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## **“THE NOVELS OF BAPSI SIDHWA: A STUDY IN FEMALE CHARACTERS”**

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### **Introduction**

“In this age of globalization it is really very difficult to categorize some writers. Bapsi Sidhwa is one of them. She belongs to India, Pakistan and the United States simultaneously but she likes herself to be described as a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi women” (Rajan). All her four novels are about her perceptions of life as a Parsi, Punjabi and American woman respectively she picks up some significant incidents from her own life or from the lives of other people and flashes them out to create a larger reality of fiction.

Bapsi Sidhwa is an award winning Pakintani novelist striving above all to bring women’s issues of the Indian subcontinent into public discussion. She was born in 1938 in Karachi, Pakistan (then part of India), but her family migrated shortly thereafter to Lahore. As a young girl, Sidhwa witnessed first-hand the bloody Partition of 1947, in which seven million Muslims and five million Hindus were uprooted in the largest, most terrible exchange of population that history has known. The Partition was caused by a complicated set of social and political factors, including religious differences and the end of colonialism in India. Sidhwa writes about her childhood, “the ominous roar of distant mobs was a constant of my awareness, alerting me, even at age seven, to a palpable sense of the evil that was taking place in various parts of Lahore” (“New Neighbors”). Sidhwa was also witness to these evils, including an incident in which she found the body of a dead man in a gunnysack at the side of the road.

Characteristically succinct, she says of the event, “I felt more of a sadness than horror” (Mass Review 523). Her home city of Lahore became a border city in Pakistan, and was promptly flooded by hundreds of thousand of war refugees. Many thousands of these were women-victims of rape and torture. Due to lasting shame and their husbands’ damaged pride, many victims were not permitted entry into their homes after being “recovered.” There was a rehabilitation camp with many of these women adjacent to Sidhwa’s house, and she states that she was inexplicably fascinated with these “fallen women”, as they were described to her at the time. She realized from a young age that “victory is celebrated on a woman’s body, vengeance is taken on a woman’s body. That’s very much the way things are, particularly in my part of the world” (Graeber 6). It appears as if realizations such as this inspired Sidhwa’s later activism for the cause of women’s rights.

Sidhwa claims to have had a rather boring childhood, with the exception of the years of strife surrounding the Partition, due partly to a bout with polio, which kept her home schooled. She cites *Little Women* as being the most influential book of her childhood, as it introduced her to “a world of fantasy and reading-I mean extraordinary amounts of reading because that was the only life I had” (Rajan, p. 1). She went on to receive a BA from Kinnaird College for Women, in Lahore. At nineteen, Sidhwa got married, and soon after gave birth to the first of three children. While traveling in Northern Pakistan in 1964, Sidhwa heard the story of a young girl who was murdered by her husband after an attempted escape. She looked into the story and discovered that the girl was a purchased wife, a slave. This discovery moved Sidhwa into action. She began to tell the girl’s story in the form of a novel.

Along with prevailing expectations of women’s place during that time in Pakistan, the responsibilities of raising a family prompted Sidhwa to write in secret.

Although Sidhwa speaks four languages, she made a conscious decision to write in English, partly due to the increased probability of worldwide exposure to issues that concerned her within the subcontinent. At that time there were no English language books published in Pakistan, so after Sidhwa finished writing the novel, she published it herself as *The Bride*. The novel was critically acclaimed for its forceful style and its undeniable ability to speak eloquently of human warmth amid horrible circumstances. She received the Pakistan National Honors of the Patras Bokhri award for *The Bride* in 1985.

Soon after publication of *The Bride*, Sidhwa began work on her second novel, *The Crow Eaters*. The novel is named after derogatory slang referring to the Parsi people, in reference to their supposed propensity for loud and continuous chatter. *The Crow Eaters* is a comedy, which signals an abrupt change from her earlier work. The Parsis, or Zoroastrians, are the socio-religious group to which Sidhwa belongs, a prosperous yet dwindling community of approximately one hundred thousand based predominantly in Bombay. *The Crow Eaters* tells the story of a family within the small Parsi community residing within the huge city of Lahore. Complete with historical information and rich with bawdy, off-color humor, the novel is never boring; as Sidhwa’s acute sense of humor constantly changes from the subtle to the downright disgusting. Nothing is above this humor, which often times leaves the reader feeling guilty for laughing out loud. The main character, Faredoon, relentlessly torments his mother-in-law Jerbanoo, especially about her self-indulgent complaints of impending death. Some of the most hilarious moments involve Faredoon’s detailed and gory description of her funeral. The Parsis practice charity in life as well as death, and their funeral custom of feeding the body to the vultures reflects this belief.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s third novel marked her move into international fame. *Cracking India*, was published in several other countries in 1988 under the title *Ice-Candy-May*. Book sellers stateside feared that an American audience would mistake the unfamiliar occupational name (meaning popsicle vendor) for a drug pusher. The novel is considered by many critics to be the most moving and essential book on

the Indian partition. Told from the awakening consciousness of an observant eight-year-old Parsi girl, the violence of the Partition threatens to collapse her previously idyllic world. The thousands of instances of rape, and public's subsequent memory loss that characterize the Partition are foremost. In the hatred that has fueled the political relations between Pakistan and India since that time, these women's stories were practically forgotten. In one of her infrequent bursts of poetry, Sidhwa writes, "Despite the residue of passion and regret, and loss of those who have in panic fled – the fire could not have burned for... Despite all the ruptured dreams, broken lives, buried gold, bricked-in-rupees, secreted jewelry, lingering hopes... the fire could not have burned for months..." (Cracking India 149) Sidhwa replaces flowing, poetic sentences with forceful criticism when she theorizes about what caused the fires to keep burning. Sidhwa repeatedly condemns the dehumanizing impact that religious zealotry played in promoting mob mentality, separation, and revenge during the Partition. Sidhwa's widely varied narration alternates between opulent description, subtle humor, and bone-chilling strife. The narrator, Lenny, is astute beyond her years, yet the questioning nature of the child is portrayed so skillfully that it allows the author to effectively deal with serious subjects both firmly and with subtlety, whichever suits her purpose. When she discovers that her mother is illegally stockpiling gasoline, Lenny wrongly assumes that her mother is responsible for the bombings that are plaguing Lahore. This image is both funny and disturbing, highlighting the strange mixture of innocence and fear that Lenny is dealing with. When the citizens of Lahore become more apprehensive of the impending Partition, they stratify strictly upon religious lines. Lenny's perceptions of the differences in people changes at the same time. In reference to a Hindu man's caste mark, Lenny proclaims, "Just because his grandfathers shaved their heads and grew stupid tails is nor reason why Hari should." "Not as stupid as you think," says Cousin. "It keeps his head cool and his brain fresh" (Cracking India, 102). Seemingly simple passages such as this one succinctly and with humor on the realities of prejudice, and hint at a child's precise realization of the discriminatory nature of the caste system. The novel is made up of hundreds of such cleverly phrased passages, which make the book quite enjoyable to read despite the clarity with which the troubling passages are depicted.

Sidhwa travels frequently to Pakistan in her capacities as a women's rights activist. Sidhwa works with women to help foster an awareness of their rights, including the organization of large-scale awareness-raising public protests. She also utilizes her position as an acclaimed writer to make numerous public statements in the Pakistani media aimed against repressive measures that harm women and minority communities. She has worked as the voluntary secretary in the Destitute Women and Children's home in Lahore for years, and was appointed to the advisory committee to Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Women's Development.

Since moving to the United States in 1983, Sidhwa has received numerous literary awards both in the U.S. and abroad. In 1987 she was awarded both a Bunting Fellowship at Radcliffe/Harvard and a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts that allowed her to finish *Cracking India*. In 1991

Sidhwa received the Sitara-i-Imitaz, Pakistan's highest national honor in the arts, along with the Liberaturepreis in Germany. In 1993 she published her most recent novel, *An American Brat*, a comical reflection on the confusing friction that different cultures impose upon a Pakistani girl in the United States. The same year she received the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award, which, pleasantly enough, also included one hundred five thousand dollars. The author has received numerous other awards for her writing.

The fiction written by B.S. is of special importance, for it enables us to have an intimate peep into her psyche. The question of minority in the Indian Subcontinent is highly complex, critical and in many ways unresolved. Her works aim at throwing some light on socio-psychological values of the Parsis, their problems and plight and their predicament as delineated in the novels written by her in English because of her own labour she has become a well known novelist from India and Pakistan respectively.

As a novelist, she belongs to that group of women creative writers who have started to depict "determined women for whom the traditional role is inadequate, women who wish to affirm their independence and autonomy and are perfectly capable of assuming new roles and responsibilities". There was an attempt at resurrection of the high condition of woman in our society (and the process is still ongoing) after the introduction of western education, Reformist movements, promotion of women's institutions, the Freedom movement and so on. In post-independence India, when women's education had already commenced and life had started changing, the New Woman started emerging. The spread of education inculcated a sense of individuality among women and aroused an interest in their rights. Women started becoming economically independent and there was a striving for the realization of their own aspirations. The New Woman does not belong totally to either of the two former categories - Brahmavadini or Sadyovadhu, she belongs to a new category. This is a new phenomenon which is still taking place on a large scale and is not confined to a few individuals.

Like other women writers, Bapsi Sidhwa is able to give voice to the marginalized figures of Pakistani society, mainly women. Sidhwa's female characters, in all her other novels are as strong if not stronger than the men who run their lives; in the way that they resist the limitations of the definition of "woman" which circumscribes their identity. Her protagonists, while on the one hand, come alive on the account of their realistic presentation, on the other, they serve as the means of consciousness-raising among the female segment of society. Literature is a powerful tool in the hands of creative writers to modulate and change the societal framework, and Sidhwa through her extremely absorbing and interesting work seeks to contribute to the process of change that has already started all over the world, involving a reconsideration of women's rights and status, and a radical restructuring of society or social thought. Sidhwa was greatly influenced by western feminist literature and in that light she can be considered as a feminist but she does not think herself as a writer writing mainly for women of course her protagonists are mainly women and they invariably win against men in their struggle for survival and honors. Jarbanoo outlives her tormentor, Faredoon Jungewalla, Zaitoon manages to save her life

despite the looming threat. Ayah is liberated from the Shra Mandi and sent back to her family in Amritsar. Feroza facing failure in her first love and inspite of enormous pressure of her family to return to Lahore and her mother's all the efforts of dissuasion for settling in America, she decides to settle down in America. By the prototypal of Sidhwa's female character, there emerges out the image of strong-willed, assertive and courageous women, who resolve their erases in their own way.

Thus, Bapsi Sidhwa portrays in her novels, the vulnerability of women, the power of women, the deviousness of women, the helplessness of women, the courage of women etc. Inevitably, Bapsi Sidhwa's novels clearly emerge as feminine texts concentrated on women's struggle to find and preserve their identity as mother, wife, daughter and above all as human beings, set against the patriarchal modes of the contemporary Pakistani society. Bapsi Sidhwa became the champion of individual freedom which is manifested in varied forms in her novels.

She weaves her novels around feminine, feministic and female experiences. She tries to vivify the image of those women who have tried to assimilate the conventional social norms and the alien culture and have tried to accept the changed identity overthrowing the old cultural and religious heritage in which they took their first breath. The most significant thing is their spirit with which they adjust themselves with the new surroundings and new identities. She portrays in her novels the "Vulnerability of Women", the power of women the "deviousness of women", "the helplessness of women", and "courage of women". Her novels emerge as a feminine text concentrating on women's struggle to find and preserve their identity as mother wife and daughter and above all as human beings set against the patriarchal modes of contemporary society. Bapsi Sidhwa feels that all kinds of independence such as economic, social, political, sexual and personal equality of women with man in all sphere of life should not be the ultimate end of feminism rather it should enable women to achieve self realization, self actualization and self fulfillment by having freedom of choice.

Sushila Singh's definition of feminism that "as a philosophy of life 'feminism' opposes women's subordination to men in the family and society along with men's claim to define what is best for women without consulting them". Thus the ultimate end of feminism—'a quest for self individuation', self fulfillment is quite evident in the predicament of the women characters of Bapsi Sidhwa.

Bapsi Sidhwas has set her first three novels in the Indian sub continent but her fourth novel has been set partly in Pakistan and partly in the U.S.A. Sidhwa is preoccupied with the future the Parsi and is concerned with the constant threat of extinction due to the growing. Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan. She also feels deeply concerned with gender inequalities and oppressive practice under Islamic rule in Pakistan. The introduction of the Hodood ordinance and the Zina Ordinance by General Zia, which were grossly unfair to women and often encouraged crime against them is strongly condemned by Sidhwa. The canvas of the novel includes an unbiased viewing of religion and gender politics in patriarchal and fundamentalist Pakistan. This novel is "thus a study of Pakistani Parsis who are undergoing a catalytic reappraisal of which Feroza's growing up pains are only

a paradigm"<sup>4</sup> The protagonist Feroza, a Parsi teenager is packed off to America by her parents Cyrus and Zareen Ginwala, in order to escape the increasing fundamentalism in Pakistan since they firmly believe that America with its liberal traditions was akin to the liberated Parsi traditions. Her mother Zareen is perturbed because Feroza has stopped answering the phone because "what if it's someone I don't know." The un-Parsi like orthodoxy in Feroza's attitude and outlook alarms her mother. In the evening she tells her husband, Cyrus that their daughter is becoming more & more backward everyday.

Feroza firmly believes in the special code for women to follow. She doesn't consider men & women equal. While Zareen asserts that she wore frock at her age but Feroza questions her dressing.

Cyrus asks his wife what strategy she has in mind to counteract Feroza's backwardness she says that Feroza should be sent for a short holiday to America where her brother Manek a graduate student at M.I.T., will take care of her. "Travel will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head".

Manek undertakes the task of preparing Feroza for life in an alien land. He wants her to pursue her studies in America and writes to many universities and colleges for information. The best offer comes from a junior college in Twin Falls, Idaho. Manek feels that the junior college and the size of the city will ease Feroza's assimilation into the American way of life. He writes a long letter addressed jointly to Khutlibai, Zareen and Cyrus. Feroza's parents permit her to study in America.

Manek makes a private list of all that Feroza should know, experience, or do before going to Idaho. He ladles out instructions and advice to her. He teaches her to be less trusting and more alert. He shows her how to open the plastic wrappers without tearing at them with teeth. Whenever he sees her wrestling with a jar or juice bottle or tamper-proof vial, he says: "Remember this: If you have to struggle to open something in America, you're doing it wrong. They've made everything easy" (140). Manek tells her that she must learn to be humble in life because it is pride that causes the sense of humiliation.

Feroza decides to spend her winter vacation in Lahore. She is given a hearty welcome when she arrives home. After the initial euphoria, Feroza perceives many changes in her family as well as in her country. Secularism has given way to Islamic fundamentalism. Non-Muslims are being eyed with suspicion. The Islamic laws are governing the law courts. The rape-victims are being punished for adultery while the rapists are escaping scot-free. The gender bias is appalling and poverty has spread like a galloping disfiguring disease. Feroza is disconcerted to discover that she is a misfit in a country in which she once fitted so well.

Feroza's grandmother and mother are astonished at the change in her. The timid Feroza has grown into a confident creature. When Zareen broaches the subject to her marriage, Feroza says that she cannot give up her studies. Feroza says that she is not going to settle anywhere without a career as she doesn't want to be at the mercy of her husband.

Feroza's mental turmoil typifies the predicament of the modern multicultural society. She also represents the youngsters, especially the expatriate ones, striving hard to strike a balance between tradition and modernity, past and present dependence and freedom and so forth. While flying and falling alternately, they are trying to soar to the state of being self-contained from where there is no failing.

As a novelist, she belongs to that group of women creative writers who have started to depict "determined women for whom the traditional role is inadequate, women who wish to affirm their independence and autonomy and are perfectly capable of assuming new roles and responsibilities." Feministic movement gradually emerged to be world wide cultural movement to secure a complete equality of women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights-moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic etc. But the picture of the movement for the women's rights makes one think as 'Paradise Regained.' The crux of the problem is that man-woman relationship has, on the whole, evolved through centuries on a set pattern i.e. man to rule and woman to obey; man, the master, and woman, the slave, man, the god, and woman, the devout; man for the field and woman for the hearth and so on. Their preference is for cow-women. This centuries-old mutely followed relationship is now challenged. Feminism voices the objection to be treated as a door-mat or a piece of furniture meant for the convenience of man. The existential struggle is to establish one's identity, to assert one's individuality and the desperate fight to exist as a separate entity appears in all its intensity in the novels of women writers like Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande etc. thus feminism as an extension to existentialism gets echoed in world literature. Like other Indian writers, Bapsi Sidhwa is able to give voice to the marginalized figures of Pakistani society, mainly women. Sidhwa's female characters, in all her other novels are as strong if not stronger than the men who run their lives; in the way that they resist the limitations of the definition of "woman" which circumscribes their identity. Her protagonist, while on the one hand, come alive on the account of their realistic presentation, on the other, they serve as the means of consciousness-raising among the female segment of society. Literature is a powerful tool in the hands of creative writers to modulate and change the societal framework, and Sidhwa through her extremely absorbing and interesting work seeks to contribute to the process of change that has already started all over the world, involving a reconsideration of women's rights and status, and a radical restructuring of social thought.

*The Crow Eater*, set in pre-independence India, excels the condition of woman at that time. Jerbanoo, mother-in-law of freeddy, located in the private space of the home and body. Yet, she helped freeddy to settled his business and become worthy. But for Jerbanoo whose protestations are ignored and trivialized by male instituted terminology like 'Nagging,' Coupled with her forced confinement to a room in the house of the Allens in London. Being the oppressed subject, with no legitimate space for resistance, Jerbanoo makes her own body the site for generating protest. "We will stay where we are..... Let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever, rule : what does it matter? The sun will continue to rise and to set-in their arses. " it is a remark which clarifies the conditions of women. Putli, wife of freeddy conforms to the traditional image of a fidel, faithful and serving wife who seems to be capable only of humouring things out of her husband. She submits to the moods of the man she is wedded to, tolerating in the process, the conventional hegemony given to the male of the species among human being. Rather than the changes of society, Putli tries to preserve certain customs, like walking behind her husband.

*The Bride* is the story of a woman's fight to survive in a world that offers no easy way out. Zaitoon, a young girl is victimized by the debilitating patriarchal situation of an insular tribal society. The woman is held as repository of moral values in a patriarchal society. Zaitoon signifies the 'woman-as-victim' paradigm in much feminist writing. Her escape from her husband and his family is the only act of zaitoon propelled by her own free will, after being a victim of ineluctable fate almost throughout the narrative. Carol, the American girl married to a Pakistani army officer is equally oppressed in her relationship. But the means of resistance being more easily available to her, due to her privileged class and race identity, she decides to break free. In the end of the novel Carol takes the charge of Zaitoon and perhaps returns to America. This is the best example of female solidarity of sisterhood.

*Ice Candy Man* is a clear reflection of 'women-as-victim' paradigm but here the victimization is a result of a collective action viz. The communal riots that followed the Partition. Shanta (her address inscription in novel is Ayah.), the maid in the parsi family at Lahore is the one who suffers the impact of partition the most. The story of the partition is synecdoche in the story of 'Ayah". Even after her marriage with Ice-candy-man, she was kept at a Kotha and become Mumtaz. She "used like a sewer "by" drunks, pedlars, sahibs and cut-throats, " with the connivance of the Ice-candy-man. But as soon as the opportunity presents itself, she seizes her freedom and gets away from the man she does not love. Godmother liberates her with the help of the recovered women's camp. Then she prefers to go back to her family in Amritsar.

*An American Brat* dramatises and interrogates the conflict in the mind of Feroza, a modern, educated Parsi girl. Feroza Ginwalla the rebellious daughter of Cyrus and Zareen Ginwalla makes the transition from Gulberg, Lahore to Denver, Colorado with a mixture of frustrations, anger and humour. Feroza finds that she has outgrown the confines and limitations of her secluded, sheltered life in Lahore. She has developed an independent mind and is willing to chalk out her own career, instead of being guided by solicitous advice from parents and elders. But she can not marry with her own choice whom she loves. When Feroza wants to marry David Press, an American Jew, the perennial parsi problem of inter-faith marriage arises. The family assemble at Lahore and treat the situation like a dire emergency. Zareen's plan to break off the relationship of Feroza and David gets success. David leaves Denver for a job elsewhere. Initially Feroza feels depressed but gradually recovers, strengthened in her resolve to continue her life with different culture of USA and "there would be no going back for her."

## CONCLUSION

Thus, Bapsi Sidhwa portrays in her novels, the vulnerability of women, the power of women, the deviousness of women, the helplessness of women, the courage of women etc. Inevitably, Bapsi Sidhwa's novels clearly emerge as feminine texts concentrating on women's struggle to find and preserve their identity as mother, wife, daughter and above all as human beings, set against the patriarchal modes of the contemporary Pakistani society. Women in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa question the validity of the accepted set of values and rebel against the existing moral codes and social norms which deny women the oxygen of freedom that nourishes individual self. To view them as mere champions of feminism is doing them injustice. Bapsi Sidhwa's women refuse to be an acquiescent, suffering and sacrificing lot. They are women who are conscious of their emotional needs and hence cry for a change of order that starves them of individual fulfillment. They are women who long for an atmosphere congenial for self-expression and conducive to self-fulfillment. The hardship and suffering involved in fighting against an



established order, the shattering experience of divorce and the resultant alienation between parents and children form the thematic concern of Bpasi Sidhwa. Her women strive to establish a new order with changed standards where women can be their true selves and where there is no need for hypocrisy. They believe that character is to be judged not by chastity of body but by purity of heart. These women wish to herald a new morality which demands accommodation of individual longings for self-fulfillment and seeks consideration not for just the deed but the heart and feelings too. Their concept of freedom and identity is not confined to the realms of social and economic freedom. It is the freedom of mental make up and emotional attitude.

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