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## Cultural resilience and assimilation: exploring family dynamics among Parsis immigrants in Mumbai in Rohinton Mistry's 'Family Matters'

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### Abstract

This study article examines the complexities of family dynamics inside a Parsi immigrant family residing in Mumbai, India. The present study examines the intricate cultural legacy portrayed in the characters of Rohinton Mistry's novel, Family Matters, and the inherent conflicts that arise within this context. This study aims to investigate the cultural heritage of the Parsis, examining its competence and resilience in flourishing within the context of Indian society alongside other major civilizations. The novel explores the multi-generational trajectory of Nariman Vakeel's family and its changing dynamics within the context of altering beliefs and societal norms in contemporary India. This study delves deeper into the process of assimilation and the convergence of lifestyles among Parsis, with a focus on the distinct patterns observed across different age cohorts to which the characters are assigned. Moreover, the present study endeavours to gain an understanding of the amalgamated existence of the Parsi family in question and their respective identities, particularly in the context of their immigration to Mumbai. The ability of the community to assimilate or adapt, overcome adversities, and demonstrate resilience through their customary behaviours, conventions, worship, and traditions enables them to effectively accept their new place of residence. The Parsis demonstrate a constant effort to establish a distinct identity throughout all domains of human existence, despite their relatively small population size. The primary objective of this study is to gain insight into the challenges and successes experienced by Parsi communities within the context of a modernized Indian culture, as well as their ability to maintain a sense of belonging and home in a foreign environment.

**Keywords:** Indian culture, human existence, Parsis, assimilation, cultural heritage, generational conflicts etc.

### Introduction

The Parsi community is considered to be one of the most ancient civilizations globally. Parsis are regarded by Indian authorities as an exemplary model for other communities. The Indian Parsis are a community of individuals who trace their origins to Zoroastrian heritage in Persia. They are recognized for their distinct cultural practices, one of which is the notable funeral rite involving the placement of deceased individuals in a specially constructed tower to be consumed by vultures (ABC News). The novel Family Matters by Rohinton Mistry portrays the Vakeel family as a middle-class Parsi household residing in Mumbai, facing significant financial constraints and challenges. In Mistry's latest literary work, titled Family Matters, the narrative explores the profound impact of religious intolerance and inflexible adherence to traditional values, tracing their subtle yet pervasive influence across multiple generations within the Allen and Brooke family. They are members of one of the minority and immigrant communities in India. Nariman, being a member of the Parsi minority community, finds himself compelled to get into matrimony with Yasmin, a woman of 42 years of age who has two children from a previous marital union. Despite Nariman's genuine affection for Lucy Goan, the concept of love appears to be a remote consideration for him, particularly as he develops romantic feelings for a woman who does not belong to the Parsi community. Nariman endeavours persistently to persuade his father; yet, his father's orthodox convictions prevail, hindering his comprehension of the affection his son holds for a non-Parsi individual.

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The publication of Nariman's father's writings in the editorials posed an additional concern and obstacle for Nariman. According to Mistry (2004) <sup>[10]</sup>, a priest conducted a navjote ceremony for the offspring of a Parsi mother and a non-Parsi father, an act that is considered highly forbidden by the conservative elements. The matter in question emerged as a significant source of controversy between the reformist and orthodox factions, ultimately remaining unresolved the phenomenon of the generational divide becomes evident in a heterogeneous contemporary Indian society as the younger generation undergoes a transformation in its Parsi values, cultural expectations, and ambitions.

In the novel *Family Matters*, the author, Rohinton Mistry, delves into the disruptive influence of Parsi fundamentalism on the familial dynamics and the atmosphere within Nariman's residence at the ironically named Chateau Felicity apartment complex. Nariman's father, as noted by Allen and Brooke (2002) <sup>[4]</sup>, gained notoriety for his written contributions to the editorial section, where he strongly criticized the priest. Therefore, when Nariman chooses to embrace affection in his personal life, it takes on greater significance. His choice becomes symbolic of the collective sentiments and entrenched traditional values of his Parsi community, which are conveyed through his correspondence and writings.

However, finding a compatible marital companion within a small community like the Parsis proves to be a challenging task, as highlighted in the narrative. As reported by ABC News (2023) <sup>[3]</sup>, the current proportion of unmarried individuals among Parsis exceeds 30 percent, underscoring the difficulties faced by individuals in finding suitable partners. Additionally, Mistry portrays instances of violence and animosity among various religious factions, such as the Hindu-Muslim riots. These events exacerbate sentiments of unease and apprehension within the story. The impact of such episodes on the Vakeel family is significant, leading to increased concerns and a transformation in their worldview. The family's experiences mirror the broader societal tensions and conflicts, showing how external factors can deeply affect individual lives and familial relationships.

The Parsi community experiences a sense of vulnerability due to their geographical location as a small island amidst the expansive waves of a densely populated nation, *Batra*. Insecurity permeates the community, hindering its ability to fully assimilate and adapt. The influence of one's belief system is more significant than an individual's emotional stability and mental state. Moreover, the presence of Nariman's Parkinson's disease and the injury to his leg exacerbate the existing financial situation, hence exacerbating the challenges faced by Yezad and Roxana in their daily lives. The intricate dynamics of the marital relationship between Nariman and Yasmin have a profound impact on their offspring, namely Jal, Coomy, and Roxana. The cultural milieu that is collectively inhabited by the Parsi community in India is characterized by a combination of opulence and simplicity. Hybridization refers to the phenomenon wherein distinct social practices or structures, previously existing in separate forms, amalgamate to produce novel structures, objects, and practices characterized by the fusion of the aforementioned elements (Canclini 2001) <sup>[6]</sup>. Nariman's family undergoes a process of amalgamation, resulting in the formation of a cohesive unit. Concurrently, Nariman draws inspiration from

Shakespeare's works and develops an affinity for, engages with, and imparts knowledge to individuals belonging to diverse communities within India, including the Parsi community. The Parsis are motivated by Western influences to integrate themselves into contemporary Mumbai. Thus, the novel centres on the diverse adversities encountered by the family of Nariman Vakeel and their endeavour to integrate and thrive within the prevailing communities in contemporary Mumbai.

The novel, *Family Matters*, depicts the Parsi family and explores the complex dynamics and unique experiences of this minority immigrant population in India. The experiences of Nariman Vakeel and his family serve as evidence of their arduous efforts to integrate into the cultural fabric of contemporary Mumbai. Nevertheless, the family's endeavours to preserve its original roots, legacy, culture, and other traditional practices continue to be of utmost importance. One of the key themes explored in the work is the complex and emotionally distressing history between Nariman Vakeel and Lucy Braganza. This particular aspect of their past is deeply intertwined with religious beliefs and the rigid conventions associated with orthodoxy. The encounter with Lucy on the pavement evoked a strong emotional response in the protagonist, leaving him deeply affected (Mistry 2004, p.67) <sup>[10]</sup>.

Within the context of this literary work, the theme of love is shown as possessing a multitude of facets and exhibiting a complicated nature. Music serves as a catalyst for enjoyment, evokes nostalgia through its unforgettable melodies, and offers solace to individuals. Nevertheless, love can also be attributed as the underlying factor for anguish and discord. Nari's mind has been inundated by contemporary concepts. The protagonist failed to acquire the ability to maintain a delicate equilibrium between adherence to tradition and embracing modernity (Mistry 15). The practice of endogamy persists among the Parsis, as seen by the situation where Nariman's parents compelled him to marry Yasmin instead of Lucy. Lucy is denoted as the "ferangi" by Mr. Kotwal. Nari's encounter with the foreign woman (Mistry 1). The foundation of their marital union is not rooted in affection, but rather on the society norms and familial obligations that dictate their union. Nariman's family exhibits a limited degree of acceptance towards the contemporary concept of interfaith weddings. The revelation of his relationship with Lucy has exposed their latent or implicit biases towards accepting a non-Parsi individual as a member of their group. This aids in comprehending the extent to which the Parsis were able to assimilate as immigrant citizens of India. The individuals engaged in laughter, progressively escalating the level of vulgarity in their comments.

Soli, in particular, made a derogatory remark concerning individuals of foreign origin who opt for the use of paper for cleansing purposes, rather than adopting a more hygienic approach of washing (Mistry 15). These incidents provide insights into the process of partial absorption of the Parsis into the cultural traditions and lifestyle of Mumbai. This observation provides more insight into the negative sense of cultural diversity that arises as a result of societal modernity. This can also be read as an examination of the extent to which the Parsis prioritize the preservation of their identity and cultural practices. The perception of uneasiness emerges when contemplating the prospect of becoming marginalized within various minority populations in India. The characters'

ability to survive and maintain their livelihoods in this literary work is characterized by their adherence to endogamy, since they refrain from marrying others of different religious beliefs.

However, the portrayal of Parsi in the literary work *Family Matters* is a fusion of Indian and Persian cultural elements. Based on a scholarly article published in 2017, it is observed that the Parsi community in India has been experiencing a significant decline in population growth compared to other ethnic groups. The rate of decline for Parsis has been estimated at 10 to 15 percent every decade. The practice within the Parsi community of exclusively marrying individuals from within their own group led to a significant proportion of individuals being unmarried during the 1970s and 1980s (ABC News, 2023) [3]. Likewise, it is evident that Nariman Vakeel entered into matrimony with Yasmin just in his fourth decade of life.

The novel serves as a representation of the challenges encountered by the Parsis. According to the Parzor Foundation, delayed marriages have been identified as a potential factor contributing to infertility issues among women. In contrast to various other religions such as Christianity and Islam, the Parsi community abstains from engaging in the conversion of individuals from different religious backgrounds to Zoroastrianism, as reported by ABC News. Hence, this serves as the prominent rationale behind the Parsis' steadfastness in prohibiting the encroachment of other religious beliefs within their community. The persistence of orthodox ideas is considered a contributing factor to the declining population of this group. However, it is also said that these beliefs serve as a protective mechanism, preventing the dissolution of their community in the face of other culturally dominant spaces. This ongoing battle continues to have a significant impact on Nariman and his family members, both in the past and in the present. The Parsi community's religious beliefs and social boundaries exhibit a complex and relatively exclusive nature. Nevertheless, they have managed to thrive amidst the presence of more influential or dominant communities.

The Parsi communities and their rich traditions play a crucial role in their ability to maintain their existence, preserve their cultural history, and uphold their distinct identities. The frequent reference to the fire temple indicates the importance of fire within the Zoroastrian community. Starting from the 18th century, Mumbai emerged as a significant religious hub and administrative base for the Parsi community and their fire temples (Kumar 2021) [8]. A Fire Temple, alternatively referred to as an *Atroshan* or *Agiary*, serves as the primary locus of religious devotion for adherents of Zoroastrianism, who hold fire in high esteem as a representation of both divine purity and enlightenment (Fire temple). The evident significance of the fire temple and its associated ceremonies is apparent within the context provided. Nariman's family exhibits a strong interconnection with the Parsi religion and its traditional customs. Similarly, the story portrays the observance of Navroze and Khordad Sal as days of sacred significance. The Parsi New Year, also known as the celebration of Navroz or Nowroz, occurs throughout the period between July and August. In Persian, the term 'Nav' signifies 'new', while 'Roz' denotes 'day', resulting in the translation of 'new day' (Kumar 2021) [8]. The Parsi community partakes in the observance of a New Year ritual that has been celebrated by Iranians and Zoroastrians for a span of 3000 years. The

festival of Navroz derives its name from Jamshed, the Persian king who is attributed with the creation of the Persian or Shahenshahi calendar.

According to the community (Kumar 2021) [8], there is a belief that he played a pivotal role in averting a global catastrophe. The individuals' fervent religious beliefs and unwavering adherence to longstanding cultural traditions are evident in this context, as they persistently maintain their original heritage and customary activities. According to Mistry (2004) [10], the Zoroastrian calendar is adhered to for the purpose of conducting prayers and religious rites. In this context, it is observed that the roj corresponding to Murad's birthday occurs four days prior to the present day. The Parsis are known to adhere to the Zoroastrian calendar, a practice that sets them apart from other communities. Another significant occasion is Khordad Sal, a day dedicated to celebrating the birth of Zoroaster, the revered prophet of the Zoroastrian faith. The commemoration of Zoroaster's birth is often regarded as a symbolic representation of optimism, benevolence, and affection. Additionally, it was seen by Pourushaspa, the father of Zoroaster, that his son possessed an inherent resistance to the effects of fire, rendering him impervious to its burning properties.

In Mistry's novel, the silver thurible held by Coomy evokes a sense of veneration and childhood nostalgia for Roxana, as it once belonged to her mother (Mistry 2004, p. 25) [10]. In this context, it is evident that religious practices constitute an integral aspect of the Parsi communities' way of life. The customs hold a deeply ingrained nature and form an integral part of Roxana's early recollections, ranking among her most cherished reminiscences. Roxana had great pleasure in the aroma of frankincense, as matters of ritual and religion held a greater significance for her compared to Yezad (Mistry 2004, p.24) [10]. Nevertheless, Yezad finds solace in his religious beliefs, and he seeks refuge in the fire temple as a means of attaining inner tranquillity towards the conclusion. Coomy exited the chamber and reentered while carrying the silver thurible, enveloped in a cloud of white smoke. The protagonist's head was currently adorned with a white mulmul scarf (Mistry 2004, p. 24) [10]. The tale briefly emphasizes the conventional rituals observed by the Parsis. According to Mistry (2004) [10], Roxana perceived Loban smoke as resembling ethereal beings such as angels and *fareshtas*, gracefully traversing through the household. Roxana says that Yezad should don a head covering as the silver thurible is presented to each individual. The Parsis engage in several forms of worship that bear resemblance to practices observed in other religious traditions in India. Several characters undergo a process of self-reinvention throughout the course of the work, with Yezad being a notable example as he transitions from a carefree individual to one consumed by obsession (Kroller). Yezad's fervent devotion emerges subsequent to his termination from employment subsequent to the demise of Mr. Kapur. Hence, it is evident that Parsis struggle to take solace in their religious practices and beliefs, as they perceive life to be unravelling.

The Parsis are renowned for their adherence to principles of integrity and steadfastness. According to Mr. Kapur, the presence of a Parsi employee in his sporting organization based in Bombay is regarded as a fortunate circumstance. He asserts that there is no cause for concern with cash adhering to the inner fabric of one's pants. Mistry (2004) [10]

expresses a desire for the existence of additional communities similar to the one being discussed. The Parsi community has diligently endeavoured to establish a sense of trust and acceptance within their adopted country, India the stories shared by Nariman with his grandkids serve as a means to unveil more layers of complexity and belief systems inside the Parsi community. According to Nariman, the answer is negative. There is an absence of feline animals. Parsi households refrain from keeping feline companions. According to Mistry, cats are often perceived as symbols of bad luck due to their aversion to water and their reluctance to engage in bathing activities. Nariman imparts to the students the significance attributed to beliefs within their group, beyond that of factual information. According to Mistry, the individual also asserts that Parsis refrain from harming spiders and exclusively consume female chickens, avoiding male ones. This claim is said to be supported by the narrative of Zuhaak the Evil one. (ibid). The individual proceeds to recount the story of Zuhaak and the rooster, along with the arachnids that serve to anchor him within the depths of Mount Damavand. The young minds of Murad and Jehangir are exposed to the beliefs and practices of the Parsis through the medium of folktales. Furthermore, Yezad recounts the narrative of his father, who held the position of chief cashier, and the display of courage he exhibited in the concluding months of the Second World War. The individual continued to recite the prayer known as Yatha Ahu Varyo while proceeding forward (Mistry 233). At this juncture, Jehangir and Murad are once again imparted with valuable life lessons, emphasizing the profound significance of prayer and the act of seeking divine assistance. The seniors within the community have served as exemplary role models for succeeding generations, so embodying dignity. To clarify, the term "cultural legacy" refers to the collection of artifacts and intangible characteristics that are passed down from previous generations within a particular group or community. These elements are carefully kept in the present and are intended to be passed on to future generations for their benefit (Vijyalakshmi. C and Renuga. A.S). The Parsis persistently encounter challenges, such as a diminishing population and interfaith unions. Nevertheless, their capacity to endure, adapt, and remain dedicated contributes to their ability to sustain a flourishing identity within Mumbai's diverse community. In addition, the Parsis possess a diverse range of culinary traditions. Roxana expressed her satisfaction with the taste of the Dhandar Paatiyo, which elicited a joyful reaction from Coomy.

According to Mistry, Coomy asserts that Paatiyo must possess a high temperature in order to be deemed worthy of the name Paatiyo. Dhansak is the name given to a dish consisting of mutton and vegetables cooked along with dal, and typically eaten alongside brown rice. The term "Dhandar-Patyo" refers to a cultural practice or tradition. The traditional meal known as 'dhan dar' or Parsi dal is commonly referred to as 'dhan dar' Patio (Lalit). The Parsi community adheres to specific dietary patterns in their daily lives, which include the consumption of alcoholic beverages by the older generation as a customary tradition. According to Mistry, there exist certain parallels between the Parsis and the South Indians as well. Jal made a remark in a low and indistinct voice regarding the practice of consuming meals served on banana leaves and adhering to traditional customs. Rohinton Mistry's story also serves as a reflection on the

cuisine heritage of the Parsis. Significantly, Death is perceived as the ultimate state of impurity within Parsi culture, leading to the refusal of burial practices in order to prevent the contamination of the ground. The deceased individual's remains would be ceremoniously positioned atop the Tower of Silence, also known as the Dhokhma, with the purpose of facilitating consumption by vultures (Lalit 2001) <sup>[11]</sup>. This particular practice is commonly observed among the Parsis.

Based on the most recent census data, it has been observed that the population of the community, which was recorded as 114,000 in 1941, is currently estimated to be approximately 50,000 (Kumar et al 2001) <sup>[12]</sup>. The Parsi community, which played a significant role in the development of modern India, is seeing a decline in its population, a circumstance that is regrettable. According to Dr Fitter, the individuals who are to be considered as our fathers are the industrialists and shipbuilders who laid the groundwork for contemporary India. Additionally, he acknowledges the benefactors who provided us with essential institutions such as hospitals, schools, libraries, and gardens, highlighting the significant contributions they made to our society and the nation as a whole (Mistry 51). Additionally, the Parsi community possesses distinct institutions such as Parsi general hospitals, Parsi Dairy Farms, and Irani eateries, which serve as emblematic representations of their collective identity. For example, Nariman was admitted to Parsi General Hospital for the purpose of receiving medical therapy for his Parkinson's disease. Furthermore, in the concluding chapters of the novel, a significant event occurs on Murad's birthday. In commemoration of this occasion, the character's mother arranges for the acquisition of confectioneries from Parsi Dairy Farm, as mentioned by Mistry. The Parsi community has made significant contributions to the development of Modern India. Notable Parsis include the founders of the extensive Tata conglomerate, as well as early participants in the Indian independence movement and the Indian National Congress, which was formerly the predominant political party (Kumar et al., 2001) <sup>[12]</sup>. Despite experiencing a decline in population, the Parsis, as a minority society, have consistently demonstrated exceptional achievements in various domains, including economics, politics, and social spheres. Dr. Fitter's statements regarding their forefathers are characterized by a profound level of reverence and esteem. The Parsi community holds the belief that they possess a better status among the human race. They maintain that intermarriage outside their group will compromise the purity of their lineage, thereby leading to a decline in population (Lalit 2001) <sup>[11]</sup>.

In contemporary times, there has been a discernible shift in their traditional views, leading to a greater inclination towards inclusivity and acceptance of individuals belonging to many religious backgrounds. This shift in perspective can be interpreted as Murad expressing his disapproval of his father, Yezad, who has just adopted a fervent religious ideology. According to Mistry (2004) <sup>[10]</sup>, the suggestion is made that the League of Orthodox Parsis could potentially develop a device referred to as a "Purity Detector." This proposed invention is likened to an airport metal detector, emitting a series of beeping sounds upon detecting an individual deemed unclean. Mistry also underscores instances of violence and animosity among diverse religious factions, like as the Hindu-Muslim riots, which exacerbate



sentiments of unease and apprehension. The episodes have diverse impacts on the Vakeel family, contributing to their concerns and altering their worldview. However, the fortitude and vigour exhibited by Nariman's family are deeply rooted in their religious beliefs and unity. Throughout the course of the story, Yezad and Roxana consistently demonstrate a steadfast commitment to their beliefs, even in the face of significant challenges. The merging and subsequent establishment of a cultural space enable individuals to navigate the complexities of contemporary Mumbai while simultaneously safeguarding their Parsi traditional beliefs. The Parsi forebears have served as notable pioneers across various domains, so establishing commendable precedents for future generations. Consequently, they persist as the most accomplished minority community. Over time, the affluent habits, cultural identity, and sense of pride constitute the inheritance bequeathed to them by their forebears. Hence, the resistance and resilience of the community manifest via the preservation of folktales, adherence to rites and traditions, confidence in a higher power, and the observance of customs, all of which serve to unify and interconnect its members. An examination of Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* thus can involve a forward-looking exploration of the text, employing psychological analysis, narrative analysis focused on memory, and an investigation of the portrayal of parenting.

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