CHAPTER 9

BAPSI SIDHWA
Bapsi Sidhwa is a new and important voice in the world of Commonwealth fiction. She was born in Karachi in 1938. Brought up and educated in Lahore, she graduated from the Kinnaird College for Women in 1956. She comes from a prominent Parsi business family, the Bhandaras of Pakistan. Apart from being a writer, she is also active social workers. Sidhwa’s first first novel, *The Crow Eaters* was published in 1978, and provides as excellent contrast to her later novels, *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) and *The Ice-Candy Man* (1990).

Sidhwa’s novels are remarkably different from one another in both subject and treatment. Her first novel, *The Crow Eaters*, ¹ belongs to the comic mode. It deals with the lives and fortunes of the Junglewallas, a Parsi family in British India. Though it has serious touches here and there, farce and satire pervade the whole work. Her second novel, *The Pakistani Bride*, ² on the other hand, is serious, almost tragic, though it has its lighter moments. At the heart of this novel is the struggle of an orphaned girl for survival in the brutal and primitive tribal society in the mountains of Pakistan. Her third novel, *The Ice-Candy-Man*, ³ is the prism of Parsi sensitivity through which the cataclysmic event is depicted. The novel is written on the theme of Partition. The novel shows in the beginning the non-committal attitude of the Parsi community towards the flux in which the various communities of India found themselves in the beginning of the twentieth century. It distills the love-hate relationship of the Hindus and Muslims through the consciousness and point of view of Lenny, and unusually precocious five-year-old Parsi girl. Though the novels are very loosely plotted and lack a single uniting idea or a major protagonist, they are
very absorbing and dramatic. The author finely controls the tension throughout.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *The Crow Eaters*, set in pre-independence India, excels in its representation of a combination of Indian and British characters. Sidhwa establishes her Parsi identity in the very opening pages of the novel. It was attacked by a section of the Parsi community which considered it to be an unfair portrayal. However, this criticism arises from the assumption that the chief concern of the novel is to portray the life of Parsis in India. The author herself attempts a disclaimer in her Preface to the second edition thereby acknowledging, in a way, the basis for the controversy:

*Because of a deep-rooted admiration for my community – and an enormous affection for its few eccentricities – this work of satirical fiction has been a labour of love. The nature of satire being to exaggerate, the incidents in the book do not reflect at all upon the integrity of a community whose scrupulous honesty and sense of honour are renowned.*

Though the protagonist, Faredoon Junglewalla, and all the major characters of the novel are Parsis, and that Parsi life and rituals are minutely described in the novel, yet these factors to not make the novel an indictment or even an attack on the community. The novel is not particularly about Parsis. It is a novel whose characters happen to be Parsis.

*The Crow Eaters* is a loosely constructed narrative which begins with an extended flash-back. Faredoon Junglewalla tells the story of his early years to a captive audience consisting of his seven children and some neighbouring kids. He tells how at the end of the nineteenth century, at the age of twenty-four, he embarked on a journey to Punjab with his wife and mother-in-law; how he struggled many years with his mother-in-law for Control over his household; how, through a fraudulent insurance scheme in
which he set fire to his own shop and frightened his mother-in-law, he
becomes both the master of his house and rich; and how he rose to a power
and eminence in the community with hard work and craft.

The novel set in pre-Independence India, excels in its representation
of a combination of India and British characters. Fare-doon Junglewalla
uses public space in his business and social interactions, while his spirited
and indefatigable mother-in-law, Jerbanoo may be located in the private
space of the home and body. Faredoon Junglewalla is a pioneering Parsi at
the turn of the century. He transports his family in an ox-cart from Gujrat to
Lahore. He, like many other Parsis, was following the British flag in search
of trade. His identification with the British Raj is strong and here he
represents the majority of pre-Independence Parsis. In a multi-religious
Lahore, Faredoon Junglewalla and his family enjoy superior status by virtue
of being Parsis. So the novel is rich in Parsi idiom; the highly evocative
Parsi Gujarati is translated into English by Sidhwa.

Parsi alienation from mainstream Indian culture and fascination with
things Western is satirized in Faredoon Junglewalla’s hilarious attempts at
quoting English proverbs. This alienation is also underlined in the
Junglewalla family’s horror when their son Yazdi wants to marry an Anglo-
Indian girl and mingle his pure Persian blood with her ‘mongrel’ blood. The
Parsi fascination with England is satirized in Faredoon’s visit to Britain
with his wife and mother-in-law. The visit ends in an embarrassing fiasco
and the Junglewallas return to India.

The novel ends on a rather ambiguous note. The Jungle-walla family
is definitely at home in India and not in the West. However, this India is on
the verge of being torn apart by Hindus and Muslims. Faredoon Junglewalla,
like most Parsis, remains aloof from the freedom movement. Secure in his
religious exclusivity and the immunity it offers against violence and death,
he sits back and is ready to let Hindus and Muslims bat-tle over India. To
Junglewalla, like to the majority of Pars is, it mattered little who was to rule over independent India or over the new State which was to be wicked out of her side. The Crow Eaters explores both the superficial and the more profound dimensions of the comic mode. Not only is it an entertaining satire and farce on the foibles of its main characters, it also embodies a larger vision of the world, a vision which is best described as broad, tolerant and sympathetic.

Sidhwa’s second novel, The Pakistani Bride, is completely different from her first. Let alone the assertion of Parsi identity; it does not have even a single Parsi character. The novel is about a young Pakistani girl who is a Muslim refugee from India and is adopted by a Pathan during the Partition upheavals. The language, the insight into the Pakistani ethos, the understanding of the Pathan psyche, is a superb testimony to Sidhwa’s assimilation into Pakistan.

Zaitoon, a young girl is victimized by the debilitating patriarchal prescriptions of an insular tribal society. A child of partition, her parents are dead when she is four or five. Brought up by Qasim as his own daughter, she grows up secluded in Qila Gujjar Singh, Lahore. At sixteen, her marriage is fixed by Qasim with Sakhi, the son of Misir Khan, Qasim’s cousin. The marriage seems to be doomed to fail. First Miriam warns Qasim about the differences between hill life and urban life. Finally, Zaitoon herself has misgivings and begs to be taken back with Qasim. But Qasim is adamant, even threatening to kill the girl if she crosses him. The marriage and the interlude of joy that follows are both short-lived. Zaitoon’s torture begins on the very next day after marriage. Soon after that, she is broken in by her “tyrannical, animal-trainer” of a husband, who “beat her on the slightest pretext.” Two months after her marriage, Zaitoon is severely battered for going up to the river against the commands of her husband. The river is the boundary between the tribal territory and the army. Beyond the
river is the world Zaitoon is familiar with. She longs to go back to it seeing her wave at the ‘Jawans’ across the river, Sakhi nearly kills her. She decides to flee from her nightmarish world. Zaitoon frames her resistance in the gesture of defiance. Her escape from her husband and his family is the only act of Zaitoon propelled by her own free will, after being a victim of ineluctable fate almost throughout the narrative. Carol, the American girl in the story married to a Pakistani army officer, is equally oppressed in her relationship. But the means of resistance being more easily available to her, due to her privileged class and race identity, she decides to break free. The open-ended novel makes available to the reader various options to construct its likely end. But there are strong pointers in the text towards Carol taking charge of Zaitoon and perhaps returning to America. The end of the novel achieves the feminist utopian ideal of female solidarity of sisterhood.

The novel is a very moving and powerful work of art. It portrays a great idealism, a philosophical outlook which shows the primacy of the human spirit over physical and material obstacles. It is a story of courage and heroism, superbly narrated.

The Ice-Candy-Man is a re-inscription of male text on the Partition, which valorizes objective reality in the narrative and ignores the experiential realm of the woman. Sidhwa uses again the ‘wome-as-victim’ paradigm but here the victimization is a result of a collective action viz. the communal riots that followed the Partition. Riots are largely orchestrated by males and become a signifier of a collective male victimizer. The maid in the Parsi family at Lahore, the ‘Ayah’, is the one who suffers the impact of Partition the most.

The Ice-Candy-Man is the prism of Parsi sensitivity through which the cataclysmic event is depicted. It is the only novel written by a Parsi on the theme of Partition. While the novel shows in the beginning the non-committal attitude of the Parsi community towards the flux in which the
various communities of India found themselves at the beginning of the twentieth century, it distills the love-hate relationship of the Hindus and Muslims through the consciousness and point of view of Lenny, and unusually precocious five-year-old Parsi girl.

When the partition riots erupt, the Ice-Candy-Man seizes his chance to debase the ayah and leads a Muslim mob to Lenny’s house. The Parsi family and its Muslim servants hide the ayah, but Lenny unwittingly betrays her. At this level, it is the wider and constant betrayal by all Parsis of the one land which has given them refuge. Ayah is dragged away by the mob and raped. After her degradation, the Ice-Candy-Man, sets her up in a house in the prostitute’s quarters in Lahore. Having proved his mastery over her, he now professes to be crazily in love with her and wants to marry her. She, having been betrayed by him and physically abused by the mob, refuses to accept him. The women from Lenny’s family eventually rescue her and she becomes a candidate for rehabilitation. However, the ever-present betrayer, the Ice-Candy-Man, goes along with the rehabilitated ayah to perhaps ravish her afresh.

Interwoven into this dark and sordid talk of political betrayal and rape is Lenny’s childhood and her Parsi identity. The Parsi ethos is not stressed but subtly interwoven into the narrative. Lenny the maimed child is at once autobiographical as well as metaphorical. In this novel Sidhwa also confronts the issue of how the Parsi identity was going to cope with the changes on the political front. Lenny is thus a witness to the varied adult worlds which are in the process of tearing the community which bore witness to the carnage of the partition of India. Though Sidhwa’s novel does focus on the changing attitude of the Parsi community, it leaves out the exploration of the dilemma that the Parsi community had to resolve regarding its unnatural schismatic division between Indian and Pakistani Parsis.
Sidhwa’s prowess over the genre is impressive. Her range of settings, plots, themes, and characters makes her one of the most exciting of the recent commonwealth novelists.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *an American Brat* is her most recent novel, and is the first to be set in America. Sidhwa emerged as a novelist of international repute from Pakistan in the 1970s. She was born in Karachi and grew up in Lahore, and now spends her time between Lahore and Houston, Texas, where she teaches. She is another example of the increasingly cosmopolitan and transnational lifestyle adopted by many better-known and well received Pakistani writers in the West. To date, Sidhwa has published four novels and some short stories, the latest being the novel examined in this paper. She belongs to the minority community of Parsis in Pakistan and all her writing invokes the Parsi way of life.

The Parsi community has been in diaspora from the time of their fleeing from Iran in 850 AD in order to escape forcible conversion to Islam. During the time of British colonialism they enjoyed an exclusive status on par with the ruling English. In 1947, during Partition they were forced to choose either India or Pakistan as their home, therefore causing them to become a Partition Diaspora. Since the 1970s, they, like many educated Asians, have chosen to migrate to the West forming a Western diaspora. Since the Eighties, several of them have contributed in a big way to postcolonial diasporic writing from the subcontinent. In *An American Brat*, Sidhwa explores the complexities of being Parsi, of being a Pakistani, and of migration to the West while carrying the other two identities. Feroza, a Parsi teenager is packed off to America by her parents Cyrus and Zareen Ginwala, in order to escape the increasing fundamentalism in Pakistan. Nilufer Bharucha reveals the reason for Parsi migration to the West in “Reflections in Broken Mirrors: Diverse Diasporas in Recent Parsi Fiction.” She observes: “It is this distance between the Parsis’ elite consciousness and
their downgraded position in postcolonial India that the migrant Parsi is trying to escape. This end-of-Empire uncase in the Indian diaspora is a reason for the Westward movement by many Parsis in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. However, there is a certain degree of guilt connected with this Western diaspora, which is a voluntary one, unlike the feeling of self-esteem generated by the forced diaspora from Iran.\textsuperscript{4}

Feroza is sent to America as her family believes that America with its liberal traditions ‘was akin to the liberated Parsi traditions. The novel is at once typical and unique typical as it talks of a Third World student’s experiences in the West and peculiar as it deals with a minority community’s reaction to the nation which they consider as home and from which they are increasingly marginalised, and their consternation at realizing that the Western tradition with which they feel kinship is unsuitably liberal. The novel is reflective of the typical dilemmas of the Parsis today and their multiple alienations. Like most Parsi fiction from diasporic writers, the novel reflects fractured images of their glorious past, their reduced preent and their inse-cure future. Once in the US, Feroza is encouraged to stay there for higher studies, by her uncle Manek. The novel deals with the change that Feroza undergoes, in the West and how her perspective of Pakistan changes.

Feroza’s ‘passage to America’, her education in life, and her transformation into a mature young woman, all set to realize her potentials in a country where freedom is a cherished ideal, form the kernel of the novel. It talks not only of margi-nalisation through ethnicity, but is also mediated by the question of gender. \textit{An American Brat} talks specifically of the woman in exile and celebrates the better understanding of one-self and one’s culture that distance and exile offer.
References