



**PRESERVATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE, COMMUNAL IDENTITY &  
CUSTOMARY BELIEFS AS REVEALED IN MISTRY’S FAMILY MATTERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Art derives from the community for the community. It springs from the particulars of gender as well as class, race and cultural experience. The fictional works of Rohinton Mistry deal with a particular phase in the history of post-colonial India and hastens to present the position of Parsi Community and their efforts to preserve their rich cultural heritage. In Family Matters, Mistry introduces a bedridden, retired Parsi Professor Nairman Vakeel as protagonist and the novel is centered on the experience of his family members covering three generations of Parsis in the fast changing Indian Socio-Political context. Everyone is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage which reveal one as an individual, as communities, as nations or civilization and a species. In other words, it is the cultural legacy of Physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, preserved in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. It is legacies which one wants to recognize and reserve because it strengthens one’s cultural identities of sense of who they are as people.

**Keywords: Preservation, Cultural heritage, Communal identity, Customary Beliefs, Parsi Community**

**INTRODUCTION**

In Post-colonial literature, writers who represent oppressed social groups and ethnic populations produce cultures different

from mainstream majority cultures. Many of these writers earnestly attempt to highlight the glories of their culture, restore lost

values and give their own version of their social history. A vociferous assertion of community with its glorious past and deplorable present is clearly discernible in the writings of minority parsi writers.

Cultural expressions are one of the most important ways to retain the core elements of a traditional culture, helping societies to pass on their knowledge, wisdom and tradition to future generation. Cultural expressions also allow members of a society to communicate and share the beauty.

Heritage means individual's perception of their unique communal identity, including the artifacts, culture, traditions and values passed down through generation. Cultural heritage is widely considered positive, positive in the sense that the elements being passed down are meaningful elements that identify one's family, community, social position, cultures and customary beliefs that supposed to be inherited from ancestors.

Cultural heritage often brings to mind artifacts (paintings, drawings, prints mosaics, sculptures), historical monuments and buildings, as well as archaeological sites. Moreover, cultural heritage is not only limited to material objects that one can see and touch. It also consists of immaterial

elements: traditions, oral history, social practices, rituals, knowledge and skills transmitted from generation to generation within a community . All people contribute to the richness and vastness of the culture of the world. That's why preserving of customs and beliefs of people is important to respect and safeguard all cultural heritages. Cultural heritage is not a property to be inherited; it is a value to be passed on from one generation to another generation. This study evaluates Parsis' effort to safeguard their customs, beliefs and practices as revealed in Rohinton Mistry's Family Matters.

## **ORIGIN OF PARSİ COMMUNITY**

The Parsis were the natives of Iran .In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, following the Arab conquest, they were forced to leave Iran to avoid forcible conversion to Islam. Many of the migrant Parsis came to India and settled in Gujarat. Jadav Rana, the king of Gujarat, offered refuge to the Parsis on condition that they should give up their weapons, attempt to proselytize and adopt the local language and dress. Till date the Parsis keep this promise and strive hard to preserve their unique religious purity and cultural identity. Added to this, they have a sense of superiority which makes them isolate from the Indian main stream.

A good majority of the Parsis are well-educated and affluent. They find it extremely difficult to cope with Indian atmosphere. The Parsis' dischantment with the Indian life style started along with the Partition of India and intensified by the serious threats posed to the secularism of the country by fundamental outfits and political manoeuvrings. This paradigmatic shift in the approach of the Parsis is overtly seen in the Parsi writers who have brought out their works after 1980s. Analyzing the community consciousness of the modern Parsi writers, Avadhesh Kumar Singh points out that their

“Works exhibit consciousness of their community in such a way that the community emerges as a protagonist”(28)

Dharan remarks “Post-Independence Parsi writing in English is ethnocentric, culture specific and Community oriented” (7)

### **MISTRY'S DEPICTION OF PARSI COMMUNITY**

Among the leading Parsi writers, Rohinton Mistry, who is now in Canada, pays more attention to the depiction of his community and his fictional works are replete with numerous details of Parsi life, culture and religion. In the case of Mistry, in addition to post-colonial concerns of narrating country and community there is an exigent need to write about his community.

As it is verging on extinction he wants to leave a record of it for the benefit of posterity. In an interview, Rohinton Mistry confessed:

“When the parsis have disappeared from the phase of the earth, his writings will preserve a record of how they lived, to some extent”.

Mistry's fictional works deal with a particular phase in the history of post-colonial India and hastens to present the position of his Parsi community of their rich cultural heritage as well as customary beliefs.

Mistry's novel *Family Matters* can be considered as a sermon on Parsis' cultural heritage and communal identity and their efforts to protect their racial purity, religious practices, and sense of superiority, attitude to Indians, food habits, elite status, and the present regrettable position of the community. His novel *Family Matters* Mistry's atavistic urge takes a violent turn and force fully avows the predicament of his community in wake of the Ayodhya issue. In *Family Matters* Rohinton Mistry introduced a bedridden, retired Parsi Professor, Nariman Vakeel, and makes him symptomatic of the feeble condition of his community. The novel is centered on the experiences of this protagonist and the

members of his family, covering three generations of Parsis in the fast changing Indian socio-political context.

### **CULTURAL HERITAGE**

To highlight the Parsis' efforts to preserve cultural heritage, communal identity, Mistry quotes certain incidents in the life of the protagonist Nairman Vakeel and his grandson Murad. Nairman Vakeel reminisces about his love affair with Lucy Bragansa, a Goan girl. His parents grieve over his affair with a non-Parsi girl and compel him to give her up. As a result, he accepts that

**“traditional ways were the best”**

(mistry16) and realise his responsibilities to hold up the values and the purity of his community, he marries a forty-two year old Parsi widow with two children. One of his close relatives, Mrs. Katwal shouts in joy that the “naughty boy at last becomes a good boy, it's a double delight” (13) Nairman, though a highly educated person and a professor, has to surrender his personal predilections in preference to his community consciousness. He cannot have the life partner of his own choice as being a Parsi his allegiance to his community is in his flesh and blood that decides his life. Nairman's grandson Murad develops intimacy with Anjali, a non-Parsi girl. Yezad is terribly upset when he finds his son

Murad kissing the girl in the stairwell and he makes it clear to him that his relationship with the non-Parsi girl spoils their culture. He makes him aware of their cultural purity and advises him “You can have any friends you like, any race or religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage, the rules are different”(469).

Their personal laws only address marriage between two Parsis of the opposite sex. Admitting of bride or bridegroom of all mixed marriage would improve statistics', but will dilute even destroy a very distinctive ethnic identity. They make efforts to preserve their ancient Cultural Heritage.

### **COMMUNAL IDENTITY**

Yezad is a representative Parsi who affirms to preserve their communal identity. Mistry has deliberately brought into the novel the love experiences of both the grand father and grandson with non-Parsigirl to reiterate that the Parsis can never give up their communal identity and try to imbibe their cultural purity of their race at any cost.

Mistry in Family Matters proclaims their communal identify by giving importance to education as possible. The Parsiboys and girls outshine other students and perform their duties well by displaying their talents in the best educational institutions of the country. Nariman narrates

stories from the realm of literature to his grand children who listen to him carefully. Yezad's brilliant sons attend the famous St.Xavier's school run by Catholic nuns and they are at the top of their classes. The Parsis enjoy an elite status in the pluralistic Indian society in their quest for knowledge.

Another distinguishing feature of the Parsis community is their sense of being honest. During the Second World War, Yezad's father was a cashier in a bank. Once in a week, he used to carry cash between his branch and the Head office. On a fateful day, he was travelling in a taxi along with his guard, Duleep Singh. All of a sudden, they heard the sound of explosion. Duleep Singh, out of fear, left the rifle in the taxi and ran away. The driver also deserted the car and ran to safety. Yezad's father who was more conscious of his honesty and duty did not care for his life even at the trying situation. He was praying 'Yatha Ahu Varya' (a Zoroastrian prayer) and walked to the bank quite courageously fully realizing his responsibilities. Yezad narrates this story to his children with a view to instill the virtue of honesty among them

"He always said, when he finished telling me the story, 'Remember, people can take everything away from you, but they cannot rob you of

your decency. Not if you want to keep it. You alone can do that, by your action.(226)

Ministry's Community consciousness comes to fore when he makes his Parsi characters feel proud of their great tradition. Once Yezad's son Jehangir asks him whether he can change his name. To him, Yezad gives a piece of advice:

"You are a Parsi so you have a Persian name. Be proud of it, It is not to be thrown out like an old shoe'(239).

Yezad's remark is not an individual's opinion, but it is the view of his Parsi communal identity.

### **PARSIS' CUSTOMARY BELIEFS**

Parsi people though belong to highly educated and cultured community, have their own customs and beliefs. Parsi families never keep cats. They consider them as badluck as cats never take a bath. Listening to his mother's words, Jehangir reminds her of the fact that cats clean by ticking themselves. At this time, Nairman intervenes and informs them.

"Beliefs are more powerful than facts. Like our belief in spiders and cocks"(156)

Jehangir confesses that he is totally ignorant of the beliefs associated with spiders and cocks.

Nariman continues that

“Parsis do not kill spiders, and they only eat the female chicken, never a cock”(156)

To make the boy learn more about Parsis' beliefs, old Nariman explains to Jehangir the reason why Parsis do not kill cocks and spiders. In the past there was an evil king named Zuhaak who always tortured his subjects. At last the great hero Faridoon came forward to defeat him. Earlier Zuhaak had killed Faridoon's father. They fought for a long time. But at the end Faridoon over powered Zuhaak and tied him with huge chains. At last, Faridoon buried him deep inside Mount Damaard. But Zuhaak is still alive with his super natural power. Every now and then he tries to come up. Whenever he tries to come up, the cock crows to awaken the world and at once spiders spin their webs around him. Thus cock and spider save human kind from the great evil. Nairman's story, though humorous, exposes the Parsis' fervor in observing age-old traditional customary beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

Mistry's Family Matters reveals Parsis' deliberate act of keeping cultural and heritage from the present to the future. It means preservation or conservation. The

protection of the cultural heritage means protecting the particularly sensitive cultural memory. Everyone is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage which identify who one as an individual, as communities, as nations or civilization and a species. In other words, it is the cultural legacy of artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from part generations, preserved in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. It is legacy which one wants to recognize and reserve because it strengthens one's cultural identities of sense of who they are as people. All aspects of communal identity essentially share the same background and the sense of wanting to preserve a cultural heritage and legacy even if they might be directly recognized and tied to that culture through usage.

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