

Representation of Parsi Culture and Identity in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the various intricacies of the Parsee's culture and identity. Apart from this, Sidhwa's engaging descriptions of the multiple facets of the life of Parsees, their rituals, their practices, remove the veil of secrecy which covered much of their activities and made them an object of curiosity to other communities. The approach of the writer behind articulating the ideas may be because of bringing them from margin to center. Bapsi Sidhwa can also be brave enough to risk criticism from her own community and do what she really believes- depict her community with a vision which sees not just the immediate future but a long term perspective.

Keywords: Parsee, ethnicity, culture, identity, Zarathustra, Zoroastrianism, Navzote, subjugation

The Parsees are an ethno-religious minority community in India, living mostly on the West Coast of the subcontinent, especially in Mumbai. In Pakistan, Parsees reside in Karachi and Lahore. The Parsees are a miniscule community as compared to other communities like Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The origin of the word 'Parsi' is from "*pars*" or "*Fars*", (*Parsi Fiction Vol. 1*) an ancient Persian province, now in Southern Iran. When the Parsees came from Persia to seek shelter in India because of the invasion of Arabs, the name of province was added to their identity. The Parsees left their homeland over twelve hundred years ago in the search for a safer place to maintain their identity and practice their religion, both of which were threatened by the Arab invasion of Persia. The Parsees stayed for about nineteen years at the port of Diu before finally shoring up at the port of Sanjan in Gujarat. Sanjan was then ruled by a liberal king by the name of Yadav Rana. The Dastur, who was the priest of the Parsi community, met Yadav Rana and urged him to grant them shelter in the new land. Initially, Yadav Rana was hesitant to give in to the wish of these refugees from Persia. He asked them what they wished from him. They replied that they desired freedom of worship, freedom to bring up the children in their own religion and land for cultivation so that they could be self-sufficient. Yadav Rana ultimately agreed to accede to their request to stay at Sanjan and also granted them their wish to be able to live on their own faith and be self-sufficient. But he also stated five principles which they had to accept if they wanted to stay at Sanjan. The five principles stated by Yadav Rana were as follows. The Parsis would have to adopt Gujarati as their language. Their women would have to adopt the life of Indian women. Men were supposed to handover their

weapons. And the cow would have to be venerated as a mother. Marriage ceremonies would have to be performed at night. The Parsis agreed to these conditions set by the King. The Parsis accepted the conditions in letter and in spirit. They promised that they would genuinely try to integrate themselves with the mainstream of society and at the same time maintain their distinct identity. It was a question of saving the religion, their religion and their identity that forced the Parsis to flee when the Arab invaders attacked their land. The Parsis refused to be coerced into following Islam, the religion of the invaders, and their culture. The Parsis followed the teachings of Zarathushtra, the prophet of the community. He was the person who gave them a new path of life, one in which they could live with contentment and *asha*. The Parsis followed the teachings of Zarathushtra, the Parsi religion, Zoroastrianism, was an ancient religion founded as early as 2000 B.C. The exact date has not been confirmed by historians, who are divided in their opinions as to the real date of birth of Zarathushtra. But the date mentioned above is generally accepted by the Parsis as the right one. When the Zoroastrians immigrated, mostly they settled down in coastal areas, and were thus connected to the rest of the countries of the world. Zarathushtra was the prophet of Parsis. It was he who taught them to live a life with a stress on ethics and optimism about the future which translates as a positive approach to life in general. He also preached that they should live with contentment and never look at oneself in sorrow. It was not worthwhile to pity the self because the future was pre-decided and it is best to bear one's lot with equanimity. Zarathushtra believed that good ultimately overcomes evil and triumphs over it. It may temporarily be overcome by the forces of evil and the victory of good may take time but ultimately it does happen. So, he asked the people to follow the good in life—to think good thoughts, speak good words and do good deeds. These were the three principles of living which gave everyone the freedom and dignity to live virtuous life. The Parsis believed and practised the teachings of Zarathushtra and were, as a result, a peace loving and non-violent people. Zarathushtra also spoke of his belief in monotheism, 'Ahura Mazda', is the one Lord, the God of Wisdom, who is also the God of good. And his antagonist is the God of evil, '*Ahriman*'. Zarathushtra is the follower of 'Ahura Mazda'. The prototypes of the 'Ahura Mazda' in the Hindu religion are Gautam Buddha and Mahavir. Since the Parsis followed the teachings of Zarathushtra and he is credited with founding their religion as its first prophet, the religion of the Parsis is known as Zoroastrianism. (*Parsi Fiction Vol. 1*) The religious text of the Parsis is called the *Avesta*. It is the collective name given to the different Gathas which explain rituals and codes of conduct for the community. The religious text of the Parsis is written in the Pahlavi script. The text is in the form of a dialogue between God and Zarathushtra, the dialogue form helping to explain in detail the various aspects of the religion and its practices. The religion of the Parsis is admirable in that it abhors the use of force in any way—either for conversion or in day to day life. These days, the

nonviolent character of this religion has brought it to the notice of a world riven apart by religious and sectarian differences. 'Navzote' is a ceremony which is very important in the life of every Parsi, since it is a part of initiation into the religion. It is hence a compulsory ritual for anyone who desires to call himself a Parsi. It is performed when the child is 7, 9 or 11 years old. The initiation is done with a ritual bath, which signifies the purification of the body, following which the child wears a "Sudra" for the first time. After a short prayer, he or she ties a "kusti" around the waist. The "Sudra" is a white Muslin shirt, the white symbolizing purity. The other symbol, the "kusti", is a sacred thread tied three times around the waist whenever Parsis recite their prayers. It symbolizes and reminds the wearer about the three teachings of Zarathushtra—good thoughts, good deeds and good words. The "kusti" is woven from 72 threads of sheep wool, the threads symbolizing the 72 chapters of the scriptures, the "yasna", which includes the "Gathas". During the acceptance of the religion the following prayer (freely translated) is recited:

I follow the mazdayasni religion, the religion of Zarathushtra. I love and accept this religion. I love and accept the very mind of good thought. I love and accept the very utterance of the good words. I love and accept the very action of the good deeds. I love and accept the good and true mazdayasni religion which stops all quarrels and wars, teaches us to die for others, and leads us to *Asha*, the truth of God. The mazdayasni religion is for me the greatest, the best and the finest of all religions which are or which shall be because it is God's religion shown to us by Zarathushtra. I believe all things good come from Ahura Mazda. Such are the boons of those who follow the mazdayasni religion. (Novy Capadia 31)

The Zoroastrian faith gives freedom of choice in life. It never imposes any restriction on the heart and mind of people. Neither does it compel a person to live in it and accept it completely. By birth no one is Parsi and therefore they cannot be coerced into accepting this faith. The Parsis never influence any person in any way to accept their religion except out of one's own choice. As the Zoroastrian faith states :

Freedom of choice is a cardinal doctrine in the teaching of Zarathustra. A child born of Zoroastrian parents is not considered a Zoroastrian until he has chosen the faith at the *Navjote* ceremony. Zarathustra in his Gathas says: Give ear to the Great Truths. Look within with enlightened mind (Lit: flaming mind) at the faith of your own selection, man by man, each one for himself (*The Crow Eaters* 124).

The Parsi's marriage ceremony is rather different from ceremonies in other religions. The marriage ceremony takes place three days before the actual marriage date. Before the actual marriage, the couple individually take a bath to signify that they have purified themselves. Both of them sit down silently side by side together and a screen of cloth is held between them. Below this screen, the couple hold their right hands which symbolizes their love and union throughout life. This bond is further

strengthened by the priest who binds them with thread, encircling them seven time. The screen is then lifted and people shower rice over the married couple while the priest recites prayer for their lasting relationship and happiness. During the prayers, both bride and groom are asked thrice whether they have willingly consented for marriage. This is done in the presence of people of both parties. This is followed by blessings to the married couple by the elders present at the ceremony, and finally, they are blessed by the priest for the new journey that they are setting out on. Divorce is also accepted in the Parsee community. In the Parsee community inter-marriage is banned and if anyone does this, he fails to get the faith of community and Zoroastrian religion. The patriarchal system of religion refuses marriage with non-Parsees. Another problem which complicates matters is that most Parsees marry later than people of other communities. There are many reasons for marrying their late, such as the desire for economic independence before marriage, career development, unwillingness to let go of joint families, and high standards of living. Moreover, most Parsee girls want freedom to live their own life on their own terms so they never like to be dependent on any other person, even their husbands. For this reason too, sometimes they marry late and sometimes prefer not to marry at all. This is the effect of changing times and values. The change in societal conditions and the changing norms determining the success and failure of both men and women have added fuel to fire. Another norm in Parsee society is there are restrictions on living together during the period of child-bearing. During this period, a woman lives in a secluded room away from others. The other restriction imposed on Parsee women is based on the notion that the menstruation period is an 'unclean' time for women. So, during this period she can not meet anyone. It means the condition of a woman in the Parsee community is like any other community of the country where a woman is subjugated on the level of discrimination of roles and gender. The agency of the discrimination of power is in the ideology of the discussion in which a woman has been convinced to accept the matrix of roles. It is also advocated that the role of a woman is a biological construct, where a man is supposed to be neutral. In *The Crow Eaters* we have a description of Putli who retires to the "other room" because she had her periods: "Every Parsee household has its other rooms, specially reserved for women. Thither they are vanished for the duration of their unholy state. Even the sun, moon and stars are defiled.... In primitive man's fear of blood". (*The Crow Eaters* 70)

The Indian tradition in culture and civilization has percolated deep into the minds of the community of Parsees. Having lived here for so long, there is naturally a great devotion and commitment to the country. During festivals or ceremonies, they celebrate freely. Whether in India or abroad, they remain loyal to the country in which they have become naturalized citizens. Sidhwa makes this argument effortlessly through the character of Jerbanoo, who is by turns hilarious, serious and pathetic. These are some of the salient features of the Parsee religion. The community, living on the basis of the Zoroastrian faith, has an identity

distinct from that of other communities. It is this distinct identity that Bapsi Sidhwa attempts to depict in all her four novels. The Parsees' loyalty to India as opposed to the British-a point that is often contentious- is driven home by Jerbanoo's verbal pummeling of Mary for wearing a short skirt. It gives Jerbanoo the occasion to go over the top and point out that Mary's skirt is an insult to the country's dignity: "Sometimes her remarks were India-personal, India-insulting: 'Why you not wear nice long gown? Silly frock. It shows you got a terrible leg. Why you not have bath! Water bite you?'" (*The Crow Eaters* 256). There is no *Purdah* in Parsee community/society. Women never cover their face with any sort of veil. In Pakistan and India, only Muslim women suffer *Purdah* system. From the early twentieth century till now, Parsi women have never worn the *burqa* over the face. But in Pakistan, at a certain point of time, they feel compelled to do just that. Though the Parsees are very particular about their identity, they have been adaptable as well. And this has been the reason for their steady rise to prosperity. Nowadays they are into different businesses like silk, rice, jewel, medicine and many others. The Parsees are rather more industrious than other communities. They are also dedicated and highly concerned about fulfilling their commitments. They also have an instinctive sense of business. Bombay, Karachi and the state of Gujarat have expanded their business to almost all the major countries of the world. Apart from the trade their other concern is charity. They spend a part of the money they earn on religious acts in the community. They also help beggars and the downtrodden and the fortunate belonging to the community itself. Their personal lives also follow patterns. They are very happy to devote their time and energy for their profession. They prefer nuclear families because of the impact of urbanization. Most Parsees are highly educated and earn lots of money. In addition to these activities, Parsees also did much work in the field of finance. They played an important role in establishing important banks in the city of Bombay: Central Bank of India, The Government Bank of India, Asiatic Bank and so forth. Although they were distinct, the Parsees also attempted to integrate themselves into the mainstream of society, particularly during the freedom struggle and its aftermath. Being a very small community numerically, their attempts were determined by this fact as much as by the events unfolding around them. And Sidhwa has been writing of these efforts too in an authentic manner.

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