

The Search for Self: Identity Crisis and Cultural Struggles in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters

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Abstract

This paper explores the theme of identity crisis and cultural struggles in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters by analyzing the struggles of various characters in the perspective of their cultural, familial, and personal dilemmas. According to Erik Erikson's concept of an identity crisis, the paper examines how characters like Nariman Vakeel, Yezad, Coomy, and Jal confront questions about their identities within the frameworks of family expectations, religious values, and social pressures. Nariman Vakeel's diminishing role within his family due to aging and illness, as well as his unresolved love for Lucy, exemplifies the emotional turmoil of lost identity. Yezad's journey from materialism to spiritual awakening mirrors the broader search for self amidst societal constraints. The Parsi community's struggle for survival and relevance in post-colonial India is explored through the characters' relationship to their heritage and customs. The paper also highlights the external pressures of communal violence, exemplified by Husain's trauma during the Babri Masjid riots, as a reflection of the broader societal identity crises in post-colonial India. Through these narratives, Mistry portrays the impact of historical, cultural, and familial forces on individual identity, revealing the complexities of belonging, faith, and self-perception in a changing world. The novel's characters' attempts to reconcile with their pasts and find their place in the present reflect the universal struggle for self-understanding and a sense of home.

Keywords: Identity Crisis, Family Dynamics, Turmoil, Society Pressures And Generational Conflicts.

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian writer known for his poignant storytelling and exploration of post-colonial themes. Born in 1952 in Bombay (now Mumbai), he belongs to the Parsi community and immigrated to Canada in 1975. His novel *Family Matters* (2002) examines identity crises, generational conflicts, and socio-political issues in India. Mistry's works, including *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, often depict the struggles of marginalized communities. His writing is characterized by rich narratives, intricate character development, and deep social commentary. He has received numerous literary accolades, cementing his place as a significant contemporary author.

Identity crisis is a phrase many people go through when they question or reassess who they are. A search for identity crisis is

common during teenage but people may also reassess their lives after a major life event such as retirement. It is a type of feeling that you are not sure of who you are or what you should do. An identity crisis usually occurs when there is a change in a person's life. But it can happen at any time. Identity crisis is fundamental in the world of humans. The search of identity is considered to be a theme in literature. Identity comprises of certain a continuous self-image over time in experiences, values, beliefs, and relationships that help individuals create a continuous self-image over time.

The minority Parsi community was considered marginalized. They experience a limited declining population, late marriages, low birth rate, high rate of divorce, attitudes to the girl child, urbanization, alienation, etc. Mistry's protagonists struggle in their search for identity in both family and society, yet disappoint them. In the lives of the characters, the unwavering spirit in the face of difficulty is evident. Post-colonial becomes the major theme in the works of minorities especially Parsi writers like Rohinton Mistry. He depicts how Parsi react with the rest of the population.

Mistry in *Family Matters* centers on a specific family and conveys a universal message regarding love, death, and the decline of human values both within the home and in society, leading to issues such as companionship, corruption, communalism, and fanaticism. Nariman Vakeel embodies the everyman and through his characters, Mistry provides a voice for the marginalized Parsi community in the society. Mistry raises some of the problems of minorities and identity crises which are the main issues in post-colonial studies Mistry tried to show how a Parsi community struggled to find a balance between the past dignity and present circumstances depicting the tension arising out of an overlapping culture.

The title *Family Matters* has a double meaning. Firstly, it refers to domestic life and secondly, it refers to a nation as a family where cultures, races, and religions, live together as members of a nation. Just as disruption in a domestic home brings out imbalances, the same happens to the nation. The characters in the novel struggle for their place and identity in both family and society yet both disappoint and corner them. In Both domestic and national life all the characters face identity crises.

The demolition of Babri masjid in 1992 is triggered waves of communal violence across India. This event also marked a significant identity crisis for non-Hindu Indians. Through the experiences of Husain, the horror of this incident and its aftermath are continuously reflected. Husain, who works as a peon at Bombay Sporting Goods Emporium, tragically became a victim of Babri masjid riots. The Shiva Sena participated in the looting and burning of innocent and impoverished individuals. Husain recalled the devastation in Antop Hill where goondas set people ablaze. In the riots, Husain lost his entire family. In the riot, the police were behaving like gangsters. In Muslim mohallas, they were shooting their guns at innocent people. Houses were burnt, and the neighbors who came out to throw water at them were targeted by the police, firing bullets like target practice. Husain couldn't even recognize his poor wife and children.

Nariman Vakeel's search for identity is the main crisis in the novel. He suffers from Parkinson's and osteoporosis disease. He is living with the stepchildren Coomy and Jal contractor whose father died at a young age and unwillingly the parents of Nariman Vakeel forced him to marry a Parsi widow named Yasmin which ended in an unhappy marriage and after her death, Coomy and Jal took care of Nariman in the chateau felicity apartment. Nariman is confined to a small room which portrays the diminished role in the family. It exacerbates the loss of identity as a represented family figure. Rohinton Mistry was from the Parsi community and most of the fictional characters in the novel are from the Parsi community who feels extinct in the society.

The traditional and spiritual values cause the loss of self-identity of Nariman. In the novel *Family Matters* the Parsi community values are exploited through the life of Nariman. He is not

the victim of a single force but of forces like old value systems, culture, religion, and his blood relations. Nariman and Lucy tried to develop their way of life. They fought for eleven years to be accepted by their families but failed. In the end, they surrender to their dominant culture which didn't allow them to connect their happy love life.

Coomy and Jal's identity crisis is evident throughout the novel. Being a stepchild of Nariman Vakeel and without adopting the surname Vakeel it adds to their identity crisis. They are Contractor by blood and flesh but Nariman Vakeel raised them as his children. This adds to their complex love-and-hate relationship with Nariman. Because of the hyphenated relationship, they feel that Nariman doesn't love and care for them as he cares for Roxanna whom they describe as his priority. Jal and Coomy's collection of childhood toys shows their attempt to find their identity in the past. It also contains prizes Jal and Coomy had won at school when their father was present. They keep all these toys to cheer them up when they feel lonely. Through this Mistry shows how a person's fixation on the past affects their present.

Yezad, the Parsi protagonist of the novel and son-in-law of Nariman Vakeel wants to move to Canada because he wants Mistry to try to give an autobiographical touch through Yezad also wants to go Canada for security and identity which he couldn't get in India. Yezad is not happy with the progress of his country. He firmly believes that the petty interests and selfish motives of the politicians responsible are not the happy pictures of India.

Jahangir, the son of Roxana and Yezad was appointed as a Homework monitor by Miss. Alaverzez as he thought it would save lives and would make things better for him in the country. He resolved to be the best homework monitor, hardworking, and impartial until the financial crisis took place in his family. The students who were unable to answer correctly gave Jahangir some money as a bribe for the correction. One of the characters Ashok gave twenty rupees to Jahangir and he agreed to help his family. He thinks to use the money without getting in trouble. He slipped his twenty rupees into his mother's envelope and when she found the money thought it was from Daddy's salary. Jahangir after noticing it as a mistake and realizing his actions leads to questions of his morality and integrity.

Nariman's struggle for self-identity is the central conflict in the novel. The loss of his love resulted in a loss of his sense of self, which continues to haunt him throughout his life. He appears to be a puppet controlled by his family and his community. He suppressed his own happiness for their sake, which contributed to his crisis of identity. Nariman's longing for the past with Lucy mirrors the Parsi community's yearning for their once-glorious history.

In the novel *Family Matters* the very word 'home' becomes a myth because instead of protecting and providing security and peace, it becomes a contesting ground for those who belong to it and who are outsiders. As such the feeling of belongingness to a home is threatened which made the minorities question their identity and the place they belonged. The protagonist's forceful eviction from his own home by his stepchildren Jal and Coomy reflects the displacement of minorities in their homeland.

Yezad, the son-in-law of Nariman leads a happy life with his wife Roxana, and their sons Murad and Jahangir. When he visits his father-in-law at Pleasant Villa where he respects and enjoys his time there. Roxana's selfless care for her bedridden father made their life miserable. Old age Nariman caused many challenges and lost his respect due to his health. Yezad does not even allow his sons to touch the things and instruments of Nariman. Nariman is called a Genital father when he first visits his daughter, son-in-law and Grandchildren. Due to his health issue, Nariman had lost his elderly Identity in the house to make decisions. Nariman's health deteriorates due to Parkinson's disease, he becomes dependent on his stepchildren Jal and Coomy and later on his

biological daughter Roxana. This dependence on his children creates a problem for Nariman who struggles with dignity and contrasts sharply with his precious role as the head of the Family.

The realization of Yezad's mistakes made him behave properly in the upcoming days. Yezad helped to groom Nariman and took care of him in all the ways. He also became spiritually and traditionally engaged in the values and beliefs that made Roxana happy. Yezad is a complex character who undergoes significant changes throughout the novel. These changes reflect his internal struggles, external circumstances, and the cultural and social tensions he faces as an individual in a changing society

After 5 years of gapping Murad despite his father's reproaches to his birthday party, Murad is obstinate and he is very particular in inviting Anjali to his birthday party. At last the father and the son work out a plan which clearly shows the Parsis' sense of superiority. Mistry has deliberately brought into the novel the love experiences of both the grandfather and the grandson with non-Parsi girls only to show that time has not changed anything for Parsi, the Parsis can never change their convictions whatever be the whims and fancies of the individual. The identity of Parsi community and their values are always valued and never changed from Nariman's father to Murad's Father. Yezad warns Murad not to cross the rules and laws of the Parsi Community.

The identity crisis faced by the characters, particularly the older generation, is highlighted in their efforts to reconcile the past with the present. It is considered as a necessity in human life and also in society. But Nariman suffers physically and mentally more than any other character. Mistry's *Family Matters* presents identity as a fluid and evolving construct, shaped by personal experiences, generational conflicts, and socio-political realities. The novel highlights how identity crises arise when individuals struggle to reconcile personal desires with familial and societal responsibilities. Through the character of Nariman Vakeel, the novel explores the impact of aging and dependence on self-identity, while Roxana and Yezad's struggles depict the tensions between duty, tradition, and modern aspirations.

Conclusion

Family Matters suggests that identity is not static but is constantly negotiated within the family unit. The novel underscores the complexities of familial bonds, where love, duty, and sacrifice shape one's sense of self. Mistry offers a poignant commentary on how identity crises whether due to age, economic hardship, or cultural shifts are resolved through resilience, compromise, and, at times, painful acceptance. In doing so, *Family Matters* becomes a profound exploration of the human condition, illustrating how identity is both a personal and collective experience within the family structure.

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