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An Exhaustive Study of the Themes in Bapsi Sidhwa's Fictions

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Abstract

The purpose of this research article is to highlight Bapsi Sidhwa's creative achievement which chiefly lies in recuperating the submerged voices and weaving their personal stories into larger histories of community and nation. Moreover, the researcher explores the thematic apprehensions in Sidhwa's novels - sense of community; man-woman relationships and gender issues; migration and diaspora; history and transgression; and the idea of nation, and how these themes are welded into one artistic whole.

Keywords

Partition; Diaspora; Identity; Migration; Subjugation.

Bapsi Sidhwa's perception of the political and cultural events and transformations taking place swiftly since 1940's to the end of the last century is most expressively and dramatically ruminated in her representation of her own community. Almost all her novels in overt or covert manner, imprecating the history of Parsi migration to India, and enlighten in highly nuanced description almost every aspect of this community's multifaceted but highly individualistic modes of survival, perseverance and triumph in becoming an inevitable part of Indian life. She engraves into reader's mind a distinct concept of Parsi identity.

No erudition on a sub-continental writer can be considered in negation of the sole dynamics of the region. Every creative author, whatsoever one's period or place of birth, and not withstanding of the community to which one belongs, is psychologically shaped by this widespread forces at work, yielding, that these features (period, place, and community) do exercise their occurrence in various ways. And Bapsi Sidhwa is no exclusion to this sensation. Thus, maintaining loyalty to the label of the book *The Crow Eaters*, the researcher wishes to discover the universal contemporary apprehensions in Sidhwa's novels and the methods in which her biological life, her unrestricted writing styles and the times in which she grew up, inclined her writings.

Sidhwa's writings are points at three key elements that of being a Parsee, of being an associate of the 'Second Sex' and of rising up in the partition, living in Pakistan and seeing the progresses in the country. These three constituents invoke, in various variations and mixtures, the fiction she writes. It is this design which the researcher has focused on and tried to transport in this critical review on her narratives.

Sidhwa's first novel, *The Crow Eaters* has her community in center stage. The other novelists too, in varying degrees move everywhere in the community. But this is supplementary, because of her mindfulness with the community than any evangelistic Parsee enthusiasm on her past. The fact that *The Crow*

Eaters, its title as well as its gratified was not very well approved by the Parsee community tells its own tale. In the *Ice-Candy-Man*, the Parsees, like the other communities, feel the streams of the partition, both before and after. It is Parsee only in the setting that the novel is recounted by Lenny, the polio-stricken youngster, through whose eyes the actions divulges. Sidhwa also admits to the fact that her system is a powerful instrument for affecting social cognizance in people.

An American Brat deals with this state in post-Bhutto Pakistan, and how it traces the Parsees who live in Pakistan. Her elaborate knowledge of the Parsee community provides her the autonomy to gag about its peculiarities and unconventionalities, and at the same time speak forcefully about the sense of estrangement that they experienced in the subcontinent. She has no misgivings about writing amusingly about and even mocking certain aspects of Parsee life and behaviour. But at the same time she is at pains to express the Parsee point of interpretation about a multitude of issues, their apparent studied indifference to the freedom movement, their insecurity stemming from the feeling of being 'outsiders' in India, and more recently, the bitterness of Pakistani Parsee against the rule of the 'Mullahs' in Pakistan. It is a vivid balance that she accomplishes in the novel.

Any novelist who lived through the partition cannot discount it. And the partition is common anxiety in all her novels, either directly or indirectly. While it functions as a background for much of *The Pakistani Bride* and *The Crow Eaters*, it is the issue in *Ice-Candy-Man*. In fact, *Ice-Candy Man* has accomplished the status of a classic on partition. The partition scenario is depicted, perhaps for the first time in English, from a Pakistani standpoint. Sidhwa, as a citizen of Pakistan, has a clear outline with regard to the partition. Her brief, that the Pakistani point of view has not got penetrable acceptance, led her to try and re-write history from the Pakistani point of view. The myths built up around Gandhi and Nehru, by Indian and British

historians, the exaltedness credited to Gandhi and the complexity with which Nehru was associated, and the consequent satirizing of Jinnah - all this she has sought to correct. She has also sought to depict Muslims as sufferers during the partition unrests and upbringing.

Bapsi Sidhwa depicts the partition scenario impartially. In fact, how the news of the partition and then the actual event itself changed the subcontinent relations is echoed in the changes that occur in the microcosm of India and Pakistan populated by Lenny, her parents, Ayah and her circle of enthusiasts. Sidhwa's worth as a writer dealing with the partition is that she has brought her own exceptional vision to bear on the events. And her forte is that she does not falter to own up and is not repentant about what she feels and why. Bapsi Sidhwa, the woman and Bapsi Sidhwa, the novelist are intimate. It would be fashionable to label her a feminist, but her insolence about this is quite clear. She does not believe in feminism, but more in involving her readers and appealing their sensibilities by writing from the point of view of women. Thus, the state to which women in Pakistan are currently concentrated is echoed in *An American Brat*. The past was worse, and *The Crow Eaters*, *The Pakistani Bride* and *Ice-Candy-Man* exemplify this. While her first novel accounts the obstacles of women in the Parsee society, *The Pakistani Bride* is about the rejection of women in Pakistani society. *Ice-Candy-Man* speaks of women in general, the thrust being on fallen women. Hira Mandi occurs recurrently in her novels, almost all of them, spoken of by her male characters. It is the attitude of her characters, both male and female, that make readers select what is wrong and what is right. Sidhwa's influence as novelist depends in no callous measure, upon her upheaval against the stifling, oppressive and patriarchal society of the contemporary time.

But Sidhwa is not simply the tone of women in Pakistan. She has not faltered to highlight other social and political glitches. She has waged a persistent war through her art against delusions, taboos, orthodoxy, repression

and other unwholesome aspects of life in the Asia. She has a thorough understanding of the workings of society and attacks its injustices. Her concern is not just the dignity of woman but the dignity of human life. Sidhwa's women characters belong to two categories, the high society women such as Slavesister, Godmother, Lenny, Carol, Feroza and Zareen, etc. and women who belong to the lower strata of society such as Afshan, Putli, Ayah, Zaitoon, Zohra and Miriam, etc. Women belonging to both segments of the society are dominated by the men. Their social status does not change, the way in which they are treated by their male counterparts. However, women characters carry a ray of hope.

Sidhwa's art and technique has moulded her women characters in a new way. Her women characters never die. This approach pervades the message of hope and although women do struggle for survival till the last breath of their life, they eventually move towards the uplift and regeneration of life. Bapsi Sidhwa presents a further stratification of Hindu and Muslim women. This stratification may or may not be without bias. There are a number of researches have been succumbed and customary that that the women of the third world face the similar kind of squalor and the women of the south Asian continent are marginalized and subjugated irrespective of their religion. The epistemological categorization which serves as a powerful apparatus in the hands of the socially privileged class allows them to resist. Through the model of a veined social inequality the overriding class practically excludes the oppressed class from assuming subjective social positions. The intimacy between labeling and politics is to be supposed as a significant and extremely subtle truth. Moreover, the political and the cultural contexts that give rise and bear witness to the dynamics of class relations are conditioned by the political master-slave relation produced by categorizations. The primary aim of such categorization is to create modes of 'alterity' which can be used to restrict the

subordinated to the periphery, occluding their narratives including history, and thus keeping them from taking up subject positions.

A close look at social hierarchies reveals how they comprise different levels of consciousness, each of which is mediated by the other. The social disorder of oppressed status, while ideologically 'fixed' exists only with reference to those above it, so neither is independent of the other.

What I feel that the defeat of woman is because of not accepting the personhood of a woman which is her subjectivity/individuality by the privileged one class. The Position of woman is realized on the basis of discrimination of the roles. Bapsi Sidhwa has taken this mission with a purpose to eradicate all the taboos created by the power class. (76)

In *The Pakistani Bride*, the moral code of law plays an important role to decide the fate of women as in the case of Zaitoon. She does not make any effort to halt the rules and orders her father imposed upon her. She indicates to carry on as the code of honour prescribed. She was trapped in the patriarchal conservative society where there was no way out in her life to go beyond the four walls. The women were sandwiched between the traumas of the two communities. The ordeal of partition has also made a great bearing on the life and attention of the women. The position of women was no more than of the part player and nothing else. The high position in the society is always ruled by the men as they do not deliberate to implore power in the hand of women. The hierarchy of power has, from the beginning, created a vacuum especially in the life of third world women which put them on the sideline through a consistent agency of ideology.

The writer is an unbeatable champion of human consciousness. Her novels depict the social, political and spiritual picture of the south Asian continent. Sidhwa has also expressed her faith in the essential goodness of the human soul, which safeguards the self-respect of mankind despite the worst

circumstances of life. She is a realist who dreams of a new social order which can ensure equality and prosperity. Her vision of the future is optimistic. Her novels are, in a way deeply worried with the serious problems aggressive the bright future of the country. She endeavours to achieve cultural integration among different communities. Like the great social reformers of the past, she is fully conscious of those social evils which hinder the development of the country and tries to eliminate them. She strongly attacks the preventive traditions and social evils in her attempts to form a universal culture and sensibility.

It is very stimulating to trace and portray the central ideas that form part of the novelist's view of life. Our care is drawn mainly by different aspects of her thinking. First, she has a clear vision of the future of Pakistan. The image of a prosperous and efficient country that she has in her mind finds powerful expression in *An American Brat* and *The Pakistani Bride*. Secondly, Sidhwa launches an inflexible attack on what she calls 'anti-social tendencies' of life and the stifling aspects of the traditional way of life in *An American Brat* and *Ice-Candy- Man*. Her novels stress on harmonious co-existence of different communities and religions. She entreats for a synthesis, an integration of the cultural values of different communities, which alone can end the tension between two conflicting ideologies, restore peace and show the way forward.

The brain child of the novelist is embodied in *The Crow Eaters*, *Ice-Candy-Man*, *An American Brat* and *Water*. Besides this, she has also been very specific about the selection of characters to present the spirit of the age and time for which she manages to take the protagonists specially women, who have refused to accept the narrow and constricting roles to them under vague terms as *honour*, *shame*, and *modesty*. She made every endeavour to present the women from remote sphere to the public sphere so that they could be able to make their voice known. In India and Pakistan, the position of women is of the unrecognized voice as they are being quieted because of historical

dominance. What Bapsi Sidhwa realizes to work for the subjectivity and personhood which the hallmark of the contemporary women's writings.

This study of the subject matter and conception of Bapsi Sidhwa reveals that she is a writer with a mission and purpose, that she offers not only scathing criticism of the contemporary sub-continental social and political scene, but also gives signal of her consistent exploration for a solution of the problems besetting society. In this effort to bring about social and political transformation the writer appears to have been deeply influenced by some of the seminal ideas of Ghalib, Allama Iqbal and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. She was also predisposed by some women writers like Zehra Nigar, Kishwar Naheed. Sidhwa is worried with the marginalization and the discriminations against woman. Sidhwa's *An American Brat* is a sensitive depiction of the impact of modern America on a new arrival. Feroza got asylum in the lap of traditional conundrum of Pakistani led fundamentalism.

An insight into how the heterosexual narratives ensure female subjection can be derived from Kathleen Barry's study involving male and female sexual orientation remarks: As sexual power is learned by adolescent boys through the social experience of their sex drive, so do girls learn that the locus of sexual power is male...As young girls become aware of her own increasing sexual feelings...She turns away from here to fore primary relationships with girlfriends. (218)

Sidhwa's *Water* (2004) is one of the breakthroughs in the tradition of writing culture and values of the country India and the globe. The novel involves a notion that no one values can sustain for so long as it requires constant progressive one. The original script was suggested by Deepa Mehta to be adopted into film but later on it was written in suggestive form by Sidhwa with clarification. Bapsi Sidhwa herself has to say; "Besides, being an enthralling story, the plot also deals with the domineering hold that traditions

have on women and tells of subjugation and constraints that govern even a girl child life in a patriarchal society” (Interview, Feb. 2008).

The images of women in Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels are not continuing inert and prolong to bear male oppressive environments. Bapsi Sidhwa has depicted the ever-changing status of individual in their societies. She has given a trivial note on her blog that states her susceptibilities towards women and the society:

How long can one go on pandering to bigots? It is one thing to have freedom of speech, although it’s quite another to use that freedom to claim that any television show which depicts Muslims as regular, law-abiding folks next-door is telling a dangerous lie. But this move, perpetrated first by the evangelical wing nuts and secondly by a prominent corporation like Lowe’s, is abusing freedom of speech ,while dealing a nasty backhand to our country’s vaunted freedom of religion. I was heartened by all the major networks and comedy talk show host’s responses to the absurdity of the bigots’ claims. (Blog on official website)

Sidhwa is a truthful and dedicated writer and her criticisms and her solutions arise out of her sense of commitment and belongingness to the subcontinent of India and Pakistan. It is authoritative that these ideas to be taken up discussed and adapted if necessary, with the same sincerity that they have been voiced.

Jointly, all her works cannot be located in the category of Parsi writing or any other group. The preference of her subjects and the profound consciousness of her characters, mindscape and landscapes confirm to an unfettered, individualistic perception of experiences that cannot be coded or enclosed. She divulges an indomitable will to accomplish beyond the available mores. Notwithstanding any appraisal of her as either Parsi writer or a Pakistani writer, her searching analysis of diverse kinds of human condition

surpasses both categories. Writing is an organic necessity for Sidhwa. She writes, “If I had not written, I would not have maintained my sanity” (*Houstonian Magazine* 51). Writing about her community, women and the subjugated – show her deep association with the pain, grief, loss and humiliation endured by people. Writing has specified her grasp of the times fleeting that astoundingly in her narratives comes dramatically alive.

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