

The impact of social suppressions in the characters of Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters

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ABSTRACT: *Since time immemorial, the impact of communal suppression on every individual is identified in every Indian space. The communal suppression becomes vigorous due to the impact of colonialism. The writers like Rohinton Mistry exhibit the conditions of Indians in accordance with the communal variation. In his Family Matters, Mistry describes the communal sufferings of the protagonist Nariman Vakeel, a 79 year old Professor who belongs to non-parsis community. Nariman Vakeel is very much depressed when his love affair with Lucy Bragansa who belongs to non-parsis community was rejected by his parents. Owing to his communal enforcement; Nariman is forced to marry a widowed woman who belongs to his community with her two children. The protagonist faces a lot of confrontation in his marriage life. Nariman insists the same to his grandson. Generation after generation they are being communalized.*

KEYWORDS: *Suppression, common man, post-colonial, enforcement, communalization*

I. INTRODUCTION

In post-colonial Literature, writers identify the oppressed social groups and ethnic populations produce cultures but are different from mainstream majority cultures. Many of these writers made their attempt to highlight the glories of their culture, restore lost values and give their own version of their social history. A vociferous assertion of community with its glorious past and deplorable present is clearly evident in the writings of minority Parsi writers. A remarkable feature of the Parsi community that Mistry wants to vindicate in the novel is its exclusivity, racial purity and cultural superiority. The denial of the Parsis makes them to treat as outsiders. In the novel, the protagonist Nariman Vakeel is treated as an outsider for his love affair with Lucy Bragansa, a Goan girl. His parents grieve over his affair with a non-Parsi girl and that makes him to give her up. As a result, accepting that "traditional ways were the best" (Mistry 16) and realizing his responsibilities to hold up the values and the purity of his community, he marries a forty-two year old Parsi widow with two children. Nariman, though a highly educated person and a professor, has to surrender his personal fondness in preference to his community consciousness. He has no rights to have the life partner of his choice as being a Parsi his allegiance to his community is in his flesh and blood that decides his life.

To highlight the Parsis' efforts to preserve racial purity, Mistry quotes a similar experience. Towards the end of the novel, Nariman's grandson Murad develops intimacy with Anjali, a non-Parsi girl. Yezad is terribly upset when he finds his son Murad kissing the girl in the stairwell and he advises him that his relationship with the non-Parsi girl is totally unacceptable. He shouts in anger, "I'm warning you, in this there can be no compromise. The rules, the laws of our religion are absolute; this Maharastrian cannot be your girlfriend". (469) Yezad continues his berate and warns his sons "you can have any friends you like, any race or religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage, the rules are different" (469). Yezad is a representative of Parsi who affirms to preserve the purity of his race at any cost "because we are a Persian race a unique contribution to this planet and mixed marriages will destroy that" (469) Mistry has deliberately brought into the novel the love experiences of both the grandfather and the grandson with non-Parsi girls to reiterate that the Parsis can never change their convictions even it affects whims and fancies of the individual.

Mistry also realistically depicts in the novel the present miserable condition of the Parsi race. In free India, They are gradually losing the lofty and exalted position they once enjoyed. At present there are various factors which make them feel that their existence is under threat. They feel that the successive governments of India are biased towards them. The changing social system, the increasing communal clashes and violence triggered off by fundamentalism suppress them to a great extent. The Parsi race is nearing its extinction that makes them worry about the future of the race. At this juncture, a reality threatens to annihilate his race. He exposes his fears through Dr.Fitter in the novel who bemoans the pathetic conditions of his community as follows:

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 baags, what lustre they brought to our community and the nation(Mistry 49)

Evidently, Mistry opines that the Parsis are not able to maintain and sustain the much esteemed status once his forefathers enjoyed in India. On another occasion, Dr. Fitter and Inspector Masalavala are deep

in conversation and they share their grief and concern over the future of their community. Dr. Fitter Comments that the Parsis will be like “dinosaurs”(400). “The experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left”(400). Dr. Fitter further humorously makes a comparison between the Parsis and the other Indian communities. “There are lots of wealthy couples living alone in new flats who produced 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”(401).

In family Matters, the significant implication of the Bombay railway is described as “a stage where the regalia of British sovereignty were displayed, where the space was most explicitly governed”(29). The

link between railway and the body is deployed in strikingly different ways as evident in Mr. Kapur’s adventure at Bombay railway station. It is in the railways that Mr. Kapur countenances the spirit of Bombay in flesh and blood. He excitedly narrates the incident he had encountered at the railway station to Yezad. The man lifted his hands towards the running train and he was immediately helped by myriad of helping hands. The image of the railway as the convergence of all kinds of humanity is a striking metaphor for a nation which is overpopulated yet struggles to overcome numerous barriers to survive. The mixing, melting and merging of humanity in the railway station is completely contrastive to Bombay which is segregated in the name of religion. Mr. Kapur’s words “My beloved Bombay is being raped”(151) encapsulate the present condition of the city. Bombay is a microcosm of the post-colonial India. Predominant religious fanaticism and its impact on the ordinary people in Bombay are played throughout the novel. The fact that all those who stand up against religious fanaticism are silenced is an allegory noted in the killing of Mr. Kanpur by the shiv sainiks, Destruction of secularism in the city symbolically alludes to demolition of anti-colonial nationalism by varied forces of religious identification though Bombay is under the hold of unholy nexus of politicians.

Race and ethnicity are the significant cultural and social categories in the heterogeneous societies. These are “one of the most effective and compelling determinants of cultural difference and of literary specificity”(Ryan 148). Ethnic studies characterizes the ethnic identity and inter-ethnic relations centre staging differences and diversity, celebrating hybridity and multiculturalism as parameters of dynamic intercultural interaction resulting in growth, vitality and change in the evolving geopolitical situation. The focus is on the other cultures and their literatures highlighting singularities and individuations of difference and exposing the hidden agenda of colonialism responsible for hierarchical or binary structures that are the natural offshoot of hegemonic oppressions. *Family Matters* witnesses the Babri Mosque riots rocked Mumbai. The demolition of Babri Mosque was a major cataclysmic event aimed at hurting the secular polity of India. Mistry has brought out expostulations of minority community with the ‘secular’ multicultural image of the Indian polity. The role of the government agencies in the perpetration of atrocities against the innocent civilians of the minority communities has been questioned. An aged Parsi couple is burnt down in their bedroom by the rioting mobs, under the impression that Muslims were hiding there. Mistry points out the danger exists is for both the Muslims and the Parsis. Husain, a peon at the Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium, is a victim of Babri Mosque police, which were behaving like gangsters. While narrating his woeful tale, Husain becomes an authentic voice of not only the minority Muslim community but also of the author’s own Parsi community.

Mr. Kapoor, his benevolent employer, responds, “More than three years have passed, and still no justice. Shiv Sena polluted the police. And now Shiv Sena has become the government.”(155). Mistry’s diatribe against Shiv Sena at several places in this novel becomes understandable in the wake of Shiv Sena’s alleged partisan role in the Babri Mosque riots. It becomes the resultant of insecure feeling by the ethnic minorities including the Parsi Zoroastrians who mostly are identified in Bombay. An undercurrent of tension between the Parsi minority community and the Hindu majority community may be taken cognizance of. However, this tension is not volatile enough to manifest itself into a violent confrontation causing irreparable loss to the fragile multicultural life of Bombay. Mistry further makes Nariman and Jal deride the whims and caprices of the party leadership. In another scene, when Yezad along with his wife and children is going back after attending Nariman’s birthday party, he has an encounter with the drunkards at the bus stand who ogle at Roxana and make libidinous remarks.

On being challenged by Yezad, they scoff at his threat and reveal their identity. “We are Shiv sena people, we are invincible!”(44). Mr.Rangarajan, a non Parsi technician in the Parsi hospital says that some Shiv Sainiks have infiltrated the GPO, subjecting innocent letters and postcards to incineration if the address reads Bombay instead of Mumbai. Any person moving under suspicious circumstances in a Parsi locality may be construed as a Shiv Sainik. In another incident the politician-criminal-police nexus is exposed by Gautum, a non-Parsi journalist. The novelist has succeeded in lending a political background to the otherwise personal life story of a Parsi family. The ethnic minorities in India are wary of the current ethno-religious politics being pursued by the dominant majority community group. These minorities are affirming their ethnic identities by retreating to their ethnocentric enclosures. Within the hegemonic Hindu cultural order the assertion of ethnic identity and self-imposed ghettoization has assuasive effect on the Parsi mind beset by doubts and uncertainties. Mistry has focused on the current issues, glorious Parsian past, the Indian connection and ways and mores of the Parsi Zoroastrians. He discourses not only the problems of Nariman Vakeel, an aged Parsi of 79 suffering from the diseases of the old age like Parkinson and Osteoporosis but also the ageing Parsi community on the verge of extinction. Inspector Masalavala in his conversation with Dr. Fitter comments, “The experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will no Parsis left”(412). Dr.Fitter’s ironic humour is not without a tinge of tragedy in it: “Extinct like dinosaurs. They’ll have to study our bones, that’s all”.(415) The reasons given for the dwindling Parsi population include decreasing birth rate, Parsi men and women marrying non-Parsis and the heavy migration to the West. Inspector Masalaval laments that in a few more years, there won’t be any Parsi left alive to tell that it was they who built the beautiful city of Bombay and made it prosper. He sadly reflects, “But it will be a loss to the whole world. When a culture vanishes, humanity is the loser”(415).

While discussing the various issues facing the Parsi community, Mistry dwells upon the inter-religious marriages in the community through the paradigmatic shift to Nariman’s love affair in the flashback scenes which unfold Nariman’s past life history. In the first flashback scene Nariman is shown surrendering to the will of his parents by agreeing to end his ‘ill considered liason’ with a Catholic girl Lucy Braganza. For eleven years he and Lucy struggled to create world for themselves but “they had been ground down by their families”(13). Lucy’s parents too were against her marrying outside her religion. Inter-religious marriage is a problem not peculiar to the Parsi community alone. It is a worldwide phenomenon, which has usually been resisted by the different communities. However, inter-religious marriages in the case of Parsis should be considered in the context of their fast diminishing numbers. Parsi men and women marrying outside their community is one of the major reasons for the downward trend in population. Under the impact of westernization all Zoroastrian institutions have undergone change but religion has singularly remained unaffected. However, with the changing times, the need for reforming the debilitating prescriptions of the fixed Parsi faith has been felt by the liberals though has been tenaciously opposed by the conservatives. Mistry takes up the case of performing the sacred ceremony of ‘navjote’-investiture ceremony of ‘Sudra’ and ‘Kusti’ into the Zoroastrian religion-of the children of a Parsi mother and a non-Parsi father which is an absolute taboo for the orthodox Parsis. Nariman’s father being orthodox writes a letter to the editor of a local newspaper opposing such an investiture. However, his neighbour Mr.Arjani, a liberal, writes a fervent polemic favouring the acceptance of such children into the Zoroastrian fold. This incensed Mr. Vakeel and in his vitriolic letters he called Mr.Anjani “a prime example of the substandard mind whose cogitations were clearly worthless, unable to grasp the simplest tenets of the religion and the supreme significance of navjote”(133). This polemical debate took them to the court when Mr.Anjani sued Mr.Vakeel for libel. Though Mr.Anjani lost the case due to some technical lacuna in the libel laws, he later did not miss the opportunity to wreak vengeance on his son through Lucy by employing her as a household drudge.

An unpleasant concomitant of the elderly Parsi community is the care of aged parents like Nariman. Low birthrate and high average age of the marriage have left very few young couples to look after the aged parents, Nariman’s middle-aged, and unmarried, stepchildren Jal and Coomy are not unencumbered with the responsibility of looking after the aged step-father. Mistry’s concern for the moribund community finds further manifestation in his depiction of quotidian level of existence of the ageing and unmarried Parsi women. Coomy’s bitterness for the step-father goes back to Nariman’s early married life when her mother was subjected to extreme mental torture by Nariman’s resumption of old love ties with Lucy. Coomy’s life story, far from being farcical, becomes a sad tale full of sympathy. Her true feelings for the family come to light when a wedding gift with a note, “For Murad and Jehangir, on their wedding”(484), containing two pairs of gold cufflinks and two sets of shirt studs was discovered by Jal after her death. It is this gesture, which brings tears in Roxana’s eyes and makes Jehangir reflective. Mistry’s introduction of a talented violinist Daisy Ichhapporia in the life of the bed-ridden Nariman is a welcome exception, which wafts him away from the sordid and insalubrious living conditions to the soothing world of music.

The image of the railway as the convergence of all kinds of humanity is a striking metaphor for a nation which is overpopulated yet struggles to overcome numerous hurdles to survive. The mixing, melting and merging of humanity in the railway station is in complete contrast to Bombay which is segregated in the name of religion. Nariman's senility coupled with his Parkinson's disease, Jal's partial deafness; echo the decaying condition of the country they live in. Nariman Vakeel in the text represents the fate of the geriatric Parsi community; the fate of the colonial elite is similar to that of the condition of the Parsi community in the post-colonial country. Nariman devotes a lot of time in delineating the internal rift between the conservative and the radical section inside the Parsi community. The relationship between Mr. Kapur and Yezad is a case in point. Their relationship is other than employer/employee kind, they share their lives, loss and happiness. As Mr. Kapur shows Yezad the priceless photographs of Hughes Road in 1930s Yezad's memory opens into his childhood happy days and he becomes emotional and exclaims "No matter where you go, there is only one important story: of youth, and loss, and yearning for redemptions" (221). Reading it one might agree with Mr. Kapur that there is one and one story of youth, loss, yearning and redemption. In this case it is the story of the loss of good old cosmopolitan Bombay. Yezad's memory and reactions to time and loss finally reveal him as incapable of coming to terms with mutability one of the key terms that is tangible here is Yezad's reaction to the spaces longing to get back to his father's house at Hughes Road. Mr. Kapur's photograph brings back the longing in him. In his own words he tells Mr. Kapur, "You know, in these pictures you have shown me my loss" (220). Yezad's own failure to sustain the connection becomes the book's final tragedy and undermines any simple redemptive modernistic vision of wholeness of art.

Yezad and other characters like Mr. Kapur, Mr. Nariman, Coomy cling to their past and are ultimately lost. For instance, Coomy and Jal's collection of toys decaying in their cabinet signifies their fixation of the past, Lucy's obsession and thereby the ensuing struggle to get back her "Nari" symbolizes inevitability of decay. Yezad's tragedy is that he fails to recognize and contest the social forces behind the transformation of his and his father's 'space'—just as he fails to confront the abuses of body and spaces Yezad attempts to migrate, unfortunately fizzles and makes him bitter. Husain is a living example of how the residue of the riot can ravage the human beings emotionally as well as physically. Nariman's Parkinson's near vegetative condition and Jal's handicap corroborate Boehmer as scarred. Often because of the very barrier they erect themselves to protect wrap from the outside world. Yezad, Coomy and Nariman's parents wrap themselves in religion fanatically thereby disrupting the lives of their loved ones. This is symbolic of the religious fundamentalists who try to undermine the enshrined secularism their motherland. Mistry's novel recognizes the role of capitalism and colonialism in dividing people and making it difficult to keep body and soul together. Indeed all the machination of the capitalism and neocolonialism could not help with Yezad's unemployment after Mr. Kapur's murder, with Suresh and the unorganized illiterate cheap labour go to Vilas to write their letters, or with the insecurity of the highly westernized Parsi community and the xenophobic religious fanaticism. These pointers emphasize the text's interest in the moral culpability and impossibility of bold insulation against the taint of money in a society where anything or anyone can be bought and sold.

II. CONCLUSION

Family Matters is about imposed patterns and double-edged search for order in the flux on both the individual and the national levels. It uses patterns of reoccurrences and cyclicity and multifunctional elements. If the Indian national allegory less as the story of the nation in a finite, self-contained textual space than as a proliferation of stories that go up to make the present day India.

REFERENCE

Mistry, Rohinton. *Family Matters*. Vintage. 2003. Print.