Community and the Individual: A Note on Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters*

Abstract

Rohinton Mistry was born in 1952 in Mumbai, but settled in Canada, is a well known contemporary postcolonial writer. His novels portray modern India, focusing on conflicting situations and redemptive moments. His works *Such a Long Journey* (1991) *A Fine Balance* (1996) and *Family Matters* (2002) emphasize poverty, corruption and injustice intertwined with humour and tragic beauty highlighting the perception of life of the urban poor. Mistry uses both myriad and mixed experiences of a particular family to present the brokenness of modern society which is compounded by various and different memories and feelings. The paper throws light on community and the individual in *Family Matters*, it was published in 2002, and is Mistry’s third novel. It has been rightly acclaimed as a masterpiece and also shortlisted for Man Booker Prize in 2003. The writer’s humanity and compassion towards human beings relations and problems have been delicately portrayed. Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters* focuses upon the problems of un- belongingness and preservation of family values. The novel reveals the mutual equation of family members and family politics in the post modern society. The novelist delineates the importance of belongingness and
preservation of family values through the most trustworthy institution named family and reflects the psychological stance of the members of family towards their aging and dying elders. The novel is a representation of harsh realities and selfish human nature of the characters who expresses the status of an individual in relation to family, community and society.

**Keywords:** Community, Politics, Family, Modern Society, Humanity, Compassion and Values etc.

**Introduction:**

Rohinton Mistry as a fiction writer occupies an important place in Indian Writing in English. Right from his first literary work titled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, the collection of eleven short stories; it had become clear that Indian English fiction had got a very talented writer. Being based in Canada does not affect the depth of his insight into the Indian reality. Like Nayanatara Sahgal, Salman Rushdie, Khushwant Singh, V.S.Naipal, Vikram Seth and Shashi Tharor among others, he is deeply concerned with history. It is therefore, congruous to analyze Rohinton Mistry’s fiction in order to understand the whole range of novelist’s use of history, for it would help us to see how it impinges on the nature and scope of fictional style.

Rohinton Mistry’s corpus is concerned more with the collective than the individual identity. The Parsis, as portrayed in his fiction, come out as feeling insecure, so far as their identity is concerned. That should not be taken to mean that his characters do not have any individuality. The main protagonists of his novels, whether it is Gustad or Yezad in *Such a Long Journey* and *Family Matters* respectively, are in the psychic dilemma of their own identity as they consider themselves to be minorities or second class citizens in the same
nation for all. Identity is the most vital question in their day-to-day life and it controls even the basic requirements of food, clothing and shelter, besides their world-view and perception of life.

From the widely peopled space and chaotic canvas of *A Fine Balance*, Mistry’s *Family Matters* (2002) seems to have sunk considerably in the expanse covered. But it is the territory of the working human of the mind that is at stake here, delving into areas of human psychology. As Nilufer E Bharucha opines, “It is a book which is very ‘big’ in compassion – it is indeed Mistry’s most compassionate book to date. At the age of 50, from his Canadian point of vintage, Mistry has viewed the life of middle – class Parsi family in Bombay in the mid-1990s.” (169)

The current explosion of ethno-religious politics in the Indian sub-continent has forced the recognition that racial and religious identities cannot be easily subordinated to indices of secular modernity. The politics of ethnicity plays a vital role within postcolonial spaces. In postcolonial society, the dominant usually becomes the norm, whereas the ethnic minorities become marked. Besides foregrounding resistance to the colonial past, postcolonial texts focus on indigenous domination and marginalisation within the new spaces. Rohinton Mistry, born and brought up in Bombay, though now residing in Canada, witnessed the last bright sparks of the Parsis in India, and the criminalisation of the city Bombay in the last three decades of the twentieth century. Being a diasporic writer, he carries with him his historical and ancestral background along with other realities which he acquired during his stay at his birth place Bombay. In the opinion of Vijay Mishra:

Diasporic people are those, whose ancestors disperse from one centre or more. Such people carry the memories of their homeland in their mind in terms of physical location, history. They experience a sense of alienation and non-acceptance in the new land. They carry the impression that their true
homeland is their ancestral homeland, which they have lost, but to which their descendents should or would return finally. (70)

Mistry prefers to disclose Indian identity in all his novels which proved him that he has not broken his terms and relationship with his mother nation i.e. India. As William Safran opines “they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to the homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.” (85) Mistry chooses realism as his style to discuss the problems of the human conditions of the middle class of the Parsi, especially the migrants who locate in Bomaby and its nearby country places. Parsis, the working class, the women and the aged people in Mistry’s fiction play the role of the ‘other’ to the Hindus, bourgeois and the upper class.

Mistry came back to India in 1990s during that time communal riots took place because of the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992. The situation after the demolition of the Masjid led to lot of communal violence across India, the incident brought serious prejudice between two major religions in India. The novel shows the events at the level of the local and the familial and how the common man is affected by the communal politics and disturbances. It is the story of Nariman Vakeel, who is a sufferer of loosing control over parts of his body but who loves his children and grand children with utmost love and care. But parallel to it, Nariman’s past is gradually unveiled – where his love with a Catholic woman (Lucy) is abandoned and forced to agree to marry a woman belongs to the Parsi, married and survives with two children. By accepting his parent’s demand, he joined hands with Lucy to look after the stepchildren forever as a Father.

Mistry makes to understand that while the breakup with Lucy was painful. She tries her best to dissuade Nariman saying none of them would be happy with the marriage:
Lucy tried one last time to convince him; they could turn their backs on everyone, walk away from the suffocating world of family tyrannies, from the guilt and blackmail that parents specialized in. They could start their own life together, just the two of them. Struggling to maintain his resolve, he told her they had discussed it all before, their families would hound them, no matter what. The only way to do this was to end it quickly. (Mistry 13)

The novel Family Matters also deals with the raise of the ideology of Hindutva fundamentalism that collisons on the life of the ordinary and unsuspecting citizen. Mistry handles larger issues of religious Zealotry, bigotry and fundamentalism within all communities and even his practicing Parsi community is not exempted from his criticism. Through Yezad’s life (son-in-law of Nariman), the novel highlights the bad experiences of Mr. Kapur, the victim of the 1947 Hindu-Muslim clashes, who speaks about the Partition days. Husain, the Muslim peon is hired at Mr. Kapur’s Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium several months after the Babri Mosque riots at the urging of the Ekta Samiti working to help rehabilitate riot victims. Mr. Kapur nurses battered emotions till he is ready to resume his duties. Whenever Yezad finds himself getting annoyed by Husain, Kapur reminds the horrific story of the about the burning chawl in Antop Hill where goondas set to people on fire:

Husain and his Muslim neighbours watching as their chawl went up in flames, wondering where his life and three sons were….and then four burning figures trumbling down the steps of the building, their smoking hands beating at the flames […] while the goondas sprinkled more kerosene from their cans over Husain’s family. (Mistry 144)

What Husain witnessed is the ultimate scene of denial of his privilege to enjoy citizenship and his right to existence. The blind communal hatred never sees the particular
group of people as human beings but only as the group of representatives. Commenting on the heart-breaking experience of Husain, Nandini Bhautoo-Dewnarain writes:

The horrors of the Babri Musjid riots through the agony of Husain, the Muslim peon who intermittently relives the trauma of seeing the burning bodies of his wife and children. (38)

Mistry became nostalgic towards the native land especially Bombay. He emphasized and recollects the past glory and present situation of his native land, and how the name of the city Bombay has been changed Mumbai by Shiva Sena Party. But Mistry portrays Bombay as Bombay only in all his writings. As Patrick Holm says:

The realist discourse of home relies on a long-standing conceptual structure in which two figures are balanced and constructed-as opposites: the figures of belonging and exile. The home as house (and, behind it, the home as homeland) is the site of a claim to affirmation whose incontestability has been established by a thick web of economic, Judicial and scientific discourses - which also constructs the meaning of exile. (203)

As a staunch believer of secularism and an idealistic worshipper of Bombay, Mr. Kapur determines to fight against the sanitation. He feels Bombay is the place of awarding plenty of opportunities to all to combine all people with different races and religions to live side by side in peace and harmony embracing the poor and the hungry and the muddled masses. Thus Kapur describes Bombay as:

This beautiful city of seven islands, this jewel by the Arabian Sea, this reclaimed land, this ocean gift transformed into ground beneath our feet, this enigma of cosmopolitanism where races and religions live side by side and the cheek by jowl in peace and harmony, this diamond of diversity, this generous
Godless who embraces the poor and the hungry and the huddled masses,
this Urbs Prima in India, this dear, dear city languishes. (Mistry 160)

In Family Matters, Bombay as a city is idealized by Mr. Kapur who talks about it an innocent girl, then a young woman and how the change of name to Mumbai will affect his comfort ability. In the novel, Inspector Masalawala comments:

To think that we Parsis were the ones who built this beautiful city and made it prosper. And in a few more years, there won’t be any of us left alive to tell the tale. Well we are dying out, and Bombay is dying as well, said Dr. Fitter. When the spirit departs, it isn’t long before the body decays and disintegrates. (Mistry 416)

Even Yezad cannot stop the poetic flight of Mr. Kapur. To Mr. Kapur, Bombay endures because it gives and it receives. Mr. Kapur feels worry about Bombay that losing its dignity which is being violated by the crooks and the thugs for their personal gain. Mr. Kapur plans to participate in the municipal election. Northrop Frye’s description of the romance genre in its mythic/magical mode supplies one important answer. As Northrop Frye says, “The Romance is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream [...] the perennially child-like quality of romance is marked by its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space.” (186) Mr. Kapur’s romance reaches its zenith. When he says “in this shop we will celebrate all festivals: Divali, Christmas, Id, your Parsi Navroze, Baisakhi, Buddha Jayanti, Ganesh Chaturthi, everything” (159). In this way the Bombay Sporting Emporium is known for successful unity of Sikh-Parsi-Muslim. This is yet another example of ‘fusion’ and ‘assimilation’. For the humanist tradition, As Eagleton comments:

Meaning is something that I create, or what we create together; but how could we create meaning unless the rules which govern it were already there?
However far back we push, however much we haunt for the origin of meaning we will always find a structure already in place. This structure could not have been simply the result of speech, for how were we able to speak coherently in the first place without it. (98)

But the coarseness of fanatics causes the communal riots and threatens the civilian life. Besides the abhorrence of the Shiva Sena and its narrow parochial ways, Kapur, Hussain and Yezad worry about the destruction caused by mafia dons and the city’s nexus of politicians, criminals and police. The government plays a mute role as the city which is in no way connected to the Babri Masjid riots becomes a victim to it, where the religious chauvinism of Shiva Sena is augmented by the Pan-Indian militant Hindutva of the BJP. The newspapers boldly write about the Hindu fanaticism and its anti-communal bloodshed. “Everything was on the point of being exposed: Shiva Sena involvement in looting and burning, police helping rioters, withholding assistance in Muslim localities.” (Mistry 154)

As described by Mistry, Matka (Number Game) occupies an important role in Bombay along with Share Bazaar (Share Market) in Family Matters. Matka was so popular even though it was illegal, and was allowed at every part of Bombay. Though it was illegal, Yezad had opted Matka to generate income for the medicinal requirements of his father-in-law who was the dependent and extra-burden too in his family. He at one time, used to make fun of Villie Cardmaster. She is a spinster, stays with her mother in the same building where Yezad also reside. Villie guides Yezad to invest his amount in Matka for gaining unexpected profits. At initial stage, he begins to receive some amount as profit. Later, Yezad is encouraged to bet large amount into Matka. Yezad even claims that investing money into Matka is just for a fun game and it is as easy as that anybody can purchase a lottery ticket. Thus he advises more people to do this.
But Matka also finances Shiv Sena machinery. And Matka money paid for the plastic explosives with which the terrorists blew up the stock exchange. You see the paradox? The enemies of the nation and political parties that claim to be defenders of the nation, all rely on the same source. ‘Problem is, ‘said Vilas, ‘So do millions of ordinary people. The numbers they bet each night give them reason to wake up next morning. In some ways Matka is Bombay and Bombay is Matka. (Mistry 207)

The guardians of the law behave like gangsters in the riots and aim their guns at the innocent people, years passed by, but no justice is done to the victims where as the Shiva Sena that hired and polluted the police have now become the government. Mr. Kapur decides to contest the Municipal elections to deal with the Lawlessness and acting as a buffer against the fundamentalists. To rekindle Mr. Kapur’s zeal for social reform, Yezad persuades his friend Vikas to get Shiva Sena activicts to threaten Kapur with extortion. His predictions about the real violent destructive potential of Shiva Sena turns to be prophetic when the real Shiva Sena activicts burst into Kapur’s office and kill him in front of Husain’s terrified eyes. Husain, who is reconstituted his life with the kind help of Kapur, has witnessed Mr. Kapur’s death. Mr. Kapur, a Hindu, is killed for his liberal views that do not fit in with the exclusivist demands of the Hindu fundamentalists. Mr. Kapur is presented not only as a businessman but also as a person, who has the sensibility to understand human emotions.

**Conclusion:**

Thus, *Family Matters* portrays the personal, social, religious and political aspects of the Indian people through one family in the novel and that family represents entire nation. The novel in many ways unearths the different mindsets of human mind and hard facts of family bonds in the era of developing materialism in the post modern society in India. Mistry,
the literary recorder of country’s contemporary history in his novels and perfect observer of human behaviour that raises the universal and all time important issues such as human relationships, family ties, old age, death and theme of belongingness. He uses his own Parsi community to portray many characters to inter-voven for a perfect development of the plot.
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