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**Parsis Moving Beyond Custom and Tradition -
Bapsi Sidhwa -A Voice to the Voiceless**

Iftikhar Hussain Lone, M.Phil.

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Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bapsi_Sidhwa

“Feroza slipped under her quilt fully dressed, her eyes wide open, her mind throbbing with elation. She was going to America! She found it difficult to believe. She repeated to herself “I’m going to America, I’m going to America!” until her doubts slowly ebbed and her certainty too, caught the rhythm of her happiness to the land of glossy magazines, of “Bewitched” and “Star Trek,” of rock-stars and Jeans...” (*An American Brat* 27)

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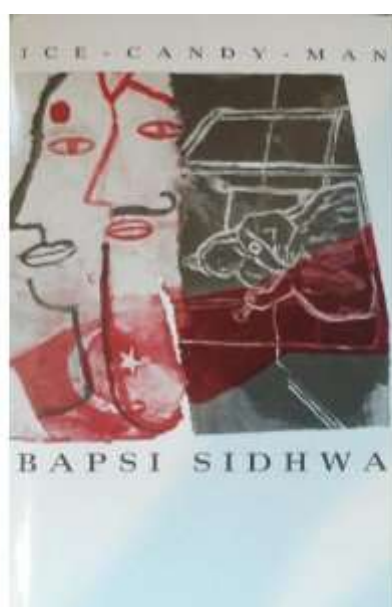
Parsis Moving Beyond Custom and Tradition - Bapsi Sidhwa -A Voice to the Voiceless

Presenting Parsi Ethos in Double Diaspora

Rooted in displaced or double Diaspora conditions, the characters in Sidhwa's novels are initiated into a self-awakening or self-realization or at other times an acute awareness of one's own culture. Instigation, self-awakening, and voyage into oneself are a few of the major characteristics of Sidhwa's novels. These characters undergo an awakening into a political consciousness, and a consciousness of their own bodies and their indigenously; and these result in a general outward growth, and development into the sub-continental human psyche.

Thus, Sidhwa's characters are all strong reflections of the people of the sub-continent who have attained awakening and have come to terms with the time-tested ruthlessness of the culture they are living in.

Ice-Candy-Man



In *Ice-Candy-Man* Lenny displays a self-realization and acceptance of her polio, and her sexuality, of her indigenously as a Parsi which provides her the advantage of being a detached observer during the partition, and with this she comes to terms with a new identity, of being a Pakistani, 'in a snap.' (40) The Parsis shun their community restraints to help universal peace and progress. Sidhwa's characters show invincible courage in breaking loose from the customary and traditional practices of their community. She releases herself from such practices occasionally. She writes:

There are those who don't like to mix with me anymore, because I am so talked about and written about, and that is looked down upon, frowned upon slightly; someone's husband would feel this girl is a bad influence on everybody. (Zaman 174)

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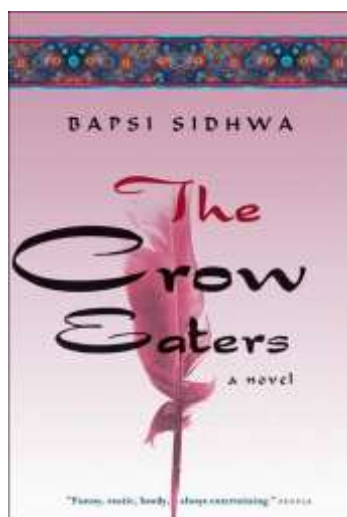
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The novel *Ice-Candy-Man* plays a key role in Bapsi's oeuvre intertwining her Pakistani identity, with her Parsi roots, giving voice to the guiding preoccupations of her work: the fate of the dispossessed and the demand of the East; the onslaught of revenge and violence to which the women of the other communities are subjected to in the name of faith and nation. It also brings forth the Parsis' moral position when faced with the religious and ethnic dilemmas of their Muslim, Sikh and Hindu neighbours.

Bapsi shows Parsis act beyond their religion as they are found involved in many tasks of helping the refugees from India and those leaving Lahore; they provide them petrol, drinks, comfort and other basic amenities. The rescued kidnapped women are sent back to their families by Parsis. Explaining their secretive and seemingly suspicious outings, Lenny's mother says: "I wish I'd told you. We were only smuggling the rationed petrol to help our Hindu and Sikh friends to run away. And also for the convoys to send kidnapped women, like your Ayah, to their families across the border." (242)

The motivation behind such selfless and noble actions by Lenny's mother is neither individual heroism nor political fanaticism, it is the desire to do the right thing, to help the helpless, to see justice done. Zoroastrian ethics of "good deeds" could also play a big part in their energetic involvement in such charitable acts. A remarkable energy of rescuing Ayah from the "Kotha" is shown by Rodabai, Lenny's Godmother. She takes Ayah to a rescued women's camp and then arranges to send her to her relatives in Amritsar.

The Crow Eaters



The Crow Eaters narrates the journey to establish superiority, to Westernization and hybridity, and a subsequent journey back to reassert inactiveness. Freddy, Putli and Jerbanoo embark on the much awaited trip to England, ".... the England of their imaginings was burnished to an antiseptic gloss that had no relation

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to human menial toil.” (*The Crow Eaters* 252) But moments after their arrival in the enchanted land of their dreams, their excitement turns into disillusionment, as they see Englishmen sweeping streets and working as clerks, sales girls equally. They also find houses with no servants where people had to scrub their own toilet bowls. Thus a disgruntled Jerbanoo cries: “I want to go back to my Lahore. I don’t want to die in a foreign land.” (258)

The Crow Eaters is full of Charm and exuberance, imparting in its excellence the magic and colour of India. In the novel, Freddy’s traditional views are rejected by his own son and thus elements of tradition and innovation get amalgamated in some sections of the novel. A succinct account of the success of a Parsi businessman, from rags to riches, Sidhwa brings into it a strongly attractive prospect of doing business in British India. An extraordinary tale of very ordinary people, the story takes twists and turns and goes from one generation to another with ease and flow. The descriptions are vital, while the pace and humour make a perfect combination to transform the story into a magical tale.

Portraits of Independent Thinking and Acting Parsis

There is very little that Sidhwa’s pen misses as she creates an array of delightful, independent thinking and acting Parsis. The result is a gallery of pictures, and the prose remains boisterous and baroque. The Parsis have always been a flamboyantly prominent community in public life. What goes on behind this façade had been remote and mysterious. They have been described as smart and talkative; they are innovative and imaginative entrepreneurs, with business in their genes. Best of all they are ribald, something comparable to Galsworthy’s fore-sites. Sidhwa opens all doors and windows of their world’s innermost recess. Far from ridiculing the Parsis, the novel celebrates their community, and in turn, celebrates the all-encompassing idea of community.

Bapsi Sidhwa shows the Parsis extremely preoccupied with their Westernization and the following of British ways, one of the reasons for it being the long-standing policy of the community of continued proximity towards the state, a close relationship between state and community based on mutual support. In consideration with their limited status of a minority community, the Parsis demanded religious autonomy and protection, in return to their consistent loyalty. This is why Freddy took every opportunity to show his undying support and loyalty towards the British Raj by taking care to wear his most splendid clothes whenever he visited the Government House and sign his name in the visitor’s Book, to ascertain his testimony and loyalty towards “Queen and Crown”.

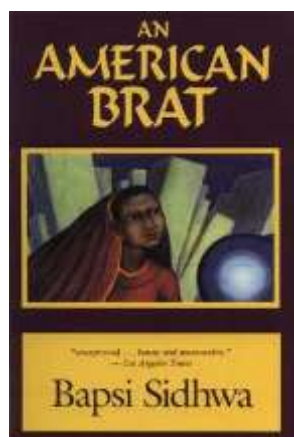
An American Brat

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Feroza undergoes the initiation into the indigenusness of her country and culture and the need to bind her identity to it in *An American Brat*. She undertakes a Journey into the depths of the alien culture in an effort to adapt and assimilate an independence and strength of character, and decision-making which was denied to her. But in the journey of the novel, she gets disillusioned by the Westernization, the foreignness and the borrowed identity. She is consoled by her Indian friend and his ghazals, in the essence of being a Parsi, in the 'Sudra' and 'Kusti' and the Security and power which it gave her in a time of desolation, having been rejected by her Jewish boyfriend who refuses her country, religion and customs; and finally, the incompatibility of an intercommunity marriage having dawned on her.

The changing prospects and freedom from conventions mixed with dreams of flying to the land of rock stars and Jeans make Feroza in *An American Brat* feel the tremendous joy of freedom in her life. A trunk call to America puts Feroza face to face with the infirmities she would have taken with her culture and position to a much upgraded society. As she screams in delight to her uncle Manek, over the phone, he says: "Why do you third world Pakis shout too much?" (26). Amid the excitement of transporting herself to her dream land, this touches a chord somewhere and she asks her parents: "... Why am I a Paki third worlder?" (27)

As the flight halts at Dubai, Paris and London, people who had boarded the plane with her, had almost all left, and new passengers joined her for the rest of the journey substituting cultures for cultures, preparing Feroza for the foreign atmosphere awaiting her in New York, where she would step down into a totally new world. The cultural bias that comes along with third world tag, awaits her no farther than the passport counter where she is quizzed on different things by cold, and unsmiling officers who seemed to doubt anything she said. Feroza was quite new to such unfriendly dispositions: "It was Feroza's first moment of realization – she was in a strange country amidst strangers..." (54)

The humiliating mistrust that meets her at the immigration shocks her solid sheath of dignity, and pushes her down the threshold of third world prejudice and

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abject demoralization. Grilled by the officers, tears smarting, unable to withhold anymore tormenting, she screams in a yellow blaze of fury and fierce dignity: "To hell with you and your damn country. I'll go back." (58) It shows the contrast between two opposite cultures - a thought that would just cross her mind, now and then, years later. Freed from the embarrassment at the airport, Feroza gets in to the excitement of discovering America - the bright city lights, the sky scrapers, the museums, the lavish display of pearls and designer accessories in the windows:

The sheer bliss of telephones that worked, come cloud or drizzle, the force of the water in the YMCA showers, electricity that never fluctuated or broke down or required daily hours of 'Load shedding' were joys Feroza was discovering for herself. (102)

The novel *An American Brat* is a sensitive portrait of how America appears to a new arrival, and an exploration of the impact it has on her. She is caught in the strange beauty of beautiful America and things take her by surprise. America is within the hearts of millions of others, as a land of dreams of liberty and of freedom from age-long conventionalities. Feroza also discovers that there is another side to America's alluring magic "... an 'alien filth'. So you've seen now, America is not all Saks and skyscrapers." (156)

Out at the airport and away from the insults and dehumanising behaviours of the officers, Feroza forgets her first disturbing impressions of having left her culture for the alluring attractions of an alien soil as she indulges in a tour of New York. She shouts at the sight of the incredible lighting of the city in Punjabi "Vekh! Vekh! Sher-di-batiaa" (Look, Look, the lights of the city) The sky-high buildings with its shimmering glass and steel embankments reflecting the sunlight are all wondrous sights to her. She marvels at the quick service at the restaurants, the quantities of fries, ketchup and coke. The opulence in the city mesmerizes a gaping Feroza:

It was like entering a surreal world of hushed opulence festooned by all manner of hats propped up on stands and scarves and belts draped here and there like fabulous confetti. The subtle lighting enhanced the plush shimmer of wool and leather and the glowing colours of the silk. Feroza felt she had never seen such luxuriant textures or known the vibrant gloss of true colours. (73)

Refuse to Return to Pakistan

Though initially depressed and saddened at her change of fortune, Feroza refuses to return to Pakistan or marry any one of the three eligible boys chosen for her. While she still turns to her religion, culture and civilization, the music, ghazals and memories to connect her to a well ordained identity, Feroza is a changed girl, very different from the one that had left Pakistan. "Their preoccupation with children and servants and their concern with clothes and furnishings did not interest her. Neither did the endless round of parties that followed their parents' mode of

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hospitality.” (312) She had experienced freedom from the restraining traditions, the disturbing ordinances, the sight of poverty, the insecure social ties, the oppression and discrimination against women, and refused to let it go. The sense of dislocation and of not belonging though might be part of her existence throughout; it seemed more tolerable than a fateful return to all that she had left behind for the better.

Shashi, her friend at the university, tries to comfort a dejected Feroza, after her break-up with David, by dramatically uttering a ghazal by Iqbal Banoo, “Ulfat Ki Nae Manzil Ko Chalay... (*To reach new destinations of love*), *Embarked on a new mission of love*,

You who have broken my heart, look where you're going I, too, lie in your path.” (311)

Feroza, being brought up in the midst of conventional Parsis and Muslim environments, stands confused trying to accommodate as much as possible of both and runs herself to the extremities called forth by either community. She is quick to adapt to the traditions of a Muslim nation by natural effect of her peers and the school she attended in Pakistan, giving birth to her mother's growing concern towards her retreat into her shell and considerable backwardness. Moulded in American culture and style, Feroza again feels left out when she goes to Pakistan on a holiday and sees for herself the measure of things changed. “Time had wrought alterations she could not have foreseen - while her memory had preserved the people and places she knew, and their relationships with her, as if in an airtight jar.”(235)

In confrontation with age-old practices and unquestionable rituals, love and passion stand bleak, leaving an imminent option between the two. The very thing that had attracted him to Feroza, her exoticism, now frightened David. Zareen had made him feel that he and Feroza had been too cavalier and callow in dismissing the dissimilarities in their backgrounds. He felt inadequate, wondering if he could cope with some of the rituals and behaviour that, despite his tolerant and accepting liberality, seemed bizarre.” (309)

Feroza once again feels alone in her world, after her experiment with company, and after her choice to drift away into a region of bliss and liberation, she settles down to heartbreak. “Feroza wept, yearning for the land of poets and ghazals she had left behind, for her friends from the Convent of the Sacred Heart, and for her own broken heart - when it occurred to her that she had thought of everything in past time.” (311) Feroza's heart leaps up for what she had very consciously left. She is aware of the fact that world which had changed beyond recognition alienated her. “For even in her bereft condition, she knew there was no going back for her, despite the poets and her friends.” (311)

Parsi Inclination to Move Beyond the Customary Boundaries

So, Sidhwa, throughout her novels, presents Parsi inclination to move beyond the customary boundaries and their longing for the Parsi tradition they leave behind.

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The pain over the lost tradition proves too heavy for her characters and nothing seems to be compensation enough for it in the end.

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