



Critical Evaluation of The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa in her writings examine issues of gender, culture, and identity while frequently referencing South Asian history and the experiences of minorities. Her critically regarded books, such as 'The Pakistani Bride', 'The Crow Eaters', and 'Ice-Candy Man' (also known as Cracking India), demonstrate her literary mastery and cultural awareness. Through the eyes of Lenny, a young Parsi girl, 'Ice-Candy Man' depicts the agony of the 1947 Partition, emphasizing societal turmoil and the loss of innocence. 'The Pakistani Bride' delves at the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies while 'The Crow Eaters' satirically portrays Parsi life in colonial India. Sidhwa's art eloquently and humorously conveys cultural history, societal critique, and resilience.

Keywords: Partition, gender oppression, cultural identity, Parsi community, feminism.

Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the finest Pakistani-American novelists produced by her country. She is acknowledged for her vibrant and lively storytelling; insightful and penetrating explorations of social issues; reflections and contemplation on South Asian history, particularly from the perspective of minority communities and splinter group. Bapsi Sidhwa is born in Karachi. She is a member of Pakistan's Parsi (Zoroastrian) community. She is a powerful and dominant feminist voice from Pakistan who mainly highlights the themes of gender, class, religious identity, and political upheaval, offering nuanced representation of Parsi culture and the experiences of women in the subcontinent.

In this paper, I have dealt with three major works of Bapsi Sidhwa – 'Ice-Candy Man', 'The Pakistani Bride' and 'The Crow Eaters'. The novelist is widely known as a Pakistan's leading diasporic writer who represents her personal experiences of the Indian subcontinent and the conflicts during the partition of 1947.

The novel 'Cracking India' is commonly known as 'Ice-Candy Man'. The story of this novel is set in Lahore during the violent upheaval of the 1947 Partition. The Britishers divided India into two independent nations, India and Pakistan. The story is narrated by Lenny Sethi. At the beginning of the novel Lenny is five years old in 1942. She is a Parsi girl who is suffering from Polio. She

witnesses the horrors of Partition. She is smart girl but also has child's innocence. She is also inquisitive by nature. By the end of the novel Lenny is eight years old. She is a precocious child who sees events through a childlike perspective but also with the hints of maturity. Another character is Shanta. She is a Hindu woman of eighteen years. She takes care of Lenny and is called 'Ayah' in the novel. Ayah is very beautiful and affectionate. Her beauty attracts a group of diverse admirers, including the eponymous character, Ice-Candy Man. As the political situation escalates, religious tensions increase among her admirers, transforming them from friends to foes. Ice-Candy Man, in particular, goes through an intense change when he learns about the death of his sister in communal violence. This leads him to take out his rage on Shanta (Ayah).

The novel clearly depicts that how the innocent friendships and peaceful relationships are shattered by religious and political division. Lenny's family, belonging to the neutral Parsi community, tries to maintain peace but side by side they have to face the pressures of conflicting loyalties. The novel explores the trauma, betrayal, treachery and survival during the partition of India. This period is indeed counted as one of the most traumatic periods in history.

The novel starkly portrays the horrors of the 1947 Partition which were followed by the senseless violence. The novel very minutely deals with the atrocities that were faced by the masses. The story of the novel reflects on how ordinary lives are torn apart by political decisions and religious animosity. Through Lenny's childlike yet alert outlook, Sidhwa contrasts innocence with the barbaric realities of adult conflicts. Lenny's gradual loss of innocence symbolizes the effect and result of Partition on a generation. She attains maturity much earlier than her age.

Women are particularly in jeopardy, as their bodies and lives become symbols in the struggle for power, retaliation and revenge. Ayah's fate showcases the precarious position of women, who suffer the consequences of men's anger, antagonism and societal conflicts. The theme of the exploitation of the particular gender and the cruelties faced by them is truly heart rendering.

The novel explores how religious and cultural identities can form and shape the relationships. Through Lenny's Parsi family, Sidhwa highlights the experience of the splinter group and minorities who are caught in larger conflicts at the time of partition. Culture cannot be considered as an extraneous entity of our society because under this comes multiple social institutions like- religion, caste, creed, race, ethnicity. Culture is analyzed through various facets of social rituals, religious beliefs and different institutions of law. Sidhwa as a literary doyen has exhibited a dominant role in the process of expanding and softening the cultural clutches to emancipate human civilization.

Lenny's friends and family relationships take a drastic shift with Partition. Friendships dissolve under communal pressures and violence and trust is betrayed and vanished as people turn against each other. The novel mirrors the greater societal breakdown during Partition. 'Ice-Candy Man' is a powerful expedition and reconnaissance of Partition's traumatic impact on the complexities of human behavior. It depicts that when a common man is under pressure, most of the time his innocence is lost amid societal upheaval. Sidhwa's subtle portrayal of such themes, make the 'Ice-Candy Man' an enduring piece of work in South Asian literature.

Another novel that is often considered as poignant and pitiful is 'The Pakistani Bride'. Bapsi Sidhwa, in this novel highlights the themes of cultural identity, oppression, tyranny, gender discrimination and the struggles of women in a patriarchal society. The story of this novel is set against the pitiable and despicable condition of the women during partition of India and Pakistan.

The novel also foregrounds both a personal and cultural examination of identity and survival. It is the story of a girl who gets a new name 'Zaitoon'. She is an orphaned Punjabi girl. During partition she was very young when she lost her parents. She is adopted by a Pakistani man named Qasim. Qasim is from a tribal background in the northern mountains. He takes Zaitoon in the city of Lahore and raises her up. They start living with Marium and Nikka. Marium takes up the role of a mother and rears up Zaitoon as her own daughter. As Zaitoon matures, Qasim arranges her marriage to his nephew who is a tribal man from his homeland. Zaitoon dreams of love and companionship with her husband but her marriage turns into a nightmare due to the harsh, patriarchal customs and traditions of the tribal community. Moreover, Zaitoon is caught in the incongruous disparity between urban and tribal cultures. Bapsi Sidhwa takes her readers on an unforgettable and spectacular journey with a range of emotions. The leading character, Zaitoon feels torn between her father's expectations and the life she knows. She goes through innumerable and deplorable ups and downs in her life. Facing severe cruelty, oppression and abuse from her husband and village, Zaitoon decides to flee. Her journey through the mountains becomes a quest for freedom. She escapes from her husband's grasp though she faces both physical and emotional challenges that force her to confront her identity, self respect, strength, dignity and resilience.

The novel explores the clash between the cultures and traditions of the patriarchal society. Zaitoon is torn between the urban Pakistani life and the tribal traditions that she has to face after her marriage. Her struggle symbolizes the position of women in a male dominated society where they are maltreated at the hands of their husbands. The identity crisis and the scuffle to escape from the clutches of the age old traditions where women are not treated as human beings highlights the broader tension between progress and tradition within Pakistan. Through Zaitoon's experiences, Sidhwa examines the oppression, limitations and hardships that are faced by women in traditional societies. The novel also celebrates female resilience, showing Zaitoon's strength as she fights to assert her autonomy and her quest to attain a free life away from her cruel husband and the village. The patriarchal culture showcases the ways that age old traditions limit the choice and freedom of the other gender. The male-dominated tribal society in the novel not only imposes strict rules on women but also ill-treat the women. In the patriarchal society male shows the authority over women. They feel that they have power and right to govern the women folk.

Zaitoon's journey through the mountains is not only a physical escape but also a metaphor for her quest for freedom and survival. She challenges the timeworn, cliché-ridden and frayed customs and the social constraints. 'The Pakistani Bride' brings attention to the intense personal and societal challenges that woman in traditional societies face, blending personal struggles with social commentary. Through Zaitoon's story, Bapsi Sidhwa critiques the limitations imposed on women while highlighting the resilience they display in fighting for their right to live freely.

Another novel of Sidhwa that holds the comical aspect is 'The Crow Eaters'. It is a satirical novel that is written to amuse its readers. It was published in 1978. It is witty and also very entertaining. The story of this novel is the presentation that offers a vibrant and humorous portrayal of the Parsi community in British India. The title refers to a phrase that means to describe people who talk incessantly. The title is apt as it captures the lively, outspoken characters in the book.

As the story of the novel starts the main character Faredoon Junglewalla (Freddy), who is a Parsi business man and lives with his family in pre-independent India. Freddy is an ambitious and

resourceful man. Freddy moves to Lahore to make wealth and lead a prosperous life for his family. The story revolves around his entrepreneurial journey. He has to navigate through many challenges for running his business, maintaining his social standing and managing his family. Freddy has to face numerous challenges to lead a peaceful and prosperous life including the comical but formidable character of his mother-in-law, Jerbanoo. Jerbanoo, who constantly meddles in his affairs, becomes a source of tension, driving the readers to laugh and enjoy at her acts. He makes relentless efforts to deal with his troublesome mother-in-law. For Freddy, Jerbanoo is like a villain who always muddle with him. The narrative of this novel delves into Freddy's expedition and his struggle to balance tradition and modernity and most importantly the dynamics within his family. Sidhwa's sharp wit, insightful nature, close and keen observations shine as she explores themes of self-respect, cultural identity, assimilation, and community pride, painting a rich and affluent portrait of Parsi's life. The novel commemorates and critiques the Parsi's community. It also explores their traditions, customs, superstitions, and distinctive culture. Bapsi Sidhwa remains unfaltering and consistent to give a lucid picture of Parsi's identity. The inter-generational clash and conflict with the traditional values, old customs and modern aspirations plays a central role in the novel. The ideas that are reflected in the novel are prevalent in the South Asian context and these ideas also have the potential to play a crucial role in the cultural competencies. The backdrop of British rule portrays the colonial India. The cultural clash between Parsi's identity and British advancement and their desire to prosper their tradition portray their yearning to go beyond the customary boundaries. The philosophical, socio-political environment and its influence on minority communities have been showcased. Sidhwa uses witty statements and humor to address serious themes, making the novel interesting, engaging and thought-provoking.

'The Crow Eaters' is not only celebrated for its unusual and unique voice but also for its role in bringing Parsi literature to international attention. Parsi culture has been aptly used, justified and kept alive by Bapsi Sidhwa. She is applauded for her ability to capture the nuances of cultural heritage with warmth, refinement, subtlety and humor. Throughout the novel, the lives of the members of Freddy's family are presented against the backdrop of the British Raj, showcasing the challenges faced by the Parsi community and the way they balance tradition with modernity. Freddy's ambition, aspiration, moral compromises, ethical dilemma, persistence and resilience highlight his complex character. The novel highlights the tale of migration, relocation, adaptation and the adjustment of the Parsi family in the society. The novel offers a rich and keen observation of Parsi customs, traditions, norms, values and the community's efforts to preserve its identity in a rapidly changing world. This novel is in the backdrop of British rule. It reflects how minorities like the Parsis have to adapt to the colonial rule while maintaining their cultural distinctiveness.

The intricate relationships within the Junglewalla family, particularly between Freddy and his rotund mother in-law Jerbanoo, underscore the challenges of familial obligations, generational conflicts, and the pressures to maintain harmony and peace, thus giving importance to family dynamics.

The intricacies of ambition and survival in a cutthroat environment are highlighted by Freddy's entrepreneurial zeal and determination to transgress moral limits. Sidhwa makes the book interesting and thought-provoking by use comedy and satire to approach weighty subjects like gender roles, social expectations, and ethnic pride. A recurrent subject that reflects the challenges of people and

communities in a shifting socio-political environment is the conflict between traditional values and modern desires.

The amalgamation of East and West shows the acumen and better understanding of Sidhwa with such issues. The Indian-born Pakistani author Bapsi Sidhwa, who is Parsi by origin as well as by heart and spirit, never shies away from addressing the significant historical and cultural problems. Her passion and devotion to the Parsi community are reflected in the novels she wrote. These novels highlights the unique and distinguished characteristics; patterns and experiences of migration and expatriation; ingrained and entrenched cultural relativism, the Parsi ethos, marriage, religious practices, and their underlying sentiments.

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