UNIT 4 PARSI IDENTITY IN *ICE-CANDY-MAN*

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are two-fold (a) to give a socio-political background of the Parsi paradox and the way it is represented in two of Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels, *The Crow Eaters* and *Ice-Candy-Man*. The comparison is essential as what transpires in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* is like a sequel to the earlier novel; (b) to provide a background of the Parsi ethos and the changing shape of the identity of this hybrid community during the communal riots of Partition. Taken together they convey the Parsi identity in this novel very aptly. It also shows Sidhwa’s remarkable ability to parody some of the pretensions and attitudes of her own community. The illustrations from the text are taken from several chapters to provide a comprehensive view.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

4.1.1 The Parsi Paradox and the British Raj

The *London Times* of July 1905 made a pertinent remark about the Parsi community under the British Raj. It said, “whether from necessity or inclination, the Parsi of the twentieth century is almost a foreigner to the great mass of the Indian population as was his predecessor of the eighth century.” The British regarded the Parsis as ‘elite’. Sir J.R. Carnac, the English Governor of Bombay said on 11 August 1877: “Then, gentlemen Parsis, I would ask you to remember that you have what is called the very bluest blood in Asia.” Thus the conscious anglicisation of the Parsis and their alienation from other Indian communities are major paradoxes which stem from certain historical factors.

The process of assimilation started in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Surat was the most important seaport on the west coast of India and a major trade centre for both the Moghul and European trading companies. Unimpeded by religious taboos or a dominant clergy, the early Parsis showed a lot of flexibility and developed commercial relationships with the foreigners. They were employed as chief brokers
in Portuguese, French, Dutch and English factories and soon became indispensable because of their knowledge of local customs and language and their adaptability in learning the language and manners of the foreigners. After the Portuguese relinquished Bombay to the British in 1661, Surat within a few decades lost its importance as a major trade centre. The British encouraged the early Parsi settlers and gave them land on Malabar Hill for the establishment of the first *Dokhna* or The Tower of Silence which is the place where the Parsis dispose their dead bodies. In India, they are located in Mumbai, Chennai, Ahmedabad and Calcutta. In other Indian cities Parsis bury their dead bodies. (see Appendix A). These early business contacts led to the growing understanding between the Parsis and the British. Parsi historians like Khusrau Edalji Ghamat stated, “The prosperity of the Parsis dated from the advent of the British rule in India.” Thus throughout the nineteenth century, the Parsis identified themselves with the colonial power. This attitude was particularly evident during insurgency, when they were gaining lost territory and gathering information about enemy movements. (This reference is related to the 1857 War of Independence or the Sepoy Revolt, during which most of the Parsis supported the British). The British also cleverly raised the Parsi citizens to the rank of nobility which not only gave them prestige within their own community but also obligated them to the Crown. There were three Parsi baronets, and sixty-three Parsis were knighted till 1946.

Unhindered by religious opposition, academic education of girls and widespread emancipation of women spread by the middle of the nineteenth century. The trend of higher education for Parsi women started in 1842. That year Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy had his daughters educated in strictest secrecy to avoid criticism by the community on this “revolutionary innovation”. Again during the same year, Meheribai Hormusjee Shroff let her daughter Dosebai attend an English private school. This created a great scandal amongst the conservative section of the Parsis, some of whom sent threatening letters and resolved to excommunicate the family. However such threats soon subsided and by 1870, over 1,000 Parsi girls had received the benefits of secondary education. Tradition was fully breached when around the middle of the nineteenth century, a group of young Parsi reformers, assembled at the Elphinstone College (Bombay) and decided to set up Parsi schools to assist education and reforms in the community. In 1863 the Alexandra Native Girls Education Institute was founded by Maneckjee Cursetjee. Several other Parsi schools were then founded. Although Gujarati was the medium of instruction, English was added as a second language. Soon English overtook Gujarati as the educational and cultural language of the Parsis. Education led to the quick acceptance of English standards in daily life. Clothes as well as eating habits changed. Homes were furnished with English furniture, pianos, violins and amongst the rich, crystal chandeliers. The intensive use of the English language, study of English literature and the enthusiasm for sports and drama all became part of the Parsi ethos between 1880 and 1920. With the advent of the Congress and the growth of the Indian National Movement, there was an apprehension amongst the Parsis that as a minority community they would become unimportant once India gained independence. These lurking fears, identity crises and the paradox of whether to remain loyal to the British Raj or be pragmatic and side with the Freedom Movement are aptly delineated by Bapsi Sidhwa in her novels, *The Crow Eaters* and *Ice-Candy-Man*. In both these novels the author uses irony, parody and at times witty conversation to create occasional humorous effects.

### 4.2 IDENTIY CRISES IN *THE CROW EATERS*

A striking manifestation of the identity crises which I mentioned in the previous section is evident in Bapsi Sidhwa’s first published novel *The Crow Eaters* (1978). The protagonist who is the head of the family, the idiosyncratic Faredoon Junglewalla protests vehemently against the nationalist movement. He exhorts his off-spring to
remain loyal to the British Empire. Dadabhai Naoroji one of the founders of the Indian National Congress and a prominent leader in the Freedom Movement is referred to as “that misguided from Bombay” who started “something called Congress and keeps shooting off his mouth like a lunatic, ‘Quit India! Quit India!’”

Fifty years after Independence such views may appear shocking but they were representative of many middle-class Parsis in the 1920s and 1930s, especially the business class, bankers and civil servants. So Bapsi Sidhwa is historically accurate in the way she presents the dominant views and collective traditions of her community during the last decades of the British Raj. The gruff caricature and paranoid sentiments of Faredoon Junglewalla are a clever ploy by the author which enables her to parody the lurking fears of the Parsi community. She shows that except for a fringe minority, drawn into the vortex of the Nationalist Movement, the majority of the Parsi community shared the views expressed by a dying Faredoon Junglewalla on the freedom struggle.

He (Dadabhai Naoroji) utters ideas. People like Gandhi pick them up...people like Vallabhai Patel and Bose and Jinnah and Nehru...and that other fool in Karachi, Adil Mama. What does he do? He sacrifices his business and abandons his family to the vicissitudes of poverty. He wears a Gandhi cap, handloom shirt and the transparent diaper they call a dhoti. He goes in and out of jail as if he were visiting a nautch girl at the Hira Mandi. Where will it get him?...Nowhere!....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! (The Crow Eaters p.282).

The apprehensions of Faredoon Junglewalla are not the figment of a dying man’s frenzied imagination but based on social reality. There were three anti-Parsi riots in Bombay and other cities on the west coast in 1851, 1874 and 1921. On the last occasion, Gandhi had called for a boycott of the visit of the Prince of Wales to India. Many Parsis resisted this boycott which sparked off a violent riot (there were fifteen reported deaths.) Such incidents led to anti-Parsi feelings, which were often experienced by this minority community in their daily lives. So fears of local harassment and memories of the previous violent incidents became an integral part of the Parsi milieu and increased their loyalty to the British. However displaying characteristic adaptability, Faredoon Junglewalla makes a perceptive remark about the necessity of changing allegiances as Independence became inevitable. In reply to his son-in-law Bobby Katrak, the ageing Faredoon makes a prophetic reply:

We will stay where we are...Let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever rule. What does it matter. The sun will continue to rise — and to set—in their arses. (The Crow Eaters p.283)

Such witty caricature and genial satire both shocks and offends Parsi sensibilities in the sub-continent but they are the hallmarks of Bapsi Sidhwa’s style of writing. It is an expression of minority discourse and an exposure of the attitudes and paradoxes of this miniscule community.

I have dwelt at length on Faredoon Junglewalla’s fears about Independence in The Crow Eaters because it is a socio-political theme that has fascinated Bapsi Sidhwa. A similar kind of paranoia, the same paradoxes and dilemmas are repeated in Ice-Candy-Man. In the earlier novel, that Parsi paradox about Independence is presented through the ravings and prophecies of an individual. In Ice-Candy-Man, the similar dilemma is presented in the form of an acrimonious debate amongst different members of the community. The urgency is now greater as both Independence and Partition are inevitable and round the corner. So we see a thread of continuity and a recurring political theme in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, which provide a historicist
reading of the text. It represents a movement of the times from the late twenties and early thirties to the mid-forties. The fears expressed by the Parsi community in this debate also reflect the minority community's apprehensions of being swamped by the majority community and its culture. Hence the problem of the Parsi identity crises. Now I would like to examine the various reactions of numerous Parsi characters in *Ice-Candy-Man* about the crucial issue of whether to extend support to “Swaraj” or not.

### 4.3 THE DEBATE AT WARRIS ROAD

The Parsis have always considered themselves as superior, hybrid, westernised and idolised by the British. These prevailing folk traditions are on the verge of getting shattered due to the impending political change. Thus a central Parsi consciousness is carefully examined and delineated in the debate at the fire temple hall at Warris Road. This exuberant, brainstorming session enables Sidhwa to provide some perceptive insights into the marginalised personality traits of the community. She also shows how many Parsis are cultural hybrids, living and sharing intimately in the cultural life, languages, traditions, moral codes and political loyalties of two distinct peoples, which never completely interpenetrated and fused. So Sidhwa uses this political debate to present a sociological critique of her own community.

The Parsi paradox of whether to support “Swaraj” or to maintain their loyalty to the British Raj is humorously delineated. A piquant touch is given to this dilemma. With the impending news of Independence, the paranoid feelings of the Parsis, a miniscule minority get accentuated. The Parsis in Lahore at a special meeting at their temple hall at Warris Road, have an acrimonious debate on the political situation. The meeting expresses the insecurity of the Parsis not because of communal antagonism, but the apprehension of their status at the departure of the British. Already the unstinted loyalty to the British is declining. Colonel Bharucha and Lenny’s father blame the British for bringing polio to India. So at the meeting, India’s smallest minority are trying to redefine their strategy which Colonel Bharucha claims as “We must hunt with the hounds and run with the hare”. (*Ice-Candy-Man* p.16)

The ambivalent attitude of the Parsis towards Partition and Independence emerges when Colonel Bharucha, the president of the community in Lahore advocates status quo. He urges fellow Parsis to shun the anti-colonial movement and the nationalist agitation spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi. His reasoning is based on expediency. If there is ‘Home Rule’, political glory, fame and fortune will be acquired by the two major communities, Hindus and Muslim. He considers Home Rule as a power struggle, saying “No doubt the men in jail are opportunists....They know they will acquire instant martyrdom and political glory ....But this short cut to fame and fortune is not for us. It is no longer just a struggle for Home Rule. It is turning into a struggle for power. Who's going to rule once we get Swaraj?” (*Ice-Candy-Man* p.36). He also advocates caution, because of the Parsis long standing attitudes of loyalty to the British. This attitude stemmed from the Zoroastrian religious belief of loyalty to a ruler and a close relationship between state and community. The other cause for loyalty to the British was purely economic. The Parsis primarily traced their secured status as a prosperous minority to British rule, identified as the “good government” of the Afringan prayer. So loyalty was a self-evident precept. Thus Colonel Bharucha does not want any Parsi of Lahore to offend British sensibilities by espousing nationalist causes. In a tone of admonition he says, “I hope no Lahore Parsi will be stupid enough to court trouble— I strongly advise all of you to stay at home—and out of trouble”. (*Ice-Candy-Man* p.37)
4.3.1 Responses to Partition

In her first novel *The Crow Eaters* (1978) Bapsi Sidhwa portrayed the dying businessman Faroona Junglewalla vehemently protesting against the nationalist movement and exhorting his offspring to remain loyal to the British Empire. Colonel Bharucha in *Ice-Candy-Man* has a somewhat similar attitude. However with Independence and Partition inevitable, there is a subtle change in the attitude of the different people of Lahore. The patriarchal advice of Colonel Bharucha is opposed. Dr. Mody promptly poses a plea for involvement in the Freedom struggle. He says, “our neighbours will think we are betraying them and siding with the English” (*Ice-Candy-Man* p.37). The banker Mr. Toddywalla says that the different Parsis should support the Indian community which appears to be in a dominant position or will acquire political power after Independence. So he asks the assembled congregation to formulate attitudes and actions on Independence based on self-interest. Finally the assembled Parsis resolve to remain in Lahore and abide by the rules of the land. They agree to Colonel Bharucha’s suggestion, “Let whoever wishes rule! Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian we will abide by the rules of their land”. (*Ice-Candy-Man* p.39)

Some Parsis in the congregation express apprehensions about remaining in Lahore after Independence and wish to migrate either to London or Bombay where a majority of their co-religionists live. However such fears get overruled. The final resolution is one of adaptability and compromise. The President of the Lahore Parsis says, “As long as we conduct our lives quietly; as long as we present no threat to anybody; we will prosper right here,...” (*Ice-Candy-Man* p.40). Through this animated conversation, Bapsi Sidhwa reveals the implicit, lurking fear of the Parsis, that the vulnerable minority, will get swamped by the majority communities either Hindus in India or Muslims in Pakistan. So even amongst the Parsis in undivided India, the Partition sparked off an impulse towards migration from their homelands. Bombay was opted for, primarily due to the safety in numbers rather than the safeguards of democratic India. Historically however the movement to Bombay, as the novelist also indicates was minimal. The Parsis remain in urban areas of India and Pakistan, trying to preserve their identity by not meddling in political matters. The advice of Mr. Toddywalla is followed, “But don’t try to prosper immoderately. And remember don’t ever try to exercise real power”. (*Ice-Candy-Man* p.40)

Amidst banter, repartee and humour Bapsi Sidhwa subtly portrays the underlying fears of the Parsis about Partition and Independence. The depiction of their mental turmoil can be compared to John Master’s depiction of the plight of the Eurasians commonly called Anglo-Indians before the British left the sub-continent. In his novel, *Bhowani Junction* (1954), John Masters aptly depicts the identity crises of the Anglo-Indians. For instance the loud-mouthed and arrogant Peter Taylor talks of going ‘home’ to England (which he has never seen) and wears his solar hat all day to be recognised as an Englishman. Even the anglicised Peter Taylor has a foreboding of impending Independence. He asks Victoria in sheer frustration, “What are we going to do?” (*Bhowani Junction* p.42) Knowing that they could become neither English nor Indian, Taylor’s conclusion is “We could only stay where we were and be what we were” (*Bhowani Junction* p.21). This shows how Taylor and the Anglo-Indian community have become prisoners of circumstances. Bapsi Sidhwa shows how the Parsis are similar captives of the circumstances in the upheaval of Partition.

Adaptability being part of their social code, the Parsis of Lahore adjust to the changes after Partition. In *The Crow Eaters*, Bapsi Sidhwa had only hinted at the necessity to alter allegiance after Independence but in *Ice-Candy-Man*, the shift in attitudes is depicted. Lenny suffers from polio and the disease is considered as another example of British treachery. Later in the novel, Lenny’s mother, Mrs. Sethi works with other women to organise relief camps for the riot affected people and assists in rehabilitation of destitute women. Lenny’s Godmother rescues the Hindu ayah forcibly married to her former Muslim friend, the seller of ice-candies. The Godmother helps Ayah return to Amritsar, under police escort. There is already a
sense of involvement with the new reality as Lenny’s parents and Godmother try to bring some semblance of sanity in frenzied Lahore.

4.4 THE PARSI TRADITION

4.4.1 Nostalgia or Preserving Folk Traditions

During the colonial period, the Parsis could be divided into two distinct types, the nationalist Parsi and the Anglophile Parsi, the latter being in the majority. In her novel on Partition, Bapsi Sidhwa shows the Parsi paradox in different situations. Initially this hybrid community is uncertain whether to seek identity with the mainstream in India or Pakistan or to seek migration to the West. Unlike Jews or the Chinese, the Parsi diaspora yearns for neither a spiritual nor a familial homeland and their allegiances are to the tribe or place of settlement. So the problem of migration is treated at times with mock-seriousness and comedy in the novel.

Before I comment on Sidhwa’s presentation of the Parsis’ need to assert a distinct identity and the postcolonial concern for cultural autonomy, I would like to show that historically Parsi writers have displayed diasporic traits and highlighted identity forming problems. For instance the pre-colonial oral tradition of the Gujarati folk song—Garba—records the arrival of the first band of Parsis to India and the conditions upon which they were given refuge. The Persian text, *Kissah Sanjan* by Kaikobad Sanjana in 1600 A.D., tells the same story but in the written tradition. Both these texts valorize the glorious Persian past, the Persian empire, ancient Iranian heroes and detail the life of the prophet Zarathushtra and his monotheistic religion. Colonial Parsi writers like Behram Malbari and Cornelia Sorabji also display diasporic traits of nostalgia and loss in their poetry, fiction and autobiographical work. So Bapsi Sidhwa is part of this tradition. However there is another dimension to the works of Bapsi Sidhwa who belongs to the second generation of post-colonial Indian English writers. This period coincides with what Edward Said has called the second stage of anti-colonial resistance, “the charting of cultural territory”, or the attempt to shake off the socio-cultural domination of the erstwhile coloniser. The charting of cultural territory as pointed out by several postcolonial critics such as Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak involves a repossession of history and its politicisation. In the case of Bapsi Sidhwa the battle for cultural territory involves a demographic question. As the end of the twentieth century approaches, the Parsis are in demographic decline. Late marriages, a low birth rate, marriages outside the fold by Parsi women whose offspring are then not accepted as Parsis, and a ban on conversions has led to a rapidly declining population. It is estimated that only about 100,000 Parsis survive in the world today. So the writings of Bapsi Sidhwa and other Parsi novelists like Rohinton Mistry help to preserve a record of how the Parsis lived and they recall certain ethno-religious characteristics. As I will show in the next section, by citing some examples from the text, identity forming is a central concern for the Parsis.

4.4.2 Identity Forming

Through many incidents in the novel, Bapsi Sidhwa shows that as communal discord increases, the Parsis also become conscious of their identity. For example the verbal skirmishes between the butcher and the masseur on the one side and the government house gardener, Sher Singh and the wrestler restaurant-owner on the other, show how deep the pattern of communal discord among the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs has become. The novelist implies that such acrimonious communal relations augurs ill for the three communities as Partition looms large on the horizon.

These widening differences are filtered through the prism of the Parsi character—narrator Lenny. Her response to such communal discord is discerning as it shows
that the Parsis become aware of religious differences due to the ensuing communal turmoil. Lenny and by implication the author herself remarks:

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

By such seemingly casual but pertinent observations of the precocious child narrator, Sidhwa shows that the composite culture that had evolved in India for centuries was slowly disappearing and instead the various communities had become aware of their individual status. Even lovers change. As time passes, Lenny becomes aware of the new found religious fervour among Ayah’s admirers. The child narrator also notices how men remain huddled in groups and discuss the adverse influence of an imminent Partition. In such a surcharged atmosphere the reactions of Lenny often reflect the existing Parsi attitudes. Initially in such an atmosphere of heightened communal consciousness, the Parsis are reduced to “irrelevant nomenclatures”(Ibid, p.94). Initially the small minority community is apprehensive but treats the situation in a mocking manner. The author cleverly ridicules such differences by showing the classification of jokes. “Cousin erupts with a fresh crop of Sikh jokes. And there are Hindu, Muslim, Parsi and Christian jokes.” (Ice-Candy-Man p.95)

The communal discord is not confined to the cities but has even spread to the villages. On her second visit to the village Pir Pindo, Lenny goes along with members of Imam Din’s family to Dera Tek Singh on the occasion of Baisakhi. Imam Din’s family lives in the Muslim village of Pir Pindo. Lenny and some members of Imam Din’s family travel to check if the tension of the cities has spread and find that communal discord has extended to the rural areas. Bapsi Sidhwa in characteristic style presents the lurking tension very subtly in the sensitive observations of a young Muslim boy, Ranna. In the midst of the joyful celebration at the Baisakhi festival, Ranna senses the lingering doubt, fear and suspicion. Bapsi Sidhwa captures the feeling of alienation:

And despite the gaiety and distractions Ranna senses the chill spread by the presence of strangers; their unexpected faces harsh and cold. A Sikh youth whom Ranna has met a few times, and who has always been kind, pretends not to notice Ranna. Other men, who would normally smile at Ranna, slide their eyes past. Little by little, without his being aware of it, his smile becomes strained and his laughter strident. (Ice-Candy-Man p.106)

The apathy of Ranna’s friends is symptomatic of the tension which the arrival of the Akalis in Dera Tek Singh had generated. This lingering communal tension is not just a child’s sensitive observations but Ranna’s father Dost Mohammed also notices the surcharged feelings. The patterns of communal relations between Lenny’s first and second visit to Pir Pindo are noticeably different. During her first visit, it was apparent that communal tension had not affected the rural areas. The Sikhs and Muslim had pledged their lives to save each other from any intruders. Yet during her second visit the feelings of communal harmony had declined, mainly due to what Sidhwa presents as the influence of nationalist politics. Thus the communal harmony had been replaced by a pattern of fear and suspicion between the two communities. It is thus seen that in the pre-Partition era there is communal amity between the Hindus and Sikhs and as a group they are opposed to the Muslims. The initial section of the novel, written in almost lyrical fashion, from a child’s perspective, deals with the widening communal schisms and discord. The author shows that the worsening situation leads to a change in the attitudes of the Parsi community from passive neutrality to active involvement in humanitarian causes to aid the victims of Partition. The author does not imply any motives for this. However she hints that it could stem
from either the motive of self preservation or the Zoroastrian ethic of good deeds or
the desire to set an example of humanitarian work to benefit their friends.

4.5 ACTIVE NEUTRALITY OF THE PARSIS DURING THE COMMUNAL HOLOCAUST

In the dominant discourses on the Partition, the Parsis are hardly ever mentioned as playing a role in the historical processes and the tragic consequences of Partition. Sidhwa deliberately contradicts the received discourses by showing the silent but active role played by Lenny’s parents and her aunt Godmother in helping the victims of Partition, irrespective of their community. Lenny’s parents help in the rehabilitation of the orphaned Ranna and the destitute woman Hamida. Lenny’s mother undertakes many secret outings to smuggle rationed petrol to “help our Hindu and Sikh friends to run away” (Ice-Candy-Man p.242). Sidhwa uses these incidents to show how the Parsi community in Lahore were not indifferent to the mayhem and atrocities of Partition. She also highlights how the Parsis, affected by the chaos all around them have moved from passive neutrality to active neutrality. So this becomes another phase in the identity forming of the Parsis. It can also be seen as the author’s attempt to write an alternate history which contradicts the received histories. I would now like to describe the role of the Godmother to illustrate the active neutrality of the Parsis.

4.5.1 The Active Role of Godmother

Lenny’s Godmother (one of her aunts) whose name is Rodabai shows exemplary social commitment and ability to influence individuals and manipulate the system. The author shows how the Godmother goes out of her way to rescue Ayah, get her enrolled in the Recovered Women’s Camp and then helps her (Ayah’s real name is Shanta) to return to her relatives in Lahore. Earlier in the novel, Ayah had been kidnapped by a gang led by the Ice-candy-man. Ayah’s lover initially keeps her as a dancing girl and then marries her. She is re-named Mumtaz. Godmother reduces the Ice-candy-man to a state of complete bewilderment by her “rage and terror” (p.249) and fierce verbal attack. She calls him a “shameless badmash! Nimakharam! Faithless!” (p.248). In her cold rage she also calls him a “low-born, two-bit evil little mouse!” (p.248) and the “son of pigs and pimps” (p.249). Godmother’s righteous indignation and her reputation as a fierce and fearless woman makes the Ice-candy-man capitulate. Once Godmother is convinced that Ayah is being kept against her will she even visits the disreputable “Hira Mandi”. She speaks to Ayah and realises that the latter wants to break up her marriage and return to her family in Amritsar. It is Godmother who arranges the rescue, using her influence and contacts. The deft handling of the crisis shows the active role of the Godmother, an example of the little remembered humanitarian deeds performed by the Parsis during the troubled days of Partition.

The Godmother is not only a good samaritan but she also cajoles Ayah to recover her spirit and confidence in life. In the aftermath of the incidents, Ayah has become morose. The understanding Godmother consoles Ayah and says:

That was fated daughter. It can’t be undone. But it can be forgiven...Worse things are forgiven. Life goes on and the business of living buries the debris of our pasts. Hurt, happiness...all fade impartially...to make way for fresh joy and new sorrow. That’s the way of life. (Ice-Candy-Man p.262)

Her wisdom, kindness and understanding are reflected in these words of advice to the shattered Ayah. Sidhwa stresses that such incidents are not isolated but reflect the
overall humanitarian approach and involvement of the Parsis in moments of crisis and extreme stress.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

As we have read, the Parsi paradox stems from a long historical association with the British. Several social factors, such as absence of any religious taboos, adaptability in learning the language and manners of the foreigners and emphasis on education led to proximity with the British and subsequent prosperity. Sidhwa uses this paradox very effectively in literature. She chronicles the changing attitudes to the British, in a time period from the 1920s to the months prior to Partition in 1947. All the apprehensions of this miniscule minority get reflected in their confusion of whether to support Swaraj or not. The major fears are losing status and submersion of identity. The problem of identity for this cosmopolitan community is related to the changing political scenario, the end of the colonial era and the departure of the British. This problem is reflected humorously as is shown in the above section in two of her books The Crow Eaters and Ice-Candy-Man.

Identity forming as we have seen is a central concern for the Parsis and is historically reflected in their literature. So we see that as communal discord increased in the months prior to Partition and Independence, the Parsis also become aware of their identity. Initially it is a passive neutrality that the Parsis maintain. They try to caricature or joke about the communal discord and lack of trust among the major communities. Ultimately however the Parsis react to the complex historical process. Sidhwa shows that contrary to the views of the dominant discourses the Parsis were not indifferent or passive onlookers but acted with passion to provide humanitarian relief to the distressed.

4.7 GLOSSARY

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afringhan</td>
<td>A prayer of benediction or thanksgiving offered by the Parsis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baronet</td>
<td>A rank of nobility during the British Raj. It is a rank of honour below a baron and above a knight.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diaspora</td>
<td>The migration or scattering of a nation’s people or the movement of a community of people to another region.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hybrid</td>
<td>A person produced by the blending of two diverse cultures or traditions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Milieu</td>
<td>A word of French origin which means environment or surroundings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paradox</td>
<td>A contradiction between two equally plausible statements or positions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repartee</td>
<td>A conversation passing to and fro between people, full of sharp and witty retorts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Samaritan</td>
<td>A biblical term meaning a benefactor or helper or good person.</td>
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4.8 QUESTIONS

Q.1. Trace the socio-cultural background of the Parsi paradox.

Q.2. What is the Parsi paradox? Give an outline of how it is presented in both The Crow Eaters and Ice-Candy-Man?

Q.3. How and why did the Parsis change their attitude from passive neutrality to active neutrality during the communal holocaust?

4.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Background Material


Primary Reading


Towers of Silence

The English phrase, 'Towers of Silence', for the original Dakhma or Dokhma was coined by Robert Xavier Murphy, some time English translator to the Government of Bombay in the late nineteenth century.

As the Achaemenians held sacred the three elements of earth, fire and water, the corpse could neither be buried, burnt or immersed. Dead bodies were, therefore, exposed on mountain tops, or placed in towers specially built for this purpose. The ancient Iranians then collected the dried bones and placed them in ossuaries, or deposited them in tombs, built or cut in the rock.

The word Dakhma is used in the sense of 'a receptacle for the dead'. The Dakhma is built on high ground wherever possible. The Tower is a massive structure of solid stone, about ninety metres in circumference. Steps from the ground lead to an iron gate which opens on a circular platform of stone with a well in the centre. The platform is paved with large stone slabs divided into three rows of shallow, open receptacles. The first row is for males, the second for females, and the third for children. There are holes in the inner side of the well through which rain water is carried into four underground drains at the base of the Tower. These drains are connected with four underground wells, the bottoms of which are covered with thick layers of sand. Pieces of charcoal and sandstone are placed at the end of each drain, and the charcoal is replaced from time to time. Thus, the rain water passing over the bones is purified before entering the soil, in keeping with the ancient command that the earth shall not be polluted. (Chrishman Iran, p. 162; J.J. Modi, The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees, Bombay, 1937, pp. 65-70, 231-238).