Chapter-Two

Parsee Society and Culture

This experience can be studied through the works of some of the best Parsee writers who live in India, Pakistan, England, Canada, or United States. Some of these writers had their childhood and adolescence in India or Pakistan and then moved on to make their homes in the West, where they have successful careers through their writings. Some of them have won prestigious national and international literary awards. Parsees have created a lot in all fields including Literature too.

A considerable part of Indo-Anglican literature consists of the works written by Parsee writers. The early Parsee writings have not dealt with Parsee identity of the community. Only in the recent novels created by Parsees that one could find the assertion of ethnic identity. Nilufer Bharucha remarks thus: “It is in the novels and short stories of Bapsi Sidhwa, Farrukh Dhony, Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta and Boman Desai that the ethnic uniqueness of the Parsee community is focused upon” (249).

The Parsee writers want to assert their position in Indian literature as well as in the world literary arena. They also wish to establish their own space in the dominant culture of India in the postcolonial period. Their Zoroastrian religion and their Parsee culture are all that they wanted to preserve through their writings. Ajit Duara states:

The census report, outlining the decline in number of Parsees has distributed the Community and regenerated an old debate about the need to relax rules on Parsees marrying outside their religion
and to allow conversation to the Zoroastrian faith. Any ethnic group below the number of thirty thousand is termed as ‘tribe’ not a community, and at the present rate of decline, it is estimated that Parsees will reach that nadir in 2020. (3)

This fear of extinction is also due to the emigration of Parsis to other countries. Some of the writers who have migrated to Western countries have found it difficult to get a place in these countries. Therefore, the recent fiction written by Parsees analyses all these aspects of Parsee identity and examines how it disturbs them in Indian context as well as in the western countries.

The trend of Parsee authors in English started a century ago with Behram Malbari, the poet, who was one of the earliest Indians to write poetry in English. His well-known collection of poems entitled ‘The Indian Muse in English Garb’ was first published in 1877. His later publications include a *collection of twenty-six sketches in Gujarat and Gujarati’s* [1882] and *The Eye on English Life* [1895] are his observations about the English life. Both of these books are pseudo fictional in nature. In twentieth century, another well-known Parsee writer was Cornelia Sorabji who published three volumes of interesting short stories *Love and Life behind Purdah* (1901) *Sun Babies* (1904) and *Between the Twilights* (1908) and two autobiographical works.

Parsees are one of the minor communities in India and Pakistan. They are basically Zoroastrians. Being a Parsee herself, Sidhwa knows well about the different customs, rituals and circumstances. Sidhwa’s study of the Parsees deserves more than praise both as a sociological and as a literary document. Ruthlessly truthful, deeply perceptive, she tells on the inner story of the Parsees
with rare courage, frankness and good humor. Sidhwa’s ideological precepts could be found as inextricably linked to the early religion, Zoroastrianism.

Zoroastrianism is one of the earliest monotheistic religions. A Hindu scholar says: “the Gospel of Zarathustra, the Gathas, covered all the ground from the Rigveda to the Bhaagwad – Gita, a period extending over 1500 years at least, in the short span of a single generation Zoroastrianism lies, thus at the center of all the great religions of the world, Aryans and Semitic” (52).

The Faravahor is the sacred figure of Zoroastrianism. It symbolizes the soul’s journey through life and the eventual union with Aura Mazda. “The Lord of Light” with the aid of the mind Zoroastrianism, like the Old Testament book ‘Leviticus’ in the Bible insists on the importance of purification of the mind and body.

According to Christianity, Man comes to earth stained by what is called ‘Original Sin’ and according to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, Man takes birth with the blurring cloud of ignorance and the burden of the past ‘karmas.’ But according to Zoroastrianism man is born completely pure and spotless with perfect freedom of will. The Zoroastrians stress again and again that human concern is at the very centre of Zoroastrianism.

The Zoroastrianism had the similar experience of the Jews who fled to various countries all over the world unable to bear the onslaught of Hitler. Their Diaspora experience was painful. They lost their home lands, children, parents, relatives and their sacred temple at Jerusalem. The Zoroastrians too were repeatedly attacked by the Muslims in Iran.

Bapsi Sidhwa is undoubtedly Pakistan’s best known and the most successful English novelist. She has published four novels. *The Crow eaters, The
Pakistani Bride, Ice-Candy Man, and An American Brat. In fact, it is somewhat difficult to categorize her fiction because of multiplicity of themes. The reflection of the Parsee ethics and comic tone in her writings make her both a trend setter and one of the finest Asian writers of English Fiction. In her fiction, the themes vary-from the partition crisis, expatriate experiences, the Parsee milieu, and social idiosyncrasies of this small minority community.

Sidhwa has chosen to write in English, though she knows many other languages like Urdu, Gujarati and Panjabi. Bapsi Sidhwa’s fictional works focus on various aspect of Parsee community; she is therefore a trend setter for later Parsee novelists like Firdaus Kanga, Rohinton Mistry and others.

In The Crow Eaters, Sidhwa recounts the traditional story of the Parsees’ arrival from Persia to India, at the time of the Arab invasion thirteen hundred years ago, with their sacred fires. Here, they were granted sanctuary by an Indian Prince Yadav Rana. He sent a messenger to the Zoroastrian refugees, with a glass of milk, signifying that the Indian people were a united and homogenous mixture that should not be tampered with. In response, the Parsees dropped a lump of sugar in the milk, saying that they would blend in easily and make the culture sweeter.

The prince granted sanctuary on condition that they would not eat beef, wear raw-hide sandals or convert the susceptible masses. It followed they were granted a home in India but the Parsees neither proselytized nor entered politics. To this day, the Parsees do not allow conversion to their faith or mixed marriages. Thus, Sidhwa’s heritage allowed her to witness the Partition from a safe distance, since the Parsees held a religiously and politically neutral position. As she says, “The struggle was between the Hindus and the Muslims and as a Parsee, I felt I could give a dispassionate account of this huge, momentous struggle” (Eaters10).
Bapsi Sidhwa’s writing has encompassed many thick and slack lawyers of prejudice, convention, ignorance and reticence in literature as well as in life had no autonomous existence. With the influence of Western education and culture, Bapsi sidhwa has re-emerged as new-being. The contemporary literary stage of Parsee writing is agog with women writers who have made significant inroads in world literature, winning top international literary awards. Increasingly more women are giving voice to their concerns and experiences and creating a body of literature of their own. Through their works they defied and destroyed the stereotyped the image of the angel in the house, of a submissive house wife, mother and of writers writing only about women and expressing their revolt against masculine world. It is not surprising that most of the female writers for grounded women as subjects of their works but global, political, historical, cultural, economical and other significant societal Concerns also find articulation in their works. Their position can be seen as essentially humanist. Homi Bhaba argues that the solution the female writers offered was the feminization of society:

When women did begin to comment in the social system in fiction their outlook was essentially humanist. Leaving aside isolated statements on the position of their own sex, which occur in the writings of all women therefore they tended to stand aside from and indeed, distrust political systems and solutions and view the problems they described in terms of human relations… and see the solutions in terms of the feminization of society. (152)

The contribution of a female writer to humanist is represented by a female identity. The Female identity is represented as a subject in process a subject that is always in progressive Motion. Contemporary women writings exhibit the
following traits. They celebrate their defiance of norms and boundaries and expose its constructed nature. They vocalize their experiences and question deep structures of sexual politics. They deconstruct myths that demonize Women and also they are alert to an ecological consciousness which underlines their writings. These writings are questioning every aspect of social order the pillars of community marriage, Motherhood, control of sexuality and moribund traditions. Their works register important shift in the ways of seeing, showing, saying and even not saying. Their writing seems to draw on women as a representation of independent thought and action.

Bapsi Sidhwa illuminates the Parsee culture through the protagonists who are some way or the other connected to the Parsee community. The descriptions of culture and customs are rich in color, sound and aroma. Her novel *An American Brat* revolves around a Parsee young girl of Pakistan, Feroza. Sidhwa describes how her culture influences her habits, thoughts, and values too, and when she encounters the western world, the realization of her Parsee origin overpowers her decisions.

The novel starts in the ‘old country’ Pakistan, and the place is Lahore and the year 1978. At this time General Zia has seized power and the liberal Zulfihar Ali Bhutto is in jail, soon to be executed. Zareen, a Parsee and a Bhutto supporter sees that, her sixteen year old daughter Feroza is becoming an Islamic fundamentalist and increasingly conservative.

On the one hand, Zareen is proud of being a Parsee but on the other she is depressed because she belongs to a minority, community. Zareen likes to dress herself like the other Parsee women, but Feroza feels ashamed of that. When Zareen goes to bring Feroza from school she wears a sleeveless blouse, which
embarrasses Feroza the utmost. In the car she says, “Mummy please don’t come to school dressing like that. She objected to my sleeveless sari blouse! Really, this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her too. I told her: Look, we’re Parsee, everybody knows we dress differently” (10).

This is Zareen’s complaint to her husband Cyrus against her daughter; Feroza Zareen wants to make Feroza updated. She does not want her daughter adapt to the life style of the mullahs. When alone with her husband, Cyrus always expresses her opinion about the condition of Pakistan and the worse condition of the minorities like Parsees, since they have to follow the Muslim code of living as defined by the Mullahs. As she observes, “Instead of moving forward, we are moving backward. What I could do in 59 and 60 my daughter cannot do in 1978. Our Parsees’ children in Lahore won’t know how to mix with Parsees’ kids in Karachi or Bombay” (11).

Sidhwa submits the fact that the Parsees respect other religions too. Zareen has a lot of faith in the muslin culture. When Zareen recalls that she has not visited Data Gunj Baksh’s Shrine, since Cyrus’s appendectomy more than a year ago, she silently begs the Muslim saint’s forgiveness for the neglect, and prudently thanks him for his past kindness.

Then, without thinking that it is the least bit strange, she switches to her own faith as she says a short Zoroastrian prayer, invoking Sarosh Ejad, the Angel of success, who protects mankind with effective weapons. This medley of religious faith brings out the exciting spiritual impulse that sustains the people of all faiths, in the sub-continent.

In An American Brat, Sidhwa throws light on many important aspects of Parsee rituals. Parsees worship fire, and it is supposed to be their Lord. But in the
novel Feroza commits the cardinal sin when she takes a few puffs from a cigarette at Jo’s boy friend’s compulsion. Whereas Jo had tried to protect her friend “Lay off. It’s against her religion to smoke. She worships fire” (164).

That night Feroza feels ashamed of herself. She hunts out her _Kusti_, a sacred thread around the waist and her _Sudra_, Zoroastrian religious undergarment made of pure white muslin and covers her head with a scarf. As the novelist observes: And then, she wound the ‘Kusti’ three times round her waist, knotting it at the front and back to the accompaniment of the appropriate prayer. After performing the _Kusti_ ritual, Feroza bows her head to beg divine forgiveness for desecrating the holy fire—the symbol of _Ahura Mazda_, God. There is another incident in the novel when, Robinson Kaka confesses; “I am a Parsee; Parsees don’t smoke” (50).

The Parsees are one of the educated communities of today. All Parsee boys, by virtue of their demanding roles as men, are presumed to be geniuses. The community’s perception genius rests of materialism. One finds the community flourishing at the financial, business, accounting, doctoring, engineering, and the research levels. At the same time, the girls are not required to study abroad. If they want and if the family can afford it, they might be allowed their choice. It is also expedient sometimes to send them to finishing schools in Europe, either to prepare them or divert them from marriage.

The Parsees regard the English education as one of the blessings conferred upon them by the colonizers. The Parsee education system which was experimentally introduced by Navroji in 1948 proved to be a failure since it lacked modernity and flexibility. The mode of westernization brought about a double alienation. Though they were adequately westernized, the British never treated
them as their equals. At the same time, they were alienated from the Indian mainstream since their identification with the British was total.

Parsees live in almost every part of the globe. In America also, Manek and Aban know many Parsee families. There are about four hundred Parsees, if one counts the suburbs. The community organizes functions almost every month and in that way they sustain their communality.

In Pakistan, the community functions are very enlarged and grand. This is the reason why Manek’s wife, Aban is upset after their son’s birth. She feels completely homesick, as she complains to Feroza, “You haven’t even seen your new cousin ... I thought once I had the baby everybody would flock to see my little Dilshad, but nobody come ... Neither my parents nor sisters, nor any one from Manek’s family, not even you” (314).

Feroza understands Aban’s situation. She has missed out the seventh and ninth pregnancy ceremonies, the gifts, clothes and the family jokes and now she will be deprived of her baby’s sitting and first step ceremonies. She thinks that if she were in Lahore, the grand parents would be trying to look after her and the aunts would compete for her attention in a grand function.

The Parsees are very particular about withdrawn in wars on sexuality. They hold the virginity of a girl as a divine possession. In An American Brat, Sidhwa exemplifies the fear of Zareen about the loss of her daughter’s virginity. In the novel, one night Zareen becomes restless. She feels something terribly missing, and with a shock, she realizes that Feroza is not there in the room. She looks at the watch, it is three o’clock.

For the first time, Zareen suspects that her daughter probably has slept with David. She hurriedly ties her scarf round her head, and begins to pray. Zareen
knows she must do something. However admirable and appealing David is, it is natural to the stimulating and care free environment that he will deprive her daughter of her faith, her heritage, her family and her community. She will be accused of committing the most heinous sacrileges. Cut off from her surroundings like a fish out of water, her child will eventually shrivel up. And her dread for Feroza alters her opinion of David.

Among the Parsees, most have a comfortable relationship with the faith they are born into; they accept it as they do the color of their eyes. A Parsee woman, having her menstruation period cannot enter the fire temple, as it is believed that the presence of that lady would pollute the temple.

In the novel, the day before Feroza’s departure, she drives their blue Volkswagen car to the trendy new agar in the Parsee colony. She visits the fire temple about four or five times a year and on special occasions, like her impending voyage. Zareen cannot accompany her because she is on her menstruation period. She is of the belief that her presence will pollute the temple.

Parsees are known for their splendid marital extravagance. Every ritual is celebrated with pomp and cheer and splendor and majesty. As presented in An American Brat, Zareen is much excited at the thought of Feroza’s marriage. Marriages are something special in Zareen’s community. One finds it very enthusiastic while talking about her daughter’s wedding.

The first ceremony before marriage is known as Madassar ceremony. Sugar and coconuts are offered as gifts to the would-be couple. They are the cultural totems of blessing passed on to the couple by the parents, grandparents and other guests. As the novelist writes:
We’ll have the madassar ceremony first you all plant a mango tree. It’s to ensure fertility. May you have as many children as tree bears mangoes? In all ceremonies we mark your foreheads with vermilion, give you envelopes with money, hang garlands round your necks, and give you sugar and coconuts. They’re symbols of blessings and good luck. (297)

The second ceremony before wedding is named as adarnee or engagement. On this occasion, the relatives of the girl and the boy offer an assortment of clothes, supplemented with gift and money. The girl’s family offer cloth and jewellery to the boy in exchange of the same from the latter. This is one enunciation of the ritual of love. As the novelist observes:

Then we have the adarnee and engagement. Your family will fill Feroza’s lap with five saree sets, sari, petticoat, blouse, underwear. Whatever jewellery they plan to give her must be given then. We give our daughters-in-law at least one diamond set. I will give her the diamond and emerald necklace my mother gave me at my wedding. (297)

On the wedding day, the couple is seated on a throne like chair as the priests chant prayers accompanied by the relatives’ wedding songs. Garlands adorn the couple. Both the girl and the boy are dressed in gorgeous garments. The guests shower upon their blessings on the couple. As the novelist observes: “Next, we come to the wedding you’ll sit on thrones like royalty, under a canopy of white jasmine, and the priests will chant prayers for an hour, and shower you with rice and a coconut slivers” (298).
Mixed marriages are a matter of concern for the entire Parsee community. They believe that it will put their survival at stake. They are a very few in number, only a hundred and twenty thousand in the whole world. And considering the low birth rate and the rate at which the youngsters are marrying outside the community and given their rigid non-conversion laws and the zealous guardians of those laws–Parsees area gravely endangered species.

Through a notice by the Zoroastrian society inter-marriages are restricted. As found in the novel:

NOTICE

Please note that According To the Parsee, Zoroastrian Religious Beliefs, Percepts, Tenets, Doctrines, Holy Scriptures, Customs and Tradition, Once a Parsee–Zoroastrian Marries a Non–Zoroastrian. He or She is deemed To have Renounced the Faith and Ceases to Be a Parsee–Zoroastrian, The laws of purity of the Zoroastrian Faith Forbid intermarriages, as mixing Physical and Spiritual Genes is Considered a Cardinal Crime Against Nature, Hence, Or She does not have any Communal or religious Rights or Privileges. (305)

*An American Brat* is centered on conflicts arising out of generation gap. For instance, one finds the issue of Feroza’s marriage to an American. The youngsters and elders try their best to explain their outlook. The youngsters urge their uncles and aunts to enlarge their narrow minds and do the community a favor by pressing the stuffly old trustees in the Zoroastrian Anjuman in Karachi and Bombay and
move with the times. Bunny, Jeroo and Behram’s daughter remark whole situation “For God’s sake! You’re carrying on as if Feroza’s dead! She’s only getting married, for God’s sake!” (268).

But later, Feroza is compelled to say ‘Sorry’, on such occasions, the elders try their best to control, influence and motivate the youngsters. For their part, aunts try their best to establish the community ethics. As an illustration: “You know Parsee girls are not allowed into the Fire temple once they marry out. You know what happened to Parin Powri” (269). At that time they give different examples like Parin Powri and Roda Kapakia, the girls who have married outside the Parsee community.

When Zareen finds David a suitable groom Feroza, finds her trapped in a paradoxical situation. Though Zareen has preference for David’s admirable qualities, she is also conscious of her faith and family that her daughter’s marriage with David, a Jew by faith would lead to excommunication. Zareen is also worried that such a marriage would sever the cultural roots. Latha Rengachari has the following to offer in this context: “… the community, Sidhwa points out, refuses to change not permitting conversions either. She indicates the necessity for more openness in the religion, a less rigid attitude which will enable its followers to understand its basic tenants better.” (66)

Parin Powri is a girl. She defiles her family reputation by marrying a Muslim. She dies of hepatitis four years later. Parin’s family flies her body to Karachi to be disposed off in the dokhma. Parin Powri’s body is denied accommodation in the Karachi dokhma, and the priests refuse to perform the last rites. So, her body is eventually buried in a Muslim graveyard.
Another example is Roda Kapakia. She is a Parsee who has married a Christian. She is made to sit outside on a bench, as a consequence, and she is not allowed to stay close with her relatives when her grandmother is dead. As the novelist writes, “She was made to sit outside on a bench like a leper! Would you like that to happen to you when your grandmother dies?” (270).

The uncles and aunts in this community use these kinds of situations to instruct the youngsters. They also forbid the boys to marry ‘a Parjat’ (271). In the meeting, Soonami questions her grandson, thus “You won’t marry a Parjat. Will you? You must marry a nice little Parsee girl of your own choice. And don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Marry the girl you like” (271). The other boys try their best to be as innocent, obedient and accommodating as he is.

Again, Zareen in An American Brat also is confused, and finds her questioning the ban on interfaith marriages for the first time. She has often felt, it unfair that while a Parsee man who marries outside keep his faith and bring up his children as Zoroastrians, whereas a Parsee woman cannot. And the ‘non Parsee’ is not permitted to become a Zoroastrian. She argues this from a purely feminist point of view. She herself has accepted the conventional wisdom for one simple reason that she has been nurtured in the conservatism.

Parsees have an enduring trait—a compelling sense of duty and obligation towards other Parsees. They are well known for their unity in community. Sidhwa portrays this aspect brilliantly in her novel, The Crow Eaters. They are like one close–knit family as they assist each other, sharing success and also rallying to support the failure. Whenever a Parsee becomes rich, he mostly devotes a big portion of his income to charity. He donates money to build schools, hospitals and orphanages. Also, a Parsee sponsors housing, scholarships and finance.
In the novel, all the four Parsee families are delighted by Faredoon Junglewalla’s visit and enchanted at the prospect of another family that has come to swell their ranks. This unity is also shown by them, at the time of the insurance claim, when Freddy’s shop and house get destroyed in a fire accident. All the members of the Parsee community unite together to help him.

Mr. Toddywalla supports Freddy as he argues with Mr. Adenwalla, an insurance agent. He says, “… It does not look like your company is going to be satisfied with truth and facts and the word of a gentleman! They just want some damned excuse to wriggle out of their commitment…” (96). Mr. Bankwalla is very disturbed by the agent’s behavior and argues with him… “Are you accusing our friend, Mr. Faredoon Junglewalla, here of purposely setting a torch to his own house?” (96). At last, the agent has to submit a satisfactory report and Mr. Faredoon Junglewalla receives a sizeable cheque.

After almost twenty years, the number of Parsees in Lahore has increased considerably. The poor Parsee families in Bombay have drifted off to Lahore. Faredoon, with all his willingness and ability tries to help them and devotes his time in solving their problems. By now, he is the undisputed head of the community. He is renowned for his loyalty to his community and friends. People come to seek his help in bagging prime jobs, contracts, favors and securing licenses. As it is for any other Parsee gentlemen, the good reputation of his community is very important for Faredoon. In the novel, Mr. Adi Sodawalla from Bombay goes to Faredoon for help, for his brother, who is languishing in a London jail on the charge of smuggling. Faredoon’s reaction is “Something will have to be done, not for that indolent bastard’s sake, but for the good name of our community. We can’t let it get around that a Parsee is in jail for smuggling opium!” (152).
The Parsees are particular about observing customs and religious rituals, one aspect of Parsee religious ceremony is *Navjote* ceremony. This is an inevitable part of every Parsee child’s life. *Navjote* is the proudest memory of every parent, when their children are formally initiated into the Zoroastrian faith at this time. Then, the children are invested with the outward symbols of the Zoroastrian faith ‘Sudra’ an under-shirt and the ‘Kusti’, a sacred thread woven from seventy two strands of wool, girdled around the waist three times by doing so they are girdled to serve the Lord of Life and Wisdom.

A child born of the Zoroastrian parent is not considered as Zoroastrian until he has chosen the faith at the Navjote ceremony. Zarathustra in his Gotha 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” (124). This ceremony is described in the novel, when Putli, Faredoon Junglewalla’s wife remembers the Navjote ceremonies of her children.

As described earlier in *An American Brat*, fire is one of the most sacred elements of the Parsees. They respect fire as an outward symbol of their faith. It represents the Divine Spark in every man and 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.

In almost every Parsee household candles are snuffed with a pinch of the finger. The cooking fire is never permitted to be extinguished; it is politely preserved in ashes at night and fanned alive next morning. To blow on fire is vile. The priests tending the temple fires cover their mouths with cloth masks. As described in the novel, *The Crow Eaters*, a servant is caught smoking because it is considered as a shameful act that hurts everyone deeply. Hence, each of them
thrashes the boy. Smoking is taboo here as it is tantamount to defiling the holy symbol with spit.

The Parsees are portrayed by Sidhwa as very religious by nature. The Zoroastrians believe in their ceremonies but the most striking feature is their respect for other cultures too. The Parsees give the Vedas, the Holy Gita and the Bible the same dignified and sacred place as the Avesta, the Holy Book of Parsees. As shown in the novel, “It stood on a shelf right above the prayer table, snug between the Bible and the Bhagawad Gita. Other books on the shelf were translations of the Holy Quran and the Avesta … And books representing the Sikhs, Jain and Buddhist faiths” (52).

Mixed marriages are considered to be sacrifices by the whole Parsee community and are treated as a blunder or a big shock. As described earlier in *An American Brat*, Sidhwa portrays this aspect in *The Crow Eaters* also. In the novel Faredoon’s son, Yazdi shows his willingness to marry an Anglo – Indian girl. Faredoon tries his best to convince his son against as he say:

You are too young to understand these things … Now this is not something I alone believe, It is what our ancestors professed; and our race will go on believing till the end of time. You may think what I have to say is non – sense, but once you are past a certain age you will see the wisdom and truth of these thoughts. I believe in some kind of a tiny spark that is carried from parent to child, on through generations … A kind of inherited memory of wisdom and righteousness, reaching back to the times of Zarathustra, the Magi, the Mazdianians. It is a tenderly nurtured conscience evolving towards perfection… I am not saying only we have the spark. Other
people have it too; Christians, Muslims, Hindus … They too have
developed pure strains through generations. But what happens if you
marry outside our kind? The spark so delicately nurtured. Its
precise balance is scrambled. It reverts to the primitive. (128)

Another important custom of the Parsees is one that is related to their
funeral rites. The Parsees constitute a tiny community which leaves their dead in
open–roofed enclosures atop hills to be devoured by vultures. The place is known
as ‘Tower of Silence.’ The Tower has a marble floor sloping towards the centre
where there is a deep hollow. This receives the bones and blood. Underground
ducts from the hollow lead to four deep wells outside the Tower. These wells are
full of lime, charcoal and sulphur, and provide an excellent filter. The outer rim of
the floor is made up of enough marble slabs to accommodate fifty male bodies,
then comes the accommodation for fifty women and the innermost space, around
the hollow, is for children.

It takes the birds only minutes to strip the body of all flesh. The height of
the tower is very high. The vultures taking off at full throttle are only just able to
clear the Tower wall. If they try to get away with anything held between their
claws or beaks they invariably crash against the wall, only the professional pall–
bearers are allowed to witness the glorious spectacle inside the tower.

Since the Parsees have moved to the Indian sub-continent and other parts
they still practice this ritual but the Parsees who choose to settle in far–flung areas
where there is no ‘Tower of Silence’, have to be content with the usual burial
custom.

In *The Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa shows the emotional and psychological worry
of Jerbanoo Freddy’s mother–in law, about being buried under Earth, because there
is no Tower of Silence in Lahore. When they first came to Lahore, Jerbanoo has been mildly troubled by the discovery that there is no Tower of Silence in the city. Now that her imagined age has brought her so tragically close to death, this worry becomes an obsession. She tells them that she absolutely refuses to be shoved beneath the mounds of maggot–ridden earth! (46). In *The Crow Eaters*, when Soli, Freddy’s son dies, all the customs and the rituals of the Parsee religion are performed. The body is bathed and dressed 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.

A room in the living quarters of the priest has been hastily prepared to receive the body. Soli is laid on two stone-slabs and the pall bearers draw three circles round with a sharp nail. Now none can enter the circle, except the pall bearers. The stricken women sit encircled to the corpse, on a white sheet spread on the floor. They wear white saris, except Jerbanoo who sits next to Putli in her widow’s black. The entire atmosphere is filled with grief, pain and sorrow. Putli weeps soundlessly and hopelessly. She stares at the body as if she is willing it back to life. An oil lamp (diya) is placed in the corner. After that, the priest’s dog is brought into the room. It has two eyes like spots above the eyes. It is believed that all the four eyes can ward off evil spirits and can detect the faintest hint of life. Late in the evening, when everyone has left, the Junglewalla family and their closest friends settle on the sheets for the night.

When the fire after altar is brought into the room and placed on a white cloth on the floor, the priest begins to recite from the Avestan scriptures. He chants through the night and keeps the fire alight. In the morning, the Fire Temple is filled up with the Parsees, Muslims, and Sikhs, Hindus, Christians and a few British
Officials, The body is wrapped in a white sheet up to the neck and the small, white nostrils are snuffed with cotton.

At three O’clock the pall-bearers come into the room carrying an iron bier. They place it beside the body and recite a short prayer: “We do this according to the dictates of Ahura Mazda” (178). They are dressed in white. Even their hands are gloved in white clothes; white scarves bandage their foreheads and the side of their faces. Putli weeps uncontrollably when the pall-bearers drape a white sheet over the corpse, lift the body on to the iron bier and then to their shoulders.

The women stay behind. The bier followed by men, is carried out into the compound. Freddy sees the surge of faces. Faces of friends, neighbors, officials, princes, police men and college students. There is a disappointed murmur to see the white sheet covering Soli’s face. Putli kisses her son’s cold, pallid cheek, quickly, the men encircle the bier. According to Parsee rituals once the sacred rites are performed over the body, people of the other faiths are not permitted to look upon it. Someone said, “Faredoon, this is sacrilegious! Pull yourself together!” (179) and the bier there move slowly.

At the graveyard, Freddy sees his son encased within the four marble slabs and buried forever. When the mound of Earth is smoothed, a pall-bearer claps his hands thrice and men turn towards the setting sun to pray over their sacred threads. The ceremony for the welfare of the departed soul goes on for four days and nights. At the end of all these ceremonies, Freddy makes the customary proclamation of charity. The entire family visits the site of the grave on the fifth day in remembrance of Soli.

The Parsees take to a different dressing code. In The Crow Eaters, Putli and Jerbanoo never appear in public without mathabanás that is, the white kerchiefs
they wear around the hair to fit like skull caps. The holy thread encircling their waist is displayed and they also wear Sudra. With the passage of time, the Parsees in the metropolitan dress themselves in modern outfits and in the novel, one finds Tanya dressed in Tennis outfit.

The Parsees have some strict kind of customs. The women are supposed to remain in separate rooms during monthlies. Thus, every Parsee household has a room, specially reserved for women. It is a tiny windowless cubicle, as even the sun, the moon and the stars are not supposed to come in contact with them during these days. The woman leaves the room only to use the bathroom. And in times of prayer the women have to wait till the prayer is finished. Food is served on a separate plate, exclusively reserved for this occasion.

In *The Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa presents Putli as having been secluded in the other room. Since this seclusion is religiously enforced, she relishes every moment of her seclusion: it is only chance she ever has to rest. She leaves the room only to use bathroom. Then she has to loudly call ‘I want to wash’ (70). If Jerbanoo or Freddy are at the Prayer table, they shout to wait and hastily finish their prayers as they say “All right you can come now” (70). Putli maintains proper distance from the prayer table and covers her face with a shawl before entering the bathroom.

Sidhwa gives a very earthy description of Parsee marriages with the color of natural delight. As also shown in *An American Brat*, the celebration of Parsee marriages in *The Crow Eaters* is somewhat different because of different locales. The bride is from Bombay and the groom is from Karachi. So, the customs are influenced by both the sides. The very first ceremony is token money. In this ceremony, the date of the marriage is fixed. And both the sides authorize the girl
and the boy as the would-be couple, as they present various gifts back dropped by traditional songs.

In the novel, *The Crow Eaters* the marriage of Billy and Tanya is one good illustration. Tanya’s mother, Rodabadi garlands Billy and gives him the little envelope containing the token money and the gift of a gold watch. And then, Billy’s mother, Putli performs the rites. She gives Tanya twenty one Queen Victoria Sovereigns and blesses her. Rodabadi anoints Billy’s forehead with vermillion, to the toes of his shoes, and sprinkles rice on his forehead. The ceremony is restricted to women, and except for the bridegroom no one else is present. The next step after this is the preparation of the marriage with various sarees, jewelers, perfumes, suit lengths, shirts, cufflinks etc, for the bride and groom and for the other relatives too.

Jerbanoo and Putli visit every good shop available in town to buy jewelers, clothes and sarees for the occasion. Tanya’s seventeen sisters and her mother are to be given sets of clothes—sarees petticoats, blouse material sudreh, maharani, panty, and a thin chain of gold. Tanya’s four brothers will get their shares of suiting and shirting, and also cufflinks with pearl studs and diamond tie pins. Tanya’s choice of jewelers and perfumes is given special care.

The next ceremony that takes place before marriage is the ‘Madassar’. A fish-patterned platform is decorated for the event. The bride and groom plant the mango sapling so as to guarantee fertility, as believed by the Parsees. After that the sisters of Tanya are hopped up to be garlanded and are stained with vermillion and are also presented with the gifted clothes strings of gold. Then the uncles and aunts are honoured respectively with their small envelope containing cash. Tanya’s mother then performs honour for Jerbanoo and Putli.
The final ceremony is the wedding. The wedding of Billy and Tanya is arranged in Taj Mahal Hotel, Bombay. Five thousand guests assemble to celebrate the wedding ceremony. Both Billy and Tanya sit demurely on the carved chairs, in their lovely traditional dresses. Two priests stand before them chanting mantras throwing rice, coconut slivers, and rose petals at them. Putli and Faredoon stand behind Billy and, Sir and Lady Easy money behind Tanya, as one witnesses:

The officiating priest eventually recites, Say whether you have agreed to take this maiden named Tanya in marriage to this bridegroom in accordance with the tribes and customs of the Mazda worshippers, promising to pay her two thousands dirham of pure white silver and two dinars of standard gold Nishahpur coinage? (223)

After their positive reply he questions the boy and the girl thus “Have you desired to enter into this contract with pure mind and until death do ye part?” (223).

Then, after their ascent, the priest invokes the blessings of God on the married couple and advises them on how to conduct themselves properly. The bridal couple is smothered in garlands and presented with thousands of envelopes containing money and gold coins. It is a memorable wedding. Flowers are commissioned from Bangalore, cheese from Surat and there is then the special party of Scotch and Burgundy. A special package of gift is offered to those Parsees residing in charity houses. Sacks of flour, along with large quantities of butter and Indian sweets are given as gifts.

Parsees are like Hindus, very ritualistic on some special occasions especially when it comes to moving into a new house. Various kinds of precautions
are taken and special care is given to customs and religious beliefs. In the novel, *The Crow Eaters* when Billy and Tanya initially enter their new house, a number of honors and rituals are performed. In the verandah, Putli welcomes them. Tanya and Billy bow as she swings a silver tray containing water and uncooked rice round their heads. She puts its contents then on their feet. She breaks an egg after circling it seven times over their heads. Then, a fresh coconut is cracked on the floor. This is done to ensure the couple’s happiness. Putli colors their foreheads with vermilion and leads them through the freshly garlanded portals. And in this way she welcomes them to live in their brand new house. As part of the Diaspora, the Parsees reveal a unique mindset. It is their readiness to adapt themselves to new environments. This is one strategy of survival yet, once displaced they develop a sense of loss, nostalgia and identity crisis.

Parsees are a minority community and they keep off the political sphere but like others, they are affected by it. In *The Crow Eaters* Faredoon Junglewalla is upset over the political scenario of the country. He tries to console his family not to lose hope and advises them to be neutral in their behaviour.

He also shows his hopelessness when he says softly, “We will stay where we are … let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or who ever rule. What does it matter? The sun will continue to rise and the sun continues to set–in their rises” …! (283). As Bapsi Sidhwa tells Julie Rajan in an interview:

Naturally one adopts the mores of the dominant society. This is particularly true of Parsees; we are a people who have no land, so we have to adapt to whichever culture we find ourselves in. I would describe myself as a Punjabi-Pakistani Parsee woman, because all three societies influenced me. (285) Bapsi Sidhwa loves and
respects her community; its culture, rituals, values and traditions. She admits that her Parsee Zoroastrian religion influences her identity. As she tells Ahmmede Hussain in an interview: It formed my habits, my thought, my thoughts, my values … No matter where they are, the Parsees are a minority, and the tension this creates compels one to express feelings, ideas, politics, etc. Being a Parsee can also make a writer a more objective observer perhaps. (287)

Before one places Sidhwa in the right perspective, it is worth quoting Juliet Mitchell. She observes:

Conglomeration of precepts and a series of demands by women who saw themselves as a distinct sociological group and one that was completely excluded the tenets and principles of the new society. The seventeenth century feminists were middle class women who argued their case in explicit relation to the massive changing society that came about with the end of feudalism and the beginning of capitalism. (63)

Marx and Engels offered not only an explanation for the origins of female oppression and an analysis of its history but also suggested a strategy for its resolution. For them the position of women in society was a serious question that could be resolved only with the onset of communism. But many socialists were convinced that a Marxist analysis was, “just another male analysis with no potential for liberating women. For them, the class struggle, not the women question, became the red herring, a ruse to disguise its progenitor, the patriarchal society” (Hamilton 77).
A Marxist distinguishes society by its forms of productivity and characterizes the history of any society in terms of change in production. A feminist theory according to Marxist standards would direct itself to the sexual division of labour and the implications of this division for, power differentiates between women men. It was Sheila Rowbotham in her Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World (1973) who realized that a Marxist distinguishes society by its forms of productivity. Marxism had traditionally ignored the personal experience and therefore Rowbotham examined aspects of women’s language and culture in terms of feminist politics.

Shulamith Firestone’s The Dialectic of Sex (1970) is the most comprehensive statement of radical feminism. Together with Simone de Beauvoir, Firestone stresses the fact that historically women have “borne the greater burden for the perpetuation of the species” (84). Upon the fundamental biological inequality of the sexes had risen the caste like system in which the men receive ego gratification and enjoy comforts from their domination of women.

In Explorations in Feminism, Geography and Gender, (1984), Women and Geography Study Group of the IBG states, “The socialist feminist attempts to link gender relations to the wider framework of social relations which exist in society as a whole, and Which is structured by other factors as well as gender differences” (25).

Socialist feminists thus seek to find “an answer to the oppression of real women, in this case at the fulcrum of two intersecting institutions capitalism and patriarchy” (Sylvester 63).

The Saint Simonian Movement in France that attacked the traditional family and advocated a system of communal living, which would take away the
burden of child rearing from the individual to the community, can be said to have paved the way for socialist feminism. It was accompanied by change in the traditional sexual roles and the traditional family system. But the radical doctrines were the views of only a minority of feminists. They saw the family of the future as some combination of women and children with state providing either financial assistance or child care, or a combination of both, but in either case independent of male support.

Three intellectual traditions have been associated with feminism, each originating in the eighteenth century and continuing to operate till date. They are, the revival given by evangelical Christianity, the appeal to human reason by the Enlightenment Philosophers and the dissatisfaction with the restricted domestic life among the middle classes. Evangelical Christianity had its hold over both Britain and United States in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This revival, which gave a fresh meaning and significance to religion to facilitate conversion, naturally was concerned with social issues, especially slavery. Under its influence women began to emerge from home to take an active role in public life, as they became more and more involved in issues of moral and social reforms. Some of the Women characters in Sidhwa’s fiction are involved in the act of human activism.

The second tradition was that of the Enlightenment philosophers. Their principle was the appeal to human reason rather than to tradition and its most influential feminist propagators had been Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill. Differences between men and women were seen as being molded by the environment rather than by nature. Women like slaves and other oppressed groups were deprived of their natural rights. These enlightenment thinkers were responsible for the self-realization, freedom and autonomy of women.
Among the middle class women, dissatisfaction with their increasingly restricted domestic life was an important stimulus to campaign for the vote and for access to higher education. The increasing cost of nurse maids and servants for the rich, and inadequate housing conditions of the poor along with the reasons mentioned earlier were thought to account for the ‘alarming’ decline in marriage and fertility rates of the period. The modern idea that, manual domestic work using new scientific household equipments was no longer a demeaning activity for the middle class women also contributed to the liberation. Although women knew that freedom was good, they were socialized to accept willingly their subordinate position in society. They further created their own barriers when they did not exploit the available opportunities. And to add to this, approval was not given, it was for doing something in the home.

Very soon there was to be a change in this situation. Radical feminism began early in the 1960’s when small groups of women activists in the Civil Rights Movement, and later in the New Left, began to the conscious of the limited role assigned to women in the movement, and in particular to their exclusion from decision making, and their religion to domestic and other auxiliary chores. The attempt by these women to raise the issue of women’s rights met not only with a refusal to listen to their arguments, but also with a level of contempt and ridicule. It was this that did a great deal to stimulate the incipient feminism of the women involved.

Radical feminist saw sex as a form of oppression independent of social class. By emphasizing sexual rather than economic exploitation they treated men as an exploiting class almost equivalent to the ruling class in Marxist orthodoxy. Kate Millett, the author of *Sexual Politics* (1970) was one of the radicals. Through
various examples from the writings of Norman Mailer and Henry Miller she proves how in matters of sex it is man who is skilful in acting to obtain a desired result to his advantage. Concepts like consciousness raising and sisterhood were also derived directly from this marxist ideology.

One of the most original of the radical feminists in the American movement was Shulamith Firestone, who has authored *The Dialectic of sex* (1972). She bases women’s oppression on reproduction itself and felt that no solution could be found until artificial child bearing was technologically possible. Firestone is of the opinion that women could achieve both economic independence and sexual freedom only by breaking the ties between women and reproduction. She also feels that artificial reproduction would break down the cultural division between male and female based on biological reproduction. Besides, men and women would share characteristics, till then sharply sex-linked. The Radical feminists allege that through marriage, man controlled both the women’s reproduction and her person. The position of the wife as unpaid domestic laborer and her traditional sex role within marriage were all under attack. Romantic love was thought to be a way of trapping women into accepting their own oppression.

Sidhwa exposes the illusion on which the male super structured based, arguing that there is neither any final classless society, which will end human conflict, nor an absolutely universal class. Prompted by such a backdrop, Sidhwa allows one to make a comprehensive examination of the situation of women. She firmly believes that such absolutes could only lead to the discovery of a new ideology. Her fiction demonstrates a new approach to feminist politics. One finds Sidhwa’s existentialistic perspective out of which she is able to understand the women’s situation. Existentialism dealt with human individuals in a subjective
manner. Behavior believed that existentialist could offer an analysis of, both women’s oppression and of their freedom. In her introduction, Beauvoir the existentialist claims that she had escaped the limitation of being a woman only by luck. She had never felt herself discriminated against. By her analysis of oppression she has come to the conclusion that woman is ‘trapped in the bad faith of men’. Men want women to be an inferior object, will-less being acting according to their wishes. So they encourage her weakness, punish her self-assertion, make her dependent and tantalize her with adoration. Beauvoir’s independent woman wants to be active and knowing. She accepts male values, but thinks, acts and creates in the same way as the male.

After eradicating ‘male characteristics’ like hierarchy, competition and aggression from this world soft quality of affection, co-operation and tenderness, which were the part of the ideology of ‘the feminine’ in the nineteenth and twentieth century’s have been perpetuated once more. This has intensified the maternal role based on biology and made the mother-child relationship central.

This pro-woman version of feminism accepts that sexism involves sex-role stereotyping but argues that the process of reproduction and even the children were agent of oppression by men. The removal of male domination would allow women not only to be free but also to be female. This view depends on a notion of the essential difference between men and women while some radical feminists like Firestone want to free women from biological maternity, other feminists like Adrienne Rich and Rossi seek only to free maternity from male domination. Rossi and Rich identify motherhood with sexuality. This involves on the one hand the return of childbirth to women themselves, and on the other the progressive removal of the rights and duties of fatherhood.
The practical effect of this de-radicalization has been increasing the limitation of feminism to specific feminist issues like abortion, birth control, divorce and property, improving child care facilities, changing the image of women in the media and ending discrimination against women in education and employment. Another consequence has been a move away from the sex-war and the recognition of the fact that the present sex role stereotyping oppresses both men and women. According to this version, the institution of marriage and the family must be changed by reform rather than by abolition. The solution lies in what is frequently termed androgyny or role sharing in which both personality and role behavior will cease to be sex-typed. Moreover, since it is the system rather than men that is seen as oppressive, change depends not upon a revolutionary struggle but upon the conversion of both men and women to a new system from which both will gain. This will require a change brought about by a reformed system of education, both in the system of childhood care and in life-style so that the burden of childcare does not fall solely on women and in sex stereotyping. This seems to be the ideology of feminists like Betty Fireman, who dislike the sex war analogy, for it makes a woman sorry for loving her husband or children.

In pondering the assertive-female absence in literature, feminist criticism has taken various stances. One of them was to examine the portrayal of female character in male-authored texts. Literature reveals the fact that male authors could not speak truly about women. Consequently the feminists proposed that whatever one could consider, as a female presence in a male-authored text would be filtered through the complex workings of a male desire.

As a second strategy therefore, feminist criticism concentrated upon recovering works written by women to set the record straight, to correct the
imbalance and to restore to critical attention authentic female voices. The process has developed Radical feminism, advocated by Shulamith Firestone, Simon d’Beauvoir, Germaine Greer, Kate Millett and Juliet Mitchell. Radical feminism regards the subordination of women by men as the fundamental inequality in all human societies.

In the next stage the feminist writers tried to examine the many ways in which male power was exercised. In the *Female Eunuch* (1970), Germaine Greer concentrated on women’s sexuality. According to her, women have been repressed. The answer put forth by Greer was that women must assert themselves sexually, discover their own pleasures and their own rights to sexual expression.

Kate Millett argues in *Sexual Politics* (1970) that ideological indoctrination, as much as economic inequality is the cause of women’s oppression. Juliet Mitchell’s *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) provides a fresh, less reactive revaluation of Freudian theories. Mitchell argued that Freud was not prescribing but just describing. If the patriarchal society he described was not ideal, he at least located some of the mechanisms that kept it in place. Mitchell’s Freud provided a different kind of corrective to Marxism. Existentialists had tried to show that individuals did not act automatically in the interest of their class but were free self choosing consciousnesses. Freud showed how the male and female personality was formed in the family. A female achieved her femininity along with her submissiveness. Eventually, Sidhwa’s Women could be categorized as against the above mentioned discussion feminism.