



Parsiness in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters

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Abstract

*Rohinton Mistry, the Indian born Canadian writer belongs to the Parsi community, a small and minor community and all his novels deal with Parsi community. Mistry's point of view about Parsi community is set in his fiction. This attitude about the life and ideas of survival as a minority community also presents in his works. Like *Such A Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, his third novel *Family Matters* also centers round a Parsi family. *Nariman Vakeel*, an aged Parsi widower suffering from twin diseases of the old age - Parkinsonism and Osteoporosis is the protagonist of the novel. Mistry depicts the problems of common Parsi's in the novel. The novel is gone forward with both negatives and positives about the Parsi family. This paper is an attempt to explore Parsiness presents in Mistry's *Family Matters*.*

Key Words: Parsi community, Parsiness, Nariman Vakeel.

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian born Candian writer, who focused on the Parsi people and also socio-political issues in all his novels. His works seek to evolve a vision that involves both the community-centred existence of the Parsis and their involvement with the wider national framework. Like *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine balance*, his *Family Matters* concerned with the experience of the Parsi in India. Mistry's *Family Matters* has rightly been acclaimed as a masterpiece expressing beautifully the writer's humanity and compassion and it was also shortlisted for Broker Prize.

Rohinton Mistry was from the Parsi community and most of his fictional characters are from that community. So it would be beneficial to know more about the Parsi community in India. He depicts the problems of common Parsi's in his novels. He employs a humanistic approach in his works and therefore it is easy to recognize the spiritual nature of human beings and integrates their thoughts, feelings, spirit, body and soul.

Discussion

Family Matters is a recent novel by Rohinton Mistry published in 2002. Mistry recounts to the tale of the struggles of a Parsi family residing in the Indian city Mumbai. In the novel “Rohinton Mistry depicts the Bombay Parsi community he observed from close quarters, and gives us a glimpse of minority group fearing extinction.” (Wadhawan 100). Through the lives of this family, Mistry likewise investigates the bigger issues that Parsi communities face. The novel represents the minority communities of India. The role of government is being questioned throughout the novel in the atrocities to minority communities and the struggle of Parsi community. Religious politics by the major community leaves the minority communities in confusion regarding their life and properties in India. Parsi community is represented as an elite group and their present position in the country is also shown in the novel. Efforts to protect the Parsi community, their religious practices and customs were the central subjects of the novel.

In *Family Matters* Mistry narrates the journey of Nariman Vakeel, an aged Parsi widower suffering from twin diseases of the old age - Parkinsonism and Osteoporosis. The novel is not based on imaginary but it is a real story happening in the daily and routine life of the Parsi community. The protagonist Nariman Vakeel, a retired English professor, lives with his step children Coomy and Jal. At his young age he loved a non Parsi girl but forced to end the relation due to the severe oppositions from his family. He then marries a Parsi widow with two children, and everyone becomes very happy back then. At present his wife is expired and his daughter Roxana is living with her family separately. Coomy is planning to arrange a party on his 79th birthday. Since Nariman is suffering with early Parkinson's disease, Coomy does not want him to go out for a night walk. Despite her concerns Nariman ventures out on a night walk and falls down. He suffers with an ankle break and Coomy tries to take care of him. Nariman was struggling very much while using the toilets and end up using a portable bedpan. Coomy gets frustrated in taking care of her stepfather and plans to send him to his daughter Roxana's place. Without informing Roxana about the broken ankle, they have dropped him in Roxana's place. Roxana's family forcefully adjusts with Nariman in an expectation of his immediate return. One of Roxana's son Jehangir likes to take care of Nariman.

The family faces financial crisis after Nariman's arrival. In a series of events, Roxana's husband turns unemployed and Coomy does not want Nariman to return. She has made up a story of a flood, and vandalized the house to prevent Nariman's return. Unfortunately her plan got backfires on herself and she got killed by a building collapse. After Coomy's death, guilt-stricken Jal invites Nariman, Roxana and her family to the renovated house. Nariman returns to the house with his daughter and family. The story takes a leap of five years and Nariman is still alive but weak and seriously affected with Parkinson's. Roxana appoints a full time nurse to take care of Nariman despite feeling guilty on it. Her husband turns out to be seriously religious and ardent follower of Zoroastrianism and forbids his son in having an affair with a non Parsi girl as happened in the life of Nariman years ago.

Family Matters as a novel shares the misfortune just as the consequent battle for the means of life. In *Family Matters*, the family individuals' moralities are incited through Nariman Vakeel. It allows Mistry to analyze issues of corruption and religious battles that are part of his worries about his home town Bombay.

Mistry is very much aware of the power of the political parties in Bombay and the alliance among BJP and Shiv Sena. The destruction of Babri Mosque is likewise indirectly indicated by Mistry.

A major character in the novel is Nariman Vakeel, is represented as a “metaphor to the geriatric community on the brink of extinction”. (Bharucha 206). Current situation of the Parsi community is portrayed with sympathy as the birth rates are extremely low in the community and the elders of the community are not supported by the youngsters. The fate of the community is depicted through the words of a character in the novel as: “The experts in demographics are confident those fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left.” (FM 412). The community is at the verge of disappearance and another character says that: “Extinct like dinosaurs. They’ll have to study our bones that are all.” (FM 412). The once prosper community which contributes much to the development of the economy of India is now becomes extinct and Mistry says that: “it will be a loss to the whole world. When a culture vanishes, humanity is the loser.” (FM 415). In the novel a character named Dr. Fitter comments about the fall of birth rates in Parsi community as: “There are lots of wealthy couples living alone in new flats who produce just one child. Two, if we’re lucky. Parsis seem to be the only people in India who follow the family planning message. Rest of the country is breeding like rabbits.” (FM 413)

Since Parsis are considered as one of the most educated people, Dr.Fitter comments again that “your demographers will tell you, the more educated a community, the lower the birth rate.”(FM 414). A humorous statement in response to this by Inspector Masalavala sarcastically suggest that- “Then we need to fix that. I have two suggestions. First, our youth must be prohibited from going beyond a bachelor’s degree. Give them cash incentives to study less. And those who want to do post-graduate studies tell them they will get no funding from Panchayat unless they sign a contract to have as many children as the number of people over age fifty in their family. Maximum of seven- we don’t want to spoil the health of our young women”. (FM 414).

Cultural superiority of the Parsis and the decline of the community are portrayed through these humorous lines. According to Aditi Kapoor, “Unless something is done to augment their fast depleting number and to revive their religion, the Parsis after an illustrious past could well just fade out in oblivion.” (Kapoor 32). The cultural superiority and racial purity of the Parsis is well known among others. To show this, the protagonist of the story Nariman Vakeel, remembers his past love affair with Goan catholic girl named Lucy Braganza and the opposition he faced form his family. At the end he had accepted the wish of his parents and had decided to end his “ill-considered liaison with that Goan woman ...that their beloved Nari had finally listened to reason and agreed to settle down.” (FM 11). Mistry, describes the condition of Nariman as: “Like an invalid steered by doctors and nurses, he drifted through the process, suppressing his doubts and misgivings ready to believe that the traditional ways were the best.” (FM 16). But at last, as per the wish of his family, he agrees to marry a forty years Parsi widow with two kids and one of his relative “Mrs. Kotwal scuttled across the room, pinched his cheek, and said, “When the naughty boy at last becomes a good boy, it’s a double delight.”(FM 13). This is an evident of Nariman’s surrendering towards the will of his community where inter religious marriages are not welcomed.

Parsis are very much concerned about preserving their racial purity in future generations and therefore they always oppose inter religious relationships. One of the characters in the novel Murad, loves a non-Parsi girl and comes closer to her on the stairs. To this Murad's father Yezad, responds as:

"I'm warning you, in this there can be no compromise. The rules, the laws of our religion are absolute, this Maharashtrian cannot be your girlfriend. You can have any friends you like, any race or religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage, the rules are different".

"Why"?

"Because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet and mixed marriages will destroy that"

"You think you're superior?"

"Inferior or superior is not the question. Purity is a virtue worth preserving." (FM 482).

The infirmity of the Parsis on the traditional rules can be seen from the attitude of Yezad. They believe in maintaining a racial purity in their generations and therefore they don't promote marital relationships or any such kind of closeness with non-Parsi women. They want the members of their community to adhere on the traditional and contemporary values set by their ancestors.

During the British rule in India, Parsis enjoyed an elite status because they were closely associated with Britishers in all their activities. This close connection with the Britishers provided them an influential capacity in the society. But post-independence, Parsis lost their importance in the society and their condition turned into a miserable state. "Parsis suffer from a sense of loss resulting from the loss of political patronage they enjoyed during the British rule." (Basantani 36). Now the Parsi race is at the verge of becoming extinct. Dr. Fitter in the novel describes the situation of the community and his disappointment regarding the state of his community as:

"Parsi men of today were useless, dithering idiots, the race had deteriorated. When you think of our forefathers, the industrialists and shipbuilders who established the foundation of modern India, the philanthropists who gave us our hospitals and schools and libraries and bags what luster they brought to our community and the nation". (FM 51)

These lines reflect the failure of the Parsi community in maintaining their social status and influence in the country. They had occupied prestigious positions in the society and very much concerned about the importance of education. But even after attaining prestigious educational qualifications, they lack open mindedness in issues like inter religious marriages, which led to the extinction of their community. Low birth rates, high economic pressures to live in Bombay and other social norms insist the unmarried children to take care of the aged parents.

This issue was portrayed in the novel with Nariman, his step daughter Coomy and his daughter Roxana. Coomy hesitates to take care of Nariman when he was fallen down and broke one of his ankles. She wanted her married sister Roxana to take care of Nariman and to escape from her own duty. "Nariman's

longing for fresh air and life outside the ambit of his step-children is symbolized by the picture on the cover of the text, that of an old Parsi, in a trade-mark Sola Toppee, that harks back to the colonial times, standing with his back to the camera, gazing out at the sea that girdles the island of Bombay and twice a day with its life-giving breezes flushes out the stale odours from the city.” (Bharucha 172). The pathetic state of the aged community is visible from Nariman’s and Coomy’s talk regarding going outside the house for a walk. Coomy doesn’t want to take Nariman outside and says that:

“This building isn’t called Chateau Felicity for nothing. I would lock out the hell of the outside world and spend all my days indoors.”

“You couldn’t” said Nariman. “Hell has ways of permeating heaven’s membrane”. He began softly, “Heaven, I’m in heaven” which irritated Coomy even more, and he stopped humming. “Just think back to the Babri Mosque riots”. ...said Coomy indignantly,

“The riots were in the streets, not indoors.”... Nariman said,

“You remember that, don’t you?”

“The goondas who assumed Muslims were hiding in Dalal Estate and set fire to it?”(FM 4)

Coomy’s fears come true as Nariman falls for the second time which had caused him a serious physical damage. He was treated in the Parsi General Hospital and there he met Mr. Rangarajan, a non-Parsi, aspiring to immigrate to Canada. Middle class Indians wanted to immigrate to other developed countries from India. Likewise, educated Parsis were also longing to migrate to other developed Western countries. According to Mistry, Parsis who left India to settle abroad are not in a favorable condition as they are failing to meet their expectations there too. They could not adjust with the Western culture and always wished to be associated with other Asians. A discussion between the Parsi police officer Masalavala and Dr. Fitter shows the issues of the Parsi community as-

“The Orthodox and reform argument? That’s only one part of it. The more crucial point is our dwindling birth rate, our men and women marrying non-Parsi, and the heavy migration to the West. Vultures and crematoriums both will be redundant ... if there are no Parsis to feed them.” (FM 412).

Mistry in his novel *Family Matters* highlights several customs and beliefs particular and peculiar to Parsi community. Nariman used to entertain the children with stories from the Shah-Nama and his own childhood. Even the birthdays are also celebrated in traditional Parsi style. As Sujata Chakravorty states- “Murad’s eighteenth birthday is celebrated in traditional Parsi style along with Parsi sweets- sooterfeni, burfi, malai-na-khaja, from the Parsi dairy farm.” (Chakravorty 46).

Conclusion

Family Matters by Mistry is an exemplary work that talks about the Nariman and his Parsi family and their problems of unbelongingness and preservation of family values. Mistry discusses the controversies among Parsis in terms of changes demanded in different matters. Mistry depicts the life of Indian Parsis in his novel and desires to save his community from extinction. So he is particular in preserving the Parsi

tradition and culture. *Family Matters* is considered as a rich novel with gentle humor and possess a narrative style which earned Mistry the highest popularity.

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