

Asian Resonance

Surviving Between Cultures: A Critical Overview of Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters



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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born, Canadian short story writer and a novelist. He is a writer of the Indian Diaspora who resides and writes from Canada. His fiction is set against the backdrop of socio-communal and religious ambience of the Parsi community in India. As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the margins of Indian Society. He as a writer feels in hanging in between two different cultures. The novel *Family Matters* narrates a magnificent reminiscence of his social and political community and events. It is a diasporic text with emphasis on the diverse aspects of the lives of two Parsi families, their inter-personal relations, Indian political set up and a probe into human psyche via the Parsi families caught up in the labyrinth of an existential enigma due to precarious financial state in contemporary Bombay. The protagonist of the novel – Nariman Vakeel, Coomy and Jal are the mouth piece of the Parsi community expressing their future, high rates of divorce, late marriages, low birth rate etc. The community becomes a character in his novel. The novel is an attempt at preserving Parsi culture as no individual stands in alienation; he exists with the specificity of gender, race and religion, community and nationality.

Keywords: Diaspora, Alienation, Identity, Assimilation, Multiculturalism.

Introduction

The present paper is an attempt at a critical analysis of the novel *Family Matters* by Canadian writer of the Indian Diaspora Rohinton Mistry. Identity is the core issue in any exploration of diaspora, especially diasporic identity which is composed of hybridism and cross-cultural social regimes. Mistry's novel is an honest mirror to the social-communal and religious ambience of the Parsi community in India. His novel is an effort at preserving the Parsi culture. His work does not suggest of nostalgic tones but echoes and laments the tragedies and the lacking in India.

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born (Bombay 1952) Canadian short story writer and a novelist. Having been a successful Canadian writer for the last 20 years, his novels are exclusively about India and about his own (Parsi) community. Mistry is a prominent and a promising face amongst the 20th century writers. He is a writer of the Indian Diaspora who resides and writes from Canada. Mistry began his literary sojourn in 1980 but recognition dawned on him with the publication of his maiden anthology of short stories *Tales from Firozsha Baag* published in 1987. Later in 1991, his debut novel *Such a Long Journey* brought him instant fame and accolade. His novel *Family Matters* was also short listed for the 2002 Booker prize; won the Governor General's award and also the Common Wealth Writer's Prize for the best book.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the paper is to critically analyse Rohinton Mistry's novel *Family Matters* as a diasporic text and to highlight the diverse aspects in the lives of the two Parsi families.

Review of Literature

Rohinton Mistry is a prominent Canadian writer of the Indian Diaspora. He was awarded the Neustadt International prize for literature in 2012. He has 3 novels and 3 short story collections to his credit. Mistry occupies an important place in the contemporary diasporic writings. Broadly speaking, three types of analysis are available on the subject:

1. There are many essays and discussions by the critics who are themselves not creative writers.

Asian Resonance

2. There are many discursive essays by critics and writers examining the concept of diaspora and how Rohinton's writings fall in line with the broader term.
3. There are few articles which deal with the structure, themes and techniques of Rohinton Mistry's novel.

Research Design

1. To examine the implication of Diaspora.
2. Placing the work of Rohinton Mistry with Diasporic theories.
3. Investigating the theme.
4. Analyzing the types of characters and the situational set ups.
5. Use of Technique And Language.

Diasporic writers live on the margins of two countries and create cultural theories. Dr. Annie John and T.N. Kolikar state that

The chief characteristic feature of Diasporic writings are the quest for identity, uprooting and re-rooting, inside and outside syndrome, nostalgia, nagging sense of guilt etc. The diasporic writers turn to their homeland for various reasons. As for e.g. Naipaul who is in a perpetual quest for his roots; Rushdie visits India to mythologise its history whereas Mistry visits and revisits India for a kind of re-vitalization and to re-energize his aching soul.¹

Mistry's fiction is set against the backdrop of socio-communal and religious ambience of the Parsi community in India. Parsis have descended from Persian Zoroastrians who emigrated to India to avoid religious persecution by the Muslims. They reside chiefly in Bombay. Over the years, the Parsis have attuned themselves well into Indian society and have simultaneously maintained and developed their own distinct customs and traditions.

Like other Parsi writers, Mistry's work is guided by the experience of double displacement – firstly exiled by the Islamic conquest of Iran, putting them into the Indian subcontinent and secondly departure to England and America after India gained independence in 1947. As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the margins of Indian society. It is said that diasporic writers experience two different cultures.

Their writings tend to bridge the chasm between the past and the present and opens up spaces for new expressions of a transnational global culture. Igor Maver opines: "Contemporary Canadian diasporic authors have increasingly come to be seen as trans-cultural and trans-national author, the writers of two homelands, figuring in the global cross-border so English speaking cultural collage space and in the Canadian multiethnic, part-ethnic society."²

Speaking of Mistry's double displacement B. Vinodhini in her article "The Portrayal of Parsi Culture and Religion" in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* writes:

As a Parsi and also an immigrant in Canada, we look at him as a symbol of double displacement and this sense of displacement is a recurrent theme in his literary works. His historical situation includes development of new identity in the nation to which he

has migrated and a complex relationship with political and cultural history of the nation he has left behind.³

Though culturally alienated, Mistry goes down the memory lane looking for the evident remnants of his life, lived and left there, and narrates a magnificent reminiscence of his social and political community and events. Through his characters, Mistry shows his own affinity towards his motherland. Nariman Vakeel in *Family Matters* expresses the poignancy of Mistry when he says, "because I think emigration is an enormous mistake, the biggest anyone can make in one's life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills."⁴

Mistry distinctly falls into the category of new writers who have explored their region and their community through their writings, including Amitav Gosh, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth and so on. He also shows remarkable affiliations with writers of his own community like Bapsi Sindhwa, Farrukh Dhondy, Boman Desai in clearly voicing out the concerns and dilemmas of modern day Parsis. His work is a kaleidoscope of Parsi culture into the larger context. Gabriel Sharmani Patricia remarks in her article.

In the texts of Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukherjee, Amitav Gosh and Rohinton Mistry reject all appeals to a narrative of cultural identity in their attempts to dismantle and reconfigure the dominant narrative of the nation/state. In these texts home and nation are renarrated not in terms of a monolithic space, but as a historically constituted terrain, changing and contested, and cultural and nation identity as a narrative in struggle and therefore also always in process.⁵

Though Mistry has to his claim two very prominent works *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and *Such a Long Journey*, our paper is an observation on Mistry's novel *Family Matters* as a diasporic text with emphasis on the diverse aspects of the lives of two Parsi families, their inter-personal relations, Indian political set up, its post-colonial relevance and also a probe into human psyche via the Parsi families caught up in the labyrinth of an existential enigma due to precarious financial state in the contemporary Bombay. Though Mistry is an immigrant writer, yet he is well acquainted with the socio-political events taking place in India. His characters are deeply rooted into Indianess.

The novel is a classic tale of human relationship in myriad forms – unadorned, comprehensible and simultaneously complex and intricate. Relationships exist in a two tier system

- a. between individual member of the family and
- b. between individual vis-à-vis neighbourhood and community.

The story revolves around Nariman Vakeel, the protagonist, a seventy nine years old Parsi widower besieged by Parkinson's disease, osteoporosis and varied other torments of the soul.

He lives with his two step children, Coomy – the daughter (dominating, irritating and aggressive) and son, Jal (submissive, mild and obliging). Coomy and Jal have been for years tending and caring for

Asian Resonance

their father but years of concern had flared-up their temperaments.

Once when Nariman Vakeel is brought home after having fallen while crossing the land outside Chateau Felicity, Coomy remarks to him, "Tomorrow you'll complete seventy-nine years and still you don't act responsibly. No appreciation for Jal and me, or the things we do for you." (FM, p. 6)

More trouble starts brewing when Mr. Nariman Vakeel is incapacitated with a fractured ankle. Coomy, as Mistry depicts silently harbours grudges against her father for the unhappiness of their mother and also for the love and warmth that he feels for his own daughter Roxana, "If you don't like what we've been saying, ask your daughter's opinion when she comes tomorrow... your own flesh and blood, not like Jal and me, Second class." (FM, p. 7)

Coomy's exasperation aggravates because of her financial constraints and the additional responsibility of attending to her bed-ridden and ailing father. Her bitterness drives both Jal and her to foist Nariman's responsibility on Roxana. The unexpected revelation about Nariman's ailment and his shift to Roxana's house creates ripples in the otherwise calm family of the chinoyis. The claustrophobic chinoyis Bombay flat suddenly changes into a general ward.

Nariman Vakeel's physical and mental dislodgings, his slow deterioration, his complete dependence on Roxana for his daily chores of feeding, bath and bed pans – all have been very aptly and poignantly described by Mistry. Nariman's helplessness, guilt, loneliness, short-sightedness is very dexterously expressed when Nariman realises that Coomy has cleverly kept him out of his own home by lame excuses. He softly speaks: "To so many classes I taught Lear, learning nothing myself. What kind of teacher is that, as foolish at the end of life as at the beginning?... Its the name of a king, who made many mistakes.... Don't worry. This Lear will go home again." (FM, pp. 196-197)

Roxana is the gentle Cordelia Act N, Sc 7 "O my dear father! Restoration hang the medicine on my lips, and let this kiss repair those violent harms that my two sisters have in thy reverence made. Yezads co-operation to his wife and his father-in-law cannot be negated, yet with the passage of time, Yezad's frustration and the tension keeps on piling up due to his inability to provide money for his family upkeep. Instances of Yezaad opting for the 'matka' and Jehangir's taking bribes from his fellow students to help the family in financial distress is very touching.

Mistry reflects that it is basically the circumstances that make a man evil and disrupts the functioning of the family and interpersonal relationship of the family members.

Being a Parsi, Mistry tries to remain firm to his own roots and culture. His characters too imbibe his personality and they simultaneously assimilate other cultures as well. Mistry departed from India in 1975, yet Mistry's novels are a nostalgic representation of India in its varied hues. The delicacy and subtlety with which Mistry has portrayed India and his experiences of immigration is very touching. Mistry

has a firm grip over the political situation in India and the corruption which is quite rampant. In a conversation between the family get together, corruption raises its ugly head. Yezad opines: "Corruption is in the air we breathe. This nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks Right, Chief? "The answer, unfortunately is yes." The country has gone to the dogs. And not well-bred dogs either but pariahs" (FM, p. 31).

Political governance also features in their course of discussion. Mistry is well aware of the prominent party exercising its power in Bombay and the coalition between BJP and Shiv Sena. The demolition of Babri Mosque is also slantly hinted at by Mistry. Jal voices his opinion for the aforesaid matter and says: "May be the BJP and Shiv Sena coalition will improve things. Said Jal... Yezad laughed, if a poisonous snake was in front of you, would you give it a chance? Those two parties encouraged the Hindu extremists to destroy the Babri Mosque" (FM, 31-32).

He continues, "And what about all the hatred of minorities that Shiv Sena has spread for the last thirty years" (FM, 33).

Mistry, however does not confine himself to the vicinities of his family but extends and explores situations and relationships between neighbourhood, community and country. In interactions between Yezaad and his boss Mr. Kapur, Yezaad gets nostalgic on being reminded of Mr. Kapoor's three photographs of Jehangir Mansion and Hughes Road his lost house.

"This building – its Jehangir Mansion, my parents moved there when they got married... Yezad continued to drink it all in "Amazing, how a photo shows you things your eyes forgot to see." (FM, 223). Mistry has very beautifully captured the nostalgia to its very core. He writes, "The photograph, conjuring up the street for Yezad, let him hear the traffic, smell the meaty smoke that always hung outside the sizzler, taste the Bhelpuri" (FM, 224).

Mr. Kapoor is moved by the emotions of Yezad on observing the photographs. He feels sorry for having put Yezad into such a situation, but Yezad is quite thankful to him. He asserts, "The photograph had made him aware how much the street and the buildings meant to him. Like an extended family that had taken for granted and ignored, assuming it would always be there" (FM, 228).

Mistry makes earnest efforts in creating authenticity in his descriptions of places as this is a fact associated with almost all emigrant writers who have to bank upon their memory.

The streets of Bombay come alive in his novel Through the walks of Nariman Vakeel:

He went to the lane where the vegetable vendors congregated their baskets and boxes, overflowing with greens and legumes and fruits and tubers, transformed the corner into a garden... In the flower stall two men sat like musicians, weaving strands of marigold, garlands of jasmine and lily and rose, their fingers picking, plucking, knotting, playing a floral melody.... A man selling bananas strolled up and down the street. The bunches were stacked high and

Asian Resonance

heavy upon his outstretched arm: a balancing and strong man act rolled into one. It was all magical as a circus, feel Nariman, and reassuring, like a magic show. (FM, 5)

Mistry's characters are proud of being Parsis. He also describes the ethical core and rituals of the Parsi faith with loving care. In conversation between Yezad and his son Jehangir, Mistry asserts what it means and how it feels proud to be a Parsi.

Jehangir says: "Daddy, can I change my name to John? As a short form?"

Yezad replies, "Listen, Jehangla, your Christian friends have Christian names, your Hindu friends have Hindu names, you are a Parsi, so you have a Persian name. Be proud of it, it's not to be thrown out like an old shoe" (FM, 247).

Further, the descriptions of the fire temple and how the rituals associated with the sacred thread worn by male Parsi symbolise the ties that bind family and religion. Other concerns of the modern day Parsis are also mentioned by Mistry. His characters become a mouthpiece of Parsi community in expressing their future, high rate of divorce, late marriages, low birth rate and the most important - declining population. Jal expresses very eloquently, "The more crucial point is our dwindling birth rate, our men and women marrying non-parsis, and the heavy migration to the west.vultures and crematoriums both will be redundant... if there are no parsis to feed them" (FM, 412).

Mistry, undoubtedly is the chronicler of Parsi community. The community almost becomes a character in his novel. For Mistry, "There is much to be revealed beneath the Veneer of the family. As he delicately scratches surfaces of his Parsi family life, the uncertainty of present day existence is pushed to the foreground within the larger sweeps of history and politics."⁶

Mistry keeps on applying balm perhaps to his wounded soul by narrating the experiences of Parsis in India, thereby connecting himself. He has a vision that involves the Parsis and their involvement with the wider national context. A critic writes

As both Canadian and Indian, Mistry's work is a paradoxical chronicling of the similarities in the experience of colonialism in two of Britain's former colonies while unraveling the grave dissimilarities in the multicultural mosaic of the two countries. The

vitality of his writings springs from posing this stark contrast in the histories, culture, language and politics of the two countries that Mistry inhabits.

Conclusion

Mistry's works are ethno centric. The pain of being doubly displaced and the dwindling strength of the community is an evident mark of his novels. His works are an effort to preserve Parsi culture because an individual exists with the specificity of gender, race, religion, community and nationality, he has no identity of his own. He attempts to re-think and re-narrate the history of his community in *Family Matters*. A critic observes, "Mistry carefully crafts a narrative that heightens our sense of the vital life of a Parsi family – one filled with sibling rivalries, lost loves, secrets, and also the growth pains of the young alongside the deep sufferings of the old."⁸

Mistry's writing prowess has been validated by a series of prestigious awards; his writings are a search for identity, his need for roots, the desire for location in history and histories, making him one of the better known writers of the Indian Diaspora.

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