A Thematic Exploration in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*

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Abstract

Among the many voices that constitute the Parsi diasporic literary tradition, Rohinton Mistry's stands apart for its rare combination of sociological attentiveness and deep human sympathy. His novel *Family Matters* (2002) is, in many respects, the fullest expression of his fictional vision. Set against the turbulent backdrop of Bombay in the 1990s, the novel traces the fortunes of the Vakeel-Chenoy household as it struggles to manage the illness of an ageing patriarch. It is, on one level, a novel about Parkinson's disease and the domestic upheaval it causes. But it is also, and more profoundly, a meditation on what families owe one another, on how communities police the intimate lives of their members, and on the extraordinary tenacity of love even under conditions of severe material and emotional privation. The present paper undertakes a thematic exploration of these concerns, examining Mistry's handling of intergenerational relationships, the ethics of care, the Parsi community's investment in racial

exclusivity, and the redemptive possibilities that the novel discovers within the ordinary fabric of family life.

Keywords: Parsi Diaspora, Rohinton Mistry, Intergenerational Conflict, Caregiving, Communal Identity, Racial Purity, Postcolonial Fiction.

It is well recognised among scholars of Indian writing in English that Rohinton Mistry occupies a singular position within the literary tradition he inherits. Born in Bombay and settled in Canada since the late 1970s, he writes from the vantage point of the diasporic observer, one who is removed enough from his subject to see it whole, yet emotionally close enough to render it with intimacy and precision. His abiding subject is the Parsi community, a Zoroastrian minority whose presence in India stretches back over a thousand years but whose numbers have been declining steadily for generations. Mistry has spoken candidly about the archival dimension of his fiction. In an interview with *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, he acknowledged that his writing is partly motivated by a wish to preserve some record of how this community lived, before it fades further from view. This is not mere nostalgia. It is the recognition that a way of life, with its customs, its prayers, its social hierarchies, and its peculiar anxieties, is genuinely at risk of being lost, and that literature is one of the few instruments capable of holding it in place.

And yet it would be a serious misreading of Mistry's fiction to reduce it to documentation. What distinguishes his novels, and *Family Matters* in particular, is the way in which the communal and the personal are made to illuminate each other. The social world he depicts is never merely backdrop. It presses upon his characters, shapes their choices, and determines the consequences of their desires. His Bombay, with its crowded apartments and its political volatility, its hierarchies of class and caste and religion, is as much a protagonist as any of the human figures who move through it.

Family Matters centres upon Nariman Vakeel, a seventy-nine year old widower and retired professor of English literature, who is in the advanced stages of Parkinson's disease. He shares a seven-room apartment at Chateau Felicity with his two grown stepchildren, Coomy and Jal, the children of his late wife Yasmin by her first husband. Coomy is a woman of formidable will and accumulated grievance; she runs the household on her own terms and subjects Nariman to a regime of petty restrictions that he endures with diminishing patience. Jal, by contrast, is gentle and without resolution, constitutionally unable to resist his sister's authority. Nariman's biological daughter, Roxana, is married to Yezad Chenoy and lives with him and their two young sons, Murad and Jehangir, in the modest flat at Pleasant Villa that Nariman himself had gifted them as a wedding present.

When the novel opens, Nariman is already struggling. His evening walks, which represent for him one of the last remaining dignities of independence, are a source of constant friction with his stepchildren, who regard the streets of Bombay as too dangerous for a man in his condition. Nariman's defiant response to their warnings, that ditches and potholes and traffic cannot extinguish all the joy of life, establishes immediately the terms of his situation: he is a man fighting, on every front, to preserve some remnant of selfhood against the encroachments of age and dependency (*Family Matters* 3). When he suffers a serious fall and breaks his ankle, the encroachments become overwhelming. Confined to bed and requiring constant attention, he becomes a burden that Coomy finds intolerable. Her response, which is to arrange his transfer, by ambulance and without ceremony, to Roxana's already cramped household, sets the central domestic drama of the novel in motion.

The ethics of caregiving is perhaps the most insistently examined theme in *Family Matters.* Mistry is deeply interested in what it means to look after another person, and in the moral character that such looking-after both requires and reveals. Coomy's failure of care is not presented as simple heartlessness. Mistry takes care to show the genuine difficulties of her

position, the physical exhaustion, the emotional toll of daily nursing, and the long-standing resentments that make tenderness impossible for her. Her breakdown over the practicalities of Nariman's bedridden condition is rendered with a kind of terrible sympathy, even as the reader understands that her subsequent decision is a betrayal. She is, in the end, a woman whose capacity for love has been eaten away by years of grievance, and Mistry finds in her situation as much sadness as condemnation.

Roxana represents the opposite possibility. Faced with circumstances far more straitened than Coomy's, she responds with an unstinting generosity that the novel treats as genuinely heroic, not in any showy or self-congratulatory sense, but in the quiet, unrecorded way that most actual heroism operates. Her husband Yezad is less serene. The financial pressures of maintaining an additional person in their small flat wear on him badly, and there are moments when his resentment threatens to overflow. It is Roxana who reminds him, at one such moment, of the Gandhian teaching that service to the weak and the suffering is among the noblest things a person can do (*Family Matters* 278). Mistry does not present this as easy wisdom. It costs Roxana something to hold on to it, and the reader feels that cost.

Nariman himself, in his more reflective moments, meditates on the meaning of care in ways that lift the novel toward the philosophical. Observing an elderly hospital orderly performing the most degrading of physical tasks with a quiet composure, he finds himself wondering whether such service might constitute a path to something like enlightenment. It is a characteristically Mistry-like moment: an ordinary scene charged, without sentimentality, with unexpected spiritual weight. The most affecting embodiment of this ethic, however, is the young Jehangir, who feeds his grandfather with a natural gentleness entirely untouched by the resentments and calculations that govern the adults around him. Watching her son wipe a stray grain of rice from Nariman's lips, Roxana feels she is witnessing something almost sacred (*Family Matters* 108). The word is carefully chosen. Mistry is suggesting that the ordinary

work of caring for another person carries within it a dignity and a holiness that no amount of difficulty can entirely obscure.

The conflicts of the present in *Family Matters* are inseparable from the wounds of the past, and Mistry is at his most accomplished in showing how injury accumulates and transmits itself across time. The source of Coomy's hostility toward Nariman lies in the history of his marriage to her mother. Nariman had been deeply in love with Lucy Braganza, a Goan woman, before his parents intervened and compelled him, on grounds of communal propriety, to marry a Parsi widow. The marriage was a prolonged unhappiness for all involved. Years later, Nariman can still articulate his sense of having been robbed of the best years of his life by parental authority, and Coomy can still articulate her sense that her mother was the primary victim of his bitterness (*Family Matters* 7). Neither is entirely wrong. That is precisely Mistry's point.

Lucy Braganza's fate is the novel's most sorrowful subplot. Never recovering from the loss of Nariman, she eventually accepted employment as a domestic worker in a house near his, a humiliation that the novel narrates with great delicacy. The proximity of the former lovers, and the emotional impossibility of their situation, produced a catastrophe in which both Lucy and Yasmin lost their lives. As the critic Nandini Bhautoo Dewnarain has argued, Nariman's story is itself a commentary on the disastrous consequences of tyrannical parental authority and the excesses of communal exclusiveness (qtd. in Duresh 39). What Mistry adds to this observation, by the manner in which he constructs Nariman's death, is a sense of a life that has been lived fully, despite everything. Nariman dies in Chateau Felicity with a serene expression, having traversed love, grief, guilt, generosity, disease, and desertion. His end, when it comes, feels earned rather than merely concluded.

If Nariman's story is the novel's elegiac strand, Yezad's is its cautionary one. He begins as a man of energy and mild irreverence, inclined to question the pieties of Parsi religious

practice and broadly sympathetic to the secular ideals that his employer, Mr. Kapur, represents. His decline is precipitated by a sequence of misfortunes that are partly the consequence of his own misjudgments: he encourages a political scheme that ends in Kapur's murder, and is then left unemployed when Kapur's widow closes the business, with only a month's salary as compensation for fourteen years of service. The material privations that follow, compounded by the emotional strain of Nariman's presence in the household, push Yezad toward a religious fundamentalism that is, in truth, a form of despair seeking the disguise of conviction.

By the novel's end, Yezad has become a rigid religious patriarch, imposing on his own son the same atmosphere of intolerance and authority that once suffocated the young Nariman. The cycle, as Mistry renders it, is not melodramatic but deeply melancholy. It speaks to his broader conviction that the patterns of oppression within families and communities repeat themselves with a terrible fidelity unless something intervenes to break them. Nothing intervenes for Yezad. The irony is complete, and all the more devastating for being so quietly observed.

Threaded through the personal and familial drama of the novel is a sustained exploration of the Parsi community's investment in racial and religious purity. This is a subject Mistry approaches with considerable nuance. He is neither a simple apologist for communal exclusiveness nor a dismissive critic of it. He understands that a community which has survived as a small minority for centuries, and which feels itself to be on the verge of extinction, has comprehensible reasons for its protectiveness. What he examines, with an unflinching eye, is what that protectiveness costs.

The parallelism between Nariman's generation and Murad's is the novel's most deliberate structural device in this regard. Nariman's love for Lucy Braganza was broken apart by parents who regarded any liaison with a non-Parsi as a threat to communal survival. Decades later, Yezad's discovery of his son Murad's relationship with a Maharashtrian girl provokes an

eruption of the same ideology: "The rules, the laws of our religion are absolute; this Maharashtrian cannot be your girlfriend" (*Family Matters* 469). The language here is significant. Yezad does not speak as an individual expressing a personal preference; he speaks as the instrument of a collective will. As Duresh has observed, Mistry places the love experiences of grandfather and grandson alongside one another precisely to demonstrate that the community's convictions operate independently of individual feeling and cannot be altered by any particular person's desires (94). The tragedy is not simply that Nariman was denied Lucy Braganza. It is that the same denial is being prepared, by a different hand, for a new generation.

There is a further dimension to this theme that Mistry develops through small but telling details. When young Jehangir asks his father whether he might change his Parsi name, Yezad's response is immediate and categorical: the name is Persian, it is a mark of identity, and it is not something to be discarded casually (*Family Matters* 239). The incident is minor, but it reveals the depth at which communal identity operates in Yezad's consciousness. For him, names, rules, and prohibitions are not negotiable; they are the very substance of what it means to be a Parsi. Mistry does not ridicule this conviction. But he does insist on showing, through the accumulated evidence of the novel, what it destroys.

One of the more subtle achievements of *Family Matters* is Mistry's refusal to allow any of his characters to settle into simple moral categories. Coomy, who functions for most of the novel as an emblem of coldness and resentment, is posthumously revealed to have carried within her a tenderness she was never able to express in life. After her death, Jal discovers a wedding gift she had quietly set aside for Murad and Jehangir: gold cufflinks and shirt studs, with a note addressed to the two boys for the occasion of their future marriages. The discovery moves Roxana to tears. It moves the reader, too, and deliberately so. Mistry is insisting that

human beings are rarely as legible as their behaviour suggests, and that the full truth of a person often remains concealed until it is too late to act upon it.

The novel concludes on a note that is subdued but not despairing. The family has regrouped at Chateau Felicity. Nariman dies peacefully. And Roxana's youngest son, asked whether he is happy, answers simply: yes (*Family Matters* 487). That single syllable carries a great deal of weight. After everything the novel has put its characters through, the possibility of happiness, even a quiet and provisional happiness, is not a trivial thing. It is, for Mistry, the appropriate conclusion to a story about people who have struggled, fallen short, hurt one another, and yet somehow managed to remain a family. Indeed, as Charles Foray observed in *The Times,* Mistry does not flinch from showing the rough and difficult truths of family life. That truthfulness is, in the end, the source of the novel's lasting power.

Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* is, at its deepest level, a novel about what survives. It is about the survival of love within families that have been subjected to every kind of pressure: financial, political, physical, emotional. It is about the survival of individual dignity within a community that often subordinates the person to the collective. And it is about the possibility, always fragile and always costly, of learning to do better than those who came before. Mistry is not a sentimental writer. He earns every moment of warmth in the novel by placing it honestly against the cold. What he leaves the reader with is not comfort exactly, but something more durable: the conviction that ordinary life, lived with care and attention and the willingness to bear difficulty without abandoning those who need us, is itself a form of heroism. *Family Matters* not because family is uncomplicated or always redemptive, but because it is, for most human beings, the primary theatre in which the most essential questions of how to live are rehearsed, tested, and slowly answered.

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