

Anxiety as a Spring of Motivation: A Critical Study of the Select Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa

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Abstract

Parsi community is confronted with a menace of extinction due to diverse factors such as low birth rate, strict laws against religious conversion and extreme urbanization. This closed way of living directs the collateral emergence of ethnic anxiety in its members regarding its survival in the next century. The instinctual adaptability into their instantaneous ambience has been a mainspring of survival for these dwindling community members who have been witness to the centuries of social and cultural cataclysms. Sidhwa, being an indispensable part of this community, epitomizes herself on behalf of her community and tries to surmount this anxiety in a creative comportment. Her desire to triumph over the authorial anxiety is clearly reflected in her efforts to get herself transcended beyond her own limit. Her works are not confined within individual anxiety; they are, rather contextualizes a clear lacunae of the community as a whole. The present paper closely scrutinizes various key aspects of Parsi community and its sensibility through the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa. The fear of assimilation and an undiminished appetite for the eternal perpetuation of their own identity in post colonial India and consequent emigration to the West is a manifestation of centuries-old anxieties, which too has been the focal point of Sidhwa's works.

Key words: anxiety, motivation, ethnicity, identity, Parsi community.

1. Introduction & Background

Anxiety is a form of uneasiness, nervousness and tension arising out of an anticipation of uncertain and unfavourable future outcomes. It is a moderately sufficient extent of fear and apprehensions, and is mostly triggered by distressing conditions, stressful life situations and thoughts like psychic demolitions or personal survival intimidations. This individual survival threat when followed and carried on by a mass, develops into a cumulative concern for survival and becomes a mass anxiety attack. Ethnic minorities having a strong sense of group identity and experiencing complex challenges regarding their continued existence, share a collective sentiment of anxiety and insecurity of a potential threat. It includes an overwhelming fear of getting “merged, penetrated, fragmented, and destroyed”

(Hurvich, 2003). Parsi community, which is an ethnic minority in all sense, is nevertheless, a part of this social phenomenon called ‘collective annihilation anxiety’.

Over the centuries since the first Zoroastrians arrived in India, the Parsis have integrated themselves into the Indian society while simultaneously maintaining their own distinct customs and traditions. This, in turn, has given the community a rather peculiar standing: they are Indians in terms of national affiliation, language and history, but not typically Indian in terms of cultural, behavioural and religious practices. Their religion has remained pristine and their core beliefs have kept them a people apart, which constitute them as one homogeneous community. This, however, is the outcome of the community’s exilic mind which is oath bound- an oath of allegiance given to the Hindu King on their arrival in India. Not only the community is committed to its oath, but it is also confronted with a menace of extinction due to diverse factors such as low birth rate, strict laws against religious conversion and extreme urbanization. Regrettably, this closed way of living directs the collateral emergence of ethnic anxiety in its members regarding its survival in the next century. Many Parsi writers have the clear notion of the fact that the community is disappearing at an alarming rate. Hence, a collective trial against shared qualms of annihilation is what they often try to project in their writings. Bapsi Sidhwa, an Indian-born, Pakistani-based Parsi Zoroastrian author strives to project this collective annihilation anxiety of her community through her works and further, utilizes this community anxiety to develop numerous creative works to leave their footprints on the sands of history.

2. Objective

The present paper hypothesizes how the collective annihilation anxiety of a dwindling community like Parsi turns into a motivation factor to keep them endure with the anxiety of their diminishing number and yet, helps the writers surmount this anxiety in a creative comportment with reference to the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa.

3. Methodology

In order to get a better insight into the proposed objective, the present paper holds a qualitative approach and collates materials from various sources including textbooks, research articles, dissertations, encyclopaedias, interviews, criticisms, newspapers and other media reports. A thorough analysis of the contents, narratives and discourses has been made so as to decode and categorize ideas and observations for clear assessment of the findings.

4. Discussion

The Parsi Zoroastrian community with its dwindling population of nearly 111,691-121,962 has already entered the final stage of demographic transition. Late marriage, no marriage, limited child birth, fecundity, urban craze that leads to migration, and of course the desire to keep the bloodline ‘pure’ often result in a

drastic reduction in their demography thereby signifying a terrible depletion of community potential and their rich cultural exclusivity (Kulke, 1978). As the community encounters the spectre of extinction, its members are put in a perpetual grip, often doubting their own survival and identity in the near future. The community members uphold a compelling sense of community identity and cohesiveness. Their lives and endurance concerning their race, religion, customs and traditions, language, their survival strategies in the brink of extinction, crisis of identity and integration have always been a matter of concern. The way they fled conquered home territories, kept their religion unsullied and retained their core beliefs, the way they have preserved their racial distinctiveness and became successful when exposed to modernity project their commanding quality of adaptability as a homogeneous community. So far as their number constituting only a negligible 0.007% of Indian population, religious rites and practices are concerned, they do not appear to be essentially Indian lacking in consanguinity or cultural, behavioural and religious practices (Register General of India, 2001). According to a study, the Parsis have sustained their Persian roots by discouraging interfaith marriage with bordering people (Nanavutti, 1970). Needless to say that the community does not share anymore social bond with its long left place of origin, Persia, neither does it exchange any language or contemporary history with them. Yet, their distinctiveness comprises their religious conviction, their history, ethnicity and the perception of their elite status. Besides, they also share a kind of collective elite consciousness resulting from the colonial epoch, which can be seen as another aspect that has brought the Parsis into incongruity with the Indian identity (Deshmukh, 2014). The community believes that their collective ethnic consciousness is the key to their survival and therefore, it invokes an alarming concern when it comes to getting merged with the dominant culture.

The members of the otherwise isolated Parsi Zoroastrian community share similar beliefs, ideologies and moral ethics which organize them as one unifying force within the society. This makes them increasingly attached to the community's cultural, philanthropic and historical legacies, and simultaneously stimulates them to get ways to fit into the customs at large and means to preserve their unique ethnic heritage. However, the awareness of their dwindling number at one hand and the collective fear of possible societal transition at the other, question their ethnic essentialism, and create a sense of cultural anxiety. This cultural anxiety intensifies the worries concerning their community cognition and their inalterable essence of ethnic identity. The constant anxiety over the dropping number and cultural transition further triggers an intense state of ethnic annihilation anxiety. Literary figures like Bapsi Sidhwa maintains this collective anxiousness in various novels drafted by her and eventually converts this feeling into an existential motivation so as to contribute more in form of community specific literature for the eternal perpetuation of Parsi identity.

Being a Parsi not only by birth, but also by heart and soul, the Indian born Pakistani writer, Bapsi Sidhwa never fails to address the serious historical and cultural issues of her community, the predicament of her people concerning their sustainability in the near future and of course the problem mounting out of the

belongingness towards their own community and identity. The three novels discussed here authored by her are the reflection of her ardour and fidelity for the Parsiness of her community, their idiosyncratic quintessence, the patterns and experiences of expatriation and migration, entrenched cultural relativism, the Parsi ethos, theme of marriage, religious practices and its underlying sentiments have been widely discussed and debated.

Her novel *The Crow Eaters* breaks conventionality and leads its readers towards a hilarious saga of the Parsi community whose members are often called *Kagra-Khaow*. The element of joy, the slapstick uproar, has earned the community the label *Kagra-Khaow*, which means ‘Crow Eaters’. This witty caricature hits the sentiment of the Parsi people. Even Sidhwa was disliked for revealing the community’s secrets to the world. However, for her, this is a way to encompass the minority discourse and her unfair portrayal of the community’s peculiar attitude serves like a unique survival method, which she adopts to promote her very dear minuscule community among other dominant cultures.

Moreover, Sidhwa gives a refutation of the criticism she receives from her own community. She marks in the “Author’s Note” to the third edition of Penguin India, 1990:

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. (Sidhwa, 1990, B)

Sidhwa aims at throwing light on an unexplored ethnocentric life of her own community by showcasing its eccentricity to the world, thereby impelling the world to preserve the community’s journey from partition through migration, adaptability, westernization to hybridization of identity, which has helped it to keep intact its uniqueness. The novel unfolds the myriad aspects of the Parsi identity. The plot draws a pre- Independence image wherein the dislocation and alteration of a Parsi family, namely Freddy Jungalwalla’s is shown with a powerful depiction of the author’s consciousness about culture. The Parsi protagonist Freddy’s social mobility takes the prime position in the novel. He uproots his family from a nondescript village in central India and moves on to Lahore for settlement. He, like his fellow Parsis, is seen as the blind supporter of the British Empire. His identification with the British Raj is strong and represents the majority of pre-independent Parsis. He wears his most majestic attires each time he visits the Administrative House. He demonstrated his loyalty to the ‘Queen and Crown’ by paying homage to the British Empire.

However, Freddy remains a true Zoroastrian from the core of his heart. His quest for affluence and social status is typical of the Parsi propensity. His dedication

towards the Zoroastrian values of generosity and charity is evocative of his devout Parsiness. The compelling sense of duty and obligation towards others, which is one of the most endearing features of this microscopic community, is carried forward by him. Sidhwa, through the character of Freddy, tries to give an autobiographical touch, reflecting upon her genetic inheritance, her high cultural fidelity thereby ensuring the community's cultural stability and customary longevity even at the face of disturbing factors. Alex Mesoudi in his book *Cultural Evolution* maintains that

Cultural variants can be passed faithfully from one individual to another, just as genes are passed from parent to offspring in biological evolution. Moreover, this cultural inheritance is of sufficiently high fidelity that it can successfully support the gradual accumulation of modifications, just as Darwin observed for lineages of biological organisms. (Mesoudi, 2011)

The narrative also employs the comic and ironic modes to retain the realization of Zoroastrian values in the lives of Freddy and his two sons, Billy and Yazdi. Sidhwa showcases the distinctive clothes and manner of dressing of the Parsis through her remark on the subject of an assemblage of Parsis on a railway station:

The Parsi women... tied their heavy silk saris differently, with a triangular piece in front displaying broad, exquisitely embroidered borders. The knotted tassels of their kustis dangled as if pyjama strings were tied at the back, and white mathabanas peeked primly from beneath sari-covered heads. The men wore crisp pyjamas, flowing white coats fastened with neat little bows, and flat turbans. They looked quite distinctive. (Sidhwa, 1990, C, p. 56)

Similarly, Sudra and Kusti, which carry a very important role in the Parsi Zoroastrian faith is worn by all Parsis. The Parsi protagonist Freddy also wears it as a symbol of purity and sanctity. Even his wife and mother-in-law have never made a public appearance without the 'mathabanas'. However, the cultural generational gap continues to appear as the members of the community get exposed to westernization.

While Freddy's cultural fidelity is clearly spelt out in the novel through his feeling proud of their rituals, the customary dress code, the next generation comprising Billy, Tanya and Yasmin show a greater inclination towards the British, resulting in a cultural hybridity. This means they are neither able to completely give up the long cherished rituals of their community, nor they can be fully identified with the British. Their hybridization is the outcome of too quickly mixing, merging with the English and adopting their language, thereby signifying a cultural collision. Billy and Tanya are shown to be communicating in English with each other and also with

the neighbours of their age. Freddy talks about how he used to buttress the English officials to earn favour and patronage in his business. His “vernacular was interspersed with laboured snatches of English spoken in a droll intent accent” (p. 11). Sidhwa makes a caricature of her characters that eventually allows her to parody the lurking insecurities of her community members.

The community’s love, respect and longstanding act of loyalty towards the ‘Queen & Crown’ is evident when Faredoon says: “And where, if I may ask, does the sun rise? No, not in the East. For us it rise- 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 prince lings, 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?” (p. 12)

Legal security, peace and economic prosperity are therefore ensured as a result of the Parsis’ inflated servility towards the British. Sidhwa has successfully portrayed the rise of the Junglewallas from rags to riches. However, torn between the loyalty to the king and a commitment to their own community, the Parsis are found to be anxious about their future. As the partition of the subcontinent strikes the corner, a few Parsi gathered round Freddy with a concern of the upcoming division. Sidhwa shows that except for a fringe minority, drawn into the vortex of the Nationalist Movement, almost the entire community revolves around the question asked by Yasmin’s husband Bobby Katrak in a half serious alarm: “But where will we go? What will happen to us?” The easy answer to this anxious question was so beautifully handled by Freddy, “Nowhere my children... We will stay where we are... let Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs, whoever rules. What does it matter? The sun will continue to rise and the sun will continue to set- in their arses...!” (p. 283)

The community chiefly marks its cosseted status under the British rule, recognized as the Afringan prayer’s “good government”. Allegiance is therefore, a self-evident tenet. Even we see how Colonel Bharucha ensures the Parsi inhabitants of Lahore to not affront the British sensibilities by any act of endorsement. He reprimands, “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.” (Sidhwa, 2006, p. 37)

Sidhwa explains how the Parsis brooding over choices: either to encourage the freedom movement or to stay loyal to the Raj. Some Parsi Zoroastrians do also convey their traumatic psychic state concerning their post stay in Lahore after independence and their willingness to relocate. Yet, this ongoing threat and insecurity is withdrawn as the President of the Lahore Parsis reiterates, “As long as we conduct our lives quietly; as long as we present no threat to anybody; we will prosper right here,” (p. 40). These lines spark off a concealed apprehension of the community that may get beset by dominant cultures like Hindus in India and Muslims in Pakistan.

Though the Parsis are so proud of the way in which they maintain their identity, despite of being an ethnic minority, they are at times stoop to sycophancy.

With the ironic perspective of Sidhwa, the flattery by the Parsis is hilariously uncovered in the narrative; simultaneously it articulates an identity crisis which has been constantly triggering a quest for protection for the community. The theme is quite analogous to Khuswant Singh's *A History of the Sikh* (2006), where the problem of the Sikh community is highlighted; the continuation of their customs and identity remained vague for an extended phase even after independence. While not being completely on the side of the English, the Parsis did not identify themselves with other Indian communities. The partition had left them chained to uncertainty, and their identity to an elusive base. Their divided loyalty has been attacked, exposed and satirized. This led to a mental estrangement from India for many Parsis. Sidhwa, as an insightful observer of human fallibility, understands the paradoxical facets of their identity, and perfectly reflects the identity crisis in the changing social milieu which has always been a social dilemma for the community during the British rule. Even the sufferings of the Junglewallas carry more of an autobiographical sense than merely a historical fiction (Dhawan, 1996).

The portrayal of the same is carried forward to her subsequent novel too. In *An American Brat*, the Parsi community is presented as involving in politics when galvanized with action. The Ginwalla family is seen as being actively associated in the present political catastrophe of the country. Being Parsi, Zareen believes that America with its liberal traditions resonates with the Parsi traditions. Sidhwa sets the stage for more challenging role played by her characters while deciding on between a phase of wild sectarianism in India and the experience of more concealed prejudice prevailing outside. The plot takes a twisted turn as Feroza flies abroad with the wings of hope, dreams and freedom, leaving behind the phenomenon of neo-colonialism in Pakistan. With this, Sidhwa moves from the local, for the most part to the New World, the United States of America. The Parsi characters of Sidhwa are found as the victims of post-colonial migration. They always find themselves stuck in the life-changes leading to double cultural identities. The novel *An American Brat* emphasizes the transformation that the protagonist undergoes in a different world. It also draws attention to the way Feroza changes her perception towards life and its opportunities. Her migration is a journey through three cultures- Pakistan's Islamic culture, her own Parsi culture and the western culture of the USA. Sandwiched between the cruel and harsh realities of an alien culture (the modern American way of life) and the native Pakistani culture (Zoroastrian mode of life) which has been carefully instilled in her, she finds herself a victim of the conflicts of value system. This discord created between the cultures is apparent both on the social level as well as on the personal level which led to a quest for identity (Sidhwa, 1990, A). Even though her association with her friend Jo, an American student, makes her aware of the American customs, she continues to cling to her Zoroastrian manners. Gradually, like most expatriates, she revives her ethnicity, the cause of which is nostalgia. Sidhwa skilfully chronicles an expatriate's experience in a foreign land with a special emphasis on minute details. She draws a connection between the harrowing occurrences she experienced during her own migration in the mid of partition and anxiety of her characters which is an outcome of displacement and social volatility.

Feroza stands as a specimen of her community which has an innate passion for a western flair. The introverted girl who at Lahore talked timidly to young people now enjoys freedom and does not anymore like the restrictions imposed on Parsi women. She slowly gets flexible when the issues of inter-faith marriage come into question. At the beginning, Zareen used to explain to her daughter that by getting hitched with David she would be detached forcefully from her community; that she would be unpermitted to perform the rituals of her community at the Fire temples. Even though the Parsi men marrying outside of the faith would stay unchanged as far as their religious belief is concerned, the Parsi women marrying the non-Parsis would still get excommunicated. But as Zareen herself is brought up in the Islamic code, her mind does not easily accept the practice. She reacts strongly when she receives a flux of anxious letters from Pakistan that unfold with a warning to dissuade Feroza from marrying David. However, now she pretends to have accepted her daughter's intention to marry David and tries to intimidate him by emphasizing the difference between Zoroastrian and Jewish cultures, and making him aware of the difficult Parsi rituals and customs. This leads him to rethink about his own flexibility and further his relationship with Feroza. She is attracted not only to the material comforts of America but the 'freedom' that people are endowed with in America. She follows the principles of Zoroastrianism, which believes in the 'freedom of choice' and considers it as a cardinal principle in Prophet Zoroaster's teachings. This leads her to direct her life to suit her heart and to achieve contentment in her own way, while constantly trying to get herself adapted to the new world. The issues concerning ethnic divergence and marriage has also been well illustrated through the character of Freddy in *The Crow Eaters* as he gets angry when he comes to know that his son Yazdi wants to marry Rosy Watson, an Anglo-Indian girl. He speaks with surprise: "What kind of a name is that? I don't think I know any Parsi by the name of Watson.' 'She's not Parsi. She is an Anglo-Indian.' (Sidhwa, 1990, C, p. 123). This is emblematic of the Parsis' reluctance to cut out the very ethno-religious essence of their community; hence this obsession about purity keeps away conversion. The Parsis give utmost priority to their distinct identities and believe in self- preservation and therefore do not want to dilute their Zoroastrian identity by encouraging inter-faith marriages. This fundamental aspect of purity and identity which is the very core of their religion, endures an inherited trauma across generations concerning their future survival.

In a way, Sidhwa has nevertheless depicted the cultural and socio-religious differences of her community in every way possible, sometimes through the prism of her characters and sometimes through various events and incidents. The way she has confronted with the deformed body of Lenny in *Ice-Candy Man* is emblematic of the metaphorical layers she is adding up to the plot. Her community, like Lenny, is polio-stricken and is irreparable, and symbolic of an incomplete self with a partial identity. The possibility of this partial identity getting merged with a diverse society eventually leads to the idea of dwindling into symbol in near future.

5. Findings

From the contextual analysis of narratives and discourses, it is decoded that the Parsi as a diminishing community is anxious about its growing infinitesimal demographic number that puts a big question on its survival. In a world of dominant cultures, the community has often been “reduced to irrelevant nomenclatures...” (Sidhwa, 2006). Sidhwa understands that the community is haunted by a sense of losing their physical existence, which forms the source of their ‘identity’. Their nonexistence permanently puts a period to their long lived culture and heritage, which creates a relatively undying state of worries and concern. The anticipation of a potential fear and insecurity over ‘survival’ heightens the feeling of collective annihilation anxiety among the community members. However, this anxiety serves as a spring of motivation propelling high-yield creativity in writers. Sidhwa not only delicately threads her plots highlighting all the community-specific features, but also experiencing a ‘psychic healing’ in the process. Her anxieties concerning her community’s survival always strive her to get to the next level of her productivity rather than making her debilitated. This is none less than a ‘sweet spot’, where her anxiety keeps her alert and works as a drive force to create literature which would sustain their ethno-religious exclusivity.

As said by Kahlil Gibran, “Our anxiety does not come from thinking about the future, but from wanting to control it” (Osborne, 2019). Similarly, Sidhwa’s conscious efforts to control the annihilation of her community eventually motivates her to contribute more in form of literary creations that would alleviate the community’s continued existence even after it’s extinction.

6. Conclusion

As Julian Strack along with her colleagues puts it, “the typical association between anxiety and negative outcomes appeared to be disrupted among those with higher levels of anxiety motivation.” (Strack et al., 2017). Anxiety is implanted in the socio-historical and cultural context of the Parsi Zoroastrians. This paper introduces the internally experienced psychic state of the Parsi creative writer Bapsi Sidhwa, while at the same time conceptualizes the aspects of self and identity in the backdrop of death and danger. As Sidhwa inherits the ancestral trauma and anxieties concerning her community’s sustenance and survival, she, under the strain of collective survival anxiety, uses her creative component that pushes her to perform at a higher level. The result is her numerous ethno-centric literary discourse that serves as a basis of the community’s continued existence.

Anxiety, therefore, can serve as a spring of motivation and does not only ‘disturb the comfortable’, but also ‘comforts the disturbed’ by inducing a higher level of anxiety motivation. The study paves the way for further research on annihilation anxiety concerning other ethno-religious minorities facing the issues of marginalization, exclusion, and survival.

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