Chapter-6

Comparison
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“Sublime upon sublime scarcely presents a contrast, and we need a little rest from everything, even the beautiful.”

— Victor Hugo

The current chapter is a comparative study of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry with reference to the works already studied in previous chapters. It attempts to trace commonality and distinctiveness of Sidhwa and Mistry as novelists. Both the novelists have got accolades from critics for their fascinating treatment of various issues representing harsh realities of life with varied social perspectives.

“Their novels while preserving a deep commitment to their own Parsi community are woven around contemporary issues. The diasporic concerns, community, partition, position of women etc. are some of the major themes which both the writers raise again and again in the course of their novels.”¹

Both Sidhwa and Mistry are Parsi which is the miniscule minority in today’s world with just around ninety thousand members. They both belong to different geographical locations i.e. Pakistan and India respectively, the countries which were once united before the 1947 Partition of Indian sub-continent. It is, therefore, obvious for them to share the common element of religion, faith and culture. As William Henry Hudson says:

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“Every man belongs to his race and age, and no matters how marked his personality, the spirit of race and age finds expression through him.”

The fascinating portrayal of their traditional microscopic community, ethnic anxiety and dilemma, and cultural pliancy has won Sidhwa and Mistry accolades from critics. Their works present the harsh realities of life highlighting the problem of survival in the socio-cultural milieu they have lived in. As Sidhwa and Mistry write at different points of time, the matter and manner of their concerns in their novels are bound to differ in some places, though not completely.

Nearly all diasporic communities share a common feeling of displacement and an urge to go back to their homelands. So is true of these two Parsi novelists. It is easy and natural for them to identify with the beliefs, customs and the psyche of their own community. Hence their presentation of their community’s rituals and customs, fears and insecurities, perplexities and angst, and hopes and aspirations are natural and authentic.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* gives a peep into the idiosyncrasies and concerns of the miniscule Parsi community in Lahore. While ascertaining her Pakistani identity, she never forgets to express her Parsi ethnicity. The narrator Lenny is a Parsi girl through whose eyes the incidents before and after the partition are viewed. Her Parsi family which consists of her mother, father, Godmother, Electric aunt and cousin—is at the centre of most of the incidents in the novel. There are frequent allusions to Parsi rituals and customs in the novel. In fact the novel reflects Bapsi Sidhwa’s “dual perspective, which is based on both the Pakistani and
the Parsi point of view. She speaks both for the Pakistani and the marginalized Parsi community.”

At times, there are obvious and clear expression of Sidhwa’s anxiety and concern for the isolation and nullification for her community, though in light-hearted manner. As for example, at the time of religious suspicion and disharmony, the child Lenny observes: “Godmother, Slave sister, Electric Aunt and my nuclear family are reduced to irrelevant nomenclatures—we are Parsee.” (ICM 94)

Col.Bharucha, as a representative of the Parsi community is full of apprehension and warns his fellowmen against joining the struggle for freedom:

“It is no longer just a struggle for Home Rule. It is a struggle for power. Who’s going to rule once we get Swaraj? . . . . .you’ll be mangled to chutney!” (ICM 39)

Sidhwa expresses the alienation faced by her community through the reaction of the people like the Sikh woman who asks Lenny’s name and religion:

‘I’m Parsee’ I say.

‘O kee? What’s that? They ask: scandalized to discover a religion they’ve never heard of. (ICM 96)

One cannot but feel the pain and hurt of the novelist at the neglect and marginalisation of her community in a country which had been their second motherland since long.

The novel thus cannot be viewed and analysed only as a reinterpretation and documentation of the communal riots of the 1947 Partition. The ‘Parsiness’ and
religious sensibilities are revealed in frequent references to the Parsi mannerism, traditions, customs and rituals and also the feeling of ‘otherness’.

This same sense of ‘otherness’ and identity crisis is present in Rohinton Mistry’s novel *Such a Long Journey* also. What makes Mistry different from Sidhwa in the treatment of this issue is that he is more candid and vociferous in raising his doubts and worries for the existence of his endangered community. His novel becomes the voice of a muted minority, and it is through the Parsi characters Gustad, Dinshawji, Dilnavaz and major Bilimoria that he expresses the feeling of insecurity and apprehension of the community. The growing fundamentalism and agitating tactics of the Marathas upset these Parsi protagonists who fear lest such things should disturb harmony in the society of which they are also a part.

Indian politicians particularly Pt. Nehru and Indira Gandhi become an object of verbal attack in the novel by Parsi characters who believe that both Nehru and Indira Gandhi did not treat Feroze Gandhi who was a Parsi. Dilnavaz says that Nehru never liked Feroze Gandhi from the beginning. Dinshawji agrees to it and says: “That (Feroze Gandhi’s death) was tragic. Even today, people say Feroze’s heart attack was not really a heart attack.” (SLJ 197)

They also express their angst and insecurity at the nationalization of banks, which according to Gustad was done by Indira Gandhi to feed her own selfish political motive at the cost of the interests of the Parsi bankers who earlier used to be the ‘kings of banking’. Change of names of streets and roads add to their fear of gradual weakening of the cultural markers and loss of certitude in life. The fear of impending loss of Parsi identity makes Dinshawji anxious and insecure. He says, “So what happens to the life I have lived? Was I living a wrong life, with all the
wrong names? Tell me what happens to my life. Rubbed out, just like-that? Tell me!” (SLJ 74)

In the novel, Mistry, as a representative of his community, tries to underline the point that Parsis do not like the involvement of any member of their community in any scandal which may bring defame to their community. Through the enactment of the notorious Nagarwala case Mistry attempts to convey the message that he was the victim of corruption, dirty politics and inconsistencies of the system.

It can, thus, be safely concluded that “there is a strong sense of Parsi identity in the novels of Rohinton Mistry and Bapsi Sidhwa as revealed in their rituals and customs, their attitude to religion, their myths and their daily observances.”

Apart from expressing their Parsi identity and anxiety, the works of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry loudly express their interest in national history of India and their urge to recount some significant historical events which prominently form the backdrop of the novels of both Bapsi and Mistry. The period between 1947 and 1975 has an important place in the national history of India. It is marked by the Independence and Partition on one hand and the Emergency on the other. Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry significantly chronicle Partition and Emergency in their novels.

Sidhwa’s novel The Pakistani Bride tells the story of an orphan girl Zaitoon, who lost her family in the communal violence sprung up during the Partition of India. Zaitoon (Munni) and her Muslim parents Sikander and Zohra, along with millions of others are forced to flee with the bare minimum of their possessions from the Indian side of Punjab province towards Pakistan unaware of the plan of Sikhs for
massacre of passengers, almost exclusively Muslims. Zaitoon’s mother is killed before her eyes. Soon afterwards, her father is also murdered by the fanatic Sikhs. In such a troubled and turmoiled situation, Qasim, travelling on the same train, comes across the orphaned little girl. Badly frightened at the murder of her parents, the girl discovers a masquerading stranger. Qasim, himself bereaved of his entire family, adopts the helpless girl who reminds him of his own daughter.

Sidhwa prominently deals with the critical time of Partition realistically showing heart-rending situation of communal riots that North-Indian plains witnessed. She describes the horror and cruelty of crazy mobs in a live and truthful manner. In chapter two of the novel, a Sikh Mool Singh tells his woe:

“I thought we would stand by our land, by our stock, by our mousalman neighbours. No one can touch us, I thought. The riots will pass by us. But a mob attacked our village—Oh, the screams of women, I can hear them still….. I had a twenty year-old brother, tall and strong as mountain, a match for any five of them. This is what they did—they tied one of his legs in one jeep, the other to another jeep-and then they drove the jeep apart…” (PB 16)

In *The Pakistani Bride*, Sidhwa shows the harsh reality of anti-social elements taking advantage of the chaotic situation:

“Death, cheapened by the butchering of over a million people, became casual and humdrum. It was easy to kill. Taking advantage of this attitude to settle old scores, to grab someone’s property or business or woman, Hindu killed Hindu — Sikh, Sikh —and Mussalman Muslim.”(PB 32)
Through the flashback technique, Sidhwa superbly deals with the historical event of Partition in *The Pakistani Bride*.

*Ice-Candy-Man* is another novel penned by Sidhwa which again describes the horrors of the partition of India assuming it as a subject as harrowing as the Holocaust. Khushwant Singh aptly says, “*Ice-Candy-Man* deserves to be ranked among the most authentic and best books on the Partition of India”.

The novel recounts the events of turmoil surrounding the partition through the observations of the Parsi child-narrator Lenny. Characters are portrayed with their aspirations, changing loyalties, frustrations and transformations. Sidhwa makes an attempt to reconstruct the history of the turbulent time of the Partition and the horrors and violence connected with emotions-laden and poignant scenes.

The novel shows how during communal strife and disharmony, violence and hatred get the upper hand, and, trust and human feelings are forgotten. Communal hatred turns friends into foe and traitors. During the course of the events, Lenny’s young beautiful Hindu ayah Shanta is kidnapped and raped by a group of frenzied men who had previously wooed her. The horrible description of the massacre of Ranna’s village shows how violence and communal frenzy transform good people into savages who are not the least hesitant in brutally killing their own countrymen. Hari and Moti are converted in order to save their lives. Ayah Shanta’s love Masseur is killed. The Ice-candy-man becomes uncontrollably revengeful to see the mutilated bodies of Muslims.
Sidhwa shows that during the partition, hatred reigned supreme. All the personal and amicable relationships and feelings are forgotten. There is a scene of Holi in the novel. But tragically this is not the Holi of colours, but the Holi of blood in the living inferno. The novel presents the picture of the worst kind of genocide in the history of mankind.

The novel delineates realistically how people received and survived the violence. Through this novel Sidhwa has successfully brought to light the spiritual, emotional and real implications of the Partition. Novy Kapadiya observes: “With a sprinkling of humour, parody and allegory, Sidhwa conveys a sinister warning of the dangers of compromising with religious obscurantism and fundamentalism of all categories. Otherwise a certain historical inevitability marks this historical process. Though her novel is about the traumas of partition, Sidhwa like Amitav Ghosh, reveals that communal riots are contemptuous and that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it.”

Sidhwa brings out the hypocrisy and malicious attitude of the politicians of that time who were trying to take advantage of the terribly sensitive situation and continually instilled the feelings of fear, hatred, insecurity in the hearts of people against their neighbours and friends. The novel abounds in poignant scenes of violence and murder. It has been hailed as “the only novel written by a Parsi on the theme of Partition” and stands out as a significant chronicle of Partition covering the period immediately before and after the Partition.

Rohinton Mistry’s deep interest in presenting the national history of India is revealed in his novels *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*. Mistry exploits
significant historical points of post-independence era, re-narrating India’s past vis-à-vis his community through an interwoven personal and national narrative. His version of history has different dimensions.

The novel *Such a Long Journey* is set against the backdrop of Bangladesh-Pakistan wars of the 1970s. The story of Gustad Noble and his family is interwoven with events in national scene. From the beginning of the novel, one sees ordinary public like Gustad suffering the consequences of India’s support for the Bangladeshi wars which have direct repercussions on the availability of goods and the prices of essential commodities which abruptly begin to shoot up.

The war continues through the duration of the entire narrative. War is the subject of discussion between colleagues during their lunch break and there is endless speculation about which side the US will ally with—India or Pakistan. A sense of insecurity and a fear of Pakistani attack are permanent making it necessary for the windows to be blacked out. Gustad had put up the blackout paper during the war against China in 1962. The memory of the defeat of the national army and subsequent riots is still very fresh and intermixed with personal memories of his convalescence friend. We are told that three years after the Indo-China war, the Pakistanis attacked India to get a piece of Kashmir just as they had done right after Partition.

The blackout paper becomes the symbol of the recurrent state of Emergency. The air raid siren sounds everyday at ten, keeping the threat of Pakistani bombing ever present, so much so that it has become a routine affair for the inhabitants of the city,
who even set their clock by it: ‘Ten O’ clock already.’ thinks Gustad as he hears the siren sounding on his way to work, ‘Should have been my desk now.’ (SLJ 143)

An attempt to piece together the historical past begins with Mistry’s attempt to shatter Nehru’s charismatic figure by unmasking the leader as a despot who successfully tries to establish his dynastical rule at the centre. Questioning the ambiguity buried within the historical narrative, the author describes Nehru’s daughter Indira too as a shrewd woman of action and foresight, in a run to actualize “her father’s dynastic democratic dream”. (SLJ 114) Mistry reinterprets history by tearing down the pedestal occupied by Indira Gandhi and revealing the father-daughter duo as iron-fisted in turning the modern pillar of democracy into a living myth.8

Based on an actual incident of the 1970’s, life and death of Jimmy Bilimoria is fictional equivalent of the well-known Nagarwala case. Mistry exposes the historical truth behind the glorified image of the Congress party. Mistry feels this story is ‘waiting to be told’ by the side of historiographical account which might have been just made peripheral or must have been excluded deliberately to please the centre of power and centralizes it in his narrative.9

Mistry, in the novel also takes cognizance of the rumours related to the death of the PM Lal Bahadur Shastri, hours after signing, allegedly under Russian pressure, a settlement with a vanquished Pakistan: “The night the Tashkent Declaration was signed, Shastri died on Soviet soil. Less than eighteen months after he became Prime Minister. Some said he had been killed by the Pakistanis, and others suspected a Russian plot. Some even claimed it was the new Prime Minister’s
supporters who poisoned Shastri, so that her father’s dynastic-democratic dream could finally come true.” (SLJ 114)

Mistry’s second novel under study is *A Fine Balance* which is remarkable for its sustained readability and clarity covering the period immediately before and after the State of Emergency of 1975. The novel is situated in the years immediately following the narrative period in *Such a Long Journey*, during Indira Gandhi’s Emergency. It projects a multi-dimensional picture of the internal state of Emergency and exposes its most horrifying facets and consequences faced by the protagonists due to suspension of civil liberty, media censorship, forced sterilization, elimination of slums and the MISA, “Maintenance of Internal Security Act which “allows detention without trial, up to two years. Extensions also available on request.” (FB 570)

Spanning eleven years, from 1975 to 1984, the action of the novel depicts the early rise of dalit consciousness in the 1970s, Indira’s nationalization of banks and the oppressive forces working through the infamous state of Emergency and illustrates the farcical regime of Indira Gandhi’s misgovernance. As a social fiction, the novel becomes a tale of mirrored reality of these historical events. It throws light on the life of society’s non-entities of its times and the incurring change in fortunes of each. K.C. Belliappa calls it “a wonderfully successful account of the life of the country between 1945 and 1984 . . . an accomplishment quite unusual in Indian fiction in English.”

All four protagonists—Dina, Maneck, Ishwar and Omprakash—represent different age-groups and social categories that have their lives adversely affected by
the oppression, political corruption and turmoil of Emergency. There are references to Shiv Sena’s organized regionalistic agitations in Bombay, Jayaprakash Narayan’s movement against government policies etc. During such turbulent times, small entrepreneurs like Dina struggle to survive. When the state of Emergency is declared on June 26, 1975, she dares to hope for an end to her difficult times and beginning for a bright future. But on the contrary, her sewing shop goes bankrupt due to the disabling sterilization of her tailors Ishvar and Om. As all fundamental rights were strictly limited on the mere proclamation of Emergency and situation of lawlessness prevailed, Dina’s landlord got an opportunity to evict weak tenants. Dina’s flat is also vandalized and its inmates assaulted. Though she resists bravely but is forcibly evicted. She is forced to leave her workplace and apartment and return to her brother’s place which means the loss of her precious independence.

The second strand of plot is constituted by Ishwar and Omprakash whose lives are sent to a rapid downward spiral due to Emergency. There slum dwelling is ripped down to ground for City Beautification Programme rendering them homeless. Ishvar and Om forcibly get sterilized in order to fill the day’s vasectomy quota. Ishvar’s legs become affected with gangrene after his hasty and unhygienic operation and are amputated after a great deal of pain and suffering. The tailors’ unending suffering reaches its culmination in Om’s castration which dashes to ground all his marriage hopes in future.

Maneck’s friend Avinash is tortured and killed by the police because of his anti-government vocal outbursts. His death was covered-up by the police as a railway accident. But the reporter who had closely examined the fatal injuries on
Avinash’s body confirmed that it was “wrongful death in police custody.” (FB 594) This extreme woe of Avinash’s parents was even worsened by the suicide of their three daughters who could not bear being a financial burden to their parents. This revelation comes as an unbearable psychological shock to Maneck which is further aggravated at the sight of crippled Ishvar and castrated Om, reduced to beggars in the streets of Mumbai. And the end result of extreme sorrow and depression is that Maneck throws himself upon the railway track and puts an end to his sufferings and mental tortures.

Mistry presents a kaleidoscopic view of Emergency in the novel. For the common people the Emergency is nothing but ‘one more government tamasha’ (FB 5): “No consideration for people like us. Murders, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police custody, death—everything ends up delaying the trains.” (FB 6) For Dina it is “government problems— games played by people in power. It does not affect ordinary people like us.” (FB 75) but the fact was that the Emergency did affect the ordinary people in more than one way. The novel is replete with a host of events and instances of vicious cruelty by the government and its agents that took place during this dark period of Indian history. The beautification drives robbed youth of their dreams. Even fertilizer is granted to farmers only after they are operated upon the vasectomy operation. The officers-in-charge of various projects manipulated the figures to their advantage. People were reduced to a commodity: “Late in the day the truck arrived at an irrigating project where the facilitator unloaded the ninety-six individuals. The project manager counted them before signing the delivery report.” (FB 331) A critic observes, “Mistry’s A Fine Balance dwells upon the impact of the 1975 Emergency on the poorest and weakest citizens.”11
Both Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry, by re-narration of history, focus on those issues, moments and events of history, the presentation of which makes their novels emerge as a parallel history of modern India, of course from a writer’s point of view. Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy Man* and Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* stand out as significant chronicles of the Partition and the Emergency respectively, while also covering the period immediately before, after and between these two events.

Politics form an important subtext to the main action of the novels of both Sidhwa and Mistry. The presence of politicians is very conspicuous in their novels. Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* is a politically motivated novel. In it most of the dominant and influential politicians of the time— Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Iqbal, Patel, Bose, Master Tara Singh, Lord Mountbatten — figure in some context or the other.

As a Pakistani writer, Sidhwa attempts to write a Pakistani version of history and complains about the way Jinnah has been treated and Gandhi has been hailed high. She is very critical of Congress leaders who started sitting on *dharna* and blocking rail tracks as a measure of protest against the communal riots which was in fact a political stunt. Gandhiji is strongly criticized by her as a problematic politician, “a non-violent violent monger” (ICM 91) who indulges in doublespeak. Very unconventionally, Sidhwa criticizes Gandhiji through Lenny who views him as “an improbable toss-up between a clown and a demon.” (ICM 87) She does not hesitate in making derogatory remarks for him:

“He is a man who loves women. And lame children. And untouchable sweeper—so he will love the untouchable sweeper’s constipated girl-child best. . .
It was until some years later when I realized the full scope and dimension of massacres—that I comprehended the concealed nature of the ice lurking deep beneath the hypnotic and dynamic femininity of Gandhi’s non-violent exterior.” (ICM 87-88)

On the other hand Sidhwa’s portrayal of Jinnah evokes respect and sympathy. In a conversation with David Montenegro, she says, “…in Ice-Candy-Man, I was just redressing, in a small way, a very grievous wrong that has been done to Jinnah and Pakistanis by many Indians and British writers. They’ve dehumanized him, made him a symbol of the sort of the person who brought about the partition of India. . . whereas in reality he was the only constitutional man who didn’t sway crowds just by rhetoric.”

Sidhwa speaks of Gandhi’s chief disciple and the leader of the Hindu Congress Party, Jawahar Lal Nehru in derogatory terms. There is a reference to his alleged and notorious affair with Lord Mountbatten’s wife Edwina: “Nehru wears red carnations in the button holes of his ivory jackets. He bandies words with Lady Mountbatten and is presumed to be her lover . . . he is in the prime of his Brahmin manhood.” (ICM 159)

Likewise she attacks the Akalis, led by master Tara Singh and calls them as “bloody bunch of murdering fanatics.” (ICM 42)

Sidhwa criticizes Gandhiji for having incorporated too much of Hinduism into his movements, despite his efforts to reach out to Muslims. For the same reason she expresses her anger openly at the British designs, commenting that after
fulfilling their objective of dividing India, the British favoured Hindus over Muslims:

“They favour Nehru over Jinnah, Nehru is Kashmiri, they grant him Kashmir. Spurning logic, defying rationale, ignoring the consequences of bequeathing a Muslim state to the Hindus.” (ICM 159)

Politics and politicians are butt of criticism in Mistry’s novels too. In Such a Long Journey, he denounces the corrupt politics of Indira Gandhi’s government, and attempts to shatter Nehru’s charismatic figure by unmasking the leader as a despot who successfully tries to establish his dynastic rule at the centre. His daughter Indira Gandhi is described as a shrewd woman of action and foresight, who “uses RAW like her own private agency, spying on opposition parties, ministers. Even spying on her own cabinet. Blackmail as a way she can keep control. Keep them all in line.” (SLJ 270) Her political showmanship extends to being sympathetic to the poor while she reroutes the funds to finance her son’s business ambitions. Mistry goes on to describe the intrigues and manipulation surrounding Nehru’s feud with Firoze Gandhi for latter’s expose of scandals in the government. Mistry exposes the dirty politics of an arbitrary government through the tragic tale of Bilimoria and the detailing of the country’s political corruption. The novel explores the intimate connection between war and the state politics, between the corruption of political leaders and the life of the ordinary citizens. It exposes the nature of the abusive power exercised by those in the top levels of government.

Mistry’s response to the political climate of the 1970’s continues in his next novel A Fine Balance as well. The novel underlines the Indian experience of the
Emergency and reflects Indira Gandhi’s hypocrisy by presenting chaotic injustices and brutality inflicted upon ordinary people of the country. The Emergency brings in benefits to the capitalists and gives a boost to the likes of Nusswan and Ms.Gupta, who support the discipline and benefits Emergency brings. The imposed curb on strikes and trade unions for the middle-class implies more exploitation of the labour force:

“The corporation has its own musclemen now. It’s our goondas versus their goondas. They deal with the union crooks before they can start trouble and lead the poor workers astray. Even police supports us. Everybody is fed up with the nuisance of unions.” (FB 409)

Mistry exposes the culture of bribery and nepotism that thrives with the politicians to procure black money from the businessmen needing favours. As a result, the poor bear the brunt of the high and mighty and are exploited by the moneyed class.

In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry satirises politics of the time by taking the drama of emergency a notch above satire, and questions the political truth of the country. Through her grand speech before a ‘purchased’ crowd, Indira Gandhi dubs emergency as a necessity. On the contrary, in the face of such a necessity, which was tantamount to unjust politics, ordinary citizens like the tailors were forced to confront the draconian face of modern politics. The plight of marginalized like Avinash, Nawaz and tailors paints the state of nation’s imbalance during Emergency.
“The morbid end each meets becomes the author’s sensitive reply to the grimness of living during the times of political imbalance.”\textsuperscript{13}

Both Sidhwa and Mistry have realistically illustrated women’s plight and exploitation in patriarchal society. They concernedly take up the issue of travails of ‘other sex’, ‘the soft target’. In every domain where patriarchy domains, woman is other; she is marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values.\textsuperscript{14}

Sidhwa and Mistry question this subaltern status of women and being aware of their marginalization and subjugation, portray their women characters’ struggles against oppressive patriarchal domain and strife for their individuality and self-fulfilment. Sidhwa, however, portrays her female characters stronger and more powerful than Mistry.

Sidhwa’s \textit{The Pakistani Bride} provides an incisive look into subordinate treatment of women. Her deep concern for the status of women in society is reflected in her presentation of the exploitation of women in the novel. The marriage of Afshan at the early age of fifteen with Qasim highlights the harsh reality of women being treated as purchasable-salable commodity. She is sold into a marriage with a boy five years younger than her, in order to compensate for her father’s failure to repay a debt.

Later, Qasim’s fostered daughter Zaitoon is victimized by the domineering patriarchal order of an insular and blinkered tribal society. She is brutally tortured psychologically, physically and sexually by her tribal husband. He beats her on the slightest pretext not only with a stick but also with sharp stones. Ultimately she runs
away to escape from the clutches of her barbarous husband to unfamiliar mountainous paths. The image of molestation of this starved and oppressed girl during this journey to survive exposes that ugly side of male hypocrisy in which man brutally ravishes woman whenever he finds a woman alone. Fortunately, Zaitoon survives but her husband Sakhi is compelled to take it for granted that she is dead.

Carol, the American woman in the novel also represents the problematic issues related to women. Her Westernized modes of social intercourse are misinterpreted by her husband Farukh and other men she comes in contact with. She is oppressed by the jealousy and over-possessiveness of Farukh. She loves Mushtaq but later it comes out that he too treats her primarily as a commodity and wants to exploit her sexually. Through the plight of Zaitoon and Carol, Sidhwa presents the subordinate status of women, particularly in Pakistani society where women are expected to remain passive, silent beings overcast by the shadows of their husbands, fathers and brothers. Dipika Sahai observes:

“The Pakistani Bride is a woman’s lyric cry in prose against the existential fate and societal abuse. Sidhwa has fashioned complex metaphors to orchestrate the multiple agonies of a woman, a successful portrayal of pain and suffering in the character of Zaitoon. She has written dramatically of a particular culture, marriage, loyalty, honour and their conflict with old ways.”

In *Ice-Candy-Man*, also, apart from describing the ugly and terrifying face of the Partition marked with traumatic and agonizing scenes, Sidhwa analyses men’s lecherous, violent and undignified attention and advances towards women. She
“uses the ‘woman-as-victim’ paradigm depicting the victimization of the woman as a result of a collective action viz. the communal riots that followed the Partition.”

During Partition riots, envy, hatred and violence had reduced women to the status of easy targets for taking revenge. They were exploited, victimized and sexually assaulted to declare superiority over each other. Hindu Ayah was first raped by her Muslim admirer Ice-candy-man and then dragged to the profession of prostitution.

Rohinton Mistry also takes up women issues but feminism is not as teeming in his novels as it is in Sidhwa’s. His women are, in some way or the other, defined by their relationships to men. In comparison to Sidhwa’s, Mistry’s women characters are often invisible, silent or presented within the framework of stereotypes with an exception of Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance*. Dina seeks independence from her brother’s patriarchal domination, from exploitation within the family, and from the utter state of dependence that her status as impoverished widow demands in her society and “emerges as a woman of rich complexity and strength.”

She continues to battle many oppressive traditions and constraints, establishes a tailoring business in her own home but socio-political conditions force her to move back to her childhood home and lose her precious independence.

In *Such a Long Journey*, no other woman except Laurie Coutino, the secretary at the bank, is presented as inhabiting the public world. Dilnavaz, the well-meaning mother, stays at home and for the benefit of her family dabbles in the remedies and dark arts of the grief-crazed Mrs Kutpitia. Mistry has often been criticized for the reason that “the women in the novel are reduced to mere plot
devices and are objects through which men reveal their characters. We are left with a sense of incompleteness, of stories left untold, of avenues left unexplored. In *Such a Long Journey*, women have been left at the station. An otherwise accomplished first novel is compromised by this structural flaw.”

Nilufer Bharucha also notes that in the novel, female characters “do not journey at all. They remain stationary while the world around them moves and changes. Theirs is a static universe where they are even denied the knowledge of their own stultification and repression by their creator.”

Be it Sidhwa or Mistry, both of them have been generous in sprinkling their books with obscenities and sexual violence. They do not hesitate to discuss sexual acts and assaults in the course of their presentation. In *The Pakistani Bride*, Zaitoon is married with Sakhi, a tribal youth, who mercilessly treats her at the first night after marriage. Sidhwa candidly and artistically gives detailed description of the initiation into sex life of the young bride with an ease hard to be found in women writers: “Sakhi was above her, she lusted to graft herself to him. . .” (PB 163) The scenes of intimacy, flirting and love of Carol and Mushtaq are also presented openly.

Sidhwa also deals with the act of forcefully having sex with women against their will and emphasizes the point that it is not just a criminal act but a moral sin. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, she describes at length the Partition’s victims of rape. She projects rape as motivated by an impulse to hurt the victim or to take revenge, rather than by sexual desire only. There is a repugnant scene of Hindu Ayah’s rape and abduction by a group of Muslims headed by the Ice-candy-man who has always claimed to love her: “The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands, supporting her with careless intimacy, lift her into it. Four men stand pressed against
her, propping her body upright, their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces.” (ICM 183)

Like Sidhwa, Mistry also includes several depictions of human sexual desires and powers in his novels, and by doing so he explores the despair and indignities of the human experience. In Such a Long Journey, the mentally retarded Tehmul tries to satisfy his sexual urge by committing rape on the doll, Roshan got as a prize in annul school raffle.

In A Fine Balance, Mistry presents sexual urges coupled with nostalgia and remorse. The intimate scenes of Dina and her friend Fredoon are vividly described. However their love-making reminds her, in one way or the other, of her husband Rustom:

“... they used a chair. Then one day, as she swung a leg over to straddle Fredoon, her action suddenly resurrected the image of Rustom flinging his leg over his bicycle.” (FB 59)

Though Fredoon is understanding, gentle and never imposing, intimacy with him makes Dina feel that “what Fredoon and she did in this room seemed a sordid, contraption-riddled procedure, filling her with shame and remorse. She shuddered.” (FB 60)

A particular feature in the fiction of Sidhwa and Mistry is that it brilliantly captures the throbbing life of India. Every fictional text by them has their native places (Sidhwa’s Lahore and Mistry’s Bombay) as background which commemorate their nostalgia and long association they had with their homelands.
Bapsi Sidhwa was born, brought up and educated in Lahore. She considers herself a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsee woman. At a young age of nine, she witnessed first-hand, bloody Partition of India. The historical city of Lahore became a border city in Pakistan. She has done much to put Pakistan, and particularly Lahore on the map of English-speaking literary world. She gives credit to the city for shaping her creative sensibilities as a writer. In the “Introduction: City Beloved,” she herself says:

“I have spent most of my life in Lahore, and the city of 11 million provides the geographical locations of my novels. Its ambience has molded my sensibility and also my emotional responses. To belong to Lahore is to be steeped in its romance, to inhale with each breath an intensity of feeling that demands expression.”

Sidhwa is clearly a writer of her city which forms a setting for almost all her works. She describes the city of Lahore (La Whore) in amazingly sexualized terms in The Pakistani Bride:

“Lahore— the whore, the handmaiden of dimly remembered Hindu kings, the courtesan of Moghul Emperors, bedecked and bejeweled, savaged by marauding hordes, healed by the caressing hands of successive lovers. A little shoddy . . . like an attractive but ageing concubine, ready to bestow surprising delights on those who cared to court her—proudly displaying Royal gifts.” (PB 43)

Ice-Candy-Man, Sidhwa’s “mysterious and wonderful novel” is set in Lahore in 1947:

“Warris Road, lined with rain gutters lies between Queen’s Road and Jail Road: both wide, clean, orderly streets at the affluent fringes of Lahore. Rounding the right-hand corner of Warris Road and continuing on Jail Road is the hushed
Salvation Army wall . . . a few furlongs away the dense bazaars of Mozang Chungi.” (ICM 1-2)

Sidhwa vividly presents how the communal passion during the partition of Indian subcontinent burn up the historical and beautiful Lahore city.

Just as Sidhwa’s fiction is rooted in the streets of Lahore, Mistry’s fictional work is set in “grime and grit of modern Bombay” as he vivifies, “a distillation of his own life before he left Bombay.”

Although Mistry left for Canada as early as 1975 (a month after Indira Gandhi declared the state of Emergency), and has lived there since, he prefers to write about India, particularly Bombay which engages his imagination. Bombay continues to feature as the narrative locale in his fiction. Though his focus remains the Parsi ways of life, his novels express the milling morass of the city in all its length and breadth.

The narrative action of Such a Long Journey is confined to Bombay of 1971. The city is realistically depicted as a hopeless city with chronic water shortage, overflowing gutters, pot-holed pavements, rampant disease, social unrest, tense political climate and a thriving culture of bribe-extracting public servants. Mistry describes Bombay as “A microscopic manifestation of the greed, dishonesty and moral turpitude that flourished at the country’s centre. How from the very top, whence all power flowed, there also dipped the pus of putrefaction, infecting every stratum of society below.” (SLJ 313)
His second novel *A Fine Balance* is set in an unnamed “city by the sea”, that is clearly Bombay, the capital of Maharashtra, in mid-1970s. Mistry gives a sensitive portrayal of metropolitan life through a mélange of characters by peeping into the city life. The novel tells how four ordinary people happen to get together in this metro city and their lives are overturned by the political turmoil and violence during the Emergency period. Bombay is presented as a city where people come to fulfil their dreams. However, here survival is easy but living one’s dream is not guaranteed. Mistry presents the picture of Bombay with all its cruelty and callousness, friendship and kindness, political hypocrisy and social imbalance, trains and train accidents, suicides and murders, selfishness and poverty, crowd and beggars, traffic and pollution, labour camps and *chawls* (slum dwellings). The trope of performance is used in the novel to sketch the kaleidoscopic never sleeping city of chaos and commotion. People like the Beggarmaster, the monkey man and the hair-collector who later becomes a godman Bal-baba, perform weird acts to make their both ends meet in a city like Bombay. The vicissitudes of varicoloured metropolis life is sketched in colourful strokes—the chronic shortage of water, fight over pavement dwellings, the vicious custom of stripping students in the name of ragging, rise in dowry deaths by kerosene, and hapless poverty that makes many turn to a life of crime to make both ends meet.23

Suffering and human loss are the motifs to be found frequently in the fiction of both these novelists. Deaths occur in quick succession in *The Pakistani Bride* and become the cause of mental suffering for Qasim. In the Chapter Two of the novel, we are told how two of Qasim’s children died of typhoid and one died due to a fall off a ledge. Then the five years old daughter suffered from the disease which spread
to mouth and throat and finally she died. His remaining two sons and wife also suffered from small pox and died. Within one month Qasim was only left of his family. Even the little girl Munni, later given the name Zaitoon by Qasim, suffers the loss of her parents. They are murdered with deliberate cruelty by the horde of Sikhs during their migratory train journey to Pakistan. Even Qasim himself kills the bank clerk Girdharilal before joining the caravans of people fleeing to Pakistan. He murders the clerk because he had insulted him and it is a matter of honour for Qasim to make this “non-believer” pay for it with his life.

*Ice-Candy-Man* is full of murders and massacres. Like a train of Khushwant Singh’s *A Train to Pakistan* (1956) full of dead bodies of riot victims, there is a train in Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* also. The train comes from Gurdaspur and “Everyone in it is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslims. There is no young woman among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women’s breasts!” (ICM 149)

In Pir Pindo. Men, women and children are killed by Akalis. Similarly, the Sikh families are attacked and killed in Lahore. The mutilated body of Mr. Rogers, the Inspector General of Police, is found in gutters. The Masseur’s mutilated body is found in a gunnysack leaving in Ayah “the great empty ache.” (ICM 177)

“Partition (thus) results into a series of images and events depicting human loss and agony.”

Mistry’s novel *Such a Long Journey* deals with the life of an ordinary citizen Gustad who suffers the loss of three persons close to his heart. First of all he suffers the agony of his close friend Dinshawji’s death. Dinshawji has always hidden his illness and suffering under his clownish exterior. Once this mask of clowning is
removed, he looks a sick man who has been battling cancer with humour: “a grave individual, suddenly fragile and spent, who greeted them (colleagues) with only a quiet hello… Dinshawji was no longer playing a role; reality at last has caught up with him.” (SLJ 180-81)

Another death which comes as a great shock and mental suffering to Gustad is that of his neighbor and friend Major Jimmy Bilimoria’s who becomes an unfortunate victim of political manipulations and dies under mysterious circumstances. His story is an example of how an authoritative state uses ordinary citizens as scapegoats to further its own interests.

Then there is the tragic death of the half-wit, mentally retarded Tehmul, which terribly disturbs Gustad. He carefully carries the body to the boy’s flat and performs the Parsi rituals of prayer after death. This is the time when he finally permits the free flow of “the salt water of his eyes, as much for himself as for Tehmul, as much for Tehmul, as for Jimmy. And for Dinshawji, for Pappa and Mamma, for Grandpa and Grandma, all who had to wait for so long. . .” (SLJ 337)

*A Fine Balance* again is a novel with human loss. There are scenes of deaths, train accidents, murders and suicides. In the opening chapter we are told that the train has been delayed at it has hit someone to death on the railway track. In the same manner, in the closing chapter Maneck Kohlah commits suicide by throwing himself in front of a train. In between there are a number of scenes of human loss. Dukhi mochi’s son Narayan is mercilessly killed for his open defiance by Thakur Dharmasi’s men. Not satisfied with killing just Narayan, the Thakur punishes the
whole family including his parents Dukhi and Roopa, wife Radha and daughters. They all are tied up and burnt alive in their own hut.

Avinash, Maneck’s friend, is one of the victims of the Emergency rule. He mysteriously disappears and it is revealed later that he had been killed in police custody for anti-government slogans and demonstrations. His three unmarried sisters commit suicide because their parents are not rich enough to afford wedding dowry. Then there is the tragic episode in the novel when Ashraf chacha is killed by severe beating by the police in the tumult of market place of the town.

In one of the sub-plots of the novel, Rajaram, the hair collector, failing to earn enough money by way of sale of hair, goes to the extent of murdering two beggars with very beautiful and long hair. Another beggar, the crippled Shankar, who is the step brother of Beggarmaster, is killed in a tragic road accident. He lost control of his gaadi, and flew off the pavement straight into a double-decker bus. Thereafter the Beggarmaster himself is found murdered. The novel thus abounds in deaths and suffering.

Then at the climax, there is the death of one of the four protagonists, Maneck. He returns home from Dubai after eight years for his father’s funeral and comes to know through some old newspapers that Avinash was found dead by the side of a railway track and his sisters had hanged themselves. Dismayed Maneck visits Dina only to find that she has lost her flat as well as independence, Ishvar has lost his legs and Om has been castrated and both have been reduced from the status of tailors to beggars. Horrified Maneck heads for the railway station and steps in front of a train and thus ends his life. A critic comments:
“The stage is set for everything to end badly and any voice that could have questioned this statement has been necessarily silenced.”

Both these novelists choose English as a medium of their creative urge. Sidhwa uses English language and novel as an effective medium to expose the follies, foibles, orthodoxy, hypocrisy and other harsh realities of life in her novels. What makes her unique as a novelist is her using simple, pure and limpid English which makes it easy and natural for an ordinary reader to comprehend. Sidhwa’s success lies in her choice of presenting a sensational theme mixed up with love, sex, humour, irony and realism conveyed in a convincing and objective language which is found to be readable like the language of newspaper and magazines. Her incessant and unhesitant use of Hindi words—choorail, Heramzada, Haram-khore, Shaitan, parathas, Buckwas, Swaraj etc. makes her presentation and the expression more alive and convincing.

The critics and reviews have praised Bapsi Sidhwa for her luminous prose: “Sidhwa’s Rabelaisian language and humour are enormously refreshing especially in the context of modern Indian fiction, which has tended rather towards the prim and stilted. . . she succeeds in transmitting into English much of the spirit of Punjabi language and culture, which is nothing if not earthy. But her prose is also both delicate and precise in its imagery and descriptions, with words chosen as carefully as pieces of inlay in a marble wall.”

Rohinton Mistry also occupies a unique place in the realm of English literature by virtue of his writing style and use of the language. His facility for words, use of irony, technical craftsmanship and settings of the novels has some
irresistible appeal. His well-told story with swift, linear narrative and occasional flashback captures reader’s imagination. His novels with their long descriptive passages, a third person narrative, coincidences and stories overlapping are akin to 19th century novels. Mistry like Dickens is fascinated by people who are either overtaken (like Gustad Noble in Such a Long Journey) or victims of history (like the tailors Ishvar and Omprakash in A Fine Balance). He does not go backwards and forwards in time like in Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines or use overlapping symbols, elaborate allegories, fantasy and magic realism like in the novels of Salman Rushdie.27

Mistry’s masterly approach towards illness and death, his heart-rending detailed description of the last rites and his deep rooted understanding of human emotions touch a chord in the heart, however his non-veg jokes and lengthy descriptions of slaughter of animals are disappointing aspects. Though his experimentation with the language is limited, Mistry occasionally inserts vernacular expressions into his flawlessly English intoned sentences to convey the Parsi flavour.

Thus a survey of the novels written by Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry, shows that they both take up social issues with different perspectives and style. It is not surprising that both these Parsi novelists explore rituals, customs, fears and insecurities of Parsis and their ways of life. Both of them have attained the watermark of the novelists of international repute. Their fictional output, though admittedly small in number, has carved for them a place amidst the great and immortal writers. Comparatively, Rohinton Mistry’s novels are more contemporary
in time and are located in post-independence India whereas Sidhwa nicely uses her skill of writing novel to communicate a different world which begins from Indian socio-cultural situation and ends in Pakistan.
REFERENCES


