

The Disillusion of the Family (Family Matters)

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* (2002) capturing the essence of close knit Parsee community has come close to being the Great Parsee novel. Epic in its proportion and length the novel centralizes on the domestic trials and instability that plague a Parsee family in Mumbai, India. Set in modern India, from the implication of the title, the novel tells the story of a family at odds. The question that the novel posits is who will care for their aged (but astute) parents as they succumb to incurable diseases of the old age. Set in overcrowded Bombay, the novel defuses the dilemma's of the contemporary generations.

After the physical fall in the old age that incapacitates every one, English Professor Nariman Vakeel is bedridden. His stepdaughter Coomy and her downtrodden brother Jal, forcefully oust him when the care becomes too onerous. Nariman moves into the smaller apartment purchased for his daughter Roxana and her husband Yezad and their two sons. Nariman reminisces, along with the progression of illness, about Lucie the love of his life. He recalls the performed marriage to a Parsee widow, instead Lucy at his parent's requests. It is his reminisces that recalls the incidents of his request and unfolds the tragedy of the novel.

Keywords: No

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Nariman's arrival introduces the family to unending conflicts. It also brings in the tensions between Yezad and Roxana, which are amplified in the

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community concerns of mixed religion marriages. The insecurity that the Parsee community experiences over the Hindu nationalist organization, Shiv Sena and the gnaws of poverty are represented with concerns of Parsee community. Central to the theme of the novel is Nariman's son-in-law Yezad who, unable to

cope with the cramped living conditions and the financial strain of having an extra mouth to feed, hatches doomed plans to raise. Filling the almost empty envelopes Roxana finds it difficult to pay the family expenses, yezad constantly prompted by guilt and failure fanatically returns to the religion, to fire temple to worship. When Nariman is handed over to their half-sister Roxana and her husband Yezad, the cost of looking after an aged dependent in addition to their children Murad and Jehangir, it exhausts the finances of Roxana, leading them to seek desperate way to make ends meet.

Family Matters is made richer by the infusion of Parsee culture. From the brief historical evolution of Parsees that they are regarded as Jews of India, who fled from Persia to escape Muslim invasion only to settle in India and make Mumbai their home, emerges the better understanding of the novel. It is to be considered over here that the Parsees in India have adopted a modified form of the language Gujarati as their mother tongue. They continued their belief in Zoroastrian religion and the practices of worshipping holy flame kept burning in the fire temples since the beginning of their faith. Parsees bring their dead to the Towers of Silence to be eaten by Vultures, instead of burial or cremation only to keep the elements of earth and fire pure.

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Another central concern of the Parsee culture is purity. Purity is central to Parsee ethos. They believe in keeping their race pure and excommunicate Parsees who marry outside their clan. It is because of this particular aspect of purity; Parsees face the danger of dying out. This phenomenon is particularly highlighted in the conversation of the characters in the novels of Rohinton Mistry. The utterances of some of the characters: "Vultures and crematoriums, both will be redundant. If there are no Parsees to feed them" illustrates the religious purity and cultural practices of Parsees.

Mistry while focusing on the situation of Parsees offers a vivid portrayal of the contemporary problems that plague India in general. The controversial issues: the trying circumstances; the poverty; the financial necessities in meeting the ends; the failings of the political process is bravely tackled by Rohinton Mistry.

The narration of the story of a single family has its obvious impact and fallings on the ordinary lives of the people. The depiction of the situation of Yezad as the family's 'breadwinner' against the odds of strict rationing is heart rendering. The situation of Roxana where she is compelled to cook diluted, meatless curries in the families is the apt depiction of middle class society. For its high velocity of moving portrayal of life in Indian family, the novel was shortlisted for Booker prize in 2002. Away from offering insightful comments on Indian society and politics, as it was common in the earlier novels, Mistry chooses a different step in this novel. Instead of confining to one single family,

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Mistry zooms in to offer macro analysis of contemporary Indian middle class society.

The novel is bestowed with international positive critical reception. Mistry is compared with 19th century writers as Tolstoy and Dickens for this sweeping realist family Drama. The theme of Family Matters is exhausted by the West. The tensions between the family responsibilities and private passions, social expectations and individual dreams have received only slack attention in the face of the decay of traditions in the West. As India was hurling towards modernity, the remaining communal orthodoxies; the clashes and the struggles that have fed much of classical literature find a space for renarration. While A Fine Balance is encompassed with multicultural perspectives, Family Matters could not escape the brutal social strictures.

From another narrative understanding with retired professor Nariman Vakeel's unmarried middle

aged stepchildren Coomy and Jal. Coomy behaving like a hysterical headmistress, crafts rules to govern every aspect of the elderly Nariman's life. She is caring but cruel; angry and aching from a long-ago wrong he did her mother, Yasmin. That unforgettable wrong from the perspective of Coomi pressures and precipitates the family's strife. As a young man, Nariman had loved a Goan Christian woman named Lucy, and it was opposed by his orthodox Parsi father. Nariman's stiff resistance to the proposition of marrying within Parsee community succumbs to the family pressures after 11 years. This results into marrying a Widow, Yasmin. As his emotional and psychological

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attachments and feelings for Lucy haunted him, he earned the hatredness of his new family and the guilt of seeing his wife and the beloved stands destroyed. The narration is unraveled in flashbacks and is intertwined with incessant grinding drudgery of the family's daily life. Against Coomi's advice Nariman goes for walk and breaks his ankle. Caring Nariman becomes Herculean task to the stepchildren. Mistry provides the detailed episodes of the tasking of attending to helpless, deteriorating Nariman. To escape from concern Coomi contrives a nasty plan to foist Nariman into the folds of her young half sister Roxana. Through the plotting of Coomi, Nariman moves into the conjested space of Roxana, shared with her husband Yezad and sons Murad and Jehangir. The sensitivities of the children become central concern in the futher evolution of the novel. In the process of caring the needs of Nariman, Roxana strains the relationship with her husband. A warm and Witty behaviour of her husband is saddled with vicious temper and smoldering disappointments. Failed in the attempt to emigrate to Canada, Yezad is fixed in the retail job which is beneath him and his college degrees become worthless in the face of the burgeoning computer skills. He is pulled by the temptations to become part of contemptuous Bombay's corruption to compensate the foregoing of the meat by his family in the attempt of bearing the medical expenditure of Nariman. Yezad's resentment of Nariman, sprouts into sadism. He refuses to provide the bottle to the old man for urinating and forbids his son from rendering help. This element of sadism does not emnate from his inner cruelty, which eventually becomes a painful behaviour to bear with.

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This way, Mistry in an amazing way sets up ordinary lives with the tragedies of life and succeeds in illuminating with the moments of merciful beauty. By accumulating the details of the characters existence, Mistry creates a visceral feel for the social humiliations and social victories. Yezad's actions of trimming the nails of Nariman and shaving his face become the acts of redemption overcoming the sympathetic attitudes.

Though the way Nariman loses his willpower and subjects himself to crave for love of Lucy acquires cinematically sublime position, Mistry prepares the ground for thematic convincing. Nariman pursues Lucy defying her strict family simply by standing outside her window during the monsoon, gazing up at her and ignoring her brothers threats. When Nariman marries calling off the relationship, Lucy follows him around, but Nariman ignores and avoids her for two years. Michelle Goldberg in his critical article on Family Matters commenting on the Narration observes: "Not all of 'Family Matters' works so well. The scheme Yezad constructs to advance his career is ludicrous, as is the coincidence that leaves him feeling implicated in his boss's murder. Similarly, the pair of deaths that set the story's resolution in motion are far too convenient" (In Alfred A. Knopf. P.83) Subscribing to the similar perspective Maya Jagga reviewed the novel as: "the result can veer towards sentimentality or didacticism and Jehangir's child eye view is occasionally cloying. Yet the novel steers clear of closure with a far from harminous epilogue. With deceptive simplicity, Mistry draws his fine balance between skepticism and

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affirmation, faith and bigotry, family nurture and control” (The Guardian, April 13,02).

Another prominent reviewer Charles Foran states: “ this is extraordinary writing –tender and wise, striped of the inessential. Its power rivals those apocalyptic scenes in A Fine Balance and is all the more impressive given the intimate scale Family Matters needs to stray no further than the Valeel clan and their apartments to find actors and stage for an affecting drama” (The Times 10 June 2002). This critical perception echoes the critical response of Margie Thomson. He is of the opinion :” there is much sadness and is et in Bombay’s Parsee Community. Yet it’s the grace and humanity of the story and its telling that stay with you, as heady as incense... the story takes a slow, languorous pace, looking at the troubled family from first one view point then another, and it comes to seem that the whole of India can be seen in this one tiny apartment, and that truth itself is located not in the beautiful temples where people most commonly seek it bit in the lives of ordinary people” (Reviewer . May 25.2002).

Some critics have interpreted in dialectically analyzing the family of the novel. In their critical explorations the minute details of the theme have been resurfaced. Kapur, a minor character’s significant contribution is realized in this perspective. Kapur, the owner of the sports, and recounts to his staff his response to familiar scene of commuters in Bombay trying to find a foothold on overcrowded trains. Mistry’s intention is to demonstrate cosmopolitanism and underlying humanity of Bombay that gets buried in its fanaticism and corruption. Bombay is also projected as haven to all those who drift into city regardless of

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caste, ethnicity, or religious affiliation. Kapur’s description of a passenger serves this symbolic function:” A train was leaving completely packed and the men running alongside gave up. All expect one. I kept my eyes on him, because the platform was train to an end. Suddenly, he raised his arms. And people on the train reached out and grabbed them. What were they doing, he would be dragged and killed, I thought A moment later, they had lifted him off the platform. New his feet were dangling outside the compartment and I almost screamed to stop the train. His feet pedaled the air. They found a tiny spot on the edge, slipped off, found it again.” (153). This stands as evidence for the depiction of complex aspects of daily occurrences. Mistry’s deftness in depicting becomes authentic depiction over here.

The symbolic meaning of Kapur’s failure to mimic the feat of the anonymous traveler becomes very striking to the reader. The context and language used by Mistry , transforms the scen and divorces it from the referential context and provides a relief of simple exhilaration. It is form this perspective, Mistry’s ability to transforms the function of the language becomes obvious. The self –consciousness with which the language is used affirms the proposition that literature is a social document and artifice.

Form a different critical perceptibility, the novel is considered to be presenting a magnetic tale of family obligations that comes as close to perfect as a novel can. The city of Bombay during the 1990’s wave of violent religious extremism, at the backdrop of extended parsee family’s suffering is depicted. The saga of a particular Family’s tragedy is turned into Green classical tragedy

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of Romeo and Juliet. A septuagenarian widower’s survival of catastrophic love is Juxtaposed with Parkison’s disease. The physical inability erodes the health autonomy and forces him to give up non-parsee love and compels him to enter love of parsee windowed woman with two children. Nariman’s daughter sweet natured Roxana with her loving hunband and two children living with a tight budgeted fails to provide a respectable treatment. The diametrically opposed houses Nariman’s house and Roxana’s

house become places of incalculable emotional, physical and financial strains exposing the hypocrisy of religious beliefs. As a master narrator Mistry evokes laughter and tears spinning the great wheel of human life with cartload of soul's confusion and physical decline.

From a different critical place the novel steeped in the parsi features of parsee culture to the complete extent. The parsi-ness of the novel evident in the resolution of the central character to seek shelter, and their love for Mumbai. Apart from these parsee feature it carries unique features. One of the notable things in the novel is the suffering of the old man. Nariman's parkinson's disease is the instance of the susceptibility to various elements. Nariman who suffered from the mental agony become the embodiment of the parsee community. Nariman's life also reflects the rise and fall of the community rising the issue of migration. Nariman's attempt to migrate to Canada: "clean cities Plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone" (131) bring in the biographical connotation in Mistry's attempts of migrating. His attempt is observed as: "getting rid of garbage" (246).

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Mumbai as a locate for parsee culture is the element of parsee fiction. Mumbai bound and rebounds in a variety of pulsations flavor. This bring in an easy comparison with the countries like England and America. Mumbai is depicted as an ideal place for living of the people: "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. Any where else in the world, in those so-called civilized places like England and America, such terrible conditions would lead to revolution" (152).

Mistry uses the broader canvass of this novel to offer suggestions to the solutions of parsee problems. The increasing of the parsee population could be done by parsee panchayat's prohibiting youth to pursue their studies beyond bachelor degree. Parsee's disapproval of the inter community marriage is illustrated through the tragic relationship between Nariman and Lucy. This become obvious in the illustration: "they don't want to sleep under the same roof as their mummy and daddy. Meanwhile, the other communities are doing it in the same roof, never mind the same roof, separated by a plywood partition or torn curtain. Our little lords and ladies want soundproofing and privacy. These western ideas are harmful" (401).

From another dimension parsee sees India as a corrupt country. India is country where corruption is rampant: "in the air" (30). The novel depicts, Husain, a peon of Bombay sporting as a tragic victim of Babri Masjid demolition aftermath. Husain's wife and children are killed in the riots. The depiction of Shiva Sena's involvement in the looting and burning is a true rendering of

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reality: "These guardians of the law are murdering everybody and my poor wife and children I couldn't even recognize them".

The depiction of parsees noted for their honesty is also done appropriately. But contrary, Yezad is portrayed as dishonest who deceives his owner Kapur. The psychic tormentation that yezad undergoes for committing the deception justifies the inner virtuous traits of Parsees: "the parsee reputation for honesty is well known. And even if it's a myth-there is no myth without truth, no smoke without fire" (150). Yezad's father is presented as a no nest man. Yezad feels proud of his father and narrates the story of the dignity of his father to his children Jehangir and Nurad.

Mistry succeeds in presenting the character form various communities like Parsees, Muslims, and Hindus. Mistry indicates that healthy discontinuity from the rigid tradition of every religious group is the only solution for the social and religious fabric of India.

In this deceptively ingenuous narrative construction Mistry proffers puissantly impressive investigation into the Hyman psyche through familial interactions of a Parsee family. The domestic conflicts in a Parsee family cobwebbed in existential enigma. Mistry reveals the sagacity of social commitment, justifiable anxiety in the struggling social set up of Parsee modernization and cultural cross fertilization. Anita Myles in the article “Globalizing Family ties: A Philosophical Interpretation of Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matter* “ states that “ In Family matter the universe stretches out further constituting a comprehensive theme encompassing the native Indians

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simultaneously animadverting seriously on man’s endurance “(Jayadeep Singh Dodiya. *The Novels of Rohinton Mistry* 123). So the microscopic parsee community is represented as miniature India providing ad canvass for the artistic rendering of humanity. With an intricate story of domestic violence the novel solitudes traditions with the changing patterns of life and a perusal of profound ideas that no community prospers in isolation and the entire globe must be accepted as a large family.

It is against the backdrop of communalist politics and Corruption that the action of Rohinton Mistry's third novel, *Family Matters* takes place. Ostensibly the story of the pressures faced by one down-at-heel Parsi family in its attempts to care for an aged and infirm patriarch, the novel also offers a consideration of how, despite all efforts to keep them separate, the public world impinges on the private space, and how the taint of corruption can mark even the most insular and apparently upright of communities. Characters are caught in a complex web of actions and reactions in their dealings with each other and with the wider world they inhabit. Physical corruption and the inevitable change and loss accompanying mortality are linked with the social and political corruption characteristic of modern Bombay, and with the moral corruption of characters who, often for laudable reasons, perpetrate deceits and engage in subterfuge. For example, Yezad Chenoy uses his family's precious housekeeping money to gamble on the illegal lottery, the Matka, making losses they can ill afford. Yet he does so in the hope of meeting the increased expense caused by the arrival of his father-in-law who, despite suffering from Parkinson's Disease, has been

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ousted from his home by the devious machinations of an embittered stepdaughter at her wit's end. Similarly, in a move connected to the endemic municipal and national corruption that sees politicians and criminals in league, his son Jehangir is tempted to betray his role as school homework monitor and take money for overlooking his classmates' mistakes. In particular, Yezad'S attempts to influence his ecumenical employer to stand for election on an anti-communalist, anti-corruption ticket - prompted less by concern for Bombay than for the promotion he anticipates for himself as a result - backfire in tragic fashion. The cost of such actions is investigated as part of the novel's interest in moral ambiguity and causality, means and ends, which often centers on the distinction between duty and free will. In this it recalls the strictures of Kantian ethical philosophy; and, emphasising the text's hybridity, the Zoroastrian injunction to “good thoughts, good words, good deeds” The question of how to identify the good course of action in a world seemingly devoid of moral absolutes casts a shadow over the best intentions. Mistry explores the inevitable fragmentation of such ideals in practice and the overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, compulsions of duty to family, to community, to the Zoroastrian faith, and civic duty. What is revealed is a Parsi community whose response to its glorious past and attenuated status in postcolonial India is fundamentally split between an urge for physical and imaginative escape and a hidebound orthodoxy that, ironically, echoes the purist agendas of the very Hindu nationalism that

threatens it.

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Family in the novel comes to have both positive and negative connotations. The Chenoy-Vakeel-Contractor family unit is already fractured by loss: Coomy and Jal Contractor's own father dies young and they are unwillingly swept into a new domestic arrangement when their mother seeks the security of a marriage to Nariman Vakeel, who, in turn, carries with him the whiff of scandal and divided loyalties owing to his liaison with a non-Parsi, Lucy Braganza. When his father refuses to countenance his exogamous intentions, Nariman reluctantly yields to the marriage with Yasmin Contractor. Nariman soon adds a daughter of his own, Roxana, to his newly acquired step children, leading to longstanding jealousies and resentment about favouritism.

As these almost ad hoc arrangements indicate, families develop, change and some branches die out while others are propagated and flourish. Beyond this, there are affiliations independent of blood ties that come to take on the supportive qualities of the family ideal: the letter-writer and bookstore owner Vilas Rane seems part of a multitude of "ready-made families" as he preserves the link between illiterate workers forced to leave their birthplaces and come to the city for work and those they have left behind; "writing and reading the ongoing drama of family matters", (FM, 136). Families can be protective spaces, but they can also stifle with a blanket of over-protectiveness: Yezad's older sisters fiercely resent anyone vying for a share of their brother's affections; and even the Well meaning Roxana fusses over her sons, Jehangir and Murad, worrying at the slightest sign of the inevitable childhood coughs or stomach upsets. Yet, sinister

examples of parental control are at work too, not only in Mr Vakeel's interdiction

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against Nariman marrying for Love, but also toward the end the novel when Yezad, tossed by events back to a literal and racially-based understanding of Parsi uniqueness, effectively re-enacts same prejudicial injunctions when dealing with his eldest son's first serious relationship.

Nariman's Parkinson's disease is linked to osteoporosis. He breaks his leg when out for a walk, leading to the regime of bed rest which tests Coomy, with whom he lives at first in the inappropriately named Chateau Felicity, to her limit. Eventually, the plaster on Nariman's leg give Coomy the idea of dislodging that other plaster, on the ceiling of their apartment, in order to keep her stepfather at the Chenoy's flat where he has been recuperating. Parkinsons and Osteoporosis are only two of the many examples of what one might call bodily corruption, which mark Family Matters, Characters are furnished with a full complement of ailments: Coomy's brother Jal is partially deaf and wrestles with a malfunctioning hearing aid; the increasingly choleric Yezad develops angina; and Jehangir has a delicate digestive system, upset by ill-prepared food and tie pangs of conscience. Even the mechanical cricket-bat wielding Santa, erected by Yezad's employer Mr Kapur, in his sports goods shop to celebrate Christmas and represent his inclusive view of Bombay and its communities, creaks rheumatically and shudders in its down-swing as if it too has Parkinsons. Issues of mobility versus immobility, decay and mortality are explored through Nariman's fate. From a life lived fully through the body, he comes to exist solely in the life of the mind. As he thinks back on his blighted love for Lucy, Nariman becomes, in Yeats's terms "sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal".

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(Yeats in Jeffares 1974 lines 21-22) His struggles to perform the simplest tasks become the most acute manifestation of the Sisyphean labours of other characters, such as Roxana and Yezad, struggling

everyday to make ends meet, or Coomy fighting vainly to hold back the tide of bitterness she feels for the old man she blames for her mother's untimely death.

Coomy and her brother-in-law, Yezad actually share several psychologically significant traits, despite being at loggerheads over who should look after Nariman. They both balk at the unpleasant physical realities of caring for a prostrate, paralysed relative: Coomy is sickened by his bodily effluvia, and Yezad refuses to touch the bedpan on which Nariman is now reliant. Their revulsion is of a piece with their obsessive desire to excise control over their environments and, by extension, their destinies. Yet, in different ways, this urge is every bit as damaging for these two figures as it was for the warring women, Lucy and Yasmin, whose battle for control of Nariman sends them over the edge: literally, as, locked in struggle, they plunge to their deaths from the roof of Chateau Felicity. Thus, the corruption and breakdown of family life is inextricably linked to the physical. Yet it is also connected to that other corruption infesting the social space and political institutions of Bombay, adding urgency to what Adam Mars-Jones, in his Observer review of *Family Matters*, sees as one of the text's central questions: "Do families reflect society at large, or do they act as barricades against it?" (2002 17)

On coming to power in the 1995 elections, the ShivSena/BJP administration oversaw a number of measures designed to consolidate its

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power and advance the cause of Hindutva, including abolishing the Minorities Commission, disbanding the Sri Krishna Commission looking into the Bombay riots (which threatened expose the active involvement of the Sena in orchestrating the violence), and withdrawing incitement charges against Bal Thackeray in relation to the same events³. One of the most high-profile initiatives involved the renaming of Bombay as Mumbai, seen as the first blow in a battle to expunge all "non-Hindu" place names from a "purified" Hindu homeland. (Hansel "BJP: 148-150) This last development impinges on the world of family matters, as it is Mr Kapur's refusal to change the name of his shop from Bombay to Mumbai Sporting Goods that attracts the attention of the murderous Shiv Sena goondas. Indeed the tentacular Shiv Sena has provided the 'enforcers' for many of these developments; in Mistry's novel they are also shown to have a finger in the Matka pie. The underground lottery helps to fund the Shiv Sena machinery. It also finances the organized crime that has infected the city and its institutions, causing the sagacious Vilas Rane to observe: "Matka is Bombay and Bombay is Matka", (FM, 200). In addition to its ties with gangsters, the Shiv Sena has implemented a cultural censorship programme, much to Yezad's exasperation, and opposes a bizarre diversity of events and activities it deems corrupting to the culturally homogeneous and "pure" nation it envisages; targets have included certain artworks, Valentine's day, men's magazines and women working in bars.⁵ Top of the list, as always, are those ubiquitous "national enemies", Muslims. Yezad shakes his head: "What a joke of a government. Clowns and crooks. Or clownish crooks," (FM, 265). Yet there is real danger in crossing them. Not only

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is it suggested that the Shiv Sena was implicated in the murder, during the Bombay riots, of the family of Husain, Mr Kapur's Muslim peon at the shop, but Mr Kapur himself falls victim to those representatives of the forces of sectarianism he had briefly resolved to oppose. They also beat up the radical journalist/actor Gautam for writing an article on the "politician-criminal-police nexus", (FM, 199). Nowadays the enemies and "defenders" of the state are identical and funded from the same illegal sources. This sorry state of affairs provokes a discussion between Gautam and his fellow spian, Bhaskar over a central ethical question confronting the modern Bombayite: how does one act when faced with injustice

in a situation where law and order has either broken down or is, itself, complicit with the wrong-doers? (A telling example of this is played out when, despite being an eyewitness to the murder of Mr Kapur, Husain is angrily advised by the police to stop making "wild accusations" about Shiv Sena involvement in his employer's death.) The actors muse:

'Isolated incidents, they call them,' said Gautam. 'Exactly,' said Bhaskar. 'They say that our nation has made so much progress - satellite TV, they say, Internet, e-mail, best software designers in the world.' Gautam chuckled. 'Hamaara Bharat Mahaan, they repeat like that government slogan, and they laughed ... 'What to do? People are afraid to accept the truth. As T. S. Eliot wrote, "Human kind cannot bear very much reality."' Even cricket, that watchword for probity and fair play, is now crooked, as Vilas remarks, referring to the match fixing scandals that rocked the sport in South Asia in the mid-to-late nineteen nineties.

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The moral taint that everywhere affects Bombay life also increasingly makes its presence felt in the lives of Nariman's family. The most glaring example of this is Coomy's devious plan to foist her stepfather on the already financially constrained Chenoy wing of the family, and the even more underhand measures she takes to keep him there. Yet, other, less overt instances of dishonesty also typify characters' dealings with each other and, sometimes, with themselves. Jehangir's capitulation to his classmates' entreaties to turn a blind eye to their mistakes, and so earn a few much-needed extra rupees for the family's essential purchases, betrays that faith placed in him as homework monitor by his teacher, the lovely Miss Alvarez. He wholeheartedly embraces the teacher's exhortations at the beginning of the year, that moral choices made now can be carried on into adult life, and that her pupils can help to purify the befouled air of civic affairs. As for the schoolmaster Herbert Pembroke in E. M. Forster's *The Longest Journey*, who observes that, "School is the world in miniature," so here Jehangir's classroom takes on a metonymic relationship to society and nation (98-57). Although he wants to help Miss Alvarez fight corruption in his own, small way, Jehangir eventually compromises and becomes part of it. Likewise, Yezad succumbs to temptation and removes money from the worn but neatly labelled envelopes containing savings for staple items such as "Milk and Tea", "Water and Electricity", to place bets on the Matka.

Both Yezad and Jehangir, in their different ways violate Yezad's father's example of that scrupulous Parsi honesty for which the community is celebrated. This example was set when Mr Chenoy ensured the safe delivery of a large

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consignment of money to the bank for which he worked, despite the surrounding chaos and panic caused by wartime explosions. "In gratitude for an exemplary display of courage and honesty in the course of duty," (FM, 224) he was presented with a commemorative clock which Yezad continues to cherish and refuses to allow Murad to wind, long after he himself has compromised the values it represents. After relating the tale of his father's heroism, Yezad, somewhat ironically, warns his sons: "Remember, people can take everything away from you, but they cannot rob you of your decency . . . You alone can do that, by your actions". However, Yezad, and the generation that comes after him, are, in a sense, victims as well as inheritors of standards set in other times, and in other contexts. The myth of Parsi honesty and integrity is an ambiguous one, both inspiration and burden. As Vilas Rane comments such myths can become outdated and "make misfits of men," (FM, 205). The complicating factor, and what prevents *Family Matters* from being simply a text lamenting moral decline, is that both Yezad and his son act as they do for the best of reasons: to secure extra funds to cover the increased cost of looking after Nariman

with his expensive medicines. In fact, moral ambiguity in motivation is at the heart of the novel. *Family Matters* repeatedly returns to questions of means and ends, and the negative outcome of the well-intended act. A number of situations lend themselves to a kind of double construction, according to the discrepancy between what characters think their actions will achieve and what the end result actually turns out to be: Roxana innocently suggests employing the incompetent handyman Edul Munshi to fix Coomy's ceiling, thus setting in train events that

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will lead to the death of both of them; the scam to frighten Mr Kapur into running in the forthcoming municipal election is suggested by the eminently sympathetic Vilas; while Yezad suggests that real Shiv Sena-goondas may be better equipped for the task than Vilas's verbose-actor friends. Most intractable of all, perhaps - and the sequence of events that appears to initiate all the Chenoy family's subsequent troubles - is Nariman's inability to give up his relationship with Lucy Braganza, even after his marriage to Yasmin. Lucy follows him to his new family home, takes a job as an ayah with a neighbour in Order to be near him, and repeatedly threatens suicide. Time and again Nariman follows her up to the roof of Chateau Felicity and dissuades her from jumping. Despite his efforts to calm his former lover, Nariman finds himself yielding to the promptings of old emotions as well as the concern he feels for Lucy in her distressed obsession. At one point he allows himself to wonder whether Lucy's perseverance is the result of undying love or a desire for retaliation. Likewise, as readers we are aware that, by giving way to her entreaties - albeit out of sympathy - he is hurting his wife and stepchildren: in which respect his actions can be seen as selfish rather than benevolent.

Such moral complexity gives a new twist to Mistry's perennial concern with the idea of goodness as understood in Zoroastrianism. Each of Mistry's works contains a reference to the prime requirements of the Zoroastrian faith, "munashni, gavashni, kunashni": "good thoughts, good words, good deeds". Characters orient themselves, and to an extent are judged, according to this triple injunction. *Family Matters*, however, complicates the picture by raising the

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question of what exactly these good thoughts, words and deeds might consist of. How does one recognise them in a situation where everything and everyone is, to some extent, compromised? According to Zoroastrianism, good and evil are completely separate: the former being a positive quality emanating from Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, and the latter being the result of the intrusion of the Zoroastrian Devil, Ahriman, into the Ahuric realm. (Clark 1998 126) Yet in the world inhabited by Yezad and his family, the notion of good is adulterated and evil is immanent in humankind. Good and bad permeate one another, partly through those ageless human proclivities: vengeance, pride and intolerance. Hence characters' motives are often grey. Coomy behaves badly towards Nariman and offloads him onto the Chenoy's partly because she fears the disturbance of her carefully ordered existence and the introduction of dirt and decay, partly because she doubts her ability to cope, and partly as a belated and perhaps subconscious act of revenge for the way Nariman treated her mother. Coomy's unhealthy resentment may have festered for years, but she does have a legitimate grievance. (Hence, the "father-daughters" situation here is never as morally clear-cut as in those other dramatic tales of filial disloyalty, *King Lear* and *Peregoriot*, which provide models for Mistry's investigations.) Coomy feels guilty about what she has done, as does the younger Nariman when confronted with the proof of what his continued infatuation with Lucy is doing to his family, and Yezad spends much of the second half of the novel 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.

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The great question of the novel, which permeates everything yet remains unasked until Jehangir's epilogue at the end, is who is to blame for Lucy and Yasmin's fatal fall? Visiting old Dr Fitter, Jehangir learns for the first time his grandmother's dying words, only half heard by horrified bystanders, which have echoed down the years and tarred Nariman and his kin with the indelible mark of scandal:

'all the confusion was due to one word in her sentence: did she say "he" or "we"?'

'What do you think she said?' I inquire meekly.

'Oh, I know what she said. She said, "What did we do!" But there were other people gathered around. Some of them heard, "What did he do!" and they claimed it incriminated Nariman.'

(FM, 477)

This is significant less as some sinister plot twist than as a point about how actions have consequences which reverberate down the years, but which people - often reading backwards from their own point in time and circumstance - can interpret as they wish. Certainly, Coomy has chosen to interpret her mother's unhappy marriage and death in a certain way, as her lonely life, blighted by bitterness and an unforgiving attitude towards Nariman, makes abundantly clear.

Thus, characters in Family Matters are seen largely to choose their own fates. Yet they do not do so arbitrarily. Each is burdened by an acute sense of

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duty: to family, to employer or to the city as a whole. When hearing of Mr Kapur's intention to run in the forthcoming municipal election, Yezad initially counsels that his duty lies in looking after his shop, before recognising the opportunity for an increment for himself that would accrue from the increased responsibilities. He invokes the Bhagavad-Gata in urging the preeminent claims of duty. Ironically, it is the secular-leaning Hindu, Mr Kapur, who counters this when, having decided not to run after all, he echoes Kant in justifying the decision to put family above civic duty:

'Think about it - pure duty is unconcerned with outcome. Even if I become a municipal councillor, fight the good fight, what do I have at the end? The satisfaction of knowing I've done my duty. As far as Bombay is concerned, nothing changes. Nobody can turn back the clock.' (FM, 294)

As the pre-eminent philosopher of ethics, Kant famously proposed that the moral worth of any given action could be determined not by considering its outcome, but by identifying the intention behind it. Specifically, only actions performed in accordance with duty have genuine moral worth. (Kant trans. James W. Ellington 1994 11) Although there are obvious difficulties in trying to identify whether others are acting primarily out of a sense of duty, Kant proposed some guiding principles by which the individual should orientate his or her actions. The most famous of these is his "categorical imperative": "I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law." (14) As Roger Scruton, among others, has noted, this first formulation of the categorical imperative provides, "the philosophical basis of

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the famous golden rule, that we should do as we would be done by." (2001 86) One behaves well, according to rules one would expect everyone else to observe also, for the mutual benefit of all parties. In one respect, those of Yezad's actions which seem most questionable - taking the household savings for

gambling, temporarily pocketing the protection money, setting the fake Shiv Sena thugs to frighten Mr Kapur - are all motivated by a notion of duty: the long term duty to provide for his family. However, there is a meaningful pattern in which the various duties that hem him in — to Mr Kapur as his employer as well as to his family — come into conflict with each other. Likewise, Coomy is forced to choose between the duty to look after her incapacitated stepfather, and her sense of duty to the memory of her biological mother, for whose death she holds him responsible. She decides to priorities the latter, and lies that her ceiling has collapsed in order to absolve herself of her duties to Nariman. In neither case, however, could Yezad or Coomy wish that others would behave towards them with the same kind of deception and evasiveness as they themselves have employed. Commenting on the responsibilities imposed by Kant's categorical imperative, Warner A. Wick offers the examples of lying and gangsterism: both particularly apposite for the familial and urban politics of Family Matters.

To seek credibility by lying is not a point that can be universally adopted! No rational agent can will that maxim as a universal law, for in its universal form it is self-contradictory. A lie can work only if enough people tell the truth to make truthfulness the normal expectation, just as the gangster can only succeed

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if most people are law-abiding. These miscreants act unfairly in that their maxims require that other people act differently. (Wick xviii-xix)

Extrapolating from his initial principle, Kant proposed a second formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means." (36) In other words, one should treat others always as self-determining agents, and not just as an instrument to be used to achieve one's own aims. Once more, Yezad and Coomy can be seen to fall short of this ideal: Yezad treats Mr Kapur and his genuine civic concern as a means to promotion; Coomy uses Nariman's illness as a way to exact revenge on him for his treatment of her mother. The point here is not to measure these characters against some impossible benchmark of good behaviour, nor to show how they fail to meet the Zoroastrian requirement of good thoughts, good words, good deeds. Rather, it is to give an indication of how the tussle of duty and inclination provides the motor which drive the action of the novel and its moral choices.

In short, Family Matters is concerned with causes and effects - both intended and inadvertent — and how one interprets and accounts for connections between past and present. If one cannot arrest time, as the evocative old photographs of Bombay that Mr. Kapur shows Yezad briefly offer to do, can one at least exercise some mitigating power over its apparently random dispensations? Formally, the concern for past-present connections is played out through repetitions: Yezad comes to repeat Nariman's father's inflexible

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religious dogma; Murad's non-Parsi girlfriend threatens repeat of the parental estrangement of the earlier generation; and at one point, Yezad unfairly accuses Roxana of neglecting the rest of her family in favour of her father, paralleling Yasmin's earlier complaints as Nariman abandons her and the children to run after Lucy. Against these examples of family breakdown the reader can set the many types of repair attempted in Family Matter, only some of which are successful. Edul Munshi, the disastrous handyman tries to repair the ceiling Coomy has vandalised, bringing down a supporting beam which kills them both. Dr Tavancore and the bonesetter at the hospital do their best to patch up Nariman's brittle body after his fall. Vilas's letter writing repairs families torn apart by migration. Yezad is "touched by his employer's

gentleness as he went about mending the cracks in Husain's broken life," (FM, 144) Finally, Dr Fitter and the father and son police combination Superintendent and Inspector Masalavala scurry out to fix the death certificates and help tidy up after the two fatal accidents which threaten the Parsi community with scandal, viewing it as one of the "good deeds" required of them.

A number of explanatory options are available to the Crenoy's and others as they attempt to piece together the chain of event which their family affairs have moved from initial domestic harmony to tension and hostility. In their besetting concern to find an explanation for phenomena, they sometimes resemble the characters in another of Mistry's fictional templates, Voltaire's satire *Candide*, who deliberate "on the contingent or non-contingent events world ... on causes and effects, on moral and physical evil, on free will and necessity .

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. ."⁶(Smollett 1937 201) In *Family Matters*' as in *Candide*, events are interpreted, variously, as the products of coincidence, free will, destiny, or God's will. On the way to offer his condolences to Mrs Kapur after the murder of her husband, Yezad reflects on the coincidence by which Mr Kapur was visited by real Shiv Sena thugs, after the actors he had engaged to frighten his employer by playing the role of Shiv Sena goondas had departed: "That was the problem, everyone dismissing the possibility of coincidence" (FM, 393). Later, when his newfound religiosity has taken hold and he suggests as a coincidence the fact that Nariman develops bed sores as soon as his new ayah arrives, Roxana reminds him: "You say there's no such thing as coincidence . . . You call it another word for the Hand of God" (FM, 482).

The delivery of Nariman into the Chenoy's care, and the accidental death of Coomy, is ascribed to destiny in Yezad's now fatalistic outlook. Roxana reflects on the tragedy of the shattered love-match of Edul Munshi and his wife by asking, "What is this absurd force called destiny?" to which the increasingly devout Yezad replies, "Man proposes, God disposes" (FM, 398). As characters with strong religious convictions, Roxana, and later Yezad, read causality in a particular way. They tend to assume the operations of cause and effect are regulated by a pre-existing entity they know as God, or Ahura Mazda. In effect, they hold what Kant, and indeed Voltaire, would describe as an a priori understanding of cause and effect. A priori truths are those deemed to exist independently of experience, and a priori knowledge is that which is not based

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in empirically verifiable experience. Roger Scruton gives some examples of the a priori:

The following propositions seem to be true a priori: 'Every event has a cause'; 'The world consists of enduring objects which exist independently of me'; 'All discoverable objects are in space and time.' These propositions cannot be established through experience, since their truth is presupposed in the interpretation of experience. (Scruton, Kant 30).

Thus, Scruton quotes Kant to show that the notion of God itself can be seen as an a priori regulative force: "'the ideal of a supreme being is nothing but a regulative principle of reason, which directs us to look upon all connection in the world as if it originated from an all-sufficient and necessary cause". (Scruton 69) Voltaire's *Candide* famously sends up Pangloss's unquestioning a priori justification of things as they are and the complacent optimism encompassed in his conviction that, regardless of how bad things appear, this is "the best of all possible worlds". (Voltaire *Candide* 108)

Likewise, in Mistry's novel, Roxana allows herself the luxury of a Panglossian retrospective interpretation of events working out for the best, attributing this to God's will; "when she looked back

over the events that had led them to this evening, it was almost proof of divine power in the universe, with Pappa's broken ankle the start of everything" (FM, 435). Doubtless, she would concur with Pangloss that, "free will is consistent with absolute necessity". (Voltaire *Candide* 120) an outlook which can reconcile Coomy's desire to

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attribute the collapse of her ceiling to an act of God, with the fact that she herself has encouraged her brother to take a hammer to it.

The religious components of identity are particularly important for the Parsi characters, especially in the context of the creeping Hindu majoritarianism that surrounds them. However, the main concern for this vulnerable community in *Family Matters* centres on issues of numerical decline and the merits or otherwise of traditional notions of ethnic purity. Luhrmann records how: "Until 1941 the Parsi population was slowly but steadily on the rise in India. But in 1961 they were down to over 100,000; in 1971, over 90,000; in 1991 there were 76,000 Parsis in India, with around 50,000 in Greater Bombay." (Luhrman 1996 168) Near the end of the book, Dr Fitter and Inspector Masalavala discuss the shrinking Parsi community and what should be done to halt the diminution. They enumerate the main features accounting for decreasing numbers: a dwindling birth rate, marrying outside the community, and migration to the west. Westernisation and western ideas, once seen as the lifeline of the community are now identified as part of the problem. Inspector Masalavala's cranky suggestions to shore up the community include tying educational opportunities to an undertaking to bear a certain number of children. The more stoical prescription of Dr Fitter is for a Parsi time capsule, containing items representative of the culture, to be buried for future generations to unearth when the community has died out. That sense of loss indicative of contemporary Parsi culture in India is articulated by the inspector: "To think that we Parsis were the ones who built this

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beautiful city and made it prosper. And in a few more years there won't be any of us left to tell the tale", (FM, 404).

For Yezad the issue is one of purity. He comes to view "the purity of this unique and ancient Persian community", (FM, 127) as being under threat from miscegenation, and ponders on the ritual gestures of the dastur at the fire-temple, valuing "the cumulative grace of generations and centuries ... encoded in blood and bone", (FM, 333). The psychological importance given to the orthodox of the unique, untainted Persian blood, which is felt to distinguish Parsis from the surrounding community should not be underestimated. The orthodox are against the mingling of this blood with any other. Biology supersedes social morality as a guarantor of worth according to this view, with a corresponding shift in that notion of the good (thought, word, or deed) fundamental to Zoroastrian ethics. As Luhrmann has noted: "The central cosmological struggle of good against evil is described as an effort to achieve purity — that which is evil is impure, that which is impure is evil". However, for the orthodox, a "transformation took place with the concept of purity . . . which was refigured from holiness into racial superiority". (Luhrman 101) The continuously burning fire at the temple offers that elusive past-present connection Yezad craves, and, in a way, the fire-temple replaces the family home as a sanctuary from the outside world. As he feels increasingly disempowered by events he falls back on his reawakened faith more and more, recoiling from the mongrelisation and mixing inherent in urban life, to a space of 'purity' that is, of course, at the same time one of fantasy.

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In his new dogmatic ultra-orthodoxy he becomes a kind of Zoroastrian fundamentalist, imposing his racial and cultural obsessions on everyone around him. He is an active member of an orthodox Zoroastrian association, and attempts to inflict draconian menstruation laws on his wife, and rails against Murad's non-Parsi girlfriend. Nor does it occur to Yezad that his Parsi purism is of a piece with the exclusionary compartmentalising of those Hindu nationalist forces he has previously despised. Mistry understands the psychological and nostalgic impulses behind social and cultural conservatism as well as any other contemporary writer. But his sympathies for the consoling qualities of religion and tradition evaporate when, as so often, they become a stick with which to beat others. For him ritual and dogma is of less consequence than social morality. In a comment that sums up the choices confronting so many of his characters, Mistry has remarked, "I'm not a practising Parsi but the ceremonies are quite beautiful. As a child I observed [them] carefully in the same way as I did my homework, but it had no profound meaning for me. Zoroastrianism is about the opposition of good and evil. For the triumph of good, we have to make a choice". (Lambert, 2002 7)

It might be said that, in his reversion to a defensive, insular form of Zoroastrianism, Yezad succumbs to what Kant calls the "fanaticism, indeed the impiety, of abandoning the guidance of a morally legislative reason in the right conduct of our lives, in order to derive guidance from the idea of the Supreme Being". (Scruton Kant 96)

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The question "Are you happy?" insistently asked of her husband and sons by the concerned Roxana, becomes almost a refrain in *Family Matters*. Characters have sought happiness, or at least stability by following the dictates of duty as far as possible, but, as this essay has shown, they often find that duty comes into conflict with personal inclination or immediate need. According to Kant there is no point in proclaiming happiness, in the sense of the fulfillment of one's desires, as the ultimate goal, in life, because it cannot be elevated to the level of that kind of universal law his maxims demand. In fact, to try to do so would be disastrous.

This is because each person's interests, and therefore definition of happiness, would be in some way different, and would actually lead to conflict: "while everyone's interests are the same in name (happiness), they differ in fact; and this difference is almost without limit, because the specific content of happiness varies with the temperaments, circumstances, and histories of each individual". (Wick in *Ethical Philosophy* xxviii)

In *Family Matters*, Yezad's desires for orthodoxy and order clash with Murad's definition of happiness which includes the right to go out with whoever he wants. Thus, "goodness" and happiness are not necessarily synonymous - the one is not automatically to be found in the other — so the answer to Roxana's anxious question, repeated at the novel's end, remains, at best, hesitant and provisional.

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