



PROJECTION OF EXQUISITE SOCIAL DOCUMENTS IN THE FICTIONAL WORLD OF BAPSI SIDWA: AN ANALYSIS

Dr. S. Chelliah

Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English & Foreign Languages, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.

Abstract

*Indian literature is a voice in which India speaks. Bapsi Sidwa's works are generously associated with Indian terms to convey a theme that could be seen as representing the vast canvas of Indian social issues. This paper brings out the excellent perspective of social elements projected in the novels *The Pakistani Bride*, *The Ice Candy Man*, *American Brat*, *The Crow eaters* etc. The literary space of Bapsi sidwa and the uniqueness of her writings are vividly brought out.*

India is a country that has been known from early days for its hospitality' to new cultures. It is believed by many that the Aryans came to India from some other location and spread over the country. Among the earliest existing evidence of India's cultural history, we have literature produced by the Aryans and this literature is known as Vedic Literature. Down the ages, many races came into India and many of them chose to stay back in India. They have merged with the rich cultural fabric of India, adding to the qualities of the ancient country and borrowing from its rich qualities. Hence we talk of the unity and diversity of India.

The Parsis are among the many races that came to India. Though in some ways they have also followed the example of the other races in adopting some of the ways of India, they are unique among those who have entered India in their determined isolation from the main stream culture of the country. They came to India in the seventeenth century when their motherland Persia was overrun by the Arabs.

...The Parsis are the descendents of the Iranians who had sought refuge in India in the eighth century A D when Iran was conquered by Arab invaders. The Arabs demanded that the defeated Iranians who practiced the ancient monotheistic religion, Zoroastrianism, convert to Islam. Consequently many Zoroastrians fled from Iran and sought refuge in India.

Several history books dealing with the exodus of the Parsi Zoroastrians to India have stated that after fleeing from Madyan in Iran they first arrived at the Port of Diu in eighth century A D. After their stay for about nineteen years, they set sail towards the South and landed at the port of Sanjan in Gujarat, then under the rule of the liberal monarch, King Jadav Rana.¹

Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the great creative minds of this race. She was born in Lahore of the undivided India is a second-generation postcolonial writer who tackles the question of Parsiness. At the time of the partitioning of India, Sidhwa's family, like that of many other Parsis in Lahore and Karachi, decided to stay on in the newly-created state of Pakistan. Sidhwa now divides her time between Lahore and USA. She has represented Pakistan in world bodies of literature and of women, and she feels that India has not been very fair to Pakistan. As a writer, she has some favourite themes—like the impact of tradition and culture on the lives of individuals, the impact of historic moments like the partition of India. She deals with the clash between modernity and tradition in these very traditional countries of Asia.

Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa are prominent among them because they deal with the Parsi identity in the modern world. This means that they follow the Paris beyond the shores of India and into foreign countries, especially of the west. Rohinton Mistry is mainly interested in the recollection of the Parsi consciousness in its Indian circumstances in the matter of the last few decades—he is a Parsi who has migrated to Canada. Bapsi Sidhwa is a lady who is a Parsi of Pakistan who now lives in the US mainly but maintains close links with her motherland. And the unique feature about her is her special interest in the non-Parsi life that she has seen both in undivided India and in Pakistan and elsewhere. One of her novels is devoted to the exploration of the varieties of Muslim life in Pakistan in its modern part as well as its hilly primitive parts [*The Pakistani Bride*, 1983] and this novel does not bear any reference to the Parsi experience in the subcontinent. Another novel—*The Ice-Candy Man* [1991]—is the portrayal of the devastation of the partition of India. Again, it is not the Parsi consciousness that stands to the fore in this novel. But her first published novel, *The Crow-Eaters* [1980], is only marginally connected with non-Parsi life. It traces the sage of a down and out Parsi who makes good in the new world of India of the early twentieth century. Her last novel, *American Brat* [1993], is about the exposure of a Parsi girl to the influences of the free modern world

¹Novy Kapadia, A G Khan, ed. *The Parsis: Madyan to Sanjan: An Appraisal of Ethnic Anxieties Reflected in Literature* (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1997) pp.xi-xii.



of the United States. It is the story of a young Parsi girl who is sent to the US for antidoting the influence of the clerically-dominated Pakistani life in the late decades of the twentieth century. The influence of this world gives the girl new values and then she is confronted by the demands of her conventional life— she wishes to marry a Jew and her mother thwarts her by frightening the boy with her fables of conventional Parsi life in India. The mother—who is modern in her own way, in her partiality for club life and low hip sarees—because Parsi orthodoxy prescribes that a Parsi who intermarries with any other community could never again enter the Fire Temple and never find salvation.²

Bapsi Sidhwa is a writer with a special interest in historical and sociological issues and gender questions. *The Crow Eaters*—one of her earliest—is concerned with the saga of a Parsi individual who from penury makes it to prosperity and prominence in the late decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. It incidentally shows the mercurial ways of this protagonist who manages to establish very smooth relationships with the British rulers and with the native neighbors. In this respect the novel breaks new ground [though that is not the focal point of this essay] in that it presents a Parsi who goes out of his way to disobey the convention of his community in letting in his neighbors to share in the sorrows and calamities of his family. *The Pakistani Bride* is not about the Parsis at all—it is about Muslims who belong to the main stream of society in the plains of Pakistan and the near-primitive, nominally Muslim hill tribes of Pakistan on the Himalayan slopes, and the natural tensions between them in terms of individual lives. *The Ice-Candy Man* is about the partition of India, the traumatic experiences of the main contenders in the terrible movement, the Hindus and Sikhs on the one hand and the Muslims on the other. The only other novel Bapsi Sidhwa deals with the Parsis more or less exclusively is *The American Brat*. It is a novel that traces the growth of an individual, a Parsi young woman who is sent to the U S so that she could get over the stifling training she has had in the clerically-dominated Pakistan of the post-independence decades of the twentieth century. It is the growing up story of this young woman into a responsible individual who remains a Parsi in her core and yet moves out of the pious Parsi mode of life. It means a profound change for her—establishing an individual's personal relationship with her god, abandoning the community-oriented religious life of the Parsis.³ It exposes the conflict between an individual with modernist convictions of individuality and rationality and her society which is steeped in its own conventions for all its apparent modernity and westernization.

Sidhwa's identity-crisis and evocation of Parsiness is further complicated by yet another diaspora, the one engendered by the Partition. So in *The Crow Eaters* (1978) and *Ice Candy Man* (1988), her Parsi protagonists have not only to contend with the imminent departure of the colonial rulers but also with the question of which one of the two new nations was to receive their allegiance. Being neither Hindu nor Muslim their choice of either India or Pakistan was not an automatic one; they could in theory actually make a choice. This is a difficult task but the Parsis had to also contend with the fact that either choice would lead to divided families, loss of Hindu/Muslim/Sikh friends, colleagues and business partners, which in turn would result in psychological trauma and yet another diaspora.

Faredoon (Freddy) Junglewalla and his family in *The Crow Eaters* had followed the British flag from Gujarat to Lahore. In that new city, the Junglewallas had prospered as the special friends of the colonial rulers. This strengthened their elite-consciousness. Yet they were especially protective of their own distinct ethno-religious identity and were horrified when one of their young men wanted to marry an Anglo-Indian girl and mingle their "pure", Persian blood with her "mongrel" blood. This horror of the "unclean" *Parjaat* (outsider), paradoxically enough coexisted with a fascination with all things English. So the Junglewallas undertook the obligatory 'pilgrimage' to England. This visit ended in the fiasco of Freddy's mother-in-law bathing on the hotel balcony as her sense of cleanliness would not allow her to wallow in her own filth in a bath tub. This incident convinced the family that they were more at home in India than in England. However, this home was on the verge of being torn apart by the conflicting claims of Hindus and Muslims. Rather prudently, Freddy, like most other Parsis in what was to become Pakistan, held himself aloof from that bloody fight and prepared himself for more diasporas.

Ice Candy Man is even more centrally concerned with the partitioning of India. It is the story of little Lenny and her troubled childhood. Lenny is the narrator of this novel and it is through this girl-child's eyes that we see the ghastly dismemberment of India. She belongs to the minority Parsi community and is physically handicapped. Lenny is also an autobiographical character. Sidhwa who was born in 1936 and as a child suffered from polio, could have had the experiences of Lenny. The mimed girl-child could also be symbolic of the damaged Parsi identity which was once again under threat during the division of India. With the creation of the new Muslim state of Pakistan Lenny's world shrinks, it loses its Hindus and Sikhs. Thus the



Parsi identity in Pakistan becomes a reductive entity, a victim of yet another diaspora.

In *An American Brat* (1994), Sidhwa explores the complex conflict between Parsiness, the Pakistani identity and the lure of the western world. The Parsi girl, Firoza Ginwala, is packed off to a short stint in the USA to prevent her further contamination by what her family sees as regressive Islamic fundamentalism. Thus Parsiness is perceived to be closer to western values than to those prevalent in Pakistan. However, once in America Feroza turns more western and liberated than her family would like her to be. So wheels are then set in motion to rescue her from the libidinous west.

Bapsi Sidhwa disapproves of the stance that the male is the provider and the female is the dependent receiver. She wants women to go in for quality higher education, to gain an income earning job and thereby to gain economic independence. Education and a lucrative job are the twin means that empower a woman and helps her to shed her inferiority and dependent complexes and fear psychosis. She even disapproves of the purdah system that forces the Muslim women to remain the private sexual objects of pleasure of their men. Men are selfish. Because of their intention to gratify their predilections, preferences, desires and wants, men do not hesitate to compromise the feelings, thoughts, wishes and desires and choices of the women.

Sidhwa locates the theme of Inter-community marriage in a non-Parsi context in her next novel, *The Pakistani Bride*. The two inter-community marriages depicted are between the white American Woman Carol and the Pakistani Muslim Farukh and between the girl from the plains, Zaitoon, and the tribal from the hills, Sakhi . Both marriages fail. Both Carol and Zaitoon are victimized and the marriages cost them intense agony and unhappiness. So in this novel, Bapsi Sidhwa shows that marriage outside the community can be self-damaging for the concerned people, thereby seemingly endorsing the traditional Parsi construct of prohibition of inter-community marriages.

Thus, Bapsi Sidhwa projects her fictions as exquisite social documents.

Works Cited

1. Bapsi Sidhwa. "Why Do I Write?" in R K Dhawan & Novy Kapadia, eds., *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa*. New Delhi: Prestige. 1996.
2. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, ed. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge. 1989.
3. Mushirul, Hasan. *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims since Independence*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1997; rep. 2006.
4. Nilufer E. Bharucha, "The Parsi Voice in Recent Indian English Fiction: An Assertion of Ethnic Identity", in Nilufer E. Bharucha and Vilas Sarang, ed., *Indian English Fiction 1980-90: An Assessment*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1992.
5. Novy Kapadia, "The Parsi Paradox in *The Crow Eaters*" in *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa*, ed. Dhawan and Kapadia, ed. 1988. (Novy Kapadia (a).
6. Sidhwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1993.
7. Sidhwa, Bapsi. *Ice Candy Man*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000.
8. Sidhwa, Bapsi. *The Crow Eaters*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2000.
9. Sidhwa, Bapsi. *The Pakistani Bride*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1992.