

Trauma, Memory, and Identity Crisis in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*

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Abstract: The exploration of trauma in literature and society and its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance in shaping an individual's identity is one of the foremost themes in contemporary literature. Rohinton Mistry, by exploring the current ethnic and religious violence in India, has tried to give a literary representation of the disruptive experience of trauma and its impact on one's emotional organisation and perception of the external world in his novel *Family Matters*, published in 2002. The action of the novel is set against the backdrop of communal riots in Bombay after the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992. Exploring the trauma and sufferings of the communal violence victims, my paper offers insights into the current socio-political situations of other non-Hindu communities like Muslims and Parsis who feel threatened by their identity with the escalation of communal politics of Shiv Sena in Bombay. As Allan Megill argues, "Memory is valorized when identity is threatened" this paper aims to investigate how memory becomes the domain of foregrounding resistance to political authority and sociocultural insecurities and is used as a tool to reconstruct/strengthen cultural identities (40). After Mr Kapur's murder by Shiv Sena, the Parsi protagonist Yezad's endeavours to strengthen his cultural identity by taking recourse to the glorious history of his community alludes to the pitfalls of excessive preoccupation with memory that boomerang in the form of fundamentalist and orthodox attitude having its subtle form of violence. By focusing on Mistry's portrayal of both orthodox and sceptical Parsi characters, the paper questions the religious dogmas and fanatical attitudes that stifle the humane concerns in life.

Keywords: Trauma, Identity Crisis, Memory, Communalism, Violence, Cultural Identity, Religious Fundamentalism, Family Matters, Communal Riots.

Trauma, as understood in psychological terms, is an unsettling experience that intensely affects a person's emotional organisation and perception of the external world. Cathy Caruth puts it as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). Thus, trauma can be seen as entailing intense suffering caused by an external event that not only fractures its expression in language but also makes changes to one's mind and consciousness. Dissociation or fragmentation is an integral part of Trauma.

By exploring the contemporary ethnic and religious violence in India in the novel *Family Matters*, written by Rohinton Mistry, this paper aims to investigate themes of trauma, memory, and identity by focusing on how traumatic experiences influence characters' construction of identity and political attitudes in the novel. To achieve this purpose, my paper offers insights into socio-political situations not only of the Muslim community but also other non-Hindu communities like Parsis who feel threatened by their identity with the rise of communal politics of Shiv Sena in Bombay. As Allan Megill argues, "Memory is valorised when identity is threatened" this paper further probes into how, in times of communal conflicts, memory emerges as a vital organising tool in dealing with the identity crisis and resisting political dominance at the same time. Though "memory remains the bearer of meaning, the vehicle of identity", excessive preoccupation with memory can also become "a site of struggle and contestation" and can prove counter-productive by resulting in excessive community exclusiveness, religious zealotry, and bigotry that exercises its subtle form of violence by creating more boundaries and walls among communities (Spiegel qtd. in Bell 28; Edkins 101). The portrayal of both sceptical and orthodox characters has been used to question the religious dogmas and fanatical attitudes that suppress the humanitarian concerns in life.

The action of the novel takes place against the backdrop of communal riots in Bombay after the demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992. Rohinton Mistry has tried to give a literary representation of the burning and destruction of the Babri Mosque that projects not only the growth of fundamental Hindutva ideology, communal riots, and its repercussions on the life of ordinary citizens but also

criticises the communal political pronouncements which have constructed non-Hindu communities as the religious ‘other’ by giving rise to anxiety and feelings of insecurity among these communities. The reference to Babri Mosque riots and extremist politics comes at the very beginning of the novel when Nariman deliberates on the dangers lurking outdoors as well as indoors by mentioning the brutal acts of Shiv Sena activists in Bombay. In one of these acts, they brutally beat an old Parsi woman and set a Parsi couple on fire, locked inside their house assuming that they had given shelter to the fleeing Muslims in their flat. Through the narration of these acts, he hints towards the communal violence unleashed on Muslims and how “a mosque in Ayodhya turn(s) people into savages in Bombay” (Mistry 4-5).

These horrors of Babri Mosque riots are epitomised through the agonised figure of Hussain, a Muslim peon, who works with Yezad, a Parsi, at a sports shop under a Punjabi Hindu employer Mr. Kapur. He repetitively experiences fits of shock and trauma triggered by the recurrent horrific memories of witnessing his wife and children burning alive in communal riots. Putting Hussain’s trauma in words Adina Campu says, “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” (69). As a Muslim, Hussain and his community are victims of ‘otherness’ and have an intimidating presence owing to the radical ideology of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, which thrives on “the consolidation of Hindu communal sentiment against the Muslim community in India” (Kaur, Communalism 34).

The main objective of Hindutva ideology is the elimination of all religious diversity to establish India as a religiously homogenous Hindu nation. The proponents of this ideology have depicted non-Hindu religious communities, especially Muslims as an obstacle in the accomplishment of their national aspirations. While depreciating the Muslims as detrimental to the Hindu dominance in polity, culture, and society, the discourse of Hindutva demonises them as outsiders, “as a separate people, a foreign body implanted in the heart of Hindu India” and ardent adversaries of the Hindus (Brass 35).

The Ayodhya incident was an inevitable materialisation of their anti-Muslim propaganda stimulated by “the militant Hindu demand of recapturing and restoring temples allegedly destroyed by Muslim conquerors and replaced by mosques” by appropriating the memory of previous Hindu subjection to Muslim rule and “Muslim violence in the Indian history” that set in motion the demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya (Brass 35). For them, the presence of Babri Mosque, a Muslim edifice of religion, signified the “contaminative presence of the non-Hindu other that stood in violation of the Hindu nation,” therefore, its destruction was seen as crucial for the cleansing of the Indian nation (Hansen 175). The communal riots that followed the destruction of the mosque made the Muslims an easy target because they were projected as “descendants of Babar who was an invader... [and] demolished their temples, particularly the Ram temple at Ayodhya” (Engineer 38-39). In this way, the communal politics of Hindutva annulling all other markers of identity reduced Muslims to merely a signifier of their religion or community and culminated in violence between Hindus and Muslims.

Such communal violence not only threatens the existence of minorities but also produces “body memory’ with lifelong effects” where the victims live their whole lives “remembering, mourning, and representing traumatising experiences...” (Khare 200). These victim’s narratives are important not only as “cultural correctives to accounts of contemporary violence” but also vital for issues of “social justice and any grass-roots acceptance of the human rights movement” (Khare 200). In Khare’s words:

victim’s ‘violence narratives’ provide us with that unique core of human experience of pain and suffering that is at once universal in some respects and local in others...Victim’s narratives are a domain of simultaneous expressions of remembering, forgetting, mourning and coping. As we locate violence this way within the inner and outer surroundings of the victim, we also trace how a violated, fractured self very slowly and cautiously tries to reconstruct itself once again within a highly fragile and uncertain world of hope, and possibly social justice... (200-201)

Interestingly, the impact of the communal politics of Shiv Sena in the novel is limited not only to the Muslims—the direct victims of communal violence, but characters from other minority communities are also deeply affected by it. In the novel, the idealist Mr. Kapur with his vision of ameliorating the city of Bombay and making it safer for common people is pitted against the Shiv Sena—representatives of the fanatical forces in the city. Despite his traumatic experience of being a victim of Muslim violence during partition and his displacement from his ancestral homeland Punjab after independence in 1947, he reconstructs himself and his identity by carrying out values like forgiveness and solidarity to his fellow human beings because his ideal in life is “rediscovering human bonds” (Mistry 229). Mr. Kapur—a Punjabi Hindu, owing to his belief in and practice of secular values, takes on a Parsi employee, Yezad, and provides shelter and a job to Husain—the traumatised Muslim victim of inter-communal violence. “By accepting Husain as an employee, he actively fights bigotry, narrow-mindedness, and intolerance between the Hindu and the Muslim community and becomes a representative of a human utopia” (Genetsch 187). His intent of celebrating all festivals in his shop be it Diwali, Eid, or Christmas represents him as a true humanist willing to embrace humanity.

His longing for a secular and safe experience of human interaction takes shape through his nostalgia for the older, secular city of Bombay whose memory he has preserved in the form of photographs clicked by him at various stages showing the city’s passage from the old peaceful outlook to the new one which is ridden with communal conflicts. As Duncan Bell opines, “Memory is the mental faculty by which we preserve or recover our pasts, and also the events recovered”, through Mr. Kapur’s memory, the old and secular Bombay is metonymically presented as India with its tolerant and secular outlook—a land of opportunities that has given shelter to every community, religion, and culture and has criticised its current degeneration with the rise of communal conflicts. Nevertheless, Mr. Kapur also falls victim to the forces of sectarianism and is murdered by the Shiv Sena goons for refusing to change his shop’s name from ‘Bombay Sporting Goods’ to ‘Mumbai Sporting Goods’—the Shiv Sena’s campaign of renaming ‘Bombay as Mumbai’ to remove all the non-Hindu names of streets and roads of Bombay and replace them with the proper Hindu names. He

gets killed for his liberal views that do not fit in with the exclusivist demands of the Hindu fundamentalists.

Such communal conditions not only increase the sense of insecurity among other religious minority groups but also challenge their identity and change their future irrevocably. Yezad, the Parsi protagonist of the novel, is so deeply affected by the murder of his employer Mr. Kapur by Shiv Sainiks that his whole life and identity turn around. Once an unbiased and cheerful man, he takes recourse to his past and religion to escape the hostile social, communal, and financial conditions. Here I adopt the argument of Allan Megill that when two opposing forces come into conflict, it inevitably brings about uncertainty or insecurity about identity and the manifestation of memory becomes inevitable in such situations (39). In other words, it can be claimed that “memory is closely tied up with identity” and “in moment of crisis people hark back to the past with amplified intensity” which leads to a hypothesis: “where identity is problematised, memory is valorised” (Megill 42, 40). In the novel, the extremist communal politics of Shiv Sena and their display of hatred against ethnic minorities challenge the identities of the Parsi characters and their memories get the chance to take shape in the form of politico-cultural nostalgia for a way of life that has been idealised in the religious ceremonials.

The historical background of the Parsi community and their political orientation is vital in understanding “the question of their identity crisis which lies in the fact of their marginal position in Indian society and their social mobilisation during British rule in India” (Kaur, *Re-Structuring* 139). Delineating the background of the Parsis, Ranjeet Kaur describes them as an ethno-religious minority of India who immigrated there to safeguard their religion from the Arab subjugation in the 7th century A.D. Despite being a small community, they have significantly contributed to the diverse sectors in the history of India. During the settlement, conforming to the conditions laid by the Hindu King, the community experienced a secluded marginal position which was altered with the arrival of the British in India. Due to their profound economic and intellectual ties to the English, their community not only achieved a dominant position in Indian society but also imbibed European cultural influences

(139, 140). In the postcolonial India, the Parsis “who defined themselves through the Western cultural values of the colonisers found themselves in a changed political order where they had to reconstruct and reorient their complex sensibilities” that made them more conscious of their minority status and religious ‘otherness’ in a Hindu dominating culture (Kaur, *Re-Structuring* 142). They perceive the escalation of communal activities in Bombay as a threat to their existence and identity as the Hindu fundamentalists claim “Marathas and Marathi language as superior” which leaves the Parsis feeling themselves shrunk “to a marginal position of second-class citizens who can be eliminated at any time” (Kaur, *Re-Structuring* 144). Bombay being the primary hub of Parsis since the British rule holds a special place in their hearts. Shiv Sena’s campaign of renaming Bombay as Mumbai—an ideological battle to rip Bombay of its secular identity by expunging all “non-Hindu” place names from a “purified Hindu homeland” and their replacement with proper Hindu names came as a jolt to Parsi social identity (Morey 240). For them, the disappearance of old English names amounts to the loss of both personal history and the colonial past, which bears witness to the Parsi community’s glorious past. As a result, they perceive a confusing, uncertain, and doubtful future in India. Therefore, they anticipate their future in India “as fraught with perplexity, uncertainty, and doubt” (Kaur, *Re-Structuring* 139).

In the novel, the communal activities of Shiv Sena negatively impact the life of the Parsi protagonist Yezad who got traumatised by the murder of his employer and dear friend Mr Kapur by the Shiv Sena activists for refusing to change the name of his shop. After the killing of Mr. Kapur, the resultant uncertainty in Yezad’s life pushes him in the direction of extreme religiosity and he takes refuge in the glorious history of the community to gain a sense of self. As Duncan Bell argues, “As identities are challenged, undermined and possibly shattered, so memories are drawn on and reshaped to defend unity and coherence, to shore up a sense of self and community” (6). The memory of the glorious religious past not only becomes the domain of foregrounding resistance to the political authority but also seeking one’s own identity and attaining “a positive sense of self-esteem” (Hogg & Abrams 9). As Seul also observes among the other socio-cultural factors of Identity, “religion

frequently serves the identity impulse more powerfully and comprehensively than other repositories of cultural meaning can or do”, therefore, it remains a predominant source of individual and group identity (567). It satisfies the minority group’s “needs for self-esteem, belonging, psychological security, and self-actualisation that have been invaded by the communal politics of the majority in a nation-state” (Kaur, Communalism 39). Through their identification with their religious group and ideology, they strive to “promote and protect their positive distinctiveness” from the dominant group and “secure a relatively favourable social identity” (Hogg & Abrams 9).

Yezad’s obsession with the idea of racial purity and strict adherence to tradition resulting in his antagonism towards his son’s love affair with a non-Parsi Marathi girl alludes to the underlying fear of the mixing with hegemonic culture resulting in the hybridisation of their culture destroying their unique ethnic identity. Declaring it a matter of racial purity and their unique identity, he claims, “we are a pure Persian race, a unique contribution to this planet and mixed marriages will destroy that. ...Purity is a virtue worth preserving” (Mistry 482). His religion becomes his tool to mark his differences and purity. His younger son Jahangir’s description of his father’s preoccupation with religious activities and religious literature further reinforces Yezad’s obsession with past memory. He comments, “...Daddy had been reading nothing but religious books, as though making up for lost time” (Mistry 463). His bedroom is filled up with volumes about Parsi history and Zoroastrianism, various translations of the Zend-Avesta, interpretations of the Gathas, commentaries, books by Zaehner, Spiegel, Darukhanawala, Dabu, Boyce, Dhalla, Hinnells, Karaka and many more (Mistry 463). These activities of Yezad reflect his all-consuming obsession with the past and his fixation on traditional rituals can be interpreted as a tool to defend his ethnic identity against the imposition of a homogenous national identity on him and the Parsi community in the Indian perspective. Peter Morey pinpoints Yezad’s illusive search for purity through his strict practice of religious rituals:

The continuous burning fire at the temple offers that elusive past-present connections Yezad craves, and, in a way, the fire-temple replaces the family home as a sanctuary from the outside world. As he feels increasingly disempowered by events he falls back on his

reawakened faith more and more, recoiling from the mongrelisation and mixing inherent in urban life, to a space of 'purity' that is, of course, at the same time one of fantasy (250).

The concept of memory has been extensively used to create meaning in times of crisis but Nietzsche is of the opinion that "Memory is not always beneficial; it can be counter-productive. It can obstruct the potential for moving forward, for envisaging alternative futures" (qtd. in Bell 24). Many scholars find the obsession with the past having "pernicious social and political consequences" (Bell 25). In his interview with Robert Mclay, Mistry also points out a difference between two ways of remembering the past, he says, "there is a great difference between remembering the past, which is creative and life-enhancing and trying to preserve it, which is detrimental and debilitating" (qtd in BaghyaLakshmi and Christina Rebecca 19). Duncan Bell incorporating the argument of Charles Maier warns that "an addiction to memory can become neurasthenic and disabling" (25). It highlights "the end of dreams about the possibility of radical political change; rather than looking towards the future, and retaining a belief in the transformative potential of politics, it seeks solace in the past" (Bell 25).

To resist the current socio-political dominance of the Hindu majority, Yezad's attempt to adhere to his ethnic identity and his obsession with the glorious past of his community turns him from a secular and liberal being into a religious extremist fixated on dogmatic ultra-orthodoxy and ritual purity. He becomes "a kind of Zoroastrian fundamentalist" inflicting his racial and cultural preoccupations on everyone around (Kaur, Communalism 41). Paradoxically, "his hidebound orthodoxy echoes the purist agendas of the very Hindu fundamentalism that threatens the minority communities like his own" (Kaur, Communalism 41). His real self is lost in his pursuit of establishing a utopian era of greatness and undermines his understanding of the present state and needs of his community. During his prayers, he sits as though "he is carrying a secret burden, whose weight is crushing him...His Avesta recitations...are like a rebuttal, a protest. He is locked in a struggle" (Mistry 465). On a metaphorical level, this secret burden is of history, race, and religion, which has prevented him from coming to terms with the present life.

Religious dogmas and orthodoxy of Yezad kill the liberal human inside him and obliterate his personality and his relationship with himself by turning him into a replica of a dead culture, which is unwelcoming, ill-fitted, and cut from the outer world. His intolerant and prejudice-ridden behaviour toward people born outside his religion, especially his son's non-Parsi girlfriend Anjali, a Maharashtrian girl, makes him an unsympathetic character. Even his ethical actions fail to earn him the sympathy of readers. Ironically the old liberal Yezad who did a few unethical things like playing *Matka* (illegal underground lottery), gets the sympathy of readers because his actions were directed towards the wellbeing of the family. Mistry, through his portrayal of the religious but unsympathetic character of Yezad, shows his disapproval of the severe practices that are devoid of human concerns and criticises the excessive community exclusiveness, religious zealotry, and fundamentalism within all communities as these sites of struggle for meaning create boundaries and walls that increase the possibilities of more clashes within and between communities and individuals.

By juxtaposing Yezad's orthodox religious outlook with that of his son Murad who exhibits a more tolerant attitude towards other religious communities and people, Mistry rejects idealized religious prejudice and challenges the conservative religious doctrines and extremist attitudes that suppress the compassionate concerns in life. Liberal characters like Murad and his grandfather Nariman attempt to find purpose in their lives by establishing connections with individuals born outside of their religion and race. Murad's love affair with a Maharashtrian girl and his grandfather's with a Christian girl imply their aspiration to embrace people rising above all boundaries and differences without yielding to any sort of blind prejudices. Murad's outright rejection of Yezad's narrow religious dogma suggests both a clash with the Parsi conventional outlook and the possibility of a shift in attitude towards harmonious and amicable inter-communal relationship among the younger generation.

Though Yezad's retreat into the religious extremity is suggestive of the minority communities' growing insecurity in an independent India, the disabling impact of excessive engagement with the past further reinforces the necessity of inclusion and a future-oriented approach as a more productive

way to build harmonious social relations in a society and nation-state. Through the comment of Jahangir, the youngest character and narrator of the epilogue in the novel, “Why must prayer and religion lead to so many fights” the author. questions the narrow cultural attitudes, religious dogmas, and violence against the helpless people positioned on the periphery of society and brings home the message that there is a need to be a vigorous campaign that will mobilise all relevant social, political, cultural, and professional sectors in support of peaceful inter-communal relations, strengthen the sense of dignity and solidarity among all communities, and restore equilibrium to the Indian political system.

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