

**IDENTIFICATION POLITICIS: THE STRUGGLE OF PARSI COMMUNITY IN  
ROHINTON MISTRY’S FAMILY MATTERS**

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Rohinton Mistry’s third novel *Family Matters*, brings out the expostulations of the minority communities vis-a-vis ‘secular’ multicultural image of the Indian polity. It also highlights the role of the Government agencies in the perpetration of atrocities against the innocent civilians of the minority communities and the struggle of the Parsi community in looking after its ageing patriarchy.

The current ethno-religious politics of the dominant religious majority community in secular India leaves the ethnic minorities, in this case the Parsis, in dilemma regarding their position. Freedom of religion is fundamental to a secular state. That is to say everybody can profess any religion. No imposition of any kind on religious grounds is entirely forbidden. All citizens irrespective of their religious faith will enjoy equality of rights. Article 25 to 28 of our Indian Constitution speaks about the freedom of religion.

Dr Rajendra Prasad, the first President of Indian Republic says, “There are some who think that because we are a secular state, we do not believe in religious or spiritual values. It really means that in this country all are free to profess or preach the faith of their liking and that we wish well of all religions and want them to develop in their own way without any hindrance. India being a land of multi- religions, secularism is the best arrangement ever made by any democratic country.”

This hegemonic Hindu cultural order has an assuasive effect on the Parsi mind which is beset by doubts and uncertainties. The narrative focuses on these current issues, including the glorious Persian past and the ways and means of Parsi Zoroastrians, their efforts to protect their racial purity, their religious practices, and sense of superiority, elite status and the present regrettable position of their community. Nariman Vakeel, an aged Parsi of 79 suffering from Parkinson’s and Osteoporosis, stands a “metaphor to the geriatric community on the brink of extinction,” (Nilufer Bharucha, 206) .The novel can be considered a sermon on Parsi religious community.

The Parsi community faces a real human tragedy and this is portrayed with great sensitivity in the novel. Parsis in India have zero birth rate today and the aged within the community do not have any support system provided by the young and the able as in the case of Nariman Vakeel, in the novel symbolizing the community, on the verge of extinction. Discussing the future of the community the Parsi Inspector Masalavala remarks:

The experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence,  
there will be no Parsis left. (400)

Dr Fitter who shares the grief and concern over the future responds:

Extinct like dinosaurs. They'll have to study our bones that are all.  
(400)

Their grief brings to light that Parsis were the one who built the beautiful city of Bombay and made it prosper, but now "it will be a loss to the whole world. When a culture vanishes, humanity is the loser. (403)

Talking of the falling birth rate of the Parsis, Dr Fitter draws a comparison between the Parsis and the other Indian communities to state that:

There are lots of wealthy couples living alone in new flats who produce just one child. Two, if we're lucky. Parsis seem to be the only people in India who follow the family planning message. Rest of the country is breeding like rabbits. (401)

Further he says "your demographers will tell you, the more educated a community, the lower the birth rate," (401). Ironically, Inspector Masalavala puts forward a suggestion that would increase the population of the Parsis:

Then we need to fix that. I have two suggestions. First, our youth must be prohibited from going beyond a bachelor's degree. Give them cash incentives to study less. And those who want to do post-graduate studies, tell them they will get no funding from panchayat unless they sign a contract to have as many children as the number of people over age fifty in their family. Maximum of seven-we don't want to spoil the health of our young women.  
(402)

This humorous statement not only focuses on the decline of the Parsi race but also their cultural superiority. Aditi Kapoor observes:

“Unless something is done to augment their fast depleting number and to revive their religion, the Parsis after an illustrious past could well just fade out in oblivion.” (N.P.Sharma, 32)

The Parsi community known for its exclusivity, racial purity and cultural superiority never likes to have any sort of contact with the outsiders. This is seen in the narrative when the protagonist Nariman Vakeel reminisces his love affair with Lucy Braganza, a Goan catholic girl. For eleven years, he and Lucy struggle to create a world for themselves but finally Nariman surrenders to the will of his parents by agreeing to end his “ ill considered liaison with that Goan women----- and agreed to settle down,” (11). Nariman at the Breach Candy beach tells Lucy about ending their relationship---“they had been ground down by their families.” (13)

Lucy’s parents too are seen against her marrying a non-catholic outside her religion. Nariman finally accepts that “traditional ways were the best” (16) and realizing his responsibilities to hold up the values and the purity of his community, marries a forty years old Parsi widow with two children. This makes one of his close relatives Miss Katwal shout in delight that the “naughty boy at last becomes a good boy, it’s a double delight,” (13). In spite of being highly educated Nariman is seen surrendering his personal predilections to his community consciousness. Inter religious marriages which has been a problem to different communities also seem to be a problem to the Parsi community. Being a Parsi Nariman has no right to choose his

life partner because his allegiance to his community is in his ‘flesh and blood’ (10) that decides his life.

We come across a similar effort of the Parsis to preserve their racial purity in an episode involving Nariman’s grandson Murad who develops intimacy with Anjali, a non-Parsi girl. Yezad, Murad’s father gets terribly upset when he finds Murad kissing Anjali in the stair well. Disappointed at this, he shouts in anger, “I’m warning you, in this there can be no compromise. The ruler, the laws of our religion are absolute; this Maharashtra cannot be your girl friend,” (469). He further warns his son, “You can have any friends you like, any race or religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage the rules are different.” (469)

Yezad who strongly believes in preserving the purity of his race says: “...because we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet and mixed marriages will destroy that,” (469). The dilemma facing in contemporary Parsis about inter-communal marriages is brought to light in confused Jehangir’s words with his parents Roxanna and Yezad:

He asked if there was a law against marrying someone who wasn’t a Parsi.”  
His father said, “Yes, the law of bigotry. (40)

Towards the end we see that Yezad himself turns a bigot and opposes his elder son Murad’s relationship with a non-Parsi girl.

The love experiences of both Nariman and his grandson with non-Parsi girls reiterate that the Parsis can never change their convictions whatever be the whims and fancies of the

individuals. So, inter-religious marriages in the case of Parsis can be considered in the context of their fast diminishing number.

Parsis enjoyed an elite status during the colonial rule. Giving much importance to education, and being highly educated, they are seen occupying a prestigious position as far as it is concerned with English education. James Bissett Pratl observes:

“Illiteracy with them is at minimum and the higher education of women as well as of men is very common.”

This race which once enjoyed an elite position is now reduced to a miserable condition. In free India, they are gradually losing the loft and elite status they once had. Many factors in the present which have become a threat to their existence, created a feeling in them that the successive governments in the country are biased towards them. Among the factors are the changing social systems, the increasing communal clashes and violence triggered off by fundamentalism. To put them all together, the Parsi race is nearing its extinction causing concern about the future of the race. Dr Fitter bemoans the pathetic condition of his community in the following lines:

---- Parsi men of today were useless, dithering idiots, the race had deteriorated. When you think of our forefathers, the industrialists and shipbuilders who established the foundation of modern India, the philanthropists who gave us our hospitals and schools and libraries and bags what luster they brought to our community and the nation. (49)

These lines are a reflection on how the Parsis at present are not able to maintain the much esteemed position which their forefathers once enjoyed in India.

In the words of Jagroop S. Biring, “an unsavory concomitant of the geriatric Parsi community,” is the responsibility of caring for the aged parents like Nariman. (Jagroop, 58) In a broader context in India where health care as well the support for the elderly and sick is almost non-existent, this responsibility falls on the shoulders of the younger generation Jal and Coomy- the step-children of Nariman. Low birth rate, high average age of marriage, high economic pressures of living in Bombay and the general societal norms make unmarried adult children of the Parsi community to continue to live with their parents and thus they are left to look after the aged parents. Being burdened with this care of the aged, they develop a feeling of bitterness towards their married siblings whom they feel as having shrugged off their responsibilities towards their parents. This is clearly seen in Coomy’s attitude towards her married half sister Roxana for having escaped from this duty. She goes to inordinate length to force Roxana into taking care of Nariman when he falls down and breaks his ankle.

Nariman’s conversations with his stepdaughter Coomy shows the pathetic plight of the aged in the community. Coomy discourages Nariman from taking a little stroll on the pretext of the Babri Masjid riots. The reference here is to the burning down of an old Parsi couple by rioting Hindu mobs, under the mistaken impression that some fleeing Muslims had been given shelter in that building. Nariman counters Coomy by pointing out that dangers lurk indoor as well as outdoors:

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

You couldn't," said Nariman. "Hell has ways of permeating heaven's membrane." He began softly, "'Heaven, I'm in heaven,' which irritated Coomy even more, and he stopped humming. Just think back to the Babri Mosque riots.(4)

Irritated Coomy says, "The riots were in the streets, not indoors."

Nariman said, "You remember that, don't you?" "The goondas who assumed Muslims were hiding in Dalal Estate and set fire to it?"(4)

Coomy observes:

How often does a Mosque in Ayodhya turn people into savages in Bombay? Once in a blue moon. (5)

Coomy's fears come true when Nariman falls for the second time after his birthday party causing a serious physical damage. Coomy sends her brother Jal for Dr Fitter who lives in a neighboring building to attend to Nariman. The sight of the gentle, deaf Jal irritates the old doctor. The collective helplessness of the community gets expressed when the doctor in irritation says:

Demographics show we'll be extinct in fifty years. Maybe it's the best thing. What's the use of having spineless weaklings walking around, Parsi in name only. (50)



Nariman who is rushed to the Parsi General Hospital, -- the ageing community's succor in Mumbai is treated by Dr Tarapore a fellow Parsi. His fractured leg is X- rayed and plastered by Mr. Rangarajan, a non – Parsi technician who asks Nariman an advice on immigrating to the USA or Canada as he does not wish to work in India anymore. The narrative here focuses on the dream of middle class educated Indians to immigrate from an increasingly corrupt and extremist India to a liberal Western country. This is not only the dream of the Indians but also the longing of the Parsis to migrate to the West as they are disillusioned with their life in India. We come across this attitude of the Parsis in Yezad and his family who yearns to settle in Canada. But unfortunately his dream is not fulfilled. Six months after applying for emigration to Canada the Yezads gets appointment to meet the officer concerned who asks ruthless questions to humiliate them. Yezad when is confronted with domestic problems later, laments over his fate and wails:

And they [the emigrants]would all be living happily right now in Toronto, breathing the pure Rocky Mountain air instead of the noxious fumes of this dying city, rotting with pollution and garbage and corruption. (275)

Mistry here drives the truth that the Parsis, who have left India and settled in the West, are not happy, quite contrary to their expectations. Despite their acculturation and mixing with of the Western culture, the Parsis are not identified with the Westners but clubbed with other Asians. Nariman who understands Yezad's overriding ambition to migrate to the West, advises him:

Emigration is an enormous mistake. The biggest anyone can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills” (248)

Much to the regret of the ancestors who migrated to India initially, the discussion between Dr Fitter and the Parsi police Inspector Masalavala focuses on the issues that the community is currently preoccupied with both the Reformist and the Orthodox sections of the dying Parsi community:

The Orthodox and reform argument? That’s only one part of it. The more crucial point is our dwindling birth rate, our men and women marrying non-Parsi, and the heavy migration to the West. Vultures and crematoriums both will be redundant ..... if there are no Parsis to feed them. (400)

Mistry in the narrative does not fail to place on record the controversies that are going on between the Orthodox and the radical Parsis. There are Priest and people in Parsi community who prefer to introduce drastic changes in serious matters like initiation and marriage. But Mistry being a devout Parsi, debunks it as “the poison for the Parsi community.” (126)

In the light of Post Colonial and current ethnic studies, ‘Family Matters’ can be considered “identification politics” (Gandhi,126)-a novel which endeavors to secure a distinct space for the community within the hegemonic culture.

As observed by Nilufer Barucha the narrative can be considered “having been written in those in-between spaces, the Derridean interstices, through which they cross the border between ethnicity and transnationality.” (Bharuch,59)

The current ethno-religious discourse in India is in direct response to her increasing engagement with Hindu fundamentalism. The inner disputes within the Congress party and the discrediting of its ‘secular’ image shows that the political arena in India is dominated by the extreme right wing Hindu party, the BJP. This has alarmed the minorities in India who saw the nominally secular politics practiced by the congress party as a protection and guarantee of their rights and freedom. The slogans of Hindu India and anti-Muslim rhetoric by the militant Hinduism of the BJP threatened this minority community very much. Today the community faces many serious problems in a secular democracy after independence. The importance of the religion has diminished. There is a decline in the population to about 85,000 in the whole of India. Emigration accounts for only a small fraction of the dwindling numbers. As has already been stated late marriages, inter-marriages and conversion to other faiths accounts for the rest. Centuries of inbreeding have also reduced the fertility rate among the Parsis.

Tennyson’s poem, “The Lotos- Eaters”, sums up the condition and attitude of the Zoroastrian community concerning its future and existence.

In the afternoon they came into a land in which it seemed always afternoon

All around the coast the languid air did swoon

Breathing like me that hath a weary dream.

Like the sailors in Tennyson's poem, a languid air of uncertainty seems to have overcome many Paris as regards the future of their community. Being ethnic means being oppressed and living within the culture of victims Paris have become ethnic minority.

It is sad that a country which boasts of 'Unity in Diversity,' still looks down upon a community which is a part of Indian milieu. Although the independent country presents the perfect depiction of unity in diversity with concoction of communities with dissimilar religions, cultures, casts and even with different communicating languages, the lives of the Parsi community as depicted and analyzed in *FamilyMatters* throw light on violation of Human Rights of a small community in the name of ethnicity.

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