CHAPTER -1

Introduction
Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the diasporic writers who writes about the immigrant experiences. Sidhwa, who was born in Karachi, brought up in Lahore, married in Bombay, then moved to Pakistan and finally shifted to Texas: remembers past events, past life, her childhood and her various experiences. Her novels reflect her personal experiences of the Indian subcontinent’s partition, abuse against women, immigration to the US and membership in the Parsi, Zoroastrian community. Being a Parsi, she writes for the identification of Parsi or to say Pakistani Parsi community, traces her roots, expresses her love for her homeland, and she very authentically presents the events that she herself witnessed. Continuous shifting of place made her aware of various cultures and all her experiences find expression in her novels.

Sidhwa’s childhood was contracted with Polio at two which paralyzed her leg and affected her entire life. She has used the experience to great advantage in her third novel, Ice Candy Man, about partition which is narrated by Lenny, a Parsi child. Growing up with Polio, she was educated at home until age 15, reading extensively. She received a B.A. from Kinniard College for Women in Lahore, at 19, she was married to a Parsi in Bombay. Sidhwa began writing in her 20s after the birth of her two children.

Expatriate and migrant literature, especially in the late Twentieth century, has emerged as a very strong voice and this corresponds with large formations of diasporas in the several parts of the world in the second half of the Twentieth century. The currency of the term Diaspora in contemporary world literature and literary theory has to do with this proliferation of Diaspora communities and Diaspora literature. In his book, Global Diasporas: An Introduction, Robin Cohen tentatively describes diasporas as communities of people living together in one country who acknowledge that “the old country” – a notion often buried deep in language, religion,
custom or folklore always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions’ (p. ix). The emphasis on collectivity and community here is very important, as is the sense of living in one country but looking across time and space to another. Cohen continues that a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background (p. ix).

Swaraj Raj in his article also expresses similar views about Diasporic community:

Though the term diaspora was once employed to describe Jewish, Greek and American dispersion and scattering, it has now, however, got detached from its etymological roots, and has become an umbrella term that subsumes the semantic domain of signifiers such as immigrant, expatriate, exile, ethnic community, and overseas community. (11)

Diaspora according to Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin is the “voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions” or in the other words, Diasporas are communities whose members live informally outside the “home” land while maintaining active contacts with it. The term ‘Diaspora’ initially was used in connection with the scattering and exile of the Jews from their homeland. The Jewish community in their scattered and isolated existence experienced cultural alienation and embodied the mental and cultural traits associated with two different cultures, the one they had to leave and the other they adopted in their new locations. The Diaspora displayed a very strong nostalgia for the ‘roots’, and in the Diaspora, imaginary yearning for ‘home’ was very prominent, although the ‘home’ remained a place of no return. ‘Home’ as Mc Leod puts,
imaginary yearning for ‘home’ was very prominent, although the ‘home’ remained a place of no return. ‘Home’ as McLeod puts,

. . . acts as a valuable means of orientation by giving
us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where
we originated from and where we belong. To be ‘at home’
is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we
can be with people very much like ourselves. (McLeod 205)

The (Diaspora) people also experienced an acute sense of isolation and always yearned to go back to their homeland as this return meant to for them political freedom which promised a sense of belonging. However, for the migrants with the change of land ‘home’ is lost forever. With the loss of home they suffer the loss of culture and above all their identity because identity is a part of one’s culture and it is what the culture has provided. As Avtar Brah puts it:

Identity then is simultaneously subjective and social
and is constituted in and through culture. Indeed
culture and identity are inextricably linked concepts. (Brah 208)

The identity crisis is further complicated because identity constitutes one’s roots, ancestors, class, religion and above all homeland. But for the migrants everything is lost. Whatever the reasons for migration, immigrants experience a sense of unbelonging and uprootedness in the new land. Inspite of their attempt at acculturation they do remain at the periphery and are treated as the ‘other’. Existing on the margins of the ‘host’ culture they undergo peculiar experiences. The literature which is the product of such sensibility foregrounds the life and experiences and shows the heightened concern for the presentation of the yearnings, anxieties, confusion and aspiration of Diasporas. ‘Home’ for them exists only in their nostalgic
memories of the past. As Salman Rushdie in 'Imaginary Homelands' observes: 'present that is foreign, and that the past is home' (Rushdie 9). As the past cannot be attained back, 'home' too becomes unreachable.

All the Diasporas may not incline to return 'home' but the tradition, culture, customs, religions and languages of their native place remain dear to them. The migrants though they are not able to retain back their lost identity, but are at least able to form a 'hybrid' kind of identity. In this connection Avtar Brah states:

... The word Diaspora invokes the images and traumas of separation and dislocation and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But Diasporas are not potentially the site of hope and new beginnings, they are contested cultural and political terrains where individuals and collective memories collide, reassemble and configure. (Brah 209)

Even in the alien land they nourish a community feeling with the people coming from their earlier home. The writers living in these lands share different aspects of diaspora life and try to portray its subtle nuances from various angles and perspectives. Incidentally, the space occupied by the diasporas is marked by such diversities that it is difficult to club all the diasporas together. Although their sensibilities and concerns vary as per their generation, individual perceptions, attitudes and community specific identities but their dominant concerns are displacement, rootlessness, discrimination, marginalization, crisis in identity and cultural conflicts experienced by the immigrants.

Diaspora is not a new phenomenon just as migrancy, expatriation and exile which undergird diaspora formations are not new: it is their phenomenal scale in our globalized and globalizing world that has become a paradigmatic feature of the
contemporary transnational moment. Diasporas are transnational, deterritorialized and deracinated populations where cultural and ethnic origins lie in a land other than where they currently reside and whose economic, social and political affiliations cross borders of nation-states. Foregrounding their temporality and irreducible hybridity, Homi Bhabha suggests that Diasporas are:

Gatherings of exiles and emigres and refugees; gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafes of city centres; gathering in the half life, half light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of other’s language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines; gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other words lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present. (Bhabha 139)


The writers like Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Bapsi Sidhwa etc, though they yearn for their lost tradition and culture, but at the same time, they celebrate their diasporic state and their ethnicity. They believe that
the ‘liminality’ provides them a wider canvas to portray their feelings. Rushdie expresses the similar view while talking about the plural identity:

Our Identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures, at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. (Rushdie 15)

Bapsi Sidhwa is Pakistan’s leading diasporic writer who has been largely responsible for the introduction of Pakistani fiction in English. She is of Parsi Zoroastrian background. Born on August 11, 1938 in Karachi, in what is now Pakistan, and migrated shortly there after to Lahore, Bapsi Sidhwa witnessed the bloody partition of the Indian subcontinent as a young child in 1947. Her parents Peshoton and Tehmina Bhandara belonged to the Parsi community and she has depicted Parsi life, customs, Zoroastrian religion and their immigrant experiences in great detail in most of her works with warmth and humour.

Among her many honours, Sidhwa received the Lila Wallace Readers Digest Writers’s Award in 1994, the US National Endowment for the Arts Grant in 1994, the Sitara-I-Imtiaz, Pakistan’s National honour in the Arts, and the Liberatureprais in Germany. Ms Sidhwa also held the prestigious Bunting fellowship at Radcliffe/Harward. Sidhwa was also on the advisory committee to Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on women’s development.

Sidhwa in an interview with Julie Rajan tells that she accidentally came into writing after her second marriage. She was on her honeymoon with her husband Noshir Sidhwa (a Parsi business man) in the Northern Pakistan near Karakoram where she heard the story of a young Punjabi girl. She was deeply touched and felt a
compulsion to tell the story and this became her first novel, *The Bride*. Sidhwa, whose childhood was lonely and full of silences, felt an obsession to express. Writing has been a way of breaking through her silences. Sidhwa’s first three novels are firmly grounded in Pakistan, her fourth novel moves back and forth between Pakistan and The United States. The depiction of community in its fluid state lies at the heart of Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels; *The Crow Eaters* (1980); *The Bride* (1983); *Ice Candy Man* (titled in the United States as *Cracking India*, 1991); *An American Brat* (1993) and *Water* (2006).

Sidhwa’s native country Pakistan and her city Lahore form the background of her novel *The Crow Eaters* (1978) which is the saga of Junglewallas, a leading business family of Lahore; their customs, traditions, beliefs, how they survived by serving the British and maintained their cultural identity even being a minority community. The novel ends with the reference to the partition. In her novel *The Bride* (1980), though it was first to be written; Sidhwa tells the story of a Pakistani girl named Zaitoon who was married to a tribal man, near Karakoram mountains in Pakistan. After being there for a short time the girl ran away from her husband’s home, the tribals considered this a highly dishonourable act. Some of the men hunted her down and murdered her. Sidhwa tells:

“When I came (back) to Lahore, the story haunted me”

“The girl’s story the poor tribals the way they lived, all (of) that I wanted to write about”, she adds. (Kazmi)

Sidhwa’s third novel *Ice Candy Man* or *Cracking India* deals with the bloody partition of India. The novel is highly autobiographical as the eight-year-old, polio-ridden child narrator Lenny is the presentation of Sidhwa herself. The novel begins with the reference to her home at Warris Road in the streets of Lahore.
Readers soon come to realize that they are seeing 1947 Lahore through a skillful narrator’s eyes (as) street scenes, as well as family life, come alive. Sidhwa provides a vivid, realistic picture of Indian family life and human interaction . . . with an introduction to what continues to happen (in the sub continent) today.

(Kazmi 4)

An American Brat (1993) is about a young Pakistani Parsi girl Feroza who comes to U.S. from Pakistan to study. The novel begins in the city of Lahore and from there the story shifts to America. Whereas the first three novels of Bapsi Sidhwa are set in the Indian sub continent in her native place; the fourth novel is set partly in Pakistan and partly in the U.S.A. Sidhwa fondly speaks of her city Lahore:

I can write a lot more in Lahore than I can write anywhere else . . . Lahore does have a very romantic atmosphere and it does release some type of a creative energy. (Kazmi)

Sidhwa’s novel Water (2006), based on the film by Deepa Mehta, is set in India in 1938. Water follows the life of an eight year old child-bride Chuyia, who is abandoned at a widows’ ashram in Benaras after her fifty year old husband dies, where she is expected to spend the rest of her life in penitence. Unwilling to accept her faith Chuyia becomes a catalyst for change in the lives of the widows. Infact, Water offers a riveting examination of the lives of the widows in Colonial India. Sidhwa who herself was born in pre-independent India and married in Bombay goes deeper into the Indian life and experiences through her novel. Sidhwa’s psyche as a writer is the product of the trans-cultural consciousness; her native culture and the
culture of the country in which she settled after her second marriage. As an artist, Sidhwa felt a need to discover and comprehend the reality. The thematic undercurrent that runs throughout her works in fact comes from her actual experience. She herself has experienced the trauma of homelessness, she has witnessed the partition as a young Parsi child and her expatriate experience are the chief concerns of all the characters that she has portrayed in her novels. The themes vary in her different novels – the partition crisis, expatriate experience, the Parsi milieu and social idiosyncrasies of this small minority community, the theme of marriage, women’s problems, patterns of migration, the complexities of language and the act of storytelling.

In her novel, *An American Brat*, Sidhwa has shared her own immigrant experience. Through the heroine Feroza and her various encounters she has re-written her own experiences. She has skillfully depicted the two different cultures, the first of her own community in her home and the second of USA, where she resides. Staying away from her own country enables Sidhwa to look back more clearly at the life in her homeland. But besides that, she has highlighted the basic attitude of her Parsi culture. Their hybridity and their attitude towards marriage and their basic mantra for survival. She has represented her own community in its original colour. Whether it be Freddy from *The Crow Eaters* and Feroza and Manek from *An American Brat*. These characters inherit the age old Zorastrian attitude (The policy of flattery for self interest and survival). Parsis are hybrid and adjustable to any extent. And that is why this minority community is known to everyone. Sidhwa has immortalized this marginalized community by highlighting its essential ethos, their values, customs and traditions. They have survived because they don’t allow conversion to their faith and interfaith marriages. She has represented Parsis in her own unique way. Sidhwa
centralizes the Parsi community and examines several themes of vital importance to the Parsis. The Parsi psyche and influence of a patriarchal society also form the basis of *An American Brat*.

Many critics have studied the works of Bapsi Sidhwa. Many articles and reviews have been written on her novels but the important aspect of the Parsism and its representation has remained under explored and needs detailed study.

In literature, no final view can be established, and each idea can prompt various interpretations. The present research work is a humble attempt to explore the representation of Parsis and their characteristic qualities in Bapsi Sidhwa’s fiction. Their hybridity and their Parsi milieu remain the dominant feature of her fiction. Moreover it intends to understand the dilemmas of those migrant people for whom ‘home’ remains the centre of their thoughts and the memories of past find expression in their works. The next two chapters study the characteristic qualities and behavioral pattern of Parsis and the last chapter puts together various findings obtained in these chapters in the form of conclusion.
Works Cited


