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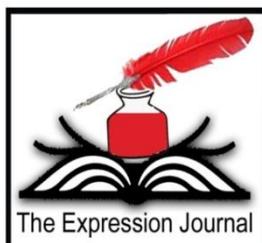
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# The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

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## **DECONSTRUCTING PARSI SELFHOOD IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S *THE CROW EATERS***

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### **Abstract**

*The Crow Eaters* (1978) is an account of a way of life, a kind of saga, in which the details accumulate to make the characters life-like. The novel describes the social mobility of a Parsi family, the Junglewalla, during the British Raj in the early twentieth century. The description of Faredoon, nicknamed Freddy, Junglewallas exploits is not just historical fiction but has a strong autobiographical element also. Sidhwa belongs to a pioneering family (the Bhandaras) of Parsi settlers in North Indian cities and was reared on tales both fictional and otherwise of the entrepreneurial skills of the elders of her community. The use of irony, caricature or buffoonery prevents the novel from becoming either excessively laudatory or too disparaging. Wealth and status is Faredoon Junglewallas ultimate aim which he achieved at a cost. Sidhwa's mode of perception is ironic. Freddy's fame and wealth are shown to have dubious roots. His acts of charity are not virtuous but tinged with self-promotion. He has developed a philanthropic image to increase his business contacts and appear selfless. Earlier Faredoon amassed capital by the dubious practice of setting his shop on fire, after hiding his goods in a hired go down, to claim insurance money. He prospered in Lahore because of sycophancy towards the British officials in the guise of public relations. In all such incidents, Sidhwa's tone is not moralistic but ironic. There is a protective irony in the novel, which balances personal inadequacies against the contradictions of life itself. The novel is not just the social mobility and values of a man and his family but the movement of the times. The Nationalist movement and the Parsis' ambivalent attitude towards it is also humorously shown. The Parsis are depicted as cultural hybrids. The novelist's penetrative insights in presenting the marginalized Parsi milieu makes *The Crow Eaters* both entertaining and educative.

### **Key-Words**

Parsi, Nostalgia, Minority, Narcissistic, Milieu, etc.

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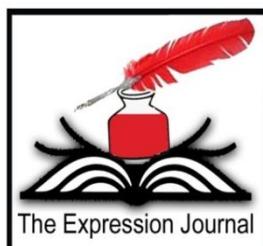
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The Parsi are an ethno-religious minority in India, living mostly on the west coast of the subcontinent, especially in Bombay. In Pakistan, most Parsis reside in Karachi and Lahore. As their name implies, the Parsis are of Persian descent. They are followers of Prophet Zarathustra; their religion known as Zoroastrianism was founded around 2000 B.C. (its essence is to be found more in the Gathas, but they are not traceable). Yet their feeling of group identity and active participation in the social, cultural and economic life of both India and Pakistan is immense. As a community they are comparatively well-off, with few living below the appalling poverty-line of the subcontinent. In her novel *The Crow Eaters* (1980) Bapsi Sidhwa attempts to create a 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 behaviour, value systems and customs. Bapsi Sidhwa never lets the novel degenerate into a mere sociological treatise.

In Bapsi Sidhwa's work themes diverge from traditional to contemporaneity. Her concern ranges from a pre-Independence social scene to partition and its aftermath, and her time frame is fifty years. In this narrow canvas Sidhwa who experiences the pleasures of exile is in a more advantageous position than most of the writers. Sidhwa's first novel *The Crow Eaters* (1978) is about Faredoon Junglewalla, 'a man of distinction and listed in the Zarathustra calendar of great men and women' and whose motto in life is 'The sweetest thing in the world is your need.' Through this narcissistic personality, in about forty six chapters, Sidhwa takes us into the heart of the Parsi community portraying its varied customs and traits. It is a straight narration without any twists in the plot and we travel through the book without much mental strain. At the age of twenty three along with his wife Putli, mother-in-law Jerbanoo and an infant daughter Faredoon settles in Lahore, never to look back. In Lahore he continues to live till the end of the novel to look back. In Lahore he continues to live till the end of the novel that is 1940. His family expands and with his pragmatic intelligence and fraud and arson in Insurance he becomes a man of great consequences among the Parsis. People travelled thousands of miles to see him in Lahore, especially as they wished to escape the tight spots they had got themselves into. This successful worldly man

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encounters disappointment and personal loss in the death of his eldest son and a self-exiled second son. Within this straight conventional theme Sidhwa flings her feminine imagination with an incongruous humour to talk about serious issues, like national politics, fraud, death-dealing of mother-in-law, Parsi superstitions, faiths, marriages, rites of death, romance, birth, multifaceted activities and forays to London. Not so much of action but so many incidents take place that one gets a feeling of contradiction. On the one hand the reader finds no link between the words on the page, and on the other the vision or experience is missing in the narrative.

*The Crow Eaters*, first published in Pakistan in 1978, describes the social mobility of a Parsi family, the Junglewallas, during the British Raj in the early twentieth century. It also traces the attempts of Parsis, migrating from the west coast and setting in the more salubrious climate of North Indian cities, in the late nineteenth and the turn of this century. A writer's imagination involves his creativity, enterprise, insight, inspiration and originality. This deliberate attempt of hers in *The Crow Eaters* to explore the exotic world and sentiments of the Parsi community is quite refreshing. In her narration in the first half of the novel she explains her point of view and excels in the technique of description which is graphic and realistic. Sidhwa's language becomes quite refined, and her analytical faculties become sharp when she has to give insights into her statements. Talking about Parsi community, which is her own community, Sidhwa makes appropriate statements: "The endearing features of this microscope merchant community was its compelling sense of duty and obligation towards other Parsis . . . There were no Parsi beggars in a country abounding in beggars . . . Notorious misers, they are paradoxically generous to a cause." (*The Crow Eaters* 21) The characters in *The Crow Eaters* are true to this statement. Her historic observation on the Parsi community's plight during partition is also authentic. When Billy asks Freddy "Where will we go?" Freddy says softly, "We will stay where we are...let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or whoever rule. What does it matter?" (*The Crow Eaters* 283) Likewise Lenny's family and Rodabai's family were not affected by the partition. It is only the neighbours and close associates of these Parsis that got affected. She has given roots to her characters in Lahore and made Lahore the enchantress. Sidhwa made an honest attempt to explain Islamic sanctity about marriage: "We take marriage and divorce very seriously. It involves more than just emotions. It's a social responsibility." (*The Crow Eaters* 181) The vision of the writer definitely creeps in the novel however much the author tries to maintain a distance from the subject.

Bapsi Sidhwa turns autobiography into art by her clever use of irony. The use of irony also prevents the novel from becoming either laudatory or disparaging, an inherent danger when an author writes about his or her own community, both the shortcomings and achievements. Wealth and status is the ultimate aim for Faredoon Junglewalla. He achieved this ambition but at what cost. Bapsi Sidhwa's mode of perception is ironic. As we appreciate Junglewallas achievements, doubts are raised about it. The novel commences on a note of praise for Faredoon Junglewalla, Freddy for short, described as a strikingly handsome, dulcet-voiced adventurer. About his career it is said: "He not only succeeded in carving a comfortable niche in the world for himself, but also earned the respect and gratitude of his entire community. When he died at sixty-five, a majestic

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grey-haired patriarch, he attained the rare distinction of being locally listed in the Zarathusti Calendar of Great Men and Woman." (*The Crow Eaters* 9) The achievement is stupendous, yet doubts are raised about it. Freddy's fame and wealth are shown to have dubious roots. The maintenance of identity, in spite of being a microscopic minority, of which Freddy is so proud, is shown as mere public relations, bordering on sycophancy: "And where, if I may ask, does the sun rise? No, not in the East, for us it rises-and sets-in the Englishman's arises. They are our sovereigns! Where do you think we'd be if we did not curry favour? Next to the nawabs, rajas and prince-lings we are the greatest toadies of the British Empire! These are not ugly words, mind you. They are the sweet dictates of our delirious need to exist, to live and prosper in peace." (*The Crow Eaters* 12)

So the sycophancy is shown as a "need to exist," neither lauded nor condemned. The tone of the author is ironic. There is protective irony in the novel, balancing personal inadequacies against the contradictions of life itself. Hence irony is also a mode of acceptance-a type of philosophy.

Freddy's ostensibly humorous comments, his obsequious behaviour towards Mr. Charles P. Allen, the Deputy Commissioner and his frequent visits to the Government House to pay homage to the British Empire, underline a basic attitude to the ruling colonial power which Bapsi Sidhwa carefully explores. Since the Parsis settled in India, they realized they could only survive as a minority by being strictly loyal to every ruling authority and avoiding tensions and conflicts between various groups' authority and avoiding tensions and conflicts between various groups and powers in the state. At no time in the subcontinent was the community itself a power factor that would have been able to enforce its own interests against the will of the rulers. Hence Parsis learned to realize that only loyalty to the ruler generates that political condition for their loyalty was that they were not hindered in the practice of their religion. Hence the exaggerated servility of Freddy, his son Billy and other Parsis towards the British is revealed as an act to ensure legal security, peace and economic prosperity. With her ironic perspective the flattery of the Parsis is humorously revealed in the novel, but it also expresses an underlying identity crisis and quest for security amongst the community as a whole.

Such a prevailing attitude also leads to adopting customs and manners of the British. Knowledge of English education in Christian missionary school was considered essential, not because of superior instruction or knowledge but as it offered a chance for rapid social mobility. The interaction of two cultures naturally produces tensions when for instance Putli, the wife of Freddy, resists change: "What revolted Putli most was the demand that she, a dutiful and God-fearing wife, must walk a step ahead of her husband. She considered this hypocritical and pretentious, and most barbarous." (*The Crow Eaters* 188)

Putli adopted to what she considered new-fangled customs, when she and her husband were invited to the formal tea-parties on the gracious lawns of the Government House. She is cajoled to these functions by her husband, for whom it is an opportunity for advancing contacts and consolidating friendships. The Parsi milieu of Putli had a different value system, which the author highlights: "Deep-rooted in the tradition of a wife waling three paces behind her husband,

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their deportment was as painful to Putli as being marched naked in public." (*The Crow Eaters*188)As regard adapting customs of the British the novel shows the gradual assimilation of British value systems in the Parsi milieu. Putli tried to preserve certain Parsi customs, like walking behind her husband. However her daughter Yasmin after marriage ignores such notations as old-fashioned and vehemently protests at the servile attitude of women: "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?" (*The Crow Eaters*190-91)

Putli, the earlier generation Parsi, is scandalized by Yasmin preceding her husband down the steps and into the carriage and her seeming relationship of equality with her husband. Initially adapting the manners and customs of the ruling colonial power was gradual and Putli's inability to understand change is seen as the 'generation gap.' However the scope of the novel is large, it shows the reality of a whole family and its network of relationships, spreading out to encompass a wide variety of human beings of different ages. Bapsi Sidhwa portrays the changing generations in the Junglewalla family. The new generations, with their increasing economic contacts with the British, like Billy's scrap iron deal, become increasingly westernized. This is best exemplified by the life-style of the youngest son Billy and his fashionable wife Tanya: "They made friends with modern couple equally determined to break with tradition. It amounted to no more than a fanatical faith in the ways of English society in India, and a disciple's knack of imitation. They were not of the masses, this young crowd. If their wealth did not set them apart, their ability to converse in English certainly did. They were utterly ashamed of traditional habits and considered British customs, however superficially observed, however trivial, exemplary." (*The Crow Eaters*245)This changing social milieu and identity crisis which Bapsi Sidhwa accurately depicts was distinctively visible amongst Parsis in British India and is a social problem for many in the community, even in contemporary India and Pakistan. In the newspaper, *The Parsi*, published since 1905 in Bombay an article appeared stressing that the ambitions of most Parsis were aimed at as close a connection with the English as possible: "The closer union of the Europeans and Parsis is the finest thing that can happen to our race. It will mean the lifting up of a people who are lying low, though possessing all of the qualities of a European race." (*The Parsis in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change*138)

In fact, such a feeling is conveyed in the novel but Behram Junglewalla and his family do not consider Westernization as a conscious abandonment of their own group identity. They observe the trappings of ostensibly 'liberal' western culture: "They entrained continuously at small, intimate "mixed" parties where married couples laughed and danced decorously with other married couples. "Mixed" parties were as revolutionary a departure from Freddy's all-male get-togethers at the Hira Mandi, and Putli's rigid female sessions, as is discotheque from a Victorian family dinner. The parties were fashionably cosmopolitan, including the various religious sects of India: Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians, the Europeans, and the Anglo-Indians." (*The Crow Eaters* 245)Parsis maintained group identity by their dress. But even in the matter of dress, generational change is evident. Faredoon and his family took pride in their traditional mode of

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dress. Whenever Faredoon went to Government House for formal parties or to pay homage to the British Empire he would consciously be, "rigged out in a starched white coat wrap that fastened with bows at the neck and waist, and crisp white pyjamas and turban." (*The Crow Eaters* 21-22) His wife Putli, and his mother-in-law Jerbanoo never appeared in public "without "mathabanas"-white kerchiefs wound around the hair to fit like skull caps. The holy thread circling their waist was austere displayed and sacred undergarments worn beneath short blouses, modestly aproned their sari-wrapped hips." (*The Crow Eaters* 23)

The next generation of Parsis Behram and Tanya slowly discard the traditional dress. Tanya, for instance, still wore a sari, but it was more revealing: "She became daring in her attire and tied her sari in a way that accentuated the perfections of her body. She took to wearing a little make-up and out led the astonishing loveliness of her lips . . ." (*The Crow Eaters* 246) However in form of dress, even Behram is still traditional. He urges and argues with Tanya, not to reveal her midriff so glaringly or to look boldly and mix freely with other men, as the intentions are misconstrued. Even in the relationships between man and woman, Faredoon and later his son Behram adopt double standards. Behram especially wants Tanya to appear Westernized and talk English. (*Journal of the National Indian Association* 73) However at home, he wants his wife to be servile and domestic, always at his beck and call. So the novel aptly reveals the Parsi milieu in the throes of change.

Besides their limited status as a minority community, another reason for the supreme respect and regard the Parsi had for the British, was because of the social code of their religion. The basic attitude of the followers of Zarathustra towards a ruler was that of loyalty akin to the Iranic, pre-Islamic Sassanain traditions. This concept of loyalty to the ruler, gave Zoroastrianism the rank of a state religion, which meant a close relationship between state and community, based on mutual support. All the Parsis wanted from the ruling British authorities was religious autonomy and protection. They got both. The ideal state in Zoroastrian philosophy is free of a deification of the ruler. The conception of a good ruler is more a just and religiously tolerant exercise of authority. In the African Prayer, there is special request for a good ruler defined thus: "A good Government is that which keeps and directs the country to be prosperous, its poor to be without distress, its laws and customs to be just, which cancels unjust laws and customs." (*Moral Extracts from Zoroastrian Books* 44) As the Parsis primarily traced their secured status as a minority, their economic and social prosperity to British rule, identical with "good government" as identified in the African prayer, loyalty was a self-evident precept for them. Another sound sociological factor which explains the consistent loyalty of the Parsis to the British, is aptly enumerated by eminent his they [Parsis] compare their condition in India with that of their co-religionists in Persia [Iran] who were reduced until recently to a miserable state of persecution, they fully and rightly appreciate blessings, which they enjoy under the British Government." (*The Parsis in India* 134)

Such feelings were prevalent in the Parsi milieu and Bapsi Sidhwa aptly conveys it in *The Crow Eaters*. Freddy took every opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty to the British. After settling

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down in Lahore, he wore his finest and most resplendent clothes to visit Government House and sign his name in the Visitor's Book. This was his way of establishing his credentials and stressing his loyalty to "Queen and Crown." If such an act seems absurd, social historians will recall that on occasions like royal birthdays, coronation ceremonies, arrival of a new viceroy or death in the royal family, the Parsis demonstrated their collective loyalty by public meetings and Jashans (group prayers). In cases of British military entanglements outside India, Parsis adopted the terminology of British imperialism. They termed Britain's wars as just and essential for world peace, for the progress of civilization and freedom. The historian D.F. Karaka recalls that 6,000 Parsis gathered in Bombay on the occasion of the Crimean War, to pray for a British victory. If such was the prevailing social milieu, Faredoon Junglewallas reference to former Deputy Commissioner Charles P. Allen's children as "my Prince" and "my Princess" and vitriolic outbursts against the freedom movement led by Dadabhai Naoroji of the Congress is not sheer exaggeration or eccentricity but a deeply perceptive insight into the workings of the Parsi mind.

It is the paranoid feelings of being a miniscule minority, which is the motivating factor for the behavioural pattern of the Parsis, ranging from quest for excellence to eccentricity. Bapsi Sidhwa constantly lampoons the zeal with which leading Parsi business magnates, Faredoon Junglewalla, Mr. Toddywalla and the baronet Khan Bahadur Sir Noshirwan Jeevanjee Easymoney championed the British cause. However hilarious their outbursts of loyalty may seem, the Parsis in British India were a schizophrenic community. A perusal of social history reveals the causes for this insecurity and alienation of many members of the community. For purposes of trade and business, the British granted the Parsis a special status as a broker and reliable trading partner. However, rapid social mobility amongst the Parsi community led to a conscious group desire to identify themselves all too closely with English themselves. The willingness to grant the Parsis a special status had its limits. The English refused to consider Parsis as their own kind even if they were equally educated and extensively anglicized. Similarly the Parsis inspired by the behaviour and statements of community leaders like Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy (*The Parsi in India* 139) and the prevailing social milieu, developed an aversion to identifying themselves with other Indian communities. This led to a mental estrangement from India, for many Parsis, without, however, finding an identity of their own, free of both the English and other Indians. Being a shrewd observer of human fallibility Bapsi Sidhwa reflects this identity search in several situations and aspects in *The Crow Eaters*.

A striking manifestation of this identity crisis is the dying Faredoon Junglewallas vehement protests against the nationalist movement and exhortations to his offspring to remain loyal to the British Empire. Dadabhai Naoroji is referred to as "that misguided Parsi from Bombay" who started "something called Congress and keeps shooting off his mouth like a lunatic, "Quit India! Quit India!" However shocking Faredoon Junglewalla's views may be, they were representative of a majority of Parsis, especially the business class, bankers and civil servants. Except for a fringe minority, drawn into the vortex of the nationalist movement, the majority of the Parsi community shared the views expressed by a dying Faredoon Junglewalla on the freedom struggle:

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"He utters ideas. People like Gandhi pick them up – people like Vallabhbhai Patel and Bose and Jinnah and Nehru...and that other fool in Karachi, Adil Mama. What does he do? He sacrifices his business and abandons his family to the vicissitudes of poverty. He wears a Gandhi cap, handloom shirt, and the transparent diaper they call a dhoti. He goes in and out of jail as if he were visiting a nautch-girl at the Hira Mandi! Where will it get him? Nowhere! If there are many rewards in all this, who will reap them? Not Mama! Not Dadabhai Naoroji! Making monkeys of themselves and of us! Biting the hand that feeds! I tell you we are betrayed by our own kind, by our own blood! The fools will break up the country. The Hindus will have one part, Muslims the other, Sikhs, Bengalis, Tamils and God knows who else will have their share; and they won't want you!" (*The Crow Eaters* 282-83)

The apprehensions of Faredoon Junglewalla are not the figment of a dying man's fevered imagination but based on social reality. There were three anti-Parsi riots in Bombay and other cities in 1851, 1874 and 1921. On the last occasions, Gandhi called for a boycott of the visit of the Prince of Wales to India. Many Parsis refused to join this boycott, which sparked off a violent riot (there were 15 deaths) and anti-British and anti-Parsi aggressions persisted for a couple of years. Memories of such incidents were an integral part of the Parsi Milieu and increased their loyalty to the British. However, displaying remarkable adaptability, the Parsis on realizing the inevitability of Independence altered their allegiances. With a dying man's perceptiveness Faredoon Junglewalla hints at the necessity of changing allegiances. Following a query by his son-in-law Bobby Katrak about the future of the Parsis after Independence, Faredoon makes a prophetic reply: "We will stay where we are...Let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever, rule. What does it matter? The sun will continue to rise-and to set-in their arses . . . !" (*The Crow Eaters* 283) Such witty remarks are the hallmark of Bapsi Sidhwa's style and the genial satire both shocks and offends Parsi sensibilities in the sub-continent. It is remarks like this which led to the function held in Pakistan to launch the novel being sabotaged by a bomb scare-suspected to be the work of some irate Parsis. *The Crow Eaters* is a rambunctious mixture of gentle perceptiveness and wild barnyard humour. The satire of Bapsi Sidhwa, though sharp is never castigating and censorious like that of Swift, but is a genial tolerance of the foibles of a community, full of paradoxes with an identity crisis caused by their minority status and ideas of loyalty to the ruling authorities.

Another aspect of identity crisis, on the verge of paranoia, amongst the Parsis, is exemplified by the escapist behaviour of Yazdi, the second son of Faredoon Junglewalla. A sensitive boy, Yazdi is aggrieved at the conspicuous commercialism and sycophancy of the Parsis. A human dimension to his revolt is also introduced, as his father refuses him permission to marry a childhood sweetheart, the Anglo-Indian Rosy Watson. These factors make Yazdi revolt against the existing system in his family. His initial form of revolt adds to the rollicking, hilarious narrative, and is almost a parody of Christ's Sermon on the Mount, "Love the neighbour, as thou love thyself." Yazdi takes charity to the extreme. He initially returned from school barefoot having given his shoes to an orphan in his calls: "A few days later he returned without his shirt, and the day after that, he climbed up to the flat in only his homemade underpants. He had distributed his apparel among four beggar near the Regal Cinema square." (*The Crow Eaters* 158) He is transferred

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to a boarding school in Karachi. There he becomes a drop-out, a modern-day “hippy,” drifting about the city, “squandering his allowance and fees on beggars” and sleeping on park benches and pavements. He sought solace by assisting the lepers outside Karachi.

Finally Yazdi makes a total break from his family. His share of the family money is put in a Trust and he gets monthly interest. Yazdi uses the money “to feed dying children” and “buy medicine for the sick left to decay like exposed excrement in choked bazaar lanes.” He becomes a follower of Mazdak, the first communist. Yazdi calls Mazdak, “A Zarathusti ancestor. He realized centuries ago that all material goods, including women had to be shared.” (*The Crow Eaters* 214-15) His family does not meet him or hear from him. Billy strolling along Chowpatty Beach, Bombay with his fiancé Tanya is the last person to see Yazdi, an emaciated vagrant lying on a beach. The characterization of Yazdi adds to the richness and variety of the novel, as it shows all Parsis are not types, nor do they have stereotype reactions. However there is a structural flaw in the presentation of Yazdi. *The Crow Eaters* is a very compact novel and though it shows a network of human relationships and reality of a whole family, there are no loose ends in the plot. The exception is Yazdi. He is never shown practicing his professed charity like Dr. Kenny in *Nectar in a Sieve* by Kamla Markandaya. The characterization of Yazdi is deliberately or accidentally left vague, which is slightly jarring.

Charity is an integral part of the Parsi value system as it stems from a firm religious conviction. The religion founded by the prophet Zoroaster is a monotheism, with the sole God Ahura Mazda (“Wise Lord”) being the creator as well as the judge on the day of the Last Judgment. Ahura Mazda rules good spirits created by him, which are opposed in this world by the evil spirits. The ethics in Zoroastrianism demand active defence of the good, which explicitly includes truthfulness, righteousness and charity. Earthly renunciation and asceticism are condemned by Zoroaster (in sharp contrast to Hinduism and Buddhism) because they indirectly support the evil in its battle. Religion providing the impetus for charity is an aspect well portrayed by Bapsi Sidhwa. The history of the delightful rascal Faredoon Junglewalla is mingled with accounts of his charitable deeds. “And once you have the means, there is no end to the good you can do. I donated towards the construction of an orphanage and a hospital. I installed a water pump with a stone plaque, dedicating it to my friend; Mr. Charles B. Allen.” (*The Crow Eaters* 10) Herein lies the salient features and highlight of the novel. As Bapsi Sidhwa’s mode of perception is ironic she shows that Faredoon’s charity does not make him a paragon of virtue but is tinged with self-promotion. Even charity has an ulterior motive, a token of gratitude to former deputy-commissioner Charles B. Allen who granted Freddy a trade license with Afghanistan. Examples of the mingling of generosity and self-interest are numerous. When he helped Bobby Katrak escape police charges for killing a beggar whilst rashly driving his silver Ghost Rolls-Royce, the amiable Faredoon claims Rs. 50,000 as expenses to bribe Mr. Gibbons the Inspector-General of Police. The bribe is only Rs. 10,000 and the remaining forty is stowed in his special kitty. As Bapsi Sidhwa in characteristic ambivalent and ironic tone says, “this was the kitty he dipped that both shocks and entertains, shows that Faredoon developed his philanthropic image to increase his business contacts and to appear

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selfless and counter the impression of being a toddy of the British. It is this ambivalent attitude towards charity, which has really piqued Parsi sensibilities, as generosity is shown as not just part of the value system but linked with the appearance and reality theme. Charity for Faredoon is neither a pocketful of poses nor is it totally philanthropic. Bapsi Sidhwa uses irony to create humour and to present the ambivalent attitude towards charity of Freddy. Irony here is a mode of acceptances, a type of philosophy, highlighting the Parsi paradox.

The overall mode of the novel is comic. It is not a social comedy like that of Jane Austen or a satirical comedy of Swift or a comedy of manners, but is a genial comedy. The view of the life of Bapsi Sidhwa is expansive. Human foibles and follies are treated with tolerance and mild corrective irony. Creditably the author is not moralistic and does not put forth norms of behaviour and attitudes to be emulated. Even when Faredoon Junglewalla resorts to dubious practices like setting his shop deliberately on fire, after hiding his goods in a hired go down, to claim insurance money, the tone is not that of chastisement. With emphasis on a mass of local detail, the comic aspect of the episode is highlighted. Bapsi Sidhwa neither approves nor disapproves. She presents the hilarious saga of a Parsi family, which is not just the social mobility and value system of a man and his family but the movement of the times. Her most perceptive insights are in presenting the marginal personality aspect within the Parsi milieu. Most Parsis in the novel are shown as cultural hybrids, living and sharing intimately in the cultural life, traditions, languages, moral codes, and political loyalties of two distinct peoples, which never completely interpenetrated and fused.

Bapsi Sidhwa also has very lucid views on the role of a writer in modern society, where there is so many medium, a flood of information and almost an overabundance of communication. She strongly feels that a writer of fiction cannot really alter social reality or change the world but for exceptions, like the poet Neruda, whom she cites as an example. As a third world author, Bapsi Sidhwa like Mulk Raj Anand earlier, does feel that the author has a proselytizing role to play. She talks about injustices which she has described as incident in her various novels. History, it is said, is more often made by accident than design. This maxim is aptly illustrated in the manner in which Bapsi Sidhwa became a writer. She began to write at the suggestion of an Afghan woman she met on a plane.

The nostalgia surrounding a bygone community fills the novels, which weave the rich tapestry of Asian life through re-creation of the smell and taste of food, the colours and textures of clothing, the sounds, odours and sights of crowded streets and over-peopled houses. *The Crow Eater* exemplifies this quality. Although many Parsis did not at first appreciate Sidhwa's boisterous portrayal of a fictional group of their community in colonial Lahore, the outside could not help but love these people and identify with them as they faced life's most rewarding yet most difficult task: the formation of relationships—that is, the maintenance of community—in spite of human proclivity toward stubbornness, pretentiousness, jealousy, domination, and all the other imperfections that comprise character. Far from ridiculing the Parsis, the novel celebrates their community—and, in turn, celebrates the all-encompassing idea of community. As *The Crow Eater* closes, the potential destroyer of community, Partition, remains on the side lines, ready to do its

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work. The inhabitants of this cosy Parsi world, Anglicized to a greater than most of their neighbours, fear that Independence and the subsequent departure of the British might leave them stranded in an alien setting, their community in tatters. For those in Sidhwa's world, though, the instinct for community remains so strong that they appreciate its fluidity and will stabilize it once again. At the end of *The Crow Eater* one of the characters asks: "But where will we go? What will happen to us?" Faredoon replies: "We will stay where we are ...let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever, rule. What does it matter? The sun will continue to rise - and the suns continue to set - in their arises . . . !" (*The Crow Eaters* 282) Although Sidhwa is not the only Pakistani to write fiction in English, she has maintained the most consistent publication record and gained the widest reputation abroad. Without staking excessive claims, one can say that Sidhwa has been largely responsible for the invention of Pakistani fiction in English.

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