

## The Plight of the Parsis in Post Independence India as Reflected in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*

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### Abstract

In this paper, an attempt is made to discuss the plight of the Parsis in post independence India as revealed in Rohinton Mistry's novel *Family Matters*. The novel is set against the backdrop of the Babri Masjid demolition riots in 1992. As a Parsi writer Mistry is trying to expose the fear, anxieties, alienation and insecurities felt by his community in post independence era through the various characters in the novel. The lamentation of the Parsis over their downgraded status in post colonial India is clearly highlighted in the narrative. Parsis' hatred for Shiv Sena for promoting communal hatred among different communities in Bombay is also exposed. The degeneration of Bombay city as well as the Parsi community during post independence era is realistically portrayed in the novel. The conflict between the liberal and the orthodox Parsis on racial purity are well discussed in the novel. The Parsi community's fear of extinction in the near future due to their sharp decline in population growth is clearly expressed in the narrative. The narrative revolves round the lives and struggles of an extended Parsi family in Bombay. The protagonist Nariman Vakeel is a 79 year old widowed Parsi who lives with his stepchildren Jal and Coomy in a large flat called Chateau Felicity. He is exposed as a victim of Parsi traditional beliefs on racial purity. After he breaks his ankle by falling into a trench, he is shifted to Pleasant Villa where his biological daughter Roxana and her husband Yezad along with their sons Murad and Jehangir live. The suffering of Yezad's family after the arrival of Nariman clearly reveals the suffering of the middle class Parsis in India.

**Keywords:** Alienation, Biological, Decline, Degeneration, Downgraded, Extinction, Orthodox, Plight.

In this paper an attempt is made to discuss the plight of the Parsis in post independence India as reflected in Rohinton Mistry's novel *Family Matters*. The novel was published in 2002 and it won many prestigious awards and recognitions and was also shortlisted for The Booker Prize. It is set in Bombay against the backdrop of the Babri Masjid demolition riots in 1992. The crises of the Parsi community in post independence era are clearly documented in the novel. As a Parsi writer, Mistry is trying to narrate the suffering and anxieties of his community through his fictional works. Regarding his writings A. K. Singh rightly asserts that:

Rohinton Mistry has demonstrated immense ability in responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community and also to the country. He narrates his community through the different narratives of his characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the changes that will affect their community as well as themselves. Their fate is bound up with the fate of their community; so their stories naturally tend to be the stories of their community. By centralising their community in their narratives they centralize and preserve and protect themselves, and thus use it as a psychological crutch. [Kapadia and Khan: 67]

Like his earlier works Mistry's concern for his community is clearly indicated in the novel. The book realistically portrays all the concerns of the Parsi community in post independence India, their struggle to maintain their ethnic identity, the ongoing conflict between the traditional and liberal Parsis and all the other issues and problems surrounding the Parsi community. It is a well known fact that religious minorities are marginalised and betrayed by the dominant community in modern India. The suffering and anxieties of the Parsis as a marginalised and betrayed community in India is clearly exposed in the novel. As a faithful chronicler of his community, Mistry's narrative clearly expresses the anger, trauma, insecurities and anxieties felt by the Parsis and the dangers of the community like declining population, strict ban on intercommunity marriage, late marriage, low birth rate, migration to the West, etc. which become a threat to the community. Addressing the crises of the Parsi community in the present century Novy Kapadia says:

The reasons for present-day Parsi struggling for identity in the modern world of changing value systems are their dual existence, namely aping of Western value systems, the pulls of tradition, confusion on whether to get 'Indianised' or 'Westernized' or another identity and the splintered family. [Kapadia:78 ].

The novel revolves round the lives and struggles of a lower middle class extended Parsi family in Bombay. The protagonist Nariman Vakeel is a 79 year old widowed Parsi who lives with his step children Jal and Coomy in a large flat called Chateau Felicity. He is a retired professor of English literature. He is shown as a victim of the Parsis' traditional belief on racial purity. According to tradition of the Parsis, marriage outside the community is strictly banned in order to safeguard the racial purity of the community. In the narrative Nariman's affair with Lucy, a Christian lady was not approved by his orthodox parents and he was pressurised to end the relationship. Nariman's efforts to marry Lucy did not succeed as he had no other options except to obey his parents' wishes. His anger, hatred and protest against his parents reflect the attitude of the liberal minded Parsis who are against the orthodox Parsis's fundamentalist attitude towards religion. The clashes between the orthodox and liberals on the matters of racial purity are graphically represented in the text. Nariman's parents along with their friends and relatives were extremely worried about his affair with

Lucy. His nature annoys his father and he angrily says “My big mistake, said his father, was books. Too many books. Modern ideas have filled Nari's head. He never learned to preserve that fine balance between tradition and modernness”. [FM:55]

The Parsi exclusivity is clearly highlighted in the novel. Though Nariman didn't like the fanatical nature of his orthodox parents he was forced to marry a Parsi widow named Yasmin Contractor who had two children from her previous marriage. On the eve of his marriage one of his relatives had said that “no happiness is more lasting than the happiness you get from fulfilling your parents” [ibid.:13]. But on the contrary his married life with Yasmin Contractor became a hell for him as he was trapped between his past and the present. After the birth of their daughter Roxana he was trying to live a happy life but the reappearance of Lucy in his life had disturbed his married life. He couldn't become a loyal husband and his married life began deteriorating. Since the tragic incident on which both Yasmin and Lucy had died has been living along with the three children. But after Roxana's marriage to Yezad he has been living a lonely life as Jal and Coomy never treated him well. Though he had given all the love and adoration of a father towards his step children they could not accept him as their father. Coomy never forget her past and she still blames Nariman for exploiting their mother's life. Nariman didn't blame Jal and Coomy for their ingratitude as “the blame lay with the ones thirty six years ago, the marriage arrangers, the wilful manufacturer of misery” [ibid.:76]. He had also abandoned all his religious duties as a Zoroastrian revolting against his parents' fanatical attitude as “he used to call it the religion of bigots. He hasn't stepped inside a fire – temple in forty years” [ibid.:384]. The decaying health and religious beliefs of Nariman represents the decaying Parsi community in post independence India. When Nariman is advised by doctors for bedrest after he breaks his ankle by falling into a trench, he is shifted to Pleasant Villa where Roxana and Yezad along with their two sons Murad and Jehangir live. The tiny flat of Roxana doesn't have enough space to accommodate Nariman but Roxana agrees to look after his father for some time. Yezad's peaceful family life is disturbed by the arrival of Nariman as he cannot tolerate the extra burden of looking after an ailing father-in-law.

The financial constraints of Yezad's family represents financial status of the lower middle class Parsis in India. Yezad's meagre income cannot meet his family's basic needs. In order to meet his family expenses Yezad secretly tries his luck in gambling through the

influence of his neighbour Villie. He even makes a crazy plan along with his friends to extract money from his employer Vikram Kapur. Taking advantage of the political scenario in Bombay, Yezad befools Vikram Kapur by saying that Shiv Sena activist had come to the shop and demanded to change Bombay in the shop's name to Mumbai “within thirty days. Or pay a fine”[ibid.:283]. His foolish plan led to the death of Vikram Kapur at hands of the Shiv Sena activists. Yezad feels guilty for his disloyalty towards his employer. Though loyalty and honesty are considered an important characteristic traits of the Parsis, Yezad could not become a loyal and honest employee due to the financial burdens of his life. His children Murad and Jehangir suffer a lot. Unable to see their parents’ sufferings Jehangir accepts bribery offered by his rich classmates and Murad also begins to return from his school on foot saving the bus fare. After the death of Vikram Kapur Yezad has lost his job and he cannot find any other job in the city. This is the turning point in Yezad's life. Later in the narrative Yezad becomes a completely changed man leaving behind his secular, less religious nature and becomes an orthodox Parsi. The Parsi exclusivity and their sense of superiority is again voiced through Yezad's transformation into a rigid orthodox Parsi. The conflict between the orthodox and the liberals on racial purity is again depicted in the epilogue of the novel where Yezad and Murad constantly fights over this issue. Murad's relationship with a non Parsi girl Anjali is seriously opposed by Yezad and he threatens to excommunicate his son if he continues his relationship. His religious orthodoxy makes his family a sad and gloomy family. Murad like his grandfather becomes a victim of the rigidity of Parsi orthodox beliefs. The spiritual evolution of Yezad becomes a melting pot for quarrelling in his household. Ban on marriage outside the community is a serious threat to the community as the community fears extinction in the near future. In this regard S. Christina Rebecca in her article “Parsis' Tenebrous Sense of Survival in Family Matters” states that:

Mistry consciously foregrounds the degeneration of the Parsi Community both spiritually and culturally through Yezad. His insecular attitude against the near extinct culture merely rings a death knell against the Parsi community. Yezad's religious fervour clouds his compassion towards humanism...Yezad's religious fanaticism is the metonym of the Parsi community on the road to destruction. In the face of extinction instead of

opening up to more liberal thinking, intercultural exchange, they become closed and rigid [Rebecca: 310-311].

This is clearly indicated when Murad confronts his father's fanatical attitude by saying that: "He is using religion like a weapon. Do you know the obsession with purity is creating lunatics in our community? I'm never going to accept these crazy ideas". [FM:423] Murad like his grandfather is revolting against his father's fanatical attitude. Madhumalati Adhikari in her article "Mirroring the Parsi Psyche" rightly asserts that:

The religious inflexibility has exercised a negative impact on the Parsi psyche. It is destructive and not constructive, it is alienating and not cementing. Religious orthodoxy is viewed from two opposing angles: to the veterans, it is the symbol of superiority and authority; to the young, it is an instrument of exploitation and oppression. [Adhikari: 48]

The community's fear of extinction is also well discussed in the narrative. Parsis are a minority community who are facing the problem of declining population. Regarding this Aditi Kapoor in her article, "The Parsis; Fire on Ice" in Times of India (14 May, 1989) voices this concern, "Unless something is done to augment their fast depleting numbers and to revive their religion, the Parsis after an illustrious past could well just fade out in oblivion". [qtd. Sharma33] The lamentation of the Parsis over their falling numbers is clearly exposed in the form of discussions between Dr. Fitter and Inspector Masalavala. During their conversation the biggest fear of the community is expressed through Inspector Masalavala when he says, "the experts in the demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left". Dr. Fitter also puts forward his idea by saying that the Parsis will "Extinct like Dinausaur".[FM:356] Mistry tries to indicate that the western lifestyles of the Parsis and their notion of individualism hinder the population growth of the community. Due to influence of western ideas, Parsi boys and girls love privacy and they are postponing marriage until they are well established in life. In the narrative Jal and Coomy are unmarried. The community's excessive aping of western culture is criticised by Dr. Fitter, "The funny thing is, we used to pride ourselves on being westernised more advanced." [ibid.:357] Because of their westernised attitude they prefer small families. The pathetic condition is put forward by Dr. Fitter : "There are lots of wealthy couples living alone in new flats who

produce just one child. Two if we are lucky. Parsis seem to be the only people in India who follow the family planning message. Rest of the country is breeding like the rabbits". [ibid.:357] The situation is crucial for the community. To combat the situation Dr. Fitter puts forward two suggestions:

First, our youth must be prohibited from going beyond bachelor's degree. Give some incentives to study less. And those who want to do postgraduate studies, tell them they will get no funding from Panchayat unless they sign a contract to have as many as the number of people age fifty in their family. Maximum of seven-we don't want to spoil the health of our young women. [ibid.:357]

Mistry's lamentation over the gloomy sad reality of his community is clearly expressed in the novel. The deep rooted sympathy for his community is revealed in the text. It is a well known fact that Parsis had enjoyed an elite status during the colonial period. They were the most advanced and wealthiest community of India during the British Raj but after 1947, they had lost their elite status and they were pushed towards the periphery by the dominant community. They are constantly marginalised and betrayed in post independent India. All their business empires has been snatched away from their hands by the successive governments of India. Their exclusive nature and the government's insensitivity towards the needs of the minorities made them feel alienated and betrayed in post independence India. Nilufer Bharucha rightly asserts:

Parsis today are trying to reorient themselves into the Indian mainstream, while others in a bid to escape this changed status move to the West. In both the cases the Parsi identity is a casualty. [Bharucha: 42]

The fear, anxieties and suffering of the Parsis in post colonial India are realistically presented in the novel. Unable to cope with the social, political, economic and religious turmoils they face in India many Parsi youths are longing for emigrating to the West to seek greater opportunities. In the narrative Yezad's fascination for emigrating to Canada clearly reveals the intentions of the Parsi youths towards

migration. In order to flee himself from the chaotic, corrupt and fallen Bombay city, he is planning to emigrate to Canada:

His dream for an end to this apeman commute had led him to apply for immigration to Canada. 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:118]

All his efforts to emigrate could not succeed but his anger and frustrations are later consoled by thinking as the following:

We have beggars in Bombay, they have people freezing to death on Toronto streets, instead of high and low-caste fighting, racism and police shootings; separatist in Kashmir, Separatist in Quebec-why migrating from the frying pan into the fire. [ibid.:119]

Mistry tries to indicate that emigraton is not a solution to all the problems. Mistry's message to the community is voiced through Nariman's words: "emigration is an enormous mistake. The biggest anyone can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills." [ibid.: 220] The crisis of the Parsi community in post-independence India is clearly foregrounded in the novel. Parsis are lamenting their glorious past. The deterioration of the Parsi community is lamented by Dr. Fitter:

Parsi men of today were useless, dithering idiots, the race had deteriorated. When you think of our forefathers, the industrialist and shipbuilders who established the foundation of modern India, the Philanthropists who gave us our hospitals and schools and libraries and

bags, what lustre they brought to our community and the nation.[ibid.: 45]

Mistry's anguish and dilemma over the degradation of his community is clearly revealed. In fact the growth of Bombay city was deeply associated with the growth of the Parsis in Bombay. They had taken an important role in developing the city. The degeneration of Bombay city due to the rise of fundamentalist party like Shiv Sena deeply hurts the Parsis. Mistry has also highlighted this issue in his earlier works. The transformation of Bombay city into a corrupt and fallen city is deeply mourned by the Parsis. The lament of Inspector Masalavala and Dr. Fitter echoes Mistry's anguish:

To think that we Parsis were the ones who built this beautiful city and made it prosper. And in a few more years, there won't be any of us left alive to tell the tale. Well, we are dying out and Bombay is dying as well. [ibid.:359]

The degeneration of Bombay city symbolises the degradation of the Parsi Community. In the post independence India Bombay has lost its charming qualities due to the rise of religious intolerance, corruption and population explosion, etc. The fate of the Bombay city is similar to the fate of the Parsi community. Both are gliding towards destruction. Christina Rebecca reveals the degradation of Bombay city:

The condition of the city reflects the condition of the society. The deteriorating intolerating nature of the city is the external symbol for the deteriorating cosmopolitan nature of the zoroastrian religion's fall of the elite status, success and respect in India both from the dominant community and of the colonial days. [Rebecca: 308]

The novel is a realistic portrayal of the life and suffering of the Parsi community in post colonial India. Their struggle to maintain their identity in a corrupt and chaotic country is clearly exposed. The economic, religious, social and political crises faced by the Parsis during the post independence era are well documented by Mistry.

Mistry also discusses the importance of certain rites and rituals and he also infuses some Zoroastrian Myths in his novel. The novel is completely devoted to the Parsis and their struggle for existence. Mistry's concern for the bleak future of his community is clearly revealed in the novel.

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