

# **Cultural Harmony: A Depiction of Monogamous Parsi community in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters***

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## ***Abstract:***

**Culture is rooted from our ancestors and is braided among humans for their continuous existence. It is weaved in the minds of people and they express them in various manners. Indian constitution gave consent to immigrants and refugees, to be an element in their construction and it demonstrates a mixture of culture and religion. The immigrants from other regions came out with their own language, culture and customs. Parsi, is one such immigrant community, they emigrated from Iran and settled in India. Rohinton Mistry, a Parsi by birth, through his works brings out the afflictions of his own culture under the political supremacy. Though subjugated by the ideologies in India, Parsi community set a strong foot on preserving their ethics and ethnicity. In Mistry's *Family Matters*, using his narratives, he features the realistic picture of a Parsi family. This paper shows how they grapple with their crisis and their efforts to preserve their humanity and identity on the outer and inner circle of culture and how they maintain cultural harmony.**

***Keywords:* Cultural harmony, Identity, Marriage, Monogamy, Parsi.**

Culture represents the way people live in a civilized manner. It is formed through many elements like language, values, norms, beliefs, symbols and actions. Every human being is made aware of their own cultural practices as it marks their identity. Culture also acts as a mirror which displays the inner psyche of all humans. Culture is expressed outwardly through the way people think, act and speak. All literary works have culture as their base upon which the content is built. However, culture differs from people to people and in the modern world there is a mixture of culture within a small territory where many cultures were fused together. India as a multicultural country is composed of various ideologies emerged from different religions and regions people. Though citizens of India have many diverging cultures among them, on the whole they possess harmony and mutual admiration which allows all culture to participate in the growth of the nation. The unity among people is maintained by a peaceful coexistence and understanding. All people in spite of their culture differences supported and worked for the welfare of nation. Among other communities, Parsi community which is an old minor community in India had their own cultural beliefs. Though they struggled to set foot on India they developed themselves and emerged as a community and they were widely known for their values. As Luhrmann says, “Modern Parsis are a tiny community settled in Bombay. They are an old people who emigrated from Persia a thousand years ago, probably to preserve Zoroastrianism from Islam” (Luhrmann 1). They practiced Zoroastrianism as their religion.

Currently, the Parsi community lost their cultural identity and many people left India for preserving their culture. Many writers have written about the Parsi community one among them is Rohinton Mistry. He is an Indo-Canadian Parsi writer and his works mainly focuses on the Parsis and their struggles in India. As Dodiya says, “Mistry has an amazing way of setting up ordinary lives scarred by tragedy, then illuminating them with moments of merciful beauty. He creates a visceral feel for their loves, humiliations and little victories” (Dodiya 89). In *Family Matters* he presents a Parsi family and their combat in a changing political world. The characters in the novel at one hand tried to preserve their culture and on the other hand they expressed their contempt against corrupted politicians. They balanced both the circles of culture and society. Cultural harmony is balanced by the people under two circles. On the social level they unite themselves along with other cultures and have mutual

respect among themselves. On the inner level, particularly in family circle they express their love for their own culture. The main focus of the novel *Family Matters* is a Parsi family which struggles after the demolition of Babri Masjid. Nariman's family consists of his daughter Roxana and stepchildren Jal and Coomy. Roxana marries Yezad and their sons were Jehangir and Murad. Through other minor characters from other religions Mistry presents the commitment of Parsi people within their family and outside their family. Inside their own family circle, the characters were rigid and they passionately followed their beliefs and on the outside they showed concern for the future of all people under the dominating world. However the Parsi family exhibits cultural harmony but it is has its own boundaries. Yezad and Jehangir were the most important characters as they come across and faced the social values and family values of Parsi culture. Their views regarding cultural harmony emerges from their encounter with the other harmonized people who belong to other religions.

Yezad as a Parsi sets a good example for people whose cultural ideas deviate within their family and outside their family. He is greatly influenced by Mr.Kapur his employer. Kapur made Yezad believe that all people strive for cultural harmony and people were only misguided by the partition made by politicians. Kapur's love for Bombay made Yezad to look upon the city with a different light. Yezad notices how Kapur finds harmony in his life by being part of every other culture. It is evident when Yezad praises the efforts of Kapur in celebrating all religious festivals. "Yezad noticed that Christmas decoration had appeared in many shop windows. Till last week their Diwali displays were up" (273). Yezad who neglects his own culture began to embrace Zoroastrianism and he practices its cultural rituals. But unlike Kapur, Yezad put forth Parsi culture before other cultures. Monogamy is seen in the character of Yezad as he respects his culture more than other cultures. He appreciates the values of Kapur and Vilas Rane on cultural harmony as a key to unite people. Yet Yezad shows his obligation to Parsi culture as he believes that commitment to their own culture gives space for an individual to accept other cultural values.

Similarly, Jehangir son of Yezad, a young Parsi child is influenced by values on cultural harmony through his school. The characters like Father D'Silva and Helen Alvarez moulds the mind of Jehangir. He respects his Parsi culture and admires its dogmas and he also believes the traditional

stories about the forefathers of Parsi religion. He is taught by Nariman and Roxana the common beliefs of Parsis like their superstition in not having cat as a pet which is practiced by them. “Parsi families never keep cats. They consider them bad luck”(162). Such teachings made Jehangir to have knowledge about his Parsi religion. But he tried to have a mutual affinity among other cultural people. He extends his understanding of harmony and merges the circle of culture and society. Jehangir is highly influenced by his school and he also favors his Parsi culture. Jehangir views school as a Utopian world where people were treated equally and everyone respected other culture with the same morality. It gave scope for young children to emerge with cultural harmony as they were the future citizens of India. Through this Jehangir learns about the need of compassion and peace which lacked in their political world. “If you are good citizens of my classroom, said Miss Alvarez, you will be good citizens of India. She believed this was the way to fight the backwardness and rot and corruption in the country: classroom by classroom”(217). Under both influences Jehangir believed that cultural harmony is accepting other cultural values along with one’s own culture. He finds happiness in linking different cultures. Both Yezad and Jehangir have different ideas regarding cultural harmony even though both belong to same Parsi religion.

Yezad’s view on cultural harmony exhibits how the individual must honour their culture at first before practicing harmony with other culture. While Jehangir gave equal space and finds harmony in the mutual existence of other culture along with one’s own culture. It is also clear in the novel that Parsis accepted every other religion as Nariman an aged Parsi has holy pictures of other religion which shows the expansion of cultural harmony on the social circle. Even Yezad comforted Husain, a Muslim after the demolition of Babri Masjid. However many Parsis like Yezad honored and treasured their culture more than other cultures. On the other hand people like Jehangir tried to find harmony among all cultures by assimilating themselves with others for the betterment of mankind.

Rohinton Mistry presents the monogamy of Parsis which divides people through the institution of marriage. Parsis accepted other cultures socially but in terms of marriage which is the key element of inner family circle, they strongly opposed the idea of inter-communal marriage. The disastrous relationship of Nariman with a Christian girl Lucy shows the rigid norms of Parsis regarding marriage.

The elder Parsis like Nariman's father considered inter-communal marriage to be a disgrace in spoiling their culture. Parsis considered such marriages as a threat that would ruin their cultural cleanliness. Hence even though they supported cultural harmony on the outside, they tried to follow their customs when it affected their inner world. Yezad too disapproves of his son Murad's relation with a Maharashtrian non-parsi girl Anjali. Yezad says, "You can have any friends you like, any race or religion, but for a serious relationship, for marriage, the rules are different" (482). This shows how such old beliefs regarding marriage diminishes the future hope of cultural harmony.

Yezad's role as an ardent supporter of Parsi is immense and he is a complex character, he accepts the ideas of mutual friendship among other religion. But he did not wish to have any serious relationship like marriage with other cultural people. It is here he marks the limit of his own cultural harmony. Murad and Jehangir the younger Parsi generation tries to enlarge the circle of culture and it shows the future hopes of Parsis to get mingled with other cultures. Cultural harmony as portrayed by the characters of the novel is working with other people in social level as they considered intimate relationship as a pollution that corrupts their culture. Hence the cultural harmony in the society is marked by a limit. Parsis understand the values of other culture but they were monogamous only in terms of marriage as their limit ends before it. In the end it is seen that cultural harmony is not a complete acceptance of other culture and nor it is a devotion to their own culture. It is maintained between people who respect their culture along with other cultures and it has limits. It is by thus mutual understanding and limit peace prevails in human beings. India as a nation is crowned with many cultures which like gems adorn its unique place. Each of those precious stone is magnificent and no particular jewel is ranked higher or lower to other. Likewise culture adds beauty to the nation and humans, every culture is a valuable treasure.

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