

# The Multilayered Texture of the Lives of Women in and Around the Domicile: The Crow Eaters by Bapsi Sidhwa

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## Abstract

*Bapsi Sidhwa's novel The Crow Eaters started with the central figure Faredoon Junglewalla's disclosure of his successful principle in his life and reminisces of his life's journey from the age of twenty-three. The whole work was episodic. The greater part threw the light of Faredoon's settlement in Lahore, his personal struggle with his pestering mother-in-law, who was the sole reason for his personal grievance. Sidhwa though weaved the story around Freddy and his house; she grabbed broader view of life around it. She discussed the situation in and around women's situation through both male and female characters.*

*Keywords:* Episodic, contemporary politics, culture, beliefs, physical assault, society.

## 1. Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa's first published novel *The Crow Eaters* was a complex woven plot having flash-back technique. The novel started with the central figure Faredoon Junglewalla's disclosure of his successful principle in his life and reminisces of his life's journey from the age of twenty-three. The whole work was episodic. The greater part threw the light of Faredoon's settlement in Lahore, his personal struggle with his pestering mother-in-law, who was the sole reason for his personal grievance. She made him restless and powerless by poking her nose into both the domestic hold and business domain. After attempting some tricks to get rid of his mother-in-law Jerbanoo, he found the way to restore his position as a head of the family as well as a successful businessman in Karachi. Of course, he was futile in his attempt of removing his cumbersome mother-in-law. The consecutive pieces of the narration evinced the story of each of his three male children elaborately. The novel ends with Freddy's analysis of contemporary politics in the country and his message to the kith and kin. As far as the title *The Crow Eaters* is concerned, the protagonist Freddy was very voluble towards his life and his Parsi culture, so it was apt to be called. It refers to the Parsis' trait of talking "ceaselessly at the top of their voices like an assembly of crows." (TCE, p.56)

Sidhwa's third-person omniscient mode of narration in the story helps the reader comprehend the characters thoroughly. Sidhwa's novels focus intimately on a very small number of characters and their milieu, as Jane Austen had exactly worked out in her novels.

However, Jane Austen's Sussex, Devonshire, Cleveland, Bath, Hertfordshire, Netherfield, Kent, Hansford, Northampton shire, Mansfield Park, Portsmouth, Surrey, Highbury, Hartsfield, Somerset etc brought out typical England scenario between the second half of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, and Sidhwa's Lahore, Kohiston (Pakistan-Afghanistan border region) etc represent India approximately between late 1930s and early 1970s. Both writers' mega focus was on fundamental realism. Sidhwa's domestic novel *The Crow Eaters* was like Austen's Domestic novels like *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* where she highlighted characters by giving comic touch and probing psyche. Sidhwa succeeded in showing macrocosm of Indian society through her microcosm of the Parsi family and its relation to external society. Though Sidhwa's characterization was limited, her wide range of issues such as culture, beliefs, sentiments, ideologies, domestic issues, familial bonds, gender conflict, women's liberation, human psyche, Parsee ethos etc dealt in the novel diligently. She cut the layers of human mind through her characters and gave universal appeal to her personae. In this process, she divulges the man's multi-faceted vices: egoism, hypocrisy, cunningness, tyranny, dominance, cruelty, cynicism, superstitions, greedy etc., and superior qualities: sociability, generosity, compassion, timely assistance, cooperation etc. She artistically intertwined all the above mentioned elements contextually.

Though Sidhwa made a male character, Fareedoon Junglewalla as a protagonist, her female persona had also significant place in the novel. In precise, she brought out the situation and people in authentic manner. In my observation, she showed different layers of people's traits, their behaviour and their interests.

As far as women characters were concerned, she portrayed them in different angles. She dealt their inner and external secrets of life. They were shown as life like. She gave a subtle touch of confliction and outlook. Each character stands on its own. She evinced the dual forces of their lives: strengths and weaknesses, victories and victimization, dominant and submissive, agreeable and cantankerous, resilience and rigidity, emotional and intellectual aspects etcetera. The commonality among them was exquisiteness, strong mindedness and compromise. She also depicted the woman in New Dimension: tradition in modernity, and Modernity in tradition. Though her women characters were constrained to particular roles and occupations in their lives, she showed each one in different shades. In fact, *The Crow Eaters*, in this way, handled the commensurate subject of multilayer texture of 20th century women's lives, in India at least partially.

In the novel, there were a few women characters of different generations. Some belonged to Parsi families and other belong to English and Anglo-Indian families respectively. Though the work dealt a minority ethnic group family in India or limited subject, especially the women characters in it were represented more or less the women of vast society in the subcontinent. Their feminine concerns were lucid along with their day-to-day domestic affairs and other matters. When we consider the point, how a small community or religious group reflected the vast, we should not ignore the assertion of the following scholarly study Katherine's study on Religion and Women: "Society has shaped religion much more than religion has shaped society. As soon as religion adapts to its social environment, its critical or countercultural impact is weekend. Gradually it loses any ability it may have had to transform society; and ultimately, it becomes a mirror for the culture, which has overpowered it."

In the text itself, there were many clues to support this very idea: Parsis use of nothing their infants' birth time exactly without missing even a second in order to get the horoscope accurately by Hindu scholars. Though the Parsis were the cultural hybrids, they never allowed mixed marriages as Hindu and the Muslim do. Of course, until today, they tried to keep promise, which had given to Prince Yadav Rana. Freddy allowed the masses to see his son's face. Such an act actually prohibited by their community. Freddy's inclination to believe in stars and magical charms of Saints and mystics as the Hindus in India was also one of the examples of society's impact on man. Putli's daily chores started as a typical Hindu woman: "She rose at the crack of dawn and dutifully filled the house with song. She sang with a determined cheerfulness, inviting the spirits of prosperity and good health to her household. Then she sat about adorning the landings with patterns of fish and entrance doors with garlands of fresh flowers – omens of good fortune" (TCE, 123). Freddy's consultation with a Hindu priest named Gopal Krishan in matters of the style and methods of design and construction of buildings was also an example of it. When Tanya gave birth to a girl, everyone in the family initially felt disappointed. Later they accepted it and felt it was a sign that Lakshmi, the Hindu Goddess of wealth came to bless them. Behram and Tanya were blessed with a baby boy in second time. Their family believed that it was Soli. In this way, they adopted the faith of the Hindus in rebirth. As in Parsi faith, there was no signs of reincarnation. Hence the Parsi family had a tremendous influence of Indian culture and tradition.

Though the Parsi women were freer than other religious women in India or they were not as much constrained as the other religious women in India, they were too had restrictions. The limitations emerged due to primarily males' attitude and secondly societal influence.

Sidhwa's Freddy and Billy were the paragons of patriarchs. They trained the "hosehold to the extent that they seek only the master's well-being and approbation is no mean achievement." (TCE, p.277) The former one was controlled his wife with three maxims and the later with infinite commandments regarding maintaining frugality, respect, tranquility etc. Freddy's sense of insecurity for losing control over the family led him to cultivate enmity towards Jerbanoo who was his one and only prime rival in this aspect. He was very kind of his wife and loved her– perhaps she was submissive. Both Freddy and Billy's attitude towards children were very similar. They tyrannized their homes through their life partners. The women were assigned their children to be well-brought up: "The children were conditioned to obedience; more out of love and an ingrained sense of respect peculiar to their training than to any authoritative endeavour on Freddy's part. The children sometimes defied their mother but never their father." (TCE, p.125.) In Billy's case, the list of his commandments spoke this aspect as: "Thou shalt bring up thy children to obey and to love me more than they do you." (TCE, p.278)

As far as societal and cultural factors influence on men's treatment towards women, Billy was a fine example. When Billy and Tanya were at the reception room in a suite to pay their bills, the counter clerk dreamily looked at her healthy bosom. It irritated Billy very much. After asking him to do the corrections in the bill, Billy warned him severely. He also ordered Tanya to button up her cardigan properly. His thoughts went to restrict her in a way, the Muslims hiding their wives beauty in the veils: "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

Mohammedian and could cover her up in a burqa. Sensible people, the Muslims, he thought” (TCE, 240) In another instance, the couple inclined to modernization and cosmopolitan social gatherings. He found that men in the parties is ogled Tanya unabashedly. They tried to grab her attention by standing on her side when she was in contradiction with her husband and cajoling her until Billy’s intervention. Therefore, he insisted her to not to look into their eyes.

Of course, there were men like Yazdi, who was Sidhwa’s portrayal of humanity. He was an embodiment of sensitivity and compassion. Unlike his father and younger brother, Yazdi was not practical, materialistic and religious. He sympathised with Rosy Watson’s miserable life and decided to marry her for rescuing her from her hellish home and unsympathetic family members. He did not see the things as Freddy saw. For instance, her poignant story “Not only her stepmother, but even her father thrashed her. They had confined her to her room without food or water, strapped to her bed. They had allowed all sorts of men into the room” (TCE, 126) – filled Yazdi’s heart with Pity and comprehended her as victim of cruel parents. To him, her physical assault by man was an act of humiliation and the chastity had a least significance. However, Freddy perceived the chastisement as drifting to prostitution. Therefore, he tried to convince Yazdi by saying that it was not really love, but his sympathy on her problems manipulated him that he was in love with her.

Sidhwa brilliantly showed contrasting human figures at one platform, just like human situation in the real world. In fact, she illustrated conflict between tenderness and ruthlessness, spirituality and materialism, truth and hypocrisy, civilised and uncivilised, physicality and emotionality, etcetera. Through her male characters in the novel, she showed men of different ideologies under same roof as in the vast society had. According to her, society had men of both good and bad. She also emphasised society’s impact on men. As India predominated with patriarchal existence, men accustomed to practice it. Of course, if you men were exception to this category. Sidhwa’s Yazdi was one such.

Sidhwa insinuated the reason for women's acceptance of the tradition: keeping the family’s wellbeing in mind, they tried to accept their men’s dominance. They also sought for adjustments and compromise because they loved their men so much or they liked their men’s financial status or respectable status in the society or they might find both the reasons, though they were deprived of exercising such choices. Sidhwa showed this trait among three consecutive generations variedly.

Soonamai belonged to older generation. Soonamai believed that it was the responsibility of the womenfolk to keep the state of affairs in the home peacefully. She believed that the men were tired and vexed after a hard day's work. She felt her concern and care towards him was no matter really in comparison with the whole day's toil. She asserted Jerbanoo that not only her son-in-law’s good nature, but also her efforts to please him made their relations cordial. She also advised to be tactful in pleasing her son-in-law by showing special difference and considering him before her daughter and herself in everything. To Jerbanoo’s question, “You want me to dance to the tune of that infernal toad?” She replied positively. “Well, why not. If it keeps everyone happy” (TCE, 73).

Putli and Rodabai were the next generation women. They loved to cherish themselves in traditional nook. Through their roles, the signs of modernity were obvious. They did not make themselves indolent in riches as both of their husbands had earned much. They preferred to work for their husbands and their children by themselves. Unlike traditional

stereotypic models, these women were more pragmatic and inclined to problem solving and relations preserving in family atmosphere. Through Putli, Sidhwa threw flash on this aspect. The following were some of the incidents support the discussion:

Freddy believed his mother-in-law was the reason for his ill luck and deteriorated condition. Therefore, he consulted the mystic for turning his bad luck into good luck and getting rid of her. He advised him to get a coil of her hair to cast a spell on her. Though he took precautions, his attempt was failed. She got off from the sleep and started quacking for his misdeed. Though Putli suspected her husband's hand in it, she pretended to agree with him. She tried to set the situation by intervening and taking measures to instill peace among the people of the household: "For her husband's welfare, Putli prudently took the domestic reins into her hands. She put an end to Jerbanoo's extravagant gossip session and firmly controlled her ransacking of the store (TCE, 41).

Though Putli suspected Freddy's sudden concern over her mother's health issues as vindictive one, she convinced later by his smart explanation that the wine help her as tonic and forget the thought of missing her relatives. She was happy with the change in her husband. Therefore, she even asked her mother to give him chance.

When she found her husband's harsh treatment towards Yazdi, she was upset much. However, she did not go for immediate remedies or give haste sort of advice. As usual when she talked about the domestic matters, she suggested him, "You did quite right to strike Yazdi - but that won't show him the right path. It might be better if you sat down with him and talked things over" (TCE, 125).

In case of Billy's marriage to her intervention went right. Putli, Jerbanno and Billy went to see the bride, Roshan of Sir Easymoneys' daughter. There he fell in love with another girl named Tanya. She was futile in her attempts of changing his mind. She was so reasonable to argue that such a modern and beautiful girl could not agree with the marriage proposal as he was in no matter equal to her for Mr Minoos Toddywalla's advice in trying. However, she tried to convince bride's mother in fear of hisson's insanity with heavy heart. Rodabai agreed to give Tanya on her request.

Putli revolted when her feelings were disturbed or hurt. She raised her voice to evince her concerned status and roles. She felt it was a safe cocoon to nurture her inner desires and keep her family get-togethers because she felt those parties were "hypocritical and pretentious, and most barbarous" y with peaceful atmosphere. The following incidents were illustrations for her revolt: Putli hated (TCE, 188). She could not accept herself preceding or walking ahead of her husband. Though she agreed to go along with him twice for the sake of her husband, she stopped to participate for in safe keeping her self-respect. She did not like the ways under the mask of modernizing:

When Freddy asked her shouting mother to voice down and speak like human but not like donkey's, it irritated Putli and then she challenged him: "How dare you call my mother a donkey. How dare you! I would like to see anyone try and stop her from speaking in this house!" (TCE, 30).

In another instance, she defended Jerbanoo from Freddy for accusing to eat gluttonously and spent the store lavishly: "Mind the Demon of Wrath" (TCE, 25) and "'Oh, come now, you don't grudge her a little social life of her own, do you?'... What if she takes a little something now and then to entertain her friends? After all, don't forget, we have uprooted her...' (and)....She is just puffed up with sorrow' "(TCE, 27). Though Putli was aware of everything, sometimes she supported her mother and some other times her husband to bring the situation in her hold. Sidhwa portrayed Putli's persona more independent. Her practicing tradition never limited her to tradition. Her fantastic traits placed her in a thrown of modernity. In fact, she was a modern woman as she asserted her identity in almost every sphere of her life.

Tanya belonged to modern generation. Through her character, Sidhwa showed the signs of tradition in modern brought up woman. She was cheerful and enthusiastic. She made Billy to get rid of his inferiority complexity in her presence. Her beauty as well as her awesome traits attracted his attention. In fact, she inspired him to use his spontaneous wit and articulacy. However, her individuality was every time dominated by him: their marriage, her way of clothing, her behaviour towards others, and her way of spending money etc. Though there were a few attempts of protest initially, she gave up all at last. She proved herself a loyal and obedient wife. She managed the household frugally. She gave in her husband's tyrannies and stringiness. She habituated herself to follow his wishes. The reason behind her compromise with him due to the satisfaction she derived from him physically, financially and emotionally.

Sidhwa showed the women and their lives in domestic domain in this novel. According to me (after investigating the text exhaustively), she reasoned the women's restricted life was due to not only the outlook of society or its men but also self-made. However, men's domination was only apparent in some crucial matters where the women's presence was completely absent. For example, there was no sign of women's enjoyment in dealing financial matters or involvement in giving opinions or participating in politics and in other external affairs. Men made women to bind in domestic matters. They took their advice and consulted in domestic sphere and managing their sons and daughters because their women showed more excellence in such matters than they could.

Men's frequenting brothals in the novel showed that their quest for entertainment on women's flesh was quite common scene. The woman who was deprived of proper familial environment treated under the most unfavourable winds. She was hapless. She had no choice to give up the profession, very harsh manner. Rosy Watson's poignant tale was one such. She was one of the Sidhwa's characters which she hated. Her youth was dilapidated under men's sensuality and sexuality. She was destined to be a promiscuous figure on the result of her parents' cruelty. She was a loser too because the father of her lover objected their marriage primarily for she did not belong to their faith. Moreover, he (Freddy) humiliated her at Hira Mandi. She submitted herself completely with her usual impassive apathy. Her last hope was shattered as she was distanced from her humanitarian beloved, Yazdi. At this point of story, Sidhwa made the readers too peep into the wretched lives of women in brothels. There the commerce went on women's flesh and their beautiful skin(prostitution). Neither their feelings nor their cravings were considered. The women in this profession were usually mechanical

and impassive. At large extent, women were forced to adopt this profession. There were many factors, which threw the women in this hapless condition: destitution, unhealthy parenthood, abduction etc. In order to attract the attention of the customers, the women wore synthetic smiles on their lips and filled their affronts. They behaved as if they were meant to satiate men's lust. Hira Mandi was such place in body movements with sensuality. They tried to behave that they were least affected with customers' Lahore. Watson was making the way to her colleague when the Prince pushed her back by saying it was not she but he needed another woman to have.

## 2. Conclusion

Hence, Sidhwa though weaved the story around Freddy and his house; she grabbed broader view of life around it. She discussed the situation in and around women's situation through both male and female characters.

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