

Exploring Disability and Psychological Suffering in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*

Sunita Chattani¹, Dr. Tamishra Swain²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India

Corresponding Author Email: sunitakataria0909@gmail.com

Abstract—Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* is a sensitive depiction of disability, ageing and psychological pain in an average Parsi family. In this novel, it is the character of an old man who is finally able to receive the truth about his existence, as he is living with Parkinson's disease that reveals the emotional and psychological suffering of a disabled person in a society that expects the able-bodied, and in which rigid social norms prevail. Mistry skillfully portrays the dysfunctional family dynamics and the way a disability causes dependency, isolation and loss of dignity. Nariman's state highlights the prejudices and discriminatory attitude of the family and the larger community, where disabled and ageing bodies are often seen as a burden, rather than a person worthy of care and respect. The novel also explores the oppressive systems in Indian society, such as institutions and cultural norms and expectations, and the obligations and responsibilities of family members which also leads to emotional suffering and disconnection. As Nariman grows ill and becomes more and more reliant on others, Mistry condemns the lack of empathy that the Parsi community has for the elderly, sick, and disabled. There are also elements of disillusionment, nostalgia, identity crisis and social exclusion in the narrative, which allows a physical disability to intertwine with a psychological trauma. *Family Matters* not only conveys the emotional plight of the disabled person and the anxiety of the family member, but also provides a powerful insight into the fragility of man, the sacrifices he makes, and the value of kindness in today's world.

Keywords: Disability, Psychological Suffering, Parkinson Disease, Ageing, Identity Crisis, Alienation, Social Exclusion, Mental Trauma, Parsi Community.

I. INTRODUCTION

Disability is not just a state of being, but a social and psychological condition; it is an outcome of culture values and norms and expectations of non-disabled persons. People are divided into categories according to a norm of 'normality', and those who do not meet this norm are negatively affected for their emotional state and treated as if they are not part of 'normality' norms or standards, which leads to emotional hardship, exclusion and discrimination. Disability is closely associated with psychological trauma in this context, loss of dignity and social marginalization. Lennard J. Davis, in *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*, argues, "Disability is not a minor issue that relates to a relatively small number of unfortunate people; it is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances" (2). His argument supports that disability is not simply physical, but socially defined by dominant concepts of "normality" and "perfection" of the body.

Individuals with disabilities are more likely to suffer emotional neglect, dependency, social isolation and differential treatment because they are viewed differently by the able majority. These experiences have a negative impact on their mental and emotional health and often leave them overwhelmed, feeling rejected and low in self-esteem. Carol Thomas explains,

“Disability is a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions on activity on people with impairments and the socially engendered undermining of their psycho-emotional well-being” (qtd. in Singh 2012). Her comment highlights the reality that psychological suffering also results from the attitudes and discriminatory actions of society towards disabled people. The connection between disability and psychological distress becomes particularly critical in portrayals that address the emotional distress of disability, dependency, ageing and social isolation in combination. The stories in literature frequently show how an individual with a disability not only has physical challenges, but may also face emotional issues from prejudice, neglect and loss of independence. A psychological and social lens for the study of disability is therefore important to grasp the human experiences of suffering, identity and marginalization in society.

Family Matters is a realistic portrayal of disability, ageing, and emotional trauma in a middle-class Parsi family, by Rohinton Mistry, set in Mumbai. The novel centres upon a retired professor of English literature who is afflicted with Parkinson's disease, named Nariman Vakeel, whose health is rapidly declining and has a fractured ankle. Mistry's focus on Nariman's sickness and disability examines the ways in which disease and disability change familial dynamics and uncover the ingrained misunderstandings and injustices that arise within a family. His stepchildren's negative behaviours (not taking care of him) reflect the discomfort of society towards ageing and disabled bodies.

The emotional neglect, forced dependency, social isolation and loss of personal dignity also play a major role in emotional suffering, which is also emphasized in the novel. As Nariman's physical condition worsens, his mental and emotional health takes a turn for the worse as well, and the added strain of caring for him leads to strain and conflict in the family. These experiences are used to attack traditional social patterns and norms, the culture and misconceptions about the aged and the handicapped, and the absence of empathy for people with disabilities. It tells a story of self-alienation, disillusionment, identity crisis and emotional trauma, making disability a close companion of emotional pain. This paper illustrates the portrayal of disability and psychological agony in the novel by analyzing the emotional, social and psychological hardships which Nariman Vakeel suffers. It also explores how social stigma, family issues, and cultural norms exacerbate the trauma of being a disabled elderly woman in the novel.

II. PSYCHOLOGICAL SUFFERING AND DISABILITY

Family Matters is an approach to disability which does not only look at disability as a physical condition, but one which is also psychological and emotional in nature, influenced by relationships within the family and social attitudes. The novel examines the emotional pain of disability people who are perceived as burdens in the home, as well as the emotional pain resulting from being old, sick or dependent. Social neglect, discrimination and the lack of personal dignity amplify the impact of being disabled on mental trauma. People who are disabled are often called “dependent” but “no-one in a modern industrial society is completely independent for we live in a state of mutual interdependence” (Oliver 9). The expectations of able-bodied society often isolate people with disabilities and leave them feeling helpless, alienated, and insecure.

The novel also depicts the transformation of the Indian family system, which is increasingly influenced by modernity and urbanization, and so the ideas of joint families have been losing their impact. Earlier on, older members of the family were given emotional support and care in extended families, but nuclear families are less accommodating with ageing and disabled members of the family. As Anita Ghai describes in *Disability in South Asia*, “Care is a human attribute that is connected to both disabled and non-disabled people. Ubiquity of care needs has to be accentuated as none of us live our lives without relying on care provided by others”. (25) Retired English professor Nariman, a victim of this changing social reality, is suffering from Parkinson's disease. Following an injury to his ankle in a fall, Nariman stays in bed and relies on his stepchildren more and more, Jal and Coomy. Coomy, who was caring for him, gets stressed out early on due to the responsibilities of caring for him, particularly because Nariman's illness demands a lot of attention and support from her.

Mistry is quick to point out that Nariman is losing his freedom, for example, through the restrictions placed on him in Chateau Felicity. There were more rules about his dinner, his clothes, his denture, his use of radiogram, “There were more rules

regarding his meals, his clothes, his denture, his use of radiogram” (Mistry 4). His movement and use of the washroom is monitored. All of these prohibitions represent the ways in which disability takes away his independence and turns him into subject of surveillance. Coomy has a paternalistic attitude towards the disabled and elderly and she justifies her controlling behavior by saying that what she does is “for his own good” (4). Under this concern, however, there is resentment and frustration that has been building up for many years. When old family squabbles come back into Nariman's life, his emotional pain grows. Trapped and humiliated, he complains to Coomy, saying:

In my youth, my parents controlled me and destroyed those years. Thanks to them, I married your mother and wrecked my middle years. Now you want to torment my old age. I won't allow it” “Such lies!” flared Coomy. “You ruined Mamma's life, and mine, and Jal's. I will not tolerate a word against her. (8)

It is a reflection of Nariman's suffering throughout his life, and of the feeling of not having control over anything in his life. Coomy's rage is indicative of the unhealed emotional wounds in the family. Accordingly, this disability in the novel becomes closely entwined with feelings of guilt, resentment and emotional conflict. Coomy is unable to deal with the grimness of Nariman's sickness, and eventually tries to get rid of him. Nariman is placed in the small apartment of his daughter, Roxana by the pretense that it's just temporary. However, Coomy sneaks up a “leaking roof” in the apartment to keep him away. In this case, Mistry displays the emotional coldness and moral degeneration that may seep into the soul of anyone who views a person with a disability as being a burden and not as a family member who is in need of compassion and respect.

Nariman's suffering isn't just physical, it's psychological as well, as he's tormented by memories of his old life, especially with Lucy Braganza. He laments that he threw Lucy away, who left her degrees and her own family's support for him, and is now emotionally scarred. His remembrances reflect guilt, a sense of the past and a sense of failure, which exacerbates his psychological plight as he grows older. *National Trauma and Collective Memory* defines a trauma as an ‘extraordinary and disruptive event’ by Arthur G. Neal. He explains:

The concept of trauma is applied primarily to extraordinary experiences in the personal lives of individuals... the essence of the trauma experience in the sense that an adverse happening that is unexpected, painful, extraordinary, and shocking has interrupted an ongoing activity. A trauma has an explosive quality about it because of the radical change that occurs within a short period of time. (1)

The death of Yasmin Contractor only adds to these feelings of trauma and emotional upheaval in Nariman's life. In each of these moments, Mistry shows how disability is a combination of physical weakness, loneliness, unfulfilled experiences, and anguish, and *Family Matters* is an intense dive into suffering and vulnerability.

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL SUFFERING THROUGH FORCED MARRIAGE

The psychological suffering is inflicted on a person due to his forced marriage. Emotional repression and forced marriage are as much as responsible for psychological suffering as are physical disability and ageing, Mistry depicts. The novel shows the profound impact of the rigid social conventions and cultural norms on an individual's emotional and mental health. Nariman's life becomes a tragic example of how personal desires are sacrificed in society and the emotional trauma and regret it causes him throughout his life.

Mistry paints a picture of Nariman's and Lucy Braganza's love affair as true and fulfilling. Yet inter-community marriages are strictly disallowed by the orthodox Parsi community and Lucy's traditional family is not accepting her. Nariman is torn between his love for Lucy and his obligation to family traditions, ultimately giving in to the family's wishes. He is forced to marry Yasmin who is a widow with two children, and this act of marriage could become a turning point in his psychical

suffering for life. The clash of personal wishes and social responsibilities evokes a feeling of fragmentation in Nariman's personality.

Nariman's parents rationalize their actions by telling him that “traditional ways were the best” and that “that’s the best you can expect, mister, with your history . . . your past is your handicap” (Mistry 6). ‘Handicap’ is a word used to symbolically show the burden of Nariman's past relationship with Lucy. At this stage Nariman is not physically disabled but his emotional past is treated as a social handicap which restricts his freedom and options in the world. Mistry thus extends the notion of body disability beyond the physical to emotional pain, social condemnation, and psychological oppression.

Later, when reflecting on this marriage, Nariman himself realizes the emotional impact it had on him: “Perhaps, was my first mistake” (Mistry 17). This is a statement of regret and discontentment which has been in his life for a long time. When he cannot satisfy his emotional needs, he suffers from a blocked up emotional past that haunts him later in life. The psychological wounds of emotional loss do not go away - the memories of Lucy keep re-appearing in his thoughts and dreams.

But Lucy too will fall victim to this oppressive society. She is socially and emotionally neglected and forced into a life of suffering and instability. Lucy gradually becomes out of touch with her emotions after becoming an Ayah in the Arjani household. She cannot get rid of her love for Nariman, and in her disturbed mind walks to the edge of the terrace and falls. Nariman is saved by him, but the situation represents the devastating effect of unobtainable love and emotional rejection. In the novel, Mistry illustrates the psychological pain and mental anguish that can result from forced marriage, social conformity and emotional repression through the experience of Lucy and Nariman.

IV. AGEING, DISABILITY, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SUFFERING

Mistry portrays old age as a time of life that may be lonely, dependent and neglected emotionally. The novel depicts the psychological fragility of elderly people in contemporary family forms, particularly those afflicted by disease and incapacity. When the social values are shifting and self-centered attitudes prevail, elderly are often left in the periphery by their children and family members, who are expected to provide affection, respect and care to them. Mistry shows the emotional distress and mental anguish of older people who are seen as a liability and not a family member through the character of Nariman. When he falls into a ditch that the phone company has dug, his left ankle breaks, and his condition worsens. He has already been afflicted by Parkinson's disease and the accident makes him more dependent on others and makes his emotional helplessness worse. Rather than being treated with compassion, Nariman becomes a nuisance and an irritant for Coomy. She thoughtlessly treats others, and it is clear that there is a gap in values between youth and old age. Anita Ghai in her article, *Disability and the Millennium Development Goals: A Missing Link* explains, “Disability symbolically represents ‘lack’, ‘tragic loss’, dependency and abnormality. It is true that all of us begin life in a completely dependent state, often undergoing experiences of shame and loss”. (282) Some money Coomy reluctantly gives to two of the ration shop workers who carry the almost unconscious Nariman home, and complains, “Whether they were lifting Pappa or a gunny of rice or furniture? Load and distance was the main thing. And just because Pappa is hurt doesn’t mean money grows on trees” (44). When Nariman is compared to an object or burden, it is a comment on the dehumanizing attitude towards the elderly and the handicapped. The statement reveals the loss of emotional value of ageing bodies in utilitarian familial structures.

Mistry also illustrates the mental anguish experienced as a senior through the degrading living conditions at Coomy's home to which Nariman is sent. However, his illness leaves him smelly and uncomfortable, causing a problem for Coomy. Instead of sympathy, she is sarcastic and resentful. Even after moving to Roxana's house, Coomy complains about the smell in Nariman's room. Amusingly quoting Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, she tells Jal:

I still smell it – even in Mamma’s room, so far from Pappa’s. Probably stuck in your head. More psychological than real. If I can smell it and it bothers me, does it matter where it is? Yes. If it’s in your head, nothing will get

rid of it. Like the damned spot on Lady Macbeth's hand, remember? All the perfumes of Arabia, all your swabbing and scrubbing and mopping and scouring will not remove it. (Mistry 108)

The reference signifies the emotional disgust and mental fatigue of caring. In parallel with this, it emphasizes that Nariman has lost his dignity as his body withers and is unable to carry out the duties assigned to it, it is now linked with impurity and burden. Mistry shows, in these incidents, the close relationship between old age and disability and psychological suffering, emotional neglect, and social alienation. As Nariman grows weaker, he loses not only the strength of his body, but a sense of self-worth and emotional stability. The novel is a condemnation of a society that undervalues elderly people if they are not self-supporting and independent. The novel is a heart wrenching critique of the emotional anguish and degradation that affliction upon a person when he becomes older, more dependent and less liked by his family members.

V. CONCLUSION

Thus, the novel is a deep dive into the world of disability and psychological distress with a focus on family, society and cultural norms. The novel shows that disability can be more than just physical: it can be emotional and social pain, the neglect, control, and mental trauma of individuals that are neglected, controlled, or marginalized. By the character of Nariman Vakeel, Mistry shows how, over time, as people grow old and sick, are forced into marriage and endure an unyielding sense of social obligation, their emotional resilience and sense of identity erode. The insensitive attitude of family members makes his life even more difficult, in addition to dependence and lack of personal autonomy. Physical disability due to Parkinson's disease and old age are intertwined with psychological distress, loneliness, regret and alienation. Likewise, the enforced divorce from Lucy and the enforced marriage for social status leave him emotionally scarred for life. Mistry skillfully demonstrates how the social norms, family expectations and community pressures can have significant impact on the mental health of individuals and cause emotional disintegration. Meanwhile, the novel highlights the significance of caring, empathy, and sensitivity for the older and disabled people. Mistry believes that disabled people and the elderly should be seen as assets to the family, not liabilities, and that their wisdom, experience and emotional support are beneficial. The novel ultimately emphasizes the emotional impact of neglect, isolation, and social prejudice, and the importance of empathy, dignity, and humane treatment for people who are disabled and suffering mentally.

WORK CITED

1. Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Verso, 1995.
2. Ghai, Anita. "Disability and the Millennium Development Goals: A Missing Link." *Journal of Health Management*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2009, pp. 279–295.
3. *Disability in South Asia: Knowledge and Experience*. Sage Publications India, 2018.
4. Mistry, Rohinton. *Family Matters*. McClelland & Stewart, 2002.
5. Neal, Arthur G. *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in American Experience*. Routledge, 2005.
6. Singh, Ritu. "Listening to the Voices of Adults with Physical Disabilities in Delhi, India: The Lived Experiences of Psycho-Emotional Disablism." *Disability & Society*, vol. 40, no. 7, 2025, pp. 2011–2030. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2024.2404564>.
7. Oliver, Mike. "Disability and Dependency: A Creation of Industrial Societies." *The Politics of Disablement*, Macmillan Education, 1990, pp. 96–97.