

Conflict In Family Relationships: A Study On Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters

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Abstract:

The present paper is a psychological study on the characters who design their own fate by misconception and poor decision making and thereby teach a lesson to the whole humanity. Rohinton Mistry is an internationally recognised Indian-born Canadian writer. His Family Matters published in 2002 is a contemporary novel deals with a Parsi family living in Mumbai, India. Family Matters was shortlisted for that year's Man Booker Prize, James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Mistry exposes the larger struggles of the Parsi community through the characters. As we live in a remarkably ready for action world, stuffed with many challenges and complications it is necessary to understand and prioritise things to maintain harmony in life. But people fail to understand fellow human beings which lead to marital disruption, rift in the relationships between parents and children, mental agony etc. Mistry through this novel brings out how a family gets disrupted by misunderstandings, unforgiving attitude, lack of tolerance, failing to show love and immature decisions.

Keywords: Old age, Misconception, Relationship, Parsi, Humanity

Introduction

Aging is an inevitable period of human life. Every individual wants to live a long and prosperous life but not ready to accept the process of aging either one's own or others. As one faces the joys of youth one must also prepare oneself to face and feel the pains. Children get every comfort from their parents but fail to give the same to their parents when they become old. They are treated as a burden by the younger generation which pushes the elderly people to a world of loneliness and despair. The diseases and the financial need for regular medical assistance add to their mental distress. As physical strength and mental capacity are reduced to cope up with the problematic situation in life, old age is the difficult part of life.

This paper aims to bring out the reasons for familial disharmony and also tries to build humanity and resilience in the minds of the younger generation. Nilufer Bharucha comments, “Mistry has transcended both the self and the others. The self being the persona of the writer and also his Parsi self; the being the wider world. Here all three have come together in an epiphanic moment that speaks across the national, ethnic and gender boundaries, with a voice that cannot be denied” (209).

Rohinton Mistry’s novel *Family Matters* deals with the story of Nariman Vakeel, a 79 years old man who faces physical and psychological problems in his old age. He is affected by Parkinson disease which affects the movement of a person. This disease is a progressive nervous system disorder in old age. The symptoms are stiffness, slowing of movement and tremors. Nariman breaks his leg when he goes for a walk and becomes helpless. The hesitation and avoidance to take care of the old man by a Parsi family is described realistically in this novel. Nariman lives in a large flat which is named as Chateau Felicity with his stepchildren Coomy and Jal. He is a Professor of English who is interested in reading books which changes his traditional and irrational thoughts and views of his own religious background. His love for a Non-Parsi girl Lucy Braganza who is a catholic Christian is seen as the biggest crime by his family. His love is shattered by his orthodox Parsi family and he is forced to marry a Parsi widow Yasmin. Nariman’s obedience and his inability to stand for what he wanted pushed him into a life of unhappiness. The need for security in society and the responsibility of bringing up her daughter Coomy and her son Jal, Yasmin re-marries Nariman Vakeel. Coomy and Jal are unwillingly forced into a new environment as their own father dies.

The helplessness of a man who belonged to an Orthodox family is clearly pictured by Mistry. Through Nariman’s continuous regrets one will realise how important is decision making in life’s important matters. He is torn by guilt and injustice whenever he looks at his beloved Lucy who works as an ayah for a neighbourhood family just because she could have a chance of seeing Nariman. Nariman’s pity and inability to give up his relationship with Lucy initiates his family’s subsequent troubles. As Lucy is depressed, her mental balance is lost. Whenever she threatens him with suicide attempt by jumping from the roof of Chateau Felicity Nariman stops her and consoles her. He finds himself yielding to the promptings of old emotions whenever he comforts Lucy in her obsession. These events create disturbances to his wife and children and to Nariman it is his marriage with Yasmin, the cause of all his mental agony.

Naturally Yasmin cannot tolerate the meetings of her husband and his former lady love; she fights with him and the family harmony is lost. Lucy is so obsessed with her love and she never stops following Nariman whenever he goes to college. Her continuous contacts with him through phone calls, letters and waiting at the college gate make Nariman more worried about her life and his guilt increases. Yasmin decides to go up and “would talk to the mad woman face to face, see how crazy she really was” (FM 379). Coomy warns her mother not to go: “The mad woman might hit you” (FM 379). Yasmin does not know how to handle this attitude of Lucy and goes with rage towards Lucy but in the heat of the moment she steps on to the ledge, they fall against the hard floor. Mistry describes the event,

He watched in horror as she grabbed Lucy's arm with both hands, Lucy pulling away, trying to shake off her grasp, and the two women swaying dangerously on the ledge. He ran towards them, his hands flying out to steady them, to hold them back. He did manage to take them both by their arms, but only for a second (FM 380).

There forms revulsion in the minds of the step children towards Nariman as they believe that his love for Lucy Braganz for the past thirty years is the reason for their mother's death. Coomy with her rules and attitude makes Narman's life miserable, "There were rules regarding his meals, his clothes, his dentures, his use of the radiogram, even on keeping the door open or locked, she was plaguing him with the rules to govern every aspect of his shrunken life" (FM 4). After the death of both the women in his life Nariman tries to protect his rights and individuality at least in his old age. He shouts, "in my youth, my parents controlled me and destroyed those days. Thanks to them, I married your mother and wrecked my middle years. Now you want to torment my old age. I won't allow it" (FM 7).

The problem of being the step children is also brought out in the novel. Coomy's tensions between bitterness and caretaking are intertwined with tensions of moral and economic responsibilities. She is forced to choose between the duty to look after her ill health stepfather, and her sense of duty to the memory of her biological mother. She thinks that Nariman is responsible for her mother's death. She is unable to understand the situation of Nariman and she makes life more complicated by her blunders. She refuses to undertake any self-criticism and she believes whatever she does is right.

Coomy could not get attached with her step father and shows her anger in all possible ways. She shouts, "If you don't like what we're saying, ask your daughter's opinion when she comes tomorrow... Your own flesh and blood, not like Jal and me, second class". (FM, 7) Her immature behaviours lead to many troubles for others and also to herself. She wants to take revenge on Nariman and she considers his ill health as a way to take revenge on him for her mother's death. Though she gets a portion of his pension for taking care of him she disrespects him all the time.

Mistry points out the regressive traditional attitudes of parents who do not allow their children to follow their heart simply because of the religious differences. The breakdown of family life is linked to psychological sufferings and in this novel everyone is psychologically disturbed because of the religious customs followed by the community. The relationships between husband and wife, children and parents get spoiled by certain rules of a specific community.

Through this novel Mistry brings out how taking care of elderly people at home becomes a burden for the younger generation. Nariman's bedridden condition is felt as a torture for Coomy and she plans a lot to get away with him. Coomy compels Nariman to shift into Roxana who is born to Nariman and Yasmin knowing well that Roxana lives in a small house with her husband Yezad, and their two boys, Murad and Jehangir. Roxona's caring attitude attracts the readers to a great extent. Though her family faces financial crisis to nurse Nariman,

she beautifully balances it. Nariman reminds the readers about Shakespeare's King Lear who is cast out of his home by his elder daughter. But the financial needs make Yezad enter into gambling, the illegal lottery "Matka", which destroys his moral character. His son Jehangir also is tempted to get money for his family from his classmates to betray his role as a school homework monitor.

As Nariman is old, he wants emotional and sometimes physical support from the family members. By this way, a heart touching relationship develops between Jehangir and his grandfather Nariman. Jehangir is helpful and most able to provide the requirements of Nariman. He consoles his troubled grandfather at night when hidden memories plague him. Mistry brings out the presence of humanity through Roxona and Jehangir as some characters fail to reach humanity.

In order to avoid Nariman's arrival Coomy makes a setup in her flat. She pushes Jal to break open the plaster of the ceiling in Nariman's bedroom and they also damage other rooms in the flat. To stop the water leakage from the terrace tank, she makes a cunning move with the help of an inexperienced handyman Edul Munshi, to repair the flat. Coomy insists Roxana keep her father until the flat is repaired. As Roxana and Yezad need money to take care of Nariman, they seek financial support from Coomy. But she refuses to help them and gives a reason that Nariman's pension is spent for house repair work. Edul Munshi, the neighbour, involves helping Coomy for the repair work which leads to a terrible accident killing both Coomy and Edul Munshi. The novel moves forward with Nariman's silences. At the end, the old man is shut away from the family in his old room, with a caretaker. He finally gets rid of this inhuman world and his family mourn him at the Tower of Silence. Roxona's family moves into the Chateau Felicity and the novel ends with Jehangir's reply to his mother "Yes, I am happy" (500). Mistry's characters are rewarded for their virtues and punished for their viciousness. Thus, Mistry with three generations of a family brings out the ceaseless conflicts and bitterness in relationships. The novel makes the reader realise the importance of forgiving one another and tolerance to find harmony in life.

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