

A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF ROHINTON MISTRY'S *FAMILY MATTERS*

R. Sivasamy, Assistant Professor of English, Government Arts and Science College,
Kangeyam-638108, Tiruppur(Dt) TamilNadu

Dr.P. Madhan, Associate Professor & Head, Department of English and Foreign
Languages, Alagappa University, Karaikudi-630003, TamilNadu

Abstract:

Contribution of Parsi writers to English Literature is immense and considerable. Rohinton Mistry is one such a great novelist who was born in Bombay and settled in Canada in his twenties. Living in Canada, he tries to portray the Parsi cultural space in India in his writings. Mistry is deeply anxious about the marginalized Parsi existence which is sternly endangered under the blow of globalization and modernity and the sharp decline in population made him startled. The increasing communal dissonance has intensified the community consciousness more than ever before. This cultural anxiety is best picturised in Mistry's novels. 'Family Matters' is the third and the most recent novel published in 2002 in the line of finding the ethno-religious minority personality. In this novel Mistry delineates the cultural turmoil and middle class family matters of a Parsi family living in Bombay in the midst of the dilemma tattered years of post Babri Masjid demolition period in nineteen nineties. 'Family Matters' tries to cross the boundary of nation, ethnicity and times and has achieved universality by taking up the thematic problems such as geriatrics and caring, familial bondage and human relationship, cosmopolitan city life, secularism, corruption and communalism, suffering and death, immigration, alienation and sense of belongingness etc. This article focuses the thematic analysis of the novel Family Matters and tries to find out Mistry's craftsmanship in achieving his aim.

Keywords: Parsi, Marginalized, Anxiety, Theme, Family, Cultural crisis, Alienation.

Rohinton Mistry's recent and last novel *Family Matters* was published in the year 2002. Like *A Fine Balance* (1995) this novel *Family Matters* is also highly appreciated and welcomed in the literary field at home and abroad. *A Fine Balance* has already brought many laurels to Mistry by winning several major international literary awards. After the grand success of his second novel *A Fine Balance* with its indispensable realism amid the critical historical phase of Indian Emergency in the 70s, this *Family Matters* has once again proved him to be great realistic storyteller sodden in the Parsi environment. In the same line of *Such a Long Journey*, where Mistry chiefly limits his narrative in the Parsi world order, again confines himself completely to the domestic turmoil and family problems of a Parsi family. This genuine compassionate narrative tells us the story of four generations of a middle class Parsi family in Bombay. This saga is a factual illustration of the insensitive realities and self-centred nature of the characters who articulate their individual eccentricity in relation to family, community and society at large. The storyline pictures the troublesome years of Mumbai after the demolition of Babri Masjid in the nineties. During this time Hindu-Muslim riots spread in Mumbai far away from Ayodhya where the actual incident took place.

It is very obvious from the novels of Mistry that he is very much obsessed with Bombay. Mistry has described the city of Bombay, now renamed as Mumbai, as a central character in the novel *Family Matters* like his earlier two novels. He 'recreates ... close attention to the details of homesick exile' (Jha 155). Mistry describes Mumbai as follows:

That's how people have lived in Bombay. That's why Bombay has survived floods, disease,

plague, water shortage, bursting drains and sewers, all the population pressures. In her heart there is room for everyone who wants to make a home here (*FM* 152).

The narrative richly delineates the city with its multi-ethnic modernity as a theme. The scene of action is carved out from the large city, a small section in terms of place and community where the whole action takes place. It focuses on the depressing and gloomy aspects of the city life. But 'Mistry's fictions reverberate well beyond their local settings and politics to gain universality (Vinodkumar 105). Mistry introduces the character Mr Kapur who is the real personification of the city. Again Mistry's fondness for the old city comes live through the voice of Mr. Kapur:

Bombay endures because it gives and it receives. Within this....woven the special texture of its social fabric, the spirit of tolerance, acceptance, generosity (*FM* 152).

As far as his narrative is concerned like his previous novels only a little degree of the cosmopolitan city finds expression in the novel. Peter Moray precisely observes: '*Family Matters* can be difficult, and Mistry doesn't shy away from showing them, in all their disturbing roughness, the real truths about them' (7). Mistry mentions about the 'city's electric trains (*FM* 160), the railway stations: Marine Lines (*FM* 138), the cricket stadiums: Wankhade and Brabourne (*FM* 213), the road network: Hughes Road (*FM* 45), Dhobi Talao Junction (*FM* 153), the Metro Cinema (*FM* 153), Asiatic Society Library (*FM* 154), and the Sonapur crematorium (*FM* 153) (Sebastian 165). In *Family Matters* too like his earlier novel, Rohinton Mistry further paints the ominous picture of Mumbai with its insecure roads, dug up footpaths, the colossal traffic (*FM* 35), the dearth of suitable accommodation in the city, people lives in the gutters and eats and sleeps close to ditches and drains (*FM* 169), multi member families live in one small room in the slums which are unsuitable even for animals (*FM* 159) and the exercise of power that landlords exerts over their tenants and their 'determined neglect had reduced it to the state of most buildings in Bombay, with crumbling plaster, perforated water tanks, and broken drain pipes' (*FM* 98). Bombay is also characterized as 'an uncivilized jungle' (*FM* 45) where there is eve teasing (*FM* 45) and gambling.

In fact, the novel is Mistry's lamentation of the degradation of moral and ethical values in different spheres of multi-cultural societal life with its rising materialism, corruption and cheap politics. 'Mistry enters the congested yet sanctified space of the Parsi family to discover the changes transported within the Parsi family formation through its negotiation of modernity, namely conflict to tradition playing within the family domain and the cynical acceptance of modern ideologies that becomes disruptive of the family tradition' (Wadhawan 98). Mistry raises his voice against universal issues in his novels; here also *Family Matters* crosses the boundary of nation, ethnicity and times by taking up the thematic issues such as geriatrics, family bondage, human relationships, death and theme of belongingness. Nilufer Bharucha has commented as follows:

Mistry has transcended both the self and the others. The self being the persona of the writer and also his Parsi self; the being the wider world. Here all three have come together in an epiphanic moment that speaks across the national, ethnic and gender boundaries, with a voice that cannot be denied (209).

The story revolves around the life of the protagonist Nariman Vakeel who is former Professor of English struck with Parkinson's disease and haunted by the memories of his glorious past. Being a widower and a decaying patriarch, he lives in a large flat named Chateau Felicity with a small but conflicting family consisting of his two step children, Coomy and Jal. Nariman's sickness has increased by his broken ankle which forced him to depend upon his step children Coomy and Jal for the daily necessities. Coomy's roughness reaches its height when she planned a design to send Nariman under the care of Roxana, her sister and Nariman's own daughter and the intricacies of the narrative opens from this point. Roxana leads a quiet and comfortable life in a small flat of Pleasant Villa with her husband Yezad and her two children Murad and Jehangir. The arrival of a new member in a small and already overflowing house proves

excruciating both from emotional and financial point of view. Nariman's stay with Chenoy's 'for the next few months changes the lives of everyone, they struggle, they grow, they learn and they endure' (Dodiya 87). In spite of this, Roxana's altruistic commitment and an urge to be a devoted daughter prompts her to accept the responsibility of Nariman without any hesitation. But Yezad is rather angry with the trouble given to them by Coomy and Jal for pushing them in severe economic unsteadiness. The inclusion of Nariman has become an additional and unnecessary burden on Yezad's household. Immersed by the ever rising financial troubles he is tempted with an idea of theft involving Vikram Kapur, his eccentric employer at Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium. After the sudden and untimely death of Mr Kapur, Mrs Kapur announces her idea of winding up the shop. She was generous enough to give Yezad a month's salary as a compensation in advance ignoring his fourteen years sincere service. With this all his hopes of betterment of monetary circumstances shattered and Yezad is plunged into a tumultuous of contemplation about the future that eventually makes him a Parsi fanatic who seeks out consolation in the holy texts and praying at the fire temple. Mistry through this conversion of a confident, unyielding and cheerful man into a religious extremist, tries to prove the inevitability of religiosity in this so called modernised world. Jal has given them a way out from the depressing future by suggesting reunion in Chateau Felicity and sell the small flat for ensuring a livelihood. *Family Matters* with its narrative scheme prove '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' (Bhautoo-Dewnarain 38).

With the familial crisis of one middle class Parsi family, Mistry communicates everything from the predicament of Indian Parsis as a marginalized community to the wider concerns of corruption and communalism. This novel shows Shiv Sena as a Hindu fundamentalist force fully involved in rioting, looting and burning the poor and the innocent people. Hussain, a peon is a tragic victim of the Babri Masjid riot who lost his wife and children in riot. In Hussain's own remarks:

The police were behaving like gangsters. In Muslim Mohallas, they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning, neighbours came out to throw water. And the police? Firing bullets like target practice. These guardians of the law were murdering everybody! And my poor wife and children... I couldn't even recognize them (*FM* 148).

The fundamental elements unleashed terror on the people. The novelist laments over the ruthless and oppressive measures taken by these religious fanatics. They are responsible for ruining the multicultural, multilingual and harmonious coexistence of the country. It speaks about how a religious minority like Parsis gets crushed under the sense of insecurity. Yezad also sums up the attitude of the Shiv Sena as: 'South Indians are anti-Bombay, Valentine's Day is anti-Hindustani, Film stars born before 1947 in the Pakistani Part of Punjab are traitors to the country' (*FM* 32). Mistry seems to put a negative propaganda and the politics of cultural terrorism through the description of this communalism. Coomy in the course of the novel also points out the peril hanging about home and abroad. Here she points out the incident of burning down of an old Parsi couple by Hindu extremist mobs. Bombay burnt for months after the demolition of the mosque in Ayodhya. 'How often does a mosque in Ayodhya turn people into savages in Bombay? Once in a blue moon' (*FM* 5) Jal, in the course of the novel, emphasises the Minority Parsi community's predicament as he says:

Just last week in Firozsha Baag an old lady was beaten and robbed inside her own flat. Poor thing is barely clinging to life at Parsi General (*FM* 5).

This narrative takes the prevalent corruption in India as a theme: 'Corruption is in the air we breathe. *Family Matters* also spreads Indian secularism. Chenoy family represents Parsis, Mr Kapur is a Hindu, Hussain is the representation of Muslim, Lucy Braganza is a Christian and there are references of Jains in the novel. The character of Mr Kapur embodies Indian secularism. He promotes secular and accommodative ideology as his religion (*FM* 361). Again Mistry has elaborately shown the theme of

today's child turning to be tomorrow's father. Jahangir is the child and the father figure is the patriarchal grandfather Nariman Vakeel. The image of the family life comes through them in the forefront. "Mistry has used the metaphor of the 'jigsaw puzzle' through which the boy tries to solve the quarrels and power politics that stake his family" (Dodiya 83).

Another theme of the novel is that of immigration. Parsis immigrate to foreign countries for the financial well-being. Narendra Kumar writes:

The Parsees Prefer the West since it offers unlimited scope for growth and prosperity. Dislocation is part of the Parsee psyche. Exiled twelve hundred years ago, they came to India. Now they are migrating to west in search of greener pasture. Thus there is 'double migration' in case of Parsees (14).

Some autobiographical elements of Rohinton Mistry are traced through Yezad's dream of emigrating to Canada, "Mistry also experiences 'alienation' like all emigrants. Through the character of Yezad, Mistry expresses his wish to come back to India." (Dodiya 84) Mistry shows the difference of emigration in case of Nariman and Yezad in his narrative. Nariman's emigration is: 'An enormous mistake. The biggest any man can in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills' (*FM* 240). But for Yezad, Mistry's version is:

He wanted clean cities, clean air, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone, where people stood in line at bus stops and said please, after you, thank you. Not just the land of milk and honey, also the land of deodorant and toiletry (*FM* 131).

Through the character of Nariman who is the embodiment of Parsi community the theme of suffering, a sense of belongingness and the crisis of alienation have been treated. 'The subjects of mobility versus immobility, decay and mortality are explored through Nariman's way of life' (Vinodkumar 108). He suffers from senile diseases like Parkinsonism, osteoporosis and hypertension. His broken ankle adds more tragedy to his already existing diseases. 'Family Matters provides an intimate and compelling depiction of matters to families in the universal situation of parents' need for home care' (Vinodkumar 101). He does not find peace in Chateau Felicity or in the Pleasant Villa. Mistry with his subtle touch tells Nariman's younger days filled with mental agony when he could not marry a non-Parsi lady, Lucy Braganza as it was denied by his parents. He was forced to lead a dejected life by marrying a Parsi widow Yasmin but was unable to forget his unfulfilled love for Lucy in his old age. 'His memory of the past destroys his willpower and brings him back to his love for Lucy' (Dodiya 86).

The novel is elaborately discussing on the slow but steady decline of the Parsi culture in turn the whole race. Mistry is longing to preserve his tradition and race amidst the fast changing multi-cultural society. The novel focuses on the Parsi community and the Zoroastrian faith. Thus the novel ends with a note of promulgation of the Parsi religion. It is not merely a Parsi family that Mistry is ultimately interested in but the family of man' (Genetsch 187). Mistry's writings would certainly be a perpetual source of inspiration for the Parsis who wish to preserve the identity of Parsi in future. 'The microscopic Parsi community of *Family Matters* is a miniature India and macro humanity rendered artistically into a finely woven tale of universal import by the novelist' (Myles 123). Thus, Rohinton Mistry with all his vast experience has depicted a story which talks about a Parsi family and its matters in *Family Matters*.

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