

Parsi Identity and Heritage in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*

¹Mr. C. Kishore Haan, ²Dr. R. Kavitha

¹(Reg:No:MKU23PFOL10953)

Part-Time Research Scholar in English PG and Research Department of English
G.T.N Arts College Dindigul-624005, Tamil Nadu, India Email: haankishore@gmail.com

²Associate Professor and Head Department of English

G.T.N Arts College Dindigul-624005, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstracts

In *The Crow Eaters*, Bapsi Sidhwa explores cultural and historical subjects in a light-hearted, comic manner, mocking parts of Parsi society. *The Crow Eaters* explores the culture and community of the Parsi family, as well as broader social concerns including Freddy's relationship with his mother-in-law and the bond between mother and daughter. For instance, during Freddy's visit to the mystic, he is instructed to cut his mother-in-law's hair. Yazdi, like other communities in Pakistan and India, has long been concerned about love marriages. The present research examines Parsi identity, charity, sense of duty and heritage.

Keywords: Parsi identity, culture, heritage, charity and sense of duty

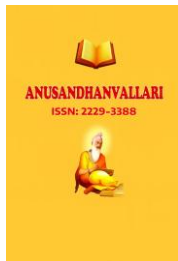
Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa was born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1938. Her parents, Peshotan and Tehmina Bharatha lived in Karachi before moving to Lahore with her family. She experienced polio at the age of two and was nine years old when partition occurred in 1947, events that would shape the character Lenny in her novels. In 1957, she graduated from Kinnaird College for Women in Lahore with a Bachelor's Degree. She was one of the first Pakistani novelists to write in the English language. She expresses her thoughts on writing. She holds the belief that a good start is half-done. She is Pakistan's premier diasporic writer and her English-language novels represent her personal experiences of Partition in the Indian subcontinent, women's harassment and immigrants to the United States, she is a natural storyteller. She is currently based in Houston, Texas, United States. She identifies as a 'Punjabi Parsi Pakistan woman'.

The Parsis have a custom of burying their deceased at the tops of hills, where they are protected from vultures. They regarded offering their ultimate remnants to the vulture as a kind of devotion. *The Crow Eaters* parodies Parsi culture and family life in a light-hearted, comedic tone, while simultaneously addressing societal ills. It's also a black comedy. This genre combines comedy and satire, often addressing serious subjects or discussing logic humorously. The Parsis have a custom of burying their deceased at the tops of hills, where they are protected from vultures. They regarded offering their ultimate remnants to the vulture as a kind of devotion. *The Crow Eaters* parodies Parsi culture and family life in a light-hearted, comedic tone, while simultaneously addressing societal ills. It's also a black comedy. This genre combines comedy and satire, often addressing serious subjects or discussing logic humorously.

Parsis

The Parsis are an ethno-religious minority in India. They primarily lived in Bombay on the west coast of the



subcontinent. In Pakistan, the most of them live in Lahore and Karachi. The Parsis are of Persian descent. The term 'Parsi' refers to a native of 'Fars,' or 'Pars,' an ancient Persian province located in southern Iran. They fled their homeland a thousand three hundred years ago to keep their religion from being Islamized by the invading Arabs. Their religion, Zoroastrianism, was created approximately 200 B.C. and they follow the prophet Zarathushtra.

The Parsi, as a peace-loving community, have always lived in harmony with their neighbors, no matter where they live. Numerically, they have been too small a community to be perceived as a threat or to have a significant collision of interests with any other community. Furthermore, their objectives have been mostly professional and industrial, with little desire for political gain or power in India or elsewhere in the world. It's also worth noting that they never asked for preferential treatment, job reservations or anything else.

Parsis are also wise and there is a mythology to prove it. They fled Persia due to religious persecution and came on the Gujarat coast. Their intelligence allowed them to secure a smooth entry into Gujarat. Shalini Pandey observes: "Sidhwa has assessed the Parsi community's role in India's partition and freedom struggle. Her research focuses on the Parsi community. She makes an effort to sketch a map of their evolving identities" (27). According to history, when they landed in Sanjan port on the Gujarat coast, they were taken to the local monarch, Jadav Rana. As verbal communication was a challenge between the king and the recently arrived Parsis, the local king instructed his attendants to send a bowl full of milk, signifying that there was no room in the palace for the Parsis. The Parsis, with their wisdom, poured a few grains of sugar into the bowl, implying that they would merge with the natives as the sugar melts in milk.

Another symbolic interpretation of this deed was that, just as sugar sweetens milk, their presence will sweeten the locals' lives. When King Jadav Rana took the Parsis into his fold, he was delighted by their intelligence and gladly accepted their demands, which included freedom of worship, the ability to raise their children in their tradition and cultivating land. But, in exchange, he imposed five requirements.

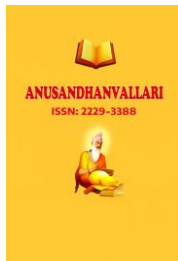
According to the five requirements, the Parsis acquired Gujarati as their mother tongue and eventually forgot their ancient language. As a mark of respect for the second criteria, Parsi women have adopted saris as their clothing. Orthodox Parsi ladies wear a 'Sidhi' sari in the Gujarati style. In terms of weapons, the Parsis gave all but two swords and two maces to protect the Holy Fire. Due to the fourth condition, the Parsis do not consume beef even if there is no religious taboo against it.

Discussion

Bapsi Sidhwa wrote the novel *The Crow Eaters* to show her respect for the Parsi community. It's a novel about her own town. In recreating the Parsi ethos, she discovers a surprisingly rich vein of humor. Upadhyia claims: "*The Crow Eaters* is a fictional, yet typical saga of a Parsi family and the corresponding social milieu. It is the only novel of its kind, as it is the first account of the workings of the Parsi mind, social behavior, value systems and customs" (28).

It is the only novel of its sort that depict Parsi value systems, rituals, social behavior and the Parsi intellect. It follows the lives and fortunes of the Junglewallas, a Parsi family from British India in the early twentieth century. According to Appala Raju Korada, "Parsi faith, there was no signs of reincarnation. Hence the Parsi family had a tremendous influence of Indian culture and tradition" (635). They have started with a single general merchant store in Lahore and are able to expand their business to a chain of stores across various North Indian cities in just one generation. They possess a license to handle all cargo movement between Peshawar and Afghanistan. His affiliation with the British Raj was strong. Though many other Parsis had followed the British banner, he stood out in his ambitions, representing the majority of pre-Independence Parsis. He has earned the unique distinction of being included in the Zarathusti calendar of renowned men and women.

Zoroastrianism places a high value on honesty and righteousness in the workplace and the economy. There is no usury in Parsi living, which is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Zoroastrian life. The



Parsis have despised debt and considered it a source of shame. A true Parsi should be generous with charity. The Parsi culture emphasizes philanthropy and care for public life. They raise charity funds in proportion to their means and numbers. Another distinguishing feature of this group is the obligation and sense of duty to fellow Parsis. They support one another as if they were one giant close-knit family, celebrating accomplishment and uniting against failure. There are no Parsi beggars in a country full of beggars. Sidhwa expresses this quality of her community as: “The moment a Parsi strikes it rich, he devotes a big portion of his energies to charity. He builds schools, hospitals and finance. Notorious misers, they are paradoxically generous to a cause” (CE 21).

In the Parsi community, the death of a family member is associated with philanthropic work. Consistent with this tendency, Freddy issues a ‘customary announcement’ upon the death of his son Soli. He claims that his family would build a school in Karachi. ‘Freddy’s charity work is laced with self-promotion. He himself admits: “I have friends – loved them – for what could be ‘ulterior motives’ and yet the friendship so made are amongst my sweetest, longest and more since I cherish them still” (CE 11).

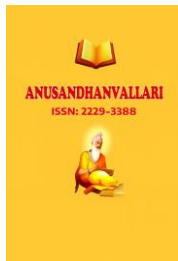
Another event confirms that chastity has an ulterior motive. Former Deputy Commissioner Charles B. Allen granted Freddy a commercial license with Afghanistan as a sign of his gratitude. Freddy is described as a cunning and tactful Parsi who balances generosity and self-interest. Freddy’s altruistic actions are flavoured with self-promotion. He has once helped Bobby Katrakto avoid police prosecution for murdering a beggar by recklessly driving his Silver Ghost Rolls-Royce and paid Rs. 50,000 as expenses to bribe Mr. Gibbons, the Inspector General of Police. In truth, he has merely paid Rs. 10,000 as a bribe and kept the rest in his purse. Overall, Faredoon has crafted his philanthropic image to appear altruistic in order to expand his commercial ties and keep the perception of being a British darling.

As a counter-foil, Sidhwa portrays Freddy’s son, Yazdi, as a living example of the Zoroastrian value of virginity, to the point of self-denial. He has saintly traits and a purpose in life. He represents complete selflessness. Unlike his father, he denies himself delight for the well-being of those around him. Yazdi takes charity to an extreme. He has once returned from school barefoot, having given his shoes to an orphan in his class.

A few days later, he returns sans his shirt. A day later, he climbs up to the flat wearing only his homemade pants. He had handed his clothing to four beggars near the Regal Cinema Square. He is moved to a boarding school in Karachi. He believes that he is completely free to expand his humanitarian efforts. When Yazdi drops out of school, he is found wandering around the city, wasting his allowance and fees on beggars and sleeping on park benches and pavements. He finds solace and enjoyment by serving lepers outside Karachi. Yazdi is troubled by the Parsis’ worldly perspective, as were his father and brother Billy. Freddy’s attempts to reason with Yazdi ultimately fruitless. He tells: “I cannot eat a bellyful and sleep between silken sheets when my brothers have nowhere to stay” (CE 185).

Yazdi ultimately splits out from his family. His half of the family’s money has been placed in a trust and he receives monthly interest. He spends the money on feeding dying children and purchasing medicine for the sick, who are left to deteriorate like exposed excrement in congested bazaar lanes. Taimur Ali Shah, Naznina Hakim Khan and Junaid Khan observe: “Money is an important thing in people’s lives, but it is not necessary to consider money as the central source of happiness for people to live” (4518). His disenchantment with love may possibly have contributed to his ultimate renunciation of materialistic life. He becomes a supporter of Mazdak, the first communist. To Yazdi, Mazdak is “A Zarathustra ancestor. He realized centuries ago that all material goods, including women had to be shared” (CE 215). This portrayal of Yazdi contributes to the novel’s richness and variety, as well as demonstrating that not all Parsis are types and do not react to stereotypes. *The Crow Eaters* remains a good introduction to Parsi rituals and celebrations. They promote the purity of mind and body. That is why Zoroastrians are supposed to bathe before each big ritual. They take pride in keeping their homes clean.

Fire is the symbol of Zoroastrianism, just as the cross is for Christianity. In their ethos, fire represents a variety of concepts. Fire purifies everything, hence it represents purity. It also refers to the ‘divine spark’ or



'inner fire' in humans. The presence of fire in a Zoroastrian temple or residence serves as a constant reminder to keep their 'inner fire alive'. Freddy's family honours the sacred fire by feeding it with expensive offerings. Their home is usually fragrant with sandalwood and incense. Parsis have a strong belief that all natural elements are sacred and should not be polluted. As a result, the vast majority of Parsis refrain from smoking. Freddy and his family adhere to this canon.

Conservatives in the community will not even allow the cooking fire to be extinguished. It is kept in ashes at night and revived in the morning. All Parsis should wear 'Sudhra' and 'Freddy' and everyone else in the story follows suit. The exquisitely woven 'Kustis' of Putli, Freddy's wife, have also gained popularity in Karachi.

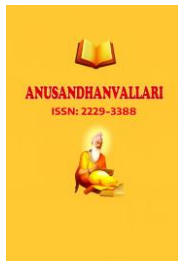
The Parsi population in Lahore is insufficient to construct a Tower of Silence. Because there would not be enough corpses to attract a group of vultures to consume the dead bodies, they have kept a Parsi graveyard. When Freddy's favourite son Soli died, his remains is carefully maintained within four marble slabs to prevent decomposition from polluting the environment. Apart from this aberration, all other burial procedures have followed Zoroastrian guidelines. In the Zoroastrian religion, the priest performing the final ceremonies adopts a dog with two eye-like spots above its eyes. A dog is brought into the chamber where Soli's body is held before the funeral rites are administered. Sidhwa writes about the significance of this ritual. "It is believed that his four eyes can ward off evil spirits and can detect the faintest hint of life" (CE 177).

The offering of one's deceased body to hungry birds is a Parsi's final altruistic gesture on earth. In *The Crow Eaters*, Jerbanoo proudly refers to this ritual, which embarrasses Freddy. Jerbanoo says: "It was his final act of charming; every Parsi is committed to feeding his last remains to the vultures. You may cheat them but not God. As my beloved husband Jehangirjee Chinimi said, "our Zarathustra faith is based on charring" (CE, 47).

Parsis keep their group identity through their attire. Even in terms of clothing, generational differences can be seen. Freddy and his family take pride in their traditional style of attire. When Faredoon goes to pay tribute to the British empire or to the Government House for formal celebrations, he is consciously dressed in a starched white coat wrap secured with bows at the neck and waist, immaculate white pyjamas and a turban. His mother-in-law, Jerbanoo and his wife, Putli, are never seen in public without mathabana's, which are white kerchiefs tied around the hair to fit like skull caps. The holy thread ringing their waist is austere shown, while sacred knickers (Sudhra) worn beneath short blouses, humbly apron their sari-wrapped hips.

The next generation of Parsis, Behram and Tanya, are gradually abandoning traditional attire. Billy wants Tanya to appear westernized and to communicate in English, yet at home he wants her to be domestic and subservient. Papiya Bhattacharjee points out: "Parsis are said most westernized of the communities in India" (1). The British accorded the Parsis unique status as a dependable trading partner and broker for business and trade. At the same time, the English refused to accept the Parsis as their own people, despite their equal education and considerable Anglicization. Parsis strongly dislike identifying with other Indian communities. This has resulted in a mental separation from India. Freddy harbours a profound suspicion of the National Movement. He aggressively encourages his children to remain loyal to the British. He believes that anyone who goes against the wishes of the British is deserving of condemnation. Freddy considers the destiny of the Parsis after independence. "We will stay where we are let the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or whoever rules. What does it matter? The Sun will continue to rise and the Sun, continue to set!" (CE 282). Faredoon Junglewalla's opinions reflect the feelings of the majority of Parsis, particularly bankers, business owners and civil officers. However, some Parsis disagree and have joined the Nationalist movement.

The Parsis' long-standing attachment to the British stems from Zoroastrian religious teachings about loyalty to a ruler and the intimate tie between state and community. In *The Crow Eaters*, Freddy takes every opportunity to show his allegiance to the British. Soon after settling in Lahore, he visits Government House and enters his name in the visitors' register. This is his way of displaying his devotion to the "Queen and Crown". On occasions such as Coronation ceremonies, royal birthdays, the entrance of a new Viceroy or the death in the



royal family, the Parsis display their collective loyalty through public assemblies and Jashans (group prayers).

The Parsis who settled in India recognize that as a minority community, they can only survive by remaining loyal to the dominant authorities. They wish to avoid tensions and confrontations between themselves and the ruling party. They also want to maintain their status as a minority community. RachnaDavi perceives: "... attempts to present a map of their changing identity. In their way, she has touched the hidden nook of his secret community. The main stress is this that their culture is their identity. Paris's don't like to disclose Parsi culture. They always believed in that they ought to preserve their culture from other major influences that surround them" (613). As a result, Freddy, his son Billy and other Parsis are obedient to British rule. This act of theirs has ensured peace, legal security and economic growth. The novel depicts the Parsis' flattery in a comical light, but it also exposes an underlying identity dilemma and a desire for security for their entire group. Freddy puts:

... our sovereigns! Where do you think we'd be if we did not curry favour. Next to the nawabs, rajas, princelings we are the greatest toadies of the British Empire! These are not ugly words, mind you. They are the sweetest dictates of our delicious need to exist to live and prosper in place. (CE 12)

Freddy's respectful and attentive demeanor towards Mr. Charles P. Allen, the Deputy Commissioner and his references to his children as 'my prince' and 'my princess' are reasonable. Aside from his unwavering commitment, his kindness and benevolence earn him a devoted following and numerous friends. He has prepared to take the covering from his deceased son's face, which is considered disrespectful to Parsi customs. He rationalizes and says: "They had stood all the while to see my son; let them. What does it matter if they are not Parsis? They are my brothers; and if I can look upon my son's face, so can they" (CE 179).

Mr. Sodawalla's son is in severe need of his assistance. Freddy acts immediately. He responds not for selfish reasons, but because the Parsi community is at stake. He states, "Something will have to be done... Not for that indolent bastard's sake but for the good name of our community. We can't let it around that a Parsi is in jail for smuggling opium" (CE 152). Thus, Freddy has a strong sense of community, which has won him the title of patriarch in the Parsi community of Lahore. In addition, he achieves social position and affluence on foreign soil.

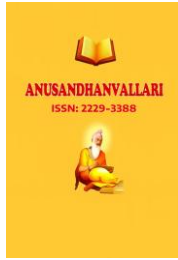
The Parsi's subservient attitude has led them to adopt British customs and manners. They regard English education in a Christian missionary school to be crucial, not because of superior knowledge, but because it provides opportunities for quick social mobility. Freddy takes his wife Putli to the formal tea parties held on the magnificent lawns of the Government House. He expects her to meet and behave like any bold English girl. According to him, such a party allows people to advance their contexts while also strengthening friendships. Despite his shaky mastery of the English language, he takes pride in his ability to use it. He would even recite English proverbs and swear like an Englishman.

Conclusion

Bapsi Sidhwa closes her story by highlighting the continuing spirit of the Parsi community, who, despite experiencing the uncertainties of freedom, eventually reassert their dedication to survival and their distinct cultural identity in *The Crow Eaters*. Fareedoon's pragmatic outlook, which concludes that the sun will continue to rise regardless of who leads, exemplifies this tenacious mindset, implying that the community will not be swept away by political instability but will find a way to stabilize and carry on their traditions. The novel concludes with a vivid, hilarious, and incisive portrait of this insular environment, emphasizing the community's complex connection with tradition and modernity and consolidating Sidhwa's achievement in giving Pakistani literature a distinct voice in English.

Works Cited

- [1] Bhattacharjee, Papiya. "Voices of Ethnicity in Selected Parsi Indian English Novels." *The Criterion An International Journal in English*. Vol. IV. Issue III, June 2013.
- [2] Darity. *When Cultures Collide: Managing Successfully Across Culture*. London Press. 2008.



-
- [3] Davi, Rachna. "The Crow Eaters: The Hilarious Saga of Parsi Family." *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*. Vol. 8, Issue-V, October 2017.
- [4] Jamil, S. A. E. and Ahmed. *Critical Discourse Analysis of BapsiSidhwa's The Crow Eaters*. Elementary Education Online. 2021.
- [5] Korada, Appala Raju. "The Multilayered Texture of the Lives of Women in and Around the Domicile: The Crow Eaters by BapsiSidhwa." *YMER*. Volume 22, Issue 06, 2023.
- [6] Pandey, Shalini. "Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*: A Delightful Insight into the Parsi Society." *International Educational Applied Scientific Research Journal [IEASRJ]*. Volume : 09, Issue : 03, Mar 2024.
- [7] Shah, Taimur Ali. Naznina Hakim Khan and Junaid Khan. "An Analysis of *The Crow Eaters* by BapsiSidhwa from the Perspective of Cultural Materialism." *Journal of Arts and Linguistics* Volume3, Issue3, 2025.
- [8] Sidhwa, Bapsi. *The Crow Eaters*. India Penguin, 2000. Singh, D. P. *Invisible Subordination: Reading the Crow Eaters through a Feminist Lens*. Language in India. 2012.