

Web of threats: Commissure of Power and politics in Family Matters

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Abstract

Rohinton Mistry, a Parsi novelist represents his community through his writings. Apart from treating Parsi theme, he also highlights the historical incidents in his novels. His [Family Matters](#) is a novel with a difference. Traditional historians consider literature and history as two entirely different pots having different ideologies. While the New Historicists analyse the literary text with an eye to history and explore the interplay between text and historical context. The present paper attempts to read the novel [Family Matters](#) in a new historicist perspective.

Introduction

Mistry, a popular Parsi writer, left India during the Emergency. Since 1975, he has been living in Canada, yet he preserves the memories of his homeland green in his mind and leaves the imprints of those fond recollection in his novels. Like most of the postcolonial writers, he delves into the history of the past and lets his readers know the past; and live in the past. His illuminating novel [Family Matters](#), lends itself to various levels of political interpretation. It unravels the misery caused by the political upheavals during demolition of Babri Masjid.

Mistry recreates Babri Masjid riots in his [Family Matters](#). On 6th December 1992, the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya was demolished by a large group of Hindu agitators. They claimed that the

place was the birth place of the Hindu god, Ram and hence the place belonged to them. They wanted to build a Ram temple in the place. The news soon spread over everywhere in Bombay. Muslims rose in anger and protested against the demolition which wounded their religious sentiments. Violence broke out. For the next 2 to 3 months, Bombay was under the grip of violence. More than eight hundred people were dead and many people lost their houses. According to the police report, many Muslims set fire to the houses of innocent Hindus and vice versa. Mistry in [Family Matters](#) highlights the atrocities of a particular party towards the minorities. Mistry describes the unpleasant development during Babri Masjid riots through an eye witness, Husain. He is working in Bombay Sporting Emporium and is one of the victims of the riot. His wife and his three children are burnt

alive before his eyes by the rioters. Kapur, his shop keeper feels pity for Husain and he details the story of Husain to Yezad:

...the burning chawls in Antop Hill, goondas setting people on fire ... Husain and his Muslim neighbours 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(Family Matters 137- 138)

Husain explains the police brutality during the Babri Masjid riots. He says that instead of saving the people, the police joined hands with the goondas. He wails in agony:

Sahab, in those riots the police were behaving like gangsters. In Muslim mohallas they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burning, neighbours came out to throw water. And the police? Firing bullets like target practice. These guardians of the law were murdering everybody! And my poor wife and children ... I couldn't even recognize the (Family Matters 148-149)

On Sri Krishna Commission which was appointed to investigate the Babri Masjid riots, Mistry observes, "More than three years have passed, and still no justice. Shiv Sena polluted the police. And now Shiv Sena has become the government" (Family Matters 149). Mistry smells the fist of Shiv Sena behind the riot. He refers to the general view that a list of non-Hindus was prepared at the behest of Shiv Sena to fix them for attack.

Vilas in Family, who runs Jai Hind Book Mart, is represented as a kind hearted fellow. He helps the illiterate labourers who work in the city to write letters to their relatives in distant villages. He collects a meagre amount from them and when Yezad requests him to charge more, he refuses. Because his clients are poor and they "might turn for help to a Shiv Sena shakha where they would be exposed to vicious communal propaganda,

might even get recruited in their sticks-and-stones method of political persuasion, their fine art of scoring debating points by breaking opposition bones" (Family Matters 135).

Gautam and Bhaskar are introduced to Yezad through his friend Vilas. They are from an amateur troupe, staging dramas with socially oriented themes. They are journalists too. While the four people meet in the restaurant, they discuss Matka, "it's a criminal scourge that has Bombay helpless in its grip" (Family Matters 199). Bhaskar details the atrocities of Shiv Sena committed on Gautam. The latter published the story about Matka, an illegal game. Describing the link between Siva Sena and Matka, he explains the role of politicians, criminals and police in the game. When the article was published, "some of their goondas caught him outside the office" (Family Matters 199). They wanted to blacken the person who blackened their party by printing lies, "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 on his face and ears and neck, even ruining his shirt in the process"(Family Matters 200). On hearing about the attack, Yezad comments "Those people are absolutely lawless" (Family Matters 200). Mistry describes how the money from Matka finances Shiv Sena. Money from Matka is also used for making plastic explosives with which the terrorists blow up the stock exchange in Bombay. He muses: "The enemies of the nation, and political parties that claim to be defenders of the nation, all rely on the same source" (Family Matters 200).

Vilas sums up "Matka is Bombay and Bombay is Matka" (Family Matters 200). When Bhaskar mentions the name Shiv Sena, Gautam expresses his fear of it and asks him not to mention the name directly because, "they'll burn down the hall where we meet" (Family Matters 202). The Police decide to ban Matka as its hand in the Bombay bomb blast is brought to light and action is launched against it:

...the police were arresting people from top to bottom – big bookies and small, kingpins and little safety pins. Rumour was that since those terrorist bombs had blown up the stock exchange and shattered Bombay, they had to do something about Matka. Even the crookedest politician didn't want Bombay to be the next Beirut. ([Family Matters 262-263](#)).

Mistry brands the Shiv Sena “urban menace” ([Family Matters 202](#)). In his assessment, “Janata Party okay, Shiv Sena not okay, secular good, communal bad, BJP unacceptable, Congress lesser of evils?” ([Family Matters 351](#)). According to Mistry, Shiv Sena opposes each and every thing and even converts trifle matters into political issues. He remarks, “Since coming to power they'd been in a constant fit of censorship and persecution. Top of the list were Muslims, their favourite scapegoat as usual” ([Family Matters 265](#)). “They have destroyed the works of famous Indian artists; set fire on the office of the Men's Magazines for publishing vulgar photos and matters. Women aren't allowed to work in the discos and bars as it was against Indian culture” ([Family Matters 265](#)). Yezad remarks “What a joke of a government. Clowns and crooks. Or clownish crooks”. ([Family Matters 265](#)). For Mistry, BJP and Shiv Sena “encouraged the Hindutva extremists to destroy the Babri Mosque” ([Family Matters 30](#)). Bombay was an embodiment of peace till 1960s but the rise of fascists parties like Shiv Sena, and BJP, turned the city's atmosphere by spoiling its uniqueness. They never liked the arrival of outsiders to Bombay. The recent violent protest against the North India settlement in Bombay vouchsafes to this.

Kapur decides to contest the election. He promises Yezad to give promotion in his absence. Yezad, who is already upset over economic hardships, feels happy about his forthcoming promotion. He always encourages Kapur to contest the election. But suddenly Kapur drops his plan. Yezad wants Kapur to be in the race. By this he can settle his family problems. After consulting his friends Gautam and Bhaskar, Yezad plans to use the name of Shiv Sena to force Kapur. Gautam and Bhaskar are ready to act as

Shiv Sainiks. For Vilas, these journalists are better than the real Shiv Sena people. Because “With real Shiv Sena, you'll have people rampaging like wild animals, glass shattering, smell of smoke and fire, goondas with sticks and bricks” ([Family Matters 315](#)).

The name of the city Bombay is changed by the Shiv Sena and renamed Mumbai after the name of Mumba Devi. Since the name of the shop owned by Kapur is ‘Bombay Sporting Emporium’, Yezad contrives a plan of threatening the former for keeping the old name. As arranged earlier, the next day, Yezad tells Kapur that two Shiv Sena men from their tax department come to the shop, “They were informing all shops, hotels, any business with Bombay in its name, that they had to change it to Mumbai within thirty days. Or pay a fine” ([Family Matters 317](#)). When Kapur asks whether it is a Government law, Yezad replies, “it was new Shiv Sena policy” ([Family Matters 317](#)).

When Yezad explains the difficulties in changing the name board, the Shiv Sena men demand payment of thirty five thousand at once every month as long as they want to keep the name Bombay in their name board or they must change the name of the shop as ‘Mumbai Sporting Emporium’.

To refute Shiv Sena's orders, Yezad says that the only option for Kapur is to run in the election. He can then root out corruption. But Kapur gives a startling reply, “A municipal councillor tackling corruption is like a penknife trying to dig up a banyan tree” ([Family Matters 320](#)). To the surprise of Yezad, Kapur hands over the suitcase stuffed with thirty five thousand rupees to him to give to the Sena. “Their arrogance: nothing will stand in their way, they seemed to say, now it is their kingdom. They are taking what they want-like a conquering army” ([Family Matters 326](#)).

But accidentally two Shiv Sena members meet Kapur and ask him to change the name of the shop. Kapur becomes violent because he links the present situation with the story narrated by Yezad. He scolds and curses them: “ You think you can

scare me, you fucking grass-eating ghaties? You know who I am? I have drunk the milk of Punjab! Saalay bhonsdi kay bharve, I'll break your faces if you act smart with me!" ([Family Matters 373](#)). He attacks them and the two persons step out to the pavement. As they are insulted openly, they threaten Kapur that he will feel sorry for the insult. Later on, Husain's words bear testimony to the fanatic ways of the Shiv Sena and caution his owner correctly: "You know when Babri Mosque was destroyed and all the riots were flaming, these bad people killed so many innocents, with my own eyes I saw it, sahab, they locked them in their houses and set fire to them, they attacked people with swords and axes" ([Family Matters 374](#)).

But Kapur replies coolly, "It's okay, Husain miyan, you don't have to fear. They only attack poor people, weak people. Like all bullies, they are cowards at heart..." ([Family Matters 374](#)). But soon, Kapur has to pay his valuable life for his reckless attitude towards the Sena. The two Sena people kill him cruelly. The police confirm the murderers as robbers, who have come for stealing goods from the shop. While Husain, the eye witness suspects the hands of Shiv Sena men, the police laugh at him. Husain reports: "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'" ([Family Matters 393](#)). Mistry brings into limelight the indifference and heartlessness of the Sena. Jagroop S. Biring in "Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters: A Critique of Ethnic Discourse" comments:

All throughout the novel Mistry does not let slip the opportunity to cast aspersions on the old betel-noir, the Shiv Sena. Kapur's murder by the 'sainiks' is the last straw in the series of events involving Shiv Sena. It is a climactic moment of the sub-plot that has obtrusive impact on the story line of the main plot. The novelist has succeeded in lending a political background to the otherwise personal life story of a Parsi family. (7)

Besides being unhappy about the communal politics in India, Mistry regrets over the corruption prevalent in the country. He pictures India as a weak country, which suffers from the disease of corruption. For him, none of the political parties strives for the welfare of the people. Instead, they have their own aims and aspirations. Jehangir in [Family Matters](#) is moved by the pitiable condition of the poor people. The stories as a whole depict Mistry's concern for the underdog:

...about poor people in a village in Bihar who'd died of hunger because money for food and irrigation went straight into the pockets of corrupt district officials; about the four hundred and fifty children crushed to death while attending a school function because the contractor who built the hall had cheated on the cement; and about the dozens who were burnt alive in a fire at a cinema without a sprinkler system because the owner had bribed the safety inspector to give him a false certificate. ([Family Matters 210-211](#)).

Mistry in [Family Matters](#) perceives the historical events from the point of view of the innocent victims and peruses them in a new historical perspective and the multiple chains of the bitter incidents in the novel evokes sympathy towards the characters in the novel.

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