

RELATIONSHIPS IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *FAMILY MATTERS*

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**Abstract:**

*Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters focuses on the relationship between various characters in the novel, underlining how each and every member of the family is instrumental in addressing the problems, questions and practicalities of the family operation and how they contribute their share to the smooth functioning of the family. The major characters who make up the story line are all members of one extended family along with an employee of one of the family members and his employer. Mistry portrays the ever changing relationship across generations among the family members through the novel.*

**Key Words:** *Changing relationship, discordant family, sacrifice.*

The structure of the story of *Family Matters* is the life and living of an elderly patriarch of a small discordant family, Nariman Vakeel who is a former Professor of English stricken with Parkinson's disease and Osteoporosis and disturbed by the memories of his good old days. He is a decaying septuagenarian who lives in a large apartment named Chateau Felicity with his two step children, Coomy and Jal, both in their forties. Out of sheer family compulsion, Nariman had sacrificed his love for a non-Parsi, Lucy Braganza and unwillingly yielded to the marriage with Yasmin Contractor, who committed suicide a few years after the marriage. Their daughter, Roxana is married and lives with her husband, Yezad and two children, Jehangir and Murad. Nariman, who loves to go for short walks, falls in to a hole and gets his ankle injured, leaving him with no option but to depend upon Coomy and Jal for the daily necessities. The former, who resents him for being unfaithful to her mother and having long seen Nariman as a little more than a burden, snatches the opportunity and takes him to 'Pleasant Villa', which is home for Roxana and her family. Though Roxana's flat is a cramped and a claustrophobic one, Mistry's shows the deep bond shared by its inmates in spite of highly contradictory emotions. Despite of Yezad's displeasure, Roxana selflessly devotes herself to the need of her father without any hesitation. Through her, Mistry emphasizes that one can survive in life by making compromises in one step or the other. She brings to her husband's notice the meaninglessness of following the age old conventions and traditions and strongly upholds the view that the essence of religion is in the service of the weak, the old and the unfortunate. She is a dutiful daughter who can be compared to the loving and compassionate Cordelia in King Lear. The relationship between Coomy, Roxana and Jal is portrayed as half or hyphenated relationship since they lack warmth despite their birth from the same womb. Coomy uses the word 'second class' to describe her relationship with Nariman, accrediting "the daughter of his own flesh and blood" status to Roxana. As the novel progresses, Yezad finds it difficult to retain monetary stability and seeks solace in sacred texts. Jal takes pity on his brother-in-law and enters the scene as a saviour and shows them a way out from the dejected state by suggesting that they sell Pleasant Villa to ensure a livelihood and move into Chateau Felicity. As the novel progresses, Nariman gets gradually reduced to silence and ultimately death. The voices and role of Yezad, and Jehangir take over as the novel further unfurls. Family matters with its narrative style prove that "the 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)

Nariman Vakkeel had been forced to marry Coomy and Jal Contractor's mother, a Parsi widow out

of sheer family pressure. Even after his marriage, Lucy, in her distressed obsession for him follows him and takes up a job as an ayah with one of his neighbours in order to be near him. She says: "I still believe you love me. Admit it. I know that something is still possible between us". (FM, 246). For eleven years, he and Lucy had struggled to create a world for themselves but to the so called 'duty' of a son and to uphold the morals and the purity of his community he was forced to end his "ill considered liaison with that Goan women" and settle down (FM, 11). Finally, he marries a forty year old Parsi widow with two children. However, he found it difficult to be fully committed to her as Lucy's memories never left him at peace. Ultimately it was because of the fact that Lucy had provoked jealousy to his wife Yasmin that led to both their deaths in a fall from the roof. Nariman leads a depressed life till his last breath and is unable to forget his love for Lucy, who remained his silent beloved till the end of his life.

In his diseased state, Coomy thinks that Nariman's own flesh and blood daughter, Roxana should take care of him. Perhaps, Coomy uses Nariman's illness as a way to pay him back in kind for his unfaithful attitude towards her mother. She revolves between resentment and responsibilities towards her stepfather. Coomy says: "I don't want to be disgusted with Papa while he lies helpless in bed. But I can't help hating him". (FM, 302) Her resentment, annoyance and exhaustion at the very thought of attending to the needs of her stepfather forces her to damage the plaster ceiling of her apartment purposefully. Jal tries to correct her, but without much success. He laments: "Family does not matter to you! You keep nursing your bitterness instead of nursing Pappa. I've begged you for thirty years to let it go, to forgive, to look for peace". (FM, 193) However, fate interferes and Coomy pays her life as the price to her evil intentions.

Yezad had the least tolerance for his children's proximity to their grandfather. He says: "First they should learn about fun and happiness, and enjoy their youth. Lots of time to learn about sickness and dying" (FM, 278). Roxana, who is an epitome of kindness has an entirely opposite view of the situation. She opines: 'be glad our children can learn about old age, about caring-it will prepare them for life, make them better human beings.' (FM, 278)

Later in the novel, Yezad realises the importance of the old and Mistry has shown the transformation of Yezad from a rude, uncaring and grumbling husband to a sweet and caring son after several months' coexistence with his father-in-law. Earlier, he had seen Nariman as a burden that shattered the monetary stability of his family. In the later phase of the novel, he is seen to trim the nails of Nariman and even shave him which shows that he repents his previous attitude towards him.

Roxana who is truly devoted towards the wellbeing of her father, is an epitome of peace, patience and devotion who has accepted what fate offered her, be it good or bad. She manages to maintain a good relation with the family members with love, care and respect. Roxana's selfless concern for her father even under tense atmosphere and Coomy's self chosen avoidance of her responsibilities even living in more comfortable surroundings brings about the contrast in their base characters.

A striking example of hatred towards inter religious relationships is brought to the arena when Yezad gets disturbed when he finds his son Murad developing attachment with Anjali, a non-Parsi girl. He remains adamant in his decision that he would not let the affair continue. According to him, the laws of Parsi religion are absolute and mixed marriages would destroy their race. He further argues: "Inferior or superior is not the question. Purity is a virtue worth preserving" (FM483)

The concept of Mistry about relationships is that which is sprouted in care, harmony and kindness. When Roxana couldn't attend to her father, it was her younger son, Jehangir, who filled the void whereby, creating an intimate bond between him and his incapacitated grandfather. He comforts his troubled grandfather at night when memories of his days with Lucy followed him. Thus, the intimate relationship between Jehangir and Nariman is also explicitly visible in the novel.

The title of the novel '*Family Matters*' speaks volumes as the novel is centered around the lives, memories and relationships of an ordinary Parsi family. Thus, Mistry, through his novel, succeeds in asserting that a lasting and healthy relationship is possible in this concrete jungle of modern world only by

mutual tolerance and better assimilation of human values.

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