
Inherited Sparks and Sacred Fires: Memory Studies in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*

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Abstract:

This research paper examines Bapsi Sidhwa's acclaimed novel *The Crow Eaters* through the interdisciplinary lens of Memory Studies. Focusing on the Parsi diaspora in the Indian subcontinent at the turn of the twentieth century, the paper explores how individual, collective, and cultural memories are constructed, transmitted, and occasionally weaponized to preserve ethnic identity. By applying theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Pierre Nora, Jan Assmann, Maurice Halbwachs, and Alison Landsberg, this paper analyzes three pivotal moments in the narrative of the patriarch Faredoon (Freddy) Junglewalla. The analysis reveals how the Parsi community relies on foundational myths and material symbols to sustain cultural memory, how concepts of "organic memory" are used to enforce ethnic exclusivity and marital endogamy, and finally, how the limits of communicative memory drive a dying patriarch to ideologically imprint his descendants. Ultimately, Sidhwa's novel serves as a profound literary articulation of how diasporic communities utilize memory not merely as a recollection of the past, but as a vital, socially embedded practice to navigate and secure their future.

Keywords: Memory Studies, Bapsi Sidhwa, The Crow Eaters, Collective Memory, Cultural Memory, Organic Memory,

Introduction

Memory studies is a dynamic interdisciplinary field that emerged in the late 20th century, shifting the scholarly focus from history as an objective chronicle to memory as an active, continuous process of meaning-making. A foundational premise of the field is the distinction, and often fundamental opposition, between memory and history. As the French historian *Pierre Nora* argues, "Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name... History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer"(8). Because modern societies suffer from the acceleration of history, spontaneous memory has been fractured; this provokes the creation of sites of memory to deliberately anchor human connection to the past. Furthermore, memory is recognized as a deep social phenomenon. In fact, sociologist Maurice Halbwachs points to the source of all individual memories as shaped by social frameworks of memory, meaning that people acquire, organize, and recall their past through the structures provided by the groups to which they belong, such as family, religion, or social class. Building upon this, Jan Assmann divides collective memory into two distinct categories: communicative memory and cultural memory.

Communicative memory relies on everyday informal interaction and has a limited time depth of about 80 to 100 years, or three to four interacting generations. However, cultural memory reaches into the absolute, mythical past and requires formal institutions, specialized careers, and material symbols to preserve a group's identity. In a contemporary context, scholars like Alison Landsberg and Michael Rothberg have expanded the field to include prosthetic memory and multidirectional memory. These concepts explore how mass culture allows individuals to take on deeply felt memories of events they did not live through, thus challenging the idea that memory belongs exclusively to specific biological or ethnic groups. Memory, here, is defined not just as a descriptive practice but as a symbolic representation of the past embedded in social action.

Bapsi Sidhwa's The Crow Eaters is a chronicle of the life, ambition, and familial struggles of Faradun "Freddy" Junglewalla, a second-generation, handsome, and sweet-talking Parsi patriarch. Set at the end of the nineteenth century, the novel depicts Freddy's migration from his ancestral village in southern India to Lahore in Punjab, as he seeks better prospects for his family. Accompanied by his pregnant wife, infant daughter, and formidable mother-in-law, he undertakes this journey in recognition of the limited future his village offers. Through a combination of shrewd business acumen, strategic loyalty to British colonial rulers, and occasional criminality, Freddy amasses considerable wealth and emerges as a dominant figure within the small Parsi community in the region.

Beyond its comic and picturesque elements, *The Prophetess* is a novel deeply invested in the survival of a minority community. The Parsis, followers of the prophet Zarathustra, fled Persia to escape religious persecution, settling in India under strict conditions of assimilation and exclusivity. Sidhwa utilizes Freddy's rhetoric and his family's evolution to explore how this insular community navigates its precarious existence. Memory functions in the novel as the primary mechanism for survival. This is continuously enacted through the invocation of ancient Persian pasts, the rigid transmission of religious purity, and the daily rituals surrounding sacred fires, as the Jungalwalla family staves off the threat of cultural absorption.

Cultural Memory and the Myth of Origins

Throughout the novel, Freddy frequently holds court in a sitting room, imparting his pragmatic and often cynical wisdom to his children and their friends. In one such extensive monologue, he explains the necessity of adapting to the ruling powers, in this case the British Empire. To justify his cynicism, he invokes the foundation narrative of the Parsi people, drawing a direct line from the ancient exile to current survival strategies in India.

There are hardly a hundred and twenty thousand Parsis in the world—and still we maintain our identity—why? Booted out of Persia at the time of the Arab invasion 1,300 years ago, a handful of our ancestors fled to India with their sacred fires. Here they were granted sanctuary by the prince Yadav Rana on condition that they did not eat beef, wear rawhide sandals, or convert the susceptible masses. Our ancestors weren't too proud to bow to his will. To this day, we do not allow conversion to our faith—or mixed marriages (Sidhwa 145).

This clearly illustrates the mechanics of cultural memory as defined by Jan Assmann. Unlike communicative memory, which fades across generations, cultural memory is based on fixed points in the past and is cast in symbols that are preserved in oral myths. Freddy's invocation of the founding narrative of the nation and the subsequent flight to India is a monumental myth that serves as an intensive identity-forming function for the present. By carrying their sacred fires with them, the ancestors exercised an object that remained stable, a symbol capable of being transferred from one generation to another.

Freddy utilizes this cultural memory to validate his present-day actions, striving to secure the community's survival. The group reconstructs its past in accordance with the predominant thoughts and needs of the present. For Freddy, the historical capitulation to the Hindu prince Yadav Rana is not a mark of subjugation but a celebrated blueprint for self-empowerment. He uses this ancient memory to justify his obsequious behavior toward

the British colonial administration. Furthermore, this memory establishes the rigid boundaries of the group. Here, memory acts as a regulatory social framework. The past is reclaimed to dictate the physical and social boundaries of the community, supporting Jan Assmann's theory that cultural memory is inherently selective, structured, and specific to a group and its values.

Organic Memory and the Policing of Ethnic Boundaries

As Freddy's children grow older, the rigid boundaries of class identity are tested. His gentle and sensitive son, Yazdi, falls deeply in love with an Anglo-Indian girl named Rosie Watson and begs his father for permission to marry her. Freddy is horrified by the prospect of a mixed-race marriage. When Yazdi points out that Rosie is a human being and a fine person, Freddy attempts to rationalize his bigotry by articulating a pseudo-scientific belief in the biological transmission of spiritual heritage. "I believe in some kind of a tiny spark that is carried from parent to child, on through generations ... a kind of inherited memory of wisdom and righteousness, reaching back to the times of Zarathustra ... What happens if you marry outside our kind? The spark so delicately nurtured, so subtly balanced, meets something totally alien and unmatched. Its precise balance is scrambled. It reverts to the primitive" (Sidhwa 125).

Freddy's argument relies heavily on the concept of organic memory. This pattern emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As historians like Laura Otis have noted, this framework proposed that memory and heredity were essentially the same and that one inherited memories from ancestors along with their physical features (Otis 186) In Freddy's worldview, memory is not merely a social or cultural construct; it is imagined as a biological entity that physically resides in the bloodline. To marry an outsider is to introduce an alien element that disrupts this genetic memory, causing it to revert to the primitive state.

This organic model of memory is intrinsically tied to identity politics and racial purity. Freddy weaponizes this biological logic to prevent his son from marrying a non-Parsi, viewing the Anglo-Indian girl as a threat to the unbroken chain of memory stretching back to Zarathustra. This stands in stark contrast to modern, mass-mediated forms of memory. For instance, Alison Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory argues that modern technologies allow individuals to take on memories that are not naturally or biologically inherited, thereby challenging the essential logic of group identities. Yazdi, who feels deep empathy for Rosie's suffering, is intuitively operating on a level of prosthetic or empathetic connection. However, Freddy fundamentally rejects this. For Freddy, memory is exclusively private property, tied intimately to descent and inheritance, and cannot be

transported across ethnic lines without destroying the identity of the group itself.

The Threat of Forgetting and the Drive for Legacy

At the age of 65, Faradun Jungalwalla realizes he is dying. Bedridden and reflecting on his life journey, he experiences a serene acceptance of his mortality. However, this acceptance is coupled with a desperate, compelling desire to ensure that his ideology and pragmatic worldview survive. He begins to summon his children to his bedside to impart his final philosophies regarding wealth, the cosmos, and political survival in a rapidly changing India. This poignant realization highlights the profound vulnerability of communicative memory, and Jan Assmann outlines that communicative memory is non-institutional, living entirely in everyday interaction. Because of this, it has "only a limited time depth which normally reaches no farther back than eighty years" (Assmann 85).

Freddy is acutely aware of his limitations. He knows that spontaneous, lived memory is ephemeral and that few would remember, even in a year, that a man called Faradun ever existed. Confronted with the inevitable erasure of his personal existence, Freddy seeks to embed himself into the foundational ideology of his people.

By shifting his focus from being remembered as a person to lingering as an influence on the mind, Freddy's transition represents a movement from individual, communicative memory into a structured and enduring framework. He seeks to preserve his pragmatic, survivalist worldview. He believes that the strength of God comes to the man of good action, becoming the guiding consciousness of the prosperous dynasty of future Jungalwallas. This reflects the perilous notion that memory installs remembrance within the sacred, as a defense against the void of forgetting. Freddy attempts to consecrate his own life's philosophy, transforming his personal self into a quasi-religious doctrine for his descendants to follow. He effectively attempts to make his ideology a site of memory for his family, ensuring that even in the nation of India during Partition, the Jungalwalla lineage will survive by adhering to his ingrained psychological frameworks.

Conclusion

Bapsi Sidhwa's The Crow Eaters offers a rich, comedic, yet deeply profound exploration of how a diasporic community navigates the precarious waters of history. Through the framework of memory studies, the novel transcends its status as a mere family saga to become a study in the mechanics of cultural survival. Faredoon Jungalwalla acts as the ultimate architect of memory for his lineage. By fiercely guarding the cultural memory of the Parsi exile, weaponizing the concept of organic, inherited memory to maintain ethnic purity, and finally, deliberately orchestrating his ideological legacy to outlast his physical body, Freddy ensures the continuity of his people. Sidhwa's text aligns with the theories of

Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann, and Pierre Nora, demonstrating that for the Parsi community in India, memory is not a passive archive of what has passed. Instead, it is a highly curated, deeply political, and fiercely defended structure that protects their identity against the relentless, erasing tides of history.

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