



PARSI CULTURE IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S FAMILY MATTERS

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ABSTRACT:

*Rohinton Mistry is one Indian author who has emerged as a significant literary figure during the 20th century. He was brought up in Bombay which made him an eminent writer for depicting the life of Parsis in India and portraying the corruption of the city during the three decades of the twentieth century. Mistry immigrated to Canada in 1975, currently resides in Brampton, Ontario-Canada. As a writer, who lives and writes from Canada, Mistry's writings focus mainly on India. Like many expatriate writers, he continues a relationship with country in his writings. As a member of Parsi community Mistry writes about the state of Parsi community within the boundary of India. Thus, as a born Zoroastrian, his works reflect his concern of the existence of his community. His love for his community is clearly shown in his first two works. His latest novel **Family Matters** has the remarkable features of the Parsi community. Like all other Parsi writers, Mistry is concerned with the preservation of the ethnic identity of his community. The ethnic identity, according to Blumer, is:*

A collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared past and cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements which define the group's identity, such as kinship, religion, language, shared territory, nationality or physical appearance.

[Blumer]

Key Words: Zoroastrian, alternative narratives, ethnic, nostalgia, liaison, orthodoxy thoughts.

Parsis are the people who, when persecuted in their homeland in Persia because of their distinct religious identity were provided refuge in India many centuries ago. Maintaining their distinct identity, they have prospered themselves and have contributed to the economy, polity and civic society of India. Over many centuries, they have proved themselves as a model community contributing distinctly to the rich social, cultural, and religious diversity of India. In English literature, there are a lot of Parsi writers who live in India, Pakistan, England, Canada or the United States. With their writings we know about the glorious past of Parsis and their culture and religion. Rohinton Mistry is one of the Parsi writers who mentions his love for his community in every work. Mistry's language is typically the language of a Parsi gentleman. Though he has been living in Canada since 1975, his English is as simple as any Indian's English. His works focus on the Parsi identity. It also reveals how Parsis are learning to cope with the reality of postcolonial Indian and how they are coming to terms with their new lives in the west. Like other postcolonial Indian writers, he also uses the form of alternative narratives and employs anti-realist modes of narration. In an interview by Ali Lakhani with Rohinton Mistry at Vancouver International Writers Festival, Mistry says about the disappearance of the Parsis on the face of the earth that his writing will **preserve a record of how they lived to some extent.**

[Interview by Ali Lakhani with Rohinton Mistry at the Vancouver International Writers Festival, 'The Long Journey of Rohinton Mistry']

Rohinton Mistry's most awaited and latest novel *Family Matters* was published in 2002. In *Family Matters* Mistry returns to Mumbai and the Parsi world with a vengeance, the focus is firmly on the Parsi community and the canvas has thus shrunk considerably but this is not a reductive book. It is a book which is very big in compassion- it is indeed Mistry's most compassionate book to date. At the age of 50, from his Canadian point of vantage, Mistry has viewed the life of middle-class Parsi in Mumbai in the mid-1990s. With the help of *Family Matters* Mistry registers the changing face of an Indian Parsi family through its portrayal of three generations of the life of Nariman Vakeel, a widower who is seventy nine when the novel begins. Taking Nariman's life as focus, the issue of family life, ethnic identity, memory and nostalgia are explored with the already running theme of India's pluralism and the place of Parsi

minority within which Mistry dealt within his earlier fiction. This novel also like his earlier works, has received accolades from critics Linda L. Richards remarks:

His most recent novel, *Family Matters*, is brilliant. It manages to be warm and familiar, while-for North American readers, at any rate-fragrantly exotic.

[Linda L. Richards, 'January Profile: Rohinton Mistry' Interview at www.amazon.ca, March 2003]

This novel is first of all unusual for the North American reader because it focuses on the Parsi and secondly because it is located in Bombay, as India is exotic for these readers.

Nariman Vakeel is the main character of the novel, he is a retired professor of English. He is living in an elegant apartment called Chateau Felicity with his two middle-aged step children namely Coomy and her brother Jal. Nariman is in the clutches of Parkinson's disease. He is representing the lower middle class Parsi family before us. In his young age Nariman loved a non Parsi girl named Lucy but his parents were against his will to marry Lucy. The vicious parental control is shown as taking up cudgels for the fast diminishing community when Nariman's parents force him to marry not for love but for the inbreeding. According to his parents, Nariman's love for Lucy is taken as an ill-considered liaison, and he is asked to make a proper choice by marrying a decent Parsi girl. The community takes upon itself to find Nariman a match, and when they see him **incapable of falling in Love with a Parsi girl**, they make him feel guilty for betraying his community by his **Lufroo with a ferangi girl** [*Family Matters*, 14]. On the contrary, he had married a Parsi widow. But he could not forget his love even in his old age and this led him to a miserable life until his death. Nariman feels sorry for Lucy who, rejected by his family, now lives in YWCA. It is his relationship with Lucy that destroys his marital life. On a fatal day, Lucy and Yasmin, the wife of Nariman, while quarrelling with each other in the balcony, fall down and die.

Vacillating between the existing discontent within the claims of Parsi tradition and existential introspection, Nariman condemns the Parsi ideals that are steeped in ossified dogmas and ultimately accepts the tradition-imposed in-humanity, but not without turning his back on religion.

In this novel we can see another instance of the Parsi hostility to alliance outside that occurs when Yezard, the son-in-law of Nariman, catches his son Murad Kissing a non-Parsi girl. He advises his son:

You can have any friends you like, any race or religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage the rules are different. Because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet, and mix marriage will destroy that.

[Family Matters, 469]

Mistry gets success to show the real Parsi orthodoxy thoughts, he depicts his community's disapproval of inter community marriage. He also shows his community's fear about their falling population. The Parsis always feel that their community is declining day-by-day. Mistry expresses his apprehension about the downfall of the community. Inspector Masalavala, Jal and Dr. Fitters discuss the future of the Parsi community. They agree that the factors contributing to the downfall are, **'dwindling birth rate, our men and women marrying non-Parsis, and the heavy migration to the west'**. *[Family Matters, 400]* Inspector Masalavala expresses his fear thus: **'The experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left'**.*[Family Matters,400]* Inspector Masalavala suggests to his community how it could be increased. He says that Parsi panchayats must prohibit Parsi youth from going beyond a bachelor's degree. If they want to do post-graduation, they have to sign a contract to have many children. He also finds faults with Parsi boys and girls for the falling of birth rate:

'Our Parsi boys and girls don't want to get married unless they have their own flat. Which is next to impossible in Bombay, right? They don't want to sleep under the same roof as their mummy and daddy. Meanwhile, the other communities are doing it in the same roof, never mind the same roof, separated by a plywood partition or a torn curtain. Our little lords and ladies want sound proofing and privacy. These western ideas are harmful'.

[Family Matters, 401]

In *Family Matters* some of the mythology of Parsi beliefs is explained to the reader through the query of one of the boys about the significance of names:

It [Jehangir] means 'Conqueror of world.'

Jehangir was impressed.....

Murud came into the front room..... 'What does my name mean?' he asked.

'You are a boon, a blessing'. said his father

'And Mummy's name?'

Roxana means the dawn.'

'And yours?'

Guardian Angel....

Their names taken together, thought Jehangir, made the perfect family: they were blessed, they possessed the whole world, they had their own guardian angel, and Mummy's dawn light shone upon all of them. Yet mummy and Daddy were fighting and unhappy.....

[Family Matters, 281]

The entire passage suggests that the names carry a unique cultural connotation. Their names are rooted in Parsi tradition and hence highlight different from the others. Like Mistry's earlier novels, the main characters in *Family Matters* are Parsis. Though the story is located in Bombay, it has a universal appeal. In this regard, Linda L. Richards writes:

'Though the story takes place in Bombay, many of the challenges the main characters face are universal, the resolutions they come to are sharply and recognizable human : you don't have to be Parsi or Indian to identify with his characters and dilemmas they face'.

*[Linda L. Richards, 'January Profile: Rohinton Mistry' Interview at
www.amazon.ca, March 2003]*

The identity about religious components are more important for Parsi characters especially in the context of Hinduism which surrounds them. *Family Matters* is described on the issue of numerical decline. It also reveals the traditional notion of

ethnic purity. Tania Luhrmann records about Parsis community in his work **The Good Parsi: The Fate of Colonial Elite in Postcolonial Society:**

‘Until 1941 the Parsi population was slowly but steadily on the rise in India. But in 1961 they were down to over 100,000; in 1971 over 90,000; in 1991 there were 76,000 Parsis in India, with around 50,000 in Greater Bombay’.

[Tania Luhrmann: The Good Parsi : The Fate of Colonial Elite in Postcolonial Society, Cambridge, Massachuself : Havard University, Press 1996, P : 168]

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