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## **Anxiety as a Source of Motivation: A Critical Study of the Select Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa**

By Shraddha Dhal<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The Parsi community in India is currently threatened by extinction due to diverse factors including low birth rate, fecundity, strict laws against religious conversion, and extreme urbanization. This small ethno minority forms a well-defined community by following an inveterate way of living; they only breed among community members, which is an outcome of their long-established allegiance. This closed way of living directs the collateral emergence of ethnic anxiety in its members about the prospect of their survival in the next century. This dwindling community has survived through adapting to centuries of social and cultural cataclysms in pre- and post-partition India. Bapsi Sidhwa, one of the first authors to give a voice to the Parsis, epitomizes herself on behalf of her community and tries to surmount this anxiety in a creative comportment. Her desire to triumph over her authorial anxiety is clearly reflected in her efforts to transcend the limits of her physical disability as well as the collective struggle of the minority she belongs to. Her works are not confined to individual anxiety; rather they contextualize the community's ceaseless quest for identity and survival. This paper closely scrutinizes various key aspects of the Parsi community and its sensibilities in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa. The fear of assimilation, an undiminished appetite for the eternal perpetuation of their own identity in postcolonial India, and the author's consequent emigration to the West are all manifestations of the community's centuries-old anxieties, which too have been the focal point of Sidhwa's works.

*Keywords:* Anxiety, Motivation, Ethnicity, Identity, Parsi community, Qualitative analysis

### **Introduction & Background**

Anxiety is a form of uneasiness, nervousness, and tension arising out of an anticipation of uncertain and unfavourable future outcomes ("Defining anxiety disorders"). It is a combination of fear and apprehension, and is mostly triggered by distressing conditions, stressful life situations, and thoughts like psychic demolitions, afflictions or threats to personal survival. This individual survival threat when carried on by a group of people develops into a cumulative concern for survival and becomes a mass anxiety attack. Ethnic minorities have a strong, shared sense of group identity because they face common life challenges, and so they share a collective sentiment of anxiety and a common insecurity regarding potential threats. These anxieties/insecurities include an overwhelming fear of getting "merged, penetrated, fragmented, and destroyed" (Hurvich, 2003). The Parsi community, though an ethnic minority group, is nevertheless a part of the social phenomenon called 'collective annihilation anxiety'<sup>2</sup>. Over the centuries since the first Zoroastrians arrived in India, the Parsis have integrated themselves into 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 in terms of cultural,

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<sup>2</sup> The paper uses the following terms interchangeably: ethnic annihilation anxiety, ethnic anxiety, and annihilation anxiety.

behavioural, and religious practices. Their religion has remained pristine—untouched by civilization—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 beholden mind which is oath bound; they gave an oath<sup>3</sup> of allegiance to the Hindu King on their arrival in India. Not only is the community committed to this oath, but it is also confronted with the threat of extinction due to diverse factors such as low birth rate, strict laws against religious conversion, and extreme urbanization. Regrettably, this limiting way of living has created an emergence of ethnic anxiety in members of this society regarding their survival in the next century. Many Parsi writers are aware of the fact that their community is disappearing at an alarming rate. Because of this, they often depict a collective fight against shared fears of extinction in their writings. Bapsi Sidhwa, an Indian-born, Pakistan-based Parsi Zoroastrian author strives to project this collective annihilation anxiety of her community through her works and utilizes this community anxiety as a source of inspiration to develop numerous creative works which have left footprints on the sands of history.

### **Objective**

This paper hypothesizes how the collective annihilation anxiety of a dwindling community like the Parsi turns into a motivation factor to challenge into creative endeavours as a coping mechanism to help them endure the anxiety of their diminishing number with reference to the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa.

### **Methodology**

In order to gain better insight into the proposed objective, this paper uses 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 in these modes is used to decode and categorize ideas and observations for clear assessment of the findings.

### **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 childbirth, fecundity, urban craze that leads to migration, and of course the desire to keep the bloodline 'pure' has resulted 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 approaches extinction, its members are put in a perpetual grip of anxiety, often doubting their own survival and identity in the near future. The community members uphold a

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<sup>3</sup> When the Parsis came to India, they first halted at Diu in Kathiawar. From Diu, these people shifted to the port of Sanjan in South Gujarat around 785 AD. This influx of the Parsis into India created a problem of accommodation. Therefore, the immigrants approached the local Hindu ruler, Jadi Rana, and requested asylum. The king imposed 5 conditions before allowing them to settle in Sanjan: i- The Parsees' high priest would have to explain their religion to the King; ii- The Parsees would have to give up their native Persian language and take on the language of India; iii-The women should exchange their traditional Persian garb with the customary dress of the country; iv- The men should lay down their weapons; v- The Parsees should hold their wedding processions only in the dark. (*The Parsees in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* (1978), Kulke, pp-27-29).

compelling sense of communal identity and cohesiveness. Their survival strategies in the brink of extinction, crisis of identity, and the question of integration have always been matters of concern. This community has shown their strong adaptive qualities as a homogenous body in numerous ways: they fled their conquered home territories, have kept their religion unsullied, retained their core beliefs, preserved their racial distinctiveness, and became successful in the face of modernity. Their population constitutes only a negligible 0.007% of the Indian population. When it comes to their religious rites and practices, they do not appear to be essentially Indian as they lack 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 people from other cultures and faiths around them (Nanavutti, 1970). Yet the community does not share any more social bonds with its long-left place of origin, Persia i.e., present-day Iran, nor does it have any exchange of ideas, similarities in language, correspondence, or contemporary connections with them. Their distinctiveness is showcased by their religious conviction, their history, ethnicity and their own perception of holding an elite status over all other communities in India. They 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. Because of this, they become extremely concerned when faced with the threat of merger with dominant culture.

The members of the otherwise isolated Parsi Zoroastrian community share similar beliefs, ideologies, and morals which organize them as one unifying force within the society. This makes them increasingly attached to their own cultural, philanthropic, and historical legacies, and simultaneously motivates them to find ways to fit into general society's customs and means to preserve their own unique ethnic heritage. However, awareness of their dwindling numbers and collective fear of possible societal transition causes them to question their ethnic essentialism and creates a sense of cultural anxiety. This cultural anxiety intensifies worries about community cognition and their inalterable essence of ethnic identity. The constant anxiety over their dropping numbers and the prospect of cultural transition further triggers an intense state of ethnic annihilation anxiety. This is an internally experienced psychic fear and disquiet about the complete extermination of the Parsi ethnic group which induces existential trauma. Literary and cultural figures like Bapsi Sidhwa depict this collective anxiousness in their works, and they convert this anxiety into a motivator to preserve Parsi identity through the creation of community specific literature.

### *Writing the 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 sense of belonging towards their own community and identity. The three novels discussed here reflect Sidhwa's ardour and fidelity for the Parsi community. In these works she explores their individual spirit, the patterns and experiences of expatriation and migration, entrenched cultural relativism, the Parsi ethos, themes of marriage, and religious practices and their underlying sentiments, which have been widely discussed and deliberated by critics and connoisseurs.

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 elements of joy,

humour and slapstick uproar infused in the novel through the crucible characters and the roles played by them has earned the community the label *Kagra-Khaow*, which means 'Crow Eaters'. This witty caricature resonates with the Parsi people. The well-regarded author had faced quite a lot of criticism 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 or caricature of the community's peculiar attitude strangely serves a unique survival method for her culture, which she adopts to promote her very dear minuscule community among other dominant cultures.

Moreover, Sidhwa refutes the criticism she receives from her own community. She writes in the "Author's Note" of 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 to shed light on an unexplored ethnocentric community by showcasing its eccentricity to the world, with hopes to propel the world to preserve the community's journey from Partition through migration, adaptability, westernization to hybridization of identity. The novel reveals the myriad aspects of the Parsi identity. The plot depicts a pre- independence image; Sidhwa shows the dislocation and alteration of a Parsi family, namely the Jungalwallas, through a powerful depiction of the author's consciousness about culture. The Parsi protagonist Freddy's social mobility is the main storyline of the novel. He uproots his family from a nondescript village in central India and moves to Lahore for settlement. He, like his fellow Parsis, is also a 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 attire each time he visits the Administrative House. He demonstrates his loyalty to the 'Queen and Crown' by paying homage to the British Empire.

However, Freddy remains a true Zoroastrian to the core. His quest for affluence and social status is typical of the Parsi propensity. His dedication to Zoroastrian values of generosity and charity shows 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. As a Parsi herself, Sidhwa, through the character of Freddy, tries to give an autobiographical touch by showcasing her allegiance to her own culture. She reflects on her genetic inheritance, her high cultural fidelity and in doing so, ensures the community's cultural stability and customary longevity through her creative works. The intention is to leave the shadows of her unique culture even after its extinction.

In his book *Cultural Evolution*, Alex Mesoudi writes:

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 comic and ironic modes to illustrate the 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 very important roles 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 and generation gaps continue to appear as the members of the community become exposed to westernization.

While Freddy's cultural fidelity is clearly shown in the novel through his pride of their rituals and customary dress codes, while the next generation, Billy, Tanya, and Yasmin, are more inclined towards British culture, resulting in a cultural hybridity. This means they are neither able to completely give up the rituals of their community, nor fully identify with the British. Their hybridization is the outcome of partially merging with the English and adopting their language too quickly, thereby signifying a cultural collision. Billy and Tanya communicate in English with each other and 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 rises- and sets- in the Englishman's arse. They are our sovereigns! Where do you think we'd be if we did not curry favour? Next to the nawabs, rajas and 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 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 anxious about their future. As the partition of the subcontinent strikes the corner, a few Parsi gathered around Freddy in 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 discourages the Parsi inhabitants of Lahore from affronting 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 were brooding over choices: either to encourage the freedom movement or to stay loyal to the Raj. Some Parsi Zoroastrians 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 a concealed apprehension of the community that may be threatened by dominant cultures like Hindus in India and Muslims in Pakistan.

Though the Parsis are very proud of the way they maintain their identity despite being an ethnic minority, they tend to occasionally 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 triggered a quest for protection for the community. The theme is quite analogous to Khuswant Singh's *A History of the Sikh* (2006), where the many problems and characteristics of the Sikh community is highlighted. In the case of the Sikh community as well, the continuation of their customs and identity remained vague for an extended phase even after independence. Though not completely on the side of the English, the Parsis did not identify with other Indian communities. The partition had left them chained to uncertainty and their identity elusive. 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 this identity crisis over the changing social milieu which has always been a social dilemma for the community during the British rule. Even the sufferings of the Junglewallas are more autobiographical than merely historical fiction (Dhawan, 1996).

The portrayal of community anxiety resulting from identity crisis is continued in her subsequent novel. In *An American Brat*, the Parsi community is presented as impelled to carry out the political actions. The Ginwalla family is actively associated with the present political catastrophe of the country. Being Parsi, Zareen believes that America, with its liberal traditions, resonates with Parsi traditions. Sidhwa sets the stage for more challenging roles played by her characters while writing during a phase of wild sectarianism in India and the experience of more concealed prejudice prevailing outside. The plot takes a turn when 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 to the most parts of 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 that lead 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 of 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 these conflicting value systems. This discord created between the cultures is apparent both on the social level as well as the personal level which led to her quest for identity (Sidhwa, 1990, A). Even though her association with her friend Jo, an American student, makes her aware of American customs, she continues to cling to her Zoroastrian manners. Gradually, like most expatriates, she revives her ethnicity because of nostalgia. Sidhwa skilfully chronicles an expatriate's experience in a foreign land with a special emphasis on minute details. She draws connections between the harrowing occurrences she experienced during her own migration in the midst of the Partition and the anxieties of her characters which are an outcome of displacement and social volatility.

Feroza represents those who have a passion for a western flair in her community. The introverted girl who at Lahore spoke timidly to young people now enjoys freedom and abhors the restrictions imposed on Parsi women. She slowly becomes flexible when the issues of inter-faith marriage come into question. Zareen used to explain to her daughter that by tying the knot with David she would be detached from her community; that she would not be permitted to perform the rituals of her community at the Fire temples. While Parsi men who marry outside of their faith remain unchanged as far as their religious beliefs are concerned, Parsi women who marry non-Parsis get excommunicated. Zareen, brought up in the Islamic code, does not easily accept the practice. She reacts strongly when she receives a flux of anxious letters from Pakistan that dissuade Feroza from marrying David. But then 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, making him aware of the difficult Parsi rituals and customs. This leads David to rethink his own flexibility in terms of his relationship and comfortability 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 promote 'freedom of choice'; it is 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 simultaneously trying to adapt to the new world. The issues concerning ethnic divergence and marriage have 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 expresses his shock over this: "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 at the very core of their religion, endures an inherited concern across generations regarding their future survival.

Sidhwa depicts the cultural and socio-religious differences of her community in various ways, sometimes through her characters and sometimes through various events and incidents. The way she depicts Lenny's physical disability in *Ice-Candy Man* exemplifies the metaphorical layers she adds to the plot. Her community, like Lenny, is polio-stricken and living permanently with a disability, which is symbolic of a minority identity. The possibility of this partial identity becoming merged with a diverse society eventually leads to the fear of losing its eccentricity thereby fading into symbol.



## Findings

From this contextual analysis of narratives and discourses, we may infer that the Parsi community is anxious about their diminishing numbers which are threatening their survival. The community has often been “reduced to irrelevant nomenclatures...” (Sidhwa, 2006). Sidhwa understands that the community is haunted by the fear of losing their physical existence, which forms the source of their ‘identity’. If they do not survive, their long-lived culture and heritage would die too. This creates a relatively undying state of worries and concern. The anticipation of this fear and insecurity over ‘survival’ heightens the feeling of collective annihilation anxiety among community members. However, this anxiety serves as a springboard of motivation, propelling prolific creativity in writers. Sidhwa not only delicately threads her plots, highlighting many community-specific features, but also experiences a ‘psychic healing’ (Ken Gewertz, 2005) in the process. Her anxieties concerning her community’s survival always make her strive for productivity rather than make her debilitated. There is a sort of ‘sweet spot’ between these two in which her anxiety keeps her alert and works as a driving force to create works of literature that sustain their ethno-religious exclusivity.

Kahlil Gibran states, “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 create more literature that would perpetuate the unique Zoroastrian culture. In that sense, she preserves her cultural ethos through her works, thereby alleviating the community’s concern for continued existence even after its extinction.

As Julian Strack and her colleagues put 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 psychological state of the Parsi creative writer Bapsi Sidhwa and conceptualizes self and identity in the face of death and danger. As Sidhwa inherits ancestral trauma and anxieties concerning her community’s survival, she, under the strain of collective survival anxiety, is pushed in to a higher level in her creative work. The result of this is her numerous ethno-centric literary discourses that preserve the community’s existence.

Because of this, anxiety can serve as a source of motivation; in this way it does not only ‘disturb the comfortable’, but also ‘comforts the disturbed’. This study paves the way for further research on annihilation anxiety concerning other ethno-religious minorities facing marginalization, exclusion, and the struggle for survival.

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