

## Assimilation and Cultural Quagmire in *Crow Eaters*

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**Abstract:** The problem of migration has existed since the time immemorial. People who are compelled to migrate for a variety of reasons are referred to as 'displaced communities'. Migration results in the formation of diasporic groups composed of individuals who share similar feelings, life experiences and challenges. A 'feeling of belonging' to one's own country is something shared by all of these people. As a result of their interaction with the society around them, a new culture emerges that combines elements of both of these traditions. As human relationships develop through contemporary technology and other methods, the global population is becoming increasingly interconnected. Because of this, we need to learn about the new horizons of multi-culture which is a blend of multiple cultures from all over the world.

**Keywords:** migration, 'displaced communities', blend, multi-culture, etc

### Discussion:

*Cultures* worldwide are constantly at odds with one another. The fundamental structures of the society are displaced when a foreign culture conflicts with the indigenous culture. Thus, the door for cross-cultural clashes falls open. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this conflict is more substantial in Bapsi Sidhwa as well as in other Parsi writers because they have been uprooted not once but twice. They lost their original home forever. They have little possibility of ever returning to Persia. In the same context, it is clear that Bapsi Sidhwa is writing about the community she was born in. Being a Parsi, she has first-hand knowledge of her community. She understands the psyche of its members and is well familiar with their beliefs and rituals,

Bapsi Sidhwa's debut novel, *The Crow Eaters*, deftly maintains her role as a cultural preserver and folk historian. The novel reflects the life and rituals of the Parsis and also their absorption into Indian and western ways of life. By detailing Faredoon Junglewalla's journey from his hometown in Central India to Lahore with his wife Putli, mother-in-law Jerbanoo, baby daughter Hutoxi, and several animals, she allegorically portrays the nomadic lifestyle of

her culture as well as its flexibility, religious beliefs, ethnic customs, and rituals. Freddy visits the region which is highly regarded by the Parsis, "Of the sixteen lands created by Ahura Mazda and mentioned in the 4000-year-old Vendidad, one is Septa-Sindhu; the Sindh and Punjab of Today" (TCE 12-13). Following a two-month journey over arduous terrain and quiet calamities, Freddy's bullock cart finally reaches Punjab. After spending just, a short time in Amritsar, the "Golden City," they ultimately go to Lahore. Soon after touching down in Lahore, Faredoon visits the Government House to add his name to the Visitors' Register. "Having thus paid his homage to the British Empire, established his credentials, and demonstrated his loyalty to 'Queen and Crown', Freddy was free to face the future (TCE 22). The Parsi customary subservience is represented by Freddy's visit. He says, "Where do you think we'd be if we did not curry favour....They are the sweet dictates of our delicious need to exist, to live, and to prosper in peace (TCE 12). As a result, they rapidly became fluent in English and accepted the British way of life and western values.

Sidhwa draws attention to how culture affects Parsi people. Just like Hindus, Jerbanoo believes in superstitions. She blackens her eyes with *kajal* and applies two enormous smudges of soot to her temples to protect herself from evil and ominous eyes. One day she hands her daughter Putli a tattered bit of meat membrane dipped in turmeric, and commands, "Here, protect me from evil spells!" Putli circles the membrane seven times over her mother's head and flings it out of the window to the crows.

The clothes that Parsis wear in Asia today, differ from what their ancestors wore in Persia and what their fellow Parsis now wear there. The men's 'angrakha' (coat) and, and the women's "sari," are similar to the attire of the Gujarati Hindus as a result of their agreement with the Hindu rulers who welcomed them to India. The attire of children is unattractive and straightforward. It is a single piece of clothing from neck to shins called a "jabhla," made of cotton, flannel, or silk. Boys and girls wear the same clothes until they are about seven years old, at which point the girls' long hair and other accessories set them apart from the boys. A Parsi home attire consists of a long shirt known as "sudra," a girdle known as "kusti," a waistcoat of white fabric or chintz with sleeves, loose cotton pants, slippers, and an achina silk skullcap.

The interaction of the British and Parsi culture brought about change in the Parsis, though it is an outward one. Like other Parsis, Faredoon and his family take pride in their traditional dress and maintain their ethnic attire even in a foreign land and mixed culture. However, the next generation of Behram and Tanya gradually abandon traditional garb, notably the mathabanas. When Tanya wears a sari, "She became daring in her attire and tied her sari in a way that accentuated the perfection of her body. She look to wearing a little make-up and outlined the astonishing loveliness of lips" (TCE 246).

Though the Parsis discarded the traditional dress, they could not discard their traditional outlook towards the women of their faith. They frowned upon men who stared at or ogled their wives. Billy could not endure the hotel clerk's sight on Tanya's naked breast and stomach. He yells at the cashier and then hushes Tanya so that she can button her cardigan.

Billy was getting more and more put off by this unforeseen concomitant of his wife's beauty. He wished for the tenth time he were a Mohammedan and could cover her up in a burqua (TCE 240).

This novel narrates the incredible story of Junglewala who overcame incredible odds to achieve the life of luxury that he now enjoys. After starting his career at a small shop in Lahore, he managed several retail outlets in India's northern towns. In addition, he was licensed to transfer goods from Peshawar to Afghanistan. In the novel, Junglewala tells the younger people of his community about the hard times he went through and how loyal he was to the British government. Junglewala thought of the British as their well-wishers, "next to the nawabs, Rajas, and princelings". He adds further: ". . . we are the greatest toadies of the British Empire!" (TCE 12). He does not just tell fantastical tales of his accomplishments; he also offers advice on how the next generation might solve the challenge of survival. He discusses with them how they might advance in their lives and pursue their passions by taking lessons from his experiences. "I have never permitted pride and follow the dictates of my needs, my wants- they make one elastic and humble" (TCE 11)

The terrible effects of cultural mixing may be seen among Parsiseven today. The formerly vibrant Parsi culture has been dulled by the shadows cast by other traditions of the Indian subcontinent. The Parsi community integrates with the other communities "like milk with sugar." Parsies don garments of hybridity by mixing their ceremonies and rituals with those of the Gujratis. Till the arrival of the British, they used their shared language and culture to maintain peace and harmony. This group altered their lifestyle, culture, and language to make them feel safe and comfortable when the British arrived. According to Brah, "A diasporic space is an intersection of borders where all the identities and subjectivities become "juxtaposed and imperceptibly mingle." (TCE 208) Cultural hybridity thus runs through the veins of the Parsi community.

The children of Jerbanoo and her daughter were very devout and traditional, whereas Yazdi, Billy, and Soli yearned for progressive change. Freddy's son Yazdi, expressed his interest in marrying Rosy Watson, an Anglo-Indian student at his school. Freddy was so infuriated by this demand that he began beating him. Faredoon subsequently reassures Yazdi that his feelings for her are only sympathetic and not romantic. He mentions Rosy as a "mixed-breed mongrel." Yazdi said, "What does it matter if she is not a Parsi? A fine person. Better than any Parsi I've met." (TCE 128) When Freddy saw the love of his son for Rosy, he recalled the teachings of the Zoroastrian religion to his son and ended his relationship with her

Freddy was also a devout Hindu. He met the Hindu pundit Gopal Krishan and was greatly impressed by him. "For Freddy was of India: and though his religion preached but one God, he had faith in scores of Hindu deities and in Muslim and Christian saints" (TCE 162). He kept his religious openness and began to believe in *Janam Patri*. He learns of his beloved son Soli's impending death through *Janam Patri*. He begs the priests to devise strategies to prevent this catastrophe from occurring. Unfortunately, he passes away. Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, and British authorities came to offer their condolences. Even though it is

against his religion, he pulls down the veil covering his son's face and says, "They had stood all this while to see my son: What does it matter if they are no Parsis? They are my brothers" (TCE 179). Freddy has lived a life of peace with members of all other religious sects. Even though he established certain relationships only for selfish reasons, he found amusement in each one.

People from different cultures living together can make them feel tense. Because of this, Putli always resists change. Putli accepted what she referred to as new-fangled taboos, although she went there for the sake of her husband. However, the Zoroastrian community had different values as highlighted by the author: "Deeply rooted in the tradition of a wife walking three paces behind her husband, their deportment was as painful to Putli as being paraded naked through the streets" (TCE 188). The novel depicts in a naturalistic fashion, the assimilation of the Parsi community into British culture and values. Although Putli herself did her utmost to uphold the traditions of the Parsi community, her own daughter choked these traditional values and beliefs. "Anyway, it's stupid to walk behind your husband like an animal on a leash – oh Mother! Hasn't Papa been able to modernize you yet?"(TCE 190). Sidhwa has illustrated the natural progression of change that occurs over time in the values, traditions and customs held by the successive generations of Junglewala. The new generation of Junglewala family became more westernised and expanded trading relations with the British.

The clothing style protected the individuality of the Parsi community, though its duration was relatively brief. Faredoon took great pride in the uniformity of his clothes. Jerbanoo never attended social events without 'mathabanas'. The new generation of young people in Parsi-Behram and Tanya, eventually abandoned the traditional style of dressing. The saris worn by women in this new generation are noticeably less modest than those worn by their grandmothers. "She became daring in her attire and tied her sari in a way that accentuated the perfection of her body." (TCE 245). Tanya often gazed straight into the eyes of men and frequently went to mixed parties which can be unacceptable for a person in the Parsi community. "The parties were fashionably cosmopolitan, including the various religious sects of India" (TCE 246).

Sidhwa portrays a typical Parsi family with all of its religious beliefs and practices; nevertheless, she also highlights the reality that multiculturalism has affected the customs, beliefs and mentality of the Parsi people. In the tradition of the Hindu religion, Pulti adorns the doorframe with colourful designs and fresh flowers. Freddy believes in mystics and astrologers as do the Indians, and contacts them in times of hardship and for future forecasts. Sidhwa mentions the Hindu custom of making horoscopes prevalent in her community: "The birth of Parsi infants is timed with the precision of Olympic contests. Stop-watch in hand, anxious grandmothers or aunts notes the exact second of delivery. This enables Hindu *pundits* to cast the horoscope with extreme exactitude" (TCE 53).

There is a lovely synthesis of Indian and Parsi traditions in preparing horoscopes. Faredoon holds the Bible, the Bhagwad Gita, and the Quran in the same regard as the Avesta, and all these holy books are put right over his prayer nook beside the book of famous English

proverbs. On his prayer table, he has images of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Goddess Laxmi, Buddha, Sita, Christ, and other Indian saints along with an image of Prophet Zarathustra and other paraphernalia associated with devotion.

*The Crow Eaters* comes to a close with Faredoon's death scene in which he urges his successors to oppose the nationalistic movements instigated by Indians and to remain obedient to the British Raj, "We will stay where we are. . . let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever, rule" (TCE 283). The fears of Faredoon represent actual life and the feelings of a helpless dying man. Given that Faredoon is a Parsi, his opinions have weight and provide a moral compass for today's youth. An all-encompassing novel, *The Crow Eaters* explores inner workings of human relationships and interactions with the outside world. The lengthy narrative sheds light on the shifting cultural norms and values of an individual and his family, and provides insight into the tidings of the time. Throughout the narrative, cultural hybridity is infused into the Parsi community, and the vulnerable aspect of this hybridity is highlighted.

**Conclusion:** *The Crow Eater* chronicles the history and mindset of the Lahore-based Junglewala business family. In the novel, the author paints a picture of this small community and shows how they lived during the British Raj. Bapsi Sidhwa accurately depicts the evolving social structure and personal identity of the Parsi community in India. She illustrates the commitment of the community to the British Raj during the period. She also underlines the changes that occurred in its social structure. Faredoon Junglewala was twenty-three when he moved to Lahore with his wife Putli, Jerbanoo, and a daughter, and he remains in there throughout the story. He grows his family there, gives them new reasons to be hopeful and becomes the focus of the Parsi community. In an interview with Laila Kazmi, Sidhwa states that as we are a people without a land, we must adapt to whichever culture we find ourselves in. This novel is a reflection not only of the cultural shifts and ideals experienced by an individual but also of the changing times.

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