CHAPTER 1V

BEYOND THE CUSTOMARY AND COMMONPLACE

Sidhwa’s characters, whether male or female are an extension of her refusal to remain constricted in the hollow and age-old inequitable practices of society. They are ambitious and adventurous and those who think beyond the circumstantial limitations they find themselves in. This chapter is an attempt to analyze Sidhwa’s characters in her novels. For this purpose a detailed analysis of her novels is set forth which leads to a study of her characters. This chapter deals with subversive female mentality and invincible courage which Sidhwa herself displayed, trying to break lose from the customary and traditional practices of her own community.

“There are those who don’t like to mix with me anymore, because I am so talked about and written about, and that is looked down upon, frowned upon slightly. Someone’s husband would feel, ‘This girl is a bad influence on everybody.’

Bapsi Sidhwa.
The Crow Eaters and The Bride were written prior to her arrival in Houston— in fact “between bridge games in Lahore”— her adherence to Zoroastrian traditions had prevented her from devoting herself to a career in Literature. In the diminishing minority of the Parsis, women are expected to contribute solely to the preservation of the family. The new environment in Houston enabled Sidhwa to break away from the patriarchal order of the Zoroastrian community. The roots of her rebellion against the traditional role of a Parsi housewife are to be traced back to an earlier phase of her works, The Crow Eaters. In this satirical account of the life of the Parsis in India, without abandoning all tradition, Sidhwa undertakes an objective examination of the role of Parsi women.

Sidhwa’s self-assertion allows her to be at once within and outside the Zoroastrian tradition. She does not believe that safeguarding of her culture need exclude the possibilities of independence and career; strongly identifying with her culture and dissenting from it, to write. A deeply ingrained dualism of apparent patriarchy and hidden matriarchy translates into her writings, In The Crow Eaters, patriarchy has apparent control but the womanly undermines it, confirming the principle of dualism at the heart of Zoroastrianism.
The novel though is a chronicle of the success of a male protagonist, is heavily weighed down with the presence of female characters. Freddy throughout the course of his life is forced to contrive according to the wishes of the women of his family, especially his mother-in-law, to whose terror he succumbs and whines;

“So effective was the malignity of Saturn in his horoscope that he weakly watched Jerbanoo usurp his authority in every sphere, impotent to counter the topsy turvy turn of domestic events.”(The Crow Eaters p.29)

His wife Putli also asserts quietly her authority over Freddy and he too gives into her instinctive control over him.

“She unblinking, seemingly inane eyes saw more than Freddy ever realised. They instinctively raked the depths of him and often enough, surfaced somewhat uneasily.”(The Crow Eaters p.23)

Sidhwa grew up in a predominantly Muslim Lahore where there were relatively less Parsis than Bombay or Karachi. The major part of her kith and kin were located in these two cities and so she led a lonesome childhood, without an extended family and the friends she would have
made in school, had she not been ridden with a physical deformity. Huge hunks of her childhood were spent in reading and fantasizing, which laid the cornerstone of her writing career. Sidhwa was married at nineteen and had two of her three children already, when she started writing at twenty seven. In fact she started writing after meeting an Afghan woman writer on plane, who impressed upon her the human facet of being a writer, and helped her to publish the first short piece, Sidhwa managed to write, in a magazine.

Sidhwa plausibly kept her writing to herself, since she came from a business family where fiction was considered a wasteful vista, or even a demonstration of insanity. The social circle she moved in consisted of businessmen, feudal-farmers, industrialists and professionals, among whom the prospect of being a writer would give rise to haughty and deductive assumptions. She wrote when she found time away from her children and husband, when she played dummy at bridge. However she found an immediate critic in her husband who read scantily but stimulatingly, Voltaire, Maugham and Einstein.

“I wrote because I had a compulsion to communicate, to tell stories, to shed light on forgotten people, to right wrongs, to
fill the silences in my life, to express the thoughts that engorged my mind…”

Bapsi Sidhwa.

Sidhwa shares space with internationally acclaimed fellow Parsi writers such as Rohinton Mistry and Farrukh Dhondy. With her ground-breaking venture *The Crow Eaters* (1978), she effectively staked out a piece of Parsi territory in the area of realistic fiction. Rooted in displaced or double diasporic conditions in the case of Parsis, the characters in Sidhwa’s novel are initiated more often than not into a self-awakening or self-realization or at other times an awakening into one’s own culture— an essential aspect of post-colonialism. Almost all post-colonial novels are centred on the coming to an understanding or realisation of the self, in a location or a particular cultural indigenousness. The central character grows into an awareness of himself. An astute example of this is Swami, in R.K.Narayan’s ‘Swami and his Friends’, in which Swami who is carried away by all things western tries to identify himself with all that, and is dejected by the borrowed westernization, which results in his subsequent awakening into his Indianness. True to the post-colonial disposition towards indigenousness, hybridity; westernization and assimilation or adaptation, are totally rejected.
Instigation, self-awakening, or in other words a voyage into oneself is one of the major characteristics of Sidhwa’s novels, whether it is, as Indian or Pakistani in the case of the displaced and routed population of the sub-continent; or realization of their land and religion in the case of her characters placed in self-exile or alien conditions. The Parsis, well acknowledged for the hybridization and adaptation into an alien culture as a means of survival, gained acceptance in the Indian society on the pretext of hybridity, and their willingness to dissolve into the culture of the sub-continent accepting all and denigrating nothing, adding to it sweetness, as sugar in milk. They adopted the Gujarati language, customs, and rites and lived in harmony with the rest of the society till the arrival of the British in India. Now they changed sides, and adopted the British standards, mixing, merging and assimilating with them. In the effort of hybridity into alien and foreign cultures, not even Edward Said’s metropolitan intellectual is match to the readiness of the Parsi community.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s female characters undergo an awakening, (apart from that into a consciousness of country and culture,) into a political consciousness and a consciousness into their own bodies and their indigenousness, which results in a general outward growth and development in the subcontinental female psyche. Thus Sidhwa’s female characters are all strong reflections of the subcontinent woman who has
attained self awakening and come to terms with her new found identity and thereby refuses to comply with the time tested ruthlessness which undermines the system that regards female human creatures in society.

In *The Ice-Candy-Man*, Lenny displays a self realization and acceptance of her polio, and her sexuality; of her indigenousness as a Parsi which provides her the advantage of being a detached observer during the Partition, and with this she comes to terms with a new identity, of being a Pakistani, ‘in a snap’, *(The Ice-Candy-Man P.140)* in the division of states. But this ability to easily shift allegiances, to hybridize her, to hold her personal safety over country and culture, is so much part of Parsi indigenousness.

*The Crow Eaters* shows a journey to establish superiority, to westernization and hybridity, and a subsequent journey back to reassert nativeness. Freddy, Putli and Jerbanoo embark on the much awaited trip to England, ‘…the England of their imaginings were burnished to an antiseptic gloss that had no relation to human menial toil.’ *(The Crow Eaters p 252)*

But moments after their arrival in the enchanted land of their dreams, their excitement turns into disillusionment, as they see Englishmen sweep streets and work as clerks, sales girls and businessmen ‘…on a footing of disconcerting equality’ *(The Crow Eaters P.253)* and houses with
no servants where people had to scrub their own toilet bowls. Thus a disgruntled Jerbanoo cries… ‘I want to go back to my Lahore. I don’t want to die in a foreign land (The Crow Eaters p.258)

Thus the older generations of the Parsis go through an initiation of their inevitability of having to return to the Indian soil.

In An American Brat, Feroza too undergoes this initiation into the indigenousness of her country and culture and the need to bond her identity to it. She undergoes a journey into the depths of the alien culture in an effort to adapt and assimilate an independence and strength of character and decision which was denied to her. But in the process she too is ultimately disillusioned by the westernization, the foreignness and the borrowed identity. She finds consolation in her Indian friend and his ghazals, in the essence of being a Parsi, in the ‘sudra’ and ‘kusti’ and the security and power which it gave to her in desolation, being rejected by her Jewish boyfriend who refuses her country, religion and customs, and the incompatibility of an intercommunity marriage being dawned upon her.

The Ice-Candy-Man is a brilliant evocation of the prowling roots of religious intolerance. It has been effectively rendered through an eight year old crippled girl, living in the midst of, yet apart from the rising tensions
among the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs during the Partition of the Indian sub-continent.

“The protagonist of the novel, ‘an eight year old girl called, Lenny, with a crippled leg, dons the attire like that of the persona that Chaucer adopts in his Prologue, rendering credibility by being almost a part of the readers consciousness. Her childish innocence is like the seeming naïve display of Chaucer’s persona, a source of sharp irony.’”

Sidhwa brings forth the complexity of violence- racial, ethnic and religious-that featured in the portioning of the Indian Sub-Continent, so touchingly, convincingly and horrifyingly: the de-humanising effects of communalism, the pillage and the mass slaughter of innocence of either side. The story is set during the tumultuous period when India gained her independence from the loathsome British Raj. Baby Lenny begins her story living in an idyllic bubble as a naïve four year old and concludes years later completely stripped of her childhood illusions and her bubble sufficiently deflated. A similar technique is used in Arundati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997), published after a gap of a decade and a half, which also is to an extent told from children’s point of view, with a cross-section of characters representing each level of society, with a touch of estranged
human relationships; an awareness of being unwelcome; politics and caste divide and a further reconciliation towards the conflict that exists at the individual and the societal levels, that which people are unable to resolve.

The children in these novels and yet again the child-narrator in Attia Hossain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, are used as mediators who negotiate the various binaries that the novels set up: between the East and the West, the national and the personal, upper caste and lower caste, male and female, minority and majority.

Lenny the precocious narrator is naive, powerfully observant, sensitive, yet beyond the stereotype patterns of a timid girl child. Sidhwa uses Lenny’s voice to render on the events an innocence, which is difficult to match. The girl has not learnt adult prejudice, the hate and contempt that exists between people of different faiths. Witnessing evil through the eyes of innocence makes it all the more chilling. The novel uses humour very skillfully to describe the world of the narrator and goes on to link the sequences of Lenny’s childish world with events leading to the partition and the subsequent loss of innocence. Bapsi Sidhwa’s precocious narrator gives account of the momentous events leading to partition and the aftermath through an incremental construction as she repeats overheard conversations, strange sights and even misinterprets situations which are later explained. In fact there are clear cadences of an unidentified adult
who reveals herself rarely but imposes a strong presence behind the shadows of this child narrator and observer. She stays in the background until Lenny establishes herself firmly and has gained ground as a convincing voice. She speaks for the first time when Lenny describes the scene in which her father returns from work, and her mother and she fret and fuss all over him, mother repeating the clever remarks the child had made during the day, and Lenny impressing upon him the happenings in his absence. The scene closes with the line, ‘Is that when I learn to tell tales?’ (The Ice-Candy-Man p.5) This ‘I’ is not little Lenny, but an adult Lenny looking back on a moment in childhood.

The Ice-Candy Man distils the love-hate relationship between Hindus and Muslims through the consciousness and point-of-view of the eight year old Parsi Girl. The novel limits itself to Lenny’s perspective, through which the dissenting and disagreeing voices of many are refracted. We believe we are witnessing the partition, but strategically placed flash forwards signal, in a subtle manner, that the adult Lenny is actually reliving the past in order to make sense of the events that baffled her when she was too small to comprehend simultaneously. She restricts herself to the experiences and sensory perceptions of the child she was. In describing the climatic incidents of Partition, Lenny maintains a tone of neutrality. In one of the nightmares she
has, she faces an immaculate Nazi soldier coming to get her, and “men in uniforms, quietly slicing off a child’s arm here, a leg there”

“…I feel no pain. Only an abysmal sense of loss-and a chilling horror that no one is concerned by what’s happening.”( The Ice-Candy-Man p.22)

Lenny inhabits a compressed space, extending usually from Queen’s Road to Jail Road and limited by a distant canal, cutting across the road beyond the bazaars of Mozang Chung. Godmother’s cannibalistic brother-in-law, who visits them, comes from way beyond the perimeter of her familiar world. Nevertheless Lenny’s world is set amidst a motley company. Instead of rendering Lenny immobile, her handicap frees her from school and enables her to roam Lahore in a pram pushed by Ayah. This gives her access to the company of a host of street characters in the park. Through their rich and varied lives and conversations, as well as sudden quarrels between guests at home, Lenny becomes aware of a changing, charged atmosphere. Lenny hears of the major political issues of the day-Swaraj; the demand for Pakistan; Gandhi; Jinnah; Wavell; the Congress; the Muslim League; the Akalis; etc.

The book’s many characters come to life through Bapsi’s skill, exhibiting the odd tasks and unpredictable behaviour of real individuals.
Lenny roams with them through the fountains, cypresses and marble terraces of the Shalimar gardens. There are Ayah; Butcher; the puny zoo attendant; the government –house gardener; the Masseur; the restaurant-owning wrestler; and the shady Ice-Candy-Man- Muslims; Christians; Sikhs; Hindus; friends and neighbours; until their ribald everyday world disintegrates before the violence of religious hatred.

She makes pertinent political comments as she breaks from the feminine stereotype role and explores the ambiguities and contradictions residing in the political situation in the Punjab in the course of her narrative. Lenny is appalled by the thought of the partitioning of India, the breaking of Punjab…

‘…will the earth bleed? And what about the sundered rivers, won’t the water drain into the jagged cracks…?’ (The Ice-Candy-Man p.54 )

Lenny’s seemingly naïve questions thus aptly convey the human loss in partition. Lenny wonders how she will see Godmother again. This is something shared by many in India and Pakistan, whose families and other kin live across the border.
Lenny accompanies Imam Din, the cook, to his son’s village, Pir Pindo, which opens before her a totally different world and people. The village with its close to earth dwelling - which Lenny views in contrast to her ‘elevated world of chairs, tables and toilet seats’ (The Ice-Candy-Man P. 58) - and the simplicity of ploughing and virtual hand-to-mouth existence, is not however immune to the toxic political scenario. The Sikh Granthi visits the village and the village Chaudary and the rest, talk about the mounting Hindu-Muslim riots. Different as they are from their city counterparts, they pledge to respect either communities and maintain peace and friendship among themselves. ‘…the madness will not affect the villages.’ Imam Din says. (The Ice-Candy-Man p. 56)

A year later Imam Din starts thinking otherwise. On their next visit to Pir Pindo, Lenny notices that people are wary of strangers’ presence in the village and their stern, unfriendly mannerisms. Talk about the Alkalis’ who plan to drive the Muslims out of East Punjab and to divide the Punjab, is in the air. A fortnight hence Imam Din has to accommodate quite a few of his distant kith and kin in his own quarters, as they are forced to evacuate the village. Yet others, who had chosen to stay in their village - assured by safety towards minority, offered by political leaders, and the geographical advantage of being in the heart of Punjab; together with the torment of uprooting themselves from the soil of their ancestors - were
cruelly dismembered. The women were brutally raped and left morally and physically wounded and the men beheaded or cold-bloodedly murdered.

Lenny’s strictly observant nature also reveals through apt sentences the hardening communal attitudes and the growing orthodoxy in the frenzied situation. “Loyal servant’s like Iman Din and Yousaf suddenly turn into religious zealots, Ayah becomes a Hindu as with renewed devotional fervour. The Sharmas and Daulatrams stress that they are Brahmins, though Lenny sees them “as dehumanised by their lofty caste and caste-marks.”(The Ice-Candy-Man p. 93) The English Christians consider Anglo-Indians inferior and the Anglo-Indians consider themselves superior to the Indian Christians, who in turn regard all non-Christians with a supercilious air. Lenny realises that they too have been reduced to “…irrelevant nomenclatures-we are Parsee.”(The Ice-Candy-Man p.94) The whole of Lahore has cultivated sectarian attitudes among them, and think in terms of “…us and them.”(The Ice-Candy-Man p.94) She instinctively senses the social divide between communities. Their visits to the Queen’s Park change in its nature.

Ayah’s admirers talk about Partition and each of them try to identify their religious pursuits with the scope of an impending Partition. They talk of Lord Wavell’s sacking and Lord Mountbatten and the wavering fate of
Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. With the imminence of Partition the park which was hitherto a symbol of unity, presents a picture of different religious groups keeping away from one another’s company. There is a distinct divide between the communities in the park as the Muslim family sits apart with their burkha-veiled women; the Brahmins form a tight circle of supercilious exclusivity in different parts of the park. Subsequently the group around Ayah meet less frequently at the Queen’s park and more at the wrestler’s restaurant, symbolic of the ring of fight that Partition is going to raise on the joint borders of India and Pakistan. The verbal skirmishes that follow among hitherto allies and fellow admirers of Ayah,—the butcher and the masseur; the gardener, Sher Singh and the wrestler show how deep the pattern of communal discord has become:

“Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, Iqbal, Tara Singh, Mountbatten are names I hear. And I become aware of religious differences.” “It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves-and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols.” “Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing ayah-she is also a token. A Hindu.” (The Ice-Candy-Man p.93.)

The Hindu neighbours leave their homes as tension mounts and Lahore burns. Lenny wonders how long the city burned,
‘Despite the residue of passion and regret, and loss of those who have in panic fled- the fire could not have burned for… Despite all the ruptured dreams, broken lives, buried gold, bricked-in rupees, secreted jewellery, lingering hopes… the fire could not have burned for months and months.’ ‘But in my memory it is branded over an inordinate length of time: memory demands poetic licence.’ (The Ice-Candy-Man p.139)

The borders are drawn and Lahore goes to Pakistan… ‘I am Pakistani. In a snap. Just like that.’(The Ice-Candy-Man p.140). As Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan are looted and mobbed and mercilessly killed, the fortunate ones flee to the other side of the border, in search of safety; as Muslims flock in thousands from India facing equally formidable crises. Still others who opt to stay back convert their religions to secure safety. The houses left behind are claimed by the terrified, grateful and dispossessed refugees, and those left unoccupied showed signs of decay.‘…like a house pining for its departed-haunted-…’ (The Ice-Candy-Man p.176)

Lenny feels sometime later the fires all over Lahore subsided, or she wonders if the flames have become so much a part of life that they
have lost attraction. ‘Does one get used to everything? Anything?’ (The Ice-Candy-Man p.178)

Sharbat Khan, the Pathan becomes suddenly much in demand as his business is sharpening knives. People line up with their assortment of kitchen knives and meat-cleavers and scythes. He says, ‘I never knew there were so many knives and daggers in Lahore.’(The Ice-Candy-Man p.151)

Sidhwa also makes a comment on the victimization of women in society and provides equal space to communal violence on both sides of the Indo-Pakistan border. The sad fate of Lenny’s ayah amid Lahore’s communal frenzy, the stories of rape victims, the descriptions of Lahore’s red light area, the Hira Mandi where women walk at three O’ clock in the evening as if they’ve just awoken from sleep, amidst the half-naked men at flower stalls and hawkers carelessly joking at them; and the tragic child-marriage of her servant’s abused teenage daughter Papoo, who is wilfully married off to an elderly and cynical dwarf, who comes to his own marriage in a drugged condition, and is left in a stupor throughout the pompous affair; are all woven into the narrative to make a chilling statement on women’s lives.

The novel plays a key role in Bapsi’s oeuvre intertwining her Pakistani identity, with her Parsi roots, giving voice to the guiding
preoccupations of her work: the fate of the dispossessed and the damned of
the earth; the onslaught of revenge and violence to which the women of
‘enemy’ communities are subjected to in the name of faith and nation. It
also brings forth the Parsis’ moral position when faced with the religious
and ethnic dilemmas of their Muslim, Sikh and Hindu neighbours. Lenny’s
mother and electric-aunt get themselves involved in the mighty task of
helping the refugees from India and those leaving Lahore, by providing
them with smuggled ration petrol and other amenities, and rescuing
kidnapped women and sending them back to their families or to the
Recovered Women’s Camps. The abduction of Ayah leaves them
dumbfounded; nevertheless they resume the task of finding her, in
whatever condition, and rehabilitating her.

The Crow Eaters is full of charm and exuberance, imparting in its
excellence the magic and colour of India. A succint account of the
success of a Parsee businessman, from rags to riches, Sidhwa brings into it
a strangely attractive world of doing business in British India. An
extraordinary tale of very ordinary people, the story takes twists and turns
and goes from one generation to another with ease and flow. The
descriptions are solid and the pace and humour makes a perfect
combination to transform the story into a magical tale. There is very little
that Sidhwa’s pen misses as she creates an array of delightful, idiosyncratic
Parsees. The result is a gallery of vivid, loveable rogues. Throughout the novel her prose remains boisterous and baroque. The plot revolves around the fortunes of the dyed-in-the-wool Faredoon Junglewalla. The book provides a brief glimpse of his migration from central India to Lahore with his wife Putli and mother-in-law Jerbanoo and focuses on his gradual rise to affluence.

The Parsees have always been a flamboyantly prominent community in public life. What goes on behind this façade had been remote and mysterious. They have been described as smart and talkative. (The title is borrowed from an old Indian saying. Anyone who talks too much is said to have eaten crows.) They are innovative and imaginative entrepreneurs, with business in their genes. Best of all they are ribald, something comparable to Galsworthy’s Forsytes. Sidhwa opens all doors and windows of the world’s innermost recess. Far from ridiculing the Parsis, the novel celebrates their community- and, in turn, celebrates the all-encompassing idea of community. In The Crow Eaters, Parsi life and rituals, including a Navajot Ceremony, a wedding, death rites and aspects of the Zoroastrian religion are minutely described.

Sidhwa recreates a fictional yet typical saga of a Parsi family and the corresponding social milieu. It is a true account of the workings of the
Parsi mind, social behaviour, value systems and customs. The novel, a loosely constructed narrative, with an extended flashback, begins with the protagonists own migration.

‘Twenty-three years old, strong and pioneering, he saw no future for himself in his ancestral village, tucked away in the forests of Central India, and resolved to seek his fortune in the blessed pastures of the Punjab.’(The Crow Eaters p.12)

Faredoom Junglewalla, pragmatic, unscrupulous, the lovable scoundrel, a rich businessman, and the popular head in the Parsi community in Lahore, his uprooting from Central India to Punjab was not the aftermath of an imposed exile. It was rather a conscious and ambitious journey in search of greener pastures. In Sidhwa’s work, there is no migration or partition without loss. Thus even Freddy’s jovial rise exerts its price. But the prevalent comedy in the novel also suggests that migration is one of life’s essential rhythms and that the losses it incurs are made good with gains in self-knowledge.

His tale thereafter is the immigrants dream come true- up the social ladder, beyond the laws which might frustrate a less aspiring spirit, a marriage alliance with a fabulously wealthy family, and the expansion of his commercial empire. Sidhwa brings out in this novel, human character
singly capable of both extraordinary cruelty and all-encompassing kindness. Though enamoured by all that he could possibly wish for, Freddy is a loner, faced with the facts of his eldest son’s death, something he could not stop despite his money and power; and his second son’s rebellion, preferring to be a beggar on the streets of Bombay, than court his father’s refusal to accept his wish to marry of his choice. Furthermore a patriarch though undoubted he is, his rule is seriously challenged by his wife and mother-in-law.

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 goods between Pashawar and Afganistan. The novel also traces the Parsis’ trend of migration from the west coast to the more salubrious regions of North India during the turn of the century. Bapsi Sidhwa, who belongs to the third generation of Parsi settlers in various cities of North India, was brought up with tales of the entrepreneurial skills of her forefathers, hence adding a certain authenticity to her rendering of Faredoon 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. Thus Freddy was particular to 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 p.15)

Whereas Putli and Jerbanoo took care never to appear in public

“…without their ‘mathabanas’-white kerchiefs wound around the hair to fit like skull caps. The holy thread circling their waist was austerely displayed and sacred undergarments (‘Sudra’) worn beneath short blouses, modestly aproned their sari-wrapped hips.”(The Crow Eaters p.23.)

However the next generation of Parsis became more unconventional in their mode of dressing,

“She (Tanya) 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 outlined the astonishing loveliness of her lips.”(The Crow Eaters p.246)
But her husband, Behram who is yet very traditional in dressing objected to her showing her midriff and mixing freely with other men, as such actions could be misconstrued. Nevertheless he later encourages her westernized ways and ability to communicate in English, though at home he often supposed her to be servile and docile, a typical obedient and submissive wife. These contradictions in character, is used by Sidhwa to exemplify the established identity crisis in the Parsi psyche and the various ways they resort to in order to maintain importance in society.

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 make sure to refer to Deputy Commissioner, Charles. 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 Faredoon Junglewalla’s fervent protests against the nationalist movement and exhortations to his children to remain loyal to the British Empire. Freddy’s repulsion is representative of a majority of Parsis, especially the business strata, 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 of a dying man also hints at the need of shifting allegiances in the face of independence, to whosoever gets to rule the country, to sustain and maintain their position in society and uphold their communal identity above everything else.

“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.”

Novy Kapadia, The Parsi Paradox in ‘The Crow Eaters’

The paranoia attached to the feelings of their minority status, motivated the Parsis to excel in their entrepreneurial capacities. It often resulted in eccentric ways of dealing with their identity crisis, which
included an exclusive display of loyalty towards the British, and a group desire to identify themselves all too closely with them. But the English refused to consider the Parsis as their own kind, though they were equally westernized in their social behaviour and education; similarly the Parsis in their occupation to proximate with the British, which would guarantee a special status, distanced themselves from the other sections of Indian society, thus denying themselves a niche in the crowd of communities and resulting in a mental estrangement from India. Sidhwa portrays most Parsis in the novel as cultural hybrids, living in close intimation with the cultures, traditions, languages and ethical codes, and political loyalties of two distinct groups of people, which never completely amalgamated and interspersed.

The Bride describes many different migrations within the country and highlights vast cultural differences between urban and rural life. Sidhwa draws upon her knowledge of the Punjab and her observations of migrant labourers from the hills to tell the story. In the early part of the novel there are some particularly powerful passages describing the horror and carnage of the partition when boundary lines were so arbitrarily drawn across the Punjab by the British, dividing the province into East and West, India and Pakistan.
In the chaotic summer of 1947; the fertile lands were ripped into two territories, a premonition of the tragic consequences of Partition that was just a call away. Sidhwa says, “the earth is not easy to carve up, India is required a deft and sensitive surgeon, but…the earth sealed its clumsy new boundaries in blood as town by town, farm by farm, the border was defined.”(The Bride p.14.14-18) Zaitoon, the protagonist of the novel is seen as a child running away with her parents from the sundry plunder and loot that caused havoc in their village. In the throngs that flee we get to see the panic-stricken families who abandoned their animals and other possessions in an attempt to get on. Zaitoon first loses her calf, the sorrow which she suppresses; and later her parents amongst the scuffle and terrible events that followed. She is found by Qasim, who decides to rear her up. He too, was victim to mass deletion of his family (by small pox), and finds solace in the company of this small girl. Sidhwa compares the morning after the terrible night of loot and kill, to a sick man, pondering each movement, lest pain should recur. Dead bodies lay casually along the streets of Lahore. Cheapened by the butchering of over a million people, death had become casual and humdrum…it was easy to kill.

Qasim and Zaitoon move into the quarters of Nikka Pehlwan and his wife Miriam- a childless couple who are instantly attracted towards the small Zaitoon- where they are almost reassured by his ribald Punjabi
humour. Zaitoon, blessed by the short memory of a five-year old, gets caught up with the new excitement in her life.

When she grows up she moves into the cloisters of a Muslim female’s life, under the influence of Miriam, and grooms herself with the ever-tightening restrictions around her. When she is fifteen, Qasim, filled with a migrant’s longing for his homeland, takes her to his ancestral home in the mountains, where she is married to one of his kinsmen, a thoroughbred tribal of Kohistan. Unused as she was to such crude surroundings and rough livelihood, Zaitoon also discovers herself caught in the net of her husband’s animal-like passion and crude mannerisms. After a period of gross sufferings and dehumanising abuse, she flees through the unfriendly and callous rocks of the jungle. She is hunted day and night, and surrenders finally to the strength of wild nature, unable to flee her fate. The importance of the novel is that as a woman, she dared to struggle against the patriarchal norms; and that disenfranchised as she was she was able to envision a future for herself away from tribal rules, and feudal laws.

In the novel, Sidhwa, juxtaposes the often brutal ways of the tribesmen of Kohistan and the gentler life Zaitoon has experienced in Lahore, and thus sets before our eyes the cultural differences within independent Pakistan. Sidhwa skilfully introduces in the novel, a young
American woman, Carol, who is married to a modern-educated Pakistani husband. The novel links up and draws parallels between Zaitoon and Carol. Her presence in the novel does not call for cross-cultural differences between the East and the West, as much as those that exist within the same country. Women are silenced voices, inhabiting the shadows cast by their fathers or husbands. Despite differences in income, education and background, both discover that in Pakistan’s patriarchal society they are but secondary beings, objects of desire and suspicion. Sidhwa makes the burkha, the ultimate symbol of silence and shadow. Wearing a burkha, Zaitoon walks past her father, unrecognised. (The Bride p.91). Offended by the stares of tribal men, Carol says “Maybe I should wear a burkha” (The Bride p. 113.) Carol’s experiences as a foreign wife of a Pakistani are juxtaposed with Zaitoon’s ordeal as an outsider married to a Kohistani tribes man.

In Lahore, women are at ease, they are truly themselves when they inhabit the shadows of silence in a burkha or the Zenana in the absence of men. The Zenana is a refuge from the male world, given to procreation, female odours, and the interminable care of children. Redolent of easy hospitality, Zaitoon is drawn inexorably to the benign squalor in the women’s quarters. The positive sisterhood of the Zenana is offset, but by the image of the Zenana as a prison- the women are described as inmates,
while the “velvet vortex of a womb” (The Bride p. 56.) is partially denied by the fact that it is also given to procreation and thus not entirely free from the influence of men. In the novel Sidhwa focuses her critical lens on the conflicts and divisions that she sees as continually faced by the women of her part of the world.

The sentiments of the Parsi community and their struggle to find a niche in a restrictive Muslim society are brought forth in *An American Brat*. The novel is about the basic alienation of an uprooted community, whose identity is cultured and nurtured in each different milieu they relate to, their exile.

As the novel begins, Zareen is worried about her daughter, Feroza’s, essential backwardness and growing lack of self-confidence. Cyrus consoles his wife telling her that she’s just influenced by Pakistan’s turbulent political scenario, associated with the trial of Bhutto and the profusely knitted conventionalism that she is exposed to in society, and when the time comes she’ll learn in two minutes. Their conversation which brings around their mutual concern for their daughter who is imperceptibly influenced by the troublesome environment introduces us to the tumultuous incidents in Pakistan following Bhutto’s arrest. Zareen’s fears take deeper root as she compares herself at Feroza’s age, when she would wear frocks
and cycle to college. “What I could do in ’59 and ’60 my daughter can’t do in in 1978! ...” (An American Brat p.15)

Clung to the patriarchal Orthodox Muslim Pakistan, they feel bereft of the privileges enjoyed by the rest of the Asian community and their counterparts in India.

Zareen is appalled by the dress code brought into effect in Pakistan. She calls this a narrow minded attitude touted by General Zia. She becomes increasingly worried of her growing daughter’s mental make-up in a totally restricted upbringing. “Our children in Lahore won’t know how to mix with Parsee kids in Karachi and Bombay.(An American Brat p.11)

Feroza now disagrees to her mother’s sleeveless blouses, refuses to answer the phone and has turned bitterly narrow-minded.

Zareen and Cyrus Ginwalla, descendants of the Junglewalla clan of ‘The Crow Eaters’, find themselves cornered in an Islamic nation where politics, with ‘it’s special brew of martial law and religion’ (An American Brat p.11) influenced every aspect of life. Zareen objects to the hypocrisy in society in the name of conventionalism and the degradation of status of women.
“Its absurd how things have changed, I was really hopeful when Bhutto was elected. For the first time it didn’t really matter that I wasn’t a Muslim, or that I was a woman…Could you imagine Feroza cycling to school now? She’d be a freak. Those goondas will make vulgar noises and bump into her and the mullahs will tell her to cover her head. Instead of moving forward, we’re moving backward. (An American Brat p.11)

There are singular and apprehensive statements of how things have changed and also memories afresh, of the days before partition. Cyrus and Zareen speak in Gujarati while accounting nostalgic memories of life in Bombay. Zareen’s mother, Khutlibai too, used in plenty, Gujarati homilies, which she hauled out and fired like heat-seeking missiles, at anything she disliked.

The blend of politics in everyday life and its mighty influence is vivid throughout the novel, as the conversations are regularly interspersed with contemporary political insights. The upsurge of political affairs and its growing influence of conventionalism in the country clearly make an impact on Feroza’s temperament as she shows grave signs of aggression and alienation.
“Feroza banged shut bedroom doors, whipped open car doors, and smashed shuttlecocks over the net at her startled adversaries…” (An American Brat p.36)

She started spending time away from home, at her grandmother’s or friends’ houses and readily sulked away, reading romances and detective stories, locking herself up in her room. Zareen decides to send Feroza to America, to her brother, Manek on a holiday to, “…broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head…” (An American Brat p.14)

As a visibly delighted Feroza, at her changing prospects, dreams of flying of to the ‘land of “Bewitched” and “Star Trek”, of rock stars and jeans…’ (An American Brat p.27), a trunk call to America puts her face to face with the infirmities she would take with her culture and position to a much upgraded society. As she screams in delight to her uncle Manek, over the phone, he says,… ‘Why do you Third World Pakis shout too much?’ (An American Brat p.26)

Amidst the excitement of transporting herself to her dreamland, this touches a chord somewhere and she asks her parents,… ‘Why am I a Paki Third Worlder?’ (An American Brat p.27)
A long line of relatives throng Feroza’s house on the day of her departure and shower her with blessings and gifts, and later accompany her to the airport. Moving out, Feroza experiences for the first time, pangs of separation.

‘…and all at once it struck her that she was going far from Lahore, from the sights, the sounds, and the fragrances that were dear to her, from the people she loved and had taken for granted… it was her city. A beautiful, lushly green and luminous city and she would miss it. Feroza felt the warmth of the sun nestle on the back of her head. She would miss Lahore, and her family.’(An American Brat p.47)

Later on the flight, as the plane takes off from her native land, she feels a sudden gravitational pull.

‘Her sense of self, enlarged by the osmosis of identity with her community and with her group of school friends, stayed with her like a permanence—like the support that ocean basis provide the wind-and moon-generated vagaries of its waters. And this cushioning stilled her fear of the unknown: an unconscious panic that lay coiled somewhere between her navel and her ribs
and was just beginning to manifest itself in a fleeting irregularity of her heartbeat.’ (An American Brat p. 52)

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

The humiliating mistrust that meets her at the immigration further shocks her stolid sheath of dignity, and pushes her down the threshold of Third World prejudice and abject demoralisation. Grilled by the officers, smarting tears, unable to withhold any more tormenting, she screams in a yellow blaze of fury and fierce dignity, ‘To hell with you and your damn country. I’ll go back’ (An American Brat p. 58) A thought that would just cross her mind, now and then, years later.
Freed from the embarrassment at the airport, Feroza gets into the excitement of discovering America—the bright city lights, the skyscrapers, the museums, the lavish display of pearls and designer accessories in the windows…

‘The sheer bliss of telephones that worked, come cloud or drizzle, the force of the water in the YMCA showers, electricity that never fluctuated or broke down or required daily hours of “load shedding” were joys Feroza was discovering for herself. The enchantments of the First World.’ (An American Brat p.102)

Manek glowed at Feroza’s amazement and admiration. It seemed that he was showing off the country to her, a proud representative of what he had become part of, and which Feroza realised he would never wish to leave. It brings in her a sense of tragic loss that her uncle, who had taken his course and learnt his lessons, the tough way, to find his own niche in this alien world, would find it difficult to return home. Trained in the American ways, Manek is hurt by Feroza’s interrupting him and her lack of respect, awe and admiration for her uncle, who had taken his share of the knocks and was ready to spoon-feed the beneficent fruit of his experience. Manek’s constant reminders of her desi behaviour and ‘third world attitude’ reflects his own hurt of having
been branded so, and his success in levelling himself consequently in the new society. The countless humiliation and experiences he endured had affected him and changed him fundamentally.

‘Feroza vaguely sensed that America had tested Manek. Challenged him, honed him, extended his personality and the horizon of his potential…’ (An American Brat p.103)

And once again the same sadness drifted towards her as she tries to accept that Manek would never be at home anywhere else. ‘He had weathered the trauma of culture shock after culture shock the New World had buffeted him with and emerged toughened’ (An American Brat p.119)

Feroza’s planned 3-month visit turns into a four-year stay. While attending college in Denver, she falls in love with a Jewish student. When they announce their intention to get married, Zareen sets out for America, hell-bent on changing their mind. The battles fought by mother, daughter, and boyfriend are handled deftly by Sidhwa.

An American Brat is a sensitive portrait of how modern America appears to a new arrival – and an exploration of the impact it has on her. She is caught unawares, and things take her by surprise. Feroza also
discovers that there is another side to America’s alluring magic – an ‘alien filth’. Manek says, “So you’ve seen now, America is not all Saks and skyscrapers.” (An American Brat p.156)
NOTES
