CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

A striking feature of all the four novels published by Sidhwa is their remarkable girth and variety. Though written almost on the same backdrop of the partition and its influence on a wide range of the population, they are outstandingly different from each other in treatment and approach. The Crow Eaters deals with the lives and fortunes of the members of the Junglewalla family in British India. The novel is pervaded by mockery and lampoon, provided by physical and verbal inaptness, fantasy and caricature, though there are serious touches here and there. The Bride on the other hand is serious in its subject though it has lighter overtones occasionally. In the heart of the novel lies an orphaned girl’s struggle for life in the callous and primitive tribal society set in the Karakoram mountains. It is an account of the interaction between two cultures and the discordance that arises in the intermingling of the either sections of society. The Ice-Candy-Man concerns the events during partition and the alarming consequences of religious and communal tensions. It is also noteworthy of its characterization, developing narrative technique and above all the rendering of the story through a child’s unprejudiced
point of view. Sidhwa’s latest novel *An American Brat* is the story of a young Parsi girl’s Americanization, into which Sidhwa deftly interweaves observations on Pakistani politics, an elucidation on the Parsi community and religious rites, and the immigrant theme.

*The Crow Eaters*, hit controversy when it was published in 1978, attacked by a section of the Parsi community understandably because of its exposition of the community and a satirical account of the incongruity of its ethnic features. The Parsi community was exposed for the first time by one of its own members, by throwing open its innermost recesses. All the major characters in the novel are Parsis and there are mentions of Parsi rites and rituals, including a Navajot ceremony, a wedding, death rites and aspects of the Zoroastrian religion.

*The Crow Eaters*, is loosely constructed, and yet has a self-contained unity: a definite beginning, middle and end. It begins with an extended flashback. Faredoon Junglewalla narrates to a captive audience of his seven children and some neighbourhood kids, the story of his migration from Central India to Lahore at the end of the eighteenth century, his disruptive mother-in-law who remained a bone of contention throughout his life, how he becomes rich through a fraudulent insurance scheme and tireless business tactics, and his rise
to prominence in society by his fawning the British and by means of his fortune. The flashback continues for about seventeen chapters of the novel. The middle part of the novel deals with the amusing events in Freddy’s children’s lives and his son, Yazdi’s unsuccessful relationship with the socially less privileged Anglo-Indian Rosy who ends up in prostitution and is rejected and insulted by Freddy. Yazdi disillusioned by his father enters into a life of self-dejection. Freddy is also witness to his elder son’s untimely death. Yazdi’s traumatic story and Soli’s death give the otherwise comic and farce novel, a sombre hue. These events in his life change Freddy completely, and he begins to realise the mystery, complexity and suffering in life. Sidhwa in the novel brings into focus the tragic and comic aspects of life, thus completing a whole cycle.

The last part of the book deals with the pragmatic Billy’s marital and social life, how he soars to prosperity and success in life. The novel is sprinkled with a number of one-liners and humorous occurrences. Above all there is an element of ridicule and physical and verbal incongruity which heightens the level of comedy in the novel.

Even though the main theme of The Bride is the courageous struggle of Zaitoon for survival in the brutal Karakoram mountains,
where she is married off, the novel contains many independent stories. A parallel to Zaitoon’s story is the story of the American Carol, married to an army officer in the mountains. There is also the story of Qasim, who adopts Zaitoon, and that of Nikka Pehlwan, whom Qasim befriends in his trip to Lahore during the Partition. Each sub-plot has its own protagonists, with well-defined actions. In other words the individuals in the novel get lesser importance compared to the importance of life given to in the whole story.

Zaitoon’s story is divided into three different sections-her childhood, her marriage and life in the mountains and finally her flee in the cruel wild. But it is only in the last section of the novel, that Zaitoon becomes the central character in the story. Earlier she is attributed a minor role along with Qasim, Nikka, Miriam, Carol, Farukh, Mushtaq, and Sakhi. Sidhwa deliberately weaves the story of Qasim’s early marriage to Afshan and his life in the hills, to familiarize the readers to the hills and the code of honour by which the tribesmen live. Similarly, Zaitoon’s parents are shown as fleeing the atrocities of the Partition, and through their story, Sidhwa introduces the communal agitation, bloodshed, exodus and the disintegration of families. Sidhwa shows the unlikely coming together of two cultures by Qasim adopting Munni, whom he later calls Zaitoon after his dead daughter,
the hill and the plain, the rural and the urban, the tribal and the civilized. Though they share the same background of disownment and being victims of Partition, their uniting is likely to create distortions and result in psychological and social frictions.

Furthermore Sidhwa has taken care to niftily juxtapose Carol’s disenchantment in the hands of his husband and lover, with whom she has a demoralizing affair, which helps strengthen the central theme of the need of emancipation of women, and their psychological flight from the rigid customs and practices that undermine the society which they constitute. She also stresses the universality of the quandary of women when it comes to treatment based on gender and social strata.

Zaitoon, orphaned by the Partition, which was reason of bloodshed and loss for millions on the sub-continent, and adopted by another person who almost shares the same predicament as that of hers, fleeing from a murder and plunged into the atrocities of the partition. She is brought up in a secluded life style in Qila Gujjari singh, Lahore. She is witness to Qasim’s longings of the hills he left behind and audience to his nostalgic reveries and fascinating narrations of the gallantry and heroism of the hills men and is unconsciously pulled into the whirlpool of the imaginative world woven around her. When Qasim
fixes her marriage to one among his clan, she is exhilarated to be part
of the enchanted place she had heard of. Miriam is the only one
apprehensive of sending her to the alien mountains and her pleadings
to not give away Zaitoon go unheeded. Before crossing the bridge
across to the mountains, Qasim is further dissuaded by Mustaq the
major and Ashiq, who has already developed an interest in Zaitoon.
But nevertheless Qasim, charged with the unwavering loyalty towards
his tribe takes her to the hills and she is married off to Sakhi. Soon
Zaitoon also develops misgivings and begs Qasim to take her back. At
this point Qasim threatens to kill her, not withstanding the fear he too
felt to leave Zaitoon there alone. But Qasim’s dogged loyalty towards
his folks was much higher and so was the honour of his word.

A month later, Zaitoon is broken by her “tyrannical, animal-
trainer husband” who thrashes her at the slightest pretext thereby
imposing his will and superiority on her and forbidding her to exercise
any wish of hers on her life. She is brutally caned for going to the river
against his wishes and when he sees her waving at the Jawans across
the bridge Sakhi calls her a whore trying to attract them. After that
nightmarish event Zaitoon decides to run away. The next part of the
novel is totally dedicated to her flight through the difficult mountain
terrain, hungry and clueless of the next moment. Sidhwa keeps
alternating the focus from Zaitoon to her huntsmen who set out to capture and kill her, for she has endangered the nobility of the hills. She is on the run for almost a week, in which she is attacked by a leopard, nearly detected by her huntsmen, raped by two strangers, who are left unattacked, ironically by the tribesmen who held honour and dignity of the clan above all. Feverish, aching and throbbing she reaches the base of the granite bridge, and is luckily spotted by the army men who carry her to safety.

The historical division of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan is simply called Partition. But the word is unable to describe one of the century’s bloodiest events. In The Ice-Candy-Man there is a strong sense of place, of Lahore, there is a strong sense of politics, and also a strong sense of political consciousness. Sidhwa has also introduced an innovative technique of letting the story unwrap through a child narrator, an eight year old Parsi girl with a polio-stricken leg encased in callipers. This decision allows Sidhwa to limit her focus to the small world of the child devoid of the complications and prejudices that would naturally govern an adult’s viewpoint. Thus she produces a world similar to the Parsi community in The Crow Eaters, or the kohistani tribe in The Bride, which she uses as a microcosm through which she delivers the wider history of the period. The Partition in its
appalling enormity is revealed through the story of Ranna, a small boy from a village called Pir Pindo, who is witness to all that was part of the bloody riots and massacre. Though Lenny or her brother Adi, and even Ranna himself find it difficult to totally comprehend the sickening violence, the tale when told through such an innocent and unassuming voice, makes it all the more horrifying and blood-curdling.

Lenny’s ayah or nanny is an effervescent young woman with a platoon of male admirers, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and et all including the wayward and entertaining Ice-candy-man. The ayah is Hindu but her mesmerizing personality seems to make others transcend their religious identity. Lenny, her ayah and friends meet regularly in a park where the home ridden girl is taken for a stroll daily, under the gunmetal statue of Queen Victoria the omnipresent symbol of the British Raj. Here they take turns to woo the magnetic chocolate brown ayah, each in their own way, and Lenny is witness to these innocent amorous acts and is introduced to the adult world of pain and passion and much later to the changing political scenario and the concern of all and sundry of their future. Their innocent world is shattered when slogans suddenly rent the air and the killings begin. The Ice-candy-man, a perfectly sane and fun loving man fraternizing with Hindus of his menial class, who goes to the station to receive some relatives discovers dismembered
bodies stuffed in gunny sacks, making him lose his balance. The experience prompts him to join Lahore’s murderous Muslim mobs, stabbing all and sundry and setting fire to Hindu houses in Lahore. In the end he leads one such bloodthirsty group to Lenny’s house and tricking the girl, abducts the ayah.

In her latest novel, An American Brat, the cultural and geographical landscape has changed. It is the story of a girl introduced to America, and how she sees America through her disbelieving and innocent eyes, her problems in adjusting to the country, her perception of the country, of herself, and the world around her. The novel is written in the context of the discordant political scene in Pakistan, during the eighties, when Bhutto was hanged, and the resultant siege in the country and the military rule, the influence of fundamentalism and the growing religious orthodoxy in the country. Sidhwa centralizes the Parsi community and examines several themes of importance to them. She deliberately ridicules the residual colonial mentality evident among ex-colonials and particularly among the Parsis. The underlying identity crisis in the Parsi psyche and the influence of a patriarchal society also form part of the novel.
An American Brat tells the story of Feroza Ginwalla, descendent of Faredoon Junglewalla whose life is chronicled in The Crow Eaters. Disturbed by the effect of fundamentalism and her narrow-minded attitude towards all things, Zareen decides to send her to America to her uncle, six years older than Feroza, for a change of air. Though repelled initially by the American code of living, Feroza succumbs to the charms of the country and decides to stay on after her visit visa expires, joins university and settles down. The novel traces her romance with a Jewish man, the break-up followed by Zareen’s effort to make him see through the obvious difference in cultures, and finally Feroza’s realization that her life has changed so much that despite the heart-ache and desolation the country had gifted her, she would never be able to return to her homeland.

Throughout the story Sidhwa touches upon almost all those aspects that new immigrants and visitors to the United States experience. She carries the reader through an enchanted tour of the country and juxtaposes all the pleasing sights with the unpleasant and ugly side of the country. Sidhwa also returns to what she is best at in the book, her depiction of the Parsi community, and her portraying of human irrationalities and imperfections. She brings to the book another picture of the family get-togethers in Lahore; the bickering, the
alliances, the steadfast loyalty towards one another, the all encompassing love and fondness for the members of the community. The American theme allows Sidhwa to broaden her canvas. Sidhwa also is careful to keep Feroza in touch with her culture and heritage, despite her Americanization and discontent towards her Third world status. She is never able to fully get into the system and always feels a gravitational pull towards the familiarity and ease of her society. She engages modestly in flirting with the other boys, visits bars, drinks and dances and suddenly stops to wonder what everyone at home would think about her if they come to know all this. Once in a delirious moment she puffs a cigarette, and realising the desecration she has committed to her religion (since Parsis consider the fire holy) hunts out her Sudra and Kusti and prays to Ahura Mazda for forgiveness. She indulges for a while in a relationship with an Indian student called, Shashi but the two are unable to carry it forward because of the “taboos that governed the behaviour of decent unmarried girls and desi men”. They end up as good friends, and Feroza finds solace in Shashi’s ghazals and poetry and grows nostalgic of the ambience she will never return to.

An American Brat has two characteristic moments, first there is action of self-actualization by Feroza by way of her Americanization; and later as she accomplishes an amalgamation of institution and
modernity there is an elaborate discussion of the theme of inter-community marriage as she chooses a Jewish man to be her husband. Thus Sidhwa indulges in an effort to provide a better understanding of her community and customs in the novel.