



Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters: Motifs and moral vision

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Abstract

Parsi writer, Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* belongs to the genre of Minor Literature. It is necessary to look into the history of the Parsi community to understand the structure of the novel. Parsis are a group of Zoroastrians community who are innate to India, specifically, Gujarat and Mumbai region. A brief intro to their history has been provided in the beginning of the essay. It is also noticed that a name holds special symbolic value in the novel. Mistry creates the character of Nariman parallel to the Parsian city of Bombay, during the historical time when Bombay was being renamed to Mumbai. On several instances, Mistry provides a critique on rechristening. This research paper makes an extensive use of Lacanian Psychoanalysis to understand the symbolism behind names. Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* (2002) [4] is a profoundly ethical novel that interrogates ageing, familial responsibility, and moral compromise within the socio-political context of late twentieth-century Bombay.

Keywords: Minor literature, deterritorialisation, lacanian psychoanalysis, rechristening, rohinton mistry, family matters

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is widely recognised for his commitment to moral realism and his sustained attention to ordinary lives shaped by extraordinary ethical pressures. Critics note that his fiction consistently locates political and ethical concerns within intimate domestic spaces rather than overt ideological debate (Morey, 2004) [5]. *Family Matters* narrows the epic social canvas of *A Fine Balance* to the household, yet retains a sharp critique of social and moral decline in contemporary urban India.

This paper examines the novel through its dominant motifs—ageing and decay, duty and neglect, money and moral erosion, memory, and spatial confinement—while situating them within established critical discourse on Mistry's moral realism and humanism. Drawing on secondary criticism by Morey (2004) [5], Kanaganayakam (2005) [3], Mukherjee (2003) [6], and Gilligan's (1982) [2] ethics-of-care framework, the paper argues that *Family Matters* represents an ethics of care strained by middle-class insecurity and social fragmentation. Mistry exposes the limits of moral idealism in a world governed by fear, economic pressure, and historical resentment, redefining family as a site of ethical struggle rather than sentimental unity. This paper argues that *Family Matters* employs recurring motifs to expose an ethical crisis rooted in ageing, economic precarity, and emotional exhaustion. Through Nariman Vakeel's physical decline and his family's conflicted responses, the novel interrogates the erosion of compassion in a society increasingly governed by convenience and survival.

Mistry belongs to a minority community of Parsi Indians. Name holds a significant value for a minor writer to retain the individuality of the community. Lacanian's concept of Real and Symbolic have been utilized to understand this representation of a being through name. According to Deleuze and Guattari, Minor Literature is the one which is written by a minority in the language of majority. Rohinton Mistry emigrated to Canada in 1975 at the age of 23, with his fiancé. Belonging to a minority Parsi Indian community, and living in Canada, he belonged twice to the class of

minority. His novel, *Family Matters* deals with the references to politics which are relevant to Parsis. In the essay *What is minor literature?* Deleuze and Guattari say that politics is a non-negatable aspect of such literature. Every enunciation takes on a political energy. *Family Matters* lies in line with the second characteristic of Minor Literature, which says "Everything is political.". Politics take a certain collective value, where the author begins to speak for an entire community. Living in a language which is not one's own is a major problem of immigrants and minorities.

The historical evidence suggests that Zoroastrian community of Iran in the 11th Century fled their country to escape the widespread conversion by the Arabic Islamists. They sought refuge in the kingdom of King Jhadava Rana of Gujarat. The Zoroastrian community of Gujarat and Mumbai are the only ones who are called Parsi. Their small community developed expertise in various vocational skills to earn their livelihood. When British colonists first arrived during the 1680s, the essential services, from rope production, to ship constructions were provided by the Parsis. They even learnt English to surpass other communities in the aspect of trade. Parsi Cultural Historian, Feroza Mistree quotes "any new colonising power requires an agent group community who could act as the commissioning agents. Parsis knew how to and where to source goods. Hence, they had built close allies with the Britishers." She compares this alliance to the 'twins in partnership'. During colonisation, the Parsi population began to multiply in Bombay due to the availability of livelihood for them. Bombay had become a home for this community.

And events of *Family Matters* occur parallel to the historical movement of 1995 Bombay.

In the novel, not much is known of the history of Bombay. Hence, I must rely upon the actual history of Bombay. The Marathi city carried a native legacy along with it. This city was originally inhabited by the fishermen natives, who used to follow their own customs and traditions. But the colonisation by Britishers led to the deterritorialisation of

the native population, where their own territory was mutated by the foreigners. Renaming of Bombay in 1995 was a step towards reestablishing the lost Marathi legacy. Certain members of the Parsi community held a strong identification with the name. In the early 20th century, Britishers had made a new law where each citizen was to have a surname. A lot of the Parsis took their professions or villages as their surname. The surname became an identity for them. This symbolic value held by name can be understood through one instance in the novel as well:

After the marriage to the widow, Yasmine Contractor, Nariman formally adopted her children, Jal and Coomy. But they refrained from parting with their father's name. "To change it to Vakeel would mean rewriting history," said his wife." Jal and Coomy kept their father symbolically alive through their last name. Even though he was no longer alive physically, his legacy was continued through their names. According to Lacan, two kinds of death exist. First is the real (biological) death, which means obliteration of the physical body. Second is the symbolic death, which precedes the real death. It is the dehumanising form of death caused by a deep sense of loss or trauma.

In contrast to the real death, Jal and Coomy provide a symbolic life to their father. Similar symbolic existence had been given to the once colonised city of Bombay, which retained the anglicised name until 1995. Renaming of Bombay to Mumbai meant reestablishment of the Marathi legacy. And to reestablish something, demolition or mutilation of the past is necessary. Changing of name led to the symbolic Reterritorialisation of the original Marathi community.

In the novel, the transformation of the city of Bombay is witnessed parallel to the character of Nariman. Nariman was a professor of English. The profession in English proves his allegiance to the English colonial masters. He had developed Parkinson's disease, which is a long-term degenerative disease. It is undetectable in the beginning, but begins to damage the brain and Central Nervous System internally. Similarly, the city of Bombay had been witnessing the internal damage through the elements who wanted to reestablish the original tradition. In the story, Shiv Sena members visiting the stores like Mr. Kapoor's Bombay Sports Emporium were one such example of elements who wanted the death of Bombay and the reestablishment of Mumbai. Next, there was Nariman's fall where he broke his leg and had to undergo permanent bed rest during the last of his months. He was unable to move and required domestic help for even basic biological needs. He could not even sanitise his body by himself. At the same time, his traumas regarding the death of Lucy and his wife, Yasmine were returning back from the past, in the form of nightmares. City of Bombay during the same time was undergoing transformation as well. Nostalgia for the past of the city was created through the means of Mr. Kapoor's collection of three monographic photographs. Yezad and Mr Kapoor would often visit those pictures and reminisce about the old times. Finally, there was the ultimate death of Nariman, and the death of the city of Bombay. With the death of Bombay, was witnessed the birth of Mumbai. And, with the death of Nariman, was witnessed the birth of a new authoritative figure in the Chenoy family i.e. Yezad. 'Yezad' literally translates to worshipful. And he turns into a true Parsi bigot as Jehangir calls him 'non-stop praying stranger'. The cycle of birth and death continues in the

novel, and a name becomes a good predictor of the culture and attitude in the novel.

Ageing and physical decay constitute the novel's most persistent motif. Nariman Vakeel's Parkinson's disease and immobility reduce him from an independent intellectual to a dependent body. His reflection that "old age is a shipwreck" (Mistry, 2002) ^[4] encapsulates both personal despair and social abandonment. The metaphor suggests not only bodily ruin but a loss of ethical visibility. Kanaganayakam (2005) ^[3] argues that Mistry's elderly characters function as ethical touchstones whose treatment exposes the moral health of society. Nariman's neglect reveals how care becomes conditional upon convenience, reflecting a broader cultural discomfort with dependency. Mistry avoids sentimentalising old age; Nariman's irritability reinforces the realism of care as difficult rather than ennobling.

The motif of duty in *Family Matters* is inseparable from resentment. Coomy's refusal to care for Nariman is shaped by historical grievance rather than immediate cruelty. Her question—"Why should we suffer for mistakes we did not make?" (Mistry, 2002) ^[4]—articulates the ethical dilemma of inherited responsibility. Mukherjee (2003) ^[6] observes that Mistry frequently explores the tension between moral obligation and emotional fatigue. Coomy's actions are psychologically intelligible but ethically indefensible. Roxana, by contrast, embodies an ethics of care grounded in endurance rather than moral heroism. However, her care exacts a disproportionate emotional and financial cost.

Gilligan's (1982) ^[2] ethics-of-care theory helps illuminate this imbalance. Care in the novel is relational and gendered, revealing how women disproportionately absorb ethical responsibility within familial structures. Mistry neither glorifies nor dismisses this burden, instead presenting it as morally necessary yet deeply exhausting.

Economic insecurity operates as a corrosive motif throughout the novel. Yezad Chenoy's growing desperation reflects the fragility of the urban middle class. The assertion that "money was the measure of all things now" (Mistry, 2002) ^[4] captures the moral climate of the narrative. Morey (2004) ^[5] argues that Mistry critiques middle-class moral erosion under neoliberal pressure. Yezad's manipulation of Mr Kapur and accommodation of communal politics illustrate how fear-driven pragmatism replaces ethical principle. Mr Kapur's death symbolises the defeat of idealism in a society increasingly governed by opportunism. Memory functions as both refuge and burden in *Family Matters*. Nariman's recollections of Lucy Braganza preserve emotional identity amid physical decline. His belief that "the past is not dead; it lives with us" (Mistry, 2002) ^[4] underscores memory's ethical role in sustaining selfhood. Kanaganayakam (2005) ^[3] describes memory in Mistry's fiction as a form of moral continuity that resists erasure. In contrast, younger characters suppress memory in favour of survival-oriented pragmatism, reinforcing generational divides in ethical orientation.

Spatial imagery reinforces the novel's moral claustrophobia. Roxana's cramped apartment becomes a site of ethical conflict where care, resentment, and exhaustion intersect. Bombay itself mirrors this congestion—overcrowded and unforgiving—shaping moral behaviour by limiting emotional and material options (Morey, 2004) ^[5].

Conclusion

Family Matters presents morality as fragile, situational, and costly. Through its recurring motifs, the novel exposes how

compassion is strained by ageing, financial insecurity, and emotional fatigue. Secondary criticism consistently highlights Mistry's refusal to offer sentimental resolution. Instead, he portrays family as a space where ethical responsibility is continuously tested. Ultimately, *Family Matters* insists that *Family Matters* precisely because it is where moral failure and moral possibility coexist. Mistry's quiet realism delivers a powerful critique of contemporary life, reminding readers that ethical care, though burdensome, remains indispensable.

Such motifs of names and metaphors are in play throughout Mistry's novel. He proved that a lot can be spoken by a name. Name holds an immense value regarding the past, and cultural traditions. The question "What's in a name?" remains redundant after reading Mistry's *Family Matters*. Because a name contains an entire legacy of a community, family or an individual.

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