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LANGUAGE AS A TOOL OF ASSIMILATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ROHINTON  
MISTRY'S *FAMILY MATTERS* AND *SUCH A LONG JOURNEY*

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Abstract

The minorities who suffer from political and economic marginalisation maintain their way of creating their ethnic identity. There are many minority groups like Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Christians and Parsis in India. Most feel deprived of certain privileges available to the dominant groups. This sense of deprivation leads to fear, anguish and insecurity in their psyche and develops a love for the language and culture of the English. The present study on the Parsis reveals their passion for the English language through the critical analysis of Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* and *Such a Long Journey*.

Keywords: Rohinton Mistry, *Family Matters*, *Such a Long Journey*, Minority, English, Language

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Introduction

Language is a robust way of communication filled with philosophy. It is a system of social and ethnic identity which reflects culture and discovers one's thoughts. It is a symbolic representation of the social commutations. In *Contemporary Linguistics*, Francis Katamba, Michael Dobrovolsky and William Grady describe the significance of language as follows: "Language is many things- a system of communication, a medium for thought, a vehicle for literary expression, a social institution, a matter for political controversy, a catalyst for nation building" (1). Language plays a vital role in the association of the social arrays. The ethnic groups are isolated from the superior groups in society and try hard to preserve their culture, traditions, rituals, and customs. As a result of this isolation, these minority groups try to assert their ethnic identity but fail. The

concept of identity has constantly distracted them. In *A Glossary of Culture Theory*, Peter Brooker states:

Ethnic identity implies a sense of belongingness founded on an attachment to an actual or possible homeland, its cultural heritage, belief system, political history, language, characteristic myths, customs, manners, food, sports, literature, art or architecture style. A corollary of this is that ethnic identity is based on perceived differences between a given identity and that of a neighbouring group or dominant culture within which an ethnic group or groups may be positioned. (92-93)

The Rational of the Study

The ethnic groups fail to transfer their native language from one generation to another since they

are forced to recall their mother tongue by the dominant groups. The multilingual approach of the ethnic groups strengthens their minority consciousness. Similarly, the Parsis in India live in Mumbai and Gujarat with multilingual systems and are forced to be familiar with Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, and English. This multilingual approach is considered to be a survival strategy. The arrival of the Parsi community in India in the ninth century changed its attires, food habits, and language as these conditions were implemented by King Jadi Rana, who allowed them to take shelter in Gujarat. Consequently, the adaptation of the Indian language by the Parsis is a result of their fear of socio-cultural estrangement. This research underscores the role of language in creating the ethnic identity of the Parsis.

### Language

Language is a culturally transmitted entity, and the Parsis experienced problems adopting an Indian language. In his book, *The Study of Language*, George Yule explains the course of cultural transmission with language reference. He states:

Although some changes can be linked to major social changes [with regards to language] caused by wars, invasions, and other upheavals, the most pervasive source of change in language seems to be in the continual process of cultural transmission. Each new generation has to find a way of using the language of the previous generation. In this unending process, whereby each new language user has to 'recreate' for him or herself the language of the community, there is an unavoidable propensity to pick up some elements exactly and others only approximately. There is also the occasional desire to be different. Given this tenuous transmission process, it should be expected that languages will not remain stable but that change and variation are inevitable. (222)

The Parsis developed a hostile approach towards the Gujarati language, encouraging them to adapt to English during colonisation quickly. They did not display any hatred towards the Britishers. They found some physical as well as linguistic

resemblance. The Parsi community took English as the language of the elites and took pride in using the language of their new land's oppressor. The Parsis' hatred for India and its culture encouraged them to assimilate the English language and culture. The Parsis always supported Britishers and served them with excellent fidelity. They wanted the Britishers to rule India as they were well aware of the after-effects of their hatred towards Indians. Somewhere, the Parsis considered the culture of Britain superior to that of India, and consequently, they strived hard to assimilate into the British culture and English language.

### The English Culture

The Parsi followed the English minutely in everything and copied their "talking, eating and living" way. This eagerness for everything English led them to love the English language and culture. Most Parsi writers show this extreme love for English in their works, and Mistry is no exception. His novels display this fancy affection of Parsis for the English language. The Parsis are deeply fond of English stories, and Mistry has displayed this aspect in his novel *Family Matters* through the character of Jehangir, who is fond of reading Enid Blyton's stories. He sometimes acts like a character in these English stories:

On rainy days, when washing couldn't be hung on the balcony, the line became a fragrant curtain of wet clothes, and he [Jehangir] preferred the room like that, in two compartments. Then he pretended to be one of the Famous Five, Or the Five Find-Outers, who all had rooms and lived in England where everything was beautiful. His imagination transported the clothes-curtained room to the English countryside into a house with a lovely garden where robins sang, and roses bloomed and to which he could return after having an adventure or solving a mystery. How perfectly he would live in that world, he thought. (87)

In the novel *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry details the grand feeling of Gustad and Dilnavaz on the performance of Sohrab as an actor, director, and producer of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Mistry states:

Gustad's and Dilnavaz's proudest moment in the Khodadad Building came when Sohrab put on a homemade production of King Lear, pressing Darius into service, plus a host of school and Building friends. The performance was held at the far end of the compound, and the audience brought their own chairs. Sohrab, of course, was Lear, producer, director, costume designer and set designer. He also wrote an abridged version of the play, wisely accepting that even an audience of doting parents could become catatonic if confronted by more than an hour's worth of ultra-amateurish Shakespeare. (79)

### The Love for English Names

In Mistry's *Family Matters*, Jehangir is also fond of the Christian name Jon Chinoy as it sounds English. The author states:

Jehangir liked the names on the Catholic team: Henry, George, Francis, William, and Philip. They sounded like the names in Enid Blyton's stories. Although the surnames were D' Souza and Fernandes and D' Mello, not at all like the surnames of the Famous Five or the Five Find-Outers. He wished he could change his own name. Jehangir, Jehangla, Jehangoo. Could be shortened to Jehan. Which was a lot like John. John Chenoy. He liked the sound of it, drawing him one step closer to the lovely world of those books. (209)

The Parsis shorten their names to sound English, and it has also been displayed by Firdaus Kanga in his novel *Trying to Grow* in the following manner:

We delight in stretching, snipping and squashing given names out of all recognition, with a view to making them roll off the tongue easily and, perhaps, even sound English. So the boys who are named Fareedoon become Freddy, Naorji becomes Neville, 169 Adi becomes Eddy, and everyone is delighted with his new name and what he hopes is his new image. (26)

### The English Language: A Symbol of Eliticism

Parsi parents feel satisfied with their children's adaptation of the English language with ease. In *Such a Long Journey*, Mistry illustrates Sohrab's interview for admission to the English medium school:

Gaining admission was not easy. The school's motto was *Duc In Altum*, adhered to with especial rigour when selecting new students. There was a tough entrance examination, followed by an interview, and Sohrab had done so well in both. Ten years old, and already his English was fluent. Not like that other interview for kindergarten when he was three, where the headmistress had asked, 'what soap do you use?' and Sohrab had answered, 'Sojjo soap', using the Gujarati word for good". (66)

In *Family Matters*, Yezad is confident of his competence in the English language for getting an immigration visa for migration from India to Canada.

Pulling out a sheaf of pages, he explained that years ago, when he was writing to the Canadian High Commission, he had decided that because his qualifications were limited- he was not an engineer, nurse, technician, or anyone in high demand- his letter would have to accomplish what degrees and diplomas normally would. It should make the High Commissioner sit up and take notice that here was an applicant worthy of Canada. Words had the power to sway, words had accomplished mighty things, they had won wars. Surely the language of Churchill and Shakespeare and Milton, ignited with a careful mix of reason and passion, could win him a mere immigration visa. (240-241)

### The Regional Language: A Symbol of Poverty

The Parsi community considers Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi as the languages of the lower class. The Parsis are reluctant to use various local languages in the different states of India and prefer English to all the regional languages. In *Family Matters*, Jal communicates in a mixture of Hindi and English to the employees of the ration shop who

took his stepfather Nariman home after falling into a ditch. He tries to make them understand, "Chalo, bring him in! Nahin, don't put him on the floor! Sofa ki ooper rakho! Wait, maybe inside on the palung is better" (47).

Mistry runs a test in linguistic intercross with Parsi contrivance. His works are full of Parsi slang, emphasising the significance of English to the Parsis. Though English has become the national language in most colonial countries, most writers do not adopt it as it has been considered the colonisers' language. These writers believe this language fails to bridge the gap between the native culture and only promotes English culture. A Kenyan novelist, Ngugi Wa Thionga, started writing in the local African language with an aim to underscore the significance of his native language as compared to English. Another African writer, Chinua Achebe, opposes Thionga's perspective in his work, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* and states:

For me, there is no other choice. I have been given this language, and I intend to use it... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (103)

In the post-colonial era, all the writers use vocabulary from the regional languages, and Mistry is no exception. This research paper underscores the Parsis's devotion to the English language, culture and tradition. This approach of the Parsis to adopt the Western language and culture isolates them from the rest of the Dominant groups in India.

### Conclusion

The present research paper investigates Parsis' love for the English language and culture. Their settlement in Gujarat in the ninth century forced them to adopt the Indian language and culture, but with the arrival of the English in the sixteenth century, they preferred English to Hindi and other regional languages. The animosity and reluctance towards Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi led to Parsis' identity crisis. They considered these local

languages a symbol of poverty and English a language of elites. They adopted the English language and culture, which suited their "Persian glory". It led to the fact that the Parsis became anglophiles and took pride in the language of their oppressors' oppressor.

Mistry's writings examine the Parsi community's psyche concerning the Indian languages. The Parsis have been so anglophile that they even neglected Avesta, their original language. Nowadays, it is considered to be a dead language. Mistry underscores this concept through various characters in his writings and displays the significance of language as an assimilation strategy, highlighting the Parsi community's commitment to English and their hatred towards Indian languages.

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