Chapter-Seven

Summation

Bapsi Sidhwa is an erudite writer who knows well how to create awareness among the western readers regarding the customs and life-styles lived by a common person in the east. Sidhwa travels frequently to Pakistan, she works as woman’s right activist with women to help foster an awareness of their rights, including the organization of large-scale awareness raising public protests.

She also utilizes her position as an acclaimed writer to make numerous public statements in the Pakistani media aimed against repressive measures that harm women and minority communities. She has worked as the voluntary secretary in the Destitute Women and Children’s home in Lahore for years and was appointed to the advisory committee to Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Women’s Development.

In her novels Sidhwa portrays people from all walks of life and from all communities. They are Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Parsees. In her novels Sidhwa provides a glimpse of her contemporary political condition in Pakistan. She also exposes the parochial attitude and narrow mindedness of the Americans. She with her statue characterization, positive outlook and humour tackles some of her contemporary problems. Her writings show the cultural multiplicity of which she has been a part. Although Sidhwa speaks four languages, she makes a conscious decision to write in English, partly due to the increased probability of worldwide exposure to issues that concerned her within the sub-continent. Sidhwa talks about serious issues like national politics, fraud, death
dealing of mother-in-law, superstitions, faiths, marriage rituals and other multifaceted activities.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels are the perfect combination of imagination and reality, through which she depicts the absolute image of the society. Sidhwa’s works depict various inside pictures that lie hidden in the dark realities of the contemporary world. Her genius lies in her juxtaposition of the themes of portrayal of Parsee community, East-West encounter, and human relationship.

Sidhwa's first three novels, although very different from one another, share what Anita Desai has described as "a passion for history and for truth telling." And in each her desire to understand the terrible events of the Partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 and the subsequent birth of Pakistan as a nation is evident. Her first-published novel, *The Crow Eaters*, is a delightfully rambunctious comedy in which Faredoon Junglewalla tells the story of his life and times from the turn of the century to the eve of Partition. In common with such a writer as Salman Rushdie, Sidhwa believes that in order to understand any single event it is necessary to consider the many events which led up to it. Like the author herself, Faredoon is a Parsi and his story takes the reader to the heart of that minority community. The focus on the Parsis, their rites, and customs, not only provides a rich subject in itself, but also an ideal vehicle for observing the history of India, and in particular the events played out between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, from a detached yet intimate insider/outsider perspective. Through the contact Faredoon and his family have with other groups in India (including the British) a picture of the whole is skillfully created. But always, behind her panoramic canvas, history ticks away and moves the reader gradually but inexorably towards 1947.
Whereas *The Crow Eaters* ends with the horrors of Partition still to come, *The Bride* (or *The Pakistani Bride*, her second published novel, but actually written before *The Crow Eaters*) uses those horrors as its starting point, and thus focuses on the first chapter of Pakistan's history as an independent nation. In this novel Sidhwa again makes use of a detached and marginalized character from one of Pakistan's minority groups. She uses Qasim, a Kohistani tribesman, as her window onto the period of history she treats. After witnessing a brutal attack on a train of refugees (a common Partition motif), Qasim adopts a young girl left orphaned by the massacre. When, years later, he takes Zaitoon to his ancestral village to be married, Sidhwa demonstrates the extent of the cultural divisions which exist within the newly drawn political boundaries of Pakistan, and in doing so raises questions about the construction of national identity. Her focus on the relationship between dominant and minority communities in Pakistan is extended specifically to include gender relations, which indeed is a strong theme in all her fiction.

In both *The Crow Eaters* and *The Bride*, Partition is a significant event without being the main subject of either novel. But in *Ice-Candy-Man*—which is revisionist history of Partition from a Pakistani perspective, and major contribution to the growing list of novels which treat Partition—Sidhwa meets that terrible event head-on. Here Sidhwa returns to the Parsi community and chooses Lenny, a young Parsi girl with polio, as her narrator. The political and historical consciousness of her previous novels reaches a pinnacle in this novel, and the young narrator, naive, innocent, and free of the various prejudices an older narrator would be subject to, proves to be an ideal means of exposing the complexities of the period. The frequent intertextual referencing in *Ice-Candy-Man* is testament to
Sidhwa’s dual literary heritage, but more significantly, her use of Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Iceman Cometh*, which provides both the title and the framework for *Ice-Candy-Man*, insists on the importance of fiction as a shaping force of history, and lends one more twist to Sidhwa’s exploration of the nature of truth.

In her richly comic novel *An American Brat*, Sidhwa chronicles the departure of Feroza Ginwalla—a member of the Junglewalla clan first encountered in *The Crow Eaters*—from an increasingly fundamentalist Pakistan of the late 1970s and her subsequent exposure to American culture. More than simply the tale of a young girl coming of age, it shows Feroza coming to terms with her identity in the increasingly diasporic climate of the late twentieth century. Sidhwa convincingly handles the personal growth of her central character and the difficulties that arise when two cultures come into contact. This novel, with its focus on diaspora, is a logical extension of the interest in displacement and the clashes between communities which is present in all her previous three novels.

Being a Parsee woman herself, Sidhwa presents an impressionable portrayal of this minority community. Sidhwa presents the customs, traditions, values and rituals of Parsee community in a refreshing and exotic manner. Parsees are basically Zoroastrians. Sidhwa describes the traditional story of the Parsee’s arrival from Persia to India, 1300 years ago at the times of Arab invasion. Sidhwa exhibits the Parsee culture through her novels.

*The Crow-Eaters* is an entertaining satire and farce on the foibles of its main characters. It can also be taken as a work which embodies a larger vision of the world, a vision which is best described – broad, tolerant and sympathetic.

In *An American Brat* and *The Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa presents an important aspect of the Parsee ritual that that Parsees worship fire and it is supposed to be
their Lord. In almost every Parsee household candles are snuffed with reverent pinch of fingers. Even the cooking fire is not permitted to be extinguished, it is politely preserved in the ashes at night and fanned alive in the morning. And, the Parsees never smoke, it is against their religion.

Sidhwa shows an important ceremony of the Parsees in her novels—Navjote ceremony. It is performed during childhood. This is the symbol of the formal acceptance of Zoroastrian faith. In the ceremony—Sudra and Kusti are invested. This is the biggest moment of pride for every Parsi—parent.

Parsees are very particular about their disapproval of inter-faith marriages. In Zoroastrians interfaith marriage are restricted. A Parsee man, who marriages a nun, can keep his faith and bring up his children as Zoroastrians, but the no one is not permitted to become Zoroastrian. This aspect is emphasized in Sidhwa’s The Crow Eaters and An American Brat. In The Crow Eaters when Yazdi insists to marry Rozy Watson, he is criticized by his father and is forbidden to do that. In An American Brat Feroza has to face a similar situation, when she declares her decision to marry David Press.

Parsees have different customs relating to marriage; they celebrate it in various stages. First ceremony before marriage is known of Madasara ceremony, in which coconut and sugar are given to the would-be-couple, as the symbol of blessings. The second ceremony before wedding is known as ‘adarnee.’ On this occasion the relatives of the girl give clothes and jewellery to the boy and vice-versa.

The next and the final ceremony is the wedding. The couple is to be seated in the throne and the priests perform prayers and rituals, the relatives sing marriage songs and then the gifts are given to both side. Parsees are different in their
dressing code. In *An American Brat* Zareen wears sleeveless blouses with saree, where as in *The Crow Eaters* Putli and Jerbanoo never appear in public without mathabanas—and the holy thread circling their waists is displayed. They always wear Sudra.

Parsees have different customs relating to their funeral rites. The members of this community leave their dead ones in open-roofed enclosures atop hills to be devoured by vultures, in the ‘Tower of Silence’. But the Parsees who are settled in far flung areas, where there are no ‘Tower of Silence.’ have to be content with mere burial, as described by Sidhwa in *The Crow Eaters*.

The description of Parsi customs and life in Lahore, Bombay and London are rich in colour, sound and aroma. Sidhwa is famous for her plenty of vivid and forceful descriptions which enhance the merits of her novels. She depicts an illustrative encounter between the East and the West, by portraying the differences in customs, traditions and rituals. She even describes the details of dissimilarities from the use of daily products to the dress code; from religious beliefs to different mind set-ups. Sidhwa shows this through the characters in her works.

In *An American Brat*, Sidhwa displays the awkwardness, hesitation and humiliation of the western people, in the east and vice-versa. Feroza right from the time of her arrival has to face these problems during her inquiry at the airport, opening the milk carton etc. Sidhwa also exhibits the various differences in the dress code between eastern and western people.

While studying in America, Feroza has to adopt the western life-style. She buys Jeans, T-shirts, sweaters and blouses to wear. Sidhwa shows western influence on the Eastern people through the character of Manek. He praises
America for its progress, sophistication, discipline and hygienic conditions and criticizes the condition of his native land, Pakistan.

Sidhwa reflects the desperate desire of people from the East to achieve the American citizenship in the novel. In An American Brat, Shashi’s brother, Deepak and his wife, Mala come to America during Mala’s pregnancy, in order to get the coveted United States citizenship for their child.

The novel portrays the life-style of the West as well. Feroza praises the space and freedom given to the child by the parents. She compares this with the strict behaviour of Eastern parents. She also comes across the ‘farmed out’ family system. She is shocked by this aspect when Jo tells her about Tom and his farmed out family. It is unheard of in Pakistani. If a man is not able to provide his family, he is helped by their relatives, but he does not give away his children.

In The Bride Sidhwa displays the contrast and admiration of the Eastern people for the beauty and personality of the Western races. Zaïtoon is filled with admiration for Carol’s light bright skin, her beautiful golden hair and her strange-tight, trousers. Whereas Zaïtoon’s confused and shy attitude is alien to Carol, her confident attitude is new for Zaïtoon.

Sidhwa shows another kind of encounter of the Eastern and the Western customs in The Crow Eaters. Putli, a traditional and religious wife is not ready to adopt western customs which allow a wife has to walk a step ahead of her husband. So she always makes excuses when she is invited to a western party. In her writings Sidhwa portrays the various aspects of human relationships – husband and wife, mother and son, father and daughter, brother and sister and also the kind relationships of concern and sympathy based on humanity.
Sidhwa presents an earthy picture of child-parent relationship. She presents father-daughter relationship with a deep affection. Cyrus’s daughter Feroza, in *An American Brat*, loves him and never wants to do anything which disturbs her father. Whereas Cyrus does his best to give happiness to his daughter. He gives permission for Feroza’s visit to America. Another relationship is of Jo and her father, Mr. Miller. The latter, like many other American parents, never interferes in her life. He has very high dreams for Jo and loves her more than her siblings. He shares his problems with her. Sidhwa also depicts Mother-son relationship. In *The Crow Eaters*, she shows Putli’s concern for her children. She loves her elder son, Soli the most but he dies in early an age of twenty-one. This fills Putli with grief and sorrow. Her youngest son, Billy tries his best to fill up this gap. He takes good care of Freddy’s business and the household.

Sidhwa depicts human-relations which are based on humanity and concern. In *An American Brat*, Feroza is helped by a policeman Ben, when she is left alone on the road. And in *The Bride*, Sidhwa shows the concern and sympathetic attitude of Major Mushtaq. He helps Zaitoon and saves her life, from the tribal men and her husband. Sidhwa as a writer is better revealed in her novel *An American Brat*. It brings out her gift of keen observation, highlighted sense of strong and character along with her moral vision of her Parsee community.

This novel also deals with the inter-cultural theme. In this narrative, the west is described as a set of values in conflict with the value system of the East. The conflict between the two cultures is discernible not only on the social plane but also on the personal level leading to a quest for identity.

Bapsi Sidhwa also represents the materialistic approach that covers the modern human relationships. In *An American Brat*, Mike (Jo’s boy-friend) takes
her almost advantage. She does domestic work to keep Mike happy, washes his
clothes, cleans his apartment and also lends him money. Sidhwa exhibits this
selfish approach through Rosy Watson’s character. She is a prostitute by
profession and pretends as a poor innocent girl in front of Yazdi. With the result of
this Yazdi decides to marry her. But she does not succeed in her plans.

In her novels, Bapsi Sidhwa shows a pure and indispensable relationship of
brother and sister. In *The Crow Eaters*, Sidhwa presents a very naughty kind of
bond between Yasmin and Billy, which fills the Junglewalla household with charm
and of the most pure platonic relationships Friendships. Feroza and Shashi are
good friends.

Shashi is from Delhi and Feroza is from Lahore (Pakistan). Shashi gives
Feroza his notes. He introduces her to his other friends. He recommends or lends
her the important books. When Feroza goes to visit Pakistan, in her winter
vacations, she buys a shalwar and shirt outfit for Shashi. She also helps him, when
his brother Deepak and his wife Mala, are in trouble.

Sidhwa also portrays various other human – relationships like mother-in-
law and son-in-law in her novels. The ill-treatment of women in the world, and the
bondage that they have to suffer and live with it is the indispensable part of her
writings. Sidhwa is famous for her enormously refreshing style and this quality of
Sidhwa’s writing, makes her every work remarkable, entertaining and universal.
She is able to give voice to the marginalized figures of Pakistani society, mainly
women. She poses a strong counter-voice to the dominant patriarchal narrative
which has subdued women’s roles to the absolute minimum, through silencing
female literature in one form or the other. She rigorously questions the histories
and the assumptions of contemporary Pakistani society and literature. The austere
attack on a number of beliefs is somewhat softened by her candid and wry humour which pervade through substantial portions of her work. The witty humour is used as a tool to open up a space which allows her to criticize without causing undue offence.

Despite the fact that *The Pakistani Bride* is a wonderful poignant story dealing with issues which govern the ethics of a particular society of Kohistan, it would be imprudent not to point out the shortcomings of it. This novel somewhat falls short of presenting an accurate picture of Pakistan, because it basically deals with individual stories, and almost all of which have the common theme of violence towards those who belong to different ethnic, religious, geographic or gender to those who might hold the power. Sidhwa seems to hold on to advance certain views and incidents in a way what fails to give the reader enough room to form his or her own judgement. The rather pedantic manner results in distancing the reader from a number of incidents, which would have enhanced the reader’s involvement in the development of the society.

*The Bride* is Sidhwa’s first novel, and lacks the punch of realism which she has to master in her later novels. She tends to criticize certain characters and actions (mostly in terms of cruelty of the men) in her novel, which are once again used as metaphors describing the supposed characteristics of their society rather than their own.

Her portrayal of the Kohistanis is rather essentialized and the people come across as uncivilized barbarians, people in desperate need of being taught the mode of behaviour of the modern world. At the same time, they carry certain glamour, and because of their primal and rather limited instincts are closer to noble savages.
The novel postulates a crude stereotype of the Kohistans, a view very easily put forth and believed by the Western audience and, indeed, many urban Pakistanis who may not have enough knowledge about these people and their way of life, for characteristics with which she endows her Kohistani characters seem to jump out of the Orientalist fiction of Rudyard Kipling.

Sidhwa implicitly suggests that the Kohistani people and society as a unit exist in a state of historical and cultural petrification. It is quite apparent that she perceives these Kohistanis, who may symbolize the Pathans as a whole as inextricably caught in the clutches of their ancient thus barbaric traditions belonging to a distant past mode of life, a world of ignorance in contrast to the sophisticated, civilized narrator who embodies the new world. Despite these apparent weaknesses, Sidhwa is able to formulate a poignant tale of a woman’s struggle to fight and survive in the contemporary society.

A title such as *The Bride* at first sight might suggest a happy story, but it soon becomes evident that it contains an ironic twist. The novel opens with the wedding of the central character, Quasim and an account of his and his bride’s shared humiliation on their wedding night. His father has married him to a woman twice his age.

The novel records with swift movement his maturation, the developing relationship between husband and wife in spite of their age difference, the deaths of his wife and children, his move from the Himalayan mountains to the Punjabi plains, and his life as a bank guard in that unfamiliar territory.

Then what little security Quasim has found during his four years in the Punjab vanishes when independence comes to India and the sub-continent is divided into India and Pakistan. After murdering a man who has humiliated him,
Quaisim decides to flee India and take his chances in Pakistan; he boards a train loaded with refugees bound for Lahore, one of the major cities given to the newly created nation.

Thus Sidhwa's first three novels, although very different from one another, share what Anita Desai has described as “a passion for history and for truth telling”. And in each her desire to understand the terrible events of the Partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 and the subsequent birth of Pakistan as a nation is evident. Her first-published novel, *The Crow Eaters*, is a delightfully rambunctious comedy in which Faredoon Junglewalla tells the story of his life and times from the turn of the century to the eve of Partition. In common with such a writer as Salman Rushdie, Sidhwa believes that in order to understand any single event it is necessary to consider the many events which led up to it. Like the author herself, Faredoon is a Parsee and his story takes the reader to the heart of that minority community. The focus on the Parsees, their rites, and customs, not only provides a rich subject in itself, but also an ideal vehicle for observing the history of India, and in particular the events played out between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, from a detached yet intimate insider, outsider perspective. Through the contact Faredoon and his family have with other groups in India (including the British) a picture of the whole is skilfully created. But always, behind her panoramic canvas, history ticks away and moves the reader gradually but inexorably towards 1947.

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The variety of themes she has taken up makes her one of the most versatile writers of the present times. Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels lend scope for further research. She can be compared with other Diaspora writers. Her sense of humour and the comic mode can be critically examined. The themes of partition, Parsee culture, East-West encounters, tradition Vs modernity and the like can be taken up for separate investigation.

The novels establish as a feminist who strives relentlessly for the freedom and emancipation of women. In short, the present thesis states its findings that:

- Women in the traditional society are confined by male hegemony and they endure suffering, unable to revolt.
- Lack-of-communication and understanding and neglecting others feelings in husband-wife relationship obstruct the healthy growth of family life.
- As a feminist, Sidhwa brings to light the feminine consciousness and the female psyche.
As a supporter of freedom of women, Sidhwa says that the joy of freedom is the essence of femininity.

As a social feminist, Sidhwa desires to place marriage in a proper social and emotional perspective.

As a modern feminist, Sidhwa opines that gender is not for marginalization but only for concern and progress.

As a humanist, Sidhwa recommends mutual love and understanding in both the sexes, which alone help for the progress of the society.

As an optimist, Sidhwa reflects the positive transformation of women in the ongoing battle of establishing female self-hood.

Sidhwa, as a feminist, reconstructs and redefines Indian women’s identity through her novels.