CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is indeed contradictory that, man who yearns for change fears it and finds himself unnerved at the possibility of its approach. Being uprooted in itself is an unimaginable prospect, no matter how harsh and unfastening life is. The uncertainty of tomorrow in an alien land is always unnerving. In an unending effort to fit into irreconcilable circumstances and battle remembrances of however difficult yet amiable days, the exile is caught in a series of dialectic tensions. The exile is always tugged by the discerning nature of communal bonds as both restrictive and comforting. He is furthermore disturbed by the reprimanding nationalistic requirements of visas, passports and so on, and reminded that globalization does not lead to a power free, liberated, multi-cultural state of being.

Bapsi Sidhwa was born into a Parsi family, on August 11, 1938 in Karachi, in undivided India, to Peshotan and Tehmina Bhandara. Soon after Sidhwa was born, her family moved to Lahore. Lahore is central to her four novels, built over high topography with vivid colours and textures. In Lahore, however, there were few Parsees and the Bhandara family was
cut off from the mainstream Parsee life. Their mother tongue was Gujarati, but they were also involved in the Urdu and Punjabi culture of Lahore. Furthermore as they belonged to Pakistan’s Anglicized elite, they also spoke English, at home. This multi-cultural, multi-lingual background is pivotal to Sidhwa’s writings. Sidhwa contracted polio at two, which paralyzed her leg. This not only made her childhood difficult but affected her entire life. She could not enjoy the common routine of schooling and was left in the care of a private tutor at home, after attending about one and a half years at the Karachi Mama Parsee School. Sidhwa was a solitary and lonely child. She spent her time daydreaming and listening to stories told by servants. She wrote about servants’ lives with such sympathy because she came to know their world, better than the society her parents moved in. On her 10th birthday, her tutor gave her a copy of Alcott’s Women, thus introducing her into the world of books and literature. As an isolated child, Bapsi had no alternative but to read copiously. She started to read everything she found-comics, magazines, classics from different languages; all these influenced the little mind. With not many acquaintances and friends to mingle with, lonely and involved in indiscriminate reading, Sidhwa’s world became that of books. She read Enid Blyton, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, The Swiss Family Robinson, Tom Sawyer, Aunt Mame, A Tale of Two Cities, Pickwick papers, P.G. Wodehouse and so much more. This influenced her, taught her the narrative structure and
characterization and later fashioned her writing. So, a grim childhood, loneliness and isolation, circumstances somewhat similar to that of Emily and Charlotte Bronte, at Haworth (a small, bleak town in Yorkshire), inspired Bapsi Sidhwa to become a writer.

At 19, Sidhwa was married to a Parsee family in Bombay. This was a traumatic change for her, plucked out of childhood and thrust straight into adulthood, in a big city. But later she found the world around her very enchanting, surrounded by open and fun-loving members of her own community. Marriage was liberating from the stern, constricted and segregated atmosphere in Pakistan. She enjoyed being among her own people and being herself. When she got divorced, 5 years later, and returned to Pakistan, life became once again limited and insipid. In 1963 she married Noshir Sidhwa, a Parsi businessman in Pakistan. Life was nothing apart from kitty parties and volunteer work, for some years since her marriage. In an interview to Jugnu Mohsin in The Friday Times of July 20-26, 1989 Bapsi Sidhwa admitted that life as a typical social wife in Lahore was one of unrelieved tedium.¹ “…How I abhorred those coffee parties!” It was during these days that Sidhwa started writing and it took up the slack in her life.
Bapsi Sidhwa wrote her first novel, *The Bride*, touched by the story of a girl lost in the Karakorams. It was followed by *The Crow Eaters*, which however got published first, in 1978 in Pakistan. *The Bride* was published by Jonathan Cape in 1982 in England. Sidhwa published her third novel, the critically acclaimed *The Ice-Candy-Man*, in 1988 by Heinemann in England. This was followed by her latest novel *The American Brat* in 1993, in USA by Milkweed Editions. All of Sidhwa’s four novels have been translated into foreign languages and published by Penguin, Fontana, Futurn, and Milkweed.

The novels of Bapsi Sidhwa bear upon us a constant yearning for the past as and when the characters are given voice. Written on the backdrop of the partition of the Indian subcontinent, her novels naturally carry an aura of the horrific recurrences of what could have been an avoidable human tragedy. Her early childhood was witness to her country and countrymen being divided right before her eyes and this is easily deciphered through the characters in her novels. She transports the reader to that bloody era by forcing them to experience the betrayal, terror and separation, filled with humorous anecdotes and loveable characters. Bapsi has a tremendous capacity to groom her characters unlike the ordinary, yet they all are commonplace, familiar, loveable, sentimental, tentative and incredibly humane. It sometimes becomes impossible to believe that they
exist, and that they behave the way they do. Reading through them is sometimes a roller-coaster ride, and yet most often, smooth and fascinating. The influence of Dickens and the nineteenth century novelists is obvious, forming a sound plot and gripping story in her novels. As a Third World author, Bapsi Sidhwa speaks of injustices which have been described as incidents in her novels.

Sidhwa wrote her first two novels in virtual isolation. At that time there were only two Pakistani English novelists of note, Ahmed Ali who had written his Twilight in Delhi (1940) before partition and Zulfikar Ghose who was the ex-patriot, who had never lived in post-Partition Pakistan, and had written The Murder of Aziz Khan (1967), the only one set in the country. The tradition of publishing English fiction in Pakistan was very limited. Sidhwa, with the help of an American friend managed to place The Bride with an American agent, but for years could not find a publisher.

At first The Crow Eaters did not find a publisher either. In 1978 Sidhwa self-published the novel in Pakistan and it was subsequently published by Jonathan Cape in Britain in 1980.

Bapsi’s four novels, The Crow Eaters, The Bride, The Ice-Candy-Man, and An American Brat, are truly a variety to ponder, yet it bears the unmistakable stamp of the author’s. The three novels, except The Bride,
have for main, Parsee characters, accounting events as they unfold in the novels. An uprooted community themselves, they become perfect vehicles to bring into effect the blood curdling trauma, through which the victims of the partition go through. They are neutral in their effort to dismember the whole story and pass comments on what might have been. Yet there is also a tremendous feeling of alienation among them throughout the novels, a desperate fight to place them in the jigsaw puzzle that the aftermath of the exodus of the victims of the partition has become.

The nostalgia surrounding a bygone community fills her novels, which interlace the rich tapestry of Asian life- the smell and taste of food, the colours and textures of clothing, the sounds and odours and sights of crowded streets and over-peopled houses.

Sidhwa’s first publication, The Crow Eaters, is a completely different attempt at, bringing to life, characters that could possibly resemble a hilarious comedy movie, something that is made for downright entertainment- a rollicking saga of laughter and humour. The characters in the novel are strictly unbelievable, yet full of encompassing warmth that comes only with acquaintance. The novel is unique in that it forces the reader to bring his mind into the practical non-sensibility which flows
throughout, yet not missing the vulnerability of a community that is long steeped into extinction.

Though published after *The Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa’s first attempt at writing was *The Bride*, a novel based on a true story in the enormous wastes of the Karakoram Hills, of a Punjabi girl who had run away from her tribal husband, and was killed after surviving the harsh mountains for almost two weeks. Sidhwa fictionalized the story and gave it a more complex plot. It provides a razor-sharp view into the treatment of women, and the role of unjust social and moral codes which prevail in the name of principle and solemnity. Bapsi Sidhwa’s apprehension of the novel creating a furor remained unsubstantiated and on the contrary was received with much interest and still remains a favourite. In fact it has become a tradition to gift the book to new brides in Pakistan.

*Ice-Candy-Man* (1991) also known as *Cracking India* by Sidhwa’s American Publishers, Milkweed Editions consolidated Sidhwa’s reputation. It was made into a powerful film, ‘Earth’ (1998), directed by Deepa Mehta. If Sidhwa’s *The Bride*, is an account of the consequential events of the partition and the struggle of the protagonists to pull forward in alien atmospheres; *The Ice-Candy Man* is a direct and unequalled exhortation of the partition, its unfolding, the mass slaughter, plunder and
loot and the heart-rending cries of the innocent victims. What is interesting is the verbatim of a child, the witness and naïve bearer of these memories. This technique of letting a child render voice to the atrocities of a historic event and its disheartening consequences is unique and can be compared next to the poetic narrative of Attia Hossain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, which too is rendered by a child character.

Sidhwa herself describes the character of Lenny as autobiographical and the similarity is quite striking. She too was affected by polio as a child, and the crippled childhood memories are often brought in, washed by the mammoth vandalism of the consequences of the partition. Throughout the narration there flows a wistful remembering of those bygone days, the lovable characters that were so much part of her life, the pain that came with their being thrown away from her world, a longing to return to those days of wonder and excitement and childish fancies.

Her fourth novel, *An American Brat* moves its locale for the most, to a new world, the United States of America. Her novel reflects the recent trend of globalization. As people move from one part of the world to another, national boundaries dissolve and the formation and maintenance of community takes on new dimensions. A number of novelists, like Bharati Mukherjee in *Jasmine* (1989); Anita Desai in *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971) and
Kamala Markandaya in The Nowhere Man (1972) have tackled this theme of migration and re-adjustment effectively. Sidhwa handles this theme expertly, with a lot of humour and from a contemporary perspective. This novel also marks her entry into the orbit of diasporic fiction.

Though Sidhwa uses the medium of English in writing, which indubitably puts her in the elite circle of writers and readers, she has been able to give voice to the marginalized sections of human society, by rigorously questioning the histories and assumptions of contemporary Pakistani society and posing a counter-voice to the dominant patriarchal narrative which has subdued women to a large extent. Nevertheless her austere attack on a number of prevalent beliefs is softened by her, candid and wry humour. She uses it as a tool to criticize without causing much offence in her novels.

Sidhwa provides an alternative perspective to the predominant narrative by subverting the roles assigned to female characters, thus recreating women’s sense of history and belonging. Her women protagonists refuse to accept the narrow and constricting roles assigned to them by society and conventional notions. Sidhwa more often than not, voices the pain and injustice endured by the victims in terms of modesty and honour, who are made to suffer in silence and whose protestations go unheeded.
“Between patriarchy and imperialism…the figure of the woman disappears…into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third-world woman caught between tradition and modernization.”\(^2\)

Spivak

The chilman, a ubiquitous bamboo curtain-a coveted barrier, which best describes the alienation/separation or the well-defined loneliness, in a world which is so busy to accommodate the vulnerable passions of the woman conceals her from the outside, but not the luring attractions of the world from them. The outside always beckons, but silence is a language through which women have realised themselves throughout. Hidden behind the veil, she lends a mystery and conforms to the archetype of women; one who veils her bounty and expresses it only as wife and mother.

From Russia to Vietnam and from Afghanistan to Chile, societies with entirely different cultural and religious backgrounds are very similar in what they think the woman’s role should be. A primary principle taught to these girls at different junctures and through different contexts is the strict observance of the three cardinal rules… when a daughter obey thy father, when married, obey thy husband; when widowed, obey thy son.
The subordination of women to men in all cultural domains in a pervasively patriarchal civilization is a characteristic trait which results from a female internalization of the male superiority. In the process, the feminine in society has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional. Such notions are further reinforced in the marginal and subordinate characterizations of females, in highly-regarded writings in literature, complementing masculine desires and enterprises. Such works implicitly addressed to male readers, solicit women to identify against themselves, making her ‘the other’, an alien outsider much alike the colonial suppression of the man of the sub-continent. Sidhwa’s women characters in The Crow Eaters, The Bride, The Ice-Candy-Man and An American Brat are all conventional figures of submissive nature. Yet she is careful to draw an expansion and realization of their rights as inhabitants of a common earth, and thus Sidhwa reforms her strategy in her novels, making them women-centric and re-establishing her female characters against the defining forces in society.

In the colonial context, the image of woman as nation or culture brings out both her power and helplessness simultaneously marshalling and emasculating her range of control. Arguments for women education and emancipation were based on the logic that educated women make better wives and mothers; yet are reminded not to overstep their bounds and
usurp authority from men, making them companions and help-mates to their men and yet as completely subservient to the male of the household. The idea is to improve the lot of the woman, yet protect her from becoming ‘decultured’, as a result of too much of education.

The patriarchal concept of male responsibility in controlling and providing for the family was mimicked by the colonial state which cast itself onto supposedly serving the colonized subject. However now the familial vocabulary extended beyond the relationship between state and subject, it shouldered the onus of expressing racial and cultural relations as well. The Colonizer became a patriarchal archetype assuming the task of looking after the crude, underdeveloped, indisciplined civilization. With the colonizer at the Centre, the colonized man felt the need to reassert and strengthen his superiority within the familial vocabulary. It resulted in the requirement of women to refresh their subservience, even though she was provided with a certain freedom and education. It is here that her silence becomes manifest.

A prominent topic of debate in post-colonial theory is the practice of ‘sati’, the traditional practice of the immolation of the widow in her husband’s pyre, in the conventional patriarchal society. Though the woman is the subject of debate, nowhere is her subjectivity discernible- the widow
herself is not discussed anytime, her ordeal and pain. Despite their differences and mutual rivalry, the colonial and indigenous patriarchies bonded together to assign a ‘place’ to native women whose prospect of real freedom presented a frightening picture to them. Those who dared to break the codes of silence and subservience became the objects of extreme hostility, which succeeded in silencing the bold. This inability of the native woman to articulate is emblematic of her difficulty to recover her voice steeped in oppression, the absence of a ‘space’ from which she can render her voice. Way down the hierarchy she finds it difficult to challenge those who rule the system.

“In this triple-baked continent
Women don’t etch angry eyebrows
On mud walls.
Patiently they sit
Like empty pitchers
On the mouth of the village well
Pleating hope in each braid
Of their mississippi long hair
Looking deep into the water’s mirror
For the moisture in their eyes…”

Shiv K. Kumar
The ‘home’ continues to be the domain of women of the subcontinent, the only place where they can realize themselves. Life is so designed that a woman is given an opportunity to realize, but not to express herself. But whether this acceptance/reconciliation is natural and stoic needs to be considered. Could it be a prison, where they find their strength and also realize their vulnerability. They live in a veiled city, which is cornered and bordered with no cracks to let the lights from outside sneak in. “Their dwellings, like gigantic wombs; the fecund, fetid world of mothers and babies” (The Bride p.27)

‘Home’ for her is where her children are, and for the children too, home remains where she is, where everything touches roots. She is a bridge and a synthesizer. She ensures the continuity of the rituals which strengthens roots. She lives sheltered, unvoiced, and undemanding. Sitting in cloistered courtyards for endless hours, trained to craft and cloth, to be patient, watchful and giving. She is born to become somebody’s wife, and mother to his children. “A girl is never too young to marry…” (The Bride p.53)

In these lie her identities, her utility, her reason to be alive. She lives amidst the so many niches, each tight in itself, like the different parts of her body, guarded jealously by no other than the woman herself. Imprisoned she lives, guarding her home like a fortress.
Women unlike men are expected to be silenced voices, inhabiting shadows cast by their fathers and husbands. Sidhwa uses the purdah as the ultimate symbol of shadow and silence in *The Bride*. Offended by the stares of a group of tribal men Carol sarcastically comments… “Maybe I should wear a burkha” (The Bride p.113)

Here the purdah is a shadow which would hide her and metamorphosize her into an anonymous part of womankind. Again in *The Crow Eaters* Billy is uneasy about the covetous glances his wife Tanya draws towards her shapely body. “He wished for the tenth time he were a Mohamedan and could cover her up in a ‘burqa’ ” (The Crow Eaters p.240)

Sidhwa brings forth the segregating nature of the purdah which is used in many ways to suit the conveniences of society;-to be worn as a symbol of social rising, as Miriam in *The Bride* takes to cover herself up as soon as her husband Nikka rises in economical status to keep up with the standards of high-class women; and at other times a constraining symbol of conventional social system, threatening to limit the female individual’s freedom of expression and choice. Qasim allows his foster child to follow a normal girl’s right to study and indulge in childish pranks, but soon after she starts menstruating, Miriam who has started observing purdah, believes that Zaitoon should stop attending school and start learning the nuances of managing a
household, for that is what she is going to be doing. Zaitoon is taken to see the traditional Muslim household of the mullah, where women live a cloistered and separated life from the rest of the society and other men in their households, and who pry through the gaps of the heavily veiled window sills across a colourful world of noise and activity. The Mullah’s house invariably portrays the lives inside the veiled orthodox Muslim quarters:

“The untidy row of buildings that crowded together along their street contained a claustrophobic warren of screened quarters. Rooms with windows open to the street were allotted to the men: the dim maze of inner rooms to the women- a domain given over to procreation, female odours and the interminable care of children. Smells of urine, stale food and cooking hung in the unventilated air, churning slowly, room to room, permeating wood, brick and mortar.”(The Bride p.56.)

But Sidhwa also attempts to draw the romantic side of observing purdah and the code of behaviour of men and women in a purdah observing world. Men and women do not even look at each other and address each other in the presence of others, and pampered patriarchs of the household and zealous guardians and providers of the women, retreat at the
note of arrival of an unrelated female in the household. However as Sidhwa depicts, this possessive attitude towards segregation and uneasiness in the presence of each other, creates a latent sexual instinct which is denied expression. This repressed sexuality often prepares men and women, alike to accept husbands and wives whom they have not seen before the wedding day and of whom they have the slightest indication. It is further seen in the vulgar dances of innocent young women at weddings where men are not allowed. Women are at ease, are truly themselves only when they inhabit these shadows together in the absence of men. The positive sisterhood of the women’s quarters is offset by the image of the zenana as a prison-and the women as inmates. The comfort and safety of the ‘velvet vortex of the womb’ is also partially denied by the fact that it is also ‘a domain given to procreation.’

However in his typically patriarchal and hypocritical world, it is only women who are confined within the notions of purdah, as we see Nikka taking Qasim to Hira Mandi. Sidhwa shows that these men who would not hesitate to kill someone who dare to look incredulously at their honour do not mind dishonoring someone else in the privacy of a dancing girl’s room. After a night of drinking and merriment they are back in the community ready to assume their high social morale and uphold their values. Sidhwa is also careful to shatter all the misconceptions of the valor
of men and respect towards their women zealously guarded behind their veils and privately possessed, when she readies us for Zaitoon’s predicament at the hands of Saki. Swept by her underlying fascination for the hills instilled by Qasim and her pledged loyalty to her foster parent, Zaitoon, the protagonist in Bapsi Sidhwa’s ‘The Bride’, almost instantly agrees to marriage. After marriage Zaitoon surrenders to brutal treatment by her husband and she has an insight into her future through her widowed mother-in-law’s treatment by her son. Sidhwa points out that the men whom they are married to are often brutal and expect to be served and treated and obeyed as masters.
NOTES

