

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 3 March 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

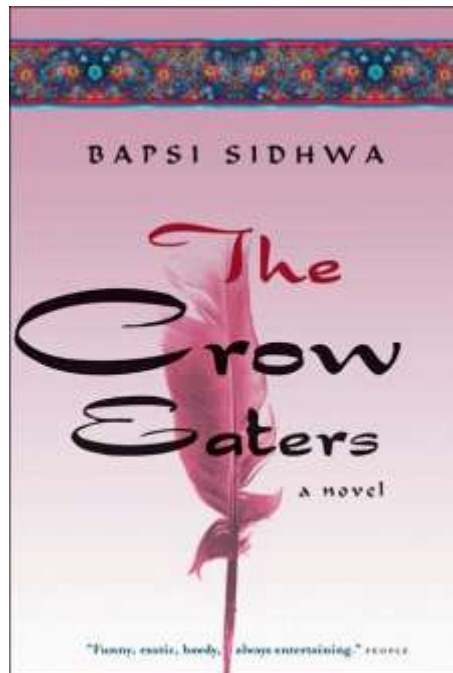
G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

## Invisible Subordination: Reading *The Crow Eaters* Through a Feminist Lens

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar

---



### Trapped Psyche

Over centuries, women have been leading a life that has been manoeuvred by the patriarchs. They have had their set behavioural roles in a pattern so designed by their biology and culture ever since childhood that it naturally leads to the

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 3 March 2012

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar

Invisible Subordination: Reading *The Crow Eaters* Through a Feminist Lens

subordination of women. The psyche is further trapped for any nonconformity by means of myths, folklore and religion so much so that a feeling of oppression seldom arises. It is for this reason that Simone de Beauvoir writes,

my childhood had been nourished by myths forged by men and I hadn't reacted to them in at all the same way I should have done If I had been a boy. (Simone de Beauvoir 103)

One comes to realise that women have unquestionably accepted what came their way and that they have been unable to recognize the subjugation conspired against them. In doing so, they have shown active participation in their subordination. The reason for this is the routine ideology which has made women passive, docile and above all ignorant.

### **Bapsi Sidhwa, A Powerful Feminist Writer**

Many authors have recognised this conspiracy and have made an effort to portray it in their works. Bapsi Sidhwa has been a keen observer of the society and its role in managing the women. She gives a clear picture of the entire scheme under which men succeed in exercising their control over women. The first and foremost preference of man has been to limit the area of exposure for a woman. She is, therefore, restricted within the four walls of the house. Within this limited periphery she is assigned multitude of responsibilities that mars her ability to observe, comprehend, object or fight. On a number of occasions a woman is placed in situations when she sees herself face to face the dual principles of the society.

#### ***The Crow Eaters***

Sidhwa's presentation of the women in *The Crow Eaters* is a conscious effort to give a picture that could awaken the thought and give a scope to analyze the muddle that women are ensnared into so that it can serve as an active agent and work for the betterment of women. Sidhwa writes: "I have been able to address...my larger concerns in my writing: concerns that engage my compassion and my sense of justice" (Sidhwa 31).

#### **Characters in *The Crow Eaters***

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 3 March 2012

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar

Invisible Subordination: Reading *The Crow Eaters* Through a Feminist Lens

In *The Crow Eaters*, Putli is one character which is portrayed by Sidhwa in a traditional role but it does not suggest that she advocates patriarchal ideology. Her characterization of Putli accounts for Sidhwa's sensitivity to raise the aspirations of women by bringing about a realization of the manacles that bind her which she has to break.

Though one gets an idea that Faredoon Junglewala, alias, Freddy is central to the novel, but the fact is that women characters occupy the novel most. The first women character taken for this study, Putli, is methodically a traditional housewife with a philosophy that it is her relationship with her husband, children, relatives that can make her complete and happy. Sidhwa writes:

Putli was content. She fulfilled herself in housework and in the care of her children and husband... Blissful in her knowledge, she would, over the years, produce seven children. From the joyous climax of conception to the delivery, Putli would enjoy it all (23).

Putli is always seen full of energy and it is impossible for her to think of anything else than the role she is in- a wife and a mother. Despite the entire family of servants in line for her she prefers to cook and serve her husband and sons herself. She remarkably administers the duties within the house and whenever required she takes the charge of the house and its members. She calms her hysterical mother on some occasions and on others, out of concern for her husband, puts an end to 'Jermanoo's extravagant gossip sessions and firmly controlling her ransacking of the store' (41). It gives us an impression that Putli is in a domineering position but it needs to be mentioned here that such an arrangement is a premeditated act of the man of the house. A woman is given a free hand as long as things go in the desired direction and the actions confirm an overbearing environment for the head of the family. This is suggested by Freddy when he claims that he controlled his wife Putli with certain maxims:

If she did or wanted to do something that he considered intolerable and disastrous, he would take stern and unshakable stand...If she did, or planned something he considered stupid and wasteful, but not really

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 3 March 2012

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar

Invisible Subordination: Reading *The Crow Eaters* Through a Feminist Lens

harmful, he would voice his objections and immediately humour her with his benevolent sanction. In all other matters, she had a free hand (13).

### **Patriarchy's Key Institution**

Sidhwa makes a point that the key institution of patriarchy is the family through which it affects control and conformity. Whenever trouble or a deviation is observed man tends to make woman a scape-goat blaming her for the entire crisis. Freddy does the same when he tends to blame Putli for being responsible for the condition of their son Yazdi who had turned into a poet and wanted to marry a prostitute. He simply puts the blame onto Putli saying, 'It's your entire fault really' (138).

### **Wifehood and Motherhood**

There is no doubt that wifehood and motherhood have been glorified and in absence of alternatives women tend to accept it as their only destiny. "Women are admired for their ability and desire to sacrifice, to suffer and live for others. This has been a psychological trap for women. Such glorification is like the sugar coating on bitter pills and, for generations, women have fallen for this bit of sugar and accepted a role that has confined, suffocated and immobilized them" (Bhasin & Khan 26).

As a consequence, such a glorification places Putli in struggle when she is expected to depart from the ritual of walking three paces behind the husband. The departure is too painful and she feels as being marched naked in public. What she has learned and absorbed is that as a dutiful and God-fearing wife, she must never walk a step ahead of her husband but when Putli is forced by Freddy to forego the ritual "she considered this hypocritical and pretentious, and most barbarous" (188). Her situation explains the hypocrisy of the patriarchs who first govern women by set rules expecting from them docility, but do not mind shedding the conventions with which she is bound when a commercial issue is concerned. Freddy tends to use Putli in order to mark a social standing among the British whom he interacts with at the Government House for formal tea parties. To exhibit an orthodox way of life would certainly not be fruitful for

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 3 March 2012

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar

Invisible Subordination: Reading *The Crow Eaters* Through a Feminist Lens

him. So he forces Putli to adopt English ways when taken for such parties placing her in situations she finds most difficult to cope with.

### **Women Cherishing Patriarchal Values**

Putli represents that class of women who cherish patriarchal values and make all efforts to abide by them without any resentment. Such an effort to conform to the ways of patriarchy is because “through the process of socialization and enculturation, woman has formed some images about herself in her mind; cultural values have been taught to her. She is not ready to do those things due to which these images about her will be broken. It is because of these that while achieving the highest position in society; a woman has to follow her duties, which are prescribed by the society. She tries to make herself fit in that image” (Chhatre 125).

It is essential to make note of the fact that as homemakers women are delegated certain authorities that ranges in and around the home affairs. By doing so, the society tends to promote a spirited co-operation from conforming women to prepare the next line of generation for similar role play. Putli, therefore, considers it as her ultimate duty to check her daughter Jasmine who, she observes, trespasses the threshold of customs by preceding her husband when she walks down the steps. Putli, thus, plays an active role in maintaining the hierarchal system and keeping the order of the society. There is no doubt that the “family not merely mirrors the order in the state and educates its children to follow it, it also creates and constantly reinforces that order” (Lerner 217).

### **Menstruation as Impure and Accursed**

Sidhwa also highlights a major aspect that accounts to demean the position of women. She makes a suggestion of how a woman’s sexual function of menstruation is manifested as impure and accursed, thus, forcing women to be segregated during the state of impurity. The author out rightly points at the treatment a woman receives and the superstition attached with it as:

Thither they are banished for the duration of their unholy state. Even the sun, moon and stars are defiled by her impure gaze, according to a superstition which has its source in primitive man's fear of blood (70).

Putli's visits to the other room, 'a tiny windowless cubicle with an iron beadstead, an iron chair and a small steel table' (70) attributed to the contaminating potentialities of menstrual blood, is taken favourably by her as it is the only chance she had exclusively for her own self. It did not bring about any guilt as it was religiously enforced. It is little understood that such a delineation of female body as impure or a polluting agent tends to cripple the psychology of women. But this has been the state of women over the years and is witnessed in smaller or greater degree everywhere.

### **Participation in One's Own Subordination**

Putli participates in the process of her own subordination since she is psychologically shaped so as to internalize the idea of her own inferiority. The role of a wife restricts her self-development. The role of a mother does it even more and "sometimes women play their roles not so much because they want to, as because they have to in order to survive economically and psychologically. Virtually all women engage in the feminine role playing" (Tong 208).

### **Rodabai and Patriarchal Ideology**

Similar to Putli, Rodabai too is trapped by the patriarchal ideology. She is credited few rights and authority but the basic laws are secured with the man who is the undisputed head of the family. Like Putli, Rodabai is at the beck and call of her husband, Sir Easymoney. She stands by his side like an attentive servant who at a subtle sign promptly places 'two silver spittoons by the reclining men' (220). Since she is under the protection of her husband she is allowed to share the position and power of the husband which she may in turn use 'to exploit men and women of the lower class' (Lerner 219). By means of this delegation of power, Rodabai sacks the servant who had been kind enough to carry her daughter Tanya on his shoulder when she gets tired walking. The nanny is forgiven only when she falls on Rodabai's feet and swears that

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 3 March 2012

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar

Invisible Subordination: Reading *The Crow Eaters* Through a Feminist Lens

she would never allow such a thing to happen again. Sidhwa definitely reveals here the moral standards which are on the high in order to keep the young girls under strict surveillance and away from any kind of interaction with men so that their chastity could be well guarded. The servants kind gesture is taken scandalously since “In the India of Billy's days, girls like jewels, were still being tucked away and zealously guarded by parents, brothers, grandparents, aunts and uncles. Everyone kept a sharp eye out. Even the innocent horseplay of children was savagely punished...” (205).

### **Sexual Knowledge – Carefully Nurtured Ignorance**

At this point the author takes up another important issue that tends to mar the healthy development of a girl child. The ignorance policy regarding any sort of sexual knowledge is practiced so that the girl child is not only pure, physically a virgin, but also innocent in mind and thought. Sidhwa suggests that “a gigantic conspiracy was practiced by an entire society to keep its girls ridiculously 'innocent'.

The wealthier the family, the more ignorant the daughters. This carefully nurtured ignorance had a high market value in the choice of a bride” (229). The girls are left to learn on their own by chance while the same practice is ignored in case of young boys who tend to have lot more premarital experience as is seen in case of Billy who ‘invited the Hira Mandi girls three times, read the Kama Sutra and discussed sex with his friends in a sombre and illuminating exchange of detail’ (230).

The author makes a clear indication of the sexual domination of men over women to the latter’s disadvantage. The denial of sexuality adversely affects either the psyche or the health of the women. While Tanya’s chastity and ignorance towards the ‘fundamentals of sex’ heightens her marketability, dire implications can also be seen on her health. Since her sexual cravings remained unexplained and the social watchdogs ensured that it remained so, her nocturnal weakness, her bed wetting, can be seen as a consequence of the same. This ideal of innocence, an attribute of the bourgeois women, thus divulges the repression of women.

### **Tanya, Reduced as a Sexual Object**

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 3 March 2012

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar

Invisible Subordination: Reading *The Crow Eaters* Through a Feminist Lens

As an educated and intelligent girl, Tanya is introduced as a promising character that would break free the hollow social mores. She is reduced as a sexual object by Behram who scrutinizes her ‘protruded...most heavily gorgeous, upthrust pair of brassiered bosom he ever hoped to see’ (201). She falls prey to the constricting traditions that sets the one and only goal for her i.e. marriage. She accepts the marriage proposal and falls in love with the man who rejects her very own elder sister for whom the proposal initially was. Man tends to see women as a status symbol and therefore, place more value to her beauty. Tanya’s beauty makes her marketable while her elder sister is a bankrupt in this term. She also fails to see the affront directed at her sister in the rejection and is easily swayed by the adulation directed to win her.

What girl, untouched, unknissed, and guaranteed virgin at sixteen, can resist the heady flattery implicit in the anxiety of a young man threatening to transform himself into a corpse for love of her?... Her fancy soared and she fell in love with the scrawny youth who had made them laugh so much two evenings back. (209)

Her union with the man does not elevate her position but rather she loses her identity and her independence and is reduced to become nothing more than a ‘loving and obedient slave’ (231). Her attractive and outward personality that had attracted Behram becomes a cause of his jealousies and he dearly wishes that ‘he were a Mohammedan and could cover her up in a *burqa*. Sensible people, the Muslims, he thought’ (240). If on one hand he wants Tanya to be ideally a traditional wife, at the same time he wants her to be smart and illustrated. Like all tradition bound subservient women, Tanya too compromises on several issues believing it to be out of love for her husband.

### **No Constructive Plan in Life**

These women in *The Crow Eaters* do not demonstrate to have any definite constructive plan, expectations, desires so as to raise their status in the society. They tend to give way to the stereotypes and accept them conveniently. They are made to perform the ideological work in every day sphere by will. This will is brought about

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 3 March 2012

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar

Invisible Subordination: Reading *The Crow Eaters* Through a Feminist Lens



by the conditioning of their mind, an effort that is in full play since the day of birth of the girl-child. Man thus succeeds in rendering women fit for life long vicarious submission. John Stuart Mill writes:

All causes, social and natural, combine to make it unlikely that women should be collectively rebellious to the power of man (Mill 443).

Sidhwa has a profound desire to elevate the position of women in the general setup of the society. This could be done only when one recognised the problems that hold back the self actualization of women. Through the portrayal of women character like Putli, Rodabai and Tanya, Sidhwa definitely succeeds in bringing into discussion the issues women need to realise and overcome in order to strengthen her position in the social edifice and become strong enough to lead a confident and free life.

---

---

### Works Cited

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. and Ed. H. M. Parshley.

London: Picador, 1988.

Bhasin, Kamla and Nighat S. Khan. *Feminism in South Asia*. New

Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986.

Chhatre, Lata. "Empowerment of Women: The Buddhist Perspective."

Ed. Meena Kelkar and Deepti Gangavane. *Feminism in Search of an Identity:*

*The Indian Context*. New Delhi: Rawat, 2003.

Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.

Mill, John Stuart. *The Subjection of Women*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970.

Sidhwa, Bapsi. *The Crow Eaters*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2001

Sidhwa, Bapsi. "Why Do I Write?" Ed. Dhawan and Kapadia. *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa*. New Delhi; Prestige, 1996.

Tong, Rosemary. *Feminist thought*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 3 March 2012

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar

Invisible Subordination: Reading *The Crow Eaters* Through a Feminist Lens

---

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar  
Assistant Professor of English  
Seth Jai Prakash Mukand Lal Institute of Engineering and Technology (JMIT)  
Radaur  
India  
[pvdameta@gmail.com](mailto:pvdameta@gmail.com)

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

12 : 3 March 2012

Priyanka Singh, Ph.D. Scholar

Invisible Subordination: Reading *The Crow Eaters* Through a Feminist Lens