



## Diasporic elements in the works of Bapsi Sidhwa

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### Abstract

*Bapsi Sidhwa is a Punjabi- Pakistani Parsi Writer writing from America about her motherland Pakistan. Belonging from a Zoroastrian, miniscule community she is always aware and depicts her community in her works too. Parsi rites and culture are discussed in her last three novels. Migration and immigration are another favourite theme of Sidhwa. She witnessed Partition of India, 1947, at a young age of nine and in an autobiographical tone discuss the theme of Partition in the novel- Ice Candy Man. Her latest novel- An American Brat is mostly set in America, displaying problems faced by the immigrants, thereby exploring Parsi/ Pakistani diaspora. Sidhwa's women characters are beautiful, intelligent and buoyant women.*

Key words: Parsi, migration, immigration, partition, Parsi culture.

Bapsi Sidhwa is a Parsi woman writer who likes to be called as “Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman”<sup>1</sup> writes especially about woman and her religious customs and traditions. She was born in 1938 in Karachi, Pakistan (then part of India). Her family migrated to Lahore after her birth. Her childhood was spent in isolation as she was only child of her parents and she was also accentuated by polio on her right leg when she was only two. For this reason she could not attend regular school. Her family appointed an Anglo-Indian governess to take care of her education at home. It was she who encouraged her to become a voracious reader. It was the books who gave her relief from boredom. She gave her Matric exam privately and received the Bachelor of Arts Degree from Kinnard College for Women in 1956. She married a wealthy Parsi businessman, Gustad Kermani in 1957, but unfortunately her marriage ended up with divorce and she moved back to Lahore with her two children. Bombay, the city which she often remembers in her novel left deep scars in her mind. But it also widened her horizons.

In 1963, Bapsi re-married with Noshirwan Sidhwa, a popular businessman at Lahore. In her honeymoon trip she happened to visit North Pakistan. There she heard the incident of a young Punjabi girl, married to a Kohistani tribal was brutally murdered by her husband for running away. This touching story compelled Sidhwa to pen it down. This story is reconstructed in a larger narrative forming her first novel- *The*

*Bride*. Later it came out with the title 'The Pakistani Bride' in India. In 1983 she migrated to U.S. with her husband. She was appointed as Assistant Professor of the Creative Writing Programme at the University of Houston. Her third novel –*The Ice-Candy Man* published in 1991 in Pakistan, received world-wide recognition. It was published in U.S. by Milkweed Editions as *Cracking India* in 1991. This time also the name was changed by the publishers to attract American readers. The new title created waves world-wide as it depicted history of partition of Indian sub-continent. The novel was declared a New York Times Notable Book for 1991, received the *LiBeraturepreis* Prize in Germany and was nominated by the American Library Association as a Notable Book the same year. Through the government of Pakistan she was awarded the *Sitara-i-Imtiaz* and the National Award for English Literature by the Pakistan Academy of Letters in 1991. Her fourth novel – *An American Brat* was published in 1993 for which she received the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers Award. *Cracking India* was screened by Deepa Mehta renaming as 'Earth'.

The foundation of Zoroastrian ethical system is '*humata*' meaning good thoughts, '*hukta*' meaning good words and '*hvarshata*' which means good deeds. Their good deeds is followed by charity and loyalty. Freddy, his son Billy and mother-in-law Jerbanoo through their comic character make the novel an entertaining one. And in capturing the Parsi ethos, Sidhwa unveils all the vice and follies of her community in a satirical tone. Her mocking tone makes her character more lively. Parsi marriages and last rites are discussed in details. Ceremonies like Madarasa and Navjote ceremonies are depicted in a picturesque way so that the non- Parsi readers can easily visualize this miniscule community.

As Sidhwa is in her real life beautiful, modest, strong willed, courageous, spent her childhood in isolation so are her women characters in the fictional world. Feroza Jussawalla observes that Sidhwa's novel consists "initiation and awakening into oneself as Indian or Pakistani as connected to the sub-continental peoples and their land and religion is the essential theme of Bapsi Sidhwa's novels and this is what makes them so real and engaging to the reading public."<sup>2</sup>

Migration and immigration are another favourite theme of Sidhwa which is prominent in all her works. The theme of mass migration due to Partition in -*The Ice-Candy Man* resembles her community who migrated to India in fear of being Islamicized. In the novel- *the Crow Eaters* the protagonist, Faredoon Junglewalla migrates towards Punjab leaving back his ancestral home in Central India. makes her character more lively. After tedious two month journey in a bullock cart with his wife, Putli a daughter, Hutoxi and his mother-in-law, Jerbanoo landed at Lahore. On the way Jerbanoo was nearly attacked by a wild buffalo in the maize field. She screamed and ran to save her life. Freddy at once thanks God and plans to order a Jashan of thanks giving at his new house. He will offer fruits and bread to hundred beggars. The thought of charity in his mind when he has still not yet settled shows his devotion towards his God.

The novel –The Bride depicts migration of Qasim from the hills of Kohistan to the plains of Punjab and finally his quest to return to his motherland via her adopted daughter- Zaitoon. Qasim was in diaspora- at Punjab before Partition and at Lahore after Partition. And in her latest novel- An American Brat, Sidhwa describes the expatriate experience of the protagonist, Feroza. The life of expatriate, groping for assimilation and finally settled are described in detail.

The migration of Qasim from the novel- The Bride is painful. Qasim was forced to migrate towards the plains as his conditions became vulnerable. He survived his living by rearing a meager string of cattles at the Himalayan hills of Afganistan. He lost three children and was survived by two sons and a daughter. But soon the dreaded disease, small pox invaded their village and swiped his whole family. Qasim was the lone survivor as he had undergone the attack of smallpox as a child. He was forced to leave his sweet home and migrate towards the plain. He settled at Jullunder, a small town in Punjab. He worked as a watchman at an English bank for three years. Later he migrated towards Lahore after Partition, he was the lone survivor in the train massacre from Amritsar to Lahore. Munni, a six year old daughter of Sikandar and Zohra became orphan in front of Qasim. So, he adopted Munni, for it reminded her dead daughter, Zaitoon. It took few days for Munni to become Zaitoon as she had no one around her except her adopted father. She was married at the age of sixteen with a Kohistani. Her father was keen to marry her adopted daughter at hills so that he could renew his old ties. His lost roots will be re-connected through Zaitoon but little did he realized how she will acclimatize herself to the harsh climate of Karakoram. Though Mariam and Nikka, (the childless couple who took care of Zaitoon) strongly opposed him. Mariam even suggested that Nikka would adopt her and Zaitoon will remain with her and Zaitoon will remain with her as her daughter or she will marry any from the plain. Zaitoon, who was fascinated when Qasim used to tell her stories about his native land at his free time. Her sweet sixteen age dreamt of fantasies about light skinned people and beautiful women; but her rosy dreams were shattered when she visited the hills on the very first day. Her disillusion with life is poignantly described by Sidhwa, ‘Her fantasy, set off by his startling handsomeness, his intense animalism, and her fascination with tribal lore and romantic savagery- took wing.’(221) She was shocked to see the life of people of hills. They lived in muddy house or caves and ate maize bread with water, which ached Zaitoon’s stomach. At night when she slept wither father she cried at the voice of jackal and clinged to her father opposing the marriage. She now realized the difference between the two culture, she urged her father to back with him, she is no more interested to live or marry the tribals. ‘I will die rather than live here.’(137) But her words paid deaf to Qasim’s ear. Poor Zaitoon was married to Sakhi a week later against her will. The very thought of uprooting from her roots made her cry. Sidhwa has deftly handled the helpless condition of the ‘third world women’. On the very first night of her wedding Sakhi ripped her silk dress in a second for he bore both proprietorial lust and corroding jealousy. He saw Zaitoon and Ashique(the man who escorted the father and daughter to the hills) together. And the imagined infidelity made Sakhi more jealous and he illtreats the animals as well as the woman of the house. He had no respect even for her mother. Animal beating episode is heart rending. Sakhi

vented his rage of jealousy and anger on her. He kicked her between her legs till she fainted. After this inhuman incident Zaitoon decided to run away. This is the only choice she decided herself in the novel. Her emancipation from the clutches of brutal tribal society had to face many odd circumstances. She walked for nine days on the less trodden cliff. With few maize bread and a blanket she ventured on adventurous expedition which had to pay her almost her life. For two days she eased her stomach with the stale bread. She chose the most difficult route of the Karakoram mountains, for she knew that the easier passages would be the first to be searched by the tribals. But she herself was unaware of the difficult routes and where her journey would end? Those mountains which she once crazed to see, now became her enemy. She lost her direction and the slippery steep slope suddenly, longed to see Sakhi. At last on the eighth day after continuous walking she was found by Major Mushtaq Khan in a half dead condition. For it became very difficult for her to recover from the rape by two Kohistani men. She was left torn and bleeding on the hills alone with the snow clad mountains.

The theme of immigration is quite prominent in Feroza's character of the novel- An American Brat. Her mother Zareen is afraid of Feroza's strange and narrow minded attitude. The novel set in the seventies and Gen. Zia's islamization was affecting Feroza's innocence mind. She objected her mother for wearing sleeve less sari-blouse. She also disliked wearing frocks or talking to strangers over phone. Zareen thought that her weird attitude is moving a century back. So, to broaden her outlook, she decides to send her to states with her brother, Maneck during the summer vacation. Her father Cyrus accepts his wife decision because he remembers she misbehaved very timidly when she saw a young boy in their drawing room a week ago. But Feroza's grandmother was objecting her daughter's plan. At the airport she is given the last minute instruction from her aunt, grandmother for not talking with strangers, nor she should accept anything to eat or drink from them as it might be drugged. Her dream to travel in 'the land of glossy magazines of 'Bewitched and 'Star Trek', of 'rock stars was thus fulfilled. Unaccustomed to the western mode and style Feroza panics and starts running on stairs, flight after flight till her lungs started to explode. A Japanese man helped her to find her way and exhorts her,

'You must have your head examined. You're not baby. You got no business in New York if you got no sense.'(94)

Poor Feroza was scolded for not being in tune with that culture which she is totally adverse to her. Feroza who was born and brought up at Pakistani Islamic Culture had to face a lot of problem in assimilating the adverse western atmosphere. It is said that the Third World migrants always carry their physical exile in the First World, but they do not cut from the emotional separation from their cultural past. The special attachment of their motherland culture exists as an ethical metaphor. And this consciousness of native culture works as an ethical indicator and controller of moral sensibility. When Feroza was encouraged by David, her boyfriend to get socialize with boys. Feroza objected because she belonged to that country where free mixing with different sex was prohibited. But gradually after David's insistence she flirted modestly with strange young

men but still, she wondered what her family would have to say of her conduct if they knew. This shows her moral values being imbibed at tender age has still not been faded. Gradually, she slid away from the ethical epicenter just in a cultural metabolism.

She is in diaspora in U.S.A. and often in her nostalgic trip she thinks about her grandmother, her parents, their friends, her ayah. She even missed her city, Lahore, the Main Market mullahs on Friday afternoons. Once, when her pet cat, Kim was turned out of her house by Jo, her roommate; and she extremely missed the cat as well as her homeland. Again, after her heartbreak with Jo, she was under trauma and her Indian friend, Sashi tried to get her out from depression. He mesmerizes her by singing the ghazals of Iqbal Banoo. Feroza suddenly realized that she is miles away from the land of poets and ghazals. She wept and yearned to hear the beautiful ghazals and songs. She longed to meet her school friends. Her emotional moments spent at mushairas evoked an unbearable nostalgia. Re-locating her homeland amidst the alien atmosphere was not easy for Feroza but she never surrendered herself inspite of all the odds. Edward Said aptly articulates:

“It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, all protagonists Sidhwa’s fictional world are women that too boyant. They are intelligent determined, courageous modest women like Sidhwa herself. They also try to cope with the parental, societal and cultural pressures in their life till they can endure and when it is out of their limits they strongly oppose and fight to have their identity of their own. Like Ayah, the marginalized character in *The Ice Candy Man* or Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride* or Feroza in *An American Brat* has faced all odd circumstances but never gave up hope and surrendered themselves but struggled hard to carve the identity of their own. Giving a voice to the marginalised figure especially women of the Pakistani society, Sidhwa has re-created women’s sense of history and belonging.

Sidhwa’s other region of interest are Partition which she has deftly handled in three of her novels. The inevitable ‘dis-location’ and migration is described in detail. Besides, portraying the political turmoil, she has also highlighted her Parsi culture. Parsi rites and rituals are discussed in detail in all her novels except *The Pakistani Bride*. The miniscule community is not only preserved safely in her novels but have also provided the non-Parsi world with a better understanding of their ways of life, their faith and values. She has thus, fulfilled M.G. Vassanji’s concept of the essential role of ‘the writer as a preserver of the collective tradition, a folk- historian and myth-maker.’<sup>4</sup>

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