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\*A. John Sujith

PhD Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages,

Alagappa University Model Constituent College of Arts and Science,

Karaikudi, TamilNadu, India,

johnsujith6@gmail.com

\*\*Dr R.Suriya Prakash Narayanan,

Assistant Professor and Head ,Department of English and Foreign Languages,

Alagappa University Model Constituent College of Arts and Science,

Paramakudi, TamilNadu, India.

### A Rendezvous with the Fictionalization of Reality: A Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's Art

#### Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss the fictional works of Bapsi Sidhwa with a special reference to the issues like gender discrimination, sufferings of widowhood, difficulties of immigrant experience and the effects of ethnic anxiety. Bapsi Sidhwa, the most celebrated Punjabi Parsi American writer, needs no introduction as her name is inscribed in the minds and hearts of the people of three different countries that she belongs to. The researcher highlights how Sidhwa's fictional works try to bring permanent solutions to the problems faced by women in different situations.

Key Words: Culture, Literature, Responsibility, Social Change and Widowhood

Literature has often used as a catalyst for the progress of a country's political, cultural and social attitudes. Mostly Pakistani writers reflect the social change of their country in their works. The writers are alarmed with the historical events and the present political conditions of their country and this concern is embedded in their works. The collective change that Pakistan has been subjected to since the partition between two countries, the cultural, political and religious influences and its present state of independence with a growing awareness of both national identity and existential problems, find expression in most Pakistani literature in English.

Awarded Sitara-i-imitiaz, the Pakistan's highest national honor in the arts in 1991, Bapsi Sidhwa occupies a prominent place among South Asian women writers. She belongs to the group of women writers and activists who feel it essential to expose the real condition of women in different situations. The exploration of the issues of cultural adaptability and ethnic anxiety of the third world people is significant in her writings. Sidhwa, elucidating her role as a writer, has explained her responsibility as a woman from a third world country. She expresses:

I feel if there's one little thing I could do, it's to make people realize: We are not worthless because we inhabit a country which is seen by Western eyes as a primitive, fundamentalist country only. . .I mean, we are a rich mixture of all sorts of forces as well, and our lives are very much worth living.(13)

In her novels like *The Pakistani Bride*, *The Crow Eaters*, *The Ice Candy Man*, *An American Brat* and *Water*, Bapsi Sidhwa Endeavours to create a portrait of reality that is human and has not been fictionalized in history. In revisiting the partition struggle of India and Pakistan as a background to her novels, she adroitly blends history, politics and fiction with a prophetic vision. The echoes of political turmoil reverberate in her writing, with an actual image of the sufferings of main stream society.

As the title of the novel *The Pakistani Bride* hints, it is about the lives of different brides caught in the cage of patriarchal society. The unendurable pain of the Pakistani tribal society is highlighted in this novel. It gives voice to the oppressed and suppressed women in Pakistan who are inhumanly branded as exchanging commodities in the market of marriage i.e., they no longer have the right to live their own lives. It is in the world of desolation, unfairness, misfortune and struggle they are revolving about. Sidhwa's writing acts as a powerful weapon to fight against social injustice and cruelties that women face in Pakistan tribal society. Anita Desai in her essay *Introduction to The Pakistani Bride* mesmerizes her strong determined mind, she illustrates:

Bapsi Sidhwa is a woman of strong feminist convictions and the story haunted her so that, on her return home, she began to write it down. With pain and outrage as its impulse, the novel could have turned into a didactic tract exposing the cruelty of a patriarchal and brutalized society out of touch with a world in which a woman could hold a respected status. Instead, the story that took Sidhwa four years to write grew increasingly complex and layered, incorporating many subsidiary characters and contrasting social worlds.(3)

Bapsi Sidhwa has been rebellious against the tortures society inflicts upon women. Sidhwa shows how her women characters are treated in the Pakistan socio-political milieu. They are not even considered as a mere living being. She seems revolutionary against all sorts of religious stubbornness of the Islamic society. Various types of segregation among different religions disturb her the most. She believes that humanity is above all the religions. The echo of this concept along with immigrant experience that the third world people face in an American world is reflected in her novel *An American Brat*. In this novel she brings forth the clash between the conservative Islamic society and the Zoroastrian community that was vibrant in Pakistan. The novel austere states the dichotomy between Pakistani culture and American culture. As Nagendra kumar rightly observes:

The process of migration to America that started in mid-nineteenth century has reached a new high in terms of immigrant population within a span of one hundred years. People from all over the world are drawn towards this country for variety of reasons. (13)

Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* deals with the consequences of partition between India and Pakistan and its aftermaths. This is the first novel by a woman novelist from Pakistan which describes the fate of people in Lahore. Throughout the human history women have been exploited as the symbol of disgrace and dishonour to the family. During the time of partition women are raped by the enemies in the name of religion. The novel depicts the plights and pangs of on growing religious intolerance through the lens of a five years old girl Lenny. As Randhir Pradap Singh articulates:

In 1947, Freedom came to the Indian subcontinent but in a fractured form. India was divided into two countries-India and Pakistan, and the border between the two was drawn with blood as nearly half a million were slain in communal clashes. Twelve million people fled their homes and over a hundred thousand women were abducted, raped and mutilated. Tens of thousands of houses, shops and other establishments were set on fire. Every right-minded person alive at this hour was outraged at the brutality. Like Lenny, the child narrator of the *Ice Candy Man*.(35)

The Ethnic anxiety of a Parsi family is revealed in the novel *The Crow Eaters*. There is a blend of humour and satire in this novel. It emphasizes the fortunes and misfortunes of the Jungewallas, a Parsi family in Pre-partition India. Makarand R. Paranjape's words are appropriate in this regard, he says:

It is true that the protagonist, Faredoon Jungewalla, and all major characters of the book are Parsis and that Parsi life and rituals are minutely described in the book, yet these factors do not make the book an indictment or even an attack on the community. Rather, the characters

and their tendencies are satirized, exploiting those ethnic features that are conducive to such satire.(82)

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Water* portrays the uglier side of widowhood. It tells the story of a group of widows who find innumerable and unimaginable ways of quandaries to lead a normal life which is quite easy for the other people. Through the life of a six years old child widow Chuyia, Sidhwa discovers the undiscovered pains of widowhood. *Water* explores the issues of child marriage, poverty, widow prostitution and widow remarriage. The role of Gandhi in eradicating the discrimination of the biased caste system in Hindu society and the need for protecting widow rights is acknowledged by Sidhwa. In her interview with Francesco Mannoni, Sidhwa voices for the muted voices of unrecognized, uncelebrated and disregarded widows. She says:

The 'Untouchables' are the pariahs of the Hindu caste system and Gandhi fought against their inhuman treatment. He renamed them 'Harijans' (Children-of-God); they now have a chance for education and some political power. This was Gandhi's most significant contribution in the social sphere. He also tried to dispel the prejudice against Hindu widows, and other social injustices. The prejudices remain, but there is improvement. Gandhi's doctrines are respected by people of all faiths; even if they are not followed.(2)

If a society has a right to make demands on the writer, the writer also has a right to affirm her allegiance to her art. With commendable restraint, Sidhwa proves that she remains as the pride of India, Pakistan and America.

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