RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Reel to Real life: A Study of Rohinton Mistry’s Family Matters

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ABSTRACT

India’s Parsi community, although a micro part, owns a unique identity and culture. The currently existing Parsis are the descendants of Zoroastrians from Greater Iran/Persia who immigrated to the western borders of South Asia (Gujarat and Sindh) during the last half centuries of the first millennium AD to escape from Muslim invaders who were defeating Persia by that time. Zoroastrianism dominated other religions during the era of Muslim conquest of Iran. In contrast to other communities, Parsi has strained a lot to maintain and promote its culture. Parsi’s Indian writing in English is noteworthy and their words spread even outside India. The fact cannot be denied that there is something distinct and quintessential about Parsi culture. Their contribution to English literature needs to be acknowledged. Being a Parsi, Rohinton Mistry clearly portrays the Parsi religion and rituals in his novels. He elaborates on the various shades of the world of the Parsi community and their problematic position within India. Family Matters deepens Mistry’s exploration of the way of life of the Parsi community. Yezad Chenoy, Nariman’s son-in-law, is a member of the Parsi community, who weaves his way between family, friends, community, work and India itself.

Keywords: Parsis, Zoroastrianism, Society, Family, India, Corruption.

Society exists only as a mental concept; in the real world there are only individuals.-Oscar Wilde

Rohinton Mistry, writing from Canada, recalls the ills which beset Bombay in the mid-1900s. But the focus in the novel Family Matters is mainly on the portrayal of human bonds which characterizes the Indian trait. The novel portrays a Bombay, on the verge of Mumbai, its soul ransacked by the Shiv Sena. With the divide and rule policy, it manifests all facts that are immoral in politics. A manner to narrate a good tale is not to oversee any social reality. Infact there is so much political, in this essentially human story.

Mistry’s love for his old city Bombay is clearly marked in the words of Mr.Kapur’s words, “Bombay treated us well. My father started over, with zero, and became prosperous. Only city in the world where this is possible” (151). In the novel, Kapur acts as the mouthpiece of Mistry and pours out his passion for Bombay. He pictures Bombay as a woman and addresses it as “her” (153). It is evident when he says, “When I feel for Bombay you will never know. It’s like the pure love for a beautiful woman, gratitude for her existence and devotion to her living presence” (152).

Kapur’s devotion for Bombay is so intense, for, he says, if Bombay were a creature of flesh and blood, he would give his last drop of blood to save the city.

According to Mr.Kapur, once Bombay was like a jewel by the Arabian Sea, but now it is being raped. In order to give Bombay a new life, Mr. Kapur wants to run in the election. He wants to create a new Bombay, which is free
from riots, corruption, exploitation and treachery. Kapur does not measure everything in terms of money.

Mr. Kapur preserves archaic photographs of his Bombay rather than Mumbai. He presents three pictures of Hughes Road to Yezad as Christmas gift. Yezad expresses his wish to keep the photographs as relics for his services at the Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium. Mr. Kapur’s intention to celebrate every festival in his shop, in order to be a potential candidate for corporation elections reflects the secular outlook of India. The usage of peculiar names like Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium and Jai Hind Book Mart shows Mistry’s attachment to India.

One of the gargantuan problems Mumbai or India faces today, ever since its independence is corruption. Mistry is at his best, when he makes corruption emanate from the school, where the future citizens of the country are shaped and moulded. Jehangir, operating from the power position of a class monitor lets off his well-to-do classmates from home work by taking money. But, his inclination to accept money springs from a motif, that of contributing to the expenditure of his family. On the other hand, Murad’s contribution to the family income is the other way around – saving his bus fares and traversing the distance from school to home by foot.

Mistry attacks fiercely at a widespread evil in Mumbai – the “Matka” (206). For most of the people, Matka is a harmless bit of fun, but, Yezad once falls a victim to it not for fun, but to make both ends meet. Matka is flourishing in Bombay due to the “Politician-criminal-police nexus” (206). Most shocking is the fact that Matka finances Shiv Sena Machinery and thus “in some ways Bombay is Matka and Matka is Bombay” (207). In the novel, Villie Cardmaster earns something by interpreting dreams. To her, life is Matka and Matka is life. When police have shut Matka down, Villie Cardmaster is completely shattered and Yezad tries to console her. At this particular point, it is better to use the words of Jal, “Bombay is an uncivilized jungle now” (45).

In Family Matters, government is pictured in a bad light. It is said that, “Corruption is in the air we breathe. This nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks” (31).

Corruption in India is a serious concern that adversely affects its economy. According to the study undertook by the Transparency International in 2005, around 62% of Indians were directly involved in paying bribes for the successful completion of their official matters. As of December 2008, 120 out of 523 Parliament members were accused of bribing (Corruption in India). In government hospitals, bribery is related with non-availability or duplication of medications, getting admissions, doctor consultations, availing diagnostic treatments.

Rohinton Mistry clearly exposes what happens in reality. His portrayal of the genuine day to day happenings gives life to the novel. In the current situation, corruption has reached its zenith. In the month of June 2013, Uttarakhand faced a terrible disaster due to heavy floods. It is said that rehabilitation measures in Uttarakhand are no less a disaster than the floods. A distance that took 30 minutes earlier, now takes 3 hours. An initial package of 1000 crore rupees was offered by the Union government and about 300 crores have been distributed to people.

Many NGOs, such as Mata Amritanandamayi Ashram and Tata Relief Committee have contributed crores of rupees for rehabilitation. But, just because of corruption by higher officials, the rehabilitation process has been slowed down. At the time of the floods, the State government was much criticized for not having a disaster management plan. Shockingly, the state still does not have one (Gopalaakrishnan 16).

Indian media has widely published allegations of corrupt Indian citizens stashing trillions of dollars in Swiss banks. There have been several cases of collusion of officials of the income tax department of India for preferential tax treatment and relaxed prosecutions in exchange for bribes (Corruption in India).

In the novel, Jal exposes his aversion for the government, which is evident, when he says, “If government had a sense of shame, lots of problems would disappear” (191). In the conversation between Yezad and Vilas Rane (an employee at Jai Hind Book Mart), it is revealed that cricket itself is not cricket today. It is “just another crooked business, with bookies and bribes and match-fixers who break the cricket-loving hearts” (213).
There is also a reference to gutter-level rowdism in *Family Matters*. In the beginning of the novel, when Roxana’s family returns home, after visiting Nariman, two drunkards approach the bus stop and one man even staggers against Roxana. Yezad calls them “two half-men” (44). It is common to see drunkards everywhere even today who cause great nuisance to the public.

The novel also illustrates some national issues. The Babri Mosque riots have been discussed at length. The involvement of the Shiv Sena in the Babri Mosque riots has been resented by Mr. Kapur in a harsh tone. Shiv Sena, he says, was involved in “looting and burning, police helping rioters, withholding assistance in Muslim localities” (154).

Husain, a peon at the Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium, is a victim of Babri Mosque riot, in which he lost his wife and children. Mr. Kapur feels sorry for the present state of Bombay, where “politics is filthy, soiling everything it touches” (157). He yells, “My beloved Bombay is being raped” (158).

In *Family Matters*, Nariman’s family criticizes the Shiv Sainiks angrily as they are the false people. Their double standards enrage the family. When Jal expresses his views regarding the improvement of things through the BJP and Shiv Sena coalition, Yezad laughs and says, “If a poisonous snake was in front of you, would you give it a chance?” (32).

While on the one hand, the Shiv Sainiks pose to be staunch supporters of Indian culture. On the other hand, they promote the degenerating Western culture by organizing a concert by Michael Jackson. So the only way to save the country is practicing the doctrine of self-reliance. There is also a hint about Mahatma’s do-it-yourself (DIY) policy, which prevents many problems in the country.

Mistry portrays the Shiv Sainiks as absolutely lawless people, who make the common people suffer. For instance, Gautam, the journalist, was badly beaten by the Shiv Sainiks, because he had maligned the Shiv Sena in his article. Moreover, elections have turned into mere fights between people. Elections today do not create good leaders, but they create chaos and quarrel among people. In the novel, when Mr. Kapur expresses his desire to run in the election, his wife advises him because, elections “are nothing better than fights between gangsters” (295). There are repeated expressions of Mr. Kapur expressing his ardent love for Bombay. At one point, he compares Bombay with Shakespeare, saying that, they both contain the universe.

In order to take Mr. Kapur’s position in the office, Yezad tells series of lies to Mr. Kapur. He says that two men from Shiv Sena came to the Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium and threatened him. On hearing this, Mr. Kapur frowns and asks the reason for their visit. Yezad replies that any business with Bombay in its name must be changed to Mumbai in thirty days or they have to pay a fine.

Yezad triggers Mr. Kapur’s interest in running in the election by telling harsh lies. He says that if Mr. Kapur wins in the election, he will get in contact with many politicians and police, so that he can easily face the Shiv Sainiks. To the suggestion of Yezad, Mr. Kapur says, “A municipal councillor tackling corruption is like a pen knife trying to dig up a banyan tree” (329).

But, Yezad tries to convince him by praising him as a hero, who can save Bombay if he runs in the election.

The novel not only provides an inside view of the ties between Coomy, Jal, Roxana and Yezad with Nariman, but also completes the process of providing such a view through Murad and Jehangir’s association with their grand-father Nariman. Mistry traces how some people seek their own fate, in the process of making their lives comfortable, by making others suffer.

While the grand-children’s relationship with their grand-father is devoid of any materialistic texture, the grown-ups are in an association with Nariman borders on economic implications. It is this that prompts Coomy and Jal to damage the ceiling of their flat to prevent Nariman from returning to the Chateau Felicity from the Pleasant Villa. In this process, unfortunately some debris from the roof falls on Coomy and she meets a ghastly death.

Yezad, in order to make quick money, tries to pocket the money which is supposed to be handed over to the Shiv Sainiks, who are on a ‘Mumbaization’ scheme, paving the way for the murder of Mr. Kapur. Similarly, Edul Munshi’s plan to slow down the process of repairing the ceiling, in order to make money boomerangs on him and he dies with the crash of the ceiling. All these people like Coomy,
Jal, Edul Munshi and Yezad represent the cunning people, who try to come up in life by hooks or crooks. Perhaps, the only person among the grown-ups in the novel, who intends to keep Nariman happy, is Daisy aunt, the violinist, through her music suggestive of the therapeutic quality embedded in it.

Similarly, there is a mention of the irresponsibility of the Indian policemen. When Coomy and Edul Munshi face an unfortunate death, all the neighbours gather in the flat and discuss to handover the dead bodies for a post mortem. But, if the matter is informed to the cops, there will be all kinds of complications and formalities, may be even a post mortem, that delays the funeral beyond twenty-four hours from the time of death “which is undesirable within Zoroastrian rites” (397).

In order to make money, the police, instead of making matters quick, drag away the time in unnecessary arguments and make things late. So, Jal suggests seeking help from Superintendent Masalavala and Dr. Fitter, who examines the dead bodies and issues death certificates for both. Through this incident, Mistry highlights the irresponsible and selfish cops, who offend their rules and regulations and forbid their duty. Corruption has spread all over the country and many writers have vividly pictured the pathetic condition prevailing in the country. Schools are supposed to make children grow mentally and morally. A teacher’s duty is to mould the students in both education and discipline. Even teachers exploit the lives of students by taking bribes. Aravind Adiga puts it clearly in his debut novel The White Tiger:

There was supposed to be free food at my school- a government programme gave every boy three rotis, yellow daal, and pickles at lunchtime. But we never ever saw rotis, or yellow daal, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the schoolteacher had stolen our lunch money….Once a truck came into the school with uniforms that the government had sent for us; we never saw them, but a week later they turned up for sale in the neighbouring village. (33)

The novel Family Matters also depicts the middle class Indian life and dirt and squalor in India. Roxana’s home is not a cosy one. When Nariman suggested to move to Roxana’s home, Yezad feels uncomfortable, because it is not spacious enough to accommodate another person. Also, when Roxana decides about Nariman’s bedding, she feels that the kitchen is not an option. This is because; mice and cockroaches persist there, despite the poison she spreads regularly. It is implied that the passage between kitchen and “WC” (374) is unhygienic. The floor near the front door is always damp and the cause is not yet traced. Since the house is not sizeable, Murad is forced to make a tent in the balcony and enjoy his nights there.

The novel Family Matters also lends instances of indescribable misery, which is the result of unhygienic conditions in government hospitals. Mr. Rangarajan, who is an employee at a government hospital in Indore, describes the government hospital as “a truly dreadful place” (59). The condition of government hospitals is deteriorated to the worst, with rats running everywhere and nobody getting upset about it. There is also a mention about two terrible happenings in the government hospital. One patient’s toes were completely chewed up by rats and a newborn was eaten by rats—partially, but fatally.

It is said that rats are not the only problem in government hospitals. There was a man with his leg in a full cast and he was complaining that his leg was burning, driving him crazy. Finally, he could not bear it anymore and jumped out of the window. When the cast was removed from his corpse, his flesh was raw, “crawling with bedbugs” (59).

Adiga also observes the poor condition of government hospitals and puts it in his novel The White Tiger:

…there is no hospital in Laxmangarh, although there are three different foundation stones for a hospital, laid by three different politicians before three different elections…. There was no doctor in the hospital. The ward boy, after we bribed ten rupees, said that a doctor might come in the evening. The doors to the hospital rooms were wide open; the beds had metal springs sticking out of them, and the
A meaningful description of the middle class Indian life is depicted by Mistry in *Family Matters*. In order to make the tent, Murad makes use of nothing more than some old plastic sheets. So, Roxana suggests him to borrow Villie’s tarpaulin to make the tent. Yezad’s concern for Roxana and her inadequate intake of nutritious food is evident, when Yezad says, “See the hollows in her cheeks, she looks like a famine victim from Orissa!” (147).

In the midst of all these corruption and exploitation, there is a reference to a man in the novel, who is noteworthy for his honesty. Yezad’s father was gifted with a clock from his bank chairman, for his bravery and honesty. Like the two sides of a coin, there are traitors and exploiters like Coomy and Yezad and also honest people like Mr. Kapur and Yezad’s father.

Rohinton Mistry takes the readers right into the life of a family in *Family Matters*, a family with all its conflicts, misunderstandings, jealousies and unexpected moments of redeeming love. India, his setting, seems to make everything feel bigger and more important, both hopeless and hopeful. The novel takes the readers on a trip of happy, sad, frustrating and testing moments of a family marred by love, hatred and mistrust. Mistry needs no infusion of magical realism to vivify the real. The real world, through his eyes, is magical.
References


