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Appraisal of Her Own Community through Rollicking Humour: A Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*

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Abstract:

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters* (1980) appraises her microscopic community with all its virtues and vices employing the age-old tools of humour. The outward flamboyant tone acts only as a foil to the novel's deep intentions of introducing the readers to the Zoroastrian tradition and philosophy of the Parsis of the Subcontinent that has maintained itself in its extant form through millennia. The readers find themselves invited to the lyrical world of the *Gathas*, and to a culture which appears as a confluence of all Aryan and Semitic traditions. The novel remains as a curious blend of the earthly and the sublime, but their conflict never weighs down its smooth flow.

Keywords: Parsi, Faith, Custom, Tradition, Representation, Humour.

Fictional texts written in English by South Asian writers have almost always acquainted the readers with the variety of existences and experiences of the peoples of different races, religions and classes of this vast region. But, this representation becomes all the more precious if the writing tells the story of a community that is a diminishing minority with its continual exercises of the extant religious and social customs and beliefs that are to be found nowhere in the world. This sort of representation exclusively demands an insider's viewpoint and his/her deep insight into the culture of that community acquired by a lifetime of experience. Moreover, sometimes, depending on the subject of the representation, its mode of narrative acquires its value and ramifications. A text, avowedly narrated in a lighthearted way, following a particular tradition of an exclusive community, can easily transcend the apparent limitations of bawdy, or, even slapstick humours at occasions, that, in case of not so exclusively rare a subject community, would have marred the gravity and multifaceted implications of the text. Pakistani Parsi novelist Bapsi Sidhwa exploits this delicate advantage perfectly well in her early novel *The Crow Eaters* (1980), in the 'Author's Note' to which she writes:

“Because of a deep-rooted admiration for my diminishing community—and enormous affection for it—this work of fiction has been a labour of love. The nature of comedy being too exaggerate, the incidents in this novel 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. (Author's Note)”

So, evidently, as par Sidhwa's claims, the intentions of the novel have been primarily humorous, not expository. Yet, Sidhwa's brilliant narrative introduces the reader to a world where intimations of a culturally exclusive and temperamentally innocuous community entertain and enlighten at the same time.

The novel narrates the lives of Faredoon Jungewalla, a poor Parsi young man from central India turned into a famous and rich businessman of Lahore, and his family which consists of his wife Putli, his children and his formidable, rotund, boisterous and troublesome mother in law, Jerbanoo. A lifelong conflict between Jerbanoo and Freddy amuses the readers as much the deep nuances of the Parsi culture and religion engross them, not to mention Freddy's personal philosophy of life:

“The sweetest thing in the world is your need...the mainspring of your wants, well-being and contentment. (10)”

Faredoon has always lived by the historically justified strategies of his community—the dictates of flexibility, elasticity and humility—a choice that had saved the community's future in India when their ancestors came here after the Arab invasion seeking refuge from Yadav Rana and were granted sanctuary on condition that they would not eat beef, wear rawhide sandals or convert people to their religion. Perhaps, Freddy's pro-establishment (pro-British in the particular case) tirades at the very end of the novel when he is at his death bed, emanates from and embodies the profound Parsi philosophy of swimming with the current that had been the key to their survival and success. Freddy alleges the Parsi gentlemen, Dadabhoy Navroji, one of the founders of Congress, and Rustom Sidhwa, the businessman turned freedom fighter from Karachi of betraying their own kind by “biting the hand that feeds (283).” He holds on to the aforesaid strategy at the end:

“We will stay where we are...let the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever, rule. What does it matter? The sun will continue to rise—and the sun continue to set—in their arses...! (283)”

The readers get a good idea of the cooperative attitude of the Parsis towards each other from the way Faredoon settles his brand-new provision store so quickly in Lahore after his arrival from his village by the helps of the Toddywallas, the Bankwallas, the Bottliwallas and the Chaiwallas—the only four Parsi families settled in Lahore. Immediately the reader is reminded of the teachings of Zarathushtra:

“Seek your happiness in the happiness of all...Regard the sorrows and sufferings of others as yours and hasten to assuage them...Teach us Ahur Mazda, to live as comrades all, in willing fellowship and loving fraternity, in brotherly helpfulness and co-operation.(87. *Thus Spake Zarathushtra*)”

Sidhwa's words directly reflect the materialization of these teachings in common Parsi lives:

“An endearing feature of this microscopic merchant community was its compelling sense of duty and obligation towards other Parsis. Like one large close-knit family, they assisted each other, sharing success and

rallying to support failure. There were no Parsi beggars in a country abounding in beggars. The moment a Parsi strikes it rich he devotes a big portion of his energies to charity. He builds schools, hospitals and orphanages; provides housing, scholarships and finance. Notorious misers, they are paradoxically generous to a cause. (21)”

Paradoxical is the Junglewalla family also. Freddy, the generous and altruistic patriarch who attained the rare distinction of being listed in the ‘Zarathusti Calender of Great Men and Women’ (9) had attempted to murder his mother in law; while Billy, the man of the house becomes avowedly materialistic and miserly, his brother Yazdi leaves home for the salvage of mankind and chooses a life of poverty and insecurity. Freddy, the generous benefactor of hundreds cannot tolerate the possibility of romance between Yazdi and the Anglo-Indian girl Rosy Watson. On their visit to Hira Mandi Freddy forces himself upon her and later breaks the heart of his son by the news. Yazdi’s poetry appears to Freddy as “emasculated gibberish” (155). The readers witness Freddy as the leader and spokesman of the Parsis of the whole of Punjab and the North West Frontier Province and also to help all sorts of wrongdoers if they are from among his community or his friends. He finances the entire rescue of the opium smuggler Polly Sodawalla from his imprisonment in London by dispatching emissaries and entreating influential connections; when Bobby Katrak, son of a diamond merchant from Karachi kills an old blind beggar under his gleaming Silver Ghost Rolls-Royce, Freddy pulls the strings and frees the culprit with the help of his friend Mr. Gibbons, the Inspector General of Police. Freddy also marries his daughter off with this Bobby. Sidhwa narrates all these in a light hearted humour and leaves the judgment in the hands of the readers. But question remains about the integrity of a man who attempts to kill his notorious mother in law by burning her alive along with his house and shop, hoping that he would get the fat insurance money and that would “kill two birds with one stone” (61).

Paradoxical appears Freddy’s superstitious beliefs in the power of Fakir too, in controlling the ‘evil’ forces of Jerbanoo, when Avesta teaches:

“Superstition is born of ignorance and fear, and thrives the most when reason is asleep...Be not superstitious. Believe not in omens, portents, charms, talismans, lucky and unlucky days, and numbers. (95-6. *Thus Spake Zarathushtra*)”

Sidhwa notes the common practices among the Parsis:

“The birth of Parsi infants is timed with the precision of Olymoic contests. Stop-watch in hand, anxious grandmothers or aunts note the exact second of delivery. This enables Hindu pandits to cast the horoscope with extreme exactitude. (53)”

Or, Freddy’d panicked realization at the devastating outcomes of his life tortured by the malicious presence of Jerbanoo:

“Freddy learnt of the devastating influence of Saturn on his stars. (53)”

Whereas, their Holy texts preach exactly the opposite:

“The stars and planets and constellations do not decide fate. (95. *Thus Spake Zarathushtra*)

This social and spiritual paradox captivates the mind of the reader despite the obvious comic intentions of the story and its narration. Perhaps, these diversions of the orthodox Parsi faith and practices can be attributed to their mixing with the long tradition of astrology and mysticism of the Hindus.

And although, the prophesies of Freddy’s *janam patri*, from among the magical scripted pipal leaves discovered by Gopal Krishnan that hints about Soli’s death, which actually takes place despite all frantic precautions, is Sidhwa’s tribute to the age old magical and mystical tradition of India, it does not satisfy the demands of rationality or of Parsi faith.

In the novel the rituals and faiths of the community are practiced in close details—the incident of the servant boy’s smoking a biri hurts everyone as:

“Fire, chosen by the Prophet as the outward symbol of his faith, is venerated. It represents the Divine Spark in every man, a spark of the Divine Light. Fire, which has its source in primordial light, symbolizes not only His cosmic creation but also the spiritual nature of His Eternal Truth. Smoking, which is tantamount to defiling the holy symbol with spit, is strictly taboo—a sacrilegious sin. There was a household in which candles were snuffed with a reverent pinch of the fingers. The cooking fire was never permitted to be extinguished: it was politely preserved in ashes at night, and fanned alive each morning. To blow upon fire is vile. Priests tending the temple fires cover their mouths with cloth masks, lest spittle pollute the *Atash*. (49-50)”

On the other hand, Faredoon’s open-mindedness and his sense of affinity with all other religious thoughts find expression in his collection of books which ranges from ‘Famous English Proverbs’ to include The Bible, Bhagwad-Gita, Holy Quran, Avesta, The Complete Works of Shakespeare, Aeshop’s Fables, *Das Capital*, and the books representing the Sikh, Jain and Buddhist faiths. On his prayer table, beside the holy lamp of the Mazdayasani faith, are adored the pictures or statues of Laxmi, Buddha, Sita, Christ and some Indian saints. Sidhwa reflects upon this spiritual harmony innate to a devout Parsi that roots back to his tradition and history:

“The table once again echoed his reverence for all faiths; a tradition dating back 2,500 years to the Persian kings, Darius and Cyrus the Great, who not only encouraged religious tolerance, but having freed the Jews held captive by the Babylonians, rebuilt their Temple. The Torah, written at this time, testifies to the influence of Zoroastrianism on Judaism, and the influence of the ancient religion of the Parsis on other Semitic religions can be dated to this period. A Hindu scholar says that ‘the Gospel of Zarathustra, the *Gathas*, covered all the ground from the Rig-Veda to the Bhagwad-Gita, a period extending over 1,500 years at least, in the short span of a single generation...Zoroastrianism lies, thus, at the centre of all the great religions of the world, Aryan and Semitic...’ (52)”

Sidhwa describes in length the details of a ‘Tower of Silence’, and describes the system as both practical and hygienic (45). She exploits Jerbanoo’s pseudo-morbid garrulousness to provide the minute details of a tradition and custom originated millennia ago in the rocky terrains of Persia and retained its practice extant till date.

The novel also focuses on one of the most illuminating philosophical aspect of the Zoroastrian faith—the ‘Freedom of Choice’. The idea of man’s mobile position in the Great Chain of Being and his Free Will that one finds in Christian theology finds a very similar expression in the words of Zarathustra:

“Ahura Mazda alone has created pairs of opposite characteristics in every walk of life in the entire creation... Ahura Mazda made human beings in His own image. He has conferred upon them the power of choosing and exercising any one of the pairs of opposite characteristics. (37-8. *Thus Spake Zarathushtra*)”

While describing the values and importance of the *Navjote* ceremonies of the Parsis, in which the children are formally initiated to the Zarathusti faith by accepting the outward symbols—the undershirt, *sudreh* and the *kusti*, the lambs-wool tape, Sidhwa takes the reader to the philosophical core of the Zoroastrian faith:

“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*.’

And this freedom of choice extends also to Good and Evil; aspects of God Himself. Evil is necessary so that good may triumph. Yet Evil by itself does not exist, it is relative, depending upon the distance from God at which the individual stands upon the Path of *Asha*—the Eternal truth—the grand cosmic plan of God. (124)”

This doctrine of the dual aspects of the Godhead reiterates inevitably the dialectical philosophy of Hinduism.

The ingenious Parsi custom of dropping salt into the drinking water to seek the attention of the other family members by a lovelorn youth is also described in an extraordinary way. The *other room* in every Parsi household specially reserved for menstruating women where they are banished for the duration of their ‘unholy’ state intricates the reader’s mind as he/she finds Putli enjoying her infrequent rest and idleness in a religiously prescribed seclusion. On the other hand, the grim and solemn rituals following Soli’s death leave a saddening shadow after them.

The wedding of Billy and Tanya brings forth before the readers a glimpse of the opulence that is common in rich Parsi houses. The ideological clash between the two

levels of Parsi society—the upper middle class and the upper class in demonstrated in a loving way by the conflict between a parsimonious Billy and an extravagant Tanya.

Sidhwa employs slapstick humour in several cases—be it the description of young Freddy eager for a woman before his marriage, or Jerbanoo’s extrication on the landing of Mr. Allen’s house in London to make herself heard. Dark comedies fill the novel with several death wishes for Jerbanoo from Freddy, his attempts to kill her by burning her, or his frustrating despondency: “Another golden opportunity gone. (265)” after he learnt about her brushing past a lorry in the streets of London. One wonders, why did not he disown Jerbanoo in the first place if he was so bothered by her. The answer to that is to be found in the basic philosophical fabric of Parsi faith that hinders Freddy to get rid of her:

“Woman is the blooming flower in the garden of life that breathes perfume all around...Woman is the teacher of gentility to man. She helps man to grow in moral height. She is the sustaining power of the life of man. (63. *Thus Spake Zarathushtra*)

Conclusion:

Although, Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Crow Eaters* (1980) explicitly intends only to amuse the readers, it clandestinely introduces them to the core of Parsi faith, philosophy, peoples, and their rituals and customs in a way that serves to illuminate the non-Parsi readers to grasp a good hold of the exclusive culture and tradition of this ancient community that has preserved its essence extant withstanding several upheavals of history and time. The novel interests all the more because of its engaging insider’s perspective. Sidhwa brilliantly employs comedy as an age-old and efficient tool to uphold the humane follies and foibles of the people of her community. This humorous self-critical approach enlivens and vitalizes the narrative with a charm that was not possible without it.

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