

Death of the Author: A Study to Explore the Author's Perspective and Position in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*

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ABSTRACT: *The focal point of this research paper is to put emphasis on the role and dynamics of an author in the creation of a literary piece of work and study the various aspects of being an author by analyzing Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*. This research explores the positioning of Parsi community by a Parsi writer while also focusing upon the author's imaginative and realistic strands involved in the portrayal of a particular community. While highlighting the role of an author, this research particularly sheds light upon the narratology of Bapsi Sidhwa and how it moves from specific to the universal by giving a voice to the margins. There are numerous researches exploring the role of the author, while this research examines and questions the distant and detached position of an author which creates a relationship of perception between the narrative and the reader.*

Roland Barthes' "What is an Author" is used as a theoretical background for this research paper. This approach assists in comprehending the various stages and dynamics of a narrative. Future Researchers can probe literary theory and how an author and a narrative is analyzed from more than one perspective by literary critics.

Keywords: Narratology, Dynamics, Author, Perception, Position

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Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa is a renowned Pakistani novelist with Parsi descent. The *Crow Eaters* is Sidhwa's debut novel in which she takes on a witty tone to bring light to the life and the culture of Parsi community. However, what is more interesting about Sidhwa's debut novel is her ability to shape her characters and their life choices in such a way that their human instincts overpower their Parsi identity. This is where Sidhwa's own identity as a Pakistani author with Parsi descent fades when she highlights the emotions of Faredoon Jungewalla as any other father towards their children. For instance, Roland Barthes, a French literary theorist, philosopher, critic, and semiotician, negates the ubiquitous position of the author because of how it starts overpowering the other literary aspects of a literary text. A literary text ends up becoming a brand name for its author while the inner world of a text remains unexamined on the basis of its own potential. Barthes says, "We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (142).

While Foucault in "What is an Author" says, "when we study the history of a concept, a literary genre, or a branch of philosophy, these concerns assume a relatively weak and secondary position in relation to the solid and fundamental role of an author and his works" (Foucault 115). Thus the author's perspective becomes the center of every critic and every reader's analysis. The thread with which a text and a plot and its characters connect itself with the issues faced and combatted by people in the real world is nearly ignored because of the ever present position of the author. For instance, the position of Bapsi Sidhwa as a Parsi author overshadows her Parsi characters and their human foibles.

In one of her interviews with Dawn, Sidhwa says that, "The weird thing is that when *The Crow Eaters* was published for the first time in Pakistan, it got terrible reviews locally" (Sidhwa). It is not solely because of the lack of Pakistani Literature in English language at that time but also because of the subject Sidhwa chose to write about. It seems as if a wedge was created between the readers' interest and what Sidhwa wrote about which is the Parsi community in *The Crow Eaters*. For instance, Sidhwa's identity of a Parsi author and her emphasis and portrayal of the Parsi community prevented her characters to be considered as flesh and blood characters. The narrative of the Parsi community with Parsi characters

came face to face with the politics of othering. It in a way clouded the literary awakening of the readers with a subject entirely unknown to them. Sidhwa's position marked it down in a specific and unacknowledged category. The *Crow Eaters*' commercial value came into play when it got published in the UK and got the David Higham Award. When it was universally acknowledged only then that the Pakistani press began to love the book.

Moreover, Barthes, in his essay "The Death of the Author", says that, "The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions, while criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's work is the failure of Baudelaire the man, Van Gogh's his madness, Tchaikovsky's his vice" (Barthes 143). Many of the times readers prefer to give a read to the reviews written on the back cover of a book or reviews mentioned on the first page of a book before purchasing it. What is significant to note here is that most of the times these reviews are comprised of the author's prowess, author's life, and author's passions. Thus, the critical commentary rests more on the perspective and position of the author than the literary work at hand. It also goes against T.S. Eliot's argument in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in which Eliot says that, "Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (Eliot 39).

It is indispensable to bring into focus a few of the reviews of *The Crow Eaters* to comprehend the position of Sidhwa as a Pakistani Parsi writer. For instance, *The Sunday Times* writes that "...Sidhwa writes with an exuberance and geniality which makes *The Crow Eaters* so illuminating and memorable." The three ellipsis suggests the omission of few words or sentences; and it also indicates the primary importance given to those parts of the review which clearly highlighted the author's prowess. *The Houston Post* says, "Sidhwa, called 'Pakistan's finest English language novelist', tells her story with such charm and wit it is hard to put this book down." Here Sidhwa's genius dominates the credibility of her work. There are reviews that only regard the author. For instance, *Harper's Queen* writes that, "A Parsi herself. Sidhwa writes out of an affection strong enough to allow for farce and satire, and so is free from the blight of folk art. Her memorably comic characters are living an epic." Sidhwa's identity as a Parsee herself becomes the main focus which commends her command over her narrative which revolves around the Parsee

themselves. Washington Post remarks that, “Bapsi Sidhwa is a master of barnyard humor, contrasting the nouveau-genteel manners of the patriarch with the vulgarity of his rotund nemesis – his mother in law ... [A] wonderfully comic and entertaining novel by a talented writer.” It shows the way Barthes claims that the author’s position “tyrannically” becomes the center. Economic Times remarks that, “Sidhwa’s most formidable asset as a storyteller is her comic imagination. Her first novel, *The Crow Eaters*, is a triumph in revelry. There is very little that Sidhwa’s deft pen misses as she creates an array of delightful, idiosyncratic Parsees.” Sidhwa’s genius as a writer put her on a pedestal higher than the text she created. The text becomes secondary while Sidhwa the writer becomes a brand name, a primary focus of every person who comes across Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Crow Eaters*.

However, there are reviews that only focus on the potential of the narrative and the characters. New York Newsday writes, “Completely charming and very funny, *The Crow Eaters* whirls about the family circle of a Parsi clan... The only complaint, and it is a serious one, that can be lodged against this novel is that it ends.” Its own comic quality commends the comic potential of the novel itself. Daily Telegraph writes, “*The Crow Eaters* is a kind of great novel in chrysalis, a mini *War and Peace* with very little war.” In this review, the grip of a good narrative becomes the focus. Moreover, there are times when a writer’s capabilities are what comes first and foremost. For instance San Diego Union writes, “This book could have been written by Kipling...an intriguing look at some sections of the subcontinent...the wit is sparkling. The fragrances, sounds, and tactile aspects of Lahore are more entrancing than any travel brochure.” The comparison of a debuted author with a celebrated author shows the mastery of the author on his/her craftsmanship. Thus it becomes integral to analyze the very reviews printed on the back cover of a book or on the first page of a book because it in a way works as a catalyst to draw readers to a particular literary text. What is also important to note here is that there are different types of readers as there are different types of reviews of a book. Some readers may prefer those reviews which boast about the prowess of the author, while some may follow the ones commending the quality of the text itself. While analyzing the author’s position and perspective, it becomes vital to go through the politics of these reviews, and the politics of readerships, and what actually drives them; the author or the narrative.

In the first chapter of *The Crow Eaters*, it is written that, "Need makes a flatterer of a bully and persuades a cruel man to kindness. Call it circumstances – call it self-interest – call it what you will, it still remains your need. All the good in this world comes from serving our own ends. What makes you tolerate someone you'd rather spit in the eye? What subdues that great big "I", that monstrous ego in a person?" (Sidhwa 2). In *The Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa uses third person narrative, an omniscient narrator who knows everything. What the question brings to this scenario is that whether this omniscient narrator is Sidhwa herself or the "extinction" of her personality as the author. It also comes with a multifaceted choice, a choice that a reader has to probe further to see whether it is the voice of the protagonist Freddy Junglewalla, or the voice of Bapsi Sidhwa, or the voice of a concept newly born, or even the voice of a reader's imagination.

Eliot says that, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot 39). An in depth reading of *The Crow Eaters* can determine whether this self-sacrifice has been done on Sidhwa's part or whether it becomes a responsibility for the reader to read it in an impersonal way while distancing it from the overpowering perspective and position of the author. Barthes says that, "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (Barthes 148). This "destination" that Barthes talks about is the awakening of a reader's imagination and a reader's perspective. Barthes goes on to say that, "Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted". Barthes leaves a literary text and its interpretation to a reader's creative faculties, and to a reader's own perspective and understanding. This way the author's work gets done the moment a literary text is unraveled and critically analyzed by a reader.

In the chapter 5 of *The Crow Eaters*, it is written that, "Parsees are a tiny community who leave their dead in open-roofed enclosures atop hills – to be devoured by vultures" (Sidhwa 33). While *The Crow Eaters* becomes a beacon for the readers to expand their creative repertoire, it also distances itself from the readers when it is presented as a Parsee novel by a Parsee writer. The identity of the author predetermines a literary text's future. For many readers, it becomes the other, a narrative of a community

with different set of beliefs. Readers are likely to start detecting differences rather than looking at the shared human experiences of their everyday life. For instance, the conflict between Freddy and his mother in law Jerbanoo is a conflict common to every person. It can be seen in this excerpt of *The Crow Eaters*, “Her hatred for him was palpable and there was no doubt in his mind that she wished him ill. When he discovered that her curses and lachrymose scenes coincided with setbacks in his business, he grew fearfully alarmed” (Sidhwa 20). The relationships between the characters are not unusual, they represent the lives led by the ordinary people and the emotions felt by them. Barthes says that, “The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes 146).

This is why it is imperative to discard the author’s identity and the author’s personal influence on a text in order to analyze and unravel the culture incorporated in that particular text. Moreover in the chapter 3, Freddy goes to consult a Mystic and the Mystic is described as “The Fakir, oblivious of all but the smell of money on the man, had not the remotest idea of his client’s qualms on behalf of his soul” (Sidhwa 23). It sheds light upon the culture of superstition and of relying on the Fakirs while they themselves are devoid of the essence of life. It also exposes the societal function of these Fakirs as charlatans. *The Crow Eaters* not only depicts a Parsee community but also brings into focus the shared beliefs and experiences they have with the other communities around them. For instance, when Freddy’s elder son Soli died it is written that, “The compound between the priest’s quarters and the stone building of the Fire Temple filled up with non-Parsees. Indian-Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and a few British officials waited patiently to see the body” (Sidhwa 159). Through encountering human loss, Sidhwa’s characters are shown as flesh and blood characters than as Parsi characters with a different lifestyle.

However, Barthes states that, “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (Barthes 147). If it is to be examined keeping in mind the author’s perspectives then *The Crow Eaters* can only be seen as a portrayal of a Parsee community written by a Parsee author who is voicing a narrative of her own community. But when it is considered as detached from its author, more perspectives and more interpretations can be detangled from the narrative. For instance, there is an incident in the novel when Freddy and his family is being mocked by two “Mussulman” children in this way,

“Two of the Children stayed to dance a jig and sing: ‘Parsee, Parsee, crow eaters!’” (Sidhwa 43). It suggests the differences inculcated and ingrained in children but its mention in the text can be analyzed in more than one way. Its presence in the text can also be an indication of not advocating these differences shown in the move of the two children. Barthes concludes the essay “The Death of the Author” by saying, “To give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (Barthes 148). This is how a reader can analyze the various layers of a text when the text is free of the author's perspective and position. Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” says that, “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates;” (Eliot 40). There is no denial of Bapsi Sidhwa's prowess and grip over her creativity but what makes Sidhwa's work a genius is its individuality and its impact on a reader's understanding and a reader's impact on the work itself.

In William H. Gass's article “The Death of the Author”, James Joyce's character Stephen Dedalus's precise description of the function of the author is quoted as:

“The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic, like that of material creation, is accomplished. The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (Joyce 232).

This is why the author's constant presence can debar a reader's understanding of the text because of how it minimizes and limits a reader's expand of imagination. For instance, *The Crow Eaters* certainly is a comic and witty treat, and when a humorous moment or incident is encountered in the text by the reader, the reader cannot get past the point of unravelling and analyzing because of how these comic elements are used to create a universal language so that readers can relate to Sidhwa's Parsi characters. Eliot says that, “The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art” (Eliot 40). Thus, the ever present position and

perspective of the author benumbs the imagination of a reader while only allowing the author's imagination to play.

What is evident to note in *The Crow Eaters* is that it starts with the death of the protagonist, who is the center of every sub narrative in the novel. He is shown as the author of his life and especially the author of the lives of his sons. Freddy lost Soli and had it been in his hands, he would never have wanted his son dead. He keeps on instructing Behram, his younger son, to thrive in life and that's what he wants for his other son Yazdi but Yazdi chooses his own path. For instance, it is written for Yazdi that, "His thoughts had tormented him and at last, after all these months, he had come to terms with himself. He was at peace; he knew what he wanted. He had to live in harmony with the dictates of his relentless conscience" (Sidhwa 166). He abandons the life of luxury while going against his father's and his family's wishes. The death of the author can be applied to Freddy's death in the very beginning of the novel, leaving his sons to carve their own paths with their artistic sensibilities.

Moreover, Foucault says that, "literary works are totally dominated by the sovereignty of the author" (Foucault 126). Thus, it becomes a process of unlearning that Edward Said talks about, not only on the part of the author but also on the part of the reader to unlearn the position and perspective of the author while deconstructing the sovereignty of the author to evaluate and reevaluate a literary text with the help of unbridled imagination of the reader. Sidhwa's debut novel *The Crow Eaters* is an example of how significant the death of the author is in the comprehension of a novel and its characters. Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters* ends up being a universal language for readers when it comes to analyzing the human emotions and familial ties, despite of the Parsi context of the novel. However, it is only possible when the text is analyzed in light of its literary scholarship and what it adds to the literary canon. Given all the reviews and popularity of Sidhwa's various books including the *The Crow Eaters*, it is evident how literary capability of her texts come into play and how her texts are placed in a larger context of Literature, hence achieving the author's absence while her characters are perceived in a nuanced position.

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