



Emerging Woman in the Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa

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Abstract: *After centuries of struggle, woman today, is in a position to lead and inspire humanity in every walk of life. Literature being no exception, women have established themselves as story writers, poets, novelists and essayists through their creative sensibility all over the world. When we look at South Asian literature, it is encouraging to see how a whole lot of women writers are transcending their traditional boundaries to mark their presence internationally. Though the Sita or Savitri image of suffering and spiritual power is an integral part of our society, the impact of western feminism is very obvious on the modern female writers whose writings explore the idea of independence and self assertion. Anees Jung's Unveiling India: A Woman's Journey explores an educated woman's search for identity. She says:*

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"Individually, they have gained a name, collectively an identity.... Their new strength stems from personalities defining their own terms, leading grace to living".(122)¹

There is a very obvious paradigm shift in the image of women from the suffering heroines of Kamala Markandaya to the bold and independent; assertive and confident female characters of Anita Desai, Sara Suleri, Arundhati Roy, Anees Jung, Chitra Fernando, Bapsi Sidhwa, Taslima Nasrin, Margaret Laurence, Minako Oba and Manjushree Thapa.

Bapsi Sidhwa doesn't claim to be a feminist writer but a deep reading of her novels reveals that her protagonists challenge stereotypes and voice their concern for survival in a man's world. Her women are strong willed, courageous and assertive who fight for their rights and dignity in the face of oppression and injustice. Her women are self-assured, vocal and outspoken but not unaware of the fact that this is a man's world. Faredoon Jungewalla, in her first novel *The Crow Eaters*, sets fire to the house to kill Jerbanoo but she is finally rescued by the fireman and outlives her tormentor. *Ice-Candy Man* (1988) published in America as *Cracking India* (1991) primarily deals with the theme of Partition and the communal violence that

jolted the subcontinent in 1947. Alongside this major theme there are many layers of subjects that oppose and overlap each other. To dig through the layering, Bapsi Sidhwa uses the single thread of male dominance and oppression common in an average South-Asian household. Through Lenny Sethi, a Parsee child, she narrates the story of communal hatred at the national level and victimization of women at the domestic level. Lenny is exposed to the world of predatory desires through Shanta, her Hindu Ayah. There were many people like the Muslim Ice-Candy Man and the Masseur, who were ready to "ogle her with lust" owing to her 'chocolate chemistry' and ravishing looks. Lenny is close to Ayah because she works in her house. It was the time of communal riots. Angry Muslims find Ayah to be an easy target and rape her. Later on she is married to Ice-Candy Man who keeps her in Hira Mandi in Lahore, the place of dancing girls. Here she is forced into prostitution but saved by her Godmother and sent back to Amritsar. Lenny's mom, Mrs. Sethi is also a powerful woman who is a dutiful wife of a responsible but unemotional husband. As the novel proceeds, she becomes an activist and works for the 'fallen women' or women who were deserted by their families. When Mrs. Sethi comes to know about her husband's affair she doesn't suffer

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in silence. She openly expresses her anger though he retaliates in his own way. The American Brat narrates the adventures of a young Pakistani girl Firoza Ginwalla in America. Feroza is precocious and deeply affected by the rising fundamentalism in Pakistan. She resents her family decision to send her to America initially. Once she settles there and falls in love with a young man she does not want to come back to Pakistan. Though there is a lot of family pressure on her to return to her home in Lahore, she doesn't want to do so. She knows that the type of freedom she enjoys in America is unthinkable of in Pakistan. She is an independent woman who can take her decisions herself.

The plight of the widows in Benaras of 1930s has been depicted in yet another novel *Water* which is based on Deepa Mehta's film *Water*. It is to be noted that none of the female characters in her novels dies despite all odds. What Sara Sureli Goodyear has to say about Sidhwa's novel *Water* is worth mentioning: "Sidhwa historicizes the images, lends greater poignancy to faces and provides speech where the film must leave the women silent."²

What Sidhwa says in an interview while writing this novel is: "Besides being a gripping story, the plot deals with a subject close to my heart, that of the oppressive hold traditions had on women...it tells of oppressions and constraints that govern even a girl child's life in a patriarchal society." Like Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989) Aruna Chakravarti's *The Inheritors* (2004) and Githa Hariharan's short novel *The remains of the Feast* (1992), *Water* deals with the themes of love and remarriage; widows' sexuality and discriminatory practices against them in the society. The story is set in the year 1936 when a law for widow remarriage was passed and a mass movement for freedom from British rule was being led by Gandhiji. The protagonist of the novel is the six year old daughter Chuhiya of a poor Brahmin priest Somnath who has been married to 44 year old Hiralal and becomes a widow before she could understand what marriage means. Her mother-in-law blames

Chuhiya for the loss of her son and sends her to an ashram meant for widows. As Chuhiya screamed, "Baba, don't leave me here! Baba, don't leave me!" Somnath stood helpless and shattered. As the story proceeds we come to know about the pathetic condition of the widows who are forced to live here. Their heads are shaven so that they don't indulge in any sort of physical pleasure; they are compelled to pray, observe fasts and suppress their desires. They are regarded as ominous. Their misery doesn't end here: they are taken to prostitution to satisfy the carnal desires of upper caste males who claimed that their touch would provide redemption to the widows from their sins. In the ashram we meet many widows with Chuhiya: Kunti with whom she plays hopscotch; Bua whose stories entertain her; Madhumati whose legs Chuhiya has to knead everyday; Kalyani who becomes her companion and Shakuntala who arouses warm feelings in her. The most powerful character in this novel is Shakuntala who sets the widow prostitute Kalyani free to unite with her lover Narayan. Again it is Shakuntala who saves little Chuhiya from routine prostitution. Kalyani, a widow, and Shakuntala, a caring mother, console Chuiya, a child widow, in her homesickness. The widows are forced to shave their hair and thus deprived of femininity and sexuality. Kalyani is the only widow who is allowed to keep her hair because the boss of the ashram Madhumita sends her to the Seths where she falls in love with a liberal young Hindu Narayan who follows the ideology of Gandhiji.

The Pakistani Bride is yet another story of a woman's indomitable courage and triumph. The basic story of the novel incorporates three worlds. In the first section we meet Qasim as a ten year old boy who has been given a gun by his father. A fellow traveller promises to give his daughter to this boy, Qasim, as he fails to pay the debt. Though the bride is much older than the boy, the relationship develops and the boy becomes a father at the age of sixteen. The second section of the novel manifests the madness of partition amid how Qasim goes down



to Punjab and rescues a little girl whose parents are slaughtered. He names this girl Zaitoon after his own dead daughter and takes her to Lahore where she enjoys a happy childhood. Life changes upside down when Qasim marries her off to his cousin's son. Zaitoon is very brutally treated by her husband but her instinct for self preservation keeps her going: she doesn't commit suicide. She patiently bears all insult and injury hurled upon her and waits for the day she could go to Lahore for childbirth. But destiny frees her even before childbirth: she waves to an army jeep as a sweet gesture and her husband reacts in a beastly manner. She could not bear it anymore and runs away from his house.

In order to highlight the plight of woman, Sidhwa introduces Carol, an American who gets married to a Pakistani, Farukh, in the Unites States and comes along with him as a Pakistani bride to visit the Karakoram Mountains. She soon realizes that she could not survive in a patriarchal and traditional society which could not offer her any space, freedom and respect. She runs away from her husband's house and is also raped before she reaches the military base. Thus we see that Bapsi

Sidhwa has given a very strong voice to the oppressed and marginalised women of India and Pakistan through her female characters. Her women may not be the privileged lot in the society but they know the life is precious and it should be preserved at all costs.

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