Community, Minority, and Communicative Memory in *The Crow Eaters* and *An American Brat*

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Abstract

This paper examines the interplay of community formation, minority identity, and communicative memory in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters* (1978) and *An American Brat* (1993). Drawing on Jan Assmann's theory of cultural and communicative memory, Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory, and postcolonial frameworks, this study argues that Sidhwa deploys narrative as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting Parsi communal identity across generations and geographies. In *The Crow Eaters*, the Parsi community's minority status in colonial India is negotiated through humor, domestic ritual, and oral storytelling, all of which function as modes of communicative memory that bind the community together. In *An American*

Brat, the protagonist Feroza's immigration to the United States stages a crisis of memory and belonging, wherein the diasporic subject must reconcile inherited communal values with the demands of assimilation. Together, the two novels illuminate how minority communities construct, contest, and transmit identity through narrative, language, and everyday practice. The paper concludes that Sidhwa's fiction constitutes a sustained meditation on the fragility and resilience of minority memory in the face of colonial, national, and global pressures.

Keywords*:* Bapsi Sidhwa, Communicative Memory, Minority Identity, Parsi Community, Diaspora, Postcolonial Literature, Collective Memory

Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa occupies a singular position in South Asian Anglophone literature as the foremost chronicler of the Parsi Zoroastrian community a religious and ethnic minority whose history in the Indian subcontinent spans more than a millennium. Her novels are not merely fictional narratives; they are acts of cultural preservation, communal self-definition, and what Jan Assmann calls communicative memory the living, informal, intergenerational transmission of a group's shared past (Assmann 126). In *The Crow Eaters* and *An American Brat*, Sidhwa traces the Parsi community across two distinct historical and geographical axes: colonial and early-independence India in the former, and late-twentieth-century America in the latter. Read together, these novels constitute a diptych of minority experience, mapping the ways in which a small, tightly knit community negotiates its identity under the pressures of colonial modernity, national partition, and transnational migration.

The concept of memory is central to both texts. Maurice Halbwachs, whose foundational work on collective memory established that individuals remember within social frameworks, argues that "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that

they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (38). For minority communities, this social scaffolding of memory is especially fraught: the dominant culture's historical narratives frequently marginalize or erase minority experience, making the community's own communicative practices--storytelling, ritual, humor, domestic life--the primary repositories of identity. Sidhwa's fiction dramatizes precisely this dynamic.

This paper proceeds in two main sections. The first examines how *The Crow Eaters* constructs Parsi minority identity through the mechanisms of communicative memory--specifically, through oral narrative, domestic ritual, and communal humor. The second section analyzes *An American Brat* as a diasporic text in which the crisis of memory and belonging is staged through the figure of the immigrant woman. The paper draws on postcolonial theory, memory studies, and feminist criticism to argue that Sidhwa's fiction performs a double function: it preserves minority memory for the community itself, and it makes that memory legible to a broader, global readership. In doing so, Sidhwa transforms the novel form into an instrument of cultural survival.

Oral Tradition, Domestic Ritual, and the Construction of Parsi Minority Identity in *The Crow Eaters*

The Crow Eaters is, on its surface, a comic family saga tracing the fortunes of Faredoon "Freddy" Junglewalla as he migrates from a small Gujarati village to Lahore and builds a prosperous Parsi household. Yet beneath its boisterous comedy lies a serious engagement with the question of how a minority community sustains itself in a colonial environment that is simultaneously indifferent and threatening. Sidhwa's title itself is a piece of communicative memory: "crow eaters" is a derogatory term applied to Parsis by other communities, and by

reclaiming it as her title, Sidhwa performs an act of minority self-assertion that mirrors the community's own historical strategies of survival through wit and adaptability.

The novel's primary vehicle of communal memory is oral storytelling. Freddy is above all a talker--a man whose identity is constituted through narrative performance. His stories, jokes, and boasts are not merely entertainment; they are the medium through which Parsi values, history, and self-understanding are transmitted. As Elleke Boehmer observes in her study of postcolonial narrative, "the oral tale in the colonial and postcolonial novel frequently serves as a counter-archive, preserving what official history suppresses or ignores" (Boehmer 112). Freddy's narratives function precisely in this way: they encode the Parsi community's sense of its own distinctiveness, its pride in its Persian heritage, its pragmatic accommodation to Hindu and Muslim neighbors, and its complex relationship to British colonial power.

Sidhwa is careful to show that this oral tradition is gendered. The women of the Junglewalla household--particularly Freddy's long-suffering wife Putli--are the custodians of domestic ritual, which constitutes a second, complementary mode of communicative memory. The preparation of Parsi food, the observance of religious ceremonies, the maintenance of the household's moral order: all of these practices encode communal memory in embodied, everyday form. Paul Connerton, in his influential study of social memory, argues that "habitual memory" is stored not in texts or monuments but in "bodily practices" in the repeated gestures and routines of daily life (Connerton 72). Putli's domestic labor is precisely this kind of habitual memory: through her body and her household management, she transmits Parsi identity to the next generation in ways that Freddy's verbal performances cannot.

The novel's comedy is itself a form of minority self-defense. Sidhwa's humor is sharp, irreverent, and deeply communal: it mocks Parsi pretensions while simultaneously celebrating

Parsi resilience. This double movement of self-mockery and self-affirmation--is characteristic of minority humor as theorized by Sigmund Freud and, more recently, by scholars of ethnic comedy. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, minority identity is always constituted through ambivalence: "the colonial subject is always already a hybrid, occupying a third space that is neither the colonizer's nor the colonized's" (Bhabha 36). Sidhwa's comedy inhabits this third space, using laughter to negotiate the Parsi community's position between British colonialism, Hindu majoritarianism, and Muslim political assertion.

The novel's historical setting spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries--allows Sidhwa to show how Parsi communicative memory is shaped by and responds to colonial modernity. The Parsis' famous collaboration with British commercial and administrative structures is presented not as simple complicity but as a survival strategy: by aligning themselves with colonial power, the Parsis secured the economic and social stability that allowed their community to persist. Yet Sidhwa is also alert to the costs of this strategy. Freddy's opportunism, his willingness to exploit both British and Indian connections for personal gain, is presented with comic affection but also with a degree of critical irony. The novel suggests that the price of minority survival is often a certain moral flexibility--a willingness to inhabit multiple, sometimes contradictory, subject positions simultaneously.

Diaspora, Dislocation, and the Crisis of Communicative Memory in *An American Brat*

If *The Crow Eaters* depicts a community in the process of constructing its communicative memory within a colonial context, *An American Brat* dramatizes the crisis that occurs when that memory is transplanted to a radically different cultural environment. Published in 1993, the novel follows Feroza Ginwalla, a young Parsi woman from Lahore who is sent by her mother Zareen to the United States in the early 1980s, ostensibly to broaden her horizons but actually to

rescue her from the growing Islamization of Pakistani society under General Zia ul-Haq. What begins as a temporary sojourn becomes a permanent migration, and the novel traces Feroza's gradual transformation from a sheltered Pakistani girl into an independent American woman.

The novel's central tension is between two modes of memory: the communicative memory of the Parsi community, embodied in Feroza's family and transmitted through language, food, ritual, and social expectation, and the cultural memory of America, which Feroza encounters as a seductive but disorienting alternative. Stuart Hall's theorization of diasporic identity is illuminating here: Hall argues that diaspora identity is "defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference" (Hall 235). Feroza's identity crisis is precisely this: she must learn to live through difference, to hold her Parsi heritage and her American present in productive tension rather than choosing between them.

Language is a crucial site of this tension. Feroza's English, already fluent from her Pakistani education, undergoes a transformation in America: she acquires American idioms, loses her Pakistani accent, and gradually begins to think and dream in a different register. This linguistic shift is not merely a matter of communication; it represents a transformation of the self at the level of memory. As Mikhail Bakhtin argues, "language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated--overpopulated--with the intentions of others" (Bakhtin 294). For Feroza, the acquisition of American English means inhabiting a language populated with American memories, values, and assumptions--a process that inevitably displaces, though does not erase, the Parsi communicative memory she carries from Lahore.

The novel's most powerful dramatization of this crisis comes through Feroza's relationship with her American boyfriend David Press, a Jewish American whose own minority identity provides a point of comparison with Feroza's Parsi heritage. Their relationship is presented as a genuine cross-cultural encounter, but it is also a site of conflict: Zareen's opposition to the relationship is rooted not in racism but in the fear that Feroza's marriage to a non-Parsi will sever her connection to the community's communicative memory. The Parsi community's strict endogamy--its insistence on marriage within the community--is, as Sidhwa presents it, a survival mechanism: in a community as small as the Parsis, exogamy threatens not merely individual family lines but the community's collective memory itself. As Assmann notes, "the smaller the group, the more dependent it is on the active maintenance of its memory through ritual, narrative, and social practice" (Assmann 130).

Sidhwa's treatment of Feroza's mother Zareen is particularly nuanced. Zareen is not presented as a simple conservative or a defender of tradition for its own sake; she is a modern, educated woman who genuinely loves her daughter and wants her to be happy. Her anxiety about Feroza's Americanization is rooted in a deep understanding of what is at stake: the loss of communicative memory is not merely a personal loss but a communal one. Yet Sidhwa also shows that Zareen's own identity is more hybrid than she acknowledges: her visit to America in the novel's second half reveals that she too is susceptible to the seductions of American modernity, and her eventual, grudging acceptance of Feroza's choices suggests that communicative memory is not a fixed inheritance but a living, adaptive process.

The novel's conclusion is deliberately ambiguous. Feroza does not return to Pakistan, but she does not fully assimilate into American culture either. She occupies what Bhabha calls the third space--a liminal position between cultures that is uncomfortable but also generative

(Bhabha 55). This ambiguity is, I would argue, Sidhwa's most important statement about minority identity and communicative memory: memory is not a static archive but a dynamic process of negotiation, adaptation, and reinvention. The Parsi community has survived for over a thousand years not by preserving its memory unchanged but by continuously adapting it to new circumstances--from Persia to India, from colonial Lahore to postcolonial Pakistan, from Pakistan to America. Feroza's story is the latest chapter in this long history of adaptive memory.

Conclusion

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters* and *An American Brat* together constitute a sustained and sophisticated meditation on the relationship between community, minority identity, and communicative memory. Through the comic domestic world of the Junglewallas and the diasporic journey of Feroza Ginwalla, Sidhwa maps the strategies by which a small, vulnerable community sustains its identity across time and space. Drawing on oral tradition, domestic ritual, humor, language, and social practice, the Parsi community in Sidhwa's fiction constructs a communicative memory that is both fragile and resilient--constantly threatened by colonial power, national partition, religious majoritarianism, and transnational migration, yet continuously renewed through the adaptive creativity of its members.

The theoretical frameworks of Halbwachs, Assmann, Connerton, Bhabha, and Hall illuminate different dimensions of this process. Halbwachs's collective memory explains how individual Parsi identity is always already social; Assmann's communicative memory shows how that identity is transmitted through informal, everyday practice; Connerton's habitual memory reveals the bodily dimension of cultural transmission; Bhabha's third space and Hall's diasporic identity capture the hybrid, ambivalent character of minority selfhood in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Together, these frameworks allow us to read Sidhwa's fiction not merely

as ethnic literature but as a profound contribution to our understanding of how human communities remember, adapt, and survive.

Sidhwa's novels argue that minority memory is not a burden but a resource a source of resilience, creativity, and communal solidarity in the face of overwhelming historical pressures. The Parsis' survival as a community, against all demographic and historical odds, is itself a testament to the power of communicative memory. And Sidhwa's fiction, by making that memory available to a global readership, extends its reach beyond the community itself, transforming a minority's private archive into a shared human inheritance. In this sense, Sidhwa's novels are not merely about communicative memory; they are themselves acts of communicative memory contributions to the ongoing, collective project of remembering who we are and where we come from.

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