

Delineation of Women Attributes in Select Fictions of Bapsi Sidhwa – A Study

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Abstract

Literature reflects the societal perceptions and its attitudes. It has witnessed the evolution of women over time. In spite of her inherent talent, women have always been relegated to margins. Their identity is obscured, their potential and abilities are undervalued. The women characters are defined with a sense of struggle and their evolution and empowerment can be seen in the different roles of women characters in literature from the past to the present. The women characters in most of the works are victimized and this cannot be denied. But in the case of Bapsi Sidhwa, one of the finest novelists of Indian sub-continent, it's different. It is because she draws the attention of the readers with the brilliant depiction of women's sufferings as well as their courageous actions in her novels. Almost all Sidhwa's fictional women are lively and are strongly built. This kind of depiction gives the reader an awareness of the past patriarchal society and culture. This study examines the various framing of women characters in the select fictions of Bapsi Sidhwa namely *The Pakistani Bride* (1982), *An American Brat* (1993) and *Water* (2006).

Keywords: *Bapsi Sidhwa, women, representation, patriarchy, oppression, evolution*

Bapsi Sidhwa, a renowned Parsi writer was born on August 11, 1936 in Karachi, raised in Lahore and settled in Texas. She is the first English writer to receive an international acclaim in Pakistan. Sidhwa started writing at a time when there was no tradition of women writing in Pakistan. As a woman writer, she may be considered as a pioneer in composing literary works in Pakistan. Though Bapsi Sidhwa belongs to India, Pakistan and the United States simultaneously, she prefers to be described as a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman. In general, the writers' characterization of women in their writings focuses on the sufferings, sexual trauma and painful experiences of women. But Sidhwa's novels provide the image of the confident women too in a male dominated society. As women, they undergo many torments

either they be a married one or unmarried or even a child. They are pushed to the state that they question the purpose of their living. Women are never treated as a human being by men. Men look at them merely as an object.

In the novel *The Pakistani Bride*, Bapsi Sidhwa has presented the miserable state of women of the Pakistani society in both the plain and the mountain. Afshan is the first woman introduced in this novel. Men never ask the opinion of women on their marriage, in which her words are more significant for the well being of their life. Women were not allowed to voice out even in the most important decisions in which they are actually connected. Afshan was used as a commodity of transaction as her father Resham Khan could not repay the debt he got

from Arbab. Resham Khan accepted to get his daughter married to Qasim, the son of Arbab who was only a ten years old boy. This was the state and fate of Afshan. She never knew that she was going to marry a boy five years younger than her. On her wedding day, an old aunt said 'yes' on behalf of Afshan as an acceptance on getting married to Qasim. "Thrice she was asked if she would accept Qasim, the son of Arbab, as her husband and thrice an old aunt murmured 'yes' on her behalf." (Sidhwa 8). She was horrified to see a small boy in her room on the wedding night. Afshan was in much confusion, she did not know whether to laugh or to cry on seeing Qasim. She also asked Qasim if he was her husband, for which he nodded dejectedly. "Was this a joke? She glanced beyond him, fervently hoping to see the man who had pushed his small brother forward to tease her. But there was no one. 'Are *you* my husband?' she asked incredulously. Qasim nodded with woebegone gravity." (Sidhwa 9). Sidhwa has constructed her women as flexible characters in her works. Afshan soon accepted her fate and lives, surprisingly cheerful.

Similarly, Zaitoon's life took a turn when she was married to Sakhi, a tribal man of Kohistan Mountain in Pakistan. Zaitoon a Punjabi by origin was an orphan, raised by Qasim as his own daughter when he moved to Qila Gujjar Singh at Lahore. She was completely brought up in the plains and was married to a Himalayan tribal community that has a barbaric culture. Her life was shaken when Qasim fixed Zaitoon's marriage at the age of sixteen. Qasim promised his cousin Misri Khan to give his daughter in marriage to the tribal son Sakhi. Nikka Pehelwan and Miriam, the neighbouring couple who took care of Zaitoon as their own daughter never agreed for the marriage and dissuaded it. Their objection was because Qasim fixed the marriage for Zaitoon with a person belonging to the tribal society which she is not familiar with. And this objection aggravated Qasim and he proceeded as per his plan. Miriam started weeping to know that her dear daughter's life was in danger.

.... they don't know how to treat women! I tell you, she'll be a slave, you

watch, and she'll have no one to turn to. No one!' Qasim flushed. He glared at Nikka while directing his icy remarks at Miriam. 'How dare you,' he said. 'You've never been there! You don't understand a thing. I have given my word! I know Zaitoon will be happy. The matter should end.' (Sidhwa 93, 94).

Qasim firmly believed that his daughter will lead a happy life over the Kohistan hills where he lived fifteen years back. Though Zaitoon was not happy with this alliance, she accepted her father's words not daring to protest against him.

After many years, Qasim had returned to his people and his place along with Zaitoon for the wedding ceremony. He asked her whether she liked his native but never did he ask if she liked the groom fixed for her. Zaitoon started crying to her father saying that not to get her married to a tribe. She disliked everything and she begged her father to take her to Lahore again. But Qasim never understood the feelings of his daughter and threatened to kill her if she refuses to marry Sakhi.

'Hush, Zaitoon, that's no way to speak to your father. It is not seemly. A decent girl doesn't tell her father to whom he should marry her.' 'But father...' 'Now understand this...' Qasim's tone was icily incisive. 'I've given my word. ... I will kill you with my bare hands.' (Sidhwa 158).

Men assault women so easily whenever it was possible for them and desire to do so. Women are just like toys in the hands of men. The ill treatment of women is witnessed when a stranger tried to harass Afshan near a stream and was protected by her husband. Comparatively, Zaitoon is the one who is tortured to an extreme level in this story. She felt highly uncomfortable to adjust with her tribal husband Sakhi. The very first day of her tribal family life was a horrible one as her husband was harsh in the nuptial bed. He thought and treated her as his own property meant to be owned and used as he desired. "Sakhi surveyed his diffident bride with mounting excitement. Here was a woman all his

own, he thought with proprietorial lust and pride, a woman with strangely thick lashes and large black eyes that had flashed in one look her entire sensuality.” (Sidhwa 159, 160).

Zaitoon expected her husband’s true love but all her efforts were in vain. Women have been considered as an object to satisfy the sexual needs of men in their marriage life. They are treated as if they have no role except obeying their husbands order in all aspects. Zaitoon was looked down upon by Sakhi, only as a source to fulfill his physical needs.

Particularly in the novel *The Pakistani Bride*, Bapsi Sidhwa has dealt with the oppression of women in the context of psychological and sexual harassment by men in such conservative tribal society. Carol, though not a main character of the story, plays a vital role in rescuing of Zaitoon at the end. Carol is an educated American woman who married Pakistani Farukh. She is a mixed character torn between American life style and tribal life style. Carol was not happy with Farukh as he failed to fulfill any of her expectations. She was much irritated with the jealous nature of Farukh, though he was fond of her. Her westernized habits of social etiquette were consistently misconceived by her husband and also by other men. Farukh’s jealousy and suspicion made life worse for Carol. She grew fond of Major Mustaq which went to the extent of sexual relationship between Carol and Mustaq in the absence of Farukh. Due to her Americanized way of living, she did not consider the affair an immoral one. She pleaded Mustaq to marry her though he was married already and had four children. But he refused to marry her. Carol represents women who are unheeded to and exploited in the male dominated society.

Hamida, the poor mother of Sakhi is one of the victims in that tribal community. She represents women, encountered with various problems in the patriarchal society. The status of women become worse if they are not treated properly even by their family. Hamida is one such character who suffered the beatings and insults of her own son Sakhi. Hamida was beaten up by Sakhi when she tried to stop him

torturing an ox with a heavy stick which ended up tearing the flesh of the poor animal. Sakhi thrashed his mother’s shoulder and legs so brutally that she could not move. She thought that she would soon die because of the brutal beating of her son. Zaitoon started crying on seeing the cruel behaviour of her husband.

Sakhi shouted and fell on the animal, beating it with his heavy stick, which fell pitilessly on a sore on its spine.She caught at his flailing arms. ‘Let it be, you will kill him’, she screeched. ...Sakhi glowered insane fury. ‘I’ll teach you,’ he hissed, ‘I’ll teach you meddling women. You think you can make a fool of me? Do you?’ (Sidhwa 172).

Women are treated as slaves by their father, husband and son. Men take control over the bodies of women when it comes to both cruelty and pleasure. Sakhi thought that the beating of his mother and wife showed him as a powerful one and they are always inferior to him. He never knew the language of love and he had always thought that only violence and suppression of women can keep them in their control. Zaitoon brought up in a city could not restrain herself from wandering in the woods. One day, she was excited at the soldiers on the way and waved at them. Unfortunately she was caught red-handed by Sakhi. He threw a stone which hurt her badly on her spine. “He dragged her along the crag. ‘You whore,’ he hissed.... ‘You dirty black little bitch, waving at those pigs . . .’ ...At last he lifted her inert body across his shoulders and carried her home. That night Zaitoon resolved to run away.”(Sidhwa 185, 186).

She was hit mercilessly by Sakhi upon which she thought of escaping from the village to be alive. She was forced to run away due to the brutal beating by her husband. Zaitoon had to escape only through the forest of which she was not aware. On the endless range, Zaitoon had to cross the river to reach the Army camp but she was dreadfully raped by the tribal strangers on the bank. She was brutally handled by those tribes of the Cheekul hill.

Sidhwa has pictured the brutal society and its ill-treatment of women merely as an object of pleasure. Finally, badly bruised, Zaitoon was found half dead by Mustaq. But it was hidden from Sakhi cleverly by the soldiers and he was informed that she was dead. Zaitoon was catered to by Carol. Zaitoon stands as a symbol of victory in a patriarchal society. Unlike the other women characters in *The Pakistani Bride*, Zaitoon's determination shows her as a valiant woman among others.

Bapsi Sidhwa has shown the transformation in one's character through the heroine of the novel *An American Brat*. She has highlighted the transfiguration of a sixteen year old Feroza Ginwalla from a traditional-bound conservative girl to a modernized girl. This novel is a combo of fictional, historical and factual elements brilliantly composed by Sidhwa. She has described the minute details of victimization of the protagonist Feroza belonging to a Parsi community. The narrow-mindedness of Feroza became problem for her parents Zareen Ginwalla and Cyrus. "I'm really worried about Feroza." (Sidhwa 9). The mother Zareen was worried about her daughter becoming more reserved day by day. She wanted her daughter to grow and expand in her thinking whereas the ideology of Feroza was different from her parents. The contradictions brought many changes in her life. She objected her mother wearing sleeveless blouse while coming to the school. She did not even attend the phone calls in fear of having conversations with somebody unknown. Feroza's parents wanted to change the ideologies of their daughter and so they decided to send her to America for few months on vacation. "I think Feroza must get away," Zareen continued. "Just for three or four months. Manek can look after her. Travel will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head." (Sidhwa 14).

After initial protest, Cyrus accepted Zareen's obligation. Zareen contacted her brother Manek who settled in America and informed him about the arrival of Feroza. The parents thought that this travel would broaden her outlook. The mother Zareen thought that the

transformation would surely be a challenge for Feroza's traditional and cultural values. On the other hand, Feroza had no words to express her happiness on visiting United States and she dreamt of how amazing her trip would be.

Initially, Feroza was conservative and shy. She was under the care of her uncle Manek Junglewala, Zareen's younger brother who was just only six years older than Feroza. He had been studying Chemical Engineering at MIT, Boston for nearly three years. He wanted Feroza to be as self-sufficient and independent being. He also informed and alerted her to be aware of sex maniacs. Manek's struggle during the initial stage of American life helped him to guide his niece. At the same time, he wanted Feroza to encounter the problems with ease. He counted his experiences as a lesson for Feroza to learn about America. Sidhwa has described vividly, the impressions, a new arrival has in the modern America. Once landed, Feroza understood that the life style was vastly different from hers. They treated men and women equally, to her surprise, American girls were more independent and active.

As a Pakistani, Feroza could not lead her life without depending on others. Throughout her journey, Feroza behaved as instructed by her elders but as soon as she reached America she changed. She tried to cope up with the different life-style of the Americans and the modern technology used by them. She was unfamiliar with the escalator which could be found even in the small stores in America. The people around her were busy with their own concerns and none of them bothered even to glance at her or stare at her as they would do in Pakistan.

As the novel progresses, one can see the changes that Feroza imbibes in America. Feroza was enchanted by America and Americans she met. She felt jubilant in shopping malls, fast-food restaurants accompanied by her uncle. Feroza also had unpleasant experience when she confronted a sex maniac at the YMCA bathroom. "The man moved to block her path. "Howja like it if I rub it up against ya?" he said softly, his rank breath and strong body smell

striking her physical blows. Feroza swerved and, banging against one of the half-doors, dodged past him.” (Sidhwa 70).

Feroza did not go back to Pakistan after three months, her three months visit turned into a four year stay. With the guidance of her uncle Manek, she joined a Junior college at Twin Falls, Idaho. The college was ready to offer stipend for Feroza and her parents also agreed to continue her studies in America. Soon she befriended Jo who helped Feroza’s requirements and needs. Feroza adapted Jo’s behaviour and imitated her way of speaking. Jo became her friend, philosopher and guide. She helped Feroza to be independent. Feroza soon started liking and enjoyed the individualistic freedom in America. The family members of Feroza were astonished by the drastic change in Feroza. She completely restyled herself to American life-style and culture. She learnt driving, drinking, dancing and even the American pronunciations. She visited Jo’s family at Boulder and continued to widen her horizons. She had out-grown her initial mentors both her uncle Manek and her friend Jo.

Feroza fell in love with David Press, a Jewish-American boy at Denver. Feroza’s love for him grew very strong and she felt that life was meaningless without David. So she disclosed her love to her parents Zareen and Cyrus in Pakistan.

The religious differences did not matter so much in America. They had decided to resolve the issue by becoming Unitarians. “Please, don’t be angry, and please try to make both my grannies understand. I love you all so much. I won’t be able to bear it if you don’t accept David.” (Sidhwa 266).

That was the first time Feroza faced opposition from her family, because they are totally against inter-community marriages. The family was shell shocked to hear the marriage proposal of Feroza. They did not want their daughter to be married off to a Non-Parsi as it is against their Parsi tradition. As soon as she received letter from Feroza, Zareen departed to America to stop her daughter from taking further

steps. Ironically, Zareen liked David but could not accept him as it would bring shame to her family. Arguments rouse between the mother and the daughter: “I should have listened. I should never have let you go so far away. Look what it’s done to you – you’ve become an American brat!” (Sidhwa 279).

As a mother, Zareen feared that the inter-community marriage would surely cut Feroza off from her culture and her surroundings. Women are not allowed to choose their life partners on their own, which is evident from all writings of Bapsi Sidhwa. A woman cannot even support other woman in such situations. David also understood that he cannot adjust to the cultural differences of Feroza’s family. He was frightened when Zareen explained their Parsi way of wedding ceremony. When Zareen and David had the conversation discussing their traditional obligations of both the cultures, he thought that he could not cope up with them and so David decided to leave Feroza. Zareen pretended as if she liked the groom and silently won in sending David off from Feroza’s life. Feroza was heart-broken after David’s departure from her life. In the beginning of his absence, she mourned on for her love and gradually she recovered from it. By the end she convicted that:

... There would never be another David, but there would be other men, and who knew, perhaps someday she might like someone enough to marry him. It wouldn’t matter if he was a Parsee or of another faith. She would be more sure of herself, and she wouldn’t let anyone interfere. It really wouldn’t matter; weren’t they all children of the same Adam and Eve? As for her religion, no one could take it away from her; she carried its fire in her heart. (Sidhwa 317).

She was very firm that she would not follow her Parsi laws in all aspects especially in inter-community marriages. Feroza was aware of her limits and her choices. She bounced back and decided not to go back to Pakistan but to live in America. Sidhwa has presented Feroza as a

woman desiring for privacy, freedom and self-fulfilment in life.

Bapsi Sidhwa in her novels has sketched diverse roles of women and through them she reflects the truth that is prevailing in the society. She has drafted the picture of widows and their torments in the novel *Water* which is originally a film directed by Deepa Mehta. The plight of widowhood, the dominance over women in the pre-independent India has been picturised with clarity by Sidhwa in the novel *Water*. In this novel, almost all the major characters are women. It shows the tribulation of a six year old child Chuyia married to a forty-four years old man Hira Lal, a widower. In a span of two years, the child becomes a widow and was forced to live her entire life in a widow ashram, and her future was completely ruined.

Sidhwa has presented the oppression and victimization of women in this novel *Water* too. The novel is set in the year 1938. Chuyia has been shown as a carefree and playful child at first. It took a change when her father Somnath fixed her marriage with an old man of his choice. He did not even discuss with his wife Bhagyalakshmi. As seen in the novel *The Pakistani Bride*, here also the marriage has been fixed by the father without the knowledge of the bride to be. Like Afshan and Zaitoon, Chuyia was also not familiar of her groom.

Men gave no importance to the words of women. It is evident in all literary writings that how women were treated in the past male dominating society. This is clearly shown when Bhaghya told her opinion on the decision made by her husband Somnath. He planned to get his daughter married to such an old man as they did not expect any dowry from them. Somnath just shut Bhaghya's mouth saying so and she had no option except obeying her husband's words. "I have agreed," he said. "Their horoscopes match. We have looked at some auspicious dates. ..." "She is only six," Bhaghya said, her quavering voice so low Somnath had to strain to catch her words. "I've heard Hira Lal is a grandfather." (Sidhwa 13).

Chuyia's marriage was fixed when she did not even know the meaning of the word

'marriage'. That was the fate of every girl child during those periods. According to Brahmanic tradition, a woman is recognised as a person only when she is married and be with her husband. Somnath states that "...a woman is recognised as a person only when she is one with her husband. Only then does she become a *sumangali*, an auspicious woman and a *saubhagyavathi*, a fortunate woman." (Sidhwa 14). The marriage took place in temple where only Brahmins were allowed. Chuyia was like a doll on her wedding and was as usual a playful child after her marriage. In a couple of years, the eight years old Chuyia attained widowhood even before her adulthood. Chuyia became a widow as her elderly husband Hira Lal died of typhoid.

As per the Hindu tradition, after husband's death, his wife is forced to spend the rest of her life in a widow's ashram and Chuyia was also put in such a state. After cremating Hira Lal's dead body, without even giving time to realise the happenings, Chuyia's mother-in-law removed her mangal-sutra from Chuyia. She complained Somnath that only because of the sins committed by his daughter in her past life, Hira Lal is dead. She did the rituals for the widowed Chuyia that they have to be done after a husband's death. She violently broke the bangles with bricks on Chuyia's tiny hands. "The smashing of the bangles was the first of many rituals designed to mark Chuyia's descent into widowhood." (Sidhwa 41) The small girl stood speechless and astonished. The mother-in-law pulled off the coloured dress that Chuyia was wearing and soon draped a white homespun cloth around Chuyia which she was supposed to wear thereafter. Chuyia was left bare foot, her jewels removed and at last a barber cut her hair closer to scalp. Such was the treatment \to anyone who becomes widow irrespective of the age. The child does not even know what was happening around her, she has to suffer all these as she has become widow.

Widows were not supposed to meet other people in the society especially in the auspicious occasions. Then widows are destined to spend rest of their life only in the ashram. Ashram, where Chuyia was deserted was in the control of Madhumati, a fat widow at her fifties.

There were also other important characters, all widows, in the novel namely Kunti, Shakuntala, Patirajji who was affectionately called as Bua by Chuyia, Kalyani, Gulabi and so on. It took some time for the child to get adapted in the ashram. She soon befriended Patirajji an old and kind lady. She was consoled and lived with the hope of being rescued by her mother. Ashrams of widow, where instead of social security and dignity, they are forced to face all sorts of humiliation, torture and prostitution of their virginity. It was Kalyani who was pushed forcefully to prostitution by Madhumati in order to run the ashram. She was a stunning young widow at her twenties and she was given a separate room upstairs and treated specially by Madhumati as she was the source of income for the ashram. Kalyani fell in love with Narayan, twenty-two years Gandhian idealist. Madhumati became aware of Kalyani's secret love through the innocent Chuyia. "“So what? I'll eat a hundred *puris* at Kalyani's wedding,” Chuyia defiantly boasted.” (Sidhwa 166). This caused commotion in the ashram. Madumathi would not allow Kalyani to get married as she could not find the source of income to run the ashram. Kalyani's hair was cropped and was locked up in the ashram but soon she was rescued by Shakuntala. Kalyani was immensely happy when she thought of her future with her beloved Narayan. But it was shattered into pieces when she realised that Narayan was the son of one of her clients Seth Dwarkanath. This pricked her conscience and she did not want to continue her relationship with Narayan. Kalyani ended up drowning herself out of guilt and her life in ashram thereafter will be a torment as she would surely be ignored and neglected by the other widows of the ashram, especially, by Madhumati. “She clasped her hands in prayer for a moment. Then she calmly walked into the river until her short hair floated in an inky stain on the water. Ma Ganga had claimed her daughter.” (Sidhwa 205).

Madhumati substituted Chuyia in the place of Kalyani which could not be tolerated by Shakuntala. She was a quiet and reserved type. She was more like a mother to Chuyia in the ashram. She wanted to free Chuyia from this trap. Shakuntala was awakened by the words of

Sadananda a gentle priest in his fifties. She immediately decided to send Chuyia from ashram. Shakuntala rescued the deeply traumatised Chuyia and handed over her to Narayan who directed his life towards Mahatma Gandhi after the demise of Kalyani. Gandhiji's followers were kind and compassionate like him, so Shankuntala boldly sent Chuyia by train with Narayan. She was satisfied and contented that she had rescued Chuyia from all her torments of life.

Shakuntala, still running alongside the train, out of breath, pleaded, “Make sure she's in Gandhiji's care.” “Yes, *didi*,” Narayan replied. And at that moment, she saw the dark woman at a window a little farther down the carriage. With a solemn look and reassuring gestures of her expressive hands, the woman conveyed she understood: she would look out for Chuyia. (Sidhwa 228).

The shattered feelings and sufferings of the widowhood due to the customs designed by the ancestors in the society are vividly expressed by Sidhwa through the characters of the novel *Water*. Thus, Bapsi Sidhwa in her novels has composed her women characters as emerging characters though they are put up with many hardships in their journey of life. Be it male domination, victimization or accusation, they evolve themselves from all misfortunes of their life and they prosper.

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