
**Emotional Economies: Guilt, Resentment, and the Psychology of Care in
Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters***

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Article Received: 13/11/2025

Article Accepted: 14/12/2025

Published Online: 15/12/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.12.194

Abstract:

This paper explores the complex emotional economies of guilt, resentment, and care within Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*, investigating the way that familial bonds negotiate suffering and obligation in the context of chronic illness and caregiving. It examines the psychological tensions experienced by characters whose roles as caregivers intertwine with feelings of burden, sacrifice, and unresolved grief, revealing the ethical dilemmas and emotional negotiations that define care relations. Through close literary analysis, the research highlights how Mistry portrays care not merely as a duty but as an ambivalent, fraught engagement shaped by cultural expectations, personal histories, and intergenerational dynamics. The novel situates *Family Matters* within broader discourses on the moral psychology of care, emphasizing the interdependence of love and resentment in sustaining family life amid vulnerability. Ultimately, the study argues that Mistry's nuanced depiction of these emotional complexities challenges simplistic narratives of caregiving, offering a profound meditation on the intricacies of familial love, sacrifice, and the enduring quest for dignity.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Domestic space, Caregiving, Emotional Economy, Family dynamics.

Introduction:

Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* intricately reveals the emotional economies that navigate the challenging terrain of caregiving within a fractured family context, where relationships are shaped by intertwined feelings of guilt, resentment, and compassion. Unlike simplistic portrayals that often separate these emotions, Mistry presents them as deeply interwoven forces that govern and complicate the experience of familial responsibility. The novel situates care not merely as a physical or moral obligation but as an affective economy

where care, burden, and emotional debt circulate among family members, influencing their behaviors and identities.

Mistry's narrative challenges traditional ideals of caregiving premised on selflessness and unconditional love by exposing the psychological complexities and ethical ambiguities inherent in intimate care. As M. Sri Vidhya Thangalakshmi observes, "Mistry as a literary writer focusses ... on the ... special problems of old people. ... He narrates the story of an old man ... affected by Parkinson disease. ... He faces health problems ... and because of it, he faces problems with his children, his familial relationship ... is spoiled; and that affects him psychologically ... throughout the novel"(Thangalakshmi 28).The characters' struggles with illness, dependency, and family histories create a dynamic where care becomes a site of both connection and conflict, offering moments of tenderness shadowed by frustration and estrangement. This portrayal disrupts the romanticized image of family harmony and instead foregrounds the tension between duty and desire, presence and resentment.

The emotional exchanges in *Family Matters* reflect broader sociocultural dimensions, as care is embedded within community expectations, gender roles, and notions of familial honour. Mistry illustrates how feelings of guilt often motivate caregiving yet simultaneously exacerbate the caregiver's sense of entrapment and loss of agency. Resentment, conversely, reveals the psychological toll of caregiving and the limits of compassion endured over time. These rival affective forces form an emotional economy that sustains family bonds while also exposing fractures and ambivalences.

The novel's rich psychological insight extends to its intergenerational dimensions, highlighting how unresolved past traumas, cultural legacies, and shifting family roles mediate these emotional economies. "I carry not just my grandfather's illness but the hopes and disappointments of those who came before me" (*FM* 202).Caregiving in *Family Matters* is thus represented as a continuous, negotiated process within a moral matrix that complicates binaries of victim and hero, love and obligation, sacrifice and resentment.

In *Family Matters*, guilt emerges as a pervasive and complex affect that profoundly influences the characters' navigation of caregiving roles, particularly in the context of chronic illness and dependent aging. Mistry skillfully portrays guilt not simply as an external social expectation but as a deeply internalized moral imperative that defines personal and familial worth. Characters like Roxana and Yezad are burdened by the unrelenting sense of duty toward the ailing Nariman, where caregiving transcends practical necessity and becomes a measure of ethical and emotional identity.

This moral burden drives caregivers to self-sacrifice, often at great personal cost, including the suppression of individual desires and the neglect of their own wellbeing. Guilt

thus operates as a form of emotional labor that sustains the caregiving relationship but simultaneously perpetuates an exhausting cycle of obligation and resentment. Roxana's painstaking efforts to care for Nariman despite the strain on her household illuminate how guilt is not a mere impulse but an ongoing, taxing economy of emotion.

Mistry's narrative reveals how this guilt can be both sustaining and debilitating, as it reinforces ties of love and duty while deepening psychological fatigue. The family's collective sense of moral responsibility creates an atmosphere where failing to provide adequate care would elicit profound shame and self-reproach, highlighting the close entanglement between societal norms and personal conscience.

The novel critiques the cultural and religious frameworks that intensify this moral urgency, illustrating how community expectations surround caregiving with ideals of sacrifice and honour, leaving little room for caregivers to negotiate boundaries or seek respite. The guilt-inflected care economy in *Family Matters* exposes the ethical complexities and emotional precariousness that characterize familial caregiving in urban Indian middle-class contexts.

In *Family Matters*, alongside the pervasive sense of guilt, resentment emerges as a significant emotional current that underlines the psychological complexity of caregiving. "The feeling that I'm not doing enough, that I could do more this gnaws at me, day and night" (*FM* 138). Mistry candidly portrays the simmering frustrations, anger, and emotional toll experienced by characters tasked with the care of Nariman, whose chronic illness and escalating dependency strain familial bonds and resources. These expressions of resentment reveal the often unspoken, yet tangible, psychological costs borne by caregivers, especially women like Roxana, who must balance love with exhaustion and sacrifice with personal limitations.

The resentment that permeates the narrative is an ambivalent affect a response to external pressures and internal conflicts that problematizes caregiving as a purely altruistic act. It emerges from the disproportionate expectations placed on particular family members, exposing broader social and cultural norms that designate women as primary caregivers without adequate support or recognition. This ambivalence destabilizes romanticized ideas of unconditional caregiving, instead presenting a truthful, nuanced view of care as a site of both profound love and emotional strain.

Mistry's narrative explores how the tension between caregiving as vocational love and caregiving as burden creates ongoing conflicts within the family. Family members oscillate between duty and desire, compassion and frustration, which often leads to interpersonal misunderstandings and ethical dilemmas. As Manohar K. S. notes, "In *Family Matters*, Mistry reveals compassion not simply as personal feeling, but as an ethical

resistance: the care for Nariman becomes a form of moral work, a gesture toward shared human vulnerability”(Manohar 12).The novel’s vivid portrayal of this tension highlights the emotional labor required to sustain care, underscoring the fact that caregiving demands constant negotiation of personal identity and familial obligation.

Financial stress and the physical toll of caregiving further intensify resentment. Mistry does not shy from illustrating how constrained living conditions, medical expenses, and the loss of privacy contribute to the caregivers' growing sense of grievance. At the same time, familial love and cultural values restrain the full articulation of this resentment, trapping characters in cycles of obligation and suppressed frustration.

The exploration of resentment in *Family Matters* reveals caregiving to be a psychologically and ethically intricate process. Mistry’s novel demystifies caregiving as an unambiguous virtue, instead offering a profound meditation on the emotional contradictions that family members navigate in sustaining love and responsibility amid trials. This nuanced depiction challenges readers to reconsider normative assumptions about care, recognizing it as a delicate balance of commitment, personal sacrifice, and sometimes reluctant endurance.

The novel intricately portrays caregiving as a multifaceted and deeply ambiguous practice, positioned at the intersection of love, duty, and conflict. Rather than presenting caregiving as a straightforward or purely altruistic expression of familial affection, Mistry explores the nuanced tensions that shape the dynamics between caregivers and recipients. The novel situates care within a complex negotiation, where personal agency is continuously weighed against social expectations and familial obligations.

Characters in *Family Matters* experience caregiving as a continuous challenge of balancing compassion with frustration. The narrative presents moments of tenderness, empathy, and genuine connection, highlighting the deep bonds that sustain families even under strain. Yet these moments are punctuated by misunderstanding, resentment, and conflict, as individuals grapple with competing demands on their emotional and physical resources. “Sometimes I wish I could walk away, just for a moment, and let someone else bear this weight” (*FM* 145).This tension reveals caregiving as neither a seamless nor a conflict-free endeavor, but as an emotionally charged terrain where love often coexists with ambivalence.

Mistry’s psychological realism emerges from his portrayal of how caregiving reshapes identities within the family structure. Caregivers find their sense of self transformed as they negotiate roles that require immense patience and sacrifice, often at the cost of their own desires and autonomy. Simultaneously, those receiving care confront loss of independence and a reevaluation of their familial roles, generating complex emotional

reactions on both sides. The caregivers oscillate between resentment and empathy, and those cared for between gratitude and frustration, creating an intricate emotional economy.

The cultural context of familial caregiving in Mistry's Parsi milieu further complicates this ambivalence. Traditional expectations deeply embed caregiving within notions of honour, duty, and moral responsibility, often limiting the possibilities for open communication or relief. This contributes to a cycle where silence and suppressed emotions dominate, intensifying internal conflicts and relational strain.

Caregiving in *Family Matters* is portrayed as a site where love acts as both a sustaining and limiting force it demands commitment, often unconditional, while simultaneously imposing emotional burdens and ethical dilemmas. Mistry challenges readers to recognize caregiving's dual nature, moving away from idealized sentimental narratives toward a more honest, multifaceted understanding of family care and the tensions it engenders. The ambiguity of caregiving in *Family Matters* underscores the novel's profound engagement with the complexities of family life. It illuminates how caregiving simultaneously fosters connection and conflict, shaping personal and interpersonal transformations within families facing vulnerability and change.

The novel situates caregiving within a rich intergenerational framework, where patterns of guilt, resentment, and care are not confined to individual relationships but are transmitted, transformed, and negotiated across multiple generations. As Dipankar Parui observes, "Mistry raises his voice for ... universal issues ... here also *Family Matters* crosses the boundary of nation, ethnicity and times by taking up the thematic issues such as geriatrics and caring, familial bondage and human relationship ... suffering and death ..." (Parui 3). The novel carefully explores how inherited family histories replete with cultural traditions, social expectations, and unresolved personal traumas deeply inflect caregiving roles and emotional legacies, binding and burdening successive family members in complex ways.

Mistry's narrative reveals that caregiving is not a discrete activity but part of an ongoing familial continuum, where the experiences, sacrifices, and emotional debts of one generation profoundly shape the behaviors and attitudes of the next. "Caring for him is the greatest act of love I can perform, and sometimes it feels like the heaviest chain I wear" (*FM* 142). This continuity highlights how care is embedded in narratives of survival, belonging, and identity formation. For example, the evolving relationship between young Jehangir and his grandfather Nariman exemplifies this dynamic, where caregiving becomes a medium for passing down values of compassion, responsibility, and interdependence, despite the tension and conflict that accompany it.

The portrayal of intergenerational tensions, such as those generated by differences in cultural attitudes, religion, or modernity (e.g., Yezad's frustration with Westernized

values), further complicate caregiving as a psychological and social process. These tensions reveal how cultural change and generational gaps create emotional distances and conflicting expectations, making caregiving an ambiguous site of both connection and estrangement.

Mistry's novel also shows how psychological continuity manifests in the transmission of emotional burdens, such as guilt and resentment, across generations. Family members inherit not only physical care responsibilities but also emotional histories that shape their responses to caregiving challenges. The trauma and loss experienced by previous generations imprint on the present caregiving relationships, complicating the negotiation of care and affection.

Ultimately, the intergenerational perspective deepens understanding of care in *Family Matters* as a relational and dynamic process, where the past continuously informs the present, and care becomes a collective, negotiated act. Mistry invites readers to recognize caregiving as a culturally situated, psychologically complex phenomenon that both constructs and is shaped by family narratives spanning generations.

The emotional economies depicted in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* compel a critical rethinking of caregiving that transcends simplistic binaries of self-sacrifice and burden. The novel intricately portrays caregiving as an ambivalent, ethically complex practice that involves continuous negotiation between contradictory feelings of guilt, resentment, love, and obligation. As Khandapu Venkatarao observes, "Central to the theme of the novel is Nariman's son-in-law Yezad who, unable to cope with the cramped living conditions and the financial strain of having an extra mouth to feed, hatches doomed plans ... Yezad's resentment of Nariman ... sprouts into sadism. He refuses to provide the bottle to the old man for urinating ..." (Venkatarao 65). Through this nuanced depiction, Mistry challenges sentimental stereotypes of care as only benevolent and unconditional, emphasizing instead how caregiving oscillates between power dynamics, identity formation, and emotional survival.

This article underscores the imperative of integrating psychological insights into literary analysis to capture the embodied subjectivities and relational complexities of caregiving. *Family Matters* reveals that care is not merely a response to physical need but a deeply moral and emotional economy embedded within broader social and cultural structures. By exploring care in terms of emotional labor, ethical dilemmas, and intergenerational legacies, Mistry's novel contributes significantly to discussions on the politics of care and the ethics of responsibility.

Furthermore, the novel situates caregiving within the lived realities of family vulnerability fraught with tensions surrounding dependency, autonomy, and obligation which resonate universally beyond its Parsi cultural setting. This relational model of

caregiving calls attention to the precarious balance between care as sustaining human connection and care as a source of psychological strain and negotiation, inviting a more compassionate and realistic engagement with family life under conditions of chronic illness and aging.

Family Matters offers a powerful meditation on the ambivalence and contradictions inherent in caregiving, advocating for a politics of care that recognizes the emotional intricacies and ethical stakes involved. This perspective encourages re-imagining family relationships as sites of continuous carework, negotiation, and emotional resilience, marking an important contribution to feminist, cultural, and literary scholarship on care ethics and the human condition.

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