

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

ONE DAY NATIONAL CONFERENCE

Language and Literature: Multidisciplinary Approaches

Department of English

Sant Tukaram Mahavidyalaya, Kannad

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

SPECIAL ISSUE: VOL.17 ISSUE-7

17 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

GUEST EDITORS

Prof. Dr. Sharad Gavande

Prof. Dr. Santosh Prasad

Prof. Makrand Joshi

www.the-criterion.com

Cultural Conflicts in Rohinton Mistry's Novel: '*Family Matters*'

Rohini Chandrakant Mane

Research Scholar,
KRT Arts, BH Commerce, and AM Science College, Nashik.

Abstract:

This paper examines the representation of cultural conflicts in Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*, exploring how the author illuminates the tensions between tradition and modernity, individual desires and collective obligations, and local identities and global forces. In *Family Matters*, Mistry poignantly portrays the decline of the Parsi community in urban Mumbai, highlighting the generational clashes over family duty, religious orthodoxy, and cultural survival amidst rapid urbanization. Through his characters' struggles to balance filial responsibilities with personal aspirations, Mistry exposes the fragile fabric of a community striving to preserve its heritage in a changing world.

By analyzing this text, this paper argues that literature can reveal the complex ways in which cultural conflicts shape personal identities and social structures. This study demonstrates how Mistry uses family dynamics, memory, and place to interrogate who controls cultural narratives and whose voices are marginalized or erased in the face of shifting modern realities.

Keywords: Cultural conflict, tradition and modernity, identity, marginalization, urbanization, environmental conflict, family dynamics.

Introduction

India is a country with many different faiths, castes, languages, and religions. The religion and culture play an essential role in structuring social values, beliefs, and human

relationships. Indian civilization and culture reflect diversity in traditions, beliefs, and practices. The Latin word "cultura," which means "to cultivate," is the root of the English word "culture." Culture plays an important role in forming human society. People's identities are shaped by their culture. Literature provides a platform for the working class and common people to communicate their ideas and feelings, giving voice to experiences that might not otherwise be heard.

Life involves inevitable difficulties and complexities. The concept of culture varies from individual to individual. Rohinton Mistry is a distinguished Indian novelist known for his sensitive portrayal of Indian society. His novel *Family Matters* (2002) highlights the cultural conflicts experienced by a middle-class Parsi family in Mumbai, exploring the tension between traditional cultural values and emerging modern individualistic attitudes.

Rohinton Mistry was born on July 3, 1952, in Bombay. He is an Indian-born Canadian novelist. His fictions are 'Such a Long Journey' (1991), 'A Fine Balance' (1995), and 'Family Matters' (2002). Because of all this, Rohinton Mistry is now well-known both in India and globally. '*Family Matters*' is the third novel published by Rohinton Mistry. Mistry's novel *Family Matters*, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, went on to win the Kiriyama Prize for fiction. Soon after its release, Mistry gave a public reading at the Asia Society in New York.

Like other Parsi writers, Mistry's work is guided by this experience of double displacement. As a Parsi, Mistry finds himself at the margins of Indian society, and hence his writing challenges and resists absorption by the dominating and Hindu-glorifying culture of India. He explores the relationship between two communities, their cultural identity, and novelty in their community living. His parents were Behram Mistry and Freny Chavry Mistry. He has a brother named Cyrus Mistry, who is a well-known dramatist. He completed his degree in mathematics from the University of Bombay in 1974. Later, he moved to Toronto with his wife, Freny Alvia.

In his novel *Family Matters*, Rohinton Mistry delves into the intricate social conflicts that emerge in a Mumbai middle-class Parsi family, emphasizing the conflicts between modernity and tradition, personal aspirations and familial responsibilities, and community identification and assimilation. Through *Family Matters*, Mistry investigates the ways in which urbanization and modernization reshape communal relationships. The novel effectively depicts how the younger family members deal with the stresses of modern metropolitan life, frequently caught between their obligations to their families and their own goals, while the elder generation, represented by Nariman Vakeel, clings to ancient Parsi rituals and ideals. Mistry explores the fragility of cultural survival in the face of increasing urbanization and the breakdown of communal relationships through the conflicts inside this family.

This paper aims to analyze how Rohinton Mistry represents cultural conflict in *Family Matters* by depicting the impact of changing social, economic, and moral values on family relationships. This study was purely theoretical-based, and the information of the study has been collected mainly from secondary sources, i.e., books, journals, articles, etc. Rohinton Mistry belongs to the Parsi community, and a majority of his fictional characters are drawn from the same community. Rohinton Mistry tries to present the real condition of the Parsi community and the social problems they face. He is regarded as one of the most important postcolonial immigrant writers and a significant voice from the Third World. He has portrayed his community in the novel *Family Matters*, published in 2002. *Family Matters* portrays the everyday lives of ordinary residents of the metropolitan city of Bombay. Conflict is a direct interaction between two cultures. Cultural conflict happens when communities with different beliefs, values, or lifestyles clash, creating tension and opposing goals. It is explained in sociology as part of conflict theory and in anthropology through studies of intercultural relations.

The narrative centers on the elderly patriarch, Nariman Vakeel, a man in his seventies, who is afflicted with Parkinson's disease. Parkinson's disease means the brain slowly loses control over movement. When an unfortunate accident befalls him, the responsibility of caring for him becomes a burden on his second wife's middle-aged children—Coomy, who is bitter and domineering, and Jal, who is mild-mannered and submissive. To relieve themselves of this strain, they transfer the major responsibility to his biological daughter, Roxana. However, Nariman's move into Roxana's household significantly complicates the lives of her family. Roxana, the daughter of Nariman and Yasmeen, is married to Yezad and has two young sons, Murad and Jehangir. The family resides in Pleasant Villa, a home gifted to them by the professor.

John Clement Ball observes that Mistry's fiction consistently highlights the vulnerability of Parsis in a rapidly changing urban and political environment, where traditional values are threatened by modernity and social fragmentation. In *Family Matters*, this concern is reflected through the domestic space, where cultural preservation clashes with practical survival and personal resentment.

Studies on *Family Matters* often emphasize themes of family responsibility, aging, and moral duty. Nilufer E. Bharucha argues that the novel presents the family as a microcosm of the Parsi community, revealing internal conflicts rooted in rigid traditions, emotional suppression, and fear of cultural extinction. The novel's focus on Nariman Vakeel's illness and dependence exposes how cultural ideals of duty and care often collapse under economic pressure and personal bitterness.

Critics such as Peter Morey analyze *Family Matters* within a postcolonial ethical framework, suggesting that Mistry examines how ordinary individuals negotiate moral choices in constrained social conditions. Morey notes that cultural conflict in the novel is not dramatic

or sensational but emerges through everyday interactions, silences, and compromises within the family structure. This subtle depiction makes the novel a powerful critique of social and cultural hypocrisy.

Urban life and modernity form another important area of critical discussion. Scholars point out that Bombay (Mumbai) in *Family Matters* functions as more than a setting; it symbolizes congestion, decay, and social pressure. According to Brinda Bose, urban space in Mistry's fiction intensifies cultural conflicts by forcing traditional communities to adapt to impersonal and competitive modern life. The cramped apartments and financial instability in the novel mirror the shrinking emotional space within the family.

Gender-based readings of *Family Matters* highlight the unequal burden placed on women. Critics have examined Roxana's self-sacrificing nature as a reflection of traditional expectations imposed on women, while Coomy's bitterness is often interpreted as a response to emotional neglect and patriarchal control. Bharucha notes that cultural conflict in the novel is deeply gendered, as women are expected to uphold moral and cultural stability at great personal cost.

Despite the growing body of criticism, many studies treat *Family Matters* primarily as a novel about aging, ethics, or family dynamics. While these readings are valuable, they often do not fully explore cultural conflict as a central theme, especially in relation to minority identity, generational tension, and the clash between tradition and modern urban realities. There remains scope for a focused study that examines how cultural conflict operates at multiple levels—family, community, and society—in *Family Matters*.

This research seeks to address this gap by analyzing cultural conflicts in the novel through a postcolonial and cultural studies perspective, highlighting how Mistry uses the

domestic sphere to reflect larger social and cultural anxieties faced by the Parsi community in contemporary India. The Parsi community, being a minority, was regarded as marginalized.

This novel tells the story of a retired English literature professor, a widower struggling with Parkinson's disease. After an unfortunate accident, the burden of caring for him falls on his second wife's middle-aged children: Coomy, bitter and domineering, and Jal, gentle yet subservient.

Nariman's love for Lucy Braganza is not accepted because she is a non-Parsi. His orthodox family forces him to marry Yasmin Contractor, a Parsi widow, in order to follow strict community traditions. He resides with them in a building called Chateau Felicity. Both siblings, though long past the age of marriage, remain unmarried. They are the children of Palonji Contractor and his former wife, Yasmeen, both of whom have passed away.

This shows how rigid cultural rules suppress personal choice and individual happiness. In his youth, he fell in love with a non-Parsi girl but was compelled to end the relationship due to strong opposition from his family. Later, he married a Parsi widow with two children, a union that brought happiness to everyone at the time. Today, his wife has passed away, and his daughter Roxana lives separately with her own family.

Nariman faced great difficulty using the toilet and eventually had to rely on a portable bedpan. Coomy, frustrated with caring for her stepfather, decided to send him to his daughter Roxana's home. Without informing Roxana about his broken ankle, they left him at her place. Roxana's family reluctantly adjusted to his presence, expecting it to be temporary. After Nariman's arrival, the family falls into financial hardship. Amid these struggles, Roxana's husband loses his job, while Coomy becomes determined to keep Nariman from returning. To achieve this, she fabricates a story about a flood and deliberately damages the house to make it uninhabitable. Jal deliberately damages the roof of Nariman's room, causing the plaster to

fall. Afterwards, the two visit Roxana and inform her that the leaking roof makes it impossible to accommodate Nariman. As time passes, Coomy devises a clever plan to prevent the professor's return. Tragically, her scheme backfires, and she loses her life when the building collapses.

Following Coomy's death, a remorseful Jal invites Nariman, along with Roxana and her family, to move into the renovated house. Nariman returns there with his daughter and her family. The narrative then shifts five years ahead, where Nariman remains alive but frail and deeply affected by Parkinson's disease. Roxana, though burdened by guilt, hires a full-time nurse to care for him. Meanwhile, her husband becomes intensely devout, embracing Zoroastrianism with fervor, and forbids his son from pursuing a relationship with a non-Parsi girl—echoing the same situation Nariman faced in his youth. However, her son Jehangir took a special interest in looking after Nariman.

According to traditional Parsi values, children are morally responsible for caring for their aging parents. In *Family Matters*, when Nariman falls ill, this cultural expectation places the burden of care on Coomy and Jal, highlighting the tension between traditional duty and the practical difficulties of modern life. Roxana takes Nariman into her small apartment despite her family's financial difficulties, showing her sense of duty and compassion rooted in traditional values. The cramped apartments in Bombay, the broken lift, and the polluted surroundings reflect the harsh realities of modern urban life. These conditions make it difficult to follow traditional ideals of caring for elders and maintaining family harmony. Coomy's resentment and controlling nature show her personal frustration with the responsibility of caring for Nariman, highlighting the conflict between modern self-interest and traditional family duty. As Nariman becomes more dependent on others, his authority as the family head weakens, showing how traditional power loses its strength in modern conditions. *"It will be a loss to the whole world. When a culture vanishes, humanity is the loser."* When a culture fades

away, humanity is deprived of a distinctive way of thinking, celebrating, and solving problems.”

Rohinton Mistry skillfully blends the themes of rituals and domination in *Family Matters* to show how power and tradition shape the Vakeel family's way of life. The holy feeling of responsibility that unites the family is highlighted by rituals such as Roxana's daily care for Nariman—"Roxana performed the morning rituals for her father with the same patience and devotion as she would say her prayers." In numerous cultures, elder care is regarded as a sacred responsibility. Roxana exemplifies this belief, revealing how her patience and sacrifice are intertwined with her cultural values. However, when Coomy, motivated by hatred, manipulates the circumstance to force Nariman upon Roxana's little home, burdening her both financially and emotionally, this very caring ritual turns into a kind of tyranny. Even though her family struggles with money while caring for Nariman, she manages everything well.

Roxana is deeply devoted to her father and tends to him with great care. Although Yezad offers little support because of mounting financial pressures, she continues to nurse her father diligently. Yezad's anxiety over their strained finances only grows heavier with the added burden of his father-in-law's medical expenses.

Mistry points out the regressive traditional attitudes of parents who do not allow their children to follow their heart simply because of the religious differences. The breakdown of family life is linked to psychological sufferings, and in this novel, everyone is psychologically disturbed because of the religious customs followed by the community. The bonds between husband and wife, as well as between parents and children, become strained and damaged under the weight of rigid rules imposed by their community.

Like countless middle-class families in the bustling city, they measure every coin before it leaves their hands. The strain of daily struggles often sparks quarrels between husband

and wife, yet their bond of understanding quickly mends the cracks. When Nariman is taken to Pleasant Villa, his heart aches as he realizes the depth of the sacrifices his family has endured—all for his comfort and care. He admits to Yezad, “That huge flat is empty as a Himalayan cave for me; this feels like a palace. But it will be difficult for you.”

Roxana and Yezad need money to look after Nariman, so they ask Coomy for help. She refuses, saying that Nariman’s pension has already been used for repairing the house. Edul Munshi, the neighbor, helps Coomy with the repair work, but this results in a tragic accident that claims the lives of both Coomy and Edul. After this, the story continues through Nariman’s quiet silences.

Mistry paints a poignant picture of the anguish faced by the old, burdened by sickness and indifference. Though Jal and Coomy try to care for him, Nariman suffers a fractured leg and is confined to bed. For a short while Coomy shoulders the responsibility, but when Parkinson’s disease deepens his frailty, she resolves to send her father to her sister’s home—a choice that reveals both her exhaustion and the quiet tragedy of aging.

For many elderly people, old age feels like a curse. The younger generations must remember that they are the roots of our foundation. Nariman finds joy in his daughter’s home, spending happy moments with his grandsons and receiving her loving care. But for Yezad, life grows increasingly difficult—his peace is lost, and he struggles to find ways to support the family’s income.

Conclusion:

In *Family Matters*, Mistry addresses the condition of the elderly while also highlighting the subaltern within the Parsi community and the marginalized in other groups. Mistry’s novels are culturally significant, not only for depicting the Parsi community but also for critically examining Indian society and history. His works highlight the marginalization of

the Parsi community, the impact of political corruption, and the resilience of human relationships during adversity. Because of his age, Nariman seeks both emotional and physical support from his family. This leads to a touching bond between him and his grandson Jehangir, who proves most capable of meeting Nariman's needs. At night, Jehangir comforts his troubled grandfather when painful memories resurface. Through Roxana and Jehangir, Mistry highlights the presence of humanity, contrasting them with characters who fall short of it.

Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* portrays cultural conflict as a persistent condition of modern life, particularly within minority communities facing social and economic change. The novel reveals how Parsi traditions of duty and moral responsibility come into tension with individual aspirations and urban pressures, generating conflict within the family. Intergenerational differences and gendered expectations further intensify these tensions, exposing the unequal burden placed on women in sustaining cultural continuity. Ultimately, Mistry presents culture as neither wholly sustaining nor entirely oppressive but as a complex system requiring constant negotiation, highlighting the human cost of preserving identity in a rapidly changing world.

Works Cited:

Ball, John Clement. *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*. University of Toronto Press, 2004.

Bharucha, Nilufer E. *Parsi Fiction*. Prestige Books, 1998.

Bose, Brinda. "City Spaces and Cultural Anxiety in Indian English Fiction." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2000, pp. 45–60.

Magdalena Banaszekiewicz and Karolina Buczkowska, Cultural Conflict, Tourism. Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland. Poznan University School of Physical Education, Poznan, Poland

Mehrotra, Arvind. Parsi Identity and Family in Rohinton Mistry's Fiction. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2003

Mistry, Rohinton. *Family Matters*, Faber and Faber, Replika Press, 2004

Morey, Peter. *Rohinton Mistry*. Manchester University Press, 2004.

Patil, Vidya. *Introduction to Literature*, Aryan Digital Press, Delhi, 2023.

Taylor, E.B., *The Origin of Culture*, New York, Harper and Row, 1958

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Rohinton Mistry: Biography, Books & Facts."

Encyclopaedia Britannica, www.britannica.com/biography/Rohinton-Mistry.