Chapter II

Culture, Self, and Fragmentation: The Parsee Milieu in The Crow-Eaters

“...in looking after our interests we have maintained our strength -- the strength to advance the grand cosmic plan of Ahura Mazda -- the deep spiritual law which governs the universe, the path of Asha” (CE 12)

The Crow Eaters saw the light of the day in 1978. Parsees worldview constitutes the core of the narrative. The Parsees or the Zoroastrians are the socio-religious group which Sidhwa belongs to. It is a prosperous, yet shrinking community of about one hundred thousand based predominantly in Mumbai today. The Crow Eaters revolves in the rich orbit of Parsi life, both on surface and inwardly. On the surface level, it celebrates the institution of family life, social life and marriage rituals with the undercurrent of the Zoroastrian value of charity. As a keen observer of the Parsi community, Sidhwa gives the minutiae of the Parsi life, customs and traditions portraying all the characters, as representatives of the Parsi community with great details. The Crow Eaters is written following the tradition of Aristophane, Fielding and V.S.Naipaul. There is a mixture of farce and irony which arouses laughter and curiosity. It also gives a unique picture of the mother-in-law Jerbanoo, wife Putli, son Behram and his wife Tanya and the paranoid second son, Yazdi. The novelist’s penetrative insight in presenting the cultural conflict of the Parsi milieu makes The Crow Eaters both entertaining and educative. In The Early Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, Makarand Paranjape writes: “The novel derives its humour from a blend of fantasy, scatology, physical and verbal incongruity, and caricature . . . so overtly funny and uproarious, that is in the tradition of Aristophane, Fielding and the modern TV “sit coms.” (89)
The novel deals with a particular phase in the history of colonial India and presents the position of the Parsee community. It is a satirical account of the way of life of a Parsee family and the social milieu of the Parsees. Carolyne Wright has the following observation:

The Crow Eaters is a rollicking comic tale, with daring shifts ... Throughout the novel, Sidhwa’s prose is boisterous, and The Crow Eaters never fails to entertain. She writes with zest and affection for her characters that makes us hope for subsequent novels continuing the Junglewalla clan story. This is a comic novel stuffed with rich, spicy characters. Sidhwa makes every step of Faredoon’s journey through time and culture a joy to read. (New York Times 20)

The title of the book is very pertinent as it refers to the ability of the Parsees to “talk ceaselessly at the top of their voices like an assembly of crows.” (CE 56) This element of joy and uproar has earned the Parsees the label of Kagra-Khow i.e. crow eaters. Sidhwa borrowed the title from proverbs of the Indian Subcontinent where anyone who talks too much is said to have eaten crows, though not literary. The novel which presents a hilarious saga of Parsee life, turned out to be a controversial novel. Bapsi Sidhwa was disliked by the Parsees for exposing the way of living of the Parsee community to the world. The Crow Eaters, according to the Karachi Herald of May 1987, made Sidhwa the Parsee whom other Parsees love to hate. Although the Parsees are generally considered to be very tolerant and open minded, the community was not used to seeing itself written and so when the novel was launched they were outraged. In her interview to David Montenegro, she declares: “The book launch took place at an international hotel in Lahore and there was a bomb-threat… It took me some time to realize the turmoil the book had created within the community... they felt I was damaging the image... they felt threatened by it although it was written out of great
It is true that the protagonist, Faredoon Junglewala, and all the major characters of the book are Parsis, and that Parsi life and rituals (including of Navjot ceremony, a wedding, death rites, and aspects of Zarathustrian religion) are minutely described in the book, yet these factors do not make the book an indictment or even an attack on the community. Rather, the characters and their tendencies are satirized, exploiting those ethnic features that are conducive to such satire. *The Crow Eaters* is not a novel particularly about Parsis; instead, it is a novel whose characters happen to be Parsis. The characters could well have been Hindu or Muslim and a good deal of satire would still have carried; each ethnic group, after all, has its peculiarities and absurdities. (90)

Discussing the theme and tone of the novel, Sidhwa, in her autobiography states: “*The Crow Eaters*, a novel about my own community, the Parsis, I wanted to tell the story of a resourceful and accommodating community tucked away in the forgotten crevices of history. In attempting to capture the quintessential Parsis ethos, I struck an unexpectedly rich vein of humour.” (Why do I write 33)

This novel is very reminiscent of Dickens’ famous novel *The Pickwick Papers*. Sidhwa was a voracious reader who used to read books by Charles Dickens, Naipaul, Leo Tolstoy in her childhood. She has herself said in an interview with Feroza Jussswalla that there are many similarities between the two novels which are of course unintentional: “I must have read *The Pickwick Papers*, at least four times during that period. I would laugh out loud. I recently re-read *The Crow Eaters* and re-read *The Pickwick Papers* and realized there were
so many parallels. I think all that I read then was an influence. A lot of Tolstoy has influenced my work.” (Within the Subcontinent and Beyond 79)

While the novel presents an account of the social behaviour, value system and customs of the Parsee community, it also traces the attempts of Parsees, crossing geographical borders, migrating from the West coast and settling in North India. Sidhwa depicts historical facts interwoven with satirical fiction. Travel becomes a kind of displacement akin to multiple border crossings: cultural, geographical and ideological. The novel is an amazing portrayal of the struggle of the characters in crossing the geographical borders by migrating to other foreign countries. Mapping cultural contours does not restrict cultural outlook but allows penetration into the other culture through assimilation and adaptation. Sidhwa through the immigrant experience explores identity crisis and the need to resolve the problem and her characters adapt to different cultures and refashion their identities.

The Crow Eaters is the first major novel about Parsees where Sidhwa gives detailed information about the customs, ceremonies, beliefs, superstitions, rites, rituals, myths, legends and other aspects of the Parsee life. In The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, R. K. Dhawan and Novy Kapadiya write: “Bapsi Sidhwa has a distinctive Pakistani yet Parsi ethos in her writings but above all a unique individual voice. It is this individualism a sense of humour which makes her one of the finest comic writers in the genre of sub continental English fiction.” (10) Ralph J. Crane in A Passion for History and Truth Telling: The Early Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa observes: “Like the author herself, the hero of the novel is a Parsi, and through Freddy, his family, and their Parsi friends, the culture of this community is imaginatively recreated.” (49)
Sidhwa has portrayed her protagonist, Freddy, with all the characteristic features who, in long span of his life, attained a pride of place in his community as an insider who was actually an outsider:

Faredoon Junglewalla . . . was a strikingly handsome, dulcet voiced adventurer with so few scruples that he not only succeeded in carving a niche in the world or himself but he also earned the respect and gratitude of his entire community. When he died at sixty-five, a majestic grey-haired patriarch, he attained the rare distinction of being locally listed in the Zarathusti Calendar of Great Men and Women’. ( CE 9 )

The novel deals with the lives and fortunes of the Junglewallas— a Parsee family in British India. The central character of the novel is Fareedon Junglewalla, a portly Parsee and a genius of his time. This novel portrays his life and his achievements. But, it is the persuasive style of the author that makes him the hero of the story. Fareedon abandons his ancestral forest home with his family- his pregnant wife, a baby daughter, and Jerbanoo, his plump mother-in-law to multiracial Lahore in search of fortune:

Fareedon Junglewalla, Freddy for short, embarked on his travels towards the end of the nineteenth century. 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 hallowed pastures of the Punjab. Of the sixteen lands created by Ahura Mazda, and mentioned in the 4,000 year-old Vendidad, one is the ‘Septa Sindhu’; the Sindh and Punjab of today. ( CE 12-13 )

Instantaneously Lahore accepts Faredoon, and Fareedon embraces Lahore. He starts his business which flourishes and dooms on the basis of his moods. He wages a continuous
battle against his mother-in-law, Jerbanoo. Years pass and because of his subtle ingenuity, he becomes an instant celebrity. He brings up seven children and finally retires from his amazing life. The novel is refreshingly amusing, informative and captivating as it opens the exotic world and mode of Parsee life. Though it has serious touches here and there, farce and satire pervade the whole work. With her extraordinary sense of humour reflected in the novel, Sidhwa wins the heart.

The migration of Faredoon Junglewalla is quintessence of the Parsis’ migration from their ancestral country Persia. Akin to numerous migratory phenomena occurred in the history, Parsi-migration from Persia to India took place to save their lives, culture and religion because of the brutality, and the fanatic zeal of Arabs who had invaded Persia under Caliph Omar. It was an effort to reconstruct their community after the religious persecution in their motherland. At first, the Parsi-refugees landed in Div or Diew. Parsis stayed there for some years then, at the suggestion of Dastoor, a Parsi priest they arrived at Sanjan on the coast of Gujrat as their new abode. King Jadav Rana refused to give them shelter showing a bowl filled of milk suggesting that his country was full. The Parsi Dastur put a spoon of sugar into milk and merged it showing that the Parsis would mingle with his subject and become one with them. Since then, the Parsis have adopted Indian languages, particularly Gujarati, rites and rituals of Indian religions, and have become hybrid of the Parsi and Indian culture. In Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities, Avtar Brah writes: “A diaspora space is an intersection of borders where all the identities and subjectivities become juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or perpetually interrogate imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition.” (Brah, 208)

The Crow Eaters is based on the historical facts interwoven with some genuinely personal experiences. Novy Kapadia in The Parsi Paradox writes:
The authenticity of Bapsi Sidhwa’s work is evident as she was born in Karachi . . . was brought up in Lahore and continues to live there. Her family, the Bhandaras, a leading business family of Lahore for generations, had migrated there in the last century. So Bapsi Sidhwa belongs to the third generation of Parsi settlers in North Indian cities and was reared on tales both fictional and otherwise on the entrepreneurial skill of the elders of her community. Hence, her description of the exploits of Faredoon Junglewalla and his family is not just historical fiction, but has a strong autobiographical element also. (126)

Migration is a phenomenon that takes place as an escape from political oppression, religious execution or for better living. The history of mankind is replete with the tale of forceful migrations, flight from one’s own land in search of a new one. In an interview with Laila Kazmi, Bapsi Sidhwa says:

“. . . we are a people who have no land, so we have to adopt to whichever culture we find ourselves in. I would describe myself as a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman, because all the three societies influenced me. I guess I actually have a whole medley of identities. And that’s wonderful because this combination made me the writer I am. (Kazmi 4)

Being a Parsee, Sidhwa is proud of her faith. Though the Parsee community figures prominently in most of her novels, it forms the core of The Crow Eaters which is fully focused on various aspects of this community. Robert L. Ross in The Search for the Community in Bapsi Sidhwa’s Novels aptly writes: “The nostalgia surrounding a bygone community fills the novels, which were the rich tapestry of Asian life through re-creation of the smell and taste of food, the colours and textures of clothing, the sounds and odours and sights of crowded streets and over-peopled houses.” (72) In this novel, Sidhwa narrates the beautiful
story of a resourceful and accommodating community tucked away in the forgotten crevices of history. Almost a three-generational saga, it renders the adventures of an insouciant rascal who lives by his wit. The narrative depicts the meteoric rise of Freddy, the Parsee protagonist and his worldly prosperity. In *Economic Times*, Githa Harihuaran writes:

Sidhwa’s most formidable asset as a storyteller is her comic imagination. Her first novel, *The Crow Eaters*, is a triumph in revelry. There is very little that Sidhwa’s deft pen misses as she creates an array of delightful, idiosyncratic Parsees. The result is a gallery of vivid, lovable rogues, with the pragmatic hero, Freddie Junglewalla, and his mother-in-law, the riotous Jerbanoo, heading the list of unforgettable characters. (n.d. n.pag)

Faredoon Junglewalla and Jerbanoo are the memorable comic characters in the novel. Prita Maitra in *Cosmopolitan* says:

I like *The Crow Eaters* the most because it exemplifies Sidhwa’s singular treatment of human character—as capable of both extraordinary cruelty and all-encompassing kindness. Two of her protagonists will live forever in the memories of *The Crow Eaters*’ readers: Freddie Junglewalla, a lovable scoundrel who is the popular head of the Parsi community in Lahore, and Jerbanoo, Freddie’s mother-in-law and bête noire whose shrewish and humourless character is one of the funniest to inhabit the pages of a book. (n.d.n.pag. May 1998)

Sidhwa’s evocation of Lahore is charming and very convincing. It is the anchor of all of her novels, very much like Wessex was to Hardy. Sidhwa has great affection and love for Lahore where she has spent most of her life. The pictorial quality of her depiction of the city is very visual when she writes:
Freddy toured Lahore all day and each hour strengthened his initial love of the ancient city. That evening they parked the cart beneath a shady tree near the Badshahi Mosque. The horizon cradled the sun in a pink fleece, touching the poetic assembly of white domes with a blush, filling Freddy’s senses with serenity. The muezzin’s cry, suppliant, plaintive and sensual, rose in the hushed air among the domes. Bells tinkled in a diminutive Hindu temple, snuggled in the shadows of the mosque. A Sikh temple, gold plated, gleamed like a small jewel in the shadows and Freddy responsive to all religious stimuli, surrendered his heart to the moment. (CE 19-20)

Parsis are extremely small in number, a sizeable minority community who have been uprooted from their moorings. They are the followers of Zoroastrian religion. The origin of Zoroastrianism goes back to 3000 B.C. The Parsis are the followers of Zoroaster, a seventh century prophet. Zoroastrianism is the Parsis’ religion. It was flourished under the three Iranian empires of the Achaemenians (549-330 B.C.), the Parthians (248 B.C.-224 A.D.) and Sasanians 224-652 A.D.). During these periods, it had attained the status of the state religion. Many people during the Achaemenian Empire were the followers of the Jewish religion. About the Islamic invasion, in The Parsee, Dosabhoy Framjee writes:

... on the conquest of Persia, the Mahomedan soldiers of the Caliphat of Bagdad traversed the length and breadth of the country, presenting the alternative of death or Koran, and compelling the conquered nation to accept the one or the other. By these oppressive and cruel means, a hundred thousand persons are said to have daily abjured the faith of their forefathers; and the fire temples and other sacred places were destroyed or converted into masques. Under such
rulers, almost the whole Zoroastrian population of Persia embraced the faith of Islam, and nearly every trace of the religion of Zoroaster was obliterated. (5)

When Freddy arrives at Lahore, he is wholeheartedly welcomed by a tiny group of four families settled in the city- The Toddywalas, the Bankwallas, the Bottliwallas and the Chaiwallas. Novy Kapadiya, in The Parsi Paradox in The Crow Eaters, writes that “It is the paranoid feeling of being a minuscule minority, which is the motivating factor for the behavioural pattern of the Parsis, ranging from quest for excellence to eccentricity” (131). They are all very pleased at the arrival of Freddy’s family in Lahore. Sidhwa writes: “An endearing feature of this microscopic merchant community was its compelling sense of duty and obligation towards other Parsis. Like one large close-knit family, they assisted each other, sharing success and rallying to support failure.” (CE 21) Lahore becomes the Promised Land for Freddy. Perhaps Sidhwa believes that the quality of rootedness is most important for the diverse enhancement of one’s personality and versatility.

The relevant moral and social values that one learns while growing up among his loved ones must be preserved and practiced along with allowing the modern and constructive ideals to manifest themselves with the changing times. One must make a right moral choice, imbibed in him by his hereditary culture, or the acquired one whichever is better, whenever he is exposed to doubts. Culture, language and religion are the governing factors that control the actions and reactions of an individual. Shock is bound to creep in when two cultures clash. In her novels, Sidhwa has dealt with culture-shock in various ways. Freddy overcomes the cultural shock. Disoriented Freddy heads towards Lahore to be one with his own culture and to have a better opportunity in life.

The narrative shifts its locale from Central India to Amritsar, Lahore, Karachi, Mumbai and London. Lahore becomes the ultimate metaphor for Faredoon’s fulfilment in business
activity as much as a platform to practice his Zoroastrian virtues in the society. There is a layered displacement within the sub-continent from Lahore to Central India. *The Crow Eater* reminds one of Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*. Though Faredoon Junglewalla is not a rogue, the novel gives the reflection of a picaresque novel. Faredoon Junglewalla packs his belongings on a cart, begins his adventures expedition: “The bullocks stuck to the edge of the road and progressed with minimum of guidance. Occasionally, having spent the day in town, they travelled at night. The beasts would follow the road hour upon hour while the family slept soundly through until dawn.” (*CE 13*)

Faredoon Junglewalla faces a number of problems during his journey which resemble to the problems experienced by the Parsis during their exodus from Persia with the same motive. But some of the problems, which Freddy undergoes during his journey to Lahore, are replete with rich vein of humour which is Sidhwa’s forte. Sidhwa transports peculiar South Asian humour to the language of the British: “Added to the ordinary worries and cares of a long journey undertaken by bullock-cart, Freddy soon found himself confronted by two serious problems. One was occasioned by the ungentlemanly behaviour of a very resolute rooster; the other by the truculence of his indolent mother-in-law” (*CE 13*). One of the most amusing situations that take place in the novel is that of the rooster episode. She makes a rooster ride on Fareedoon’s hips while he is having sex with his wife in a bullock cart:

Cocking his head to one side, he observed Freddy’s curious exertions with interest. Combining a shrewd sense of timing with humour, he suddenly hopped up and with a minimum of flap or fuss planted himself firmly upon Freddy’s amorous buttocks. Nothing could distract Freddy at that moment. Deep in his passion, subconsciously thinking the pressure was from his wife’s rapturous fingers, Freddy gave the cock the ride of his life. Eyes asparkle, wings stretched
out for balance, the cock held on to his rocking perch like an experienced rodeo
crider. (CE 15)

Loss and dislocation are the essential part of any migratory exploits. There is great
human loss and dislocation during the partition migration in The Pakistani Bride and Crack-
ing India. In Patterns of Migration in the Works of Bapsi Sidhwa, Cicely Havely writes: “In
Sidhwa’s work there is no migration or partition without loss. Even Freddy’s jovial rise ex-
erts its price. But the prevalent comedy of Sidhwa 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.” (69)
Fortunately migration in the novel The Crow Eaters is not very traumatic which it usually is; however, certain features of dislocation, displacement and even initial disorientation
form the major elements. However, gradually with unfailing tenacity, resourcefulness and
sheer will to progress, overcoming any obstacle, Faredoon Junglewalla elevates his position.
At the beginning of his quest, he is an ‘outsider’, struggling for success and social recogni-
tion. However, towards the end, he is not only an ‘insider’ of his society but also a reverential
celebrity. Thus migration proved to be a blessing for Freddy. However, Jerbanoo is always ill
with the idea of migration. She tried all the tricks to dissuade Faredoon Junglewalla’s initial
decision to emigrate from central India: “Unnerved by the uprooting and by buffalo, she had
ranted, moaned and finally resigned herself to martyrdom.” (CE 17) Faredoon Junglewalla
achieves it after spending a life-time struggle for peace and stabilized life. Parsee worldview
provides an excellent medium for adaptability. Adaptability is the forte of the Parsee com-

munity. For the Parsees, acculturation and assimilation, both close home and an alien place
are far easier ideal to accomplish than it is for many other Indians.
Faredoon Junglewalla is a shrewd man who exploits his relations with the British officers and others to the full for the maximum benefits. He has no faith in ethical values. For him one’s need should be given the utmost priority in life:

The sweetest thing in the world is your need. Yes, think on it. Your own need – the mainspring of your wants, well being and contentment.’

... ‘Need makes a flatterer of a bully and persuades a cruel man to kindness. Call it circumstances – call it self-interest – call it what you will, it still remains your need. All the good in this world comes from serving our own ends. What makes you tolerate someone you’d rather spit in the eye? What subdues that great big “I”, that monstrous ego in a person? Need, I tell you – will force you to love your enemy as a brother!’ (CE 10)

By listing his name in the Zoroastrian Calendar, Freddy thus secured a place in the history of his community, a community which admires all the skills needed for success. The opportunistic young man with a family and mother-in-law arrived at a new place which promised him a better future and with this dream he not only settled there with ease and composure but earned a great respect and admiration for himself. He is thus, a magnificent example of Parsee adaptability and assimilation towering over all the other characters. Sidhwa has specially designed this novel to capture the quintessential ethos of the Parsee diaspora by delineating the social mobility of Parsee family, which succeeds despite the generation gap between Faredoon Junglewalla, his wife Putli, and his son Behram, and Behram’s wife Tanya.

Sidhwa deals with a subject as sombre and serious as faith but is skilfully tempered with such wit, humour and irony. Reverence for Fire in any form holds great significance for the Parsee. Just as the cross is a symbol of Christianity, in the same way the fire is the symbol of the Parsee faith. In the temples of the Parsees, prayer is offered before the sacred fire. A
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priest tends it five times in a day. The fire is not let to be extinguished. The fire is paid great reverence by the Parsees as it stands for purity. It symbolizes the inner fire of human being. The fire is kept burning not only in the Parsee-temples but also in their houses. At the same time, smoking is also strictly prohibited in the Parsee houses. It is a strict taboo, a sort of sin, committed on the part of the person who smokes. Sidhwa writes: “Fire, which has its source in primordial light, symbolizes not only His Cosmic creation, but also the spiritual nature of His Eternal Truth. Smoking, which is tantamount to defiling the holy symbol with spit, is strictly taboo a sacrilegious-sin.” (CE 49) One afternoon Jerbanoo catches a servant-boy smoking ‘biri’ in the Kitchen. She hauls him up by ears, slaps him and calls for Putli and Freddy to deal with the problem. Smoking is considered one of the cardinal sins by the Parsees. In an authorial aside, Sidhwa muses over the importance of fire to the Parsees: “Fire, chosen by the Prophet as the outward symbol of his faith, is venerated.” (CE 49) In Freddy’s household candles are snuffed with a reverent pinch of the fingers. The cooking fire is never permitted to be extinguished. It is preserved in ashes at night, and fanned back alive each morning.

Another important aspect of the Parsee life which comes to the fore is the way they dispose of their dead. If they consider the fire sacred, they also consider earth holy and therefore they do not bury or cremate corpses. There is an explicit prohibition against cremation or burial underground. As a last act of charity, they give away their dead bodies to be dropped in Dokhma which in English is known as the “Tower of Silence”. In these towers, the vultures and other birds of prey dive in and feed on the dead bodies. However, these towers are so designed as they cannot carry anything out holding in their beaks. By this way, they also venerate the earth by avoiding polluting it with their remains. Sidhwa mentions this ritual at several places in her novels. In The Crow Eaters one night, Jerbanoo refers to this custom with pride much to the embarrassment of Freddy She says: “It was his final act of charity! Every
Parsee is committed to feeding his last remains to the vultures. You may cheat them but not God! As my beloved husband Jehangirjee Chinimini said, Our Zarathusti faith is based on charity.” (CE 47) Jerbanoo had been worried when she came to know that there was no “Tower of Silence” in Lahore. Now when she was old and close to death, this worry troubled her all the more. The very thought of death disturbs her as there is no Dokhma in Lahore due to the scarcity of Parsees population there. Sidhwa takes this opportunity to describe in detail the structure of Dokhma in chapter 5 for the benefit of the non- Parsees:

Just a word or two about the Tower: the marble floor slopes towards the centre where there is a deep hollow. This receives the bones and blood. Underground ducts from the bellow 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 accommodation for fifty female bodies, and the innermost space, around the hollow is for children. It takes the birds only minutes to strip the body of all flesh.

Now, the height of the Tower is precisely calculated. 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 invariable crash against the wall.

Understandably, only professional pall-bearers are allowed to witness the gory spectacle inside, the Tower. (CE 45)

This system of disposing of the dead body originated in the rocky terrain of Persia at a time when Arabic land was too precious to be used as a graveyard. Yet the fact remains that
since the Parsees consider earth, water, and fire holy and therefore they do not bury, drown, or burn polluted corpses. Instead, as a last act of charity, they leave the body exposed to the sun and the birds of prey, mainly vultures in these open-roofed circular structures.

Sidhwa reveals the Parsis’ belief in four-eyed dog, two eyes and two eyes like spots above the eyes. Such a dog is brought into the room where the corpse is laid to ward off evil spirits and to detect any hint of life. In History of the Parsis Vol. 1, Dosabhai Framji Karaka writes:

The exact object and meaning of the ceremony has not been properly ascertained; but according to common belief, dogs are supposed to guide the souls of the dead towards heaven, and to ward off on their way the bad influences of evil spirits to which they may be exposed. This belief is, however, not generally shared in by the educated Parsis of the present day. (54)

The way of disposing of the dead bodies may be considered an extreme form of Parsee-charity, a community which is rooted fathoms deep in its rituals and traditions. At the same time, this way of disposing the dead signifies Parsees’ belief in no distinction between the rich and poor in the community.

Parsi rituals of death are quite diverse from that of any other communities. Parsis are adamant towards their social and religious customs and rituals. It is observed when Freddy’s eldest son Soli passes away. All the Parsi rites and rituals associated to it are performed:

The body was bathed and dressed in old garments of white cotton. Freddy wrapped the kusti around his son’s waist, reciting prayers. As there was no Tower of Silence in Lahore, the body was transported to the Fire Temple. A
room in the living quarters of the priest had been hastily prepared to receive the body.

Soli was laid on two stone slabs and a corpse-bearer drew three circles round it with a sharp nail. Now none could enter the circle, except the corpse bearers.

(CE 176)

Traditions are bound to be broken. Though Parsees have deep faith in their customs and traditional values, being highly progressive in their outlook, they have no procrastination in flouting such conventions which appear to them outdated and unwanted. Seeing the crowd of non-Parsi mourners who had assembled to offer their sympathy, Faredoon removed abruptly the sheet of cloth covering the face of Soli, astounding his community members who considered it “sacrilegious”. He says: “They had stood all this while to see my son: let them. What does it matter if they are no Parsees? They are my brothers; and if I can look upon my son’s face, so can they!” (CE 179)

Sidhwa belongs to a community that is known for its rational faculty and progressive attitude. The belief of Freddy in astrologer, when he visits to Gopal Krishan, a foreteller who prophesies Soli’s premature death before he completes twenty one years, shows Parsees’ unique faculty of assimilating the culture and traditions of the country where they have been migrated to. On one hand, it exposes Parsees’ belief in superstitions, on the other hand, Parsi and Indian culture are shown nearly akin in some respect. The Crow Eaters mirrors the influence of mythology in Indian life and culture: “In India there is still a cornucopia of ancient Aryan wisdom, of esoteric knowledge, of incredible occurrences . . .” (CE 159) Sidhwa imparts the true colour of Indian mass by highlighting the deep rooted superstitious belief in paranormal elements:
There is a real throbbing fear of black magic - and visual evidence of its craft everywhere. There is Kali, the goddess of death and destruction and disease. And on days when she holds sway, mothers keep babies indoors. They warn their children not to step over broken eggs, little mounds of cooked rice, coloured chalk and entails of animals, strategically placed on sidewalks by evil adherents of the art. Brain and trotters are not eaten on such days; or liver, or heart- for it is not only the vegetarian Hindus who believe in the black art, but all those who are of India.

There are ghost and spirits and *dains*, witches disguised as women, who give themselves away by their misshapen feet that point backwards. And when they remove their shawls of an evening, thinking they are alone, embers can be seen glowing from braziers built into the witches’ sunken heads. (*CE 159-60*)

The charitable works of Faredoon sometimes submerge into a sort of deceit as well. The way he rescues Bobby Katrak, the son of Mr. Katrak, a diamond merchant from Karachi is ironically exposed by the novelist. “Freddy gave Mr Gibbons, who was now Inspector-General of Police, the ten thousand rupees they had agreed upon, and stowed away the remaining forty in his special kitty. This was the kitty he dipped into to help others- and occasionally himself.” (*CE 154*) But, Freddy’s selfless philanthropic bent for his community is observed when he gets Mr, Polly Sodawalla released from the imprisonment for drug trafficking by the British Police. Yazdi’s benevolence and charitable activities are the sheer outcome of the disillusionment with his love affair with Rosy Watson, yet his liberalities are obvious inheritance of the Parsee value system. In *The Fictional World of Bapsi Sidhwa*, Amit Kumar Dubey writes: “Charity is an integral part of the Parsi value system as it stems from a firm religious conviction, founded by the Prophet Zoroaster.” (*42*)
“Freedom of choice is a cardinal doctrine in the teaching of Zarathustra. A child born of Parsee parents is not considered a Zoroastrian until he has chosen the faith at the Navjote Ceremony.” (CE 124) Navjote Ceremony is one of the most significant of the Parsi ceremonies. A Parsee child is formally initiated into the religion through this ceremony or it is an induction of the child into the faith. Hereafter, he/she begins to wear the sudreh and kustis for the rest of his or her life. In Parsi Food and Customs, Bhicoo J. Manekshaw writes: “This is the ceremony in which the child is invested with the sudreh (the sacred shirt) and kusti (the sacred thread) of the religion, bringing him into the folds of the Zorastrian religion.” (36)

For Freddy’s devoted wife, Putli, her most cherished moments were the Navjote ceremonies of her children. “She spun the white lamb’s wool into seventy-two fine strands and wove them into a long thin hollow tape. The tape was turned inside out and ceremoniously washed. Her finely made kustis were in great demand, not only in Lahore but in Karachi as well.” (CE 124) Dosabhoy Framjee writes: “The sudra is made of linen or linen gauge or net, while the kusti is a thin woollen cord, or cincture of seventy-two threads. The farmer is called, in the language of Avasta, Suttehur Pesunghem, which means “The garment of the good and beneficial way.” “The kusti is passed round the waist three times, and tied with four knots, during the chanting of a sort of hymn.” (Framjee 67) Sidhwa writes that the traditional Parsee-costumes, kustis and sudreh are worn proudly by Parsee men and women as well. Parsi men appreciate to be identified by their traditional dresses. But, Freddy is depicted as “rigged out in a starch white coat-wrap that fastened with bows at the neck and waste, and crisp white pyjamas and turban.” (CE 21) Sidhwa shows that Indian Parsis were not confined to the traditional costumes but they were influenced by the diverse Indian cultures.

Sidhwa asserts that Mathabana is worn by Parsee-women to camouflage their hair. Sidhwa narrates: “... and his wife and mother-in-law never appeared in public without mathabanas white kerchiefs wound around the hair to fit like skull caps.” (CE 23) But, the modern gen-
eration of Parsis does not show its bend in wearing the traditional costumes. Billy’s wife Tanya is more rebellious in this regard: “She became daring in her attire and tied her sari in a way that accentuated the perfections of her body. She took to wearing a little make-up and outlined the astonishing loveliness of her lips . . .” (CE 246)

Sidhwa depicts about all the major and minor customs and traditions about her own community. Such a strange tradition, of putting salt into drinking water for the successive three days to draw the attention of the family with regard to one’s own marriage, is brought forth by Sidhwa. When Faredoon’s eldest sisters are married and he reaches at his twenty, he mixes salt to let his family know about his deep yearning for his marriage: “. . . And every morning, for three days, I dropped a fistful of salt into the drinking water.” (CE 111)

Sidhwa touches all the aspects of Parsi life. She has given minutest detail of familial and social life of her community with utmost precision. There is a detailed description of Parsee marriage ceremony as well in the novel. Sidhwa gives a detailed description of the token money ceremony. Freddy’s son Billy is made to stand on a small wooden platform, prettily decorated with the patterns of fish drawn in time. Tanya’s mother Rodabai anoints his forehead with vermilion, touches vermilion to the toes of his shoes, and presses rice grains on his forehead. She gives Billy a little envelope containing the token money. Similarly, Putli garlands and gives twenty-one Queen Victoria sovereigns to Tanya. Four days before the wedding the ‘Madasara’ ceremony is performed. It entails much stepping on and off the small, fish-patterned platform. After Billy and Tanya step off and plant a mango sapling to ensure their fertility, the sisters mount the platform to be garlanded, stained with vermilion and presented with their set of clothes and thin strings of gold. The gummy-mouthed aunts and uncles, eagerly awaiting their turn, come next. They are also garlanded, stained with vermilion, and given small envelopes containing cash. Rodabai performs the honours for Jerbanoo and
Putli, and then with a great deal of coaxing, mounts the platform herself. In *Parsi English Novel*, Jaydipsinh Dodiya writes: “The Crow Eaters depict the Parsi life full of peculiar customs, traditions and rituals. Social behaviour and its consequent effect on their lives also come under Sidhwa’s scanner.” (82)

The wedding of Billy and Tanya takes place on flower-bedecked stage at the Taj Mahal Hotel. Tanya, wearing a white satin sari, heavy with silver and pearl embroidery, is sitting demurely on a carved chair. Billy is sitting on an identical chair wearing a tall, dark pagri-hat, and white coat and pajamas. Two priests are standing before them chanting and throwing rice, coconut silvers and rose petals at them. Faredoon and Putli stand behind Billy, and Sir and Lady Easymoney behind Tanya, as witnesses. Sidhwa reports on the core ceremony of the Parsee marriage: “The officiating priests eventually recited,... say whether you have agreed to take this maiden…”(CE 223-24) The Parsee mode of marriage is a mix of the Hindu and Muslim modes of marriage. Sidhwa’s handling of the theme of marriage is very relevant and contemporary.

The novel is replete with numerous sensual comic incidents. One such comic incident occurs in Chapter 37 when Billy tries to kiss Tanya after their marriage:

“... gluing his mouth to hers and forcing his tongue between her teeth. Her mouth tasted deliciously of minty toothpaste.

Tanya struggled, pushing at him with her hands. Desperately she bit his tongue.

Billy fell back with a cry. His eyes were smarting with pain and humiliation.

‘What did you do that for?’
‘You are a filthy sweater fellow! Haven’t you studied hygiene? Poking your germs into my mouth!’ (CE 227)

Again, the way their consummation takes place during their honeymoon tour of Jacco Hill is highly comical. Billy and Tanya are caught amidst heavy rain and thunder and in an attempt to climb on a plateau, Tanya slides away and fell down in the mud:

Billy caught her from behind, trying to lift her, and the weight of her flesh pressed on his thin, hairy arms. He was seized by a sudden languor, a debilitating passion. All at once he was unable to support her. In an entwined, slush-soaked tangle they fell on the gritty ground.

There was a renewed peal of thunder. Billy was kissing her, impatiently fumbling with the buttons of her blouse and feverishly pulling the sari up over her thighs with the other hand. Tanya’s legs, exposed to the elements, trembled. And all this in thunder, and torrential rain!

Forgotten were the thousands pine-veiled monkey eyes; forgotten their fear of solitude. Tanya was panting. Billy was on her, muzzling her large, firm, rain-washed breasts. Tanya squirmed, instinctively widening her legs, her child-like eyes ecstatic. There was a change in his cares. Billy adjusted his body over hers in a new way. Holding himself with one hand, stroking her hair with the other and kissing her, he groped and struggled to enter. Tanya clung to him, arching her body to his. Struggling and groping, Billy feared he might push too hard or too awkwardly, and Tanya, wriggling with artless enthusiasm, was no help. Then the forest resounded with a spectacular explosion of thunder and Billy, startled out of his wits, banged in as if lighting had struck his buttocks.
The marriage at last was consummated. (CE 238-39)

In an interview with Goji Berries Sidhwa says: “I wrote naturally about sexuality because I hadn’t realized I needed to censor what I wrote. Although I am very liberated, my writing is more inhibited now.” (Alhamra Literary Issue 3 Spring 2008)

The issue of inter-faith marriages still arouses acrimonious debates amongst the Parsee community. The motif of mixed marriage is though peripheral to the narrative in The Crow Eaters. Marriages in Parsees are allowed in their own community only. They do not allow their sons or daughters to marry non- Parsees. Outside marriages or mix-marriages are discouraged by the community. Those, who marry outside the community, are excluded from their faith along with their offspring. This attitude is caused because of the inclination of keeping the ethnic identity intact and to keep the sanctity of the community preserved.

Faredoon son’s Yazdi tries to convince everyone in his family that it hardly matters if his beloved is not a Parsee. That the girl he wants to marry is a human being and a fine person. He tells his father that she is better than any Parsee. Freddy, who did not agree with him, said:

You are too young to understand these things.... Maybe I am too old to understand you. But there is one thing I would like to explain to you... 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 promise you. (CE 128)

Yazdi is a sensitive boy whose humanity and generosity towards her classmate Rosy Watson is exemplary. He is filled with pity when he learns the malicious behaviour of her stepmother and her brothers and sisters towards Rosy. The agony of the girl constricts his heart with pity:
“Don’t cry, don’t cry,’ he begged in a barely audible voice, stroking the weeping girl’s light brown, silken hair. ‘I cannot bear to see you like this. . .you don’t have to live like this. . .I will marry you and take you away from that horrible house. I will marry you,’ he repeated with a determination that made the girl raise her bowed head and look at him. ( CE 127 )

Renunciation of worldly and mundane life by Yazdi may be termed as his escape from the life of worldly attachment. When Yazdi’ wish to marry Rosy Watson, an Anglo Indian girl, is repudiated by Faredoon, he renounces the worldly life. He becomes a communist, the follower of Mazdak. He becomes a recluse, gets his head shorn like an ascetic, leaves all the luxuries of life and turns into a philanthropist. He puts in a Trust the large sum of his share, now finds a purpose and meaning of his life:

I’ll feed dying children. I’ll buy medicine for the sick left to decay like exposed excrement in those chocked bazaar lanes. You prefer not to think about them. I’ve heard the tormented screams of children at midnight! Who are they? And the perverted monsters that torment them? You chose not to know. But I know nothing else - see every morning the mutilated corpses of prostitutes found in the gutters, and the agonising pain of millions of futile, wasted life. ( CE 184 )

Faredoon visits to a sex worker in Hira Mandi with his friends and learns that she is the very girl whom Yazdi wishes to marry. The sadomasochistic perversion of Freddy with Rosy Watson has been revealed vividly: “Throwing her back on the bed he flung himself upon her. He squeezed the taut, nubile little breasts until she cried out. He fumbled around feverishly, seeking ways to humiliate the girl and assuage his anger- . . .” ( CE 137 )

In the novel, Freddy is a representative of the Parsees. He strongly supports the beliefs and traditions of his community. He is proud of his Parsee lineage and speaks of the
light that is carried forward through the purity of generations reaching back to the times of their great Zarathustra, the Magi.

Sidhwa depicts about *Jashan* or thanksgiving ceremony. *Jashan* is a commemoration of any occasion or event—a religious, seasonal or historical. Sidhwa writes: “At important Parsi ceremonies, like thanksgiving and death anniversaries, names of the great departed are invoked with gratitude— they include the names of ancient Persian kings and saints, and all those who have served the community since the Parsis migrated to India.” (*CE 9*) When Jerbanoo narrowly escaped from the charge of a village buffalo at the outskirt of a village while performing nature’s call, Freddy offers to *Jashan* prayer: “We owe Him thousands, nay millions of thanks for His grace in preventing bloodshed. As soon as we are settled near a Fire Temple, I will order a *jashan* of thanksgiving at our new home. Six Mobeds will pray over enough holy fruit, bread and sweetmeats to distribute amongst a hundred beggars . . .” (*CE 17*)

Amongst the Parsees, a weakness for western values and civilization and allegiance to everything English is very discernible. In *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa: A Critical Study*, Twinkle B. Manaver writes: “Parsi alienation from mainstream Indian culture and fascination with things Western is satirized in Faredoon Junglewalla’s hilarious attempts at quoting English proverbs. . .” (*24*) The way Putli speaks English with Freddy in the garden of the Government House makes the reader laugh: “Home! I go. You go!” (*CE 190*) The Parsee way of life is the most westernized in the Indian subcontinent. For the Parsees, this penchant for everything English is the result of yearning for favour and self preservation. As stated earlier, Faredoon is overzealous to please his rulers in order to spell-out its advantages. He calls them the Parsees “sovereigns” otherwise where would Parsis be if they did not “Curry favour?” “Cleaning out gutters with the untouchables— a dispersed pinch of snuff sneezed form the het-
erogeneous nostrils of India!” (CE 12) The first thing Freddy does when he arrives in Lahore is to go to the Government House to demonstrate his loyalty to the Queen and Crown.

Parking his splendid bullocks next to restive tonga horses, Freddy strode confidently up to the resplendent guards at the huge iron gates. The guards allowed him in almost at once and Freddy signed his name in the Visitor’s Register. Having thus paid homage to the British Empire, established his credentials and demonstrated his loyalty to ‘Queen and Crown’, Freddy was free to face the future. (CE 22)

Parsis, as a community, have fostered a strong stand with regards to the loyalty towards the ruling powers. Parsis have perhaps adopted it as a strategy to avoid any possible extermination of the very exiguous community. Their loyalty towards the ruling class is evident from their first arrival at the kingdom of Jadav Rana to the British regime. They have proved themselves unfailingly loyal to the ruling force. This tactic has been successful in their efforts of survival as well as in their economic prosperity. Faredoon’s servility to English is merely a strategy of survival and protection which is not only an individual trait but also a typical one of Parsees in India. In *The Parsees*, Dosabhoy Framjee writes:

Of all the natives of India the Parsees are undoubtedly the most loyal subjects of the British Government. Their loyalty is not on empty show, nor the result of a fear of a strong and powerful government, but is the offspring of deep-rooted conviction. When the compare their condition in India with that of their co-religionists in Persia, who are reduced to the most miserable state by misgovernment and persecution, they fully and rightly appreciate the blessings which they enjoy under this Government. (222)
The unquestionable loyalty of Faredoon towards the British as well as his community leads his prosperity and growing influence in the community. “Faredoon Junglewalla, today, philanthropist and shrewd businessman, was renowned for his loyalty to his community and friends. People came from afar seeking his help in bagging prime jobs, securing licences, contracts, permits and favours.” (CE 150) It is because of his unprecedented loyalty and excessive servility towards the British, Freddy becomes an undisputed head of the Parsee-community dwelling in the Punjab and the North West Frontier Province. In Chapter I, Freddy tells his listeners: ‘And where . . . does the sun rise? No, not in the East. For us it rises – and sets in the Englishman’s arse. They are our sovereigns! . . . we are greatest toadish of the British Empire! (CE 12) In The Parsi Paradox in Bapsi Sidhwa’s The Crow Eaters, Novy Kapadia remarks: “Hence the exaggerated servility of Freddy, his son Billy and other Parsees towards the British is revealed as an act to ensure legal security, peace and economic prosperity.” (127) In The Parsees, Dosabhoy Framjee remarks: “Whenever fitting opportunities have occurred, the Parsees have not forgotten or neglected to show their love towards their rulers.” (222-223) The Parsis’ loyalty has been a strategy for the community’s material progress and concern for its safety but it often verges towards opportunistic stand for economic prosperity only as appears from Freddy remarks:

“Yes, I’ve been all things to all people in my time. There was a bumptious son-of-a-bitch in Peshawar called Colonel Williams. I cooled him – salaamed so low I got a crick in my balls – buttere and marmalade him until he was eating out of my hand. Within a year I was handling all traffic of goods between Peshawar and Afghanistan!” (CE 10)

Parsees steered clear of the things which might cause problems to the harmony and progress of the community. The sycophantic attitude of Freddy towards the English officials
helped him on the ladder to success. Sidhwa narrates: “Years went by, Freddy expanded his business. He hobnobbed with Maharajas and Englishmen. As opportunity beckoned, he dabbled in a variety of trades, deftly ‘buttering and marmalading’ the Col. Williamses of his acquaintance and obliging others like Mr Allen with Scotch and dancing girls.” (CE 101) In The Parsees, Dosabhoy Framjee aptly remarks: “Whenever fitting opportunities have occurred, the Parsees have not forgotten or neglected to show their love towards their rulers.” (222-23)

Even Billy, who is very close fisted and his fashionable wife, Tanya, manifested “... a fanatical faith in the ways of the English society in India, and a disciple’s knack at imitation. ... Their ability to converse in English ... set them apart from common people.” (CE 245) When Tanya was expecting, she was expected to contemplate the pictures of “chubby-cheeked English babies” and produce a “European style offspring.” (CE 249) The identity crisis and changing social milieu has always been a grave issue among the Parsees of each and every generation. There has been a strong attraction towards the Western culture and way of English living style amongst the Parsees. The novelist has depicted the life style of Tanya and Billy:

They entertained continuously at small, intimate ‘mixed’ parties where married couples laughed and danced decorously with other married couples. ‘Mixed’ parties were as revolutionary a departure from Freddy’s all-male get-together at the Hira Mandi, and Putli’s rigid female sessions, as is a discotheque from a Victorian family dinner. The parties were fashionably cosmopolitan, including the various religious sects of India: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians, the Europeans, and the Anglo-Indians. (CE 245)
Tanya belongs to the new generation of Parsis. She is frank and modern in her approach. She likes to lead a luxurious life, hosting parties was her passion. Even Billy, leaving his inferiority complex, “accepted the social change.” The Crow Eaters appropriately reveals the Parsi milieu in the throes of change. In A Meeting of Streams, Dr. G.A. Ghanshyam Iyengar remarks:

Parsi and Hindu myths and beliefs find an equal space in the life and characters of her . . . novel. The Crow Eaters (1978) in which Sidhwa has dexterously maintained her role as preserver of culture, a folk historian and myth maker by projecting the life and customs of her community and their assimilation into the Indian way of life. (Iyengar 3)

The Partition of India figures in Sidhwa’s three novels, The Crow Eaters, The Pakistani Bride and Cracking India. Sidhwa depicts about the neutral stance taken by Parsis in India’s freedom struggle. Faredoon says: “We will stay where we are . . . let the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever, rule. What does it matter? The sun will continue to rise – and the sun continues to set – in their arses . . .!” (CE 283) Most of the Parsees of the subcontinent were against participation of the community in the freedom struggle so as to demonstrate their non-alienation with Hindus, Muslims or the Sikhs. Sidhwa depicts Parsees’ aloofness from the freedom struggle of India as tact of immunity against any fear of violence in the ongoing battle for power between various communities of India. The Partition turned the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs into religious bigots. In chapter 46, while talking to his family members, Faredoon utters his apprehension for the safety of his community because of the stance taken by some of the Parsi nationalist leaders:

‘Do you know who is responsible for this mess?’ asked Faredoon, not expecting an answer, and his listeners waited for the rhetoric that usually followed/
'I’ll tell you who: that misguided Parsi from Bombay, Dadabhoy Navroji! Things were going smoothly; there has always been talk of throwing off the British yoke – of independence – but that fool of a Parsi starts something called the Congress, and shoots his bloody mouth off like a lunatic. “Quit India! Quit India!” You know what has he done? Stirred a hornet’s nest! I can see the repercussions.

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

Although the Parsis were affected by the Partition, they did not become religious fundamentalists. The reason behind this is that all over the world there are only 120000 Parsis and therefore it was not possible for them to become religious bigots. Even Sidhwa is of the view that, if they were a larger community they would have become one. Without mincing her words Sidhwa frankly that in her community there are some horrible bigots. They have
been migrating to U.S.A. and interfaith marriages are very common in the Parsi community, these persons oppose their daughters’ children to be assimilated in the Parsi community. Ridiculously, the sons’ children, who are born from the non-Parsi mothers, are accepted as Parsis. Sidhwa considers it a rubbish activity in this modern and highly civilized world.

It is true that Faredoon Junglewalla and all the major characters of *The Crow Eaters* are Parsis, and that Parsee life and rituals are minutely described in the novel, yet these factors do not make the novel an indictment or even an attack on the community. Sidhwa does neither glorify nor denounce Parsee life. What she attempts to establish is that the Parsee community is like any other community with its own strength and weaknesses. *The Crow Eaters* unlike several eulogies of Parsees by Parsis, does not exalt the community but only places Parsee life in a general perspective. It offers a rich insider’s insight into Parsee life. Sidhwa’s vision is ironic which reveals her moral preoccupations. It combines in itself the elemental and the ephemeral in life. All the characters created by Sidhwa are true representatives of their community. She has portrayed Faredoon Junglewalla’s character with great care. Sidhwa depicts the dynamic and enterprising elements of her Parsee community. Yet, Faredoon assimilated the multicultural ambience of the country and the Western colonial influence.

The novel was published about four decades back but it is still very relevant to the contemporary religious fundamentalism. Faredoon’s attitude towards different religion is very pluralistic and inclusive. His prayer table reflects his equal respect for all the religious thoughts. Parsees are monotheist but they espouse the principles of equal reverence towards all the religions of the world. This feature of the Parsee life has been brought forth by Sidhwa in this novel. Freddy has great reverence for Holy scriptures- as the Bible, the Bhagwad Gita, and the Quran- as for the Avesta. They have equal standing in his life and are positioned right
above his prayer table. On his prayer table stood pictures of the Virgin Mary, goddess Laxmi, Buddha, Christ and Prophet Zarathustra’s image and other objects of worship. The various streams of cultural influences, rituals, superstitions and beliefs co-mingle in the Parsee ethos. “A picture of the Virgin Mary was framed with an inset of the four-armed, jet-haired goddess Laxmi. Buddha sat serenely between a sinuous statue of Sita, provocatively fixing her hair, and an upright cross supporting the crucified Christ. Photographs of Indian saints crowded the table.” (CE 52) Parsees are believed to be a blissful community. They enjoy their lives fully as in *Parsi Food and Customs* Bhicoo J. Manekshaw writes: “The Zoroastrian religion is a ‘happy’ religion, believing in good living, hard work, and enjoyment of life and charity—irrespective of race or creed.”(7) Sidhwa also attempts to establish an affinity between Zoroastrian and Indian belief in mystical life: “India is magic: it always was. The word ‘magic’ comes from Magi and Faredoon was a descendent of the Magi: the wise men of antiquity initiated into the mysteries of medicine, astrology, mysticism and astronomy—disciples of Zarathustra.” (CE 159) Mysticism is deeply rooted in Indian life. Amongst all the sects and religions in the country, there is great reverence for Sufis, Sadhus, Pir, Babas and Swamis. Sidhwa draws readers’ attention towards this aspect of Indian life. These mystics are believed to be endowed with the miraculous knowledge. Freddy consults Gopal Krishan a mystic. Sidhwa’s portrayal of Gopal Krishan is contrary to the popular image of a soothsayer:

Freddy studied the modest, nondescript man closely. His sombre black eyes were candid, his smooth-skinned, flat-nosed, round face gentle. The man had no pretensions in his get-up: neither caste-marks on his forehead, nor the naked torso or shaven head of priests and soothsayers. He wore neither the beads nor the bizarre raiment often affected by fortune-tellers. He was dressed like any baboo employed in a business concern. He wore a white, European-style
shirt and cotton coat over his dhoti and his head was covered by a limp, unassuming turban. *(CE 161)*

Freddy’s wife Putli is a saintly figure. She, like her mother Jerbanoo is not at all progressive but deeply rooted into orthodox Parsee tradition. Putli is a programmed woman, buckling according to patriarchal norms and values. She is a replica of the stereotypical image of feminine behaviour of Indian women, who are expected to be submissive, obedient and meek while dealing with their husbands. Putli is no *Nora* of *A Doll’s House* who changes from passivity to self assertive, from nonentity to individuality. But there is lack of protest in Putli, instead, she has deep-rooted belief in male chauvinism. Her name *Putli*, means *Puppet*, suggests the role played by her. She is depicted as a dutiful and God fearing wife who is governed and controlled by her husband:

If she did or wanted to do something that he considered intolerable and disastrous, he would take a stern and unshakeable stand. Putli soon learnt to recognise and respect his decisions on such occasions. If she did, or planned something he considered stupid and wasteful, but not really harmful, he would voice his objections and immediately humour her with his benevolent sanction. In all other matters she had a free hand. *(CE 13)*

The Parsi milieu of Putli has a different value system on which Sidhwa comments as follow: “Deep-rooted in the tradition of a wife walking three paces behind her husband; their deportment was as painful to Putli as being marched naked in public.” *(CE 188)* Putli does not change according to the time and reprimands her daughter for doing so. Her obeisance of her husband is the quintessence of the South Asian women “an ideal of Indian wifely submission, love and responsibility” *(Hashmi 138)* who have no autonomy in their conjugal life.
Using Putli as her mouthpiece, Sidhwa tries to focus on Parsee orthodox women and their attitudes towards life.

Faredoon’s arch rival, “his indolent mother-in-law” Jerbanoo is a memorable and interesting of all the characters. She is a typical Parsee lady with her love for food and endless chatter. She constantly bickers with her son-in-law who is annoyed at such a length that he does not hesitate conspiring her murder. Jerbanoo’s character is a deliberately exaggerated caricatured figure for giving comic touches to the novel, albeit with Parsee humour. The author’s obvious affection for the community at the heart of the novel in no way prevents her from poking fun at its all too human foibles. The humour is irreverent but irresistible.

Sidhwa’s portrayal of women is based on her own observation of Parsee women representing her own community. It is a firsthand experience. The writer’s capacity to provide humour and laughter makes the novel a beautiful Parsee saga.

Jerbanoo’s rivalry with Freddy is the most significant part of the novel. She becomes the cause of severe angst and embarrassment for Freddy throughout the narrative. The skirmishes between Jerbanoo and Freddy are the key source of humour in the novel. Jerbanoo, who had been against his migratory expedition, “never failed an opportunity to castigate him.” (CE 17) Jerbanoo took “a malicious delight in needling him.” (CE 24) Freddy’s progress in business in Lahore gradually begins to be impaired as she was “a canker, a thorn in his side that blighted his life” because of her gluttony, a common trait of Parsi life, who swallows huge quantities of chocolate, biscuits and wines from the store. The way she pounces on food, popping into her mouth, makes Faredoon burst: “Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings! Yes, you are eating out of the mouths of babes and sucklings!” (CE 24) Freddy consults a mystic as well to get rid of his mother-in-law. When an insurance agent visits Lahore, Freddy smells an opportunity to do away with his debt and his mother-in-law as well. He gets
everything insured including his children, his wife and his mother-in-law. He shifts his costly stocks to a newly rented warehouse near the station. Freddy manoeuvres a scheme and deliberately sets fire to his shop- an attempt to kill two birds with one stone, to get rid of his mother-in-law and get a fairly large amount by insurance. Though Jerbanoo survives the trap set by Freddy but he receives “a sizeable cheque.” (CE 99) Moreover, after the incident, she ceases to be a problem for Freddy though the conflict between the two lasts until the last days of Faredoon’s life. Freddy says: “. . . I give up. Congratulations! You have won. You will outlive me.” (CE 280)

Contrary to Putli and Jerbanoo, Tanya is the representative of the new generation of the Parsis. She is the daughter of Sir Nosheerwan Jeevanjee Easymoney, one of the richest Parsis of Bombay. Tanya is a frank and modern girl who has no belief in age old traditions of her Parsi community. It was her “oval face, the swing of black, bobbed hair and the ingenious, innocent eyes” that caused “Billy’s heart flew into his mouth” (CE 201) Instead of Roshan, Billy marries Tanya. The way she initiates her married life with Billy reveals her innate innocent. She believes in leading a lavish life style and “money simply drained through the gaps in her stubby, broad-knuckled fingers.” (CE 243)

After Billy’s marriage, Billy and his wife Tanya shift in a new house gifted by Faredoon. The newly wedded bride also undergoes problems caused by Jerbanoo. Her capacious, fretful and nagging nature started wrecking havoc in the life of Tanya as well: “She had an unerring instinct for quarrels, and as soon as she sensed a juicy one brewing, she hauled herself off to spend a weekend with the couple. She took up for Billy. She added fuel to the fire and toasted her boisterous little heart in the glow.” (CE 247) When the matter arrives to Faredoon, he sorted the problem by taking Jerbanoo and Putli on a holiday to England with him. In London, Jerbanoo’s intransigent behaviour continues, not with Freddy but with Mrs.
Allen with the humiliating treatment of hers. She begins to meddle even with her household chores: “Every morning she descended from the half-landing with cautious leaden thumps that boomed up to the attic, and Mrs. Allen’s heart sank. Jerbanoo would waddle into the kitchen and thrust an armful of clothes at Mrs. Allen. “Here, May-ree. You wash little little?” (CE 255) She meddles unrighteously in her affairs: “Why you not make curry today?” ‘Why you not cut onion properly?’ ‘Why you not rinse O.K.? I not drink with soap!’ ‘No chilli? I no digest!’ (CE 255-56) After being thrown out from Mr. Allen’s house and being shifted to a hotel, Jerbanoo causes disruption there as well. Sidhwa has certainly portrayed a comic character in her. One day, Jerbanoo comes to the balcony with a small tub filled with water and begins to take bath there indifferent with the occupants of the room beneath. The hilarious talk between Jerbanoo and the English man amuses the readers:

‘Come on, what’s going on up here? You washing clothes or something?’

Jerbanoo glowered. You not poke your nose into me mister, I not poke my nose into you!’

A fair enough answer one would think, but the Englishman was not content.

‘Look! If this bloody nonsense doesn’t stop I’m going to complain to the management. What the hell are you up to, anyway?’

Jerbanoo was stung to the quick by his rudeness. ‘Get out! Get out! Fool!’ she shouted trying to squeeze him from the door. The man stood like a rock.

‘I’m getting a bobby to find out what’s going on up here,’ he threatened, and noticing the uncomprehending look on the fierce old lady’s face, explained viciously. ‘Bobby, you understand? Policeman! Policeman!’
Jerbanoo’s face registered understanding. It also registered scorn. ‘Go! Go!’ she said, pushing him contemptuously with both hands.

‘Look here, you damn witch. You’d better tell me what’s going on up there or I’ll get you locked up?’

Jerbanoo reconsidered. She decided to hit this despicable man with a white lie.

‘You want to know?’ she asked, and her voice despite its malice rang with authenticity. ‘I tell you! I wash my bottom. I no dry-clean like you dirty Englishmen. I wash my bottom!’ (CE 269)

The South Asian societies are mostly dominated by the patriarch. Defining patriarchy, in *Feminism in South Asia*, Bhasin and Khan write: “When one uses the word patriarchy, it refers to the system that oppresses and subordinates women in both the private and the public sphere.” (8) Women are treated as the ‘second’ or ‘other’ in almost all the major communities. The tradition bound familial structure allocates woman the lowest position in the hierarchy. Discrimination with women on the basis of sex is apparently observed in these societies where man is the ruler and woman is the ruled- a reliant entity of male. Patriarchal ideology is the key source of socio-cultural practices. Parsis are more progressive as a community. The Parsi women enjoy all the privileges bestowed upon male and they are treated as equal to their male counterparts. The Parsi practice of woman segregation can be noticed while their menstrual period occurs. During the menstruation, women are confined in *other room*. Shidwa writes: “Every Parsi household has its other room, specially reserved for women. Thither they are banished for the duration of their unholy state. Even the sun, moon and stars are defiled by their impure gaze, according to a superstition which has its source in primitive man’s fear of blood.” (CE 70) Menstruating girls and women are treated as impure and polluted as such they were compelled to spend their time in isolation. During such a period, Putli was
cramped in the other room: “She was served meal in her cubicle. A tin plate and spoon, reserved for the occasion, were handed over by the servant boy. She knew she couldn’t help herself to pickles or preserves for they would spoil at her touch. Flowers, too, were known to wilt when touched by women in her condition.” (CE 70)

Sidhwa highlights the key role of Patriarchy that dictates the life of women and suppresses their individuality. The patriarchal norms and ideology are meant merely to limit the autonomy of womankind. In *Parsi Community in Bapsi Sidhwa’s The Crow Eaters*, Purvi N. Upadyay aptly writes: “The Parsi psyche, with a curious attitude towards their women, codifies female behaviour through a characteristic paradox. In the relationship between man and woman, Faredoon, and later his son Behram adopt double standards.” (31) Sometimes even woman herself becomes a tool through which patriarchal power perpetrates the act of woman’s subjugation from the childhood. Sidhwa writes: “In the India of Billy's days, girls like jewels, were still being tucked away and zealously guarded by parents, brothers, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Everyone kept a sharp eye out. Even the innocent horseplay of children was savagely punished . . .” (CE 205). Sidhwa speaks about the way the patriarchal society denies girls the access of essential knowledge of sex, and how it keeps an eye constantly guarding the girl child: “A gigantic conspiracy was practised by an entire society to keep its girls ridiculously ‘innocent’. The wealthier the family, the more ignorant the daughters. This carefully nurtured ignorance had a high marker value in the choice of a bride. (CE 229) Sidhwa satirises the patriarchal concept of chastity which is entirely gender biased and which lays emphasis on women’s chastity, not on man’s. Sidhwa shows the bias attitude of male by exposing Billy’s premarital sexual experiences: “Billy was entitled a lot pre-marital experiences. As a male it was incumbent on him to be knowledgeable in matters of sex. Billy had visited the Hira Mandi girls three times, read the Kama Sutra and discussed sex with his friends in a sombre and illuminating exchange of detail.” (CE 230)
The Crow Eaters sheds light on the secondary status of women in Parsi community. Patriarchal ideology entraps Rodabai as well. Though she exercises some authority within her narrow range of household, outside this realm, she is deprived of any rights. Shidwa depicts the way how Freddy makes Putli walk along the carpets in the Government House: “Freddy directed her along the long carpets to the garden. He did not merely steer her. He prodded, poked and pushed her each step of the way. No one would have thought, to look at Freddy’s affectionate arm encircling his wife, the strength in it propelling her forward.” (CE 188)

Sidhwa reveals the bitter reality of male domination that is exercised upon women on whatsoever the occasion is. In Shimla, when the hotel clerk gazes at Tanya’s chest and her bare midriff, Billy readily becomes critical of her:

‘Button up your cardigan!’ said Billy in a fierce whisper.

Tanya obediently buttoned herself up. The fluffy mohair covering her bosom and waist, if anything, accentuated her voluptuous curves. Billy was getting more and more put off by this unforeseen concomitant of his wife’s beauty. He wished for the tenth time he were a Mohammeden and could cover her up in a burqa. Sensible people, the Muslim, he thought. (CE 240)

The long run gender segregation has its persistence in modern generation as well. The way Billy imposes commandments on his wife Tanya reveals the existence of generations old gender apartheid:

Thou shalt not spend money!

Thou shalt not waste.

Thou shalt give me a minute detailed account of expenses.
Thou shalt obey thy husband, anf jump to his bidding.

Thou shalt bring up thy children to obey and to love me more than they do you.

Thou shalt never require anything.

Thou and thy children shall not disturb me.

Thou shalt switch off all lights and fans. (CE 278)

*The Crow Eaters* traces the most vital realities of the Parsi society. There are social and religious constraints that are meant for women only, the violation of these constraints are not permitted to women as they are tied in the shackles of religion, culture, custom, tradition, convention, belief etc. There are several social boundaries for women that confine her world and individuality. Be it is Freddy, Billy, Sir Easymoney or anyone else, the subjugation of woman has no end.

*The Crow Eaters* is a microscopic narrative of Parsee-milieu and culture. The novel is an endeavour to bring forth the fragmentation of a community, uprooted forcefully, and living as expatriates yet is able to acquire a place for self as a leading and successful community, which has a meagre number of members in the world. It is a saga of preserving the ‘Self’, as a man, a family and a community in a land of heterogeneity. In *The Parsi Paradox*, Novy Kapadia writes:

“... the prevailing social milieu, developed an aversion to identifying themselves with other Indian communities. This led to a mental estrangement from India, for many Parsis, without, however, finding an identity of their own, free of both the English and other Indians. Being a shrew observer of human mo-
bility Bapsi Sidhwa reflects this identity search in several situations and aspects in *The Crow Eaters.* (131)

Sidhwa is a keen observer of her own community, and her novel, *The Crow Eaters* is a miniature representation of the Parsee belief, conventions, customs, superstitions, loyalty, hospitality etc. Sidhwa has delineated Parsee ethos in the novel by delving into her community’s various traits. The great charm of *The Crow Eaters* is the construction of socio-political reality of her community. Sidhwa has drawn in her novel the multifarious culture of the Parsee community. As a member of her community, she makes her readers acquainted with varied cultural values, and religious faith of Parsees. The novel is a narration of Parsee entrepreneurship and many other aspects of the community. In *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa,* Novy Kapadia writes:

The novelist has employed ribaldry, humour, pathos, wit, satire, lampoon, sarcasm, and entertainment in the novel. In this regard Sidhwa has a distinctive Pakistani yet Parsee ethos in her writings but above all a unique individual voice. It is this individualism a sense of humour which makes her one of the finest comic writers in the genre of sub-continental English fiction. (10)

Sidhwa’s novels are not mere representations of her community but they also have psychological and objective treatment. Thus, her novels are a wondrous masterpieces wording of a trial by anyone and everyone, be it a Parsi or a Non-Parsi. *The Crow Eaters,* like other novels written by the Parsis, is a depiction of the Parsi life, its peculiar customs, traditions, rites and rituals. Most of the Parsi fictional writings are ethnocentric. Their anxieties and concerns are also ethnocentric. The Parsi authors raise those issues in their novels which are specifically concerned to their community. In *Community in the Parsi Novels in English,* Avadhesh Kumar Singh writes: “Their works exhibit consciousness of their community in
such a way that the community emerges as a protagonist from their works though on the surface these works deal with their human protagonists.” (66) Sidhwa has skilfully examined the social behaviour and its effect on the lives of its people. Sidhwa’s view on racial identity is crystal clear. She gives her community an international voice. In *Patterns of Migration*, Cicely Havely remarks: “*The Crow Eaters* celebrates the achievement of a tiny community which has survived migration, re-settled peacefully and prospered without losing their cultural identity.” (64) She has expressed her views about her tiny diminishing community of Parsis which helps in understanding the cultural complexities of post-independence Pakistan. Speaking about the small population and social and economic mobility of the Parsis, in *The Parsi Paradox in Bapsi Sidhwa’s The Crow Eaters*, Novy Kapadia remarks: “In the last census, conducted by the Government of India, the Parsees were only about 95,000 in number, 0.016 per cent of the total population of India. Yet their feelings of group identity and active participation in the social, cultural and economic life both India and Pakistan is immense. (125)

It will not be wrong to say that *The Crow Eaters* revolves in the rich orbit of Parsi life, both on surface and inwardly. On the surface level, it celebrates the institution of family life, social life and marriage rituals with the undercurrent of the Zoroastrian value of charity. She writes in the preface to *The Crow Eaters* that she has great admiration for her community. She writes:

Because of a deep-rooted admiration for my diminishing community—and an enormous affection for it—this work of fiction has been a labour of love. The nature of comedy being to exaggerate, the incidents in this book do not reflect at all upon the integrity of a community whose honesty and sense of honour—
not to mention its tradition of humour as typified by the Parsi natak—are legend. (*CE Preface*)

*The Crow Eaters* is like a family album albeit of an entire community and generation of people, their history, tradition and culture; a mellifluous medley of cultures and tradition. In *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa*, Alamgir Hashmi writes:

Sidhwa writes from a deep historical consciousness. Her evocation of a part of Lahore life as lived in the first half of this century is convincing—and charming . . . looking . . . through the diminutive lens of insidious comicality as an outsider who knows better; as a member of the Parsi minority in Pakistan who knows her people’s secrets, real strengths, and foibles. Her novel, beyond particular situation and character, aims at a sweep that encompasses a people . . .

(139)

Finally, The most important and undeniable feature of the novel is that it depicts the interesting culture and traditions of the Parsi community in a very efficient style. Sidhwa pens down the beliefs, norms, thoughts and customs of the fire-worshipers in a comic way. Numerous incidents in *The Crow Eaters* are comically portrayed, but as if a tragi-comedy, intermingled with the elements of tragedy. In *Interview with Sidhwa*, Bachi Karkaria aptly writes:

Sidhwa along with Rohinton Mistry is one of the very few authors who have written about the Parsis; a small but prominent sect of people with their own culture and tradition. This book exemplifies that form of writing. The Crow Eaters is an extraordinary tale of very ordinary people. It has a fast moving and engaging story full of humour and life. Sidhwa has a magical tendency of writing fiction and creating very emphatic characters. (105)
Though *The Crow Eaters* is a loosely constructed narrative, it certainly enables the reader to peep into the world of the crow-eaters.