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The Crow Eaters: The Hilarious Saga of Parsi Family

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Abstract:

This paper explains the detail description of Parsi mind, social behaviour, value systems and customs through the novel of Baspi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*. The novel begins with fare and customs. *The Crow Eaters* is a fictional novel, presents a beautiful explanation to the typical saga of a Parsi family and the Corresponding social milieu. The novel begins with Faredoon Junglewalla, the patriarch of the Parsi community at Lahore, explaining the secret of his success by its parallel with the history of his people. The protagonist of the novel, Faredoon Junglewalla is representative of Parsi ambition, industry, thrift and unscrupulousness. The whole novel is so humorous, entertaining and unpretentious, full of ghastrly character, riotously funny. The rich and Spicy characters make the novel a literary tapestry.

Keywords: Customs, rituals, culture and social behavior of Parsi family

The Crow Eaters is a fictional novel, presents a beautiful explanation to the typical saga of a Parsi family and the Corresponding social milieu. This novel explains the detail description of Parsi mind, social behaviour, value systems and customs. The novel begins with fare and customs. The novel begins with Faredoon Junglewalla, the patriarch of the Parsi community at Lahore, explaining the secret of his success by its parallel with the history of his people. The protagonist of the novel, Faredoon Junglewalla is representative of Parsi ambition, industry, thrift and unscrupulousness. The whole novel is so humorous, entertaining and unpretentious, full of ghastrly character, riotously funny. The rich and spicy characters make the novel a literary tapestry.

The Protagonist, Faredoon Junglewalla embarked on his travels towards the end of the 19th Century. He leaves his forefather's house, with his wife Putli, mother-in-law Jerbanoo and his lovely and infant daughter Hutoxi, to seek his future. During his monotonous journey, he faced many mishaps and mild disasters. Freddy's bullock-cart enters the fertile region of five rivers. In his journey, he added to the ordinary worries and cares of a long journey undertaken by bullock-cart, Freddy soon found himself Confronted by two serious problems after spending few days in the golden city of Amritsar. They move to Lahore, which is the city of Parsis. Freddy falls in love with Lahore's beauty and atmosphere. Then he decided to make his house in Lahore which was very beneficial for him. There, he finds four Parsi families in Lahore. These families are: The Toddywallas, The Bankwallas, The Battliwallas and The Chaiwallas. The Toddywallas

are the owner of tea stall and the Chaiwallas run a bar. Mr. Battiwalla is a teller in a bank and Mr. Bankwalla is a good dancer. Freddy meets all these families. With their help and guidance, he settled his family there. They are very co-operative for Freddy's family.

Fareedoon Junglewalla creates his image in society as a helpful person. Likewise When Mr. Sodawalla's son is desperately in need of help, Freddy helps him. He responds not because he personally involved in the act but only because the reputation of the Parsi Community is at stake.

The Crow Eaters depicts the social mobility of a Parsi family, a characteristic typical of the Community and their rise from a single merchant store in Lahore to a chain of stores, in several North Indian cities and a license for handling good between Peshawar and Afghanistan. The novel also traces the Parsi friend of migration from the west coast to the century. Bapsi Sidhwa, who belongs to the third generation of Parsi settlers in various cities of North India, was brought up with fates of the entrepreneurial skills of her forefathers, hence adding a certain authenticity to her rendering of Fareedoon Junglewalla's exploits in the business fraternity. Parsis were sure to uphold a group identity by flaunting the traditions of their Community and dressing immaculately according to custom. Fareedoon's wife and mother-in-law never appear in public without mathabanas- white kerchiefs wound around the hair to fit like skull caps, holy thread (Kusti) circling their waists and sacred undergarments (Sudra) beneath their short blouses. Kusti and Sudra symbolize Zoroastrian faith and they are worn by both men and women. A child first wears them at the Navjote, the ceremony of initiation into the Zarathusti 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". (124)

Another major reason why the Parsis were extremely preoccupied with increased westernization and following British ways was a long standing policy of the community of proximity towards state; a close relationship between state and community based on mutual support. In consideration with their limited status a minority community, the Parsis demanded religious autonomy and protection, in return of consistent loyalty and economical and social sustenance. Thus, 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". He would take make sure to refer to Deputy Commissioner, Chartes, P. Allen's children as 'my prince' and 'my princess'. A typical example of Parsi struggle to establish identity in an astoundingly diverse ethno religious society is epitomized in the dying Fareedoon Junglewalla's fervent protests against the nationalist moment and exhortations to his children to remain loyal to the British Empire. Freddy's repulsion is representative of majority of Parsis, especially the business status, bankers and civil servants, who rose under the Raj and to whom prosperity was related to social significance and identity. However the same Freddy, in the perceptiveness at a dying man who also hints at the need of

shifting allegiances in the face of independence, to whose ever gets to rule the country, to sustain and maintain their position in society and uphold their communal identity above everything else:

The protagonist of the novel, Freddy's relationship with his mother-in-law has never been cardinal she is quarrelsome and gluttonous woman. She eats like a horse at meals and whenever Freddy, in away, she appropriates huge quantities of chocolates, biscuits and wine. She after sends Harilal the clerk and the two salesman on errands for her. As a result Freddy's business is badly affected. He decides to consult to a mystic. The Mystic asks him to procure a coil of his mother-in-law's hair. Freddy tries to ship her hair white. She is having her afternoon siesta but she gets up in the nick of time and frustrates his plan. She wears her mathabana all the time. She blackens her eyes and presses two large spot of soot on her temples to protect herself from the envious and evil eye. One day she hands her daughter a tattered bit of meat membrane, dipped in turmeric, commanding, "Here, protect me from evil spells?" Putli circles head and flings it out of the window to the crows. This episode shows that Parsis, though quite progressive in their outlook, are not unaffected by superstitious beliefs and practices prevalent in the subcontinent. Jerbanoo suddenly turns excessively religious. She prays five times a day and each time, imitating the example temple priests, plies the kitchen fire with sandal wood. She loves her grand children. Jerbanoo had been mildly troubled by the discovery that there was no dokhma, or dungarwadi or as the British call it, the Tower of silence in Lahore. Now that her imaged age brought her so tragically close to death, this worry became an obsession. What would happen to her remains when she died? Then, they promised Jarbanoo that her dead body would be buried like a Muslim or a Christian. In *The Crow Eaters* Sidhwa says that this system of disposing of dead body originated in the rocky terrain of Persia at a time when Arabic land was too precious to be used as a graveyard. Jerbanoo gets pacified only when Freddy promises her that he will take her body to Karachi and deposit it in the Tower himself.

It was the beginning of autumn and Lahore started to smile again. It was still warm outside in the sun but pleasant indoors. Jerbanoo decided to get the servant boy to work the fan strings while she had her siesta. The fan was stiff quilted stretch of cloth and length of her bed. It was affixed to the ceiling. The boy would squat on the floor and diligently pull the fan string down and up down and up, until Jerbanoo dozed off. Jerbanoo catches a servant boy smoking bidi in the kitchen. She hauls him up by ears, slaps him and yells for Putli to come and witness the crime. Freddy is also called from the store to deal with the outrage. He is shocked as smoking is considered one of the cardinal sins by the Parsis. In Freddy's household candles are snuffed with a reverent pinch of the fingers. The cooking fire is never permitted to be extinguished; it is preserved in ashes at night, and fanned alive each morning. But Feroza, Freddy great's great-great-grand-daughter, in *An American Brat*, defiles the holy fire by taking a new puffs from a cigarette at the insistence, of the guitarist boy friend of her friend Joe. At night she realizes the gravity of her sin. After performing the Kusti ritual-winding it three times round her waist, knotting it at the front and the back to the accompaniment of the appropriate prayers-she bows

her penitent's head to beg divine forgiveness for desecrating the holy fire, the symbol of Ahura Mazda, by permitting it such intimate contact with her unclear mouth.

The Bible, The Bhagavad Gita and *The Holy Quran*, all the scriptures represents the Sikh, Jain and Buddhist faiths along with the Avesta (the holy book of the Parsis) on a shelf right above Freddy's prayer table indicate the Parsis' religious tolerance and reverence for all faiths. Beneath the shelf, the prayer table, there in a holy lamp with a likeness of the Prophet Zarathustra stamped on its glass shade. The prophet is holding aloft his finger to remind his followers of the one and only God, Ahura Mazada.

Freddy, who usually approached the prayer table once a day for a brief benediction, now visits it frequently as he finds his business steadily diminishing. In desperation he again consults the fortune tellers. He takes his horoscope, from one saga to the other for interpretation. Freddy learns of the devastating influence of Saturn on his stars. The worthies tell him to take heart as Saturn is on its way out and better days are in store for him. Of all the predictions, Freddy is most taken by what a gypsy, sitting on the pavement and dealing out a strange deck of cards, says, "A tall, slender charmer will come your way soon. The person will have a very fortunate influence on you and change the course of your life." (53) The whole novel is full of Parsi Ethos. Faredoon's wife, Putli is the traditional and dutiful Indian women who do not think twice before she embarks on the journey with her husband, to Lahore. She is an ideal of Indian wifely submission love and responsibility. She is equally understanding towards her children, even when one of them turns out to be a poet, and later a shaven head saint rebelling against the family tradition.

But Putli is at a loss when it comes to resonating to a change in culture, and adopting alien culture. Thus when it was deemed fashionable to be educated in an English missionary school, by virtue of the social mobility it provided, Putli resists change and shows displeasure at an interaction of two cultures. But Freddy is able to proud her to attend formal tea parties on the gracious lawns of the Government house, keen to advance and consolidate relationship with the influential. But Sidhwa places aptly Putli's dilemma in the face, of her husband's insistence: "Deep-rooted in the tradition of a wife walking three paces behind her husband, their department was as painful to Putli as being marched naked in public." (185)

Putli is at the edge of a loss of identity unable to adopt the manners and customs of the ruling colonies power and the inability to understand the generation's gap which comes in between her and the children. The couple's younger son, Billy is more comfortable with the family traditions and goes on to take on the business. Yazdi, who is violation of the traditions, wants to marry a girl of doubtful respectability.

The second son of Faredoon Junglewalla, Yazdi's character is portrayed skilfully by Sidhwa as study in identity crisis. Denied his wish to marry a girl of his choice, an Anglo-Indian Rosy Watson, he illustrates on the escapist behaviour. A sensitive boy, Yazdi, is wounded by the

striking commercialism and obsequiousness of his fellow Parsis. Yazdi takes to revolt against his existing family system, disillusioned by his father's insulting appraisal of his love-interest, and indulges literally in the dictum of charity popular among privileged. He renounces all luxury and leads an ascetic life on the streets of Bombay. Initially he return from school barefoot has given his shoes to an orphan in his class and again gives away his dress and entire attire. Placed in a boarding school, he becomes a dropout, drifting about the city, "Squandering his allowance fees on beggars" and sleeping on park benches and pavements. Yazdi totally breaks off from his family and takes to the streets feeding dying children and taking care of the homeless and dying. He becomes a staunch follower of Mazdak, the first communist, who Yazdi Considers a Zarathusi ancestor who realized centuries ago "that all material goods, including women are to be shared" (212) visiting home and he is last seen on the benches on Chowpatty beach, a withered tramp, Sidhwa has stressed through, the character of Yazdi that all Parsis are not similar in their attitude nor do they have stereotype reactions.

Freddy has hardly been able to get over the problem created by Yazdi when his eldest Son, Soli, aged nineteen, dies unexpectedly from a minor wound. Sidhwa gives a very detailed description of Soli's funeral rites. His body is bathed and dresses in old garments of white cotton. Freddy wraps the Kusti around his son's waist, reciting prayers. As there is no "Tower of Silence" in Lahore, the body is transported to the fire Temple. It is laid on two stone slabs in a room in the living quarters of the priest and a corpse-bearer draws three circles around it with a sharp nail. Now, none can enter the circle except the corpse-bearers. On a white shut spread on the floor, the stricken women are sitting. They are in white saris except Jerbanoo who is in her widow's black. The priest's dog, adopted by him because of the two eyes like spots above his eyes, is brought into the room. It is believed that his four eyes can ward off evil spirits and can direct the faintest hint of life in the corpse. As the dog shies away, all fond hopes of Putli are shattered.

At night the fire-alter is brought into the room and placed on a white cloth on the floor. Sitting cross-legged before it, the priest recites from the Avestan scriptures all through the night and keeps the fire alight and the room fragrant with sticks of sandalwood and frankincense. At down the mourners strut pouring in and fill up the little room, the verandah and the compound between the priest's quarters and the stone building of the fire Temple. At three o'clock the pall-bearers-husbands of Freddy's daughters Hotoxi and Ruby, Mr. Chaiwalla's son Cyrus and Mr Bankwalla- come into the room, carrying an iron bier. As the number of Parsis in Lahore is too small to warrant professional pall-bearers, these men have volunteered their services for the task. They place the bier beside the body and recite a short prayer, "We do this according to the dictates at Ahura Mazda..." And sit down to one side. They are watched in white garments. No part of their body except the eyes and the nose is visible. Even their hands are gloved in white cloth tied at the wrists.

The prayers for the welfare of the departed soul being over, the mourners pass, one by one before the corpse to have a last look and bow before it. The dog is brought into the room once again. The pall-bearers drop a white sheet over the corpse lift the body onto the iron bier and hoisting it to their shoulders move out into the compound. People, mostly non Parsi, standing in the compound feel disappointed at not being able to see the face of Soli. Freddy on an impulse removes the sheet from Soli's face. Scandalized, the men of his community crowd round the bier. Once the sacred rites are performed over the body, people of other faiths are not permitted to look upon it. Someone says, "Fareedoon, this is sacrilegious! Pull yourself together!" Freddy, fighting desperately to keep his voice steady, says: "They had stood all this while to see my son: let them. What does it matter if they are no Parsis? They are my brothers: and if I can look upon my son's face, so can they!" (179)

At the end of the four day ceremony for the welfare of the departed soul, Freddy makes the customary Proclamation of charity to construct a school in Karachi. After Soli's death, Freddy's attitude to life gets mellowed. He becomes altruistic and religious. He donates water troughs for tonga horses, benches for a sea-front promenade in Karachi, and funds for the graveyard at Quetta. He develops interests in mysticism and studies the translation of the Gathas. He shifts the business responsibilities onto his youngest son, Billy.

Billy is an equivoque combination of Freddy and Yazdi. He is a typical Parsi in his materialistic values, in his uncompromising thrift and planned mercantile activity. Yet he is different from both Freddy and Yazdi only in degree, as all of them are true Parsis, in head and heart, materialistic and spiritual values alike. Billy is an uncomplicated character whose only vocation is money - he lives to make it, multiply and hoard. If Freddy attaches paramount importance to charity, Billy is notoriously miserly. As Billy is the last hope of the family, his marriage is planned with utmost care. An advertisement is put up in the newspapers of Bombay and Karachi. Out of more than a hundred letters one is finally selected. It is from Khan Bahadur Sir Noshirwan Jeevanjee Easymoney, one of the richest Parsis of Bombay. Billy with his mother Putli and grandmother Jerbanoo goes to Bombay. As Roshan the girl whom he is expected to marry is pock-marked, he decides to marry her younger sister, Tanya.

Sidhwa gives a detailed description of the 'token money' ceremony. Billy is made to stand on a small wooden platform prettily decorated with the patterns of fish drawn in lime. Tanya's mother Rodabai anoints his forehead with Vermilion, touches Vermilion to the toes of his shoes, and presses rice grains on his forehead. The sisters, aunts and cousins sing traditional ditties while Rodabai garlands Billy. She gives him a little envelope containing the token money'. She also gives him a heavy gold watch on a chain and tells him to step off with his right leg first. Then Tanya mounts the platform and Putli performs the rites. She presents the girl with twenty-one Queen Victoria *Sovereigns* while everyone signs. In the evening the date of their marriage is fixed. Four days before the wedding the Mada-Sara ceremony is performed. It entails much stepping on and off the small, fish patterned platform. After Billy and Tanya step off and plant a

mango sapling to ensure their fertility, the sister mount the platform to be garlanded, strained with vermilion and presented with their set of clothes and thin strings of gold. The gummy-mouthed aunts and uncles, eagerly awaiting their turn come next. They are also garlanded strained with Vermilion, and given small envelopes containing cash. Rodabai performs the honours for Jerbanoo and Putli and then with a great deal of Coaxing mounts the platform herself.

The wedding takes place on flower bedecked stags at the Taj Mahal Hotel. Tanya, Wearing a white Saten Sari, heavy with Silver and pearl embroidery, is sitting demurely on a curved chair. Billy is sitting on an identical chair wearing a tall, dark pagri-hat and white coat and pyjamas. Two priests are standing before them chanting and throwing rice, coconut slivers and rose petals at them. Faredoon and Putli are standing being Billy, and Sir and Lady Easymoney behind Tanya, as witnesses. Thus, the Parsi mode of marriage is a mix of the Hindu Muslims modes of Marriage. In fact, The Parsis are cultural hybrids as they have adopted the customs of Hindu and Muslims both.

Billy and Tanya go to Shimla for their honeymoon. After spending a month there, they leave for Lahore. From the station they are driven straight to a new house in one of the better localities of Lahore. In India certain ceremonies are performed before entering a new home. Putli performs the honours on the verandah. Tanya and Billy bow to her as she swings a silver tray Containing water and unlocked rice round their heads. She trips the contents at their feet. She sacrifices an egg circling it seven times over their heads; she breaks it on the floor. Then she whacks three fresh coconuts vigorously until it cracks and spills its water. Having thus propitiated the spirits, Putli stains their foreheads with vermilion and leads them through the freshly garlanded portals. Though Billy and Tanya observes the family rituals, are utterly ashamed of traditional habits and consider they British customs, however trival, exemplary. They make friends with modern couples equally determined to break with tradition. They attend small intimate 'mixed parties' where married couples laugh and dance decorously with other married couples. But Billy often feels jealous of his wife receiving extra ordinary attention from his friends. He also grudges her impulsive spending as he loves money more than anything else in the world. Tanya dances to his tune in the beginning but when his mother and grandmother join him in finding fault with her. She becomes intolerant and even abusive.

Tanya's pregnancy wins everyone's favour in the family. She is flooded with kindly advice. Putli sticks pictures of chubby cheeked English babies all over the house in the hope that her daughter-in-law by looking at them will produce a beautiful baby boy. But Tanya gives birth to a brown skinned girl. After the initial disappointment, the members of the family console one another by saying that Laxmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, has sought to favour them. Through this episode, Sidhwa highlights the longing and the preference the people in the subcontinent for male children.

Freddy now has no worries as Billy is looking after the business very well. He takes his wife and mother-in-law on a six month holiday to England but because of Jerbanoo's frequent misdemeanors he has to get back to India, a full and a half ahead of schedule. Tanya again in the family way and this time she is delivered of a boy. When the child, robust and fair-complexioned, is one year old, Faredoon suddenly realizes that soli is reborn. This shows that the Parsis, like the Hindu, believe, in rebirth. One scorching day in June, 1940, Sixty-five Years old Faredoon feels a hot fever in his bones and he knows his end is near. He has no fear at death as he has lived his life to the full. But he feels an urge to leave a greater part of himself behind in the form of his influence on the minds of his children. He, therefore talks to each of them at length, subtly injecting the lessons of his experience and the rich fruit of his reflection.

One evening, gathered around Faredoon in the bedroom, his family finds him animated as of old, yet perturbed by the trend of political events in India. He is stirred by the talk of rebellion, self-rule and independence from the British – and most of all by the role of a few Parsis, especially Dadabhoy Navroji of Bombay and Rustom Sidhwa of Karachi. He bursts out angrily:

The atmosphere gets charged with apprehension. His son-in-law Bobby Katrak asks in alarm, "But where will we go? What will happen to us?" Faredoon says softly in *The Crow Eaters*: "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 sun continues to set-in their arses...!" (283)

Sidhwa's narrative provides multiple variations of the history and the politics of the times to subvert the 'official' version. Her choice of the Parsis protagonist is deliberate. She posits a parses an 'outsider' to give a neutral account of the most turbulent period of Indian and Pakistani history. The perspective in *The Crow Eaters* is that of the "other" which is diametrically opposite to that of the centre. Thus Sidhwa debunks a myth, a myth built by the centre to suit its purpose. She successfully establishes in artistic terms, how India undivided India end whole, became a victim of wily statement.

At another level, *The Crow Eaters* could be read as a satire on the ways of the Parsi life. The criticism by a section of the Parsi community was the result of an assumption that the major thematic concern of the novel was the life of the Parsi. Here Sidhwa neither glorifies nor vilifies Parsi life. Like several minority communities, Parsi wrote little book glorifying themselves. They were not used to having themselves parodied or lampooned. Sidhwa makes a candid admission about her own community. The Parsis are no angels by any means. One sees their strength, weakness and the strength of their women.

Bapsi Sidhwa attempts to establish is that the Parsi community is like any other community with its own strength and limitation. *The Crow Eaters* unlike several eulogies of Parsi by Parsi does not exalt the community but only places Parsi life in perspective. It offers a rich insider into Parsi life. Sidhwa's vision is ironic which reveals her moral preoccupations. It combines in itself the elemental and the ephemeral in life. Even the title is suggestive, only

means, “people who talk too much.” It refers to the Parsi’s notorious ability to talk ceaselessly at the top of their voices like an assembly of crows.

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 manner, but is a genial comedy. The view of 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 behavior and attitude 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 godown, 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. She presents the hilarious sager 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 Parsi in the novels is shown as cultural hybrids, moral codes and political loyalties of two distinct peoples, which never completely interpenetrated and fused.

In the ending lines of the paper, Sidhwa has evaluated the contribution of the Parsi community in the freedom movement and partition of India. The focus of her study is on the Parsi community. She attempts to present a map of their changing identity. In their way, she has touched the hidden nook of his secret community. The main stress is this that their culture is their identity. Parsi’s don’t like to disclose Parsi culture. They always believed in that they ought to preserve their culture from other major influences that surround them.

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