Narration, Description and Repetition in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*[*]

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목 차

[초록]

본 논문은 로힌턴 미스트리의 세 번째 소설인『가족 문제』(2002)와 이 소설의 형식에 대해 논한다. 대다수의 비평가들이 지적해왔듯이, 미스트리의 소설은 주제와 형식면에서 유럽의 고전 소설과 매우 유사하다. 이 연관성은 게오르크 루카치의 계급의식론을 통해 살펴볼 수 있는데, 루카치는 소설 장르가 새로운 계급인 혁명적 부르주아지의 등장을 표현한다고 보았다. 19세기 후반에 부르주아지 계층이 점차적으로 권력을 잡고 보수화 되면서, 서사를 강조하던 소설 형식은 묘사를 중시하는 형식으로 바뀐다. 루카치는 이러한 묘사 형식이 부르주아지의 혁명적 잠재력을 탈역사화한다고 보았다. 다른 맥락이긴 하나, 부르주아지의 "타락" 개념은 프란츠 파농의『대지의 저주받은 사람들』(1961)에서도 찾아볼 수 있다. 파농은 이 작품에서 신생독립국의 중산층을 정체되고 무력한 집단으로 평가한다. 1990년대 인도의 파르시 공동체를 배경으로 한 미스트리의『가족문제』는 전형적인 부르주아지의 가치를 다루고 있다. 필자는 이 작품에서 타락한 부르주아지, 탈식민지 역사 및 문학 양식에 대한 개념들을 살펴보고, 19세기 전반기 혁명적 부르주아지의 특유한 서사 방식이 균열과 역사의식의 부재를 극복하기 위해, 소설을 통해 부활되고 반복되고 있음을 밝히고자 한다.

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Ⅰ. Introduction

In both Georg Lukács and Frantz Fanon's writings, one finds a notable attention to the revolutionary potential of the bourgeoisie. It is well-known that whereas Lukács sees the early bourgeoisie as progressive, the later bourgeoisie increasingly becomes reactionary and decadent after having consolidating its power in 1848.[1] To Fanon, the middle-class plays a crucial role in the revolutionary struggle, but subsequently loses its progressive position in the post-independent phase. What both Lukács and Fanon emphasize is that the post-revolutionary bourgeoisie no longer seems to possess the ability or the will to occupy the position of what Hegel calls "world-historical" agency.[2] Quite the contrary, post-revolutionary bourgeois consciousness is characterized by an orchestrated attempt to *avoid* the historical. To Hegel, the historical is essentially that which reflects unresolved political tensions that form the bumps on the road towards absolute freedom.[3] The social organization, Hegel argues, that has solved these political tensions—whereby everyone, in principle, has achieved freedom—coincides with the end of history.[4] Following largely Marx's Hegelian conception of history, Lukács argues that the transformation of the bourgeoisie-from a radical to a reactionary position, in which it is unable to recognize still existing political tensions—is evidenced aesthetically through a stylistic orientation that tends to favor details and exactness, at the expense of the dynamic of narrative.

1. The Revolutions of 1848, involving many countries across Europe, were largely driven by a rising bourgeoisie rebelling against old feudal structures, and led to significant political changes. See Sperber (1994).
2. See Hegel (1991): 39.
3. See Hegel (1991): 44. See also Fukuyama (1992) for a discussion of this thesis in connection with the notion of the "the end of history": 60.
4. See Hegel (1991): 24-5.

What I want to explore in this article is a reading of Rohinton Mistry's third novel, *Family Matters* (2002), which in contrast to the author's two previous novels outlines a story that in many ways seems to orient itself in the time after history has run its course. We follow a small Parsi community—traditionally belonging to the Indian middle-class—which is both intimidated by a nationalist Hindu working class growing in power, and a smaller entrepreneurial upper middle-class increasingly losing its influence. As several critics have pointed out, Mistry's novels share a lot—thematically as well as formally—with the classic European novel form.[5] It is in this light that Mistry's novel form becomes relevant to discuss in connection with the problematics identified by Lukács. At the same time, it goes without saying that one cannot simply transfer Lukács's reflection on the European novel form—in itself highly debatable[6]—to a postcolonial context, or more specifically the post-independent epoch of India. Rather, what I am interested in is the novel form's negotiation of the "fall" that Lukács as well as Fanon discuss in connection with the bourgeoisie, whose genre according to most literary scholars is the classic novel.[7] I want to bring together these ideas about bourgeois fall, postcoloniality, and literary form in a reading of the class subjectivity that Mistry articulates in *Family Matters*—a novel which, as the title indicates, explores classic bourgeois values within a specific historical context, the Parsi community in India during the 1990s.

Ⅱ. The Fall of the Bourgeoisie

In his critique of the post-independent national middle-class, Frantz Fanon argues in the work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that while this class plays a central role in the events leading up to and during the independence fight—that is, what Fanon calls the revolutionary stage—there is a danger that it subsequently will stagnate and decay in the aftermath of independence. In other

5. E.g. see Nair (1996).

6. E.g. see Brecht (1977) and Adorno (1977).

7. See Ian Watt (1977) and Lukács (1989).

words, this class might simply try to cling to power and wealth, rather than fight for real social changes. There are several reasons why this is so. Firstly, according to Fanon the middle-class is essentially an underdeveloped class that does not possess the same historical consciousness as the 19th century revolutionary European bourgeoisie. Moreover, Fanon's middle-class is economically weakened:

> It has practically no economic power ... Neither financiers nor industrial magnates are to be found within this national middle class. The national bourgeoisie of under-developed countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labour; it is completely canalized into activities of the intermediary type. (120)

In developing his critique, Fanon may have been inspired by Georg Lukács, and more specifically the work *History and Class Consciousness* from 1923.[8] In this work, and in later writings, Lukács reflects on what he sees as the plight of the dehumanized and reified proletariat, and the necessity of developing a critical historical consciousness. Inspired by Hegel's critique of romanticism,[9] Lukács argues that the entrepreneurial 19th century European bourgeoisie represents the leading revolutionary force in history. Around 1848, however, the bourgeoisie consolidates its position as the dominant class, and subsequently takes on a more conservative, reactionary nature.

To Lukács, the novel form as a genre is closely connected to the emergent bourgeoisie, culminating with Honoré de Balzac's enormous collection of novels, *La Comédie humaine*; in Balzac's novels, the totality of history finds an aesthetic expression of necessity.[10] During the second half of the 19th century, that is, after the bourgeoisie has conquered a position of dominance and conservatism in society—at the expense of its previous revolutionary status—the novel form likewise changes. One example of this new novel form is Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862), whose style according to Lukács is fundamentally decadent, a-historical, excessive—and thus

8. See Said (2001).

9. See Hegel (1975).

10. See Lukács (1978): 116~120.

incapable of representing the totality of history as an aesthetic expression of necessity. More generally, Lukács's critique of new literary styles is gathered around an attack on naturalism, which allegedly articulates the dominant middle-class' interest in depicting a static, deterministic and unchangeable society—despite, perhaps, the authors' intentions. Naturalist aesthetics mystifies the forces underlying the totality of history; a history which thus appears meaningless, fragmented, accidental, static, lacking perspective.[11]

One could argue that Lukács's main problem with naturalism—or description, as he also calls it—is the reification of the narrative force, the dynamics of plot, which plays a crucial role in the genre of the novel.[12] To Lukács, naturalism essentially suspends the narrative force by flooding the text with excessive details, thus undermining a plot capable of elevating the characters, or readers, to a higher level from which the totality of history may be understood. In his famous 1936–essay "Narrate or Describe," Lukács argues that in realist narration (that is, the novel before 1848), the separate parts are always inserted in a composition of narrative force that contributes to the overall structure of meaning.[13] In the naturalist style, and more generally literary styles emerging in the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century (e.g impressionism, expressionism and modernism), the text's separate parts increasingly dominate, becoming important in themselves, whereby the sense of totality is lost. "Description contemporizes everything," writes Lukács; "Narration recounts the past" (130). Thus, the main problem with the naturalist style is according to Lukács that it fails to depict the overall, causal chains of events that the pre–1848 novel had been so intent on pursuing.

What Lukács seems to be doing here is to introduce a figure of *repetition*, whereby the decadent bourgeoisie must re–employ an older aesthetic technique, the 19th century narrative; even if, as Bertolt Brecht has pointed out, this is essentially an anachronistic gesture.[14] However, it is this

11. See Lukács (1978): 132–3.

12. Already in the early treatise, *Theory of the Novel* (1920), Lukács stresses the importance of plot. The novel's relatively independent parts "must have strict compositional and architectural significance ... The existence of the relatively independent parts can never be justified by their mere presence" (76).

13. See Lukács (1978): 126.

14. See Brecht (1977): 76.

anachronism, Lukács argues, that enables the articulation and identification of the as-yet-unresolved political tensions in contemporary society. In many ways, one could argue that Mistry likewise employs an anachronistic narrative gesture in his depiction of the small Parsi community in *Family Matters*—precisely in order to capture the unresolved tensions, which other forms of narrative would have simply mystified or covered. It is in this light, I argue, that one should understand Mistry's use of the classic European narrative form.

Ⅲ. Past Relations

All the novels of the Canadian-Indian writer Rohinton Mistry unfold complex, almost labyrinthine, plot structures in which the fate of the individual stands in a tense relationship to the overall history. Similar to *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and *A Fine Balance* (1995), Mistry's third novel—*Family Matters*—explores the complicated relation between the individual and the historical, albeit in a slightly less direct way. Whereas Mistry described the fates of individuals during the 1971-Indo-Pakistani war in his first novel, and the violent events in the wake of the 1975-state of emergency in his second novel, the story in *Family Matters* takes place approximately 20 years later, during the 1990s.

On an individual level, the novel tells the story of Nariman Vakeel, a retired university professor of English Literature, who by now have entered the autumnal phase of life, ageing and fragile, and unable to take care of himself, due to Parkinson's Disease. The big events in Vakeel's life have largely been of a tragic nature, not only for himself, but also for people around him; his wife, the woman he loved (who died with Vakeel's wife, as they fell from the roof during a bitter fight), and his wife's daughter, Coomy, who has never forgiven her stepfather for what he did to her mother—a feeling of bitterness that only becomes more intense as she herself ages. When Coomy dies in an accident, the novel comments that she was still "full of anger" (399). Only the youngest of Vakeel's children, Roxana, seems to a lesser extent troubled by the debris that Vakeel's life has created. But when Coomy sends the helpless Vakeel to Roxana and her family's small two-room apartment, the relationship—and the tight family budget—becomes severely strained.

In a larger sense, Vakeel represents the past itself, a country's fading memory as well as the past's moral. Right until the end, Vakeel is haunted by misfortunes of his youth. Unceasing nightmares visit his sleep as he is lying helpless on the couch in his daughter's small apartment: "Drowsy from the painkiller, he drifted on a cloud resembling slumber. Among the murmurs from the back room the word 'ayah' caught his ear ... and memory began its torments again" (131). A little later, in a dream, he hears the ghost of Lucy whisper: "remember the plans we made, Nari? Six little ones we wanted, and the names we picked" (134). The family's difficulties in looking after the ageing and fragile Vakeel becomes a metaphor of a family's—and in a larger sense, a nation's and a community's—problems with the past. It is a generation on brink of committing the same errors and mistakes as earlier generations. For example, when Yezad's son decides to invite his non-Parsi girlfriend to his birthday party, Yezad protests by referring to Orthodox Parsi rules—a situation which thus echoes Vakeel's situation a generation earlier.

In this perspective, one could argue that the novel is essentially about a generational conflict within a very specific context—the dwindling Parsi community in India during the mid-90s. The Indian Parsi community—whose members primarily belong to the middle-class—finds itself at this point in a kind of existential crisis. Vakeel's life—and the consequences of this life—reflects in many ways the conflicts and problems haunting the Parsi community during the post-independence epoch. As inspector Masalavala, a little hyperbolically, comments at one point in the novel; "The experts in demographics are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left" (412). A little later, he adds: "To think that we Parsis were the ones who built this beautiful city and made it prosper. And in a few more years, there won't be any of us alive to tell the tale" (416). It is the narrative of this community that seems to be one of the major concerns in the novel. The Parsi community during the 90s is a tormented people, externally as well as internally—the former, among other reasons, because of the increasingly popular nationalist Hindu Shiv Sena party, heavily criticized throughout the novel, and the latter because of a dwindling population, due to low birthrates, western influence, secularization, as well as the possibility of collective extinction in the near future.[15]

15. See Mistry (2003): 411~417.

To Lukács, the post-1848 bourgeoisie has lost its historical role, just as the post-revolutionary bourgeoisie to Fanon constitutes an anomie in history. This "fall" correlates according to Lukács to a very specific aesthetic expression, as we have seen previously; from a dynamic narrative form in the first half of the 19th century, to a style that increasingly seems lost in details and singularities in the second half. Mistry's *Family Matters*, however, remarkably attempts to adhere to a dynamic narrative, albeit at the same time a narrative desperately in search for connectivity and causal chains—in a world experienced as more bewildering and confusing than ever. The world that Mistry portrays in the novel is one that in many ways still lives in the shadows of the political struggles fought out in the 1970s, that is, the epoch during which Mistry's two first novels were set. What Mistry emphasizes in *Family Matters* is the *time after*, and the accumulated backlog erupting in the present. It is a present haunted by disruption, fragmentation—a time during which the sense of the historical is lost in an ever-increasing abundance of smaller narratives, all of which seems to indicate that the grand historical trajectory has come to an end. However, this is at the same time one of the novel's great aesthetic projects—to depict a larger perspective that transcends the naturalistic, fragmented gaze.

Ⅳ. Rhetoric and Visions

As the novel progresses, Yezad increasingly becomes the main protagonist. The story zooms in on his at times desperate attempts to keep the family afloat economically, although his modest salary as a sales assistant in a small sports equipment store is barely sufficient. The store is owned by Mr. Kapur, an upper-middle class Hindu who loves Mumbai—or Bombay, as he insists on calling the city—more than anything else in the world.[16] Repeatedly, he narrates the story of his family's escape from Punjab in 1947, how they arrived in Bombay, and how his father became a wealthy man. "My father started over, with zero, and became prosperous," says Mr. Kapur:

16. The love of the name "Bombay" in fact becomes one of the reasons leading to his death; when Mr. Kapur refuses to change the shop's name to include "Mumbai" instead of "Bombay," he is attacked and killed by two Shiv Sena representatives.

"Only city in the world where this is possible" (151). Another person working in the store is a traumatized Muslim man, who survived a violent attack by nationalist Hindus in 1992. Although the novel's historical background is less specific than in *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*, many of its episodes relate back to one particular event, the destruction of the Babri mosque in 1992, which subsequently lead to many confrontations between Hindus and Muslims, and further stimulated an already growing nationalist sentiment.[17] As a cosmopolitan idealist, who believes that Bombay represents (or ought to represent) a peaceful, harmonious place for all kinds of ethnicities, Mr. Kapur plans to enter local politics in order to fight against sectarian violence—a plan Yezad supports in his own somewhat roguish way, with tragic consequences. After witnessing a beautiful scene at the train station, during which people—regardless of ethnicity or religion—helped each other climbing the roof of the carriages, Mr. Kapur composes an inspired vision of harmony and serene co-existence: "This beautiful city of seven islands ... this enigma of cosmopolitanism where races and religions live side by side ... this dear, dear city now languishes ... like a patient in intensive care ... put there by small, selfish men"(160). Around 200 pages later in the novel, Mr. Kapur's beautiful vision suffers a blow when he himself attempts to climb one of the trains, only to be rejected. "They looked at me like I was a stranger," he observes, sadly; "Others seemed to find me amusing, turning to one another to laugh" (347). Yezad looks at his boss' elegant hair style, his expensive clothes, and Italian leather shoes, and understands that Mr. Kapur's love for the city is mainly built on a romantic illusion, one that is painfully different from reality:

> 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)

17. For more about the growing anti-Muslim party Shiv Sena, which came to power with the Bharatiya Janata Party in 1995, see Morey (2004): 125-132.

Apart from the reference to Rushdie's—as well as Mistry's own—works, the passage underlines once again the discrepancy between history and storytelling, fact and fiction, but at the same time acknowledges the importance of retelling events "still incomprehensible" (151), especially to the younger generation that did not witness the events directly.

Mistry's fiction in many ways constitutes a complex attempt to articulate and overcome the antinomies of postcolonial modernity, as well as the discrepancy between the great ideals and the reality of everyday life. One situation that occurs in all of Mistry's texts involves a minor character wittering about some grandiose phenomenon, while the main character is split between listening and thinking about the practicalities of everyday life. In *Family Matters,* the amateur actors Bhaskar and Gautam discuss the art of acting, while the main character, Yezad, "grew impatient, wishing they would stop sounding their own theatrical trumpets" (331). Yezad has hired Bhaskar and Gautam to play arrogant local Shiv Sena representatives in order to "persuade" Mr. Kapur—who despises the Shiv Sena party with all his heart—to run for election. But although Mr. Kapur on this occasion is persuaded, or perhaps rather duped, by Bhaskar and Gautam's playacting—with fatal consequences when the real representatives of the Shiv Sena party appear in the store—he himself is no stranger to the world of theatre, as the above quotation illustrates. At one point in the novel, Mr. Kapur delivers a pompous speech in which he compares Shakespeare and Bombay, both according to him containing "the universe"—all the while "Yezad studied his watch" (303). Earlier in the novel, Mr. Kapur rambles about Bombay's survival instinct:

> You see how we two are sitting here, sharing? That's how people have lived in Bombay. That's why Bombay has survived floods, disease, plague, water shortages, bursting drains and sewers, all the population pressures. In her heart there is room for everyone who wants to make a home here. (158-9)

Meanwhile, Yezad thinks: "Right ... fourteen million people, half of them living in slums, eating and shitting in places not fit for animals. Nice way of sharing the gift of Bombay. But none of this would have any effect on Vikram Kapur launched in poetic flight" (159). Later in the novel, Yezad is fed up with Mr. Kapur's rhetoric. When Mr. Kapur compares Bombay to an ageing

woman—with "All her blemishes, her slums, her broken sewers, her corrupt and criminal politicians" (361)—Yezad interrupts: "Hang on, Mr. Kapur. I don't think crime or corruption can be called a blemish. More a cancerous tumour. When a person has cancer in their body, they should bloody well fight it" (361). To Mr. Kapur, the vision by and large remains disconnected from the harsh reality that Yezad only knows too well. Earlier in his life, Yezad believed in the power of words. As a young man, he once wrote a visa application for Canada; "Words had power to sway, words had accomplished mighty things, they had won wars. Surely the language of Churchill and Shakespeare and Milton, ignited with a careful mix of reason and passion, could win him a mere immigration visa" (249). His application was, however, brutally rejected, and the plan to move to Canada remains a distant dream, increasingly unlikely to ever come true as time goes by.

Ⅴ. Novelistic Forces of Connectivity

The collision of grandiose rhetoric and the banalities of everyday life—or between storytelling and life—is one of the leading motifs in Mistry's works. It is a discrepancy that is never entirely overcome, one that points in the direction of a deeper and more sincere structure, a grand pattern—but also the opposite; the confusing everyday experience remaining irreconcilable with the ineffective, rhetorical rambling. According to Lukács, one of the strengths of the classic 19th century European novel is its ability to juxtapose and thus string together a dynamic of strategically separated discourses—such as rhetoric and action.[18] It it is in this way that the novel form creates trajectories of connections as well as ironic constellations, and thus directly or indirectly comments upon a given totality of social forces, as well as some of its still unresolved political tensions.[19]

18. See Lukács (1978): 126.

19. Following Hegel, Fukuyama (1992) writes that history "proceeds through a continual process of conflict, wherein systems of thought as well as political systems collide and fall apart from their own internal contradictions. They are then replaced by less contradictory and therefore higher ones, which

An example of this narrative dynamic is allegorically illustrated through the letters the book store owner Vilas Rane—one of Yezad's friends, who works nearby the sports equipment store—composes for poor and illiterate people;

> He was a writer of letters for those who couldn't, who poured out, into his willing ear, their thoughts, feelings, concerns, their very hearts, which he transformed into words upon paper at the nominal rate of three rupees per page. The language could be one of three: Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, depending on the clients, mainly labourers come to the city from distant villages to work at the docks or on construction sites. A scribe-written letter was their only link with their families. (139)

Vilas Rane narrates stories about child births, money problems, diseases, weddings, family tragedies, about young couples condemned to death because of religious issues, children being sold, and many other individual stories that—seen together—form a confusion of intertwined human lives and destinies with no apparent connections. And yet, Vilas insists that the letters together constitute an overall pattern:

> And Vilas, writing and reading the ongoing drama of family matters, the endless tragedy and comedy, realized that collectively, the letters formed a pattern only he was privileged to see. He let the mail flow through his consciousness, allowing the episodes to fall into place of their own accord, like bits of coloured glass in a kaleidoscope. He felt that chance events, random cruelty, unexplainable kindness, meaningless disaster, unexpected generosity could, together, form a design that was otherwise invisible. If it were possible to read letters for all of humanity, compose an infinity of responses on their behalf, he would have a God's-eye view of the world, and be able to understand it. (142)

There is a sense in which Mistry here, indirectly at least, inserts an allegorical or meta-reflective figure, which in many ways resembles the very text—*Family Matters*—in which this figure

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give rise to new and different contradictions" (60). Fukuyama here describes the dialectic process of history, and it is essentially this process that the novel dynamic according to Lukács works through and thus illuminates.

appears; as if to suggest that the novel as a whole is no more or no less than a series of letters that might seem disconnected, randomly put together, but which actually form a pattern, a "design that was otherwise invisible."

On the other hand, there is also a notable skepticism towards superficial (as well as superstitial) ideas of narrativity and forces of connections in the novel. Thus, on several occasions Yezad reflects on the strange appearance of coincidences. When Yezad at one point wins a Matka game—after having followed a tip from his neighbor Villie Cardmaster, who apparently is capable of predicting the winning numbers by interpreting her dreams—he rejects the occurrence as beginner's luck. But after a while, he starts to doubt: "In the days that followed, he kept hoping for, and, in a strange way, almost dreaded, Villie's next powerful dream, the temptation it would hold" (257). When Villie Cardmaster relates a dream about a bra, in which the number 18 appears, Yezad struggles to keep his composure:

> Then he thought of the powerful brassière dream—explain that, if it was all bunkum. Perhaps Villie had some natural affinity for the science of statistical probability. Like Shakuntala Devi, and all those mathematical prodigies, who could multiply twelve-digit numbers in their minds, give you the answer in less time than it took you to use a calculator. Whatever the reason, Villie's formula seemed to work. Torn between the real world and the hope dangled by Villie's realm of numbers, he decided to let destiny choose for him. (257)

In a bizarre turn of events, the winning number is indeed 18, but the same night police men closedown all matka games in a large operation spanning the entire city, which effectively means that Yezad not only loses the winning bonus, but also the household money he gambled. Much later in the novel, after the family has moved back to the old—and ominous—apartment Chateau Felicity, Roxana is convinced that her father, Vakeel, would have lived longer if they had looked after him instead of letting a stranger take care of him. "The proof is in the bedsores," says Roxana; "For almost a year I washed Papa and kept him clean and dry, and he was fine. Soon as the ayah and wardboy came, the bedsores appeared"—which Yezad rejects as nonsense: "In bed for so long, he would have got sores no matter who was nursing him. Just coincidence." Roxana replies: "You say there is no such thing as coincidence ... You call it another word for the Hand of

God" (495). As Roxana points out, Yezad seems to believe in destiny as well as coincidences whenever the situation suits him, in an entirely inconsistent way.

After the wretched business in the sports equipment store—during which Mr. Kapur dies—Yezad increasingly becomes religious. In the beginning of the novel, Yezad ridicules religious belief and believers, but at some point he begins—almost by chance—to pass by the Fire Temple, which becomes a daily habit after a while. Here, Yezad finds peace and tranquility, and perhaps more importantly; a force of connectivity in a world that "was falling apart" (201). To Yezad, the only way to explain his conversion is, as he observes at one point, that "We are not meant to understand everything. We just make ourselves miserable, trying to" (410). Later, he convinces himself as well as Roxana that "the entire chain of events, starting with Grandpa's accident and ending with Mr. Kapur's murder, was God's way of bringing him to prayer" (464).

But whereas the novel overall takes a doubtful attitude towards the force of connectivity in Vilas Rane's letters, as well as Villie Cardmaster's mystical abilities, it seems even more skeptical and ironic about Yezad's religious path. His extreme religiosity, which in the closing pages of the novel turns him into a different person, seriously disturbs the family. Uncle Jal becomes more and more withdrawn, while Murad increasingly takes on a defiant attitude towards his father: "This is the twenty-first century ... and you still believe such nonsense. It's sad" (463). When Murad wants to invite a non-parsi girlfriend to his 18th birthday party, Yezad becomes angry: "I'm warning you, in this there can be no compromise. The rules, the laws of our religion are absolute, this Maharashtrian cannot be your girlfriend" (482). The fact that Yezad in the end does agree to a compromise, and lets Murad invite the girl home, thus seems to indicate that the young generation is not willing to commit the same mistakes and errors as the past generations (for example Vakeel, Murad's grandfather, who was unable to marry Lucy because of religious differences), and that religion is not capable of creating the grand harmony of meaning, reconciliation and connectivity either.

Jehangir, the youngest member of the family, here represents at one and the same time a figure auguring reconciliation (between generations), but also rupture (of the Parsi tradition):

> I remain in the drawing-room with my face down in my book. I feel like telling my father that he is mistaken. Farah Arjani, who lives on the ground floor, is the great-granddaughter of the late Mr. Arjani, the one who had the feud with Grandpa's father. She and I were alone in the lift last week. We were laughing about something, and I teased her, she shoved me, I shoved her back, and soon we were holding each other tight. (483)

The late Mr. Arjani was a character from the older generation who once had a mean-spirited dispute with Vakeel Nariman regarding religious matters, which the latter won; however, Mr. Arjani subsequently hired Lucy—Nariman's first (and perhaps only) love—as a maid, simply for the purpose of humiliating his neighbor. It is in this light—of possible reconciliation among the younger generations, but also loss of loyalty towards Parsi traditions—that one should understand Yezad's change of personality late in the novel. Yezad's religious conversion is an expression of the fear that his family's belonging to the Parsi identity will decline; at the same time, ironically, it was religious fanaticism that almost destroyed the family in the first place.

Ⅵ. Causes and Effects

Family Matters is a novel that seems particularly preoccupied with family genealogies, which constitute the novel's perhaps most persistent forces of connectivity. However, when the concept of the family makes its entrance the first time in the novel, it is in the form of disruption; if the novel has a beginning, it is one that is haunted by rupture and the breaking of traditions—namely Vakeel's unhappy love-relationship with a non-parsi woman, Lucy. After much pressure from his family, Vakeel eventually follows the Parsi tradition and marries Yasmin, a Parsi widow, who brings along two children, Coomy and Jal, from a former marriage. When Lucy refuses to let Vakeel go, while Vakeel himself has difficulties cutting the ties, the course of events ends badly as the two women fatally fall down from a rooftop after a violent fight. Since that time—36 years—Coomy has been unable to forgive Vakeel, her stepfather, whom she still accuses of having caused her mother's death.

Like circles in the water, the ruinous beginning produces effects all the way up to the novel's present time, when Coomy and Jal send the by now helpless Vakeel to Roxana's small apartment—apparently because of a ceiling in need of repair, but which they themselves in fact have smashed to prevent Vakeel from living there. Roxana persuades a local handyman—an unfortunate fellow, happy to carry out all sorts of jobs but not very good at it—to fix the ceiling, and Coomy cunningly hopes that the man will only cause damage, so that even more time will pass before Vakeel may return to the apartment. However, not only does the handyman damage the ceiling; his work ends with a catastrophic accident that causes his own as well as Coomy's death. Meanwhile, Roxana and Yezad suffer from a severely strained budget due to due to Vakeel's medicinal expenses. To solve their financial problems, Yezad creates a crooked plan involving two actors to scare his boss so that Mr. Kapur may finally decide to enter the local elections, as the latter keeps talking about, and which potentially will be followed by the promotion of Yezad to manager of the sports equipment store, with an accompanying salary increase. The plan tragically backfires, however, and Mr. Kapur, the owner and Yezad's boss, is killed. Thus, both Roxana and Yezad unwittingly and indirectly cause the death of others.

It is in this way that the novel creates trajectories of causality encompassing different temporal epochs as well as different spatial levels—the highest levels as well as the most banal ones. At one point in the novel, a teacher discovers that Jehangir—Yezad and Roxana's son—has received bribe money from classmates while supervising their homework. When Yezad learns about his son's dishonesty, he delivers a grandiose speech to Roxana: "there's only one way to explain it. The same corruption that pollutes the country is right here, in your own family ... Is it any wonder Jehangla took the bribe?" (283). Roxana retorts that Jehangir only took the money "to help his parents with food, and with Grandpa's medicines" (283). Yezad, in return, understands this as an indirect accusation—that he is unable to earn enough money for the family. A little later, Yezad becomes involved in the before-mentioned shady piece of business, leading to his boss' death, in an attempt to get a salary increase—so he can pay for the family's extra expenses. The tight family budget is of course related to Vakeel's health issues and general helplessness, a person who is possibly the cause of several people's tragic fates, including his wife, the woman he loved, and his stepdaughter, Coomy.

Late in the novel, Roxana asks Jehangir to bring some sweets to one of their old neighbours, Dr. Fitter. This was the doctor who attended the two women—Yasmin and Lucy—after they had fallen from the rooftop. After exchanging compliments, Dr. Fitter tells the young boy about the event. At the time it occurred, a lot of rumours circulated: "was it a double murder, was it double suicide, was it pure accident?" (489). But the old doctor explains that no one actually heard Yasmin's last word—except him:

> your grandmother was conscious, managing to speak a little. And all the confusion was due to one word in her sentence: did she say 'he' or 'we'? ... I know what she said. She said, 'What did we do!' But there were other people gathered around. Some of them heard, 'What did he do!' and they claimed it incriminated Nariman. (490)

According to the doctor, Yasmin's last words were not an accusation against her husband, merely a statement of a kind; that they had all wasted their lives. Dr. Fitter's revelation ironically appears at a point when the novel almost demonstratively has insisted on the emptiness of the word compared to reality—for example, Mr. Kapur's rhetorical escapades that are more or less entirely disconnected from the reality of the world, as well as Yezad's brutally rejected immigration visa application that contained quotes from both Churchill as well as Shakespeare. On this—pivotal—occasion, however, words do matter, albeit in an ironic sense. Only much later, that is, at a time when everything has become more or less irrelevant (Coomy and Vakeel Nariman both being dead at this point in the story), does the novel reveal the words to us; as if the text suggests that the power of words, their truth, can only emerge at the time of the "too late."

There is a sense in which this "too late" in a wider perspective constitutes the foundation upon which Lukács articulates the need for a figure of *repetition*—that is, the argument that the decadent bourgeoisie must rediscover the classic European pre-1848 realist novel form's "epic concentration," in order to identify the causal dynamics underlying the unresolved political antinomies of contemporary society yet again. The episode regarding Yasmin's last word—misunderstood by an entire generation—underlines the idea of fragmentation, dissolution, separation; but also, at the same time, the hope that words may yet again find their right form—that once, at some point, they will be understood in their right context.

Ⅶ. Conclusion

In conclusion, one could say that in the beginning of the novel's chain of causal trajectories there is an interpretive problematic—like Yasmin's last words, misheard by all except Dr. Fitter. In a further perspective, it would be possible to trace what seems to be causal trajectories underneath the majority of the novel's stories and anecdotes. At the same time, however, it would be trajectories haunted by potential contingency. In this sense, the novel's formal dynamic is one that explores—not how events are related in an absolute sense—but rather how they are experienced or interpreted as being part of a larger jigsaw puzzle.

Near the end of the novel, as the perspective changes from Yezad to Jehangir, this problematic is yet again underlined. At one point, Jehangir studies an old jigsaw puzzle showing a motif of Lake Como. The puzzle, he remembers, used to occupy him for hours; now, it reminds him of his family's strangely entangled history:

> I go to my room and lie on the bed. I think of all the things I've heard, over the years, about Grandpa and Lucy and my grandmother. And the picture is still not complete. Like some strange jigsaw puzzle of indefinite size. Each time I think it's done, I find a few more pieces. And its form changes again, ever so slightly. My old jigsaws, including the beautiful Lake Como puzzle, are still on my shelf ... I wonder what it was about them that so fascinated me. They seem like a waste of time now. (491)

Like Yasmin, who also expressed regret over time wasted in her last words—a sentence which subsequently was misheard, and thus misunderstood, with tragic consequences for the generations coming after—Jehangir seems to express a temporal awareness that transcends the longing for meaning, connectivity, questions of guilt.

Time thus seems to constitute one of the most central dimensions in *Family Matters*, a novel whose title stresses the importance of family—over time. It is a novel deeply concerned with themes such as ageing, retrospection, and questions about guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation. Vakeel remembers when as a young man he used to say to the older generation: "*You've grown old without growing wise*" (17). Near the end of the novel, Yezad, Vakeel's son-in-law, tells his own son:

"Learn from this, Jehangoo. Listen to the advice of elders. When we grow up, we think we know everything. We assume old people are not right in their heads. Too much pride we acquire with our years. And then it brings us down" (494). However, when Vakeel is being more or less forced out of his own apartment by Coomy and Jal, he comments: "To so many classes I taught *Lear*, learning nothing myself. What kind of teacher is that, as foolish at the end of his life as at the beginning?" (197)—as if the novel suggests that even old age does not bring about the desired wisdom.

It is this discrepancy that the novel so persistently traces as it narrates the story of a family—and in a wider sense a people, a community, and a nation—moving from one generation to another; or, from one epoch to another. During the last pages of the novel, Jehangir reflects: "I try to recall an earlier time, before Grandpa arrived, a time when the world was so safe and small and manageable ... I wonder what lies ahead for our family in this house, my grandfather's house, in this world that is more confusing than ever" (500). It is a world, one could add, which in many ways has moved on—a world in a process of transition, no longer granting much space to small communities; a people increasingly being swallowed by history, while trying to create new narrative trajectories. Meanwhile, Mistry ties together the manifold trajectories of lives and destinies in a form that rediscovers the formal dynamic of an anachronistic novelistic tradition—in an attempt to illuminate some of the causal dynamics underlying the unresolved political tensions of today.

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Abstract

Narration, Description and Repetition in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters

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This article discusses Rohinton Mistry's third novel, *Family Matters* (2002), and the form of the novel. In the reception of Rohinton Mistry's novels, it has often been pointed out that his novels share a lot —formally as well as thematically—with the classic European novel form. In order to explore this connection, I return to Georg Lukács's theory on novelistic class consciousness. To Lukács, the genre of the novel is essentially an expression of the formation of a new class, the revolutionary bourgeoisie.

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After this revolutionary bourgeoisie has assumed a position of power and conservatism during the second half of the 19th century, the novel begins to change radically from a form that emphasizes narration to a form that emphasizes description. In Lukács's view, description reifies and de-historicizes the revolutionary potential of bourgeois subjectivity. Albeit in a different context, one similarly finds the notion of a bourgeois "fall" in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), in which Frantz Fanon develops a critique of the post-independent national middle-class as a stagnant, powerless class. In my article I want to explore these ideas about a fallen bourgeoisie, postcolonial history and literary form in a reading of the class subjectivity Mistry articulates in *Family Matters*—a novel that, as the title indicates, engages with some of the classic bourgeois values within a specific historical context, the Parsi community in India during the 1990s. I argue that the novel revives—and thus *repeats*—the mode of narration characteristic of the revolutionary bourgeoisie during the first half of the 19th Century in an attempt to overcome the problem of fragmentation and the lack of historical sense.

Keywords: Rohinton Mistry, *Family Matters*, Georg Lukács, Frantz Fanon, Realism, Narration, description, repetition

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