Chapter 5

Thematic study of *Family Matters*

**Introduction**

*Family Matters* is Rohinton Mistry's highly acclaimed third novel, following the success of his highly applauded *A Fine Balance* (1995), which was shortlisted for Man Booker prize and won several major literary awards internationally. *Family Matters* is an impressive and masterful novel. It is extensive in scope (covering almost five hundred pages), yet well detailed in its account of family apartment living in Bombay. This novel like Mistry's earlier works, has received accolades from critics. Linda L. Richards (2003) remarks:

> His most recent novel, Family Matters, is brilliant. It manages to be warm and familiar, while — for North American readers, at any rate — fragrantly exotic. It is against this backdrop of communalist politics and corruption that the action of Rohinton Mistry's third novel, *Family Matters*, takes place.

Before I explore major themes in *Family Matters*, a brief summary of the plot will be helpful to substantiate my claims.

In *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry luminously draws a contemporary Bombay peopled with characters whose lives are crammed with mundane - but no less struggles and events. As with his earlier short-story collection, *Tales From Firozsha Baag*, and novel, *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry cautiously crafts a narrative that deepens our sense of the vital life of a Parsi family: one filled with sibling rivalries, lost loves, secrets, customs and rituals, the pains of the young along with the acute sufferings of the old and all these with the backdrop of emergency. The novel examines Nariman's enduring adaptation to his
A chronic condition and the effect on those closest to him. However the book is very bulky in size, it is the most empathetic book of Mistry. The novel is narrated by an omniscient narrator and takes place in 1995, two years after the Bombay riots. Though the seventy-eight-year-old Nariman Vakeel lives in a spacious seven-room apartment house with his middle-aged stepchildren, Coomy and Jal Contractor, their relationship is not pleasant, and when he breaks his ankle he is sent to the care of his own daughter, Roxana Chenoy. Hence Nariman is transposed to the midst of a loving but burdened household on the other side of the city. Through Roxana's efforts to proffer him a dignified life within the context of her own family dynamic, the novel offers a affectionate yet honest picture of the challenge of caring for an ailing family member. This creates financial and emotional problems in Roxana's household, because the Chenoy family, which includes her husband Yezad and their two sons Murad and Jehangir, live in a one-bedroom apartment and are hardly able to maintain a middleclass lifestyle. Feeling pressured to earn more money, Yezad, who is the manager of a shop that sells sports equipment, schemes to earn a bigger salary by trying to encourage the owner, Mr. Kapur, to stand for elections in order to root out corruption and defy the Shiv Sena. His scheme has tragic cost when the Shiv Sena has killed Mr. Kapur. Coomy also dies not wishing Nariman to return as she deliberately damages the ceiling of her room and is accidentally killed when a beam falls on her. In the meanwhile, Yezad is powerless to bear the emotional and financial tension he is under hence he gradually turns to religion and becomes a committed Parsi, a far cry from his early skepticism towards religious faith.

The epilogue takes place five years later and is written from Jehangir’s viewpoint. We learn that Nariman has passed away, the Chenoy family has shifted to Jal after Coomy’s death, and Yezad has turned into a religious militant. However the tension continues to spread through the family as Yezad demands that Murad, who is now a rebellious college student, be wary of
Zoroastrian traditions. The novel concludes with Jehangir disappointed at his father’s behavior, but conscious that he has to negotiate between his responsibilities to his family and the Parsi community, and his own individual wishes.

Mistry’s penultimate work is a brilliantly written traditional novel set in the mid nineties Mumbai tracing the lives of three generations in a Parsi family. Apart from presenting the effects of religious prejudice and rigid traditionalism, the novel examines other tribulations of post colonial Indian society chief among which the never-ending corruption of government and politicians. It deals with the representation of history, as it prevails in all his works, and politics, question of belonging and unbelonging, marginalized sensibility, notions of conflicting demands for cultural traditions and religious faith. However, Mistry represents the Parsi diaspora within India from a minority perspective beyond that nation's borders and, as I will demonstrate, his representation of a Parsi family in *Family Matters* depicts the narratives of migrancy. Just like in the case of his previous novels *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance* Mistry displays an intense interest in universal human issues, such as family life. I would like to discuss all these issues in the following pages of the chapter. *Family Matters* won the Kiriyama pacific Rim Book Prize for Fiction, the Canadian Authors Association’s MOSAID Technologies Inc. Award for Fiction, and the regional Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best Book. It was nominated for the Booker Prize and short listed For the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

The center of attraction is once again the Parsi community and hence, all the members of the family presented are Parsis. Here in the novel Mistry explores his concern for his community but apart from universalities Mistry explores here contemporary ethnic and religious hostility in India attempting to give a literary representation of the importance of the burning and destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992.
For a better understanding of my analysis I consider it crucial to represent a few elements from Indian history against which the action of Mistry’s novel renders.

On the 6th of December 1992, the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya was demolished by a large crowd of Hindu activists who claimed that the site on which it was built was the birthplace of their god Ram and thus, sacred to their religion. They recommended that a temple in honor of Ram should be constructed in its place. When the news reached Bombay angry Muslims protested in the streets. However, they were soon confronted by very well prearranged groups of Hindu activists who were celebrating the victory from Ayodhya. The hostility between the two confessions continued for a couple of months and by the time it was over approximately eight hundred people had been killed and many more had lost their homes. Bombay’s reputation for tolerance and intercultural understanding was completely shattered. The Maharashtrian state elections of 1995 took place against a background of anti-Muslim feelings which were a result of the aggressions that had followed the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992. At the polls Shiv Sena, the Hindu chauvinist party won enough support to form a coalition government with the BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party.

This success represented the conclusion of thirty years of activism in Bombay by the Shiv Sena, a period of time during which the party had developed from a minor organization struggle for employment opportunities for Maharashtrian speakers to a major player in the Hindu nationalist movement. The party ruthlessly exploited the consequences fostered by capitalism development in the city. It employed flexible strategy and young activists trained to see political work as part of a larger struggle sometimes demanding corrupt methods and direct physical violence. The party was also said to have been involved in questionable activities such as protection rackets, illegal land deals, drugs and smuggling. The party has been described by Salman Rushdie (1992)
as the “most overtly fundamentalist grouping to achieve office anywhere in India” (92)

It is exactly in the midst of this violent and corrupt politics that Mistry sets his novel. Mistry embraces the Indian reality of the 1990s and the political subtext of the novel is the growth of the fundamentalist Shiv Sena principles and its repercussions on the life of the ordinary, innocent citizens speciously minority. We can see that with the rise of right wing political parties in India led to a moment of serious crisis for all non-Hindu Indians (minorities) and the novel tries to depict their anxieties, feelings of insecurity and fear. It is witnessed that the tyrannical extremist politics enter the novel from the very beginning when Nariman tries to convince Coomy that it is perfectly safe for him to go for a walk by pointing out that dangers prowl indoors as well as outdoors. This brings into the text the first reference to the Babri Mosque riots. Nariman refers to the burning downward of an old Parsi couple by angry Hindu mobs who believed that fleeing Muslims might have been given shelter in that building. But Coomy points out that in spite of the fact that Bombay did burn for months after the destruction of the Babri Mosque from Ayodhya this was but an isolated incident.“How often does a mosque in Ayodhya turn people into savages in Bombay? Once in a blue moon” (4-5)

In the opening of the novel it is very much clear that political gossip is a central topic of discussion during the birthday party organized for Nariman. All the members of the family blame the fraudulent politics of Shiv Sena and their double standards with respect to the perseverance of adherence to Indian culture while, at the same time, organizing a concert by Michael Jackson, the American pop icon in order to increase their popularity amongst the youngsters. The fact that in bureaucrat terms the Shiv Sena labels Western culture as degenerate irritates the family a lot. On the other hand the political subtext permeates the novel mainly through Yezad’s public world of friends, employers, work colleagues, customers, etc. Husain, the Muslim peon who
works with Yezad at the sports shop represents the victims of the Babri Mosque riots and the human suffering that followed. He had himself lived through the pain of seeing his whole family burnt in the communal riots that followed the destruction of the Babri Mosque in the early 1990s. Through the character of Husain the awfulness of the act and its consequences are relived repeatedly. When Husain is first introduced he is in one of his gloomy moods.

It has been noticed that there are days when he can only sit back enveloped in his dark memories. What he has witnessed is the crucial act of contradiction – of his very right to existence – the burning of his wife, children and home. Such communal abhorrence can be blind as it fails to see individuals as human beings but only as representatives of groups. Husain became poor man, a homeless man, a peon who can only afford to rent a room for twelve hours a day. He has to come to work in whatever state he is in. What counter balances his extreme suffering is the fact that he manages to reconstructs the human bonds with Mr. Kapur and, to some extent, with Yezad. The latter tries to educate him into understanding the wretched peon.

“Whenever Yezad found himself getting annoyed by Husain, he would remind himself about the peon’s story, about the burning chawls in Antop Hill, goondas setting people on fire … Husain and his Muslim neighbors watching as their chawl went up in flames, wondering where his wife and three sons were … and then four burning figures tumbling down the steps of the building, their smoking hands beating at the flames … while the goondas sprinkled more kerosene from their cans over Husain’s family …” (144)

After 1995 elections the Shiv Sena and BJP administration, after coming to the power, introduced several measures meant to strengthen their position. Some of these actions were directly aimed at minorities. One of these initiatives was the
renaming of Bombay as Mumbai which was measured as one of the first significant attempts to remove all non-Hindu place names from the so-called purified Hindu land. In his examination of the renaming of Bombay, it indicates the notion of reiterative practices of naming as a construction and fixation of identities, and of the use of names as claims to certain identities, cultures, properties, or entitlements. This understanding of names as signifiers of identity, culture, belonging and entitlement, at work in the public domain, resonates within the ancestral home and lies beneath the differing behaviors of Coomy, Jal, Roxana and Yezad towards Nariman. Coomy in particular places great emphasis on the disparity between her adoptive relationship with Nariman and Roxana's biological link to him. Thus, she and Jal react to Nariman buying Roxana and Yezad a flat by 'throwing at him the "flesh and blood" phrase, accusing him of partiality' (10).

This is one more decision of the people in power that influences the fate of one of the characters in the novel, namely Mr. Vikram Kapur. He denied changing the name of his shop from Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium to Mumbai Sporting Goods Emporium, a fact which attracts the attention of the murderous Shiv Sena activists and indirectly leads to his subsequent murder. Mr. Kapur’s concern with the renaming not only of the city but also with the renaming of streets and buildings is present at several points throughout the novel. Name for his is a kind of sense of his security and indicator of his identity as the reader witnesses how he cherishes the collection of pictures of colonial Bombay which he holds in high regard. As he tells Yezad

“From three pictures so many memories. And this can happen with every single photo – each one conceals volumes. All you need is the right pair of eyes … to unlock the magic.” (229)

The renaming of the city and characters reaction against this activity is also witnessed in Mistry’s early works. For instance in Such a long journey
Dinshwanji’s reaction against the reformation of names is resembling with Mr. Kapoor. The reformation of names indicates the troublesome implications that the building of the Indian nation-state has for a distinctive Parsi identity. In a similar line, Mistry uses Doctor Tarapore’s discussion with Nariman at the hospital focuses on the displacement of English from the contemporary Indian university curriculum. Dr. Tarapore remembers with great joy how he had been taught English literature by Nariman and lines from the poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” runs through his mind as he attends to his former professor. Back in the 1970s English language and even literature had been a compulsory subject for students of all faculties. Regrettably today only Commerce and Arts students study English as part of the political program to obliterate all foreign influence.

Apparently the story of the strains faced by one down-at-heel Parsi family in their efforts to care for an aged and infirm patriarch, the text, like its predecessors, also offers a reflection of how, in spite of all efforts to keep them separate, the public world impinges on the private space, and how the foul of corruption can mark even the most limited and apparently decent of communities. Characters are trapped in a complex web of actions and reactions in their accounts with each other and with the wider world they inhabit. Physical corruption and the foreseeable change and loss accompanying mortality are associated with the social and political corruption attribute of modern Bombay, and with the moral corruption of characters who, often for creditable reasons, perpetrate deceits and engage in deception. For instance, Yezad Chenoy uses his family’s valuable housekeeping money to gamble on the illegal lottery, the Matka, making losses they can poorly afford. Yet he does so in the hope of meeting the increased expense caused by the arrival of his Parkinson-raddled father.

The reader gets the idea how Shiv Sena has increase their influence on many domains of activity in city and they try to control and make a profit out of
everything. They are the ones behind the unlawful lottery Matka and use the profits to fund the organization. The illegal lottery also finances the organized crime that has contaminated the city and its institutions. Gautam, a journalist who had written an article incriminating the Shiv Sena underground activity has to undergo the humiliation and threats of Shiv Sena activists:

“Gautam described how a dozen of them had accosted him, screaming that journalists who maligned the Shiv Sena and blackened its good name by printing lies would receive the same treatment. The men twisted his arms behind him and grabbed his hair to keep him still. They had a tin of Cherry Blossom black shoe polish, and applied it to his face and ears and neck, even ruining his shirt in the process.” (207)

Adding to its connections with gangsters, the Shiv Sena has practiced a cultural censorship programme, much to Yezad’s frustration. They consider that the homogeneity of the nation is threatened by cultural diversity and so they banned certain artworks, Valentine’s Day, men’s magazines and women working in bars. On top of the list were, of course, the so-called enemies of the nation - the Muslims. All these make Yezad notice:

“What a joke of a government. Clowns and crooks. Or clownish crooks. Santa Claus with mask and machine gun would be a fitting Christmas decoration for the Shiv Sena. Or any other party, for that matter.” (273)

But, as it is clear, marginalized people run enormous risks if they refuse to obey the rules established by those in power. Not only is it suggested that the Shiv Sena was involved in the savage murder of Husain’s family during the Bombay riots but Mr. Kapur himself falls victim to those representatives of the extremist forces he had tried to oppose so feeably and it is crystal clear that they
beat up Gautam for writing “An in-depth analysis about the politician–criminal-police nexus.” (206) It seems that the enemies and defenders of the state are indistinguishable and funded from the same illegal sources. Mistry feels sorry for Mumbai for ‘it is being raped by politicians’ (156) and calls the Shiv Sena “the greatest urban menace” (209) The subjugation from rural areas is highlighted by Vilas Rane when he tells the story of a pair of lovers from different castes whose passion for each other was considered a break of established rule in their native village and, as a result, they were humiliated and killed to set an example for others who would dare to do similar things. This story prompts a discussion between the two journalists/actors, Gautam and Bhaskar over the central ethical question confronting modern Bombay: how are people supposed to act in the face of injustices when law and order have either broken down or are complicit with the wrong doers? The actors’ conclusion is that people are constantly trying to escape reality and unpleasant truths and that they usually believe what they want to.:

“What to do? People are afraid to accept the truth. As T.S. Eliot wrote, ‘Human kind cannot bear very much reality.’” (210)

It seems that Mistry is partially unable to look at the diversity of social movements that have challenged the Hindu Right since the destruction of the Babri Masjid because he writes about India from the diaspora. However a close examination of his depiction of the working-class characters and middle-class social activists in the novel reveals that Mistry is skeptical of any kind of progressive politics in the public sphere. This is a recurring notion in Mistry’s novels. For example, Nagesh Rao (2004) critiques A Fine Balance for only sympathizing with the marginal characters, but that the aspect of subaltern activity, of political agency is constantly kept at bay. The murdered student revolutionary, the numerous anti-government protests that are presented in passing and the occasional newspaper articles about troublemakers and strikers alert us to the presence of organized conflict. This resistance, however, hovers
phantom-like in the background, unseen and unheard throughout the novel. *A Fine Balance* thus accomplishes the task of evoking the reader’s sympathy, but it remains fundamentally blind to the possibility of the agency of the subaltern classes.

Rao simply makes a comment about the politics of the novel and not about Mistry. Yet, the similarities that I see between Rao’s critique of *A Fine Balance* and my analysis of *Family Matters* displays that Mistry belongs to a cosmopolitan class that is painful with a progressive politics where its perception is not prioritized. Working-class characters and middle-class social activists are mocked in *Family Matters*.

Even the game of cricket is subjected to the corruption which seems to have penetrated every field of action in postcolonial Indian society. Vilas Rane talks at one point about the match fixing scandals that shattered the sports world in the late 1990s. In the face of corruption “Corruption is in the air we breathe. This nation specializes in turning honest people into crooks” (31) and the threatening right-wing politics aimed against minorities, the small Parsi community feels threatened and Mistry cannot avoid the theme of immigration which can be said as a apparent solution by many members of the community who search prosperity and a better life. Immigration has both positive and negative effects upon the community. On the one hand, it provides Parsis with a better life from a financial point of view but, on the other hand, it displaces them and contributes to their fast diminishing numbers in India along with the problems regarding transculturation. Narendra Kumar (2002) points out:

“The Parsis prefer the West since it offers unlimited scope for growth and prosperity. Dislocation is part of the Parsi psyche. Exiled twelve hundred years ago they came to India. Now they are migrating to West in search of greener pastures. Thus there is ‘double migration’ in the case of Parsis.” (110)
The introduction into the novel of the theme of immigration provides Mistry with the chance to talk about Canada and its representative policy of multiculturalism, which does not really do anything in order to counter racism in that society. The agents for the discussion are Yezad and his two sons. Their life in Bombay is full of stress and anxiety. They have to go to work and school everyday traveling by overcrowded and polluted trains. They have come up with the shortage of water and uncertain financial means. All these issues make it clear that why Yezad dreams of immigration to Canada even though he had been turned down by the system many years ago. Mistry speaks here about the qualifications which are considered useful for people who wish to immigrate through the voice of Yezad who advises his sons:

“Study useful things – computers, MBA, and they’ll welcome you. Not useless things like me, history and literature and philosophy.” (45)

There is a certain degree of mockery involved in this remarks as Mistry himself when he immigrated to Canada in 1975 had useful qualifications and only after settling in Canada he started to study ‘useless’ subjects like English literature. Another irony is expressed by the fact that the man who had interviewed Yezad and Roxana and had turned them down was an ethnic Indian. He had been really rude to them and, at the end of the interview Yezad retaliated:

“You sir, are a rude and ignorant man, 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 prisoners 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)

Mistry, as an expatriate to Canada, could well describe Yezad's dream of immigrating to Canada. Here we find some of the autobiographical element in the characterization of Yezad. He makes a valiant endeavor to move his family to Canada. Mistry narrates:

His dream for an end to this ape man commute had led him to apply for immigration to Canada. He wanted clean cities, clean air, plenty of water, trains with seats for everyone, where people stood in line at bus stops and said please, after you, thank you. Not just the land of milk and honey, also the land of deodorant and toiletry. (131)

However, for Nariman, emigration is: "an enormous mistake. The biggest anyone can make in their life. The loss of home leaves a hole that never fills."(240)

Yezad is turned down by a nasty Canadian-born Japanese immigration officer, who refers to the cultured, well-mannered and perfectly dressed Chenoys as ‘you people’ and then rejects their application when Yezad, who cannot answer some stupid trick questions about ice hockey. In due course Yezad decides not to emigrant to Canada and he destroys the letters, forms and photocopies related to his anticipated emigration. But in the end, wisdom dawns on Yezad, and finally he decides not to immigrate to Canada. He is so determined that he destroys all the letters, forms and photographs related to his intended emigration. When he was tearing the papers, Roxana comes in and asks what he is doing. He replies’ Getting rid of the garbage’ (246)
If Yezad's character is autobiographical, Mistry also experiences 'alienation' like all emigrant Indians. Through the character of Yezad, Mistry expresses his desire to come back to India. At the same time Yezad's wish for emigrating is symbolical of his quest for prosperity, which also indicates the thirst of Parsi community to achieve economic status for ensuring security in life.

Such powerful critique of Canadian multiculturalism has never before been seen in Mistry’s texts and comes as a surprise for all readers. The double displacement that the Parsis have suffered which resulted in them being marginal in both India and the West and the problems regarding identity seems to take its toll on their perceptions of the outside world. Rohinton Mistry has done the work of a representative for his own Parsi community as he has illustrated the considerable functions and historical existence of his society. As an ethnic writer he has painted the sense of displacement of his community in his works. Like other ethnic writers he has focuses on the political, cultural and intellectual situations of his community. However the experiences of each of the ethnic group are not identical yet the similarity in their experiences of the margin to the centre remain in identical. This deep feeling of the margin emerges in the political, economical, cultural and aesthetical descriptions of ethnic writers trying to capture in their works.

The political and social incidents in the novel show the cultural splendor and heritage of the Parsis. The Parsis have been hyped and dignified in India for their constructive deeds and now their condition is in collapse state as Rohinton Mistry discusses:

When you think of our forefathers, the industrialists and shipbuilders who established the foundation of modern India, the philanthropists who gave us our hospitals and schools and libraries and baags, what luster they brought to our community and the nation (51).
The declining condition of the Parsis expressed again through the character of Nariman who, in his older age, is surrounded by the disease of Parkinson. Mistry, through him, is depicting the condition of the marginalized Parsis. When Nariman gets fractured while strolling, he becomes more marginalized “for the fracture was complicated by osteoporosis and Parkinsonism. Surgery was ruled out” (52). But the circumstances turn more unacceptable and marginalized for Nariman because now he was being abandoned by his care takers, his stepson Jal and stepdaughter Coomy who hate him due to his past and who they believe to be responsible for the death of their mother. Their hatred to Nariman was the most frustrating as “he was at their mercy for everything” (81). His condition had become so disturbing that he starts weeping “sometimes in the afternoon during his nap, though most often at night” (83). Nariman’s marginalized condition also reflects the marginalized condition of the Parsis and because of declining condition of population the presence of young and able people is also declining and the members who take care of their parents have left very few. But the marginalized condition of Nariman is not only because of Jal and coomy’s hatred to him but it is more of his past in which he had been a saddened and unsuccessful figure in relations. Being Parsi he has to succumb the class and religious difference and bore the hardships of life as he is reminded that “your past is your those wasted years” (16).

Nariman had engaged in the relationship of a catholic girl Lucy Braganza but the Parsi world is a world where the relations from the outside world are not considered acceptable even “where interaction with people from other communities is neither needed nor considered necessary” (Quoted by Singh, 2003: 151). The Parsi community “does not tolerate inter-religious marriages” (ibid) due to which Nariman could not marry Lucy and this situation haunts him throughout the life when he “became the husband of Yasmin contractor, and formally adopted her children Jal and Coomy” (16) and when his wife
Yasmin happens to know his relations with Lucy and when Lucy reappears in Nariman’s life, his wife becomes indignant and frustrated as “her patience was also wearing thin and an unpleasantness had entered” (68) in their lives.

The Parsi orthodoxy reveals in the conversation between Jehangir and his mother Roxana in which Jehangir asks the question about his grandfather’s remaining unable to get married with Lucy, his mother tells him that “because she was not a Parsi” (42). For Jehangir this answer was not the apt explanation for his query so he once again enquired whether there is any law against marrying someone non-Parsi. His father replies, “yes the law of bigotry.” (ibid) Due to such religious boundation of the Parsi community who claims themselves ‘to be racially pure’ by not having any contact with the outer world or any other religious community. For Nariman this problem becomes lifelong strangle as he suffers, throughout his life.

Another incident, when Yezad catches Murad kissing a girl in the staircase, his main concern is not the son’s or the girl’s reputation but that the girl belongs to another doctrine: —She is a non-Parsi (481), Yezad pronounces, for him the end of the world is in sight. It is worth noting here that in spite of his anger and disgust at his son, Yezad does not reprimand Murad immediately as he would normally do. The reason for this is: —I would not give a parjaat girl the satisfaction of seeing me argue with my son...But just wait till he's home (481). Parjaat means belonging to another community. This is one more distinctive manifestation of dogma based rejection of people not belonging to the same religious ideology. So intense is Yezad‘s repulsion and antipathy for people outside his religion that being a non-Parsi, this girl does not deserve even his disrespect or to be privy to his feelings for her and his son’s behavior. Anjali, the girl belonging to another community is improper to Yezad as she is a Maharashtrian: I'm warning you, in this there can be no compromise. The rules, the laws of our religion are absolute, This Maharashtrian cannot be you girlfriend (482). He explains this to his son, Murad: Because we are a pure
Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet, and mixed marriages will destroy that (482). A marriage with a girl who does not belong to their community, an outsider, will contaminate the cleanliness of the chosen few: Inferior or superior is not the question. Purity is a virtue worth preserving (482). This amounts to veneration of self, one’s own grouping which also involves alienation of the other, ‘the one who is not part of the sacred circle, a process of othering, of separation and hostility for those who are not instinctive into the system. This information also brings out the fact that the gap in views is not the usual divergence due to generational differences.

For Nariman this problem becomes lifelong strangle as he suffers, all the way through his life, problems concerned with his married life. First the conflicts between his wife Yasmin and Lucy and later on the harsh treatment of his step children who do not like him and proclaim that he is a burden for them. His step daughter Coomy moreover declares “I can’t help hating him” (82). This hatred causes Nariman’s displacement from his own seven rooms flat to his own daughter Roxana’s two rooms flat where he finds more relief than his earlier residing place with his step children. Nariman’s marginalized condition gets improvement in the company of Roxana’s family yet his marginalized condition is not getting any end as his appearance to Roxana’s place has made him comfortable and a little bit contended. The marginalized and concealed condition of Nariman appears in the meditative of Nariman when he is thinking of his own situation while being explained by Coomy to leave him Roxana’s house:

Suppose I say no, thought Nariman, and give them good reasons they could still have their way. Suppose I say, this flat is my home, and I put it in your names because I did not differentiate between you and Roxana. Would you now throw me out in my helplessness they would probably laugh that I was getting dramatic. (87)
Nariman is thus forced to leave his own home and is finally Coomy bundled him and transported him at Roxana’s doorstep, a much less elegant building known as Pleasant Villa, without any prior instructions. Nariman is nominally consulted for this decision. All this leads making Nariman’s personal life disturbed and making him feel alienated, being in (Roxana’s) home he is still unbelonged/homeless. And this state of unbelongingness is symbolically presents the predicament of whole Parsi community.

Nariman, being patient to the cruelties and ill handling of his step children, does not show his any resentfulness to his children and just explains his own daughter Roxana and her husband Yezad that “they tried their best” (120) and hoping of the things to be improved situation he shows his kindness towards his step children saying that “How can you force people? Can caring and concern be made compulsory? Either it resides in the heart or nowhere” (121). The adjustment and opportunity to adjust in other land i.e. in other house has brought a flash of new life into Nariman who, disturbed and disappointed by his own life in his old flat i.e. home, seeks the possibility in newly adopted house i.e. Roxana’s house and expects “If I could put my foot down, everything would be fine” (Ibid). Having found a better take care in the family of Roxana and Yezad, Nariman has got assimilation in his displacement and trying to restrain all other short comings there in the atmosphere so as to have better prospects of his life. He is so much pleased that he remarks “I’m truly blessed to have such a family. Makes up for all other deficiencies” (122).

Yet, on one side Nariman is happy enough to be living in the company of Roxana’s family but on other side Roxana’s family is facing a lot of troubles because of Nariman’s being there. It has troubled Yezad so much that his family starts concerning in family clashes. The regular discourses of Roxana and Yezad have started turning harsh and distressing. Many times Nariman was also pointed out by Yezad for different things. For example, when Nariman tells stories to Yezad’s son Jehangir, it was frustrating for Yezad and “he went
on giving Nariman a mock scolding, but his annoyance tinged with jealousy was unmistakable” (161) and the Chinoy family like this keeps involving in family struggle and dilemmas. For them the care of Nariman was bringing over trouble over their monthly budget and their family was getting stressed. So Yezad reacts over minor matters. Once when Roxana doesn’t get any proper place to dry over the clothes and hang them on the balcony, Yezad taunts her that she should “take them to Chateau Felicity. Your bloody brother and sister can dry them in their seven rooms.” (167) Such kind of statements becomes the daily clashes of the family. For Chinoy family it becomes tough to manage to look after the children properly as they have very short earnings and they have to manage with meticulous efforts:

So the Chinoy family struggle on to care for Nariman and as the monthly budget becomes more and more strained, Roxana’s men, each in his own way, attempts to supplement the dwindling pile of currency notes in the envelopes she has so painstakingly marked, butter, eggs, etc. and through which she tries desperately to juggle her monthly budget. (Bharucha, Writers of the Indian Diaspora 2003: 182)

So all the requirements for Nariman’s care and her family are now fulfilled by Roxana, but it slowly strains her relationship with her husband – Yezad. The shift brings the problem of space and comfortable belonging in Roxana’s house. She has two sons – Murad and Jehangir, living in a small-flat, given to her by her father, as her dowry. Here Yezad and his family face another sense of unbelonging in their own dwelling, symbolically in city and country. When they are on the way back home, after Nariman’s birthday party, they are teased and troubled by the people on the road. It explains the sense of insecurity of people in their own Motherland-India, and explains their feel of insecurity and how minorities (Parsis) are insecure and sense unbelonging in the nation of majority. Yezad’s explanation about his old childhood home, the Jehangir
Mansion, reflects his yearning of belonging for the home. His discussion with his sons reflects this as, “...You know it was sold. There are strangers living in my house now,” (45). The conversation mightily reflects the feeling and difference between home, a secured space and home, a building with four walls around it.

The misbehavior of Coomy and Jal towards Nariman also represents the Parsi dilemma of assimilation. Jal and Coomy are half brother and half sister of Roxana who has been ill treated by them and consequently they are called “half brother and half sister” (120). This description of “anda- half” is also described in the discussion between Yezad and his son Jehangir who asks his father about mentioning a- half for everything. The answer given by Yezad is the way of life or thinking of life of a marginalized community Parsi. Yezad replies his son that “the half is the most important part” (32). Jehangir doesn’t understand what his father said but Rohinton Mistry conveys his message that for the Parsis their assimilation in India is half and rest of the half lies in the possibility they see in their displacement and assimilation in some new land.

After long and continue trauma for him and his family members, Jal now in great anger and ire blames and argues with Coomy for keeping papa Homeless for a longer time and her plans are commented by Jal as:

“What was the point?” he screamed, pacing widly about the room. “Why did you force me to get Edul’s hammer? Why did you destroy the ceiling? You could have told them weeks ago we were kicking Pappa out!” ... “Why should you care? Family does not matter to you! You keep nursing your bitterness instead of nursing Pappa. I’ve begged you for thirty years to let it go, to forgive, to look for peace. (193)
Jal however guilt ridden confesses about all he and Coomy planned to keep their father away. And now he asks all of them to come and stay at Chateau Felicity as their belonging/Home. Yezad too decides to shift at Chateau Felicity, but unexpectedly starts feeling the sticky situation, while leaving their own home and going into the entirely new home. This feeling of Yezad is symbolic indicating the attitude towards his identity.

However Jal turns unfortunate while making his step sister’s family comfortable, as after the Chenoy family is in the Chateau Felicity, he is no more living in freedom and here develops his sense of unbelonging in the same dwellling.

However not only the major but even the minor characters like Mr. Kapur, Hussain, Vilas, Lucy too are living with a sense of unbelonging in their belonging space – their home. Mr. Kapur uses the metaphor beloved for Bombay and explains Bombay, as a home, as a survival for many homeless and exiled people. Thus he verifies Bombay as his own belonging - a home to live. Hussain is another character, focused in connection with Mr. Kapur and Yezad. He is the victim of Babri Masjid riots. Hussain is deprived of home and emotional attachment, left homeless and alienated, his family and home is burnt in the riots and he is left unbelonged and lonely.

Lucy’s, however another character with the same sense of unbelonging, she does not have her own home (her sense of security), neither as connection nor as possession. Thus she loses her power over her life and dies in alienation, falling down from the terrace.

Another minor character in the text that has the sense of homelessness is Vilas. He writes letters for the untaught. He reads and writes their emotions and feelings to and from their homes. This is how he involves himself in the family matters of many people developing a sense of belonging to someone and
somewhere, however on the other side, he feels/senses unbelonging/homeless when he remembers his own family that is far away from him. Hence, the homelessness of the *Family Matters* is understood through all angles in the pages. In the text, all the major characters like Nariman and his children, Yezad, and Roxana have the roof and shelter called as home but they had a feeling of unbelonging/never felt at home as there was lack of right emotional communication and attachment within the family. On the contrary the other characters have this sense of unbelonging due to the lack of the physical possession of home/belonging.

*Family Matters* can be read as a novel concerned with a Universalist discourse deal with the loss of as well as the subsequent struggle for meaning. Yezad’s life is affected by the loss/death of his friends in much the same way as Gustad who loses Jimmy and Dinshawji in *Such a Long Journey*, or Ishvar and Om who lose Ashraf in *A Fine Balance*. In order to have the money ready that is needed to care for Roxana’s father, Yezad indirectly attempts to blackmail his boss Vikram Kapur by having friends take action as gangsters. As an indirect effect of his plan, his friend and employer die. Likewise Dinshawji in *Such a Long Journey* dies in the course of Gustad’s efforts to help his friend Jimmy Bilimoria by laundering polluted money.

While “the narrative heart within *A Fine Balance*’s urban fabric is a domestic space,” *Family Matters* is more or less completely set within four walls, too. More precisely, *Family Matters* has as its setting of two different locations (flats), Yezad’s and Roxana’s as well as Coomy’s and Jal’s. While Coomy and Jal throw their father out, Yezad regards the old and disabled man as a raider and thus as an undesirable presence, too. Roxana’s husband is hesitant to hand out with the hermetic quality of his flat even though Nariman, due to the insufficiency of space in the flat, makes it essential for family routines to be reorganized. Thus in much the same way as Dina Shroff in *A Fine Balance* is forced to give up her insensitivity and solipsism once the tailors move in,
Yezad is called on to display flexibility and humanity in order to accommodate his father-in-law.

By virtue of its setting, *Family Matters* continues the argument of boundaries begun in *Tales From Firozsha Baag*, *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*. At stake in Mistry’s most recent novel is the interrogation of how many boundaries are useful in order to decrease the attrition of meaning and how many obstacles are detrimental because they avoid the most effective means against a loss of meaning in life, i.e. human communication and understanding. The same question is utterly posed with respect to the issue of cultural identity. It would be safe to suggest that the usefulness of boundaries in reducing an erosion of meaning in life and in constructing/maintaining a self-image is uncertain throughout the text.

Due to the “muddle life had become” (189), i.e. because of the calamities that have befallen Yezad outside the insulate of his flat, the protagonist of *Family Matters*, like Gustad Noble in *Such a Long Journey*, prefers exclusion over inclusion. In both texts, such an attitude is revealed to be problematic. However, while Gustad in Mistry’s debut novel changes from bigotry to forgiveness and understanding and thereby unreservedly comes to privilege inclusion over exclusion, *Family Matters* ends on a more pessimistic key. Mistry in the present work inverts the pattern of growth exemplified by Gustad Noble’s in *Such a Long Journey*. In *Family Matters* the initially worldly, liberal and tolerant Yezad becomes a religious fundamentalist.

Yezad spends much of the second part of the text tormented by guilt over his covert activities until he finds that religion can expediently be made to tolerate the burden of a multitude of sins. While at the beginning of the story Yezad’s wife encourages him in vain to pray and involve in the Zoroastrian rituals and customs, Yezad in the course of the novel, due to the loss of meaning in his life, utterly identifies with a religion he was already alienated from where he
was trying hard to shelter his religious/ethnic identity. It was not possible for Yezad to get sense of security from the new living even though the new home was immense compare to his old one. And his sense of unbelongingness result into the identity crises. Hence he took shelter in the Zoroastrian rituals. And that was the only source of security for him to sustain at the new place where he has been transported. The once worldly Yezad relies on religion for the construction of an identity. His emphasize on religion as marker of difference is learned through a notion of hidden boundaries and rigid borders. Like other members of the Parsi community (portrayed in Such a Long Journey, for example), Yezad fails to recognize the necessity of openness and inclusion as fertile ways of coping with the postcolonial condition. Like the members of his community, Yezad does not realize that a stress on essentialism that opts for purity over hybridity will certainly result in paralysis and unproductiveness. As in Such a Long Journey and A Fine Balance, boundaries play an important role in Family Matters in that they instrumentalise difference in order to construct a particular identity.

The power of religion over Yezad is so utter that he does not even work, his whole day is spent in the service of his religious conviction. This all consuming passion is welcomed by his wife: she doesn't mind that Daddy isn't working (464). Also: By and large, his fervent embrace of religion makes her happy, she agrees with him that the entire chain of events, starting with Grandpa’s accident and ending with Mr. Kapur’s murder, was God’s way of bringing him to prayer (464). So complete is the belief in the faith, that the choices made are also ascribed to god. Girja Kumar (1997) makes another observation, —Since mere affirmation of faith in the inviolability of the doctrine is not considered enough, resort is taken in affirming 'revelation' as the last word (19). This statement is evident in the novel in Yezad’s belief and by extension that of his wife, Roxana’s that his inconsistent interest in the scriptural system is a heavenly act. The extreme ritualism is considered as destined, enjoined by a
heavenly scheme. The strictness of the norms of purity is intense too and this is exposed to the readers when they are told about Yezad:

He bewailed the fact that in his anger he had grabbed that saitan’s arm, the contact had made him unclean in the bargain.
Now he too would need a full shower (465).

The impure state of one individual passes on directly to another simply by contact, this shows the ridiculous extent of religious zeal, bordering on the absurd that Yezad believes in. Within his turbulent state, the obsession with the concept of ritualistic purity causes blindness in Yezad and failure to identify reality as normal people would do. The fervor of Yezad’s religious beliefs is matched by the passion of his actions when he is performing his religious rituals: His expression is always very intense when he prays (465). The wooden chair in which he sits for his prayers is forbidden for use by others. He sits as though he is carrying a secret burden, whose weight is crushing him (465). The religiosity is serious dealing and this shows in Yezad's behavior, going backwards is not easy and is similar to a struggle as the narrator's words testify. According to Girja Kumar (1997) ‘nothing exists beyond revelation than the spectre of blasphemy, and in the end, perpetual hell fire for physical bodies and spiritual souls’. Once the heavenly message is revealed, it becomes the compulsory duty of the chosen one to follow the path firmly or face the cost of divine wrath. Yezad believes that his actions are necessary to save him and his community from torture. His actions take on a new and deep meaning and his zeal for the rituals he follows assumes a greater importance.

Family matters in a particular way in *Family Matters*. It is not merely a Parsi family that Mistry is ultimately interested in but the family of man. By way of intertextual reference to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, the cast-out Nariman becomes a test case for the charity and solidarity of others. The plot of the novel can be understood as detailing the ramifications of Yezad’s family’s
attempt to accommodate the “unaccommodated man” (*King Lear*), exiled by his unappreciative children. It is a test that every member of Yezad’s family passes through except the head of the family himself. Yezad’s religious keenness is revealed to be a compensation for his uncertain belief in consideration, solidarity and sharing. This is a shortcoming that the author of *Family Matters* takes issue with. Yezad is criticized for losing his faith in humanism and for replacing it by a dependence on essential difference as a doubtful approach at making meaning. While Vikram Kapur emphasizes the ideal of “the community rediscovering human bonds” (222) Yezad’s development from secular to sternly religious is not simply a psychohygienic strategy; his radical Zoroastrian belief is also a psychotic overreaction informed by communal intolerance and problematic in its treatment of others.

Particularly with respect to the previous point, Yezad differs adversely with his employer Vikram Kapur. He provides Husain, the distressed victim of intercommunal violence, with a job in his shop. Despite of having suffered himself from Muslim violence in the course of the 1947 partition of India, the Hindu Vikram practices forgiveness and solidarity to his fellow human beings. By accepting Husain as an employee, he actively fights racism, narrow-mindedness and intolerance between the Hindu and the Muslim community and becomes representative of a humanist utopia. It is people like Vikram that make multiculturalism within India work, and it is Vikram that Mistry empathises with when he, like Dina and her lodgers in *A Fine Balance*, emphasizes the importance of sharing: “

You see how we two are sitting here, sharing? That’s how people have lived in Bombay. That’s why Bombay has survived floods, disease, plague, water shortage, bursting drains and sewers, all the population pressures” (154).
Vikram Kapur underscores a philosophy that is inherent in Mistry’s other works, too. Presenting the powerfulness of stories and story-telling as ways to construct meaning in a meaningless world, he subscribes to universalism: “In fact, no matter where you go in the world, there is only one important story: of youth, and loss, and yearning for redemption. So we tell the same story, over and over. Just the details are different” (221).

Most of parsi writers use Bombay as their setting. In fact Bombay is their home, sense of security and darling. In Such a long journey Gustad feels restless in Delhi. He went there to meet up his friend major Bilimoria, who is under police custody for defrauding bank. He feels safe and sound only when he returns to Bombay. Mistry expresses his adore for Bombay in all his novels and Family Matters is no exception. Rohinton Mistry describes various features of Bombay in Family matters. Appreciating Bombay, Mr. Kapur says:

"We had to run. And we came here. But Bombay treated us well. My father started over, with zero, and became prosperous. Only city in the world where this is possible." (145)

Mistry’s love for his old city, Bombay, shines through loud and clear in the words of Mr. Kapur:

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. (152)

These words of high admiration for Bombay, conversely, come with a warning against the fundamental political party, Shiv Sena, trying to get control of the
dynamic city. Mistry has portrayed Bombay city as a protagonist in *Family Matters, Such a Long Journey* and *A fine Balance*

Mistry also depicts the theme of suffering through the character of Nariman Vakeel. He suffers from osteoporosis and hypertension. He does not find peace in Chateau Felicity. Pitifully enough while he is sent to the Pleasant Villa, he still does not find peace. We can say that Nariman is the embodiment of Parsi community. In his young age, he suffered from mental agony as his parents were against his will to marry a non-Parsi girl, Lucy. On the contrary, he had to marry a Parsi widow against his will. But he could not forget his lady love in his old age and this led him to a wretched life until his death.

We can also understand the life of Nariman Vakeel as the rise and fall of Parsi community. Parsi came to India from Persia because of the fear of Arab invaders. But though they are treated well in India, they are vanishing day by day because of late marriages, low birth rate, high rate of death and such other reasons. The death of Nariman Vakeel characteristically indicates the fall of the Paris community. The deeper the plot becomes, the more characters obtain the firmness of flesh and blood. Like the earlier texts, the main characters in *Family Matters* are Parsis. Though the story is placed in Bombay, it has a universal plea. In this regards, Linda L. Richards (2003) writes:

‘Though the story takes place in Bombay, many of the challenges the main characters face are universal, the resolutions they come to are sharply and recognizably human: You don't have to be Parsi or Indian to identify with his characters and the dilemmas they face’.

Jal is a forty-five year old unmarried and jobless man. He is the wishy-washy shadow of his highly terrifying younger sister Coomy. He suffers from a hearing disorder and has low self esteem issues. Coomy is quiet and
unpretentious. She is domineering, bossy and aggressive. She declared herself as the owner of the Vakeel household. She blames all the wrongs of her life on her stepfather and half sister Roxana. Coomy behaves like a hysterical headmistress, crafting rules to govern every phase of the elderly Nariman's life. Mistry narrates:

She should have been a headmistress, enacting rules for hapless schoolgirls, making them miserable. Instead, here she was, plaguing him with rules to govern every aspect of his shrunken life. Besides the prohibition against locked doors, he was required to announce his intention to use the WC. In the morning he was not to get out of bed till she came to get him. A bath was possible only twice a week when she undertook its choreography, with Jal enlisted as stage manager to stand by and ensure his safety. There were more rules regarding his meals, his clothes, his dentures, his use of the radiogram, and in charitable moments Nariman accepted what they never tired of repeating: that it was all for his own good. (2)

Since Nariman is afflicted with Parkinson and osteoporosis, he could hurt himself seriously if he has a fall. Though Coomy knows the fact she never cares for him. She yells at him daily as she observes him to get ready himself for the evening walk. She does not help him nor does she offer to accompany him on his Walks.

Coomy is choosy in caring for her stepfather but also cruel, still angry and aching from a long-ago wrong he did to her mother, Yasmin. She is having the misconception regarding her stepfather that he is responsible for the death of her mother and because of that she not ready to forgive him. The smell of his urine, feces and the body odor is more than Coomy can bear. In a gesture both unfair and cowardly, she cunningly hatches a plan. She quickly bundles the old
man into an ambulance and takes him to Roxana's small apartment. The bad smell in Nariman's room still annoys her, she humorously says like Lady Macbeth to Jal: "All the perfumes of Arabia, all your swabbing and scrubbing and mopping and scouring will not remove it." (104)

The most important question of the text, which clears everything however remains unasked until Jehangir’s epilogue at the end, is who is responsible for Lucy and Yasmin’s deadly fall? When Jehangir visits old Fitter learns for the first time his grandmother’s dying words, only half heard by shocked bystanders, which have echoed the misconception and placed him in the state of suffering for years. who was on the roof at the time and his near once with the ineffaceable 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.’ (477)

This is considerable less as some menacing plot twist than as a point about how actions have costs which echo down the years, but which people often reading backwards from their own point in time and situation can interpret as they wish. Definitely, Coomy has chosen to imagine her mother’s unhappy marriage and death in a confident way, as her lonely life, destroyed by bitterness and an pitiless attitude towards Nariman, make definitely clear. Thus, characters in Family Matters are seen largely to choose their own destiny. Yet they do not do so subjectively. Each is laden by a severe sense of duty: to family, to employer or to the community as a whole.
The works of Rohinton Mistry are concerned with the problem of making meaning in a world in which meaning has become meager. The function of cultural difference is complex in this in this perspective. In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry is, at least to a certain extent, interested in describing Parsi culture into his text in order to make acquainted his readers with a culture that is on the edge of destruction. While such an ethnographical project is definitely less prominent in *A Fine Balance*, whose broader scope shifts the focus away from a single community to a variety of communities within multicultural India, the sociological interest in how people construct meaning in world otherwise not possible to bear remains constant throughout all of Mistry’s narratives.

While in *Such a Long Journey* aspects of cultural difference such as language, history and religion may be said to contribute to an understanding of Parsi identity, in Mistry’s later publications cultural difference is often viewed more critically, i.e. as a source of an erosion of meaning, rather than as remedy against it. Despite a sometimes mocking indictment of Indian culture and communities, the kind of identity that Mistry writes in favor of is a hybrid one stressing cultural exchange and intercultural understanding. Mistry’s most recent novel *Family Matters* is no exception in this context.

**Conclusion**

Rohinton Mistry’s *The Family Matters* focuses on the ethno-religious politics that makes the minority communities in India, like the Parsis, wary of the majority community. Mistry himself being a Parsi expresses the uncertainties and anxieties of his community. The present study of his novel explores the limitations and relevance of the fiction focusing on particular ethnic groups. In the process it expresses the view that the novel does not remain ethnocentric as it celebrates hybridity and multi-culturalism in the continuing process of transnationalism. The study also highlights peculiarities of the post-modern,
globalized world in which identity is regarded something fluid and constructed. At the same time the concept of identity acquires greater importance for the minorities and marginalized groups who seek a space within the larger cultural groups through the allegation of their ethnic identity.

In the novel Nariman’s memories of the past tell the reader to earlier moments in the city’s, and the nation’s history in a novel that moves across three generations of the same family. Mistry has brilliantly touches the certain issues like identity, culture, struggle of minority and question of belonging are manifested by Mistry brilliantly. Furthermore, it also reinforces the notion of racial purity and helps legitimize the resistance to inter-religious marriages.