ABSTRACT

In this age of globalization, it is usually very difficult to categorize some writers and Bapsi Sidhwa is one of them. She belongs to India, Pakistan and the United States simultaneously but she likes herself to be described as a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman. All her four novels *The Crow Eaters, The Pakistani Bride, Ice-Candy-Man* and *An American Brat* are about her perceptions of life as a Parsi, Punjabi, Pakistani and American woman respectively. Sidhwa believes that all of her works have some degree of autobiographical elements. She picks up some significant incidents from her own life or from the lives of other people and flashes them to create a larger reality of fiction. To her, each book is a cathartic release. Together with these four novels, Bapsi has also published *Water: A Novel*, a work of fiction based on the movie of the same name by Deepa Mehta, and *City of Sin and Splendour: Writing on Lahore*. In addition, her stories, reviews and articles have appeared in *New York Time Book Review, Houston Chronicle, Harper’s & Queen, The Economic Times* and *The London Telegraph*.

Bapsi Sidhwa has shown considerable accomplishment as well as promise as a novelist. Like all good novelists, Bapsi Sidhwa’s works have aroused a variety of reactions. Her interests are vast and she cannot be easily categorized as just a comic writer or a Parsi novelist. Her novels are remarkably different from one another in both subject and treatment. One can find variety of themes in her fiction such as the partition crisis, expatriate experience, the Parsi milieu, social idiosyncrasies of the small minority community, the theme of marriage, women’s problems, patterns of migration. Her treatment of such wide ranging themes is a testimony to her growth as a powerful and dramatic novelist who is both an affectionate and shrewd observer of human society and a keen teller of stories. She is perhaps Pakistan’s finest English language novelist. There is a complex sprinkling of themes in her novels which defy any simplistic interpretation. The present research work is a modest attempt to make a thematic study of the fictional works by Bapsi Sidhwa and a revelation of the patterns inherent therein.
Introduction: The introductory chapter focuses on the various routes through which the Parsi fiction has travelled to reach the present scenario and tries to place Bapsi Sidhwa in a historical perspective. Attempt has also been to trace the progress of Parsi fiction in English right from its birth to its gradual evolution into the present mature and internationally acclaimed form, with Bapsi Sidhwa at the forefront. The chapter carries out a brief survey of critical studies on Bapsi Sidhwa and we find that the range and variety of these studies is not only limited in volume but also in quality. Through her every work Bapsi has tried to show experimentations in imagination with an aim to achieve artistic synthesis. In Sidhwa’s works themes diverge from the traditional to the contemporary. Thematically Sidhwa’s novels are rooted in the subcontinent where she was born and brought up yet they simultaneously possess a cosmopolitan appeal which readers can feel as a palpable presence beneath the characters. Thus, racial, regional, national and cultural issues of historical as well as topical significance form the core of her novels. This chapter takes a bird’s-eye view of Sidhwa’s all fictional works with due emphasis on the author under study due credit has been given to the predecessors, the harbingers of Parsi novel in English who set the stage and prepared the soil for the contemporary novelists.

Chapter II entitled ‘The Parsi Ethos’, provides an in-depth analysis of Bapsi Sidhwa’s chronicling of a closeted community. It deals with theme of dispassionate and even satirically oriented chronicle of the Parsi community. The major works under scrutiny here are The Crow Eaters and to some extent, An American Brat. Wherever deemed relevant, reference has been made to Ice-Candy-Man. The Parsi life and rituals of Navjote ceremony, wedding, death rites and various aspects of Zoroastrian religion depicted in her fiction in an objective and ironic manner form the core of this chapter. What surprises us is the fact that the Parsi community that prides itself as westernized and liberated community is in fact not so liberal. Sidhwa portrays Parsi community’s traditional dictum of double standards—one for man, another for woman especially when it is the question of inter-faith marriage. Man’s inter-faith marriage is acceptable and the children born out of this wedlock are accepted into the Parsi fold. But if a woman marries a non-
Parsi, she is treated as an outcast and debarred from community and even from their temple—*Agyari*. The Parsis are fundamentalists to the core so far as inter-faith marriage of Parsi women is concerned and the priests are not prepared to move with the times even when the community is dwindling. Sidhwa portrays this paradoxical situation of social life of the community where women, though considered equal, are, in fact, not allowed any kind of freedom or choice in this matter. The view of life of Bapsi Sidhwa is expansive. Human foibles and follies are treated with tolerance and mild corrective irony. Sidhwa neither glorifies nor vilifies Parsi life. The chapter makes an attempt to establish the fact that the Parsi community is like any other community with its own strengths and weaknesses. Here the author does not exalt the community but only places Parsi life in perspective. She offers a rich insider’s insight into Parsi life. Sidhwa’s vision is ironic which reveals her moral preoccupations. As a writer firmly rooted in Parsi consciousness, Sidhwa explores both the superficial and the profound dimension of the comic mode, conveying in the process, the diversity and the complexity of life. She has not only presented the various aspects of Parsi life but also provided the non-Parsi world with a better understanding of their ways of life, their faith and values.

Chapter III entitled ‘Plight of Women’ takes up the issue of the travails of other sex, ‘the soft-target’. The novel taken up principally here is *The Pakistani Bride* where the plight of not merely the Pakistani Zaitoon but that of an American girl, Carol has also been taken up. The chapter provides an incisive look into the treatment of women. Zaitoon, a young girl is victimized by the debilitating patriarchal prescriptions of an insular tribal society. At the age of sixteen, Zaitoon’s marriage is fixed with Sakhi, a tribal man. The marriage and the interlude of joy that follows are both short-lived. Zaitoon’s torture begins on the very next day after marriage. Her husband beats her on the slightest pretext and the marriage seems to be doomed to fail. She decides to flee from her nightmarish world. Zaitoon’s struggle is for autonomy and an identity of her own. She is pitted against a hostile environment and with sheer willpower and grit is able to overcome obstacles strewn in her path. She is ultimately protected and saved. Along with Zaitoon, Carol, an American girl, married to a Pakistani army officer is equally oppressed in her
relationship. In Carol, Sidhwa reveals the pangs of a western, upper-class woman in the male-dominated society. But since the means of resistance are more easily available to her due to her privileged class and race identity, she decides to break free. Carol’s story nicely complements Zaitoon’s and viewed together they help to convey the author’s view of the status of women in the novel.

*Ice-Candy-Man* with Ayah and *An American Brat* with Feroza also figure prominently in this chapter. Ayah who becomes a victim to the lust of men during the Partition riots in *Ice-Candy-Man* is another victim-figure. Ayah is the highly victimised woman who suffers excruciating pain and agony at the hands of the mob that tears her apart. As if this physical abuse by the mob were not enough, the Ice-Candy-Man clinches her lot by condemning her to prostitution. Oppression of women, which is central to the narrative in *The Pakistani Bride* is dealt with in *An American Brat* also, though briefly. The novel is deeply concerned with gender inequalities and oppressive practices under Islamic rule in Pakistan. Sidhwa strongly condemns the Hadood ordinances and the Zina ordinance introduced by General Zia which devalue woman to the level of a commodity. These legislative measures were grossly unfair to women and often perpetuated crimes against them by enabling the male offender to go free while the female victim was punished. This novel also discusses the closed attitude of the Parsi community which does not permit Parsis to marry non-Parsis and which excommunicates any woman who marries a ‘non’ while permitting a man to remain within the community even if he marries a ‘non’. Sidhwa is concerned with the way women are treated by the faith which seems biased and unfair. Sidhwa feels that Parsi community must move with the time and permit equal rights to the women who marry outside the community.

Besides this, the chapter also includes *Water: A Novel*, which is also published by Bapsi Sidhwa and is based on the movie of the same name by Deepa Mehta. *Water* is all about the Indian widows in 1930s and how they were made to live in the widow houses. This novel shows the exploitation of women especially widows by other people and how they are dragged into prostitution.

The chapter is an attempt to study how Bapsi Sidhwa has very realistically illustrated women’s plight and exploitation in the patriarchal society. Men establish
their masculine powers and hence fulfil their desires by brutally assaulting women. Men as aggressors feel elated and victorious whereas women endure the pain and humiliation of the barbarity enacted upon them. As Sidhwa is in her real life, so are her women characters in her fictional world. They are fairly beautiful, intelligent, modest but strong-willed, and courageous. They try to cope with the parental, societal and cultural pressures in their life as much as they can but when they find their very life or identity in danger, they throw off all shackles and fight with full force to foil the foul attempts of their adversary. Sidhwa is a very optimistic writer. She seems to give a positive message to women that life must be preserved under any circumstance since one can fight oppression only when one is alive. It is noteworthy that no woman character dies in any of her novels. Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride* manages to save her life despite the looming threat. In the same novel, Carol, an American girl who is equally oppressed in her married life, decides to break free and returns to her own American culture. In the same way, Ayah in *Ice-Candy-Man* is liberated from the Hira Mandi, a notorious place for prostitution and sent back to her family in Amritsar. *An American Brat* shows that the protagonist Feroza in spite of enormous pressure of her family to return to Lahore and her failure in her first love, decides to settle in America. And Chuyia, too, is escaped in the end of the *Water*. Hence we find that Sidhwa’s women are strong-willed, assertive and courageous. They resolve their crisis in their own way.

**Chapter IV** entitled ‘Partition Crisis’ is an in-depth study of the frenzied communal as well as individual divide portrayed in Sidhwa’s most serious and political novel till date, *Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India* in the wake of Partition. Here the use of narrator is also unique as it is the only novel in which Bapsi Sidhwa uses a Parsi girl-child narrator Lenny. It is the first novel written on Partition from a Parsi perspective and is, therefore, considered more objective than other books. The device of child narrator enables Sidhwa to treat the holocausts of Partition without morbidity, pendantsm or censure. *Ice-Candy-Man* gives us a glimpse into events of turmoil on the Indian subcontinent during Partition. It distils the love-hate relationship of the Hindus and Muslims through the consciousness and point of view of Lenny, an unusually precocious eight-year-old Parsi girl. This work of Bapsi
Sidhwa examines the inexorable logic of Partition as an offshoot of fundamentalism sparked by hardening communal attitudes. It also presents the Parsi dilemma of retaining allegiance to political masters, as well as a Parsi-Pakistani perspective of Partition. Bapsi Sidhwa subverts the Indian perspective on Partition in general and on Jinnah in particular. From the point of Bapsi Sidhwa, Partition was the result of British policies of divide and rule, Gandhi’s mixing of religion and politics and Nehru’s Prime-ministerial ambitions. According to Bapsi, Muslim League and Jinnah have been presented in the books of Indian and British scholars in a biased manner. Her presentation of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and Master Tara Singh as the architects of Partition and excusing Jinnah paves way for an alternate view of reality. Her assessment of Jinnah’s role in the freedom movement is also noticeable. She is of the view that British have been less than fair to him as well as to Pakistan. Her portrayal of Gandhi is too radical to miss. She squarely blames Gandhi for the Partition, while not caring to remember that the strongest opposition to the idea of Partition came from Gandhi himself.

The analysis of the political leadership during the Partition days by Sidhwa is subjective and at times even prejudiced. Bapsi says that Nehru has got preferential treatment because he was young and handsome and more importantly, he was a favourite of the Mountbattens. The contrast between Nehru and Jinnah is seen as the opposition between superficiality and worth, appearance and reality. The charm of Nehru is presented as deceptive while the austerity of Jinnah is seen as his virtue. Here the writer sheds all the pretensions of using Lenny as an objective narrator, and uses her authorial voice directly to stress the disparity between Nehru and Jinnah.

Besides this, relevant references to the Partition crisis in *The Pakistani Bride* and *The Crow Eaters* have also been made in this chapter. The Partition theme finds explicit expression in all her novels except *An American Brat*. It is briefly suggested at the end of *The Crow Eaters* and in the beginning of *The Pakistani Bride*. However, it is in *Ice-Candy-Man* that it forms the main theme of novel.

Chapter V entitled ‘Cultural-difference’ focuses on the issue of the upheavals of culture-divide presented mainly in the novel *An American Brat*. The novel is the story of a young woman who journeys through three cultures—her own
community’s Parsi culture, her country Pakistan’s Islamic culture and the western culture of the United States of America. The novel talks specifically of Feroza’s understanding of her own and other cultures that distance offers. Feroza’s passage to America, her education in life and her transformation into a mature young woman form the kernel of the novel. The novel deals with the change that Feroza undergoes in the West and how her perspective on life changes.

This chapter chronicles the adventures of a sixteen-year-old young Pakistani-Parsi girl, Feroza Ginwalla, in America. Her Lahore based family sends her to the United States of America for a three-month vacation to broaden her outlook on life. They are concerned at Feroza’s conservative attitudes which sided with Pakistan’s rising tide of fundamentalism, during the reign of the late President Zia-ul-Haq. Her mother Zareen is perturbed that her daughter Feroza has adopted un-Parsi like orthodoxy in her attitude and outlook, thereby making her a misfit in her community. It was hoped that the trip abroad would broaden Feroza’s thinking and open up further avenues for her. But the Ginwallas had no idea that she would become modern in the truest sense of the word. They had not imagined in their wildest imagination that she would challenge traditional views, static orthodoxy and grow beyond the confines of communality and the norms of a patriarchal society.

The chapter also highlights that the journey to the United States of America is supposedly a learning process but instead it makes the protagonist too modern for her patriarchal and seemingly liberal family. So in this book of self-realization, the self-awareness that Feroza Ginwalla acquires, ironically isolates her from her Parsi heritage. She centralizes the Parsi community and examines several themes of vital importance to the Parsis in the last decade of the twentieth century. The Zoroastrian mode of life of Feroza clashes with the modern American way of thinking and life styles. The resultant friction compels her to make a moral choice in her life. And Feroza’s mental turmoil typifies the predicament of the modern multicultural society. She also represents the youngsters, especially the expatriate ones striving hard to strike a balance between tradition and modernity, past and present, dependence and freedom. While flying and falling alternately, they are trying to soar to the state of being self-contained from where there is no falling. Besides An
American Brat, this chapter takes up Bapsi Sidhwa’s other three novels also since she has explored the theme of cultural difference in all her novels. So wherever needed, relevant references have been made to The Crow Eaters, The Pakistani Bride and Ice-Candy-Man.

Chapter VI is conclusive in nature. It sums up the findings of the study. The chapter takes a bird’s-eye view of Bapsi Sidhwa’s all fictional works revealing therein the thematic patterns. It also presents the writer’s vision and view of various issues she takes up in her works. It becomes clearly evident from the foregoing study that Bapsi Sidhwa’s fiction reveals recurrent patterns of major themes of Parsi life, plight of women, Partition crisis and cultural differences. Siddha diligently researches every aspect and situation in her works. She is a realist and she portrays life as she knows it. She does not provide unnecessary details and even avoids passing judgement on her characters. But she always sympathises with her characters in their trials and tribulations in her works. She is not a didactic writer who preaches about anything but undoubtedly she is a good moralist. Hers is above all a unique individual voice and it is this individualism and sense of humour which makes her one of the finest writers of sub-continental English fiction.

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