

Delineation of Parsi Customs, Tradition and Beliefs with special reference to Bapsi Sidhwa's

The Pakistani Bride, American Brat and Ice-Candy Man

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa is a prominent English fiction writers of India, Pakistan and United States simultaneously but she likes herself to be known as a "Panjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman(Rajan). She is proud of her Zoroastrian religion. Zoroastrian is a very ancient religion. Zoroastrians used to live in Iran earlier known as Persia. The Zoroastrians fled to India after the conquest of their country by Muslim Arabs. Parsis arrived to India in 18th century when the Indian king Yadav Rana permitted them to live in India on the condition that they would not eat beef, wear rawhide sandals or convert the susceptible masses. Even after twelve centuries, Parsis have kept their promise. There are no more than hundred Parsis in the world.

Sidhwa has depicted the quintessential Parsi ethos in three of her novels- The Pakistani Bride, American Brat and Ice-Candy Man. But the first published novel the Crow Eaters presents detailed information about Parsi customs, traditions, ceremonies, beliefs, legends and other aspects of parsi life. In the novel "The Crow Eaters" the protagonist Faredoon Junglewala leaves his ancestral village and went to Lahore with his wife Putli, mother in law Jerbanoo and his daughter Hatoxi. There he gets settled in a flat atop his brand new provisional store in busy and commercially rich areas of the city. His shop picks up sale and they starts living a comfortable life. Parsis, when they rise to affluence, help not only men of their community but contribute some part of their income for the welfare of the society:

"The moment a Parsi strikes it rich, he devotes a big portion of his energies to charity, he builds schools, hospitals and orphanages; provides housing, scholarship and finance. Notorious misers, they are paradoxically generous to a cause."

Parsis respect their customs strictly. Tulsi and Jerbanoo never appeared in public without 'Matha banas', white hander wound around the hair to fit the skull caps, holy thread 'Kusti' circling their waists and sacred undergarments (sudra) beneath their short blouses. Kusti and Sudra are worn by both men and women as they are the symbol of Zoroastrian faith:

Freedom of choice is a cardinal doctrine in the teaching of Zarathustra. A child born of Zoroastrian parents is not considered a Zoroastrian until he has chosen the faith at the Navjote ceremony.

In the novel 'The Crow Eaters' Freedy does not have healthy relations with his mother in law Jerbanoo. She is a quarrelsome and gluttonous woman. She eats like horse and Freedy's business is badly affected consequently. So Freedy goes to a mystic to find any solution. The mystic asks him to procure a coil of Jerbanoo's hair. Freedy tries to cut a lock of her hair at the time of afternoon siesta

but she gets up the last moment and spoils the plan. After this incident Jerbanoo never gives Freedy a second chance as she always wore mathabana and blackens her eyes and presses two large spots of soot on her temples to protect herself from evil. Once she gives Putli a tattered bit of meat membrane, dipped in turmeric and says, "Here, protect me from evil spell!" Putli circles the membrane seven times over her mother's head and flings it out of the window to the crows. This incident shows that Parsis believe in superstitious practices prevalent in sub- continent. In the same way in 'An American Brat', Feroza's mother drags her to the kitchen near the stove and circles three jalapeno peppers over her head to protect her from her malign eye and whispers the incantations, "May the mischief of malign and envious eye leave you. May the evil in my loving eye leave you, may the magic and ill will across seven seas be banished, may Ahura Mazda' protection and blessings guard you.

Jerbanoo fears that she will die very soon so she suddenly becomes very religious and prays five times a day and each time, like temple priest lights the kitchen fire with sandal wood. The thought of death makes her worried about the disposal of her mortal remains as there is no 'dohma' or dungarwadi or as the British call it Tower of Silence:

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 hollow lead to four deep wells outside the Tower. These wells are full of lime, charcoal and sulphur and provide an excellent filter.

Jerbanoo felt relieved when Freedy promises her that he will take her body to Karachi and dispose it in the tower himself. Smoking is considered in a sin in Parsis because of the importance of fire for them. Once Jerbanoo finds a servant boy smoking biri in kitchen, she hauls at him and calls everybody to witness the crime. Sidhwa asserts the importance of fire:

Fire, chosen by the Prophet as the outward symbol of his faith, is venerated. It represents the Divine Spark in every man, a spark of the Divine light. Fire, which has its source in primordial light, symbolizes not only his cosmic creation but also the spiritual nature of His Eternal Truth. Smoking, which is tantamount to defiling the holy symbol with spit, is strictly taboo- a sacrilegious sin.... To blow upon fire is vile. Priests tending the temple fires cover their mouths with cloth masks, lest spittle pollute the Atash.

Freedy has the Bible, the Bhagavad Geeta, and the Holy Quran, the book of Jain, Sikh and Buddhist faith along with Avesta in his shelf right above his prayer table. This shows Parsi's respect for other religions also. Describing Freedy's prayer table, Sidhwa praises the Zoroastrian faith and tradition:

The table once again echoed his reverence for all faiths; a tradition dating back 2,500 years to Persian kings, Darius and Cyrus the Great, who not only encouraged religious tolerance, but having freed the Jews held captive by the Babylonians, rebuilt their temple. The Torah, written at this time, testifies to the influence of Zoroastrianism on Judaism, and the influence of the ancient religions of the Parsis on other Semitic religions can be dated to this period.

Freedy's business is not running properly so he starts approaching the prayer table more times than earlier. He takes his horoscope from one sage to another for interpretation. As Parsis have deep faith in horoscope interpretation and astrology. Freedy comes to know the devastating influence of

Saturn on his stars. Of all predictions Freedy is most taken by a gypsy who predicts about the arrival of a fortunate person in Freedy's life very soon. One day Mr. Dinshan Adenwalla, an insurance agent arrives to Lahore. He motivates all the Parsi families to get insured everything that is possible. After two months of mental pressure Freedy gets an idea of getting insured his house and shop and then setting fire in both the places. In this way he will get the money and will get rid of his mother in law also. But two days before the execution of the plan his wife Putli retired to the other because of menses. It postponed Freedy's plan for a week at least. Sidhwa describes the condition of women in menstrual period:

Every 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 her impure gaze, according to a superstition, which has its source in primitive man's fear of blood.

Putli retired into a room. The family members can talk to her though closed doors or in emergency even directly provided they bath themselves from head to foot and purify themselves. She can leave the room only to use bathroom. She is served food in a tin plate and spoon reserved for the occasion in her cubicle itself.

One afternoon when Putli and children visits to Toddywallas, Freedy gets the chance to execute his plan. Sprinkling kerosene oil he sets fire to his house and shop. Though Jerbanoo is rescued, Freedy fets a sizable amount of money from insurance company. He opens the stores in Delhi, Amritsar, and Peshawar and very soon becomes the man of consequences.

Destiny attacks on freedy's happiness when his second son Yazdi requests to marry his Anglo-Indian classmate Rosy Watson who is actually a whore and has been fucked by Freedy and Mr. Allen. Yazdi's problem has hardly ended when his eldest son Soli, aged nineteen, dies unexpectedly from a minor wound. Sidhwa gives the detailed description of Soli's funeral rites. His body is bathed and dresses in white cotton garments. Freedy wraps 'Kusti' around his son's waist. His body is taken to the fire temple as there is no Tower of Silence in Lahore. The body is laid in the two stone slabs in a room. And a corpse bearer draws three circles around it. Now nobody can enter the circle except the corpse bearer. Priest's dog is brought inside to check the living sign in the body and any evil spirit. As the dog shies away, all hopes of Putli are shattered. After all night's recitation of Avestan scriptures, at dawn the mourners start pouring in and fill up the little room. At three o'clock the pall bearers-husbands of Freedy's daughters Hutoxi and Ruby, Mr. Chaiwalla's son Cyrus and Mr. Bankwalla came into the room carrying the iron bier. After the prayers being over the mourners pass before corpse one by one to have a last look and bow before the corpse. The pall bearers drape a white sheet over the corpse, lift the body on iron bier and hoisting it to their shoulders, move out into the compound. Non-parsis are not permitted to look upon the body after the sacred rites. But Freedy says that the people stood all the while to have a look of his son's face, let them.

At the small graveyard his body is encased within four marble slabs and buried. After the four days ceremony for the welfare of the departed soul, Freedy proclaims of charity to build a school in Karachi. After Soli's death Freedy's attitude towards life is changed. He retires himself from business responsibilities and hands it over to Billy. As Billy is the last hope of the family, his marriage is planned with utmost care.the marriage id decided with the daughter of Khan Bahadur Sir Noshirwan Jeevanjee Easy money, one of the richest Parsis of Bombay.

In the “token money ceremony” Billy is made to stand on a small wooden prettily decorated platform. Traditional songs are sung while Rodabai, Tanya’s mother anoints his forehead with vermilion, touches vermilion on his shoes, presses rice grains on his forehead, gives him the envelop containing ‘token money’ with a gold chained wrist watch and tells him to step off his right leg first. Now mounts the platform and Putli presents Tanya twenty one Queen Victoria sovereign.

The wedding takes place on flower bedecked stage at Taj Mahal hotel. Tanya, in white satin richly embroidered sari and Billy in dark pagri hat and white coat and payjamas were sitting on their chairs. Two priests are standing before them, chanting and throwing rice, coconut slivers and rose petals at them. The Parsi mode of marriage shows that they are cultural hybrids as they have adopted the costumes of Hindus and Muslims both. After some time Tanya gives birth to a baby girl. After some initial disappointment, the family members console themselves by considering the baby girl as goddess Laxmi. Through this scene Sidhwa highlights the fact of people’s longing for a male child and preference over girl child. Freedy is tension free as Billy is looking after the business very well. Tanya is again in family way and this time she gives birth to a baby boy. When the boy is one year old, Freedy realizes that Soli is reborn. In this way Sidhwa shows Parsi’s belief in rebirth.

One scorching day in June, 1940, 65 year old Faredoon feels hot fever in bones and he knows his end is near but he has no fear of death as he has lived his life to the fullest. He talked to each of the children at length, injecting the lessons of his experience and reflection. He says:

It has taken me a long time to comprehend Evil- and Good- and a lifetime to catch, just a glimpse of the path of Asha, God’s grand plan for man and the Cosmos. Yes, the strength of God comes to the man of good action, and such a man is gifted, progressively with the good mind, the Vahu Mana, God’s own mind.... Thus speak Zarathustra!

One evening talking about the political trends in India, Faredoon gets stirred by the talk of rebellion, self rule and independence from the British. The atmosphere gets charged and his son-in-law Bibby Katrak asks in alarm, “But where will we go?” sinking back in pillows, Faredoon says softly:

We will stay where we are... let 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....!

Faredoon’s views are representatives of Parsi compromise. Parsis are loyal to the land they inhabit. They adopt the culture they are in, and that is the reason of their survival in Indian sub-continent. Sidhwa has shown different aspect of Parsi life in her novels. Sidhwa not only preserved them but also provided a non-parsi world with a better understanding of their ways of life, their faith and values.

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