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# Redefining the Domiciliary Power Relations: A Foucauldian Reading of Mistry's *Family Matters*

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**Abstract**

Relations at all levels are essentially power relations. The novel *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry is a veracious depiction of the sordid realities of life with unsurpassed authenticity. The struggles to establish oneself firmly in the confounding strata of the society can be analysed by incorporating Foucault's theories on power. Moreover, the points of convergence between the state and the family can be easily delineated through the novel. Foucault's views about biopower, panopticon and discipline finds a vociferous assertion in the novel through its references about the Parsi bigots and their preoccupation with the population, Shiv Sainiks and their controlling gaze over Mumbai, and the manipulation of the body and its consequent reduction into a docile body. Thus Mistry, by weaving the private dimension of his characters into the macrocosmic political canvas shows the unrelenting power struggles that disrupts and constructs the society.

**Keywords**: Biopower, Panopticon, Discipline, Power struggle

Human interactions are dependent upon a system of power relations which operate at different levels to determine a person's relative worth and position. Society operates in accordance with a set of intractable and inscrutable forces which willingly or unwillingly infiltrates the mental conditioning of the people in order to bring about an ordered stratification. A society can be differentiated into various strata on the basis of an assessment as to who wields power and who yields to power. Here, "Power is the multiplicity of force relations extant within the social body" (McHoul and Grace 84).

Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* (2002) is a novel which tries to discuss the intricacies that determine the contours of a family, adulterated relationships and obligations,

and the hegemony operating in a family and society. The plot revolves around Nariman Vakeel, an ageing man suffering from Parkinson's disease, his step children, and his daughter and her family. After breaking his ankle, his step children, Jal and Coomy, are squeamish and resentful to attend to the physical needs of the bed-ridden old man. They try to evade their duties by thrusting the responsibilities upon his daughter, Roxana, who lives with her husband and two children. During these harrowing days of dependency , Nariman's mind revisits his youthful love affair with a Catholic girl named Lucy which eventually tears his family apart leaving scars that still hurt. The situation gets worse when Nariman becomes a burden to Yezad, his son-in-law, as he feels that he is an unwanted presence in their congested flat. In the several months between his departure from Chateau Felicity to Pleasant Villa and the eventual return to Chateau Felicity, much happens in the life of the characters. The self-centred Coomy treacherously plots to prevaricate from the detestable job of looking after her step father though she is killed when a beam falls on her. On the other hand the readers witness the unexpected transformation of Yezad from a Bombay man into a Parsi bigot. This novel about the survival of love and decency even in the midst of extreme circumstances, tries to shed light upon the need to broaden our perspectives by demonstrating the adversities emanating from a shallow and egoistic view point. The novel provides an intently observed portrait of present day Bombay in all its vitality and corruption. It vociferously speaks about the complications of being a Parsi in India.

> Through the stories of Nariman's doomed love affairs with Lucy, and his son-in-law Yezad's transformation into a religious fanatic, Mistry engages frontally with the ideologies of purity and the ensuing bigotry that afflicts the community, itself a vulnerable minority where majoritarian thugs hold political sway in the form of the Shiv Sena. (Gopal 149)

The novel vividly depicts the attempts of the Hindu chauvinists to claim India solely for the majority religious community and the frustration of the orthodox Parsi community due to the depreciating 'purity' of their race. Mr. Kapur, Yezad's boss, is a character in the novel who becomes a victim of the unrelenting communal despotism. The fury due to bogus idealism is amply satirized in the novel. The novel *Family Matters*, inarguably speaks about the matters of the family which ultimately leads to the assertion that family really matters. A family, being the basic unit of the society, is able to echo the government in its functioning.

The "strategic nature of power" and its deployment for furthering one's interest can be delineated through Mistry's novel (Kelly 37). Foucault in his work *The History of Sexuality* speaks about the advent of a new regime of power which deals with the states' concern in fostering life and in preserving the population. Foucault describes it as "bio-power" (*History* 143). It is mainly concerned with the regulation of the population and how the population fluctuated with changing health conditions, life expectancy, rate of birth and mortality.

> Mistry showcases a startling variety of characters, each with a distinct personality and idiosyncrasies characteristic of Parsis. ...As the novel traces the profound changes that each character undergoes, attention is drawn to the Parsi community's struggle to preserve its identity, in the face of the threat posed by intermarriage and Western migration. (Sanga 214)

The concern for the dwindling Parsi community is vehemently expressed when the elders of the community express their disappointment at Nariman's lover who is a Catholic girl. They mock him by saying "... our Nari seems incapable of falling in love with a Parsi girl" (14). The Parsi community with its unrelenting pedantry impedes Nariman from marrying Lucy. This ultimately brings ruin not just to them but to everyone around them. Later we see similar regulations being hurled upon Murad who was caught kissing a non-Parsi girl. The novel is replete with instances of open condemnation of marriage between a Parsi and a non-Parsi. The incident of a Parsi bigamist who was excommunicated by the panchayat for marrying a non-Parsi is one among the many instances that depict the entrenched notions of zealotry. The severance of familial ties is a consequence that ensues from intermarriage in the Parsi community. This chauvinism assumes colossal magnitude as not even the priest who performed the navjote ceremony for the son of a Parsi mother and a non-Parsi father, was spared from their vilification. In their constant urge to preserve the Parsi customs, the elders of the community felt that the lack of a charismatic hero like the Santa Claus might be a reason for the repugnance towards Parsi traditions by the younger generation. Yezad, who became a religious fanatic, says that the Parsi community should be intolerant to intermarriages in their race. As reason he says "Because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet, and mixed marriages will destroy that" (419). The new generation of Parsis, who feel that the excessive fervour of the Parsi elders is insipid,

interpret this steadfast endorsement of Parsi notion as unwanted. When Jehangir asks Yezad whether there is a law that forbids a Parsi from marrying a non-Parsi, Yezad replies that it is the "law of bigotry" that perpetuates such unwanted dictums (37). The novel introduces a host of people who live in the former days of glory of the Parsi community when they were a considerably big community that could make its presence felt. They are perturbed by disquieting concerns about the probable future of the Parsi community. This concern becomes acute when Dr. Fitter remarks "demographics show we'll be extinct in fifty years" (45). The elders of the Parsi community are tormented by the declining Parsi population to such an extent that they engage themselves with fervid discussions about the reasons behind the attenuating population of the community. They say that in spite of their humble beginnings, they have prospered in number in the past though they are reduced to a pitiably low number in the present due to the decreasing birth rate and migration to the West. Dr. Fitter, a Parsi bigot, says that the educated Parsis are practising family planning and he suggests that an incentive should be given to the married Parsis as a fillip to abandon their family planning schemes. In the novel, we see the Parsi fundamentalists being unsettled as they wonder whether their discussions will only be a dirge for the debilitating Parsi community. They exclaim "But it will be a loss to the world. When a culture vanishes, humanity is the loser" (358).

Foucault in his Discipline and Punish suggests a specific mode of control over the body where the body mechanisms like gestures, movements, etc are supervised in order to enhance the "usefulness" and efficiency of the body (137). The body, its forces and manoeuvres were subjugated to establish a "docility-utility" relationship (Foucault, Discipline 137). The methods employed to achieve this are called "disciplines" and the "subjected and practical bodies" treated in the process is called "docile" body (Foucault, Discipline 137). Thus, discipline seeks to "intensify the use of the slightest moment" (McHoul and Grace 68). It tries to extract the maximum utility out of everything through an exhaustive process of subjugation. Nariman, the bed-ridden head of the family, is forced to sacrifice his wishes and comforts for the convenience of his stepchildren who nurse him. Even when the doctor prescribes a bedpan for Nariman, Coomy chooses a commode as it is more comfortable for her to handle. Thus, the flippancy with which they handle Nariman prolongs his illness. Nariman relinquishes his priorities for the sake of his stepchildren who

decide his daily routine. Coomy and Jal, who compel Nariman to use a commode instead of a bedpan, make him undergo a strenuous process of physical exertion which in turn drains Nariman off his vitality. The lethargic condition to which Nariman is reduced to becomes evident through the line "Sweat had broken on Nariman's forehead, his eyes were closed" (55). Thus Nariman's life becomes a tale of endurance and subservience. He curbs his exigencies as he doesn't want to trouble Jal and Coomy with abominable tasks.

The body and its forces, their utility and docility, their distribution and submission have always been formidable issues that have elicited a deep concern and consequent inquiry. "The body is also directly involved in a political field: power relations have an immediate hold upon it: they invest it, mark it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Rabinow 173). The concept of discipline is a probe into the internalised control over every individual, their bodily postures and the sublimation of their wishes and emotions. The constant nagging from Coomy compels Nariman to silence his private needs. The complaints from Jal and Coomy about the loathsome task coupled with the physical agony that Nariman had to endure make him suppress his urge for defecation. The deplorable plight of Nariman is expressed through the line "Nariman cried out softly, like a forgotten door moaning in the wind" (67). Nariman's plight becomes even more lamentable than it seems as he doesn't cry when someone is around. His seclusion becomes his companion and inflicts a self-imposed subjecthood on himself as he wants to spare his stepchildren from the trouble of caring him. Even though Nariman has put up with a great deal, he is adulated not for his tolerance but for not groaning. Nariman's life with Roxana and her family was not of much difference to him as he was a source of discontentment for Yezad, Roxana's husband. In order to spare the concord in Roxana's house, Nariman continued his self-deprivation and self-denial. Nariman did not want to provoke Yezad who complained about the unhygienic ways in his house since Nariman's arrival. Nariman's personal likes and dislikes ebbed away to suit other's disposition. He is transformed into an object that works according to other people's convenience. "Nariman had managed to hold off each morning till everyone finished tea and breakfast, and left for school and work" (145). Thus, Nariman restricts his bowel movements for the sake of others. Later, we see Nariman concealing the pain in his ankle when he stood on crutches but in vain. Nariman tried to hide his unmanageable pain when he tried to walk after four weeks of convalescence.

"Towards the end of the week, Nariman found it harder to hide the pain in his ankle when he stood on crutches. He had remained silent because the three little steps he took went far in sustaining everyone's hope" (161). He didn't want to be an immobile burden that will augment their encumbrance as he wanted to be move around in order to alleviate their anxieties and to provide some relief. Nariman endures the most abject conditions of decrepitude without any grumbling. He does not demand a sponge bath for three days even when his body stinks. Thus, Nariman alters his body mechanisms to acclimatize with the changing situations in order to exhibit maximum efficiency and pliability. Thus Nariman becomes a "subject" not only because he is dependent upon other people but also due to the self-inflicted subservience as he is tied to his own identity by "a conscience or self-inflicted knowledge" (Dreyfus and Rabinow 212). Nariman who is helplessly subjugated by the unexpected turn of events is "disciplined" by the external forces which he assimilates in order to internalize the subjection.

Discipline sometimes gets manifested through the spatial arrangement of individuals. The concept of "spatial distribution" finds its fulfilment in a prison where each inmate is separated from the other (McHoul and Grace 68). The "panopticon" offers a vivid way in which political technologies of the body functions (Foucault, *Discipline* 200). The perpetual fear of an intangible authority, an anonymous power, which conditions the people through observation is prevalent throughout the novel. The Shiv Sena, with its hideous forces perpetuates a reign of absolutism by instigating fear through suppression and repression. The people, due to their fear for the consequences which are bound to ensue if they deviate from the trail set by the constantly supervising agency, are impelled to behave according to a predetermined pattern. There are intermittent references about the Shiv Sena and its viciousness in the novel. While speaking, when Mr. Rangarajan inadvertently says "we Bombayites" he quickly corrects himself by saying "Mumbaikars'. As reason he says "these days you never can tell who might be a Shiv Sena fanatic or a member of their Name Police" (46). This refers to the enigmatic working of the Shiv Sena which warns the people to be cautious. Mr. Rangarajan alludes to the espionage of the Shiv Sainiks when he says "It is my understanding that some Shiv Sainiks have infiltrated the GPO, subjecting innocent letters and postcards to incineration if the address reads Bombay instead of Mumbai" (46).

Later when Jal visits Pleasant Villa, the people living there are on their guard on seeing a stranger as they take him for a Shiv Sainik. They say "...he was most likely from Shiv Sena, listing names and addresses-that's how they had singled out Muslim homes during the Babri Mosque riots. Probably planning ahead for next time" (91). Then we hear the recounting of Bhaskar and Gautam, the journalists. Their speech unveils the strategies employed by the Shiv Sena to identify and punish the dissenters. The ordinary man is forced to dissimulate their opinions as they are aware of the fact that the Shiv Sainiks in the disguise of unsuspecting and innocuous men will spy upon their conduct. Here, Bhaskar and Gautam say about the abuse they had to endure for writing about the camaraderie between politicians, criminals and police. The apprehension regarding an agency that continuously observes the masses is affirmed when Mr. Kapur is confronted by a team from the local Shiv Sena. They asked Mr. Kapur to change the name of his shop from "Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium" to "Mumbai Sporting Goods Emporium". The concealed chamber from which the Shiv Sainiks monitor the people remains mysterious and this awareness constricts the individual's field of activity. Thus, the disciplinary motives of the panopticon find its fulfilment in the novel.

The novel *Family Matters* is replete with instances of deviancy from the normative code of conduct. The power to judge someone is vested upon a person who decides the criteria for determining the extent of perversion, if any, on the basis of a knowledge that only the latter possesses. The process of surveillance which emanates from an unequal intercourse between two agents or parties proceeds towards the subject upon whom power is exercised. This subject of power is not endowed with the reciprocal power to question the other. Foucault takes the Hospital General for a "semi-judicial structure" which holds a "quasi-absolute sovereignty" (Rabinow 125). The presence of such an institution which works clandestinely as a mediating agency to impose the will of the authority can be traced in this novel. It functions through illegal repressions though it has the sanction from certain supreme authorities. The Shiv Sena chauvinists and their local committee, try to force unjust laws upon the people through the use of violence and coercion. This unscrupulous agency which debilitates individual freedom is analogous to the pugnacious agency which Foucault describes as being characterized by a vicious servility to serve the supreme authority.

Rohinton Mistry depicts the morose nature of life with incomparable realism. Thus, the novel *Family Matters* provides a pedestal to the characters to display their struggle to attest one's existence. The novel is strewn with power conflicts due to the inter-person rivalry to establish one's dominance over the other. These struggles for supremacy are thus explored by inducting Foucault's theories related to power into the novel.

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