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Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*

*–Rupam Kumari**

Abstract

The article examines the significance of realism in the work of Rohinton Mistry, especially in *Family Matters* (2002). Born in Bombay and emigrated to Canada in 1975, Mistry writes generally about the India and of his youth. Through realism, Mistry represents the life with fidelity. He is a realist in true sense, who has wonderfully articulated realism maintaining situation and language.

Keywords: Realism, Mimesis, Postcolonial, Homi Bhabha.

In *Family Matters*, Mistry is aware of the dangers and benefits of realism and thus avoids the naive of some kinds of realism. First of all, he poises the separate existence of the two entities of language and reality. As a typical representative of philosophical realism, he tends to close the gap between the word and the thing. His character Jahangir ponders over the power of words with youthful marvel:

> The lavatory at school was disgusting, it stank like railway station toilets. The boys called it the bog. The first time he heard it, he was puzzled by the word, He had looked it up in Daddy's dictionary, and found more than one meaning. Slang for lavatory, it said, also, wet spongy ground. He imagined wet spongy ground, imagined putting his foot in it, and agreed "bog" was the prefect word. (96-97)

Jahangir's concoctions clearly represent the process of realist identification; he assumes that there is a reality which contains meaningful information that can finally be reflected in language. However as it is clear from the excerpt, the concord between the boggy reality of the toilet and the bogginess of the word is not natural or given, as it has to be thought. Mistry emphasizes through repetition that realism requires the active imagination of the linguistic subject in order to be effective, and thus, he presents the rationalization of consciousness, as Elizabeth Ermarth would have it. In other words, the mimesis that Mistry employs is active like Aristotle's and not passive, like the undistorted mirror which Stendhal holds before this reader.

* *Research Scholar, University Department of English, B.R.A. Bihar University, Muzaffarpur, Bihar.*

Vilas Rane, the village scribe, is one of the most vehement proponents of the realist position in *Family Matters*. He makes a living by writing letters in the name of his illiterate customers even if he gets paid for his service. He said:

> Nothing is more cruel than a letter cut short for lack of money. It's like death one moment the words flowing, next moment silence, the thought unfinished, the love unconveyed, the anguish unexpressed (140).

Vilas, in other words, shuns fragmentary writing. However, his realism also operates in the mode of Aristotelian mimesis, providing through active representative information on the one hand and pleasure on the other hand, as one of the return letter testifies to:

> Such a beautiful letter, they said, it is like being with you in the city, sharing your life, taking the train to your book shop, watching you work. And we hear your voice in every line, so wonderful is the effect of the words (141).

Even in the most realist mode, words effect the real. Through the very awareness of the fact words create an effect, Mistry questions their veracity, even if he tries to fill up the cracks in the realist code.

Next to the tendency to close the gap between word and world, Mistry's novel also bears testimony to a more overt difference between the linguistic artifact and the real world. At some point in the novel, the characters discuss the minds capacity for conceiving things which are not there as with the imagined "damned spot" on lady Macbeth's hand. The object here is "more psychological than real" (109). Although the passage does not directly concern the status of language it is symptomatic of certain tendencies in Family Matters that insist on the capacity of language to create rather than reflect the real. Even the radical realist vilas knows that language creates truth, and that truth is an ideological construct which is informed by social conventions. As such, truth is not given, but created by the community through language, as in the doctrine of post structuralism.

> Myths create the reality Point is, there was a time when living according to certain myths served your community well. With the present state of society, those same myths can make misfits of men. Even the British knew when to observe their myth of not cricket, old chap and when to hit below the belt, kick you in the balls, poke you in the eyes (213).

Vilas discussion of the creative nature of myth tastes wry though, as he uses it in defense of his own realism, which he claims is transparent and true.

However, Mistry's further comments on realism, which specifically envisage literary realism, pre-empt vilas's argument. *Family Matters* is suffused with inter textual references to Enid Blyton's realist books for children. The stories that relate the adventures of the Famous Five are fed to and greedily consumed by Murad and Jahangir, as they were by their father Yezad. Yezad believes that the English books of Enid Bytom are unsuitable for children living in India, as they function in the mode of neo-colonial alienation:

> Yezad said it did immense harm, it encouraged children to grow up without attachment to the place where they belonged, made them hate themselves for

> being who they were, created confusion about their identity. He said he had read the same books when he was small and they had made him yearn to become a little Englishman of a type that even England did not have (97).

Further in the story, Yezad remarks that "what they needed was an Indian Blytonto fascinate them with their own reality" (117). When Murad and Jahangir have grown up, also they realize that they cannot be served by the English realism of Blyton, because it presents an unreal fantastical world for Indians as well as for the English.

Mistry here recognizes that realism is not to be but on a par with reality and that there is a gap between the 'originalreality' and the reality of words. Moreover what may be real for one may be unreal for the other certainly in the case of cultural differences. The cultural discontinuity between Indian and English reality scathingly uncovers the artifice of Enid Blyton's realism. To phrase it by means of Homi Bhabha's Jargon, Blytons realism is unable to install on Indian soil, ambivalence and slippage between reality and language.

Mistry's acknowledgement of the divide between language and reality is also evident from his suspicion towards ideology and his obsession with the issue of renaming. First of all, he turns Bombay's change of name to Mumbai into a theme. Second, Jehangir Chenoy, so that he can really feel English. Also Nariman Connects words to ideology, and recognizes that renaming and rewriting amounts to alienation.

> He became the husband of Yasin contractor, and formally adopted her children, Jal and Coomy. But they kept their father's name. To change it to Vakeel would be like rewriting history, suggested his new wife. The smile appealed to his academic soul; he acquiesced (16).

And finally, also the "treachery of English Vowels" (11) leads to estrangement next to puzzlement and amusement.

As a result of the ambivalence, of realism the distinctions between reality and fantasy and between realism and magic realism collapse. For Nariman Vakeel, Professor of English and grandfather of Murad and Jehangir the streets in Bombay convey and experience of magical synaesthesia as they throb with the colours of mercantile life and dance to the rhythms and sweet tones of street musicians. Indian reality is "all magical as a circus, felt Nariman and reassuring like a magic show" (5-6). Nariman's observation reminds of the defence of magic realism by Latin American Writers. Consequently there is no need to distinguish between different modes of artistic representation of reality, as both realism and magic realism are strangely but certainly connected to the squalor of reality in a double bind anyway. "Sometimes, when Mr. Kapur spoke about 1947 and partition, Yezad felt that Punjabi migrants of a certain age were like Indian authors writing about that period, whether in realist novels of corpse- filled trains or in the magic – realist midnight muddles all repeating the same catalogue of horrors about slaughter and burning, rape and mutilation, foetuses torn out of wombs, genitals stuffed in the mouths of the castrated" (151).

Mistry's reference to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* indicates that he does not blindly write in the mode of realism, but that on the contrary he is self consciously

aware of the various modes of representation. He acknowledges that his realism is only one way to represent reality, and in this way tones down the absolute veracity of his story.

Mistry's undermining of the truth premises of realism even extends to the form of art that is for some critics responsible for the move away in the literary art from realism to modernism, namely photography. Photography, until recently, was long considered to be the epitome of realist representation. Mistry questions the photographic link to the real alongside that of literary realism. Mr. Kapur, Yezad's employee, possesses pictures of the neighbourhood where Yezad grew up. Mistry's choice of words reveals the creative faculty of art; "the pictures conjure up the real" (214). While looking at the picture, Yezad is bedazzled by their magic; "He ran his fingers over his eyes and the ghosts receded, It's like magic, this picture" (225). Some of Mistry's self conscious comments even come close to metafiction: "Nariman Vakeel's life would make a good novel, but it's not a bedtime story of a child". (235)

In a genuinely post modern novel these extracts would be interpreted as metafiction. However as Linda Hutcheen taught us metafictionaims at foregrounding the gap between fiction and reality, between literature and the real; it radically opens the representational abyss by continuously pointing the unresolved nature of the word. I think that Mistry's writing conversely tries to close the gap, without losing sight of its presence. His poetics reveal an awareness of the informative insights of postmodernism together with an attempt to think beyond them. In Mistry's realism, narrative closure is never complete no matter how hard he tries to realize it.

Rointon Mistry's writing defends realism without letting go of a continuous vigilance over the illusory nature of language. Like Vilas Ranehe proclaims the urgent need for scruting details in postcolonial India, where corruption is rife and little white lies degenerate into ubiquitous illusion.

> Some things can only be taken seriously; Vilas voice rose, and people passing assumed the two were quarrelling. "Little white lies are as pernicious as big black lies, When they mix together a great greyness of ambiguity descends, society is cast adrift inan amoral sea, and corruption and rot and decay start to flourish such is the time we are now passing through. Everything is disintegrating because details are neglected and nothing is regarded seriously". (212)

Vilas does not side with the anti realists of the story, the actors Bhaskar and Gautam According to Vilas, they are "Too pseudo for me. They become blind to real life with their intellectualizing. Stanislavsky-this and Strasberg-that and Brecht analienation is all they talk about". (210-11)

However unlike Vilas, Mistry pays tribute to the principle of representational distance which he borrows from the anti-realists. Mistry's use of intertexuality function in the same way as his self conscious commentary. Its aims at scrutinizing the cracks in the realist code, while at the same time trying to overcome them, even if this does not completely work. One character remarks:

> Everyone underestimates their own life. Funny thing is, in the end, all our stories your life my life, old Husain's life, they are the same. 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. (228)

In *Family Matters*, Mistry draws upon European as well as Indian textual resources and writerly techniques. The Parsi population in Bombay has, as a consequence of the doctrine of Brtish colonisation, little Indians sources to quote "as Mr. Kapur remarks" (303) which holds a fortiori for Rohinton Mistry's as a writer of the Indian diaspora.

The theme of problem solving and universalism recalls the liberal humanist tradition. In *Family Matters*, the vicissitudes the nineteenth century universalism are remote. The novel is set in post-colonial; India the British have taken to their homeland and the country is ruled self sufficiently. The departure of the British implicates that the Parsis can no longer enjoy the benefits of colonialism and have consequently descended a few steps down the social lodger. The Shiv Sena party consisting of extremist Hindu nationalists insists on getting rid of all the traces the British have left behind. This political programme includes renaming the colonial Bombay to the Independent Mumbai. Yet, the downfall of colonial universalism has not resulted in a post colonial attention to particulars, as it has been replaced by its neo-colonial doppelganger: globalization. The characters in *Family Matters* avidly consume Fatna, Michael Jackson and Elvis, and the possibility of migration to the west looms large, even if the roads to the land of milk and honey are thickly strewn with the impediments of opportunism and racism.

Considering this contextual evidence the persistence of alienating and difference negating universalism it would be surprising if *Family Matters* did not cry out against the common dominators of realist time and space. Some critics fault Mistry for his heavy reliance on linear plot. However, *Family Matters* draws more on the cyclical time of epic and myth than on the linear pattern of resolution. Of course, superficially, the plot covers the linear development from Nariman's fall to even his eventual death, but the narrative is suffused with circular time and repetition. The only moment when historical time is strikingly present in the story is when Yezad feels that he has got held of the world, that he will make promotion at his work and will eventually be able to pay for his family's needs. "How comforting its ticking, reassuring, like a steady hand guiding the affairs of the universe". (375)

In this particular instance, historical time is intimately linked with progress. As for the remainder of the story, historical time is thwarted, which is symbolized by the continual rewinding and failure of Yezad's clock.

Time conveys a sense of loss and isolation rather than gradual progress and liberal humanist wholeness young Murad's realization that mankind is like Sisyphus, repeating the same squalid actions day after day, "prefigures the circular resolution of the novel and the endless repetition of human misery". (117) At the end of the novel Murad, who is a Parsi, gets infatuated with a non Parsi girl, which was exactly the cause of his grandfather Nariman's familial trouble. On the political level, there is the

disillusion and subsequent death of Mr. Kapur, who initially intended to run in the elections in Bombay and turn the city into a better place. As for as economy is concerned every character loses his job. Finally even education in Bombay is corrupted and Jehangir is forced to abuse his position as a homework monitor by extorting money from his class mates to provide his family with food. Loss and failure figure at the personal, familial, political economic and educational level.

So the temporal structure of *Family Matters* is characterized by loss and circularity, which according to Homi Bhabha, "hardly identifies it with the linear conception of time in the realist tradition". (93-122) Moreover, in contrast with historical time, there is often no clear delineation of past, present and future in Mistry'snovels. *Family Matters* defies temporal division in the conflation of past and present. Nariman, one of the novel's central figures claims that "at his age the past is more present than the here and the now" (Mistry 128).

The novel relies on memory, trauma and the demoniacal rather than on the ongoing march of historical liberal time. Mistry pits the notion of memory against that of history: "Permeating everything, occupying the room as solidly as the furniture, a timeless smell" (280). For Yezad, the same time lesson is present in religion, "which he becomes completely engrossed in at the end of the story". (342) Trauma in habits Nariman's sense of time the portraits of his forefather's reprimand him for fondling with a non-parsi girl and demoniacally make the past present in present. "As they marched down the passageway, Nariman opened his eyes. From his supine position he saw the glum portraits of his fore fathers on the walls. Strange, how their eyes looked at him as though they were the living and he the dead". (89)

Family Matters also challenges the linearity of causality which is intimately linked with reason and individualism. Rational causality is replaced by the irrationality of coincidence or destiny. Yezad, who is in the beginning of the novel was the incarnation of sovereign undertaking, completely loses the will to shape his own destiny and become a religious fanatic. In the end, he thinks that "Man proposes, God disposes". (410)

Casualty no longer falls under the jurisdiction of the individual but under that of God, Roxona, Yezad's wife, "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 to bringing him to prayer. (464)

Mistry copies the rhetoric of Mahatma Gandhi who defined the nation as one extended family. "In work and in play, we the children of Mother India, must be as one family in order to free her from the chains in which she was enslaved" (215). To achieve this goal, he believed that the mosaic of India, consisting of Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Europeans and the other ethnic and religious groups, should mingle into a unitary nation and together make the Indian dream come true.

Though Mistry is very much in the shadow of the Gandhian rhetoric, aspiring to a family like nation, he still questions the idea of a unitary family nation. The text of *Family Matters* is a sear figure of broken and mended families. First of all the Parsi

religion and the community's dwindling birth rates prohibit cross-cultural marriage. Marriage outside the community is thus considered to be unnatural. Mistry, however, questions this natural conception of the family and the community through Nariman and Murad's infatuation with catholic girls. Nariman's subsequent wedding with Yasmin contractor, a Parsi widow with two children, leaves him with fundamental unhappiness and eventually leads towards his death.

At the same time Nariman plays a pivotal role in Mistry's relation to the former British ruler in India. He is not only a step father to Jal and Coomy, but as a Parsi also to the Indian people as a whole. His partition as a professor of English confirms his allegiance to the British colonizer. Moreover, Nariman's body functions as a metaphor for the disintegration of Bombay after independence. The cripple and old Nariman is unable to keep himself clean and has to rely on his family members for his personal sanity. His health problems may be metaphoric of the squalor in which the British left Bombay after Independence: "Millions of people live in the gutters of Bombay" Roxana shouted back. "Eating drains and ditches. This whole city stinks like a sewer. And you are worried about pappa's bedpan? How stupid can you be!" (170)

Mistry criticizes the solid realist concept of a nation space by pointing to the fact that the nation, like the family, is an imagined community, in Benedict Anderson's terms, and not something natural or given. The nation like of family consists of step and half combinations that betray the naturalness of the whole and show that nothing can be taken for granted.

To conclude we can say that Mistry's *Family Matters* is an example of how the realist genre can be critically engaged in a post colonical context. Mistry does not use the realist mode blindly but questions realism while at the same time endorsing it in an attempt to establish meaningful communication. Mistry's realism is denaturalized because if distrusts issues of transparent representation, common time and space, universalism and individualism-the same issues that were central to and naturalized in eighteenth and nineteenth century-philosophical realism and foreground literary conventions rather than making them. Finally Rohinton Mstry's realism and the postcolonial condition do not oppose to each other but may be said to participate in a project to make the best of this even chaotic world. The family is the perfect metaphor for his critical realism, because: "And without family, nothing else matters, everything from top to bottom falls apart or descends into choas, which is basically the malady of the west". (182)

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