



Social

## **ROHINTON MISTRY'S *FAMILY MATTERS* AS A TEXT OF 'GERONTOLOGY'**

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### **Abstract**

'Gerontology' is a term that refers to the scientific study of old age, the process of aging and the special problems of old people. This paper will discuss about the problems of the old man, Nariman Vakeel from the novel *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry. Though the definition focusses on the three aspects of old age namely (i) scientific study (ii) process of aging and the (iii) special problems of old people. Mistry as a literary writer focusses mainly on the last one that is the special problems of old people. Mistry also concentrates on the aging process; the aging refers to a multidimensional process of physical, psychological and social changes. With these perceptions in his mind he narrates the story of an old man aged 79 affected by Parkinson disease. He faces health problems and because of it, he faces problems with his children, his familial relationship as a father and as a grandfather is spoiled; and that affects him psychologically day by day throughout the novel. This paper aims at suggesting a few solutions to the problems of old age people which may contribute to better understanding of individuals at home and in society.

**Keywords:** Gerontology; Old Age; Scientific Study & Mistry.

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### **1. Introduction**

As per Oxford Dictionary 'Gerontology' is a term that refers to the scientific study of old age, the process of aging and the special problems of old people.

Though the definition focuses on the three aspects of old age namely (i) scientific study (ii) process of aging and the (iii) special problems of old people. Mistry as a literary writer focuses mainly on the last one that is the special problems of old people. Mistry also concentrates on the aging process; the aging refers to a multidimensional process of physical, psychological and social changes. With these perceptions in his mind he narrates the story of an old man aged 79

affected by Parkinson disease. He faces health problems and because of it, he faces problems with his children, his familial relationship as a father and as a grandfather is spoiled; and that affects him psychologically day by day throughout the novel.

This paper will discuss about the problems of the old man, Nariman Vakeel from the novel *Family Matters* by Rohinton Mistry.

Nowadays literature is not literally (or) contextually writing for pleasure. It has crossed this limit, so this paper aims at suggesting a few solutions to the problems of old age people and the same may contribute to better understanding of aged individuals at home and in society.

The word ‘Gerontology’ is derived from the Greek, geron – (meaning) “Old man” – logia – “study of” coined by Ilya Ilyich Mechnikov in 1903. It is a study of the social, psychological and biological aspects of aging.

Gerontology encompasses the following:

- i. Studying physical, mental and social changes in people as they age
- ii. Investigating the aging process
- iii. Investigating the social and psychosocial impacts of aging
- iv. Investigating the psychological effects on aging
- v. Investigating the age – related disease

Rohinton Mistry’s third novel, *Family Matters* is set in the city of Mumbai, where Mistry was born and grew up. It is a city that the writer has fully known. The novel opens with the 79 – year – old Nariman Vakeel, who is a decaying senior citizen and a widower with a small, discordant family consisting of his two middle – aged step children, Coomy and Jal. Coomy is his stepdaughter who always dominates Nariman and she is reluctant to look after him because of his Parkinson’s disease. Jal is his stepson always obedient not to his stepfather but to Coomy, who is his sister. Jal is an easy going person. Both Jal and Coomy always restricts Nariman that he should not go for a walk alone, not to go out without a walking stick, and irritates him due to his old age.

Parkinson disease is a degenerative disorder of the central nervous system. The symptoms are movement – related; these include shaking, rigidity, slowness of movement and difficulty with walking and gait. Depression is the most common psychiatric symptom related to this disease. Other symptoms include sensory, sleep and emotional problems. This disease is commonly found in older people.

Nariman’s sickness is worse by a broken ankle, and Coomy’s harshness reaches its submit. She planned to hand over Nariman to his own daughter Roxana. This really caused more depression in Nariman. But Roxana and her husband Yezad took care of him with lot of difficulties and financial problems in a tiny flat.

If we made a close study of this novel, we would know that

- i. It is a study of physical, mental and social changes that goes on in Nariman Vakeel, the protagonist of the novel.

- ii. It reads the aging process in Nariman Vakeel.
- iii. This novel narrates the social and psychosocial impacts on Nariman Vakeel.
- iv. This novel also deals with the psychological effects of Nariman as a background throughout all the twenty chapters.
- v. The last one is a really very important thing, it investigates the old age – related disease called Parkinson’s disease, from which Nariman suffer in this novel, and due to this disease he is left in loneliness and depression.

Nariman is 79 – years old and he is having a hearing aid. The novel opens with Nariman’s problems due to the process of aging. In Mistry’s words,

Please don’t go, Pappa, we beseech you” said Jal through the door, then grimaced and adjusted his hearing aid, for the words had echoed deafeningly in his own ear. The device was an early model; a metal case the size of a matchbox was clipped to his shirt pocket and wired to the earpiece (1).

Then in the next page itself we can note that how Coomy is dominating Nariman, his stepfather, “Coomy took over, How many times have I told you, Pappa? Don’t lock the door! If you fall or faint inside, how will we get you out? Follow the rules!” (2).

Again she adds that, “I’m going to call a locksmith and have all the locks removed, I’m warning you!” (2). This really causes depression in him and he feels that he has lost his privacy due to his disease and due to his age.

Then we can notice that Nariman after his nap, went to bathroom and after his wash, “his trembling hands took a few moments to slide the towel back on the rod” (2). This is one of the symptoms of Parkinson’s disease, because the symptom is movement related, he is also affected with slow movement and ‘trembling’ refers shaking due to fear.

Due to his Parkinson’s disease Nariman broke his ankle while on a walk, this part again relates to the age – related disease. Nariman’s fall leads to Coomy’s pressure on Roxana, Nariman’s own daughter to take care of Nariman because of his daily routine problems of bedpans, urinals, sponge baths and bedsores. This thing leads Nariman to psychological depression because as a widower crossing 79 – years he really feels that there is no one to look after him whole heartedly as if Nariman was a small child.

Nowadays we really forget an old saying that old ones are equal to a baby or a small child. Because if a baby born, we carry it till it starts walking.

Mistry here portrays Nariman’s physical and mental changes in the opening and also in the few pages exposing the increasing decay of Nariman’s physical health and stinging insults from his stepson and stepdaughter.

When Nariman celebrates his seventy – ninth birthday Yezad and Roxana brought a walking stick as a gift. At that time Coomy says that “the walking stick is a sign of how inconsiderable

you are” (36). This really hurts Nariman because shaking is the symptom of the symbol of the disease and the walking stick is the symbol of the disease.

Nariman is a widower and he has no one to share his old age feelings, he has no one to express his depressed mental situation. Mistry explains this sorrowful condition of Nariman through Nariman and to Nariman himself because he has no one with him to share even his critical situation. Nariman is a retired professor of English. He tells himself, “To so many classes I taught learn, learning nothing myself. What kind of teacher is that, as foolish at the end of his life as at the beginning?” (287). Roxana is Cordelia to Nariman the learner, the most favoured daughter because after he is affected with his broken ankle, Coomy escapes from taking care of her stepfather, Nariman by pretending that their flat is affected by leakage in the ceiling and not fit to live in and forced all the responsibilities in the head of Roxana, even to manage the cost of medicines for Nariman.

This decision is taken by Coomy and Jal without the knowledge of Nariman. Nariman clearly knows that Roxana is in bad financial situation and he is helpless at that time and he himself imagines him as ‘King Lear’ in his mind, this psychological depression typically refers to the unexplainable state of mental depression in the old age.

Parkinson’s symptoms start from the slow movement while walking and also shaking while walking. Due to this condition his friends avoid him in the morning walk and also in the evening walk because no one can accompany him to his slow walking style and he really used his old umbrella as his walking stick. So he is affected outside his home. Again this situation in the novel narrates the social and psychosocial impacts on Nariman, because of his aging process.

Nariman is also affected mentally due to his social status because he has been avoided everywhere. As a professor his life was different. Every day the professor speaks to his students and lectures all through the day but that lovable situation is now reversed in the life of Nariman, he has no one to speak to, and nobody is ready to hear his speech. This reversal of situation ends his life in miserable depression that is the pure condition of old age which Nariman faces throughout this novel.

The rest of the novel deals with his depressed life with his own daughter Roxana and their shift to Jal’s, Nariman’s stepson’s flat after Coomy’s death and the novel ends with the death of Nariman and that leaves a question to all the readers of this novel by Mistry; and the question is, what we all are going to do with old people all over the world? Because nowadays no one is ready to take care of the old ones particularly the sick old ones. Mistry leaves this question in front of us. This novel highlights the social commitment of Mistry who has deeply dealt with the problems of old age.

## References

- [1] Mistry, Rohinton. *Family Matters*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002. Print.