



PARSI ETHOS IN THE NOVELS OF SIDHWA

M. MANJULA¹, Dr V.B.CHITRA²

¹Research Scholar, ²Research Supervisor, Associate Professor, Head Department of English and
Chairman BOS
Department of English, JNTU Anantapur



M. MANJULA



Dr V.B.CHITRA

ABSTRACT

The Parsis are a religious and ethnic minority, who came to India and settled on the western coasts with their diasporic experience and adaptable attitude. Till then, they maintain a constricted social life within their miniscule community to maintain the purity of the Parsi or seed and to conform to their basic credo of neutrality. The Parsi novels emerged as an outcome of the intellectual exposure of this highly educated, socially progressed diasporic community, where shifting and change is constant. Bapsi Sidhwa is one such Parsi woman writer, who has tried to give the Parsi novels a dimension by explaining and analyzing the Parsi world view from a new perspective. This paper will explore parsi ethos, milieu, idiosyncracies in the writings of Bapsi Sidhwa. Sidhwa interprets challenges and modifies the Parsi worldview and the unique philosophy embedded in it for contributing to the development of Parsi writings.

Keywords: Parsi, Credo, Ethos, Milieu, Idiosyncracies.

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Of all literary forms, the short story and the novel seem most suited to the Parsi temperament, for they gave unlimited scope for Parsi turns of phrase. Parsi novel in English came into its own in the Eighties with the appearance of Bapsi Sidhwa on the literary scene. The emergence of promising writers like Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai, Farrukh Dhondy and Ardashir Vakil has given a new direction to parsi novel in English. Steeped in the Parsi myths and legends, these writers use English as an instrument of self-assertion. The triumph of the Parsi novelists in the use of English gives us a peep into the turbulent Parsi mind of today. In asserting themselves, they re-define the identity of the Zoroastrian community. The Parsis are from a minority group in India mainly living on

the west coast of the Indian Sub-Continent. They are the followers of the famous prophet Zoroaster or Zarathustra and they are also known as Zoroastrians.

Bapsi Sidhwa was born in Karachi on August 11, 1938. Her novels like *The Crow Eaters*, (1982), *Cracking India* (1991), and *The American Brat* (1993) are remarkable for their stylistic dexterity, parsi ethos and richness and complexity of themes. Bapsi Sidhwa is proud of her Zoroastrian faith and its foundation is based on Zoroastrian ethical system is humata (good thoughts), hukhta (good words) and hvarshta (good deeds). The true Parsis are always tolerant about the faiths and beliefs of others. They mix freely with members of other faiths, sympathise with them in their sorrows and afflictions and work

to alleviate their misery. A great importance is given to righteousness and honesty in Zoroastrianism. One of the notable features of Zoroastrian life is that there is no usury in Parsi life. Zoroastrianism always lays emphasis on charity. The tendency to be loyal to the state gives Parsism the rank of a state religion. Loyalty is a self-evident percept for the Parsis. These certain good principles of Zoroastrianism continue to offer sustenance and moral strength to the Parsis. Zoroastrianism is one of the earliest religions and its origin goes back to 2000 BC.

Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *The Crow Eaters* has given detailed information about the customs, ceremonies, beliefs, superstitions, rites, rituals, myths, legends and other aspects of the Parsi life. The novel which describes itself as the hilarious saga of Parsi family, was a controversial novel. Its publication was marked by a mock bomb threat. She herself tells Montenegro in an interview:

The book launch took place at an international hotel in Lahore and since there are not so many books written in English launched it was quite a function. . . And there was a bomb threat which subsequently I realised was from a Parsi who felt very strongly about the book. It took me some more time to realize the turmoil the book had created within the community. They thought I was revealing secrets that I had no business giving out. . . they felt I was damaging the image. . . they felt threatened by it, although it was written out of great affection (*The Crow Eaters* 33).

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*, as the title speaks for itself, is about the Parsi community whose members are called Kagra-Khaow. The element of joy, the slapstick uproar, has earned the Parsis the label Kagra-Khaow, that is, Crow Eaters. When Freddy and his family along with the other Parsis go to the station to bid Mr. Adenwalla farewell, a group of children seeing the Parsis shouted: "Parsi, Parsi, crow eaters! Parsi, Parsi, crow eaters!" Regarding this Bapsi Sidhwa herself explains that this little ditty is a well earned tribute to their notorious ability to talk ceaselessly at the top of their voices like an

assembly of crows. But it is not a crow-eating community.

It is the only novel of its kind, as it is the first account of the working of the Parsi mind, social behaviour, value systems and customs. It also traces the attempts of Parsis, in the late nineteenth century, migrating from the west coast and settling in the more salubrious climate of North Indian cities. Bapsi accurately depicts historical facts interwoven with satirical fiction and lampoon which aptly recreates the Parsi milieu and yet makes for delightful reading. In just one generation, the Junglewalla family increased their business from single general merchant store in Lahore to a chain of stores in several North Indian cities.

Sidhwa has tried to immortalize this endangered species by capturing its quintessential ethos in three of her four novels. Sidhwa writes it to preserve her Parsi community which is virtually on the verge of extinction. This novel breaks new grounds as it portrays the Parsi community in ironical mode for the first time in literature. It was attacked by a section of the Parsi community which considered it to be an unfair portrayal. According to Upadhyay, this novel made Sidhwa the "Parsi whom other Parsis love to hate" (28).

However, this criticism arises from the assumption that the chief concern of the novel is to portray the life of Parsis in India. She was disliked because she revealed the community's secrets to the whole world. The author herself attempts a disclaimer by acknowledging, in a way, the basis for the controversy, in her "Author's Note" in the novel *The Crow Eaters*:

Because of a deep-rooted admiration for my diminishing community—and an enormous affection for it—this work of fiction has been a labour of love. The nature of comedy being to exaggerate, the incidents in the book do not reflect at all upon the integrity of a community whose honesty and sense of honour—not to mention its tradition of humour as typified by the Parsi natak—are legend" (*The Crow Eaters* 7).

To this Sidhwa herself explains that this little ditty is a well-earned tribute to their notorious ability to

talk ceaselessly at the top of their voices like an assembly of crows. But it is not a crow-eating community. As Nariman says to Portia in Perin Bharucha's *The Fire Worshipper*, "It isn't the Parsis who eat crows but the other way round. And anyway, they're not crows but vultures to whom the dead are fed" (*The Fire Worshipper* 37).

In *The Crow Eaters* when Yazdi, the second son of Freddie proposes to marry an Anglo Indian girl, Rosy,

Freddie says:

I believe in some kind of a tiny spark that is carried from parent to child, on through generations...a kind of inherited memory of wisdom and righteousness, reaching back to the times of Zarathustra, the Magi, the Mazdiasnians. But what happens if you marry outside our kind? The spark so delicately nurtured, so subtly balanced, meets something totally alien and unmatched. Its precise balance is scrambled. It reverts to the primitive. (*The Crow Eaters* 128-129)

The Crow Eaters raised a great disturbance in her community for betraying the secrets of the Parsi religion in the form of caricature. But it has instances of Sidhwa's conformity to the acceptable and benevolent concepts of the Zoroastrianism. Jaydipsinh Dodiya in his book *Bapsi Sidhwa* writes:

The Crow Eaters depicts the Parsi mind, their social behaviour, their customs and traditions and their rituals. For Bapsi Sidhwa this novel has been a labour of love because of a deep-rooted admiration for her diminishing community and an enormous affection for it. (40)

This monotheistic religion believes in action and not asceticism and worldly renunciation. Besides, emphasizing on the custom of helping the poor neighbours and benevolence towards its own community and others, this oldest ethno religious group (founded nearly about 2000 B.C.) demands three moral ethics from its followers. So, Freddie takes his whole life to realize the laws of Ahura Mazda which in a very poignant and significant manner proves Sidhwa's internalization of the basic and essential ethos Zoroastrianism.

Like the narrator of *Ice-Candy-Man*, Lenny, she was contracted by polio in her childhood. Apart from *The Crow Eaters* and *Ice Candy Man*, Sidhwa's *An American Brat* also projects the quintessential values of the Parsi worldview in a newly packaged and globally modified version. Sidhwa here at the same time criticizes the reactionary ideas in her religion and champions what is relevant for this time and this world. The Ginwallas want their daughter to be free from the fundamentalist ideas of the then Pakistan and sends their only daughter Feroza to U.S. to give her life and outlook a global exposure. But their progressive attitude gets a terrible rebuff when Feroza decides to choose a Jewish American, David Press, as her life-mate. Zareen, the girl's mother gate crashes into their life as a representative of the traditional world, with all their worn out ideas of the Parsi-Non Parsi discrimination and somehow manages to devastate their future plans. Inter-faith marriage is a taboo to the Parsis, which Sidhwa shows with all its discourses and counter discourses in her works. The novel *Ice Candy Man* is mostly based on the real life situations of the author. Speaking on the autobiographical content of the novel Sidhwa says:

In *Ice-Candy-Man* or *Cracking India*, the first part is autobiographical, except that the central character of the child is not me per se...This child is informed by my adult consciousness. So a lot of me is there, but other bits are purely imaginative. For instance, the relationship between Lenny and her male cousin - I had no such male cousin! I had no such Ayah either. But we did have servants like Imam Din and Yusuf. So partially I took things directly from my own experience, but the rest is created." (*My Place in the World* 291)

In the novels *The Crow Eaters*, and *Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa recounts the traditional story of the Parsis' arrival from Iran to India in the seventh century in which the Indian Prince sent his Vazir to them with a glass of milk filled to the brim signifying that his land was full and prosperous and he didn't want outsiders with a different religion and alien ways to disturb its harmony. In response, the Parsis stirred a teaspoonful of sugar carefully into the milk

and sent it back suggesting that they would get absorbed into his country like the sugar in the milk, and with their decency and industry sweeten the lives of his subjects.

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Manek, Feroza's maternal uncle, who gave her initial welcome and subsequent shelter in America, despite having a branded first-world lifestyle, obediently marries a benign and docile girl, Aban, giving respect to his parents and community and its faith. This bluntly shows the typical Parsi psyche of double standard. They are western in their education and social lifestyle but when it comes to their religion and ethno-cultural codes they are never ready to transcend them. Sidhwa very pertinently makes Feroza "An American Brat" (Zareen at the end of the novel calls her daughter so) to question these ideas of her religion. After getting broken off in her relation at the mediation of her parents Feroza discovers new interpretations of life. She decides not to get married with David, and at the same time also refuses to get back to her homeland, Pakistan, her familiar world, her own community, her parents and relations. Feroza's staying back in America not only marks her revolt against her community but also charts how she internalizes the basic and essential ideas of her

religion in her own way with a new kind of outlook towards life and its philosophy. Sidhwa writes:

There would never be another David, but there would be other men, and who knew, perhaps someday she might like someone enough to marry him...It wouldn't matter if he was a Parsi or of another faith. She would be more sure of herself and wouldn't let anyone interfere... As for her religion, no one could take it away from her; she carried its fire in her heart. (*An American Brat* 317)

In *An American Brat*, if the concern for maintaining the unique identity is one of the major driving force of Parsi community, there is other, though less perceptible, urge which takes concrete form due to the close proximity of living in a multicultural milieu. Bapsi Sidhwa's novelistic space provides excellent ground for these contesting claims between identity, multiculturalism and generational clashes and as a writer she is not limited by them rather her novels are enriched by all these complexities and contraries.

Some of the prevalent Parsi customs show how strong the idea of equal status of all in a society is as is revealed by the Parsi system of disposal of the dead bodies. They are exposed to sun's rays and offered to birds on the same platform so that a king's corpse may lie side by side with that of a pauper. All are equal and no monument is erected to tell the glory of the great as no costly funerals or coffins for the rich and the powerful. Parsis still stick to the ancient method of disposal of dead bodies. There is an explicit prohibition against cremation or burial underground. A Parsi's last charitable act on earth is the donation of his dead body to hungry vultures. Bapsi Sidhwa describes Parsis are a tiny community who leave their dead in open-roofed enclosures atop hills—to be devoured by vultures. The British romanticized this bizarre graveyard with the title 'Tower of Silence.' Just a word or two about the Tower, the marble floor slopes towards the centre where there is deep hollow. This receives the bones and blood. Underground ducts from the hollow lead to four deep wells outside the Tower. These wells are full of lime, charcoal and sulphur and provide an excellent filter. The outer rim of the

floor is made up of enough marble slabs to accommodate fifty male bodies, then comes accommodation for fifty females, and the innermost space, around the hollow, is for children. It takes the birds only minutes to strip the body of all flesh. Now, the height of the Tower is precisely calculated. The vultures, taking off at full throttle, are only just able to clear the Tower wall. If they try to get away with anything held between their claws or beaks they invariably crash against the wall. Understandably, only professional pall-bearers are allowed to witness the gory spectacle inside the Tower (*The Crow Eaters* 45). In *The Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa says that this system of disposing of the dead body originated in the rocky terrain of Parsia at a time when arable land was too precious to be used as a graveyard. But in *An American Brat*, she puts forward a religious argument: "Since the Parsees consider earth, water and fire holy, they do not bury, drown, or burn polluted corpses. Instead, as a last act of charity, they leave the body exposed to the sun and the birds of prey, mainly vultures, in these open-roofed circular structures" (*An American Brat* 269-270).

The Parsi worldview with all its peculiarities to maintain the purity of the community has very naturally come into the periphery of Sidhwa's creative world as the Parsis have a miniscule community, where the members are serious about their beliefs and ideas and rites. They deal with it not only to conform but also to question and challenge for their betterment and modification.

This unique and restricted worldview of the Parsis, besides giving a unique identity of their own, has also contributed to their creative writings as well. Actually, the Parsis are keener on writing about their customs, beliefs, traditions and religion. V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar in his book *Parsi Novel* comments: "..., the Zoroastrian religion offers them the much-needed emotional space and sustains them on the alien land." (14).

But terming doesn't merely label and compartmentalize but offers a space for better flourishing and proper articulation of the basic uniqueness inherent in it. The Parsis are gifted with this uniqueness in their ethnicity, religion and unique social locus stand in which demand a clear

location of their own to express them in their creative writings.

As a writer firmly rooted in Parsi consciousness, Sidhwa explores both the superficial and the profound dimension of the comic mode, conveying in the process, the diversity and complexity of life. She has not only presented the various aspects of Parsi life but also provided the non-Parsi world with a better understanding of their ways of life, their faith and values. The reflection of the Parsi ethos and comic tone in her writings make her a trendsetter and one of the finest Asian writers of English fiction.

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