

Deciphering Disability in Old Age in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters Reshmi Paul¹, Dr. K. Balakrishnan²

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ABSTRACT

Disability can be described as any kind of inability, dysfunction or deficit of the body or mind which causes impediments to an individual in performing specific activities and creates obstacles in communication with their surroundings contrary to what constitutes "normal" by the able population. It exhibits itself in several forms. Disability can be congenital or acquired. The differently abled are in fact a diverse part of the society with different and special needs.

Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary area of study that examines broad questions concerning the nature, implications and consequences of disability from social, historical, cultural and political perspectives. It aims to broaden the layman's perception of disability and challenges the normal-abnormal binary. Disability Studies also evaluates the delineation of disability, prejudice towards differently abled people (ableism) as well as how disability is interpreted in literature. Despite the primary objective of Disability Studies in literature is to destigmatize disorder, sickness, disability and impairment, the majority of disabled characters are represented as objects of scorn, contempt and as victims of stereotyping.

Disability in old age is a matter of serious concern and cannot be overlooked. Disability among older people can be regarded as the gap between an individual's abilities and environmental requirements. The physiological and psychological changes that occur in old age are linked to an increased susceptibility to disability. Disability poses a high risk of morbidity in old age.

The elderly characters who constitute the periphery in Rohinton Mistry's fiction can be regarded as the 'other' or marginal. Disability pervades Mistry's *Family Matters* (2002) and is related to themes such as old age associated difficulties, family relationships and hardships and consequent helplessness. The equivocal novel *Family Matters* by Mistry masterfully intertwines old age and disability (Parkinson's disease). The novel centers around familial relationships and maltreatment of the protagonist Nariman Vakeel, a seventy-nine-year-old former English professor and Parsi widower afflicted with Parkinson's disease and osteoporosis. This paper attempts to explicate the consequences of the physical decline of Nariman Vakeel, as represented in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*. This paper also proposes to study how the novel focuses on several aspects of the lived reality of the aged patriarch with disability (Parkinson's disease) and how he experiences neglect, pity and derision in the hands of his own family.

KEYWORDS : Disability Studies, literature, disability, body, old age, society, family relationships

INTRODUCTION

Disability can be broadly defined as the physical, emotional and intellectual incapacity of individuals, which may hamper their efficacious participation in the society on an equal basis with others. It may be congenital or acquired during a person's lifetime. According to WHO, disability is an umbrella term encompassing impairments, activity limitations and participatory restrictions. An impairment is a problem with bodily function; an activity limitation is a constraint faced by a person in executing a task; and a participatory restriction is an issue endured by a person while participating in life situations. As a result, disability is a dynamic condition, that reflects a relationship between physical characteristics of the individuals and the environment in which they live.

Disability Studies is an emerging field in contemporary literary studies that situates and

delineates disability in historical, political, and cultural paradigms.

Disability not only affects the young and middle aged but it afflicts the aged also.

The elderly often have limited regenerative abilities and are more vulnerable to disease, syndromes, injuries, and illness than younger adults. The emergence of disability in old age is considered as a multidimensional phenomenon that is linked to a person's medical, physiological and psychological state and socio-economic status, societal norms and environment. Diseases such as dementia, Alzheimer's, Parkinson's etc are some of the prime causes of functional and physical decline which ultimately may lead to disability among the aged.

Through the character of Nariman Vakeel, the conceptualization of disability in old age as a 'debilitating disease' has been analyzed by Mistry. Rohinton Mistry centralizes Nariman Vakeel's dilemmas and personal struggles characterized by trials and tribulations, rehabilitation and the pivotal role of family and relationships against a turbulent cultural and political background.

DISABILITY IN OLD AGE IN FAMILY MATTERS

During senescence, most of the elderly will require treatment, care and support. In India, according to the conventional norms, one's filial relatives look after the elderly.

Family Matters illustrates the physical as well as social effects and ramifications of old age and disability against the backdrop of political and cultural animosity and hostility. The novel set in Bombay (Mumbai) in 1995, narrates the bodily deterioration of the seventy-nine-year-old Parsi widower and retired English professor Nariman Vakeel, afflicted with Parkinson's disease and Osteoporosis who consequently becomes a liability to his already fractious family. Jal and Coomy, Nariman Vakeel's stepchildren, share a strained and unsound relationship with him ever since he tied the knot with their mother, Yasmin Contractor. He resides in the palatial Chateau Felicity which he bequeathed to Coomy. Post an unfortunate accident whereby he fractures his ankle and is brought home "a helpless dead weight" (Mistry 48), making him disabled, making his already deplorable situation worsens. Nariman's stepchildren cannot put up with him, and they must assist him in bathing, moving around and in using the commode. Much to his dismay, Coomy's resentful and negligent treatment towards her stepfather elevates Nariman's distress. Owing to his old age and disability, he becomes a burden to them, who foist him to the care of his biological daughter, Roxana in Pleasant Villa. Roxana's family is monetarily constrained and struggles to meet his medical expenses and attend to his personal needs. After the accidental death of Coomy, Nariman and Roxana's family relocate to Chateau Felicity, and Pleasant Villa which is disposed off and earns them a good amount of money. At Chateau Felicity, Roxana hires a full-time maid which aggravates the agony of the old, diseased and disabled Nariman; he becomes very despondent and weeps bitterly; "No ayah! Please, no ayah!" (Mistry 468). However, they failed to understand his utmost yearning for emotional and physical support from his family. Nariman also experiences appalling treatment in the hands of the maid Rekha. Murad, Roxana's son describes Nariman's excruciating pain when his mouth scalded with hot tea, which was fed by the maid and resulted in blisters.

Disability in the novel reflects in other forms also. In the novel, family hurdles are depicted against Bombay's communal tensions. The political conflicts in Bombay, cause disharmony and suppress communal inclusivity and cultural diversity. Peter Morey rightly states that Nariman's physical dysfunction reflects his family's incapacity and the degeneration of Bombay city: "the corruption and breakdown of family life is inextricably linked to the physical. Yet is it also connected to that other corruption infesting the social space and political institutions of Bombay" (63). His old age and disability are also indicative and symbolic of his (Parsi) community's rigid cultural norms. Since the Parsi community is strictly an exogamous population, and prohibits intercaste marriages, Nariman faced the dilemma of adherence to this social custom and couldn't marry the woman of his choice, Lucy Briganza about which he laments throughout his life. Therefore it can be said that Nariman's physical dysfunction reflects his family's incapacity, the

stringent practices of the Parsi community and degeneration of Bombay thus making his old age and disability appear burdensome, oppressive, tragic and stigmatic. The novel critiques and condemns his family's disregard towards the elderly, diseased, and disabled Nariman as well as the oppression of adherence to social customs and norms that exert a tremendous influence on him.

Nariman's status as the patriarch of his family erodes, withdrawing him from all positions of control and authority and fostering a supremacy wherein his family comprising the young and able-bodied have dominance.

As the novel progresses, his ailment worsens leading to severe depression and bodily infestations culminating in his sad demise.

CONCLUSION

The disabled elderly need to be treated with compassion and the family plays a vital role for the same. Nariman Vakeel's family's negative outlook towards him and his disability contributes significantly to his anguish. Mistry's *Family Matters* illustrates the predicaments experienced by the Indian household in coping with the disabled elderly care. The novel highlights human concerns related to frailty in old age. It draws an intimate and powerful portrayal of the ubiquitous situation of the disabled elderly's need for care and affection from their families. Mistry's novel effectively depicts the turmoil and trauma experienced by the disabled elderly through the plight and consequent stigmatized condition of his protagonist, Nariman Vakeel.

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