

A Short Reintroduction to Rohinton Mistry's Fiction - Family Matters

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rohinton Mistry is one Indian author who has received acclaim worldwide. Rohinton Mistry provides rich, diverse and sharply critical insights into post-Independence India in his fiction. His range of concerns is also admirably vast; politics, community life, urbanism, the caste system, economic inequality, national events such as wars, communalism and the subaltern classes among others. His portraits of the Parsi community map the tensions of modernity and their struggle against marginalization. Mistry's fiction is about heroism in an age and context where mere survival is a heroic act.

Rohinton Mistry is a writer with great honesty of imagination. He does not attempt to follow fads and fashion. His writing suggests sensitivity to both the beauty and the fragmentation, the failings and the cruelties of his world. Much of Mistry's fiction works with the humanistic premise that the 'universal' lies in the ordinary. This is the trajectory he has chalked out for himself in the course of his brief but meteoric literary career.

Rohinton Mistry, born on 3rd July 1952, is an Indian-born Canadian who writes in English. Mistry is of Indian origin, originally from Mumbai, and currently resides in Brampton, Ontario, Canada. He practices Zoroastrianism and belongs to the Parsi community. Mistry is a Neustadt International Prize for Literature laureate (2012). He wrote novels, short stories and chapbooks.

His third novel "Family Matters" is a consideration of the difficulties that come with ageing, which Mistry returned to in 2008 with the short fiction *The Scream* (Published as a separate volume, in support of World Literacy of Canada, with illustrations by Tony Urquhart). It was first published by McClelland and Stewart in 2002. The novel is set in the city of Mumbai, where Mistry was born and grew up, and tells the story of a middle-class Parsi family living through a domestic crisis. Through one family, Mistry conveys everything from the dilemmas among India's Parsis, Persian descended Zoroastrians, to the wider concerns of corruption and communalism, Mistry writes in simple language, using a lot of dialogue.

2. FAMILY MATTERS (NOVEL)

Some of the action takes place in Chateau Felicity, a flat inhabited by a 79-year-old, Parkinson's stricken Nariman, who is the decaying patriarch and a widower with a small, discordant family consisting of his two middle-aged step children: Coomy (bitter and domineering) and Jal (mild-mannered and subservient). When Nariman's sickness is compounded by a broken ankle, Coomy's harshness reaches its summit. She plots to turn his round-the-clock care over to Roxana, her sweet-tempered sister and Nariman's real daughter and that's where the problems start.

Roxana, who lives a contented life with Yezad and her two children (Murad and Jehangir) in a small flat at Pleasant Villa takes up the care of Nariman like a dutiful daughter, but the inclusion of a new member in an already stuffed house soon becomes evidently painful both physically and emotionally for Roxana's family. As loathing for Nariman's sickness increases and finances of the already strained household go bust, inundated by the ever increasing financial worries, Yezad pushes himself into a scheme of deception involving Vikram Kapur (his eccentric and sometimes exasperating employer at Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium). Two terrible incidents occur, which turn the plot and the lives of the characters topsy-turvy.

Plot summary of Family Matters

The book opens with Nariman's accident as a result of which he is bedridden. He suffers humiliation due to deterioration in his health and the grudging care (bedpans, sponge baths, etc.) of his two step-children especially Coomy his step-daughter who has never accepted him or any of his efforts to be a father. The poor man is entirely at their mercy and they are uncomfortable with the burden of caring for him. Coomy in a fit of inspiration born of a desperate desire to not suffer this burden any longer creates with Jars grudging assistance the perfect reason as to why they can no longer nurse him. In this way, they shift the burden on to their younger sister Roxana who is married with two young sons. She lives in a tiny apartment with less than half the space as that of the flat that Coomy and Jal share.

Roxana is fond of her father but her household's resources are stretched to the limit with the cost of nursing him. Her older son and her husband resent the intrusion. Her younger son assists her as much as he can. He and his mother are the only ones who help Nariman keep his humanity. As Yezad comes to centre stage for the following part of the book, the author explores the problems faced by an average middle-class family. Financial problems lure him and Jehangir towards greed and money.

The subplot of the book, which involves Yezad hatching a plan to cheat his employer of a large sum in order to meet his growing expenses by making up a Shiv Sainik threat. This subplot acts as the turning point in the main story. The book contains many details of the Parsis' practices, rituals, intolerances, and the concerns of native Parsis. In the epilogue, the youngest of all characters, Jehangir, becomes the narrator, describing the metamorphosis that religion, age, death, and wealth bring to his family. Coomy is now dead. Roxana's family now lives with Jal. A full time nurse has been hired for Nariman and Roxana feels guilty about it since her father now has bedsores - a sign of lack of care. Yezad has undergone a sea change from an atheist to a fanatic.

3. SOME PERSPECTIVES OF FAMILY MATTERS

After the national scope of the his earlier novels, Mistry's return to the tapestry of family life in Family matters seems surprising until one realizes that it is but a variation on the theme of heroism in ordinariness (which I would characterize as Mistry's chief concern in every work). It is the story of Yezad who tries to balance his job, society and family. At the same time, this novel marks the reassertion of Mistry's identity as a Parsi and works to centre that experience as symbolic of the 'universal'.

Although Rohinton Mistry is cited almost everywhere as a Canadian writer, Canada hardly features in his writing, except marginally - as a location for the immigrant experience in his first collection of short stories. Mistry chooses to revisit his 'original' home, city and culture rather than detail the immigrant experience. In an interview, he discusses why he writes about Bombay, the middle-class Parsis in Bombay, the world he has left behind:

Going to Canada, faced with the reality of earning a living and realizing that although I had, up to that point in my life, read books and listened to music that came from the West, there was a lot more involved in living in the West. I felt very comfortable with the books and the music, but actually living in the West made that same music seem much less relevant. It suddenly brought home to me very clearly the fact that I was imitating something that was not mine, that made no sense in terms of my own life, my own reality. (Shaikh)

Thematically, Mistry's fiction has moved from the family in Tales from Firozsha Baag to the wider Parsi community in Such a Long Journey to the national tapestry in A Fine Balance. Family Matters moves back to the theme of the family and uses narrative strategies first used in A Fine Balance to intensify the plot, the human interest and the sense that the characters are firmly embedded in their Present.

The chronological timeline of Mistry's various plots shows an interesting gradual movement towards the contemporary Such a Long Journey was set in the early 1970s, during the war against Pakistan and chronicled in relation to his characters' lives how the abuse of political authority affected the ordinary citizen. In A Fine Balance, the figure of Indira Gandhi and her manipulation of Congress ideologies, political rhetoric and cruel pragmatism have direct repercussions on the lives of the four main characters of the novel. With Family Matters, Mistry moves to the India of the 1990s and the political subtext of his novel is the growth of fundamentalist Hindutva ideology and its repercussions

on the life of the ordinary, unsuspecting citizen. The discussion of extremist Hindutva permeates the novel from early on, mainly through Yezad's public world of friends, employers, customers, etc. However, for the most part, it is Yezad's family problems that are subject to sustained narrative attention.

The political subtext is important, however, as it allows us to identify the novel as a narrative of the contemporary. Mistry self-reflexively allows Yezad to reflect upon the contemporary literature on India:

Sometimes, when Mr. Kapur spoke about 1947 and Partition, Yezad felt that Punjabi migrants of a certain age were like Indian authors writing about that period, whether in realist novels of corpse-filled trains or in the magic-realist midnight muddles, all repeating the same catalogue of horrors about slaughter and burning, rape and mutilation. This functions both as a comment and as a statement of intent.

It is important, at this point, to focus on the narrative strategies of *Family Matters* that show that the whole world can be made to inhabit one small place and that the family can become the nexus of the collective and the universal. Each of the characters in the story becomes the point of entry for a whole series of experiences and varying networks of contacts which enrich the novel. Thus, Coomy's story allows an insight into several issues and subplots within the tale: the childhood rituals, Roxana's struggles for her family and the solidarity of the apartment's community among others.

Yezad's life away from home allows the exploration of political concerns. Through Yezad the novel introduces the horrors of partition (Mr. Kapur) and, closer in time, the horrors of the Babri Masjid riots through the agony of Husain, the Muslim peon who intermittently relives the trauma of seeing the burning bodies of his wife and children. Vilas and his actor friends introduce concerns of both a secular and artistic nature - they discuss Hindutva politics, the nation's dire state of poverty and the upliftment of the people. Their little game with Mr. Kapur (where they pose as Shiv Sena activists in order to push him into politics), metamorphoses into real Shiv Sena horror as he is beaten up and killed in front of his traumatized peon.

Mistry's greatest feat is the complication of Nariman Vakeel's tale. The old man, initially depicted in a state of gradual degeneration of his bodily functions (which disgusts Coomy), becomes progressively more interesting. He is redeemed by the love and caring of his children and grandchildren, who look beyond the body to the goodness of the man. But parallel to the story, of his illness, the story of his disastrous past is gradually unveiled - the story of a brilliant and madly-in-love young man who is forced because of the bigotry of his parents to abandon the Catholic woman he loves and agree to an arranged marriage to a widowed Parsi woman, already mother of two children, Lucy, the rejected woman, haunts him. Ridden with guilt, Nariman helps her, thus infuriating his wife and earning him the lifelong resentment of his stepchildren. The proximity of the former lovers, the shame of the Parsi parents and the selfishness of the employers, gradually unfold into disaster as both the former lover and the angry wife die, leaving Nariman with eternal regret, grief and guilt. Nariman's story is itself a commentary on excessive community exclusiveness within communities and the disastrous consequences of tyrannical parental authority.

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.

4. CONCLUSION

Some of the major themes of *Family Matters* are: The family and its claustrophobia, Faith and fundamentalism, Memory, Care, Charity and humanity.

When surveying the work of an author, it is always tempting to read his/her last published work as the culmination of the craftsmanship that has been evolving from the first book onwards. This reading can certainly be adapted to the corpus of Mistry's work with *Family Matters* seen as reflecting the culmination of his craftsmanship. But for Mistry's literary self-assurance, it is difficult to imagine how the story of an old man dying from Parkinson's disease in a materially straitened family could make for such a fascinating tale. Despite the scatological explicitness and the horrors created by man, the novel reverberates with the music of humanity, giving us the incredible trajectories of old and young and the precarious balance of sense and stability in existence. After the motifs of the journey and the

balancing act in his two earlier novels, all the underlying patterns of reference in this novel are based on the story of Nariman Vakeel's past and his present.

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