of the tyranny of Vakeel's parents and the parents of Coomy, Yezad, who has turned into a religious bigot, tyrannizes both Jal and his son. His behavior towards Jal is reminiscent of Coomy's towards her brother. And he reacts with all the bigotry of traditional exclusivism and orthodoxy towards his son's love affair.

This last text focuses on the intimate family canvas. However, no absolute retreat from the national destiny is ever possible. *Family Matters* shows that the private is political, even as national politics directly affects the life of more than one family in the novel (the families of Kapur and Husain). Similarly, the politics of the private realm affect the politics of the public space. There is a very tenuous distinction between the Yezad of the later days and the Shiv Sena apologists who beat up Mr. Kapur. *Family Matters* ends with an epilogue in Jehangir's voice, five years after the main events and four after Nariman's death. Jehangir, so appealing as a child, seems a touch naïve as a narrator in his teens. This strikes the only false note in this fine book, though there is a wrenching inevitability in the way Mistry ties up the loose strands. From being a refuge for the family in times of uncertainty, religious belief grows into an incubus. Nariman's tragedy may be repeated in his grandchildren's lives, as religious fundamentalism destroys a new generation's chance of happiness. This wry and richly perceptive novel has a resonance beyond Mumbai.

Works Cited:

Family Matters

Rohinton Mistry, An introduction Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain

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