

**CULTURAL QUAGMIRE AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN  
THE NOVELS OF BAPSI SIDHWA**

**DHANUSHA DESAI**  
VIVA COLLEGE,  
MUMBAI, INDIA

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**Abstract**

*Culture is an essence of society and has influenced people in all times and all places. History is evident that culture has played an enormous role in the development of people, nations and societies. Every nation or community has a distinct culture and often within it there are divergent cultural groups. Though cultural diversity adds colour and variety to the human world, it also divides people into numerous groups, causing estrangement in human relationships. BapsiSidhwa in all her novels has taken up the issue of the cultural difference and the resulting identity crisis. Sidhwa is widely recognized as one of the most prominent writers from South Asia. She is a Parsi, born and brought up in Pakistan and now migrated to America. The writer skillfully links gender to community, nationality, religion, and class, and demonstrates that these aspects of cultural identity and social structure do not merely affect or reflect one another, but also gets intertwined resulting into the quagmire of cultural differences and identity crisis. This paper endeavours to analyse cultural differences and identity crisis as a theme in the novels of BapsiSidhwa. All her four novels—The Crow Eaters (1978), The Pakistani Bride (1981), Ice-Candy-Man (1988) and An American Brat (1993)—presents Sidhwa's unique perceptions of life of Parsis as an ethnic minority, residing either in Pakistan or in India, and their sense of insecurity.*

**Key Words:** *BapsiSidhwa, Parsi ethos, Cultural difference, Expatriate experience, Identity crisis, Community clashes and insecurity, Victimization..*

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## CULTURAL QUAGMIRE AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE NOVELS OF BAPSI SIDHWA

-DHANUSHA DESAI

Culture is an essence of society. It has influenced people in all times and all places. History is evident that culture has played an enormous role in the development of people, nations and societies. In every society culture plays a pivotal role in moulding and shaping the lives and thoughts of people through its ideals. People have always shown loyalty to given ideals and patterns of behaviour provided by the motivating force known as culture. Culture can be considered as an important source of basic education in society.

The word culture is commonly used for a number of different things. For some it refers to analyse people's habits and their languages, for some others it is an appreciation of good literature, music, art and food. For anthropologists, culture refers to human behavioural patterns and perceptions. Thus every nation or community has a distinct culture and often within it there are divergent cultural groups. Though cultural diversity adds colour and variety to the human world, it also divides people into numerous groups, causing estrangement in human relationships. Bapsi Sidhwa in all her novels has taken up the issue of the cultural difference and the resulting identity crisis.

Bapsi Sidhwa is widely recognized as one of the most prominent writers from South Asia. She is a Parsi, born and brought up in Pakistan and now migrated to America. She proudly calls herself as Pakistani-Parsi-American. Sidhwa skillfully links gender to community, nationality, religion, and class, and demonstrates that these aspects of cultural identity and social structure do not merely affect or reflect one another, but also gets intertwined resulting into the quagmire of cultural differences and identity crisis. This paper endeavours to analyse cultural differences and identity crisis as a theme in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa. All her four novels—*The Crow Eaters* (1978), *The Pakistani*

*Bride* (1981), *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) and *An American Brat* (1993)—presents Sidhwa's unique perceptions of life of Parsis as an ethnic minority, residing either in Pakistan or in India, and their sense of insecurity.

The writers like Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, Firdaus Kanga, Boman Desai, Farrukh Dhondy, and Ardashir Vakil have steeped in the Parsi myths and legends. These writers use English as an instrument of the self-assertion and in asserting themselves they re-define the identity of the Zoroastrian community. At the same time, they are also confronts the persisting issues of a minuscule community such as mixed marriage and demographic decline.

The writer in her novels shows different facets of cultural difference and identity crisis. One such facet is that she depicts cultural difference as victimizing the people. Cultural victimization creates problems for the characters. In *The Crow Eaters*, for instance, Faredoon, the protagonist also called as Freddy, gets angry when he comes to know that his son Yazdi wants to marry Rosy Watson, an Anglo-Indian girl. He objects to his son's inter-community marriage and says that Parsis are not allowed to marry outside their community and emphasizes the need for preserving the ethnic purity. Freddy argues that the children born to people who marry outside the community will be misfits. Thus, the relationship between Yazdi and Rosy is crushed by the racial and cultural differences.

Parsis who marry outside the community forgo all the privileges enjoyed by other Parsis. This issue of mixed marriage is also taken up by Sidhwa in her novel *An American Brat*. Feroza, the protagonist, falls in love with David Press, an American Jew. Her parents are shocked to know this and Feroza's mother, Zareen, tries to discourage her daughter from doing this. She tells her that conversion is not allowed in Parsi community and that if a Parsi girl marries outside the faith is expelled from the Zoroastrian religious community. She can no longer practice her religion and will no longer be considered a Parsi. However, the same law does not apply to Parsi men. Contemplating on this, Zareen starts realizing the cruel restrictions put down on women. She modifies her stand on mixed marriage and conversion to Zoroastrian faith. She begins to

question the rigid code which prevails in Zoroastrianism, 'How could a religion whose Prophet urged his followers to spread the Truth of his message in the holy *Gathas*—the songs of Zarathustra—prohibit conversion and throw her daughter out of the faith?' (274). And yet Zareen feels that Feroza's marriage to a non-Parsi would be nothing less than a cultural suicide. Zareen's emphasis on the difference between the Zoroastrian and Jewish cultures frightens David away from Feroza. Thus culture difference brings an end to the relationship of Feroza and David.

In the novel *Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa depicts how inter-community marriage between the Hindu Ayah and her Muslim admirer, Ice-Candy-Man, becomes a victim of the communal passions of partition. Initially the Ice-Candy-Man is a part of the frantic mob which kidnaps Ayah and keeps her in the brothels of Hira Mandi. Later he falls in love with her. He repents and attempts to make amends. He forcibly marries Ayah, changes her name to Mumtaz, and recites love poetry to her. But love is shown as powerless when compared with cultural influence. Ayah has revulsion for her newly acquired Muslim identity. With the help of the girl-child narrator, Lenny's Godmother, she is taken to a Recovered Women's Camp and then sent to her family in Amritsar. The Ice-Candy-Man now a 'deflated poet, a collapsed pedlar' (Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy-* 265) follows her to Amritsar in vain. Their relationship ends forever. Thus it is the cultural difference that makes Ayah break up with Ice-Candy-Man though he has married her and now loves her truly.

It is the cultural difference that makes Jerbanoo, in *The Crow Eaters*, feel very awkward, first in the house of Charles P. Allen, her son-in-law Freddy's bosom friend, and then at a hotel in England. Before leaving for England she and her daughter Putli have wonderful fantasies about the land of their rulers: 'To them England was a land of crowns and thrones; of tall, splendidly attired, cool-eyed noblemen and imposing, fair-haired ladies gliding past in gleaming carriages; of elegant lords in tall hats and tails, strolling with languid ladies who swept spotless waterfront promenades with trailing gowns...' (Sidhwa, 252). But the moment they landed in London, their disillusion started evading off. "They saw grubby Englishmen, in ill-fitted woolen garments, scurry past

with faces that betokened a concern with the ordinary aspects of life' (*ibid* 253). And the expression on the faces of Londoners was no different from that stamped on the faces of a cross-section of India. 'Where were the kings and queens, the lords and ladies and their gleaming carriages? Where were the men and women with haughty, compelling eyes and arrogant men?' (*ibid*253).

The sight of their host, Mr. Charles P. Allen, scrubbing out his toilet bowl is the final blow. Jerbanoo cannot believe herself when she sees that Mrs. Allen is an overworked housewife without any servants. Due to her outlandish behaviour Freddy has to leave Charles house and move into a hotel in Oxford Street. Jerbanoo enjoys roaming around the place alone and her fat figure wrapped in a sari attracts a lot of attention. The rooms in their hotel do not have attached baths. There is one bathroom at the end of their corridor and three tiny lavatories. In the lavatories there are no taps and no water, only flush bowls and toilet paper. Every time Jerbanoo goes to wash herself, she carries water in the brass jar she has brought with her from India. Freddy feels embarrassed to see his mother-in-law with this old-fashioned water container and forbids her its use. Jerbanoo finds out a way. The moment Freddy and Putli leave the hotel, she rushes to the lavatory with her jar. Because of such behaviour they have to face lot of indictment by the people in the hotel. It is the feeling of isolation in an alien culture that gets revealed by Jerbanoo'sbehaviour.

Whereas Jerbanoo feels isolated in an alien land, Qasim in *The Pakistani Bride* finds himself an odd man out in his own country. He is a Kohistani tribal living on the mountain. After the untimely death of his wife and children caused by a smallpox epidemic, he leaves his mountain village and goes to Jullundur where his cousin finds him a job as a watchman. Qasim wonders at every common object in Jullundur, right from torches, safety-pins, electric-lights, to cinemas and cars, they all seem magical to him. The sight of women walking with brisk buttocks and bare midriffs is a new experience to him. A meal of spicy curries and vegetables sets in contrast to his daily mountain diet of flat maize bread soaked in water. He finds a striking contrast between his

native place and Jullundur as regards their basic values:

The men of the plains appeared strangely effeminate. Women roamed the streets in brazen proximity. These people were soft, their lives easy. Where he came from, men—as in the Stone Age—walked thirty days over the lonely, almost trackless mountains to secure salt for their tribes (21).

How much ever Qasim tries to adjust himself to the mode of life in Jullundur, he still remains an outsider, especially for the people in the bank where he works. Qasim uses the bank toilet very rarely but whenever he uses it, he leaves it clogged with stones and scraps of smooth-surfaced glass. It causes much inconvenience to the employees visiting the lavatory later. One day he is caught red-handed by Girdharilal, the clerk. When he asks him if he threw the stones there, Qasim merely smiles as he doesn't follow his words. When someone explains the charge to him, he admits the facts but still smiles not realizing the gravity of what he has done. Like everyone staying on hills, he dies not wash his bottoms. This incident brings bitterness between him and Girdharilal.

Although Qasim lives in cities far away from his village on the mountain for a pretty long time, he still feels nostalgic for his native world of wilderness. In order to re-establish the lost link with his homeland, he marries Zaitoon, his adopted daughter, to one of his kinsmen in the mountains. But Zaitoon, having lived first sixteen years of her life in cities like Ludhiana and Lahore, is little suited for the harsh life in the hills. Her husband beats her brutally on the slightest pretext. At the end of two months, she rebels and runs away from her husband. Thus once again a relationship is estranged due to cultural difference.

Bapsi Sidhwa also depicts the feeling of insecurity arising out of cultural differences. Almost all the protagonists and major characters in her novels are on a quest to attain security.

*The Crow Eaters*, set in pre-independence India, exemplifies the accomplishment of a tiny community, which has survived migration, resettled

peacefully and prospered without losing its cultural identity. The narrative of the novel begins with an extended flash-back. Faredoon Junglewalla, the dying businessman and protagonist, tells the story of his early years to a captive audience consisting of his seven children and some neighbouring kids, how he became rich and how he rose to power and eminence in the community. While narrating the story, he exposes one of the facets of Parsi community, that is, loyalty to the rulers. Like other Parsis, Faredoon was also the blind supporter of the British Empire for their vested interests. His identification with the British Raj is strong and he represents the majority of pre-Independence Parsis. The dying Freddy's advise to his offsprings to remain loyal to the British Empire shows the sense of insecurity lurking in the Zoroastrian community.

By portraying Freddy's devotion towards Britishers, Sidhwa reveals that the Parsis' longstanding attitudes of loyalty to the British stemmed from the Zoroastrian religious belief of loyalty to a ruler and a close relationship between state and community (Sharma 35). All that the Parsis wanted from the ruling British authorities was religious autonomy and protection, and they got both. Such feelings were prevalent in the Parsi milieu and Bapsi Sidhwa aptly conveys it in *The Crow Eaters*. Freddy missed no opportunity to reveal his loyalty to the British. Soon after his arrival in Lahore, Faredoon goes to Government House and signs 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' (22). Freddy's visit emblemizes the traditional submissiveness and pragmatism of the community. As Faredoon says:

And where, if I may ask, does the sun rise? No, not in the East. For us it rises—and sets—in the Englishman's arse. They are our sovereigns! Where do you think we'd be if we did not curry favour? Next to the nawabs, rajas and princelings, we are the greatest toadies of the British Empire! These are not ugly words, mind you. They are the sweet dictates of our delicious need to exist, to live and prosper in peace. Otherwise, where would we

Parsis be? (*ibid* 12).

Hence, the exaggerated servility of Freddy, his son Billy and other Parsis towards British is revealed as an act to ensure legal security, peace and economic prosperity.

The identity crisis in changing social milieu which Bapsi Sidhwa accurately depicts in the novel was distinctively a social problem for the Parsis of the British India. Since the Parsis settled in India, they realized they could only survive as a minority by being strictly loyal to every ruling authority and avoiding tensions and conflicts between various groups and powers in the state. Parsis realized that the only way in which their community can remain undisturbed is by showing loyalty to the rulers. The only condition for their loyalty was that they were not hindered in the practice of their religion. But gradually British value systems started assimilating in the Parsi community. This resulted into clashes between the old and the new generations. Putli, for instance, tried to preserve certain Parsi customs, like walking behind her husband. However, her daughter Yasmin after marriage ignores such notions as old fashioned and vehemently protests at the servile attitude of women: 'Anyway it's stupid to walk behind your husband like an animal on a leash— Oh Mother! Hasn't Papa been able to modernise you yet?' (*The Crow Eaters* 190-191). Putli, the earlier generation Parsi, is outraged by her daughter's belief in equality in man-woman relationship. The problem of generation gap is clearly presented by this incident. Further, the new generation, like Freddy's Son Behram and his wife Taniya, adopts western attitude and drift away from the Parsi tradition. This is exemplified in the novel through changing generational attitude towards traditional Parsi costumes. Parsis maintained group identity by their dressing style. Whenever Faredoon went to the Government House for formal parties or to pay homage to the British empire, he would consciously be, 'rigged out in a starched white coatwrap that fastened with bows at the neck and waist, and crisp white pyjamas and turban' (*ibid* 21). His wife Putli, and his mother-in-law Jerbanoo never appeared in public 'without "*mathabanas*"— white kerchiefs wound around the hair to fit like skull caps. The holy thread circling their waist was austere displayed and sacred undergarments, worn

beneath short blouses, modestly aproned their sari-wrapped hips' (*ibid*23). But the next generation of Parsis, Behram and Tanya, slowly discard the traditional dress. Thus the novel aptly reveals the Parsi community on the threshold of change. But whatever the characters do, Sidhwa vividly reveals that it is out of the act of self-preservation and self-advancement of the Parsis.

In *An American Brat*, Bapsi Sidhwa exposes the expatriate's experiences and the quest for identity. Through the character of Feroza, Sidhwa depicts that when people move from one part of the world to another, the national boundaries tend to dissolve, and the sense of community takes a new dimension all together. Entering into into the field of diasporic fiction through this novel, Sidhwa exposes the problems faced by Feroza in adapting an alien culture when she migrates to America. Feroza comes face to face with an alien culture which is starkly opposite to her own culture.

Discussing the major trends in postcolonial literatures, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write, 'A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being, the concern with the development of recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place' (Ashcroft 8-9). Feroza gets disoriented and confused when she finds herself to be landed up in a country where individualism and freedom becomes a great impetus and which is very different from her rigidly reserved value systems of Lahore. The dilemma of the expatriates is rightly pointed out by Viney Kirpal, 'the compelling need in a migrant, which almost becomes a survival-strategy, is to cling to his own traditions and to mix with people of his own country' (65). Feroza, like most expatriates, keeps her ethnicity alive. This is evident in the scene where she performs the *Kusti* ritual to beg divine forgiveness to overcome her guilt of smoking. Despite her long stay in America, Feroza keeps the Zoroastrian faith alive in her heart. Her quest is not only for a true identity but also for self-development. Caught between the two diversely opposite cultures, Feroza realizes that although she feels the sense of dislocation in the new world, it is more tolerable because it is shared by thousands of expatriates like her. In the beginning of the novel we find Feroza struggling with herself and the new

society, but towards the end of the novel there is a transition in her character. She becomes more mature and firm in whatever stand she takes. Despite of a broken relationship with David due to cultural differences, Feroza decides to get married in future only with a person whom she will be able to love truly even if he is a non Parsi. She decides not to bother much about her community and its value system since she believes in caring the true essence Zoroastrian faith in her heart. She decides to settle in America and continue her life in a multicultural, multiethnic place. BapsiSidhwa's novels thus provide excellent ground for these contesting claims between identity, cultural differences and clashes, and the resulting crisis.

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