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HISTORY MATTERS IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S "FAMILY MATTERS"

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Abstract: *This paper concentrates on Mistry's penultimate book "Family Matters", a beautifully written traditional novel set in the mid-nineties Mumbai tracing the lives of three generations in a Parsi family. Apart from charting the effects of religious bigotry and rigid traditionalism, the novel scrutinizes other ills of post colonial Indian society chief among which the unending corruption of government and politicians. I shall try to emphasize that despite Mistry's keen interest in universalities which permeates all his work, one of his main preoccupations remains history and the toll it takes on the lives of ordinary people.*

Key words: *politics, history, corruption, violence.*

1. Introduction

Mistry penultimate work is a beautifully written traditional novel set in the mid-nineties Mumbai tracing the lives of three generations in a Parsi family. Apart from charting the effects of religious bigotry and rigid traditionalism, the novel scrutinizes other ills of post colonial Indian society chief among which the unending corruption of government and politicians. It explores issues of integrity and corruption; notions of the multiple and sometimes conflicting demands are set alongside filial loyalty, personal vengeance and religious faith. Just like in the case of his previous novels *"Such a Long Journey"* and *"A Fine Balance"* Mistry displays a keen interest in universal human issues, such as family life. *"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 attention is once again the Parsi community and therefore, all the members of the family depicted are Parsis. But apart from universalities Mistry explores here contemporary ethnic and religious violence in India attempting to give a literary representation of the significance of the burning and destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992.

2. Post-colonial Indian historical background

For a better understanding of my analysis I consider it necessary to present a few elements from Indian history against which the action of Mistry's novel takes place.

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On the 6th of December 1992, the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya was destroyed 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 suggested 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 organized groups of Hindu activists who were celebrating the victory from Ayodhya. The violence between the two confessions continued for a couple of months and by the time it was over almost 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 consequence 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 culmination 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 fighting 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 tactics and young activists trained to see political work as part of a larger struggle sometimes demanding unscrupulous 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 as the

"most overtly fundamentalist grouping to achieve office anywhere in India" (Rushdie, 92)

It is precisely in the midst of this violent and corrupt politics that Mistry's novel takes place.

3. An all-controlling politics

As we have already seen, with *"Family Matters"* Mistry embraces the Indian reality of the 1990s and the political subtext of the novel is the growth of the fundamentalist Shiv Sena ideology and its repercussions on the life of the ordinary, innocent citizens. The rise of right wing politics in India led to a moment of serious crisis for all non-Hindu Indians and the novel tries to diagnose their anxieties, feelings of insecurity and apprehension. Hints on the oppressive extremist politics enter the novel from the very beginning when Nariman tries to persuade Coomy that it is perfectly safe for him to go for a walk by pointing out that dangers lurk indoors as well as outdoors. This brings into the text the first reference to the Babri Mosque riots. Nariman refers to the burning down 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 however an isolated incident.

"How often does a mosque in Ayodhya turn people into savages in Bombay? Once in a blue moon" (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 4-5)

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Political gossip is a central topic of discussion during the birthday party organized for Nariman which opens the novel. All the members of the family blame the corrupt politics of Shiv Sena and their double standards with respect to the insistence 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 official terms the Shiv Sena labels Western culture as degenerate irritates the family a lot.

However 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 trauma 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 figure of Husain the horror of the act and its consequences are relived repeatedly. When Husain is first introduced he is in one of his dark moods. We are told that there are days when he can only sit back enveloped in his dark memories. What he has witnessed is the ultimate act of denial – of his very right to existence – the burning of his wife, children and home. Such communal hatred can be blind as it fails to see individuals as human beings but only as representatives of groups. Husain has been reduced to a poor man, a dispossessed 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 reconstitute human bonds with Mr. Kapur and, to some extent, with Yezad. The latter tries to educate himself 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 …" (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 144)

After coming to power in the 1995 elections, the Shiv Sena and BJP administration introduced several measures meant to consolidate their position. Some of these measures were directly aimed at minorities. One of these initiatives was the renaming of Bombay as Mumbai which was considered one of the first significant attempts to remove all non-Hindu place names from the so-called purified Hindu land. This is one more decision of the people in power that influences the destiny of one of the characters in the novel, namely Mr. Vikram Kapur. He refuses to change 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 as the reader witnesses how he cherishes the collection of pictures of colonial Bombay which he holds in high esteem. As he tells Yezad

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"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." (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 229)

In a similar line, Mistry uses Doctor Tarapore's discussion with Nariman at the hospital to bring to the fore 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"* run 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. Unfortunately today only Commerce and Arts students study English as part of the political program to erase all foreign influence.

The reader sees how Shiv Sena have spread their influence on many domains of activity in town and they try to control and make a profit out of everything. They are the ones behind the illegal lottery Matka and use the profits to fund the organization. The illegal lottery also finances the organized crime that has infected the city and its institutions. Gautam, a journalist who had written an article incriminating the Shiv Sena underground activity has to endure 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." (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 207)

In addition to its connections with gangsters, the Shiv Sena has implemented a cultural censorship programme, much to Yezad's exasperation. 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." (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 273)

3. 1. The widely spread corruption

But, as we have already seen, ordinary people run great 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 feebly and it is crystal clear that they beat up Gautam for writing *"An in-depth analysis about the politician–criminal-police nexus."* (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 206) It seems that the enemies and defenders of the state are identical and funded from the same illegal sources. Mistry feels sorry for Mumbai for *"it is being raped by politicians"* (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 156) and calls the Shiv Sena *"the greatest urban menace"* (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 209)

The oppression from rural areas is highlighted by Vilas Rane when he tells the story of a pair of lovers from different

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castes whose infatuation for each other was considered a breach of established order in their native village and, as a result, they were mutilated 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.'" (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 210)

Another illustrative example in this respect is Mr. Kapur's murder. As an eyewitness Husain wants to provide some details about the attackers but he is advised against it by the police investigating the case:

"They said it was not right to connect Shiv Sena, there was no evidence. One policeman laughed in a very bad way. He said, 'You Muslims, always trying to blame Shiv Sena.' He frightened me. 'I'm very sorry, police sahib,' I said with my hands joined. 'That's not my wish. Please punish the killers, whoever they are, I mention it only because you asked for everything.'" (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 405)

Even the game of cricket is subject to the corruption which seems to have penetrated every field of activity 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"* (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 31) and the intimidating right-wing politics aimed against minorities, the small Parsi community feels threatened and Mistry cannot avoid the theme of immigration which is perceived as a 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. Narendra Kumar 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."(Kumar qtd. in Devi, 110)

The introduction into the text of the theme of immigration provides Mistry with the chance to talk about Canada and its official 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. They have to go to work and school everyday traveling by overcrowded and dirty trains. They have to put up with the scarcity of water and precarious financial means. All these considered it is not difficult to see why Yezad dreams of immigration to Canada even though he had been turned down by authorities 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:

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"Study useful things – computers, MBA, and they'll welcome you. Not useless things like me, history and literature and philosophy." (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 45)

There is a certain degree of irony 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 represented by the fact that the man who had interviewed Yezad and Roxana and had turned them down was an ethnic Indian. He had been extremely 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." (Mistry, *"Family Matters"* 253)

Such virulent critique of Canadian multiculturalism has never before been encountered 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 seems to take its toll on their perceptions of the outside world.

4. Conclusion

As a witness to the unending spectacle of violence and corruption Mistry seems to pinpoint, with sadness, the fact that in contemporary times the Indian state acts as a neo-colonial power towards its own citizens, minorities included. The novel is an attempt to offer the insiders' view and decentre mainstream assumptions about violence, be it political, ethnical or religious, as illustrated in Western representations.

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