

# Nariman's Long Journey in Search of Selfless and Caring Soul in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters

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## Abstract

*A Parsi is a member of a Zoroastrian community, one of two mainly situated in India, with a few in Pakistan. Parsis migrated from greater Iran to Gujarat, where they were given refuge, between the 8th and 10th century to avoid persecution following the Muslim conquest of Persia. Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian writer. Born in Bombay in 1952, of Parsi origin, Mistry immigrated to Canada in 1975. Like other Parsi writers, Mistry's work is guided by this experience of double displacement. As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the margins of Indian society, and hence his writing challenges and resists absorption by the dominating and Hindu-glorifying culture of India. Family Matters is at once a domestic drama and an intently observed portrait of present-day Bombay in all its vitality and corruption. At the age of seventy-nine, Nariman Vakeel, already suffering from Parkinson's disease, breaks an ankle and finds himself wholly dependent on his family. This research paper aims to explore Nariman's Long Journey in search of a selfless and caring soul in Mistry's Family Matters.*

**Keywords:** Parsi, Identity, Family, diaspora, minorities.

## Introduction

A Parsi is a member of a Zoroastrian community, one of two situated in India, with a few in Pakistan. Parsis migrated from greater Iran to Gujarat, where they were given refuge, between the eighth and tenth century to avoid discrimination following the Muslim conquest of Persia. At the time of the Muslim takeover of Persia, the presiding religion was Zoroastrianism. Iranians fought against Muslim conquerors for nearly two hundred years. During this time several Iranians who are now called Parsis decided to conserve their religious identity by escaping from Iran to India. The survival of the Parsis within the Indian landmass distinguishes them from the minor Zoroastrian Indian Community of Iranis, who are much more new arrivals, largely descended from Zoroastrians escaping the suppression of the Qajar dynasty and therefore the overall social and political turmoil of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Iran. Parsis are usually not alarmed with the theological study part of Zoroastrianism. Most Parsis are familiar with religious practices tied to their identity and thus know little about the formal doctrinal teachings. The core modules of Zoroastrianism as practiced by the Parsi community are the philosophies of initiation and purity, daily prayers, worship at fire temples, marriage, funerals, and general worship.

Today, Parsis are found larger numbers in the old Bombay Presidency. They have also settled in recent times in all main cities and towns throughout India. Massive immigrant residents are now found in the United States, Canada, Britain, and Pakistan.

## Discussion

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian writer. Born in Bombay in 1952, of Parsi origin, Mistry immigrated to Canada in 1975. In 1987 Penguin Books Canada published his collection of short stories, *Tales from FirozshaBaag*, which together describe the daily life of the Parsi residents in a Bombay apartment block. The stories concern themselves with the tribulations and the idiosyncrasies of Bombay Parsis. Mistry's fiction is rooted in the streets of Bombay, the city he left behind for Canada at the age of twenty-three. This 'imaginary homeland' - something of a literary capital within South Asian diasporic writing today - has inevitably led to comparisons with Salman Rushdie, another Bombay born author now based abroad. However the differences between the two men are perhaps as compelling as their similarities.

Rohinton Mistry is a writer who makes up a part of the Indian diaspora. Moreover, he is also a Zoroastrian Parsi whose ancestors were exiled by the Islamic conquest of Iran, putting him and his kind in diaspora in the Indian subcontinent. Like other Parsi writers, Mistry's work is guided by this experience of double displacement. As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the margins of Indian society, and hence his writing challenges and resists absorption by the dominating and Hindu-glorifying culture of India. What Mistry explores in his stories are the relationships at the heart of this community, their cultural identity and the uniqueness of their community living. At the same time Mistry seeks to shed light and indeed fully embrace the syncretic nature of the diasporic Parsi experience whether that be in North America or in India. His writing includes *A Fine Balance* (1995), *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *Family Matters* (2001), *The Scream* (2008), *Tales from FirozshaBaag* (1987).

Rohinton Mistry's enthralling novel is at once a domestic drama and an intently observed portrait of present-day Bombay in all its vitality and corruption.

At the age of seventy-nine, Nariman Vakeel, already suffering from Parkinson's disease, breaks an ankle and finds himself wholly dependent on his family. His step-children, Coomy and Jal, have a spacious apartment (in the inaptly named Chateau Felicity) but are too squeamish and resentful to tend to his physical needs. Nariman must now turn to his younger daughter, Roxana, her husband, Yezad, and their two sons, who share a small, crowded home. Their decision will test not only their material resources but, in surprising ways, all their tolerance, compassion, integrity, and faith. Sweeping and intimate, tragic and mirthful, *Family Matters* is a work of enormous emotional power.

*Family Matters*, the title is at once cleverly plain and gently wordplay. Mistry has viewed the life of a middle-class Parsi family in Bombay from his Canadian point of vantage. The novel focuses on the oppression and comfort of individual and family relationships. It hints at the current and existing effects of public policies on private life. This Bombay epic is a three generational series piece and mourns for the negation of Parsi family. In *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry has explored human frailty in old age that arises to question between emotional and economic and the moral and spiritual implications. Although, its' specific geographical and cultural setting is in India. *Family Matters* illustrates universal issues of impartiality caretaking and family relationships.

*Family Matters* as a novel that shares with the loss as well as the subsequent struggle for the meaning of life. In *Family Matters*, the family members' moralities are provoked through the injury Nariman Vakeel. It permits Mistry to examine matters of corruption and religious struggles that are part of his larger concerns about his home city of Bombay. Mistry is well aware of the prominent party exercising its power in Bombay and the coalition between BJP and Shiv Sena. The demolition of Babri Mosque is also slantly hinted at by Mistry. Jal voices his opinion on the matter above and says: "May be the BJP and Shiv Sena coalition will improve things. Said Jal... Yezad laughed if a poisonous snake was in front of you, would you give it a chance? Those two parties encouraged the Hindu extremists to destroy the Babri Mosque" (*Family Matters*,

31-32). He continues, “And what about all the hatred of minorities that Shiv Sena has spread for the last thirty years” (33).

Mistry, however, does not confine himself to the vicinities of his family but extends and explores situations and relationships between neighborhood, community, and country. In interactions between Yezaad and his boss Mr. Kapur, Yezaad gets nostalgic on being reminded of Mr. Kapoor’s three photographs of Jehangir Mansion and Hughes Road his lost house. “This building – its Jehangir Mansion, my parents moved there when they got married... Yezad continued to drink it all in “Amazing, how a photo shows you things your eyes forgot to see.” (223). Mistry has very beautifully captured the nostalgia to its very core. He writes, “The photograph, conjuring up the street for Yezad, let him hear the traffic, smell the meaty smoke that always hung outside the sizzler, taste the Bhelpuri” (224).

Mistry novels reflect the interest in the importance of personal and cultural identity. These issues take their parts in the family response to Nariman’s sudden need for care. Family Matters provides an intimate and compelling depiction of matters to families in the universal situation of parents’ need for home care. He unfolds the detailed story of religious, ethnic, and cultural. It comes across with all who have experienced the complexities of the haunting of the present by the past and the oppressions of selfishness and pride. Mistry invokes the experiences of all of the family matters tremendously in the life of individuals. There is a sudden shift in the dynamics of a family resulting from illness or disability in Family Matters.

The novel Family Matters deals with questions of religious intermarriage, problems arising in a blended family between parent (Yasmin), stepparent (Nariman), children (Roxana) and step children (Coomy and Jal) and the difficulties of caring for aged and ailing parents. The structure of the Novel Nariman Vakeel is the 79-year-old professor of English. He is suffering from Parkinson and Osteoporosis. He is living with his two adult unmarried stepchildren Jal and Coomy in their large family house. When he was about 35 years old, he wanted to get married to Lucy, a Goan Christian. Reluctantly, and with tragic consequences, Nariman

succumbed to family pressure and took instead a Parsi widow (with two children) to wife. However, Lucy never stopped loving him and became half-crazy with his decision to conform to family wishes. This made Nariman feel devastated.

Lucy hounded him taking up premises close to where Nariman has started living with his new wife Yasmin and their children. Even though he has started his life with another woman, he does not stop loving Lucy. His private meeting with Lucy displeases his wife, Yasmin. The two step-children are marvels of characterization. Coomy, the righteous spinster secretly blames Nariman for having killed her mother, with his unruly love of Lucy. One could say that she is her deceased mother’s avenger. Her life is full of hatred. Jal, her soft-willed brother, represents as opportunistic powerless, because even though he is friendly, he cannot resist his sister’s fury and rage, and objectively sides with her.

Nariman is, at first, taken care of well, but being bedridden, he is now an invalid. Coomy pretends that they have no money any more to look after him. She and Jal bundle him in to an ambulance and deliver him to his own daughter Roxana. Yesad, the son-in-law of Nariman leads a life of happiness, laughing with his boys (Murad and Jehangir), enjoying his wife’s loveliness when he came back from work. When he visits his father in law, he respects him and enjoys his time there. But things start changing when Nariman is obliged to stay with Roxana. He is called a ‘genial father’ when he initially visits his daughter, son in law and grandchildren. Later he becomes a rigid purist, as he is bed ridden. Then, Yesad will not allow ‘his’ sons to touch Nariman’s instruments, and lets the old man starve in agony if Roxana is away. In addition, this unbalancing of an ordinary virtuous life reverberates on the innocence of his boys. Joy and happiness are no longer the rule at home, because a poison of greed and hatred has been inoculated somewhere up the line. Jehangir gets himself trapped in a bribe-taking scheme at school (he helps classmates to cheat on their lessons), so he can bring money to pay for grandpa’s medicines. Yesad’s son Murad, is in love with a non- Parsi, as his grandfather does with Lucy.

In the world inhabited by Yesad and his family, the notion of good is adulterated, and evil is

immanent in humankind. Good and wicked permeate one another, partly through those ageless human proclivities, vengeance, pride, and intolerance. Hence, characters' motives are often grey. Coomy behaves badly towards Nariman. It is perhaps a subconscious act of revenge for the way he treats her mother for which she has a legitimate grievance. Yezad is tortured by guilt over his covert activities until he finds that religion can conveniently be made to bear the burden of a multitude of sins.

All characters in the novel face identity crisis and they struggle individually. But Nariman suffers physically and mentally more than any other character. For example, Yezad's life in Bombay reflects full of stress and strain of daily commute to work and insufficient salary working conditions. Yezad has eager to immigrate to Canada. Ironically, Yezad and Roxana had interviewed but at the end of the interview Yezad lost his faith with,

You sir, are a rude and ignorant mar, a disgrace to your office and country. You have sat here abusing us, abusing Indians, and India, one of the many countries your government drains of its brainpower, the brainpower that is responsible for your growth and prosperity. Instead of having the grace to thank us, you spew your prejudices and your bigoted ideas. You, whose people suffered racism and xenophobia in Canada where they were Canadian citizens, put in camps like prison is of war-you sir, might be expected, more than anyone else, to understand the more enlightened Canadian ideals of multiculturalism. But if you are anything to go by, then Canada is a gigantic hoax. (253)

This is Mistry's the first instance of anti-Canadian discourse after the early critiquing of Canadian multiculturalism in "Lend Me Your Light" and "Swimming Lessons" in *Tales from FirozshaBaag*. Then, the Bombay riots are proclaimed by Yezad's boss, VikramKapur points out, Bombay endures because it gives and it receives. Within this warp and weft is woven the special texture of its social fabric the spirit of tolerance, acceptance generosity. Anywhere else in the, world, in those so-called civilized places like England and America, such terrible conditions would lead to revolution.

Finally, this myth supports the basic Zoroastrian belief of the eternal battle between good and evil that

rages within the soul of all men. Thus, it is important for human beings to remember their origins through such devices. Shattered dreams of immigration also trouble the pages of *Family Matters*.

## Conclusion

The *Family Matters* is an exemplary work. It completely talks about Nariman and his family. It reflects family and society at large. Since it is a family novel, it asserts small walled events and supports the family in length. The proposed epigraph of Mistry is,

'Each happy family is happy in its way, but all unhappy families resemble one another.'

Nariman is a man who leads the race of searching identity and individuality at one stage when he will get it he dies. So, the novel *Family Matters* progressively depicts Parsis' plight of the earlier novels of Rohinton Mistry.

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