



Mixed Sensibilities of Diasporic Writer as Reflected in Select Novels of Bapsi Sidwa

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa is a renowned diasporic writer born and brought up in Pakistan, spent years in India and later found her true home in America. All her works bring out the struggles women in the orthodox patriarchal systems they live in. Sidhwa writes about the challenges faced by women of different communities like Hindu, Muslim and Parsi as reflected in her novels *Ice-candy Man*, *Water*, *The Pakistani Bride* and *An American Brat*. Her Pakistani roots, Indian influence and American style of living shaped her sensibilities as a writer. The present paper is an attempt to study the impact of the mixed sensibilities of the writer on her works. The treatment and delineation of the women characters in the above mentioned novels prove that Sidhwa could project the plight of women of various communities because of her mixed origin and upbringing.

Key words: patriarchal, self-realization, idealism, alienation, ostracize

Bapsi Sidhwa is a diasporic writer, Pakistani-American in nationality and Parsi in descent. She was born in a Parsi-Zoroastrian family in Karachi. As mentioned in Wikipedia, later her family moved to Lahore, Punjab Province. She was two when she got infected with polio and nine at the time of Partition in 1947. She later shifted to Bombay after marriage when she was 19 years old but the marriage failed and she landed to her maternal place Lahore after 5 years. She remarried in Lahore and later shifted to United States with her family. Currently, she lives in Houston (Wikipedia). Her Pakistani roots and American living changed her outlook as a writer. She calls herself Punjabi-Pakistani-American as she is comfortable in Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati and English. She is the perfect example of a diasporic writer who has lived in extreme corners of the world. As Dr Farzana Ali points out in the Preface of her book *Diaspora in Fiction*, "The diaspora writers interweave the Indian and the global that marks the emergence of cultural mix at a mass level in the

times impacted by globalization and unprecedented growth in the field of technology and communication. Their writings show how the developments in one part of the world have immediate and wider impact in different parts of the world. Their fictional works become more significant for giving expression to cross-cultural encounter from a different perspective (Preface)."

The mixed sensibilities of the diasporic writer Sidhwa are reflected in her versatile writings. Four of her novels *Ice-candy Man*, *Water*, *The Pakistani Bride* and *An American Brat* portray the hardships of women caught in difficult situations, in different countries, in different social setups. Sidhwa's mixed Pakistani-Indian-American origin influence has writings especially the lead characters. She is equally proficient in narrating the tale of a victimised Hindu Ayah who is subjected to inhuman and horrendous tortures during Partition violence in the novel *Ice-candy Man*; in *Water* the story of an aggrieved Indian widow Kalyani, a victim of circumstances ; Zaitoon

in *The Pakistani Bride* facing the cruel patriarchal system; as well as the challenges in the life of Zareen and Feroza in *An American Brat* as they confront the lavish living of United States after the repressive situation in Pakistan. Sidhwa makes use of her pen adroitly to convey the sufferings of the Indian and Pakistani women in *Water* and *The Pakistani Bride*. She brings alive the atrocities committed on women during partition in a tumultuous novel *Ice-candy Man* which was later adapted into a movie *Earth* starring Aamir Khan and Nandita Das. Lenny in *Ice-candy Man* is much similar to the child Bapsi as both are polio-inflicted and both were affected tremendously by the Partition of 1947. The character Feroza in *An American Brat* has a lot of similarity with herself. The novel highlights her own life in America where she finally settled after a long period of uncertainty and instability.

A comparison of the themes of these novels *Ice-candy Man*, *Water*, *An American Brat* and *The Pakistani Bride* reveal her versatility in the choice of themes for her novels as well as justice to the demands of the plot through distinct narrative styles to depict the conditions of the lead characters. All her works advocate a strong feminist approach. In *Water* the revolt of the widows in the ashram against prostitution and child abuse, in *Ice-candy Man*, the unforgiving stance adopted by Ayah at the end of the novel and the flowering of the persona of the Pakistani Feroza and her ultimate transformation into an American brat in the novel of the same name are testimony enough for the die-hard feminist approach reflected in her novels. The liberal outlook is translated on page through the unorthodox endings of the novels. In *Water* Shakuntala breaks free from all shackles of the ashram and rushes to the railway station at the climax of the novel to save Chuiya's life. In *Ice-candy Man* Ayah refuses to bow down to the patriarchal system and leaves her husband who had married her forcibly. Sidhwa's favourite topics are no doubt, migration and immigration as depicted in *Ice-candy Man* and *An American Brat*.

The plot of the novel *Water* revolves around child widow Chuiya who is forced to live a

life of oblivion in an ashram at Benaras after she becomes a widow. Her new life is full of thorns as she has to follow the stringent rules of the ashram. She befriends Kalyani, another inmate of the ashram and plays the cute pet dog of Kalyani. Chuiya is punished by the ashram supervisor Madhumati for her childish acts. Shakuntala, a sympathetic lady at the ashram adores the cute girl Chuiya. Kalyani is the sole bread-winner of the ashram. She is the prostitute of the area who is sent to local Brahman landlords. She gets special importance in the ashram. Her head is left unshaven while the rest of the inmates including Chuiya have tonsured heads.

As the plot progresses, Kalyani is attracted to Narayan, a handsome young man, new to the place. He follows Gandhian idealism. Love blossoms between them and Narayan professes his love for Kalyani. He even proposes marriage to her and promises her of a new life in Calcutta away from the oppressive life at Benaras. They start dreaming of a bright future but destiny has other plans for them. Chuiya innocently reveals about their clandestine affair to Madhumati. Madhumati is enraged at the prospect of losing the sole earning member of the ashram. Madhumati gets into action and locks Kalyani in her room but not before tonsuring her head so that her dreams are crushed. But Shakuntala helps Kalyani in escaping. As Kalyani goes with Narayan to meet his parents, she realizes that Narayan's father was her customer in the past. She is shocked at this new development and drowns herself in the Ganga as she feels that suicide is the only solution for her.

The climax of the novel *Water* provides a ray of hope as Shakuntala decides that Chuiya won't meet the same fate as Kalyani. Just as Chuiya is forced into prostitution, she picks up an unconscious Chuiya, tattered from sexual abuse and runs for safety. She rushes towards the railway station carrying the injured Chuiya in her arms and looks for some source of help from the travellers. Just then she spots Narayan who is boarding the train for Calcutta. Narayan picks up Chuiya from Shakuntala's hands. Thus, Chuiya is saved from the hard life of widowhood by the benevolent act of Narayan and Shakuntala.

Sidhwa portrays the real picture of women living in different communities through her works. In *An American Brat*, the turbulent life of Zareen in Pakistan and the growth of Feroza, her 16-year old daughter traversing the shores of Pakistan and United States point out about the fate of Parsee women trapped in male-dominated patriarchal system. The sufferings of the Parsi women are highlighted in the novel *An American Brat*. Zareen could not tolerate the orthodox outlook of her daughter Feroza. Her sense of insecurity is evident through the following lines as she complains to her husband, "She objected to my sleeveless saree blouse! Really this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her, too. I told her, look, we are Parsi, and everybody knows we dress differently (10)." She decides to pack her off to United States to her uncle Manek. She feels that the oppressive laws in Pakistan would hinder the growth and progress of her daughter. Her daughter starts the new life in the lavish lanes of US but Zareen gets the shock of her life when she comes to know that Feroza wants to marry and American Jew David. Zareen knows very well that Parsi women who marry outside faith are ostracized. Kulke in his book *The Parsees in India: A Minority as Agent of Social Change* has brought about this fact- "Marriages of Parsis with women of other communities are only given a limited recognition in the community. The children of such marriages are accepted conditionally but not, however, the mothers who remained foreign to the community. Parsi women who marry outside of the community, however, are categorically excluded and are therefore along with their children lost to the community (45)." Zareen succeeds in calling off the marriage but she repents her decision. Feroza flowers into a strong-willed woman, unperturbed by the male dominant patriarchy. "She wants to live her life in America where she can enjoy freedom, privacy and physical space (312)." She matures into an American brat and represents the modern generation which detects restrictions and dominance. Sidhwa portrays the fate of women in different cultures and ethos showing her strong grasp in defining her characters. She showcases the discrimination of

women and blasts out at the orthodox setup in various communities for women. Her voice against tyranny is well-heard globally

In, *The Pakistani Bride*, Zaitoon an orphan is adopted by Qasim in a refugee camp during the Partition riots. Zaitoon was in a state of shock after losing her parents in the Partition riots as evident in these lines, "Zaitoon had not mentioned her parents for a week. She had fretted awhile but, blessed with the short memory of a five-year-old, appeared to be caught up in the excitement of a new life in the camp (37)." She is brought up in Lahore but later married off in a hill town tribal community of Qasim. She has a ruthless husband who abuses her mentally and physically and leaves her devastated. Zaitoon decides to run away from her oppressive husband but knows that punishment for such escape in the tribal community is death. The story unfolds the dangers awaiting Zaitoon during her escape and the brutality she has to face including the nightmarish experience of Zaitoon and the tragic turn of events leading to her rape. The story ends on a sad tone promoting pessimism and distress. Sidhwa highlights the condition of illiterate Pakistani women in this novel who are treated like slaves by men. She advocates the issue of women's rights in this novel.

Sidhwa's *Ice-candy Man* is a grim reminder of the atrocities perpetuated on womenfolk during Partition. The Hindu Ayah is in love with Muslim boy Dilnawaz, an ice-candy seller. She is admired by many men because of her charming ways and beauty. The outbreak of partition violence changes everything and everyone. The love of Ice-candy Man for Ayah is lost in the mad frenzy of partition violence. He begins to hate all Hindus after viewing a trainload of dead bodies of Muslims from India. Ayah is gangraped and abducted by Muslim hooligans and Ice-candy Man doesn't even try to save her. Later he forces her into prostitution and also marries her forcibly by changing her religion. But the tough ordeal and tortures transform Ayah into a lifeless being. She abhors Ice-candy Man and wishes to go back to India. She is rescued by Rhodacarid, Lenny's relative. Rhodabai tries to convince Ayah to forgive Ice candy Man who repents and tries to woo her back but Ayah has made up her mind. She

is unwilling to forgive Ice candy Man and leaves him forever. The unforgiving Ayah is a picture of the hardcore feminist stance used by Sidhwa to project the trauma of the oppressed women.

Bapsi Sidhwa, a prolific diasporic writer could do justice to various cultures and histories because of her mixed sensibilities obtained from her Pakistani roots and upbringing in the lap of Indian and American cultures. Her novels follow the journey of women caught in the web of patriarchy and violence and offer insight into their final self-realization and self-definition. Through the characters Lenny, Ayah, Chuiya, Kalyani, Zareen, Feroza, Zaitoon in the select novels, Sidhwa explores the tribulations of women trapped in the stringent patriarchal system in different time frames and eras. The varied themes of her novels and her success in dealing with them highlight her mixed sensibilities as a writer.

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