it is their characters, indeed, that make people what they are, but it is by reason of their actions that they are happy or the reverse. (Aristotle, *Poetics*, Book 6)

The world as evil let us not resign,
But be good whilst to good we still incline.
Nor good nor bad forever will remain;
Let us in memory the good retain.


On 6 December 1992, the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya was destroyed by a large crowd of Hindu militants, claiming the site on which it stood as the birthplace of the god Ram and therefore sacred to their religion. In its place they proposed the construction of a Ram temple. Within hours of the news reaching Bombay, angry Muslims had taken to the street in protest. But they soon found themselves confronted by highly organised groups of Hindu activists celebrating the ‘victory’ at Ayodhya. The horrific violence that ensued continued sporadically throughout December and January. By the time it came to an end almost eight hundred people were dead and many more had been made homeless. In a few short weeks Bombay’s reputation as a haven of tolerance and communal eclecticism lay in tatters.¹

The Maharashtra state elections of 1995 took place against a background of anti-Muslim sentiment consequent on the civil unrest which had followed the destruction of the Babri Mosque two and a half years earlier. At the polls the Shiv Sena (Army of
Shiva), depicting itself as the ‘defender of Hindus’, won enough support to form a coalition government with the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). This success represented the culmination of thirty years of activism by the Shiv Sena in Bombay, fuelled by its charismatic and ruthless leader, the Senapati, Bal Thackeray, which had seen the organisation develop from a cadre concerned with employment opportunities for Maharashtrian speakers to a major player in the Hindu nationalist movement on the metropolitan, and hence national, stage. Drawing on its appeal to a broad spectrum of the Bombay population, and raising the banner of Hindu majoritarianism, or Hindutva, the Shiv Sena exploited the inevitable consequences, in terms of inequality, fostered by capitalist development in the city. It employed flexible tactics and a posse of young, vigorous activists trained to see political work as part of a larger struggle sometimes requiring unscrupulous methods and direct physical violence, and was involved in such nefarious activities as protection rackets, illegal land deals, and drugs and contraband smuggling. The movement of the Shiv Sena from fringe player to main actor in the unfolding drama of Bombay politics both indicates, and is a symptom of, what Novy Kapadia has described as the ‘criminalisation of politics and the politicisation of crime, so rampant in India in the last decade of the twentieth century’.

It is against this backdrop of communalist politics and corruption that the action that the action of Rohinton Mistry’s third novel, *Family Matters*, takes place. Ostensibly the story of the pressures faced by one down-at-heel Parsi family in their attempts to care for an aged and infirm patriarch, the novel, like its predecessors, also offers a consideration of how, despite all efforts to keep them separate, the public world impinges on the private space, and how the taint of corruption can mark even the most insular and apparently upright of communities. Characters are caught in a complex web of actions and reactions in their dealings with each other and with the wider world they inhabit. Physical corruption and the inevitable change and loss accompanying mortality are linked with the social and political corruption characteristic of modern Bombay, and with the moral
corruption of characters who, often for laudable reasons, perpetrate deceits and engage in subterfuge. For example, Yezad Chenoy uses his family’s precious housekeeping money to gamble on the illegal lottery, the *Matka*, making losses they can ill afford. Yet he does so in the hope of meeting the increased expense caused by the arrival of his Parkinson-raddled father-in-law who, in turn, has been ousted from his home by the devious machinations of an embittered stepdaughter at her wit’s end. Similarly, in a move connected to the endemic municipal and national corruption that sees politicians and criminals in league, his son, Jehangir, is tempted to betray his role as school homework monitor and take money for overlooking his classmates’ mistakes. In particular, Yezad’s attempts to influence his ecumenical employer to stand for election on an anti-communalist, anti-corruption ticket – prompted less by concern for Bombay than for the promotion he anticipates for himself as a result – backfire in tragic fashion. The cost of such actions is investigated as part of the novel’s interest in moral ambiguity and causality, means and ends, which often centres on the distinction between duty and free will. In this it recalls the strictures of Kantian ethical philosophy, and, emphasising the text’s hybridity, the Zoroastrian injunction to ‘good thoughts, good words, good deeds’. The question of how to identify the good course of action in a world seemingly devoid of moral absolutes casts a shadow over the best intentions. Mistry explores the inevitable fragmentation of such ideals in practice and the overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, compulsions of duty to family, to community, to the Zoroastrian faith and civic duty. What is revealed is a Parsi community whose response to its glorious past and attenuated status in postcolonial India is fundamentally split between an urge for physical and imaginative escape and a hidebound orthodoxy that, ironically, echoes the purist agendas of the very Hindu nationalism that threatens it.

Although set in the mid-1990s, the novel again blends past and present as Nariman Vakeel, progressively immobilised by Parkinson’s disease, reflects, in italicised passages, on the
incidents leading to the joint deaths of his wife and former lover, a cataclysm to which the family’s subsequent fractures and barely suppressed hostilities can be traced. Nariman is the narrative’s initial controlling consciousness, but he is gradually reduced to silence and ultimately death, and the voices of his stepson, Yezad, and nine year old grandson, Jehangir, take over as the novel progresses. In a final Epilogue, ‘five years later’, Jehangir takes over completely. More mature and reflective now, he is able to piece together more of the jigsaw of adult motivation and cunning his grandfather’s tangled love life has so painfully scrambled.

As the double play of the title suggests, family is important both as the site of primary loyalties – ‘filiation’, as Edward Said might say – and the locus of tangled and often unresolved issues. Family in the novel comes to have both positive and negative connotations. The Chenoy–Vakeel–Contractor family unit is already fractured by loss: Coomy and Jal Contractor’s own father dies young and they are unwillingly swept into a new domestic arrangement when their mother seeks the security of a marriage to Nariman Vakeel, who, in turn, carries with him the whiff of scandal and divided loyalties owing to his liaison with a non-Parsi, Lucy Braganza. When his father refuses to countenance his exogamous intentions, Nariman reluctantly yields to the marriage with Yasmin Contractor. Nariman soon adds a daughter of his own, Roxana, to his newly acquired stepchildren, leading to longstanding jealousies and resentment about favouritism.

As these almost ad hoc arrangements indicate, families develop, change and some branches die out while others are propagated and flourish. Beyond this, as in A Fine Balance, there are affiliations independent of blood ties that come to take on the supportive qualities of the family ideal: the letter-writer and bookstore owner Vilas Rane seems part of a multitude of ‘ready-made families’ as he preserves the link between illiterate workers forced to leave their birthplaces and come to the city for work and those they have left behind; ‘writing and reading the ongoing drama of family matters’, finding ‘a pattern only he
was privileged to see’ (FM, 136). Families can be comforting spaces, but they can also stifle with a blanket of overprotectiveness: Yezad’s older sisters fiercely resent anyone vying for a share of their brother’s affections; and even the well-meaning Roxana fusses over her sons, Jehangir and Murad, worrying at the slightest sign of the inevitable childhood coughs or stomach upsets. Yet, sinister examples of parental control are at work too, not only in Mr Vakeel’s interdiction against Nariman marrying for love, but also towards the end of the novel when Yezad, tossed by events back to a literal and racially-based understanding of Parsi uniqueness, effectively re-enacts the same prejudicial injunctions when dealing with his eldest son’s first serious relationship. Family and its expected loyalties can be as much an offensive weapon as a shield against threatening outside forces. As a counterpoint to the increasingly vehement patriarchal thunderings, a touching relationship develops between Jehangir and his incapacitated grandfather. As Nariman’s body fails him, so his need for emotional and sometimes physical support increases. Of all the Chenoys, Jehangir is most able to provide the sustenance Nariman requires. They are temperamentally similar – both respond readily to sensory and imaginative stimuli – and value the physical proximity which Nariman’s arrival in the small flat in Pleasant Villa forces on them; Jehangir soothes his troubled grandfather at night when unbidden memories plague him, and even helps him with basic bodily functions when he lapses into an increasingly childlike helplessness as the illness progresses.

Nariman’s Parkinson’s disease is linked to osteoperosis. He breaks his leg when out for a walk, leading to the regime of bed rest which tests Coomy, with whom he lives at first in the inappropriately named Chateau Felicity, to her limit. Eventually, the plaster on Nariman’s leg gives Coomy the idea of dislodging that other plaster, on the ceiling of their apartment, in order to keep her stepfather at the Chenoy’s flat where he has been recuperating. Parkinson’s and osteoperosis are only two of the many examples of what one might call bodily corruption, which mark Family Matters. Characters are again furnished with a full
complement of ailments: Coomy’s brother, Jal, is partially deaf and wrestles with a malfunctioning hearing aid; the increasingly choleric Yezad develops angina; and Jehangir has a delicate digestive system, upset by ill-prepared food and the pangs of conscience. Even the mechanical, cricket-bat-wielding Santa, erected by Yezad’s employer, Mr Kapur, in his sports goods shop to celebrate Christmas and represent his inclusive view of Bombay and its communities, creaks rheumatically and shudders in its down-swing as if it too has Parkinson’s. Issues of mobility versus immobility, decay and mortality are explored through Nariman’s fate. From a life lived fully through the body, he comes to exist solely in the life of the mind, giving a new twist to that theme of imprisonment so popular with Mistry. As he thinks back on his blighted love for Lucy, Nariman becomes, in Yeats’s terms, ‘sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal’. His struggles to perform the simplest tasks become the most acute manifestation of the Sisyphian labours of other characters, such as Roxana and Yezad, struggling every day to make ends meet, or Coomy fighting vainly to hold back the tide of bitterness she feels for the old man she blames for her mother’s untimely death. Jehangir’s first encounter with mortality comes in the form of his grandfather’s story of his now-dead best friend, who grieved so piteously over the loss of his pet dog. Yet the gallows humour and grotesquerie associated with death are on display too: for example, when Murad tells his joke about the dead Beethoven ‘decomposing’ (FM, 164).

Coomy and her brother-in-law, Yezad, actually share several psychologically significant traits, despite being at loggerheads over who should look after Nariman. They both baulk at the unpleasant physical realities of caring for a prostrate, paralysed relative: Coomy is sickened by his bodily effluvia, and Yezad refuses to touch the bedpan on which Nariman is now reliant. Their revulsion is of a piece with their obsessive desire to exercise control over their environments and, by extension, their destinies. Yet, in different ways, this urge is every bit as damaging for these two figures as it was for the warring women, Lucy and Yasmin, whose battle for control of Nariman sends
them over the edge: literally, as, locked in struggle, they plunge to their deaths from the roof of Chateau Felicity. Thus, the corruption and breakdown of family life is inextricably linked to the physical. Yet it is also connected to that other corruption infesting the social space and political institutions of Bombay, adding urgency to what Adam Mars-Jones, in his *Observer* review of *Family Matters*, sees as one of the text’s central questions: ‘Do families reflect society at large, or do they act as barricades against it?’

On coming to power in the 1995 elections, the Shiv Sena/BJP administration oversaw a number of measures designed to consolidate its power and advance the cause of *Hindutva*, including abolishing the Minorities Commission, disbanding the Srikrishna Commission into the Bombay riots (which threatened to expose the active involvement of the Sena in orchestrating the violence), and withdrawing incitement charges against Bal Thackeray in relation to the same events. One of the most high-profile initiatives involved the renaming of Bombay as Mumbai, seen as the first blow in a battle to expunge all ‘non-Hindu’ place names from a ‘purified’ Hindu homeland. This last development impinges on the world of *Family Matters*, as it is Mr Kapur’s refusal to change the name of his shop from Bombay to Mumbai Sporting Goods that attracts the attention of the murderous Shiv Sena goondas. Indeed the tentacular Shiv Sena has provided the ‘enforcers’ for many of these developments. In Mistry’s novel they are also shown to have a finger in the *Matka* pie. The underground lottery helps to fund the Shiv Sena machinery. It also finances the organised crime that has infected the city and its institutions, causing the sagacious Vilas Rane to observe: ‘Matka is Bombay and Bombay is Matka’ (*FM*, 200). In addition to its ties with gangsters, the Shiv Sena has implemented a cultural censorship programme, much to Yezad’s exasperation, and opposes a bizarre diversity of events and activities it deems corrupting to the culturally homogeneous and ‘pure’ nation it envisages; targets have included certain artworks, Valentine’s day, men’s magazines and women working in bars. Top of the list, as always, are those ubiquitous ‘national enemies’,...
Muslims. Yezad shakes his head: ‘What a joke of a government. Clowns and crooks. Or clownish crooks’ (FM, 265). Yet there is real danger in crossing them. Not only is it suggested that the Shiv Sena was implicated in the murder, during the Bombay riots, of the family of Husain, Mr Kapur’s Muslim peon at the shop, but Mr Kapur himself falls victim to those representatives of the forces of sectarianism he had briefly resolved to oppose. They also beat up the radical journalist/actor Gautam for writing an article on the ‘politician-criminal-police nexus’ (FM, 199). Nowadays the enemies and ‘defenders’ of the state are identical and funded from the same illegal sources.

Again urban and rural oppression are drawn together, when Vilas tells the story of a pair of lovers from different castes whose relationship was felt to threaten the status quo in their village, and who were mutilated and killed as a warning to others. This sorry state of affairs provokes a discussion between Gautam and his fellow thespian, Bhaskar, over a central ethical question confronting the modern Bombayite: how does one act when faced with injustice in a situation where law and order has either broken down or is, itself, complicit with the wrong-doers? (A telling example of this is played out when, despite being an eyewitness to the murder of Mr Kapur, Husain is angrily advised by the police to stop making ‘wild accusations’ about Shiv Sena involvement in his employer’s death.) The actors muse:

‘Isolated incidents, they call them,’ said Gautam.
‘Exactly,’ said Bhaskar. ‘They say that our nation has made so much progress – satellite TV, they say, Internet, e-mail, best software designers in the world.’

Gautam chuckled. ‘Hamaara Bharat Mahaan, they repeat like that government slogan’, and they laughed …

‘What to do? People are afraid to accept the truth. As T. S. Eliot wrote, “Human kind cannot bear very much reality.”’ (FM, 202–3)

Even cricket, that watchword for probity and fair play, is now crooked, as Vilas remarks, referring to the match-fixing scandals that rocked the sport in South Asia in the late 1990s.
The moral taint that everywhere affects Bombay life also increasingly makes its presence felt in the lives of Nariman’s family. The most glaring example of this is obviously Coomy’s devious plan to foist her stepfather on the already financially constrained Chenoy wing of the family, and the even more underhand measures she takes to keep him there. Yet, other, less overt instances of dishonesty also typify characters’ dealings with each other and, sometimes, with themselves. Jehangir’s capitulation to his classmates’ entreaties to turn a blind eye to their mistakes, and so earn a few much-needed extra rupees for the family’s essential purchases, betrays that faith placed in him as homework monitor by his teacher, the lovely Miss Alvarez. He wholeheartedly embraces the teacher’s exhortations at the beginning of the year, that moral choices made now can be carried on into adult life, and that her pupils can help to purify the befouled air of civic affairs. As for the schoolmaster Herbert Pembroke in E. M. Forster’s *The Longest Journey*, who observes that ‘School is the world in miniature,’ so here Jehangir’s classroom takes on a metonymic relationship to society and nation. Although he wants to help Miss Alvarez fight corruption in his own, small way, Jehangir is eventually compromised and becomes part of it. Likewise, Yezad succumbs to temptation and removes money from the worn but neatly labelled envelopes containing savings for staple items such as ‘Milk and Tea’, ‘Water and Electricity’, to place bets on the *Matka*. (Later, he temporarily removes the envelope of money intended as payment to the Shiv Sena *goondas* in return for their turning a blind eye to the continued use of Bombay in the sports emporium’s name, although he reconSIDERS and returns it before its absence is noticed.)

Both Yezad and Jehangir, in their different ways, violate Yezad’s father’s example of that scrupulous Parsi honesty for which the community is celebrated. This example was set when Mr Chenoy ensured the safe delivery of a large consignment of money to the bank for which he worked, despite the surrounding chaos and panic caused by wartime explosions. ‘In gratitude for an exemplary display of courage and honesty in the course of..."
duty’ (*FM*, 224), he was presented with a commemorative clock which Yezad continues to cherish and refuses to allow Murad to wind, long after he himself has compromised the values it represents. After relating the tale of his father’s heroism, Yezad, somewhat ironically, warns his sons: ‘Remember, people can take everything away from you, but they cannot rob you of your decency … You alone can do that, by your actions.’ However, Yezad, and the generation that comes after him, are, in a sense, victims as well as inheritors of standards set in other times, and in other contexts. The myth of Parsi honesty and integrity is an ambiguous one, both inspiration and burden. As Vilas Rane comments, such myths can become outdated and ‘make misfits of men’ (*FM*, 205). The complicating factor, and what prevents *Family Matters* from being simply a text lamenting moral decline, is that both Yezad and his son act as they do for the best of reasons: to secure extra funds to cover the increased cost of looking after Nariman with his expensive medicines.

In fact, moral ambiguity in motivation is at the heart of the novel. *Family Matters* repeatedly returns to questions of means and ends, and the negative outcome of the well-intended act. A number of situations lend themselves to a kind of double construction, according to the discrepancy between what characters think their actions will achieve and what the end result actually turns out to be: Roxana innocently suggests employing the incompetent handyman Edul Munshi to fix Coomy’s ceiling, thus setting in train events that will lead to both their deaths; the scam to frighten Mr Kapur into running in the forthcoming municipal election is suggested by the eminently sympathetic Vilas; while Yezad suggests that real Shiv Sena *goondas* may be better equipped for the task than Vilas’s verbose actor friends. Most intractable of all, perhaps – and the sequence of events that appears to initiate all the Chenoy family’s subsequent troubles – is Nariman’s inability to give up his relationship with Lucy Braganza, even after his marriage to Yasmin. Lucy follows him to his new family home, takes a job as an ayah with a neighbour in order to be near him, and repeatedly threatens suicide. Time
and again Nariman follows her up to the roof of Chateau Felicity to dissuade her from jumping. Despite his efforts to calm his former lover, Nariman finds himself yielding to the promptings of old emotions, as well as the concern he feels for Lucy in her distressed obsession. At one point he allows himself to wonder whether Lucy’s perseverance is the result of undying love or a desire for retaliation. Likewise, as readers, we are aware that, by giving way to her entreaties – albeit out of sympathy – he is hurting his wife and stepchildren: in which respect his actions can be seen as selfish rather than benevolent.

Such moral complexity gives a new twist to Mistry’s perennial concern with the idea of goodness as understood in Zoroastrianism. Each of Mistry’s works contains a reference to the prime requirements of the Zoroastrian faith, ‘munashni, gavashni, kunashni’: ‘good thoughts, good words, good deeds’. Characters orient themselves, and to an extent are judged, according to this triple injunction. Family Matters, however, complicates the picture by raising the question of what exactly these good thoughts, words and deeds might consist of. How does one recognise them in a situation where everything and everyone is, to some extent, compromised? For example, whereas Gustad Noble, in Such a Long Journey, was able, by and large, to recognise the right path, but needed to develop the courage and will to follow it, in Family Matters every move seems fraught with danger, either to oneself or to others, regardless of one’s designs. According to Zoroastrianism, good and evil are completely separate: the former being a positive quality emanating from the Wise Lord, and the latter being the result of the intrusion of Ahriman into the Ahuric realm. Yet in the world inhabited by Yezad and his family, the notion of good is adulterated and evil is immanent in humankind. Good and bad permeate one another, partly through those ageless human proclivities, vengeance, pride and intolerance. Hence characters’ motives are often grey. Coomy behaves badly towards Nariman and offloads him onto the Chenoys partly because she fears the disturbance of her carefully ordered existence and the introduction of dirt and decay, partly because she doubts her ability...
to cope, and partly as a belated and perhaps subconscious act of revenge for the way Nariman treated her mother. Coomy’s unhealthy resentment may have festered for years, but she does have a legitimate grievance. (The father/‘daughters’ situation here is never as morally clear-cut as in those other dramatic tales of filial disloyalty, *King Lear* and *Père Goriot*, which provide models for Mistry’s investigations.) Coomy feels guilty about what she has done, as does the younger Nariman when confronted with the proof of what his continued infatuation with Lucy is doing to his family, and Yezad spends much of the second half of the novel tortured by guilt over his covert activities until he finds that religion can conveniently be made to bear the burden of a multitude of sins. The great question of the novel, which permeates everything yet remains unasked until Jehangir’s epilogue at the end, is who is to blame for Lucy and Yasmin’s fatal fall? Visiting old Dr Fitter, Jehangir learns for the first time his grandmother’s dying words, only half-heard by horrified bystanders, which have echoed down the years and tarred Nariman – who was on the roof at the time – and his kin with the indelible mark of scandal:

‘all the confusion was due to one word in her sentence: did she say “he” or “we”? ’

‘What do you think she said?’ I inquire meekly.

‘Oh, 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.’ (*FM*, 477)

This is significant less as some sinister plot twist than as a point about how actions have consequences which reverberate down the years, but which people – often reading backwards from their own point in time and circumstance – can interpret as they wish. Certainly, Coomy has chosen to interpret her mother’s unhappy marriage and death in a certain way, as her lonely life, blighted by bitterness and an unforgiving attitude towards Nariman, make abundantly clear.

Thus, characters in *Family Matters* are seen largely to choose their own fates. Yet they do not do so arbitrarily. Each is
burdened by an acute sense of duty: to family, to employer or to the city as a whole. When hearing of Mr Kapur’s intention to run in the forthcoming municipal election, Yezad initially counsels that his duty lies in looking after his shop, before recognising the opportunity for an increment for himself that would accrue from the increased responsibilities. He invokes the Bhagavad-Gita in urging the pre-eminent claims of duty. Ironically, it is the secular-leaning Hindu, Mr Kapur, who counters this when, having decided not to run after all, he echoes Kant in justifying the decision to put family above civic duty: ‘Think about it – pure duty is unconcerned with outcome. Even if I become a municipal councillor, fight the good fight, what do I have at the end? The satisfaction of knowing I’ve done my duty. As far as Bombay is concerned, nothing changes. Nobody can turn back the clock’ (FM, 294).

As the pre-eminent philosopher of ethics, Kant famously proposed that the moral worth of any given action could be determined not by considering its outcome, but by identifying the intention behind it. Specifically, only actions performed in accordance with duty have genuine moral worth. Although there are obvious difficulties in trying to identify whether others are acting primarily out of a sense of duty, Kant proposed some guiding principles by which the individual should orientate his or her actions. The most famous of these is his ‘categorical imperative’: ‘I should never act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law.’ As Roger Scruton, among others, has noted, this first formulation of the categorical imperative provides ‘the philosophical basis of the famous golden rule, that we should do as we would be done by.’ One behaves well, according to rules one would expect everyone else to observe also, for the mutual benefit of all parties. In one respect, those of Yezad’s actions which seem most questionable – taking the household savings for gambling, temporarily pocketing the protection money, setting the fake Shiv Sena thugs to frighten Mr Kapur – are all motivated by a notion of duty: the long-term duty to provide for his family. However, there is a sense in which the various duties that hem
him in – to Mr Kapur as his employer as well as to his family – come into conflict with each other. Likewise, Coomy is forced to choose between the duty to look after her incapacitated step-father, and her sense of duty to the memory of her biological mother, for whose death she holds him responsible. Of course, she decides to prioritise the latter, and lies that her ceiling has collapsed in order to absolve herself of her duties to Nariman. In neither case, however, could Yezad or Coomy wish that others would behave towards them with the same kind of deception and evasiveness as they themselves have employed. Commenting on the responsibilities imposed by Kant’s categorical imperative, Warner A. Wick offers the examples of lying and gangsterism: both particularly apposite for the familial and urban politics of *Family Matters*:

> to seek credibility by lying is not a point that can be *universally* adopted! No rational agent can will that maxim as a universal law, for in its universal form it is self-contradictory. A lie can work only if enough people tell the truth to make truthfulness the normal expectation, just as the gangster can only succeed if most people are law-abiding. These miscreants act unfairly in that their maxims require that other people act differently.  

Extrapolating from his initial principle, Kant proposed a second formulation of the categorical imperative: ‘Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means.’ In other words, one should treat others always as self-determining agents, and never just as an instrument to be used to achieve one’s own aims. Once more, Yezad and Coomy can be seen to fall short of this ideal: Yezad treats Mr Kapur and his genuine civic concern as a means to promotion; Coomy uses Nariman’s illness as a way to exact revenge on him for his treatment of her mother. The point here is not to measure these characters against some impossible benchmark of good behaviour, nor to show how they fail to meet the Zoroastrian requirement of good thoughts, good words, good deeds. Rather, it is to give an indication of how the
tussle of duty and inclination provides the motor which drives the action of the novel and its moral choices.

In short, *Family Matters* is concerned with causes and effects – both intended and inadvertent – and how one interprets and accounts for connections between past and present. Characteristically, the text centres on the difficulties of making sense of, narrativising, and hence controlling time and change. Many media are employed by characters in their attempts to bridge the gap between past and present. Mr Kapur’s photos of Hughes Road in various stages of development (1908, 1940s, 1990) take on a sacred quality for Yezad as part of his desire to roll back the years to the uncomplicated days of childhood. The photos offer the illusion of continuity, of that elusive connection between the carefree boy he was then, and the stressed middle-aged man with responsibilities he is now.

If one cannot arrest time, can one at least exercise some mitigating power over its apparently random dispensations? Dreams seem to offer one option to Yezad in his increasingly desperate search for control over events. In particular the dreams of Villie Cardmaster, the *Matka* queen, yield arbitrary images in which she discovers those numbers that will be blessed by Chance in the weekly draw. After winning with his very first bet, a stunned Yezad reflects on Villie’s accurate prediction: ‘Coincidence? Or had she predicted the future? And if dreams could do that … no more worry and anxiety. The worst news, foreknown, would lose its sting’ (*FM*, 196). There are other, less desperate and mercenary attempts to turn the tide of time too. Nariman’s recollections of days spent with Lucy blur memories with the dreams of semi-consciousness, while snatches of old songs conjure up a wealth of submerged associations and feelings. In particular, the virtuoso violin playing of Daisy Ichhaporia offers Nariman a little heaven on earth as she serenades him with a repertoire that includes classical pieces and popular songs from his youth, including the significantly titled ‘One Day When We Were Young’. Her playing acts as a restorative, effecting repairs to the ruptured skein of Nariman’s ebbing life. He certainly appears to find it more congenial than his son-in-
law’s earnest yet aggressive bedside devotions in the disturbing scene in which Yezad’s prayers and Daisy’s music seem to do battle over the mute, prostrate elder (FM, 433–5).

Formally, the concern for past-present connections is played out through repetitions: Yezad comes to repeat Nariman’s father’s inflexible religious dogma; Murad’s non-Parsi girlfriend threatens a repeat of the parental estrangement of the earlier generation; and, at one point, Yezad unfairly accuses Roxana of neglecting the rest of her family in favour of her father, paralleling Yasmin’s earlier complaints as Nariman abandons her and the children to run after Lucy. Against these examples of family breakdown the reader can set the many types of repair attempted in *Family Matters*, only some of which are successful. Edul Munshi, the disastrous handyman, tries to repair the ceiling Coomy has vandalised, but only succeeds in bringing down a supporting beam that crushes them both to death. Dr Tavancore and the bonesetter at the hospital do their best to patch up Nariman’s brittle body after his fall. Vilas’s letter writing repairs families torn apart by migration. Yezad is ‘touched by his employer’s gentleness as he went about mending the cracks in Husain’s broken life’ (FM, 144). Finally, Dr Fitter and the father and son police combination of Superintendent and Inspector Masalavala scurry out to fix the death certificates and help tidy up after the two fatal accidents which threaten the Parsi community with scandal, viewing it as one of the ‘good deeds’ required of them.

A number of explanatory options are available to the Chenoys and others as they attempt to piece together the chain of events by which their family affairs have moved from initial domestic harmony to tension and hostility. In their besetting concern to find an explanation for phenomena, they sometimes resemble the characters in another of Mistry’s fictional templates, Voltaire’s satire *Candide*, who deliberate ‘on the contingent or non-contingent events of this world … on causes and effects, on moral and physical evil, on free will and necessity …’18 (While hospitalised, Nariman remarks on the striking physical resemblance between one of the wardboys looking after him and the
great French philosopher Voltaire. The character never reappears, but in this passing reference it seems that Mistry is directing us to one of the key preoccupations of his novel.) In Family Matters, as in Candide, events are interpreted, variously, as the product of coincidence, free will, destiny or God’s will. On the way to offer his condolences to Mrs Kapur after the murder of her husband, Yezad reflects on the coincidence by which Mr Kapur was visited by real Shiv Sena thugs, after the actors he had engaged to frighten his employer by playing the role of Shiv Sena goondas had departed: ‘That was the problem, everyone dismissing the possibility of coincidence’ (FM, 393). Later, when his newfound religiosity has taken hold and he suggests as a coincidence the fact that Nariman develops bed sores as soon as his new ayah arrives, Roxana reminds him: ‘You say there’s no such thing as coincidence … You call it another word for the Hand of God’ (FM, 482).

The socially committed actors, Gautam and Bhaskar, have another explanation for events. Discussing the desired effect their ‘performance’ as Shiv Sena ruffians is to have on Mr Kapur, they rehearse the question of the role of the audience, free will and destiny. They acknowledge that their performance will be unorthodox: while an audience for the kind of street theatre they specialise in always knows it is watching a performance, Mr Kapur will be unable to distinguish between performance and reality. Unaware, he will be both actor and audience:

‘An actor without awareness is a wooden puppet,’ declared Gautam grandly, believing he had scored a decisive point.

‘In a culture where destiny is embraced as the paramount force, we are all puppets,’ said Bhaskar with equal grandness. (FM, 322)

Their performance is designed to be ‘“a call to action for Mr Kapur, and an unstated moral: that evil must not be ignored by those able to oppose it”’ (FM, 323).

 Basically, Mr Kapur needs to experience an epiphany. So we must convey more than just present danger to him and
his shop. We must transcend the here and now, move beyond this bank and shoal of time, and let him glimpse the horrors of a society where the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity. (FM, 323)

The actors are vehemently anti-Shiv Sena, and their street theatre has the Brechtian aim of the politicisation of the audience, moving it ‘beyond catharsis’ (FM, 324). Yet their formalist preoccupations, symbolised by their second-hand rhetoric and abstract theorising, mean that they miss the essence of the situation. Despite their good intentions, they end up creating the same terror as the real Shiv Sena thugs, effectively paving the way for them.

The delivery of Nariman into the Chenoys’ care, and the accidental death of Coomy, is ascribed to destiny in Yezad’s now fatalistic outlook. Roxana reflects on the tragedy of the shattered love-match of Edul Munshi and his wife by asking, ‘What is this absurd force called destiny?’ to which the increasingly devout Yezad replies, ‘Man proposes, God disposes’ (FM, 398). As characters with a strong religious faith, Roxana and, latterly, Yezad, read causality in a particular way. They tend to assume the operations of cause and effect are regulated by a pre-existing entity they know as God, or Ahura Mazda. In effect, they hold what Kant, and indeed Voltaire, would describe as an a priori understanding of cause and effect. A priori truths are those deemed to exist independently of experience, and a priori knowledge is that which is not based on empirically verifiable experience. Roger Scruton gives some examples of the a priori:

the following propositions seem to be true a priori: ‘Every event has a cause’; ‘The world consists of enduring objects which exist independently of me’; ‘All discoverable objects are in space and time.’ These propositions cannot be established through experience, since their truth is presupposed in the interpretation of experience.19

Thus, Scruton quotes Kant to show that the notion of God itself can be seen as an a priori regulative force: ‘the ideal of a supreme being is nothing but a regulative principle of reason, which
directs us to look upon all connection in the world as if it originated from an all-sufficient and necessary cause.” Voltaire’s *Candide* famously sends up Pangloss’s unquestioning *a priori* justification of things as they are and the complacent optimism encompassed in his conviction that, regardless of how bad things appear, this is ‘the best of all possible worlds’. Likewise, in Mistry’s novel, Roxana allows herself the luxury of a Panglossian retrospective interpretation of events working out for the best, attributing this to God’s will: ‘when she looked back over the events that had led them to this evening, it was almost proof of divine power in the universe, with Pappa’s broken ankle the start of everything’ (FM, 435). Doubtless, she would concur with Pangloss that ‘free will is consistent with absolute necessity’; an outlook which can reconcile Coomy’s desire to attribute the collapse of her ceiling to an act of God, with the fact that she herself has encouraged her brother to take a hammer to it.

However, religion is not simply a smokescreen or a comforting security blanket for characters here. Mr Kapur loves the heterogeneity and bustle of Bombay with the zeal of a convert, having migrated there from the Punjab at the time of Partition. He values Bombay’s assimilating inclusiveness, which he links to the spirit of tolerance that historically defined Hinduism in its dealings with other faiths, before the *Hindutva-wallahs* sank their claws into it. However, there is a danger in the analogy he posits when justifying his decision not to run in the election:

> ‘Hinduism has an all-accepting nature, agreed? … Even false gods are accommodated, and turned into true ones, adding a few more deities to its existing millions.
> The same way, Bombay makes room for everybody. Migrants, businessmen, perverts, politicians, holy men, gamblers, beggars … So who am I to say these people belong here and those don’t? Janata Party okay, Shiv Sena not okay, secular good, communal bad, BJP unacceptable, Congress lesser of evils?’ (FM, 351)

Mr Kapur’s outlook here seems *too* relativistic, since it makes room for the Shiv Sena and BJP, forces that deny and seek to repress the very difference he cherishes. They are here depicted...
as a legitimate part of *Kalyug*, the Hindu age of chaos, in Kapur’s now quietistic view, just another of Naipaul’s ‘million mutinies’, characteristic of modern India. Of course, he soon discovers that, for him, it is too late to assume such studied indifference to seeping corruption and communalism.) Moreover, his visceral identification with Bombay – the desire to ‘become one with the organic whole that is Bombay. That’s where my redemption lies’ (*FM*, 336) – is equally illusory: he tries running for the train as he has seen ordinary Bombayites do, but no one holds out a hand to help him on board, as he had hoped and believed they would. His dream of Bombay is simply that – a dream – just as Yezad’s idealisation of Canada, to which he once hoped to emigrate, crumbles in the face of patronising xenophobia at the Canadian High Commission.

The religious components of identity are particularly important for the Parsi characters, especially in the context of the creeping Hindu majoritarianism that surrounds them. Other coordinates of Parsiness are once again on display, including aesthetic westernisation in the form of a preference for European classical music, and Jehangir’s penchant for jigsaws and Enid Blyton books. Reference is also made to the popular farces of Adi Marzban – ‘chock full of Parsi jokes and skits and songs’ (*FM*, 299) – that were for many years a feature of the Parsi social calendar. Tanya Luhrmann sees Adi Marzban’s plays as definitive of Parsi humour: ‘They were performed in Parsi-Gujarati; you went to see them on New Year’s Day, and by all accounts they were raunchy, rude and (supposedly) very, very funny.’

However, the main concern for this vulnerable community in *Family Matters* centres on issues of numerical decline and the merits or otherwise of traditional notions of ethnic purity. Luhrmann records how: ‘Until 1941 the Parsi population was slowly but steadily on the rise in India. But in 1961 they were down to over 100,000; in 1971, over 90,000; in 1991 there were 76,000 Parsis in India, with around 50,000 in Greater Bombay.’ Near the end of the book, Dr Fitter and Inspector Masalavala discuss the shrinking Parsi community and what should be done
to halt the diminution. They enumerate the main features accounting for decreasing numbers: a dwindling birth rate, marrying outside the community and migration to the west. Westernisation and western ideas, once seen as the lifeline of the community, are now identified as part of the problem. Inspector Masalavala’s cranky suggestions to shore up the community include tying educational opportunities to an undertaking to bear a certain number of children. The more stoical prescription of Dr Fitter is for a Parsi time capsule, containing items representative of the culture, to be buried for future generations to unearth when the community has died out. That sense of loss indicative of contemporary Parsi culture in India is articulated by the inspector: ‘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 left to tell the tale’ (FM, 404).

For Yezad the issue is one of purity. Just as Nariman’s orthodox father unwisely engaged in a fierce exchange of letters with a reformist neighbour in the pages of the Jam-e-Jamsheed newspaper over the issue of intermarriage, so, too, Yezad comes to view ‘the purity of this unique and ancient Persian community’ (FM, 127) as being under threat from miscegenation. He speaks in almost identical terms when pondering on the ritual gestures of the dastur at the fire-temple, valuing ‘the cumulative grace of generations and centuries … encoded in blood and bone’ (FM, 333). The psychological importance to the orthodox of the unique, untainted Persian blood, which is felt to distinguish Parsis from the surrounding community, should not be underestimated. The orthodox are against the mingling of this blood with any other. Biology supersedes social morality as a guarantor of worth according to this view, with a corresponding shift in that notion of the good (thought, word, or deed) fundamental to Zoroastrian ethics. As Luhrmann has noted: ‘The central cosmological struggle of good against evil is described as an effort to achieve purity – that which is evil is impure, that which is impure is evil.’ However, for the orthodox, a ‘transformation took place with the concept of purity … which was refigured from holiness into racial superiority.’26
The continuously burning fire at the temple offers that elusive past-present connection Yezad craves, and, in a way, the fire-temple replaces the family home as a sanctuary from the outside world. As he feels increasingly disempowered by events he falls back on his reawakened faith more and more. Towards the end of the novel, the focus of his piety becomes a ‘holy cabinet’ he has placed in a special corner of the drawing room, protected by what the sceptical Murad describes as a ‘cordon sanitaire’ to keep out non-Parsis or those who have not ritually purified themselves. This ‘shrine’ has previously contained the untouchable clockwork toys belonging to Jal and Coomy, and symbolising Coomy’s attempt to hold on to something of her childhood, before death entered her world and took away first her father, then her mother. After her own demise, it comes to contain Yezad’s sacred paraphernalia, which replaces the commemorative clock in his affections. Both the toys and the clock represent more of those doomed attempts to cling on to the things of the past. Yezad’s new use of the cabinet merely perpetuates the same inclination, only with a different object. The cabinet holds framed pictures of Zarathustra, photographs of the remnants of the ancient Persian Empire, including the ruins at Persepolis, and a miniature plastic *afargaan* with a glowing electric flame. In a sense the cabinet is both a fire-temple in miniature and that Parsi time capsule suggested by Dr Fitter. Yet, for all his efforts to foster an atmosphere of reverence and obedience, Yezad constantly struggles to block out the music and non-Zoroastrian influences inevitable in a lively household containing two teenage sons. It seems that his attempts at sanctification have not brought him peace.

What is worse, in his new dogmatic ultra-orthodoxy, he becomes a kind of Zoroastrian fundamentalist, imposing his racial and cultural obsessions on everyone around him. He is an active member of an orthodox Zoroastrian association, attempts to inflict draconian menstruation laws on his wife and rails against Murad’s non-Parsi girlfriend. The punishment he advocates for Parsis who dare to cultivate inappropriate relations with non-Parsis – excommunication and public humiliation – is
different only in degree to that meted out to the two ill-fated cross-caste lovers whose story he has heard earlier. Nor does it occur to Yezad that his Parsi purism is of a piece with the exclusionary compartmentalising of those Hindu nationalist forces he has previously despised. Mistry understands the psychological and nostalgic impulses behind social and cultural conservatism as well as any other contemporary writer. But his sympathies for the consoling qualities of religion and tradition evaporate when, as so often, they become a stick with which to beat others. For him ritual and dogma is of less consequence than social morality. In a comment that sums up the choices confronting so many of his characters, Mistry has remarked, ‘I’m not a practising Parsi but the ceremonies are quite beautiful. As a child I observed [them] carefully in the same way as I did my homework, but it had no profound meaning for me. Zoroastrianism is about the opposition of good and evil. For the triumph of good, we have to make a choice.’ It might be said that, in his reversion to a defensive, insular form of Zoroastrianism, Yezad succumbs to what Kant calls the ‘fanaticism, indeed the impiety, of abandoning the guidance of a morally legislative reason in the right conduct of our lives, in order to derive guidance from the idea of the Supreme Being’. Essentially, he overlooks what Richard Kearney, writing of originary cultural myths, calls the ‘need to keep our mythological memories in critical dialogue with history’, lest ‘they engender revivalist shibboleths of fixed identity, closing off dialogue with all that is other than themselves’.

Against this somewhat negative way of using narratives, Mistry shows other instances where stories offer a valuable way of orientating oneself amid the chaotic and daunting modern world. Jehangir’s Enid Blyton stories may contribute to a kind of deracination – he longs to live in the sort of genteel, upper-middle-class English world enjoyed by the Famous Five, and wishes he could anglicise his name to John – but they temporarily offer him a more attractive world than the cramped and fractious environment of Pleasant Villa. This ‘dream-England’ – along with the jigsaw of Lake Como which is always
incomplete, its promised beauty unattainable – represents for Jehangir the ‘best of all possible worlds’, that ‘kingdom of ends’, in Kantian terms, where everything is in its place and nothing contradicts the requirements of reason. It is a mark of Jehangir’s development in the epilogue that he has moved on from such illusory idealism and is coming to terms with the moral complexity of things as they are, just as his father seems determined to journey in the opposite direction. The earlier, more open Yezad at one stage reflects on the need the survivors of partition seem to feel to go on telling their stories: ‘like Indian authors writing about that period, whether in realist novels of corpse-filled trains or in the magic realist midnight muddles’ (FM, 145). As with those Jews who have survived the Holocaust, there is often an urge to speak, to write, to remember: ‘What choice was there, except to speak about it again and again, and yet again’ (FM, 145). Something in the act of telling itself brings balm. In fact, religion may be simply another of those consoling fictions mitigating the loneliness and horror of life: Roxana tells the growing, and hence sceptical, Jehangir that Nariman has died and is now in heaven being feted with ‘new clothes, ice cream, pudding, everything’ (FM, 465); while Murad endures the ritual ministrations of the father with whom he is at odds during his roj (eighteenth) birthday ‘without rolling his eyes or displaying any sign of impatience’ (FM, 484). There is a sense in which this highly stylised language of gesture is the only level on which they can now communicate. Similarly, Jehangir restrains himself from jumping up in bed to spoil his brother’s carefully planned Christmas surprise as he plays Santa, even though he no longer believes in Father Christmas: ‘the Santa Claus story was like the Famous Five books. You knew none of it was real, but it let you imagine there was a better world somewhere’ (FM, 362).

Early in his stay, Nariman tells his grandsons the story of Zuhaak and Faridoon from the Shah-Namah. The evil king Zuhaak murders his father, seizes his crown, and conducts a thousand-year reign of terror which includes the slaughter of young males, whose brains are scooped out to feed the two
snakes sprouting from his shoulders. Eventually, Zuhaak is defeated by Faridoon – whose father had been one of the tyrant’s victims – and is thrown into a bottomless pit. Zuhaak is the personification of worldly evil, deployed here in another of the novel’s attempts to lay hold of the roots of evil and suffering in the world. Jehangir says, ‘I know there isn’t any Zuhaak. It’s just a story, like Santa Claus,’ to which Grandpa Nariman replies, ‘I think you’re right Jehangir ... But even if Zuhaak were real, he wouldn’t bother you, He’d be busy with diseases and famines, wars and cyclones’ (FM, 157–8). In view of the novel’s main concerns, one might wish to add corruption, brutality and communalism to the list of Zuhaak’s vehicles. Against Zuhaak’s feared return, Parsi folklore posits the spider, spinning the gossamer webs that are, at the same time, the chains that continue to bind Zuhaak in his subterranean captivity. Elsewhere, webs are used as images of those things which connect: Nariman and Jehangir look at a cobweb as something beautiful, while the embattled Yezad views the overhead telephone wires of Bombay as an ensnaring web. Indeed the web of stories – those which make up this novel and all like it – harmonises the discordant cacophony of difference into a single, shared human story with many variations, something Mr Kapur recognises: ‘Funny thing is, in the end, all our stories – your life, my life, old Husain’s life, they’re the same. In fact, no matter where you go in the world, there is only one important story: of youth, and loss, and yearning for redemption. So we tell the same story, over and over. Just the details are different’ (FM, 221).

The question ‘Are you happy?’ repeatedly asked of her husband and sons by the concerned Roxana, becomes almost a refrain in Family Matters. Characters have sought happiness, or at least stability, by following the dictates of duty as far as possible, but, as this chapter has shown, they often find that duty comes into conflict with personal inclination or immediate need. According to Kant there is no point in proclaiming happiness, in the sense of the fulfilment of one’s desires, as the ultimate goal in life, because it cannot be elevated to the level of that kind of universal law his maxims demand. In fact, to try to
do so would be disastrous. This is because each person’s interests, and therefore definition of happiness, would be in some way different, and would actually lead to conflict: ‘while everyone’s interests are the same in name (happiness), they differ in fact; and this difference is almost without limit, because the specific content of happiness varies with the temperaments, circumstances, and histories of each individual.’ In *Family Matters*, Yezad’s desires for orthodoxy and order clash with Murad’s definition of happiness which includes the right to go out with whoever he wants. Thus, ‘goodness’ and happiness are not necessarily synonymous, so the answer to Roxana’s anxious question remains, at best, hesitant and provisional.

In contrast to the notion of happiness as sensory or material gratification, Aristotle proposed the possibility of *eudaimonia*, or genuine happiness. This is to be found in the life lived not for sensations or ephemera, but for the rewards which come from that social interaction he sees as the purpose of human existence. As Simon Blackburn puts it, ‘The Aristotelian alternative requires engagement with the world. It requires reasoning and activity, and engagement with others, and notably it requires real love and friendship.’ Hence, it is in keeping with the Zoroastrian injunction for action and against aesthetic withdrawal mentioned earlier. It is just such a life Yezad backs away from in his retreat into the penumbra of religion: a move epitomised by his decision to break with his old friend Vilas, whose letter-writing keeps just those lines of communication open. In his desire to escape from the teeming crowds of Bombay, Yezad ends the novel in a similar position to that held by Gustad Noble at the beginning of Mistry’s first novel, *Such a Long Journey*. Yet, whereas for Gustad the quiet promptings of personal affection coalesce with the internalised values of his faith to bring him out of his self-imposed isolation, Yezad recoils from the mongrelisation and mixing inherent in urban life, to a space of ‘purity’ that is, of course, at the same time one of fantasy.

Thus, while *Family Matters* may, as Frank Kermode claims, ‘lack the power and scope’ of *A Fine Balance*, owing to its more
intrinsic concern with the Parsi community, it is nevertheless clearly continuing the investigation of the interconnected spaces of a multitudinous nation, and the intersubjective processes of storytelling that lies at the heart of Mistry’s *oeuvre*. Its cast of characters includes a secular Hindu who holds out against the excesses of the zealots in his own religion, a Muslim shop worker who drinks beer with his employer, and – for a while at least – a Parsi who is determined to do his best for his family *within* a society scarred by moral turpitude and prejudice, but also exalted by small acts of generosity and kindness. Mistry is a writer for whom morality is politics and politics is morality. Dogma of any kind will not do. Only by sharing our stories can divisions be overcome and understanding promoted: ‘I sometimes think there is a latent desire in all of us to be storytellers. In the best of all possible worlds, all of us would be storytellers and listeners.’

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