CHAPTER VI

SKETCHING SOULS IN EXILE

It is a widely accepted belief that exiled writers benefit from their uprooting and what is left behind is more clearly seen, while the new abode is viewed in a much sharper sense, than its indigenes can manage to.

Belonging to an urbane Parsi family, Sidhwa benefited from both a secure cultural identity and a tolerance of other communities at the same time, by virtue of the absence of dietary and social taboos in Zoroastrianism. Moreover, though a traditionally sheltered community, young Parsi girls were not as sequestered as their Hindu and Muslim counterparts in society. Above all, the Parsis have been all along known to be westernized and pro-British more than any of their fellow brothers in India. Thus Sidhwa was exposed to the norms of hybridization very early in her life, which made her mental and cultural exile easier to depict in her novels. The physical migration of millions of uprooted people closely encountered by Sidhwa, prepared her mind further to endorse the feelings of the exiled and cement her perceptions through
the eyes of them, who are left in the wilderness. She has drawn extensively on her communal heritage and benefited from the privileged environment and cosmopolitan background typical of a wealthy Parsi household.

In *The Bride*, Sidhwa has put on the same boat, the more privileged and fiercely independent Carol; who chose over other things the exotic unknown that lay in the mysterious land, and Zaitoon, the naïve and untutored orphan girl, who is swayed by the illusionary land portrayed by her father. Both end up in virtual bondage in a distant and unsympathetic world. This deft mechanism reminds the reader of the similarity in the state of exile in human beings irrespective of the distance between the continents. Zaitoon’s struggle against oppression and fight for freedom ends when she manages to cross the bridge and migrates to the other side of the river, and seeks shelter in the hands of another man, whom we believe will provide her much reprieve. But for all that we have witnessed it could lead to the inevitable future, which holds in store for her, loneliness, ostracism and further struggle.

In *The Ice-Candy-Man* a tale of basically two parties crossing the border in search of a safer abode, Sidhwa recounts the process of migration from a position of relative security, and thus records much
more than a split, a shattering of a complex social system. She contrasts how two communities consider migration and uprooting—the relaxed and cosmopolitan Parsi community to whom the thought of exile is nothing new and whose allegiances remain totally with the tribe, rather than the place of settlement; and the Muslim villagers to whom the prospect of migration is almost unthinkable.

“Do you expect us to leave everything we’ve valued and loved since childhood? The seasons, the angle and colour of the sun rising and setting over our fields are beautiful to us, the shape of our rooms and barns is familiar and dear. You can’t expect us to leave just like that!” (The Ice-Candy–Man p.111.)

In An American Brat, Sidhwa narrates the story of the emigration and transformation of a young Parsi girl. Feroza realises that she is irrevocably poised between two cultures. She evolves a new hybridity, which allows her neither total absorption into American culture, nor a complete sense of being at home in the country she has left behind.

Sidhwa’s first three novels are firmly grounded in Pakistan, the larger community and then in the smaller communities that form the entirety. When The Bride opens community has already disintegrated.
Partition is in the air playing havoc in all regions. Qasim having left the mountains amidst an outbreak of small pox, in which his entire family dies, commits a murder of revenge in Jullunder where he worked as a watchman at a bank, boards a refugee train bound for Lahore ….a train ‘with a solid mass of humanity clinging to it like flies to dung’ (The Bride p.25).

He rescues a child who is caught in the frenzy created by an angry Sikh mob, which tears apart the people in the train, adopts her and names her after his dead daughter on his way to Pakistan. What follows in the novel is a most critical account of unjust traditions that undermine the structure of society.

The Bride is a challenge to the patriarchal culture and values of Indian-Pakistani society. The novel is a typical statement of the patriarchy and the traditions governing the male-female relationships prevalent in the community. The male characters in the novel equally suffer from the strictures, struggles under the burden of honour and behave in compliance with a learned attitude towards women. Qasim lacks the strength to rebel against his tribal dignity and notions as well as his feeling and commitment towards brotherhood when he feels uneasy at Zaitoon’s impending fate, though he experiences…‘an
unreasoning impulse to take her back with him on some pretext or the other’ (The Bride p.166)

The Ice-Candy-Man can be treated as a sequel to The Crow Eaters in that in the beginning it draws a similar picture of variegated Asian life, takes the same delight in the comic spectacle of human kind and stresses the familiar devotion to community. Several communities are depicted sharing the same space in The Ice-Candy-Man. Lenny’s immediate family, Ayah and her circle of admirers, the Hindu, Sikh and Christian neighbours and the Muslim villagers of Pir Pindo.

As the novel progresses through the rummages of Partition, each community which was so lovingly established in the beginning is affected by disintegration and they move apart and turn on one another, in the face of a historical chance that encroaches on their lives and over which they have no control. But just as in The Crow Eaters, life goes on because community is fluid and can be re-established. Lenny’s household resumes its cycle of activities, the downfallen and tortured innocent Ayah is hopefully restored and sent to her relatives in Amritsar and the brutal Ice-Candy-Man becomes a sensitive and harmless man. In Sidhwa’s search for integration in community, even the destroyers give into the spirit of oneness.
The moral vision of *The Ice-Candy-Man* provides us with a future of the larger community attaining the oneness and unity of the smaller communities, pulling together the polarities and striking out the barriers which ultimately cut through the whole. This is depicted in the people of various communities who encircle Ayah’s beauty and innocence.

In *An American Brat*, Sidhwa addresses the immigrant experience, an inevitable carrying forward of the sense of community as people move from one part of the globe to another, dissolving national boundaries and thereby adding new dimensions to the notions of community. In this novel, Sidhwa’s characters are the descendents of *The Crow Eaters* and *The Ice-Candy-Man*, those who voiced their concerns at the eve of Partition and during the ensuing upheaval.

When the novel opens, the times are relatively peaceful, barring the tumultuous political scenario that emerges by the trial of Bhutto in Pakistan. Zareen is concerned with Feroza’s succumbing to the influence of Islamic fundamentalism which is sweeping the country under the rule of General Zia. She is plucked from and transferred to a totally new community, where she adjusts herself with the tremendously different ways of life and commits unthinkable deeds to her own community she has left behind. But the narrative finally leads Feroza to a quest for community,
being totally disillusioned by the new-found pleasures. That awareness leads her to seek understanding, so that‘….Maybe one day she’d soar to that self-contained place from which there is no falling, if there was such a place’(An American Brat p.317)

She realizes that there will be no going back for her. She finds herself between communities, unable to go back or forward fully. In contrast, Zareen who had come to America to bring back Feroza to a community and its norms which she wishes to outrun in her quest for fulfilment and independence needs to return to her secure community in order to regain balance.

Zaitoon is an orphan whom Qasim adopts, in the frenzy of Partition, and brings up as his daughter. He takes her to Pakistan, where he meets Nikka Pahlwan and Miriam, a childless Muslim couple. Miriam takes up the responsibility of rearing her into an astute Muslim girl. Zaitoon is aware of her adopted condition yet her age and the short span of memory that comes with it helps her to fuse easily in the new found milieu where she is groomed in the ways of the new land.

Feroza too, had almost successfully adapted herself to the Muslim stronghold of Pakistan thanks to peer pressure and influence outside home. She imbibes the Muslim culture to an extent that frightens her
mother that she might outgrow her Parsee culture and behaviour. Zareen blames General Zia’s fundamentalism for Feroza’s backwardness. “Really, this narrow-minded attitude touted by General Zia is infecting her, too.”(pg.10)

Zaitoon is narrated constantly the heroism and daring beauty of the hills by Qasim and he makes it a point to remind her (being his daughter) of her ‘real home’.

“Qasim, nostalgic for the cool mountains, wove such fascination into reminiscences of his life among them that Zaitoon longed to see what she considered her native land. Often she asked, ‘Father, when can we visit home?’” (The Bride p.90.)

Feroza too is told not to follow strictly the traditions of a conventional Muslim country copying her Muslim friends and not to retreat into her shell, but be outgoing and bold as any other Parsee girl.

Both Zaitoon and Feroza, in their respective ways adapt to the new surroundings, yet find themselves pulled away by constant reminders. But doing so they are forced to live in two worlds. The two girls have to behave normally in their present surroundings, yet it is
instilled into them that they belong to the ‘other’. This turns out to be a more or less alternating periodical rooting and uprooting. When the two girls finally are placed away, they undergo a drastic change and an uprooting, beyond contemplation and difficult to accept.

Zaitoon is shocked to see the coarseness of life in the hills and cries to her father to not leave her back, ‘Abba,’ she sobbed, ‘I don’t want to marry. Look how poorly they live; how they eat! Dirty maize bread and water! My stomach hurts.’ (The Bride p.157.)

Whereas Feroza finds herself lost in a threateningly superior world, which dwarfs her existence and identity; Zaitoon is given away to a very, uncivilized tribe whose rudimentary existence disillusions her.

Zaitoon longs to return to her previous dwelling and Feroza is constantly haunted by her own deprived background and the apprehension of her existence in America, their previous worlds beckoned by their dreams.

Both the girls undergo a symbolic uprooting when Feroza locked up in the staircase finds herself lost in a labyrinth and Zaitoon fleeing through the jungle, in her attempt to run away from the tribal settlement, struggles to find her way to the mainland.
Sidhwa brings to light a barbaric world of uncivilized people in ‘The Bride’, and juxtaposes Zaitoon’s plight with the civilized world of Carol. Sidhwa presents Carol as another character in dislocation and partitioned from her home and culture in America. For a young American woman, Farukh and the exotic land of Pakistan, with its romance and adventure, seems to be the only answer to the drudgery associated with the job of a sales assistant in a department store in San Jose. She marries him and leaves for a completely alien culture and surroundings. She recognizes the strange customs and traditions of Pakistan, however inferior to her civilized way of life. Sidhwa brings to light yet another aspect of the civilized world of Pakistan—the economic class structure, through the character of Carol.

Once in the mountains, she impresses upon the bronze liquid-eyed men of the country and attracts their flirtatious glances by her casual American ways. She is flattered by all, and little does she realize that for them, it is merely a passing affair, in a country where few women are seen unveiled. This invites her husband’s jealousy, and life turns immensely difficult for her combined with her disappointment in the repressed erotic climate in Pakistan which pulls her towards the advances made by Major Mushataq, who also considers their relationship as a mere affair, in the face of the thought of forsaking his
wife and children and distinctly points out the differences between their different ways of life.

“You’d find life in the zenana with the other woman pitifully limited and claustrophobic – she’d probably find yours …terrifyingly insecure and needlessly competitive”.
(The Bride p. 180.)

Rejected by Mushtaq and embittered by his callousness, she turns back to her husband and dreams of having children and making her marriage successful. She imagines herself going into the tribal world like Margaret Mead and ministering and enlightening the handsome savages and cavemen as a goddess. All these are shattered when she sees a young tribal woman’s head bobbing up and down in the dark waters of the river. Sidhwa who had said earlier that, “Her fantasy set off by his startling handsomeness, his intense animalism, and her fascination with the tribal lore and romantic savagery-took wing” (The Bride p. 221)

Carol glimpses generations of cloistered womanhood, where women get killed for one reason or other in an insecure, uncivilized, cruel and brutal world dominated by men behind the garb of the gallant and protective world which she had fantasized. Her conflict between two cultures that cannot meet, end when she decides to accept her failure in
her marriage with Farukh and resolves to return to her own culture and land. She is spiritually encouraged by Zaitoon’s successful attempt in getting across the bridge and hopeful recovery in Lahore.

Both Carol and Zaitoon, who were allured by the romantic rosy world of fantasy, find themselves constrained in the dark and cruel layers of humanity in the midst of the mountains which can be as cruel and suffocating as they are attractive and romantic. They refuse to become victims of an alien barbaric culture. They rebel against the age-old cultural, social and environment forces of an alien culture, breaking off the shackles, seeking freedom from negation of life and attaining identity. Zaitoon with her dauntless courage and instigating resolution deflects the direction of Carol’s yet hopeless drift.

Sidhwa’s mother characters’, Putli in The Crow Eaters; Zaitoon, Lenny’s mother in The Ice-Candy-Man; Zareen in An American Brat & Miriam in The Bride, are all steadfast followers of the traditions that behold their communities and strongholds of religious and cultural discipline. They are tenable bridges connecting modernity and age-old customs, forbearing the temperamental atmosphere of change, on the influences of the indelible custom and ritual.
Interestingly, Sidhwa has also deployed elderly characters of a generation ahead, as staunch supporters and paramount representatives of a rich lineage; constructing and wielding influence on successive generations- Jerbanoo, Putli’s mother in The Crow Eaters is an unpleasant reminder of a denounced ancestry, disconsolate and hysterical, prevailing on the reminisces of a lost gaiety.

In The Ice-Candy-Man, Sidhwa has churned out an important role for Rodabai, Lenny’s Godmother. She is the influential representative of her community, meticulous and faultless of the mores of her community, yet intensely humane and passionate over the incidents during partition.

Zareen’s mother in An American Brat provides the link between the dwindling customary practices related to marriage, and the augmented need to keep the community swelling. She sends constant reminders whenever Zareen shows signs of cosmopolitanism and strengthens their straining traditions.

The mother characters are an extension of the values and customary practices of the community upheld by the former generations, nevertheless these women show traces of reformation and broadening of outlook which in a fuller form, is materialized in the later generations.
Thus they occupy seats of intelligence, practice and assimilation. They feel equal affinities towards both circumstances and influences

Putli, trained and influenced by her mother Jerbanoo, though outgrows the completely illogical tantrums thrown by her mother, religiously upheld the traditions taught to her when it became directly linked to her. Forced to adapt to the English social customs and practices by way of Freddy’s growing social influences and rising magnanimity, she tries to please her husband by behaving more or less like an English lady, shaking hands and conversing in elite mannerisms, but considers it sacrilegious to walk a step ahead of her husband. Yasmin, her daughter on the contrary is quick to resign herself to the demands of a changed social atmosphere and joyously adopts the behavioral patterns expected of her and a more liberal society.

Lenny’s mother in The Ice-Candy-Man conforms to the traditional image of a faithful and dutiful wife who seems to know only the way of humoring him, to extract things out of her husband. The fact is that she unassumingly submits to the moods of the man she is wedded to, tolerating the conventional hegemony of the male species. But she makes amends for this submissiveness by steering in help for those who are stripped of their lives and property in the disorder during the partition.
Zareen, though forms part of the predictably liberal and modern society of the Parsee community in the post-Partition era, she too is tied with restrictive social codes. Much against her mother’s disagreement, she decides to send her daughter, Feroza to America to help her get out of the constrictions and unhealthy reclusive attitude she had developed in the socially and politically austere atmosphere in Pakistan. But she musters all her courage in the same circumstances when Feroza decides to marry outside the community, and comes off with all ammunition to regard the values and mores of the community she and her daughter belong to.

A significant aspect of all these women characters is the way in which they deal with physical displacement in the novels. Putli, and perhaps Miriam are the only characters who were forced to shift from the land they belonged to. But the intensity with which they adapt to the foreign surroundings, the need and responsibility harnessed on them, to fit into and provide others the warmth and décor to fit into, drives them beyond the impulsiveness to slobber over the uncanny atmosphere and insensitive tidings. Zareen from the beginning impresses upon us her differential existence by her conversing in Gujarati and her happy reminisces of the bygone days. Yet again when she visits America, after the initial amazement of the country, she soon starts to show signs of disregarding and nostalgia.
Thus Sidhwa’s women characters uphold the traditional role with much zeal and honour, yet are also determined women who find this inadequate and wish to affirm their independence and autonomy, beyond the notions of dominance and hierarchy.

Before the First World War, impressions of a woman writer were confined to the commonplace and regular domain of domestic affairs, romance and cognition of varied human relationships. But during the period following the Second World War, Indian literature in particular saw an upsurge in the production of feminine literature, not only depicting life in its all too well recognized colours, but also depicting large-scale social or intellectual questions.

A powerful and dramatic novelist, Sidhwa’s novels portray events traditional and contemporary, moving from a pre-independence era to the Partition of the Indian sub-continent and its aftermath, in a time span of fifty years. Sidhwa has shed many of her inhibitions as a female writer under the privilege of being a writer in exile, and again one who is less conscious of her gender. Sidhwa’s first novel is about Faredoon Junglewalla, ‘a man of great distinction and listed in the Zarathust calendar of great men and women’ through this descriptive epic Sidhwa explores the varied customs and traits of the Parsi community. This
successful character, who never looks back once he migrates to Lahore, where his family expands with a rise in fortune, fame and position, is also seen prone to the insecurity and disappointment that would affect a lesser character, in the death of his eldest son and self-exile of his second son. We witness a certain credulousness and vulnerability behind the sheen of a magnanimous and lofty being, to whom people came from thousands of miles across to confront their problems.

Sidhwa is able to narrate the events in the novel with an incongruous humour in which she interplays the malicious workings of an extremely snobbish mother-in-law, always at arms with Freddy, and serious issues of national interest, Parsi superstition, faith, marriage, rites, romance, birth and culture shock.

Qasim in The Bride is seen as a soul in forfeit, who is denied a childhood, by the burden of a family at the early age of 10, and is yet a plaything in the hands of death fleeing from his ancestral land, first to Jullunder and then to Lahore. He is always on the move psychologically, never being able to come to terms with his location and alien cultures he is placed into. A return back to his land also remains a distant dream, and the only hope of connecting to his descendent culture is his foster child whom he marries of to one of his fellow natives. He transfers his
fascination and nostalgia of the mountains through different reminisces to Zaitoon who comes to think of that as her real home, thus displacing her from her immediate surroundings. Sidhwa displays through the novel Zaitoon’s inability to survive in the rustic and crude mountains and the incompatible marriage with Saki, a representative of the harshly patriarchal nature of society, domineering and oppressive in its treatment towards women. Bapsi Sidhwa dexterously juxtaposes Zaitoon’s story with that of Carol the American wife of a soldier in the army camp, whom she meets on her way to Kohistan. Sidhwa draws similarities in their displacement, culture shock and struggle to come to terms with an immensely threatening reality and challenge to their identity, far from what they had envisaged, enthralled and allured by the charms of the distant mountains. Carol says, “Her life is different from mine, and yet I feel a real bond, an understanding at some deep level” (The Bride p.180)

Both the characters become subject to suspicion and ill-treatment, and they decide to attempt to change their course of life, whereas Zaitoon has to take a much more bolder chance of escaping the brutal ways of her husband or be hunted and killed by the mountain fraternity, Carol has to take the pragmatic decision to leave the mountains and return to her native land. Sidhwa treats human experience through the
contemporary issue of women’s role in deciding her own future, and the social values and morals which undermine this basic right, through a depiction of relationships, struggle and significant statement of ideals and loyalty.

In *The Ice-Candy-Man*, the adult speaks through a child’s recollections of a horrid atmosphere she chanced to be part of during the horrendous consequences of the partition of the Indian sub-continent, thereby rendering a certain incredibility and also at the same time a convulsive awakening to the innocent and unprejudiced narration of the turmoil of events. Parallel to the theme of historic disaster, Sidhwa places the child-narrator’s slow awakening to sexuality and realization of adult sensuality. Shanta, an 18 year old maid, who is mentioned throughout as ‘Ayah’, is the centre of attraction in the novel around whom hovers a cosmopolitan group of thirteen admirers, which initially in the novel represents the close-knitted and emotionally stable communal relations before independence, and which becomes later a cross-section of the differences and religious intolerance after partition.

Sidhwa depicts a significant figure in the characterization of Rodabai, whom Lenny calls ‘Godmother’, a towering personality of social importance. She is probably influenced by Sidhwa’s experience as a social
worker. In her selection of theme and treatment of characters Sidhwa has emerged as quite enterprising, with an original creativity and straight narration. Sidhwa’s female characters are ordinary and less innovative, compared to her men with distinct personality traits, who lead superficial existences in their socially important yet limited orbits, yet these women refuse to suppression and bondage and show the courage to liberate themselves from the shackles of meaningless social customs.

Sidhwa’s novels display her firm and purposeful control over her diction and language. She writes in a plain, matter of fact language with no decorative or flowery expressions, though it rises when necessary into poetic greatness and verbal intensity. She maintains an unswerving, unselfconscious style which gives rise to dramatic and absorbing plots. Sidhwa’s controlling dexterity over her novels is notable, so is her range of settings, plots, themes and characters.

As a natural influence of being born and brought up in the subcontinent, Sidhwa became used to a miscellany of languages, from Gujarati, which was her mother-tongue to Parsi, Punjabi, and Urdu. English was to Sidhwa a result of being part of an affluent, well-heeled Parsi family who were anglicized to a great extent. She started writing in English, as was the case of most of the writers born in the tail end of the
British Raj. But Sidhwa’s writing is heavily punctuated with Gujarati and Urdu words, Parsi proverbs and Parsi-Gujarati cadences.

The influence of Urdu poetry on Sidhwa and her writing is clearly seen in Ice-candy-man’s frequent rendering of poetry and quotations from Iqbal (Pakistan’s national poet and a mystic poet), Faiz Ahmed Faiz (a Lenin prize winner) and women poets Zehra Nigar and Kishwar Naheed. In fact Urdu poetry overflows in the book and is deftly woven into the structure making it a natural characteristic of the novel.

As in The Bride, Sidhwa resorts to a certain overwriting and flowery language in An American Brat as well. When Feroza’s romance fades into a strong friendship with Shashi, Sidhwa writes:

“After all, Feroza was in his bouquet of mountain wild flowers. She didn’t wish to be torn from it nor did Shashi want her to be. The flowers bloomed and distilled their fragrance in the currents of the friendship Shashi generated, in the quick-witted air in which he circulated…”

(An American Brat p.232)
Sidhwa engages in a language familiar to romantic novel readers, when she describes David as a “golden, languishing god”, and how they behaved on the dance floor:

“She felt David’s heartbeat against hers, pounding loudly in her ears, and she wanted that sturdy heart to beat and beat forever like that, close to her. Its throb and pulse were her natural element, just as the oceanic depths of her eyes were when she had found herself swimming in them like fish.”(An American Brat p. 252)

Sidhwa has used several Indian words and usages in her four novels which give them a typical eastern touch. In bringing out the essence of the novels Sidhwa has been careful to use the different techniques which give a natural feel of the environment in which the characters and events in the novels are placed. Except in particular cases, Sidhwa’s characters use words and nomenclatures, which if translated plainly are actual descriptions of the characters; thus in The Ice-Candy-Man, Lenny calls cousin’s mother electric aunt, or ‘bijili aunty’ owing to her swiftness in dealing with matters, and ‘slave sister’, Godmother’s younger sibling, who she bullies and keeps busy at all times with domestic chores. Similarly Godmother’s husband is called
‘Old husband’, owing to his relatively passive posture for most of the time in the novel, comparatively less contributing and buried in his book on his cane-bottomed chair. Lenny herself in the course of introducing characters gives a description of the term ‘bijili;

“My electric-aunt is a resourceful widow addicted to quick decisions and swift results. The speed at which she moves from spot to spot-from dawn to dusk- has earned her a citation. She is called, in moments of need and gratitude-bijili: a word that in the various Indian languages, with slight variations, stands for both electricity and lightning.”(The Ice- Candy-Man p.21)

Lenny calls her maid ‘Ayah’ and seldom is she addressed by her name Shanta. Her identity lies in being Lenny’s ayah, which later is bitterly transformed to the courtesan Mumtaz. Many characters in the novel lack proper names and are talked about by virtue of their work or relation towards Lenny. Thus the all-knowing cousin of Lenny is always called ‘cousin’; Ice –candy-Man is never called by name, neither is masseur.

Sidhwa liberally uses Indian usages in The Ice-Candy-Man; Mother affectionately calls Father, ‘Jana’, and Father soothes a
harrowed Lenny with her plastered leg calling her ‘mai’. Ayah always addresses Mother, ‘baijee’ and ice-candy-man calls Mother and Godmother ‘bibi’ and ‘memsahib’. Furthermore there is a free use of Indian words such as palloo, vazir, durbar, begum, etc. Pappoo, the child servant’s mother engages in a flow of slang usages against her daughter in bouts of anger as ‘choorail,

This technique resorted to by Sidhwa in the novel, apart from contributing to the ethnic element of her novels, also adds to the natural aura of the rendering of a child character, giving it authenticity and credibility. In her Indianization of written English and the verbal jugglery which create nuances of commonplace and regular rhythms of the sub-continent, call for comparisons with Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Alan Sealey, and Anurag Mathur, who have set a trend of interspersing vernacular diction and expressions in their novels, whereas her story-telling with a gripping story line, sound plot, astute characterization and sharp humour has a clear cut influence of Dickens and the nineteenth century novelists.