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A Study of Alienation in the Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry

Santosh Kumar Singh

Research Scholar, Sunrise
University, Alwar, Rajasthan,
India

Dr. Ankit Gandhi

Supervisor, Sunrise University,
Alwar, Rajasthan, India

Dr. Deepak Kumar Singh

Co-guide, D.A.V. College,
Lucknow, India

Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry are diasporic award winning Pakistani and Indian novelists respectively. Both of the writers have migrated to foreign countries; Bapsi Sidhwa to America and Rohinton Mistry to Canada. Bapsi Sidhwa was born in Karachi in 1939 which was then in undivided India while Rohinton Mistry was born in Bombay on July 3, 1952 after Independence of India. Both the writers mentioned here, are Parsis and their community made India its home some centuries ago after the Arab invasion on Persia (Iran). According to Jagdish Batra, "Their exodus to India started after a century or so. The documentary evidence speaks of a stream of migrants from 785 to 1021 A.D. However, trade and cultural relations between India and Persian Empire existed since, at least, the third century A.D. According to *Kissa-I Sanjan* written in Persian by Dastur Sanjana, the migrating Parsis were received by the king of a coastal region in Gujarat- Jadhav Rana, who gave them permission to settle down on certain conditions." (Rohinton Mistry: *Identities, Values and Other Sociological Concerns* 34) They can be said to lead a life of up rootedness from their

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original roots. But the migration of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry to foreign lands is tantamount to their 'doubly displaced' status. As the Parsis were forced into exile by the Islamic conquest of Persia, both-Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry's are in Diaspora even in India as their ancestors were also included the lot of the exiled Parsis. It is for this reason that their writings are replete with the experience of double displacement. The present paper intends to find out the phenomenon of this feeling of search for their lost home and also tries to find out to which extent these elements of alienation and marginality are present in their novels with special reference to *The Bride*, *An American Brat* and *The Crow Eaters* of Bapsi Sidhwa and *A Fine Balance*, *Family Matters* and *Such a Long Journey* of Rohinton Mistry.

Key Words- *Alienation, Marginality, Ill-Treatment, Exploitation, Suppression.*

Bapsi Sidhwa has produced five novels in English that reflect her personal experience. She belongs to India, Pakistan and the United States but she likes herself to be described as a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman. Her novels, *The Crow Eaters*, *The Bride*, *Ice-Candy-Man* and *An American Brat* are about her perceptions of life as a Parsi, Punjabi, Pakistani and American woman respectively. Her novels are remarkably different from one another in both subject and treatment. One can find variety of themes in her fiction such as the partition crisis, expatriate experience, and the Parsi milieu, social idiosyncrasies of the small minority community, the theme of marriage, women's problems, and patterns of migration.

She was born in 1938 in Karachi, Pakistan and migrating shortly thereafter to Lahore. She was on the advisory committee to Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Women's Development. She has taught at Columbia University. Her characters are very close to her as in an interview she said, "Feroza is closest to me and my views" about the identity issues of Pakistani Parsi immigrants to the US, their life-styles and their culture. She is the author of such distinguished novels as *The Crow Eaters* (1978), *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), *The Bride*

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(1982) and *An American Brat* (1993) and *Water* (2006) to be translated and published in several languages. Her Anthology *City of Sin and Splendor: Writings on Lahore* was published in 2006. *Ice-Candy-Man* was made into the film *Earth* by Canadian director Deepa Mehta. Her novel *Water* is based on Mehta's film of the same name. In addition, her stories, reviews and articles have appeared in *New York Time Book Review*, *Houston Chronicle*, *The Economic Times* and *The London Telegraph*.

Rohinton Mistry is an Indian-born Canadian writer in English who is famous for his short stories and novels. He was born in 1952 in Mumbai, India in a Parsee community; his writings are heavily influenced by his religious, social and cultural views. At the age of 23, he immigrated to Canada where he studied at the University of Toronto and received a B. A. degree in English and Philosophy. Even though he is settled in Canada, it is his upbringing in Mumbai that reflects in all his writings. Mistry wrote his first short story, 'One Sunday', in 1983. He won two Hart House literary prizes and Canadian Fiction Magazine's annual Contributor's Prize in 1985. In 1987, he published a collection of short stories entitled *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. He published his first novel, *Such a Long Journey*, in 1991, for which he received Canada's Governor General's Award and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the Best Book. It was also nominated for the Man Booker Prize and the Trillium Award. He is the author of three novels: *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002). *A Fine Balance*, which won the Giller Prize and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, is also shortlisted for the prestigious Booker Prize. In 2011, he was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize and in 2012 won the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. His books give diverse aspects of Indian cultures as well as Parsi life, customs, and religion.

The novels of Rohinton Mistry portray the spirit of the cultural identity in the feeling of rootlessness, helplessness and alienation felt by the Parsi community. The Parsis had to face economic losses, lowered social status and personal suffering. This is evident in his all novels. In *Such a Long Journey* the protagonist Gustad Noble, a teller in the bank, had to face

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many trials in his life. His dreams regarding Sohrab, his eldest son are shattered when he declines to join the prestigious IIT despite clearing the entrance examination. Not only this he also rebels against his father and leaves his home to try his luck in music. In utter desperation he states: "Throwing away his fortune without reason. What have I not done for him, tell me? I even threw myself in front a car. Kicked him aside, saved his life, and got to suffer all my life (slapping his hip)." (*Such a Long Journey* 52)

In the same novel Mistry has tried to bring home the fact that even after Independence Parsis' integrity has been doubted and they are subject to ill-treatment by the authorities and the government. It is shown through the character of Major Bilimoria, a resident of Khodadad Building. He has been victimized by the then Indira Gandhi regime in a bank fraud case when he as a cashier of SBI bank released 60 lakh to one Mira Obili on the behest of the manager on being allegedly told by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on phone . However it is based on the real life scandal involving Sohrab Nagarwala, a cashier in the State Bank of India during the 1971. He claimed that he had received a call from the Prime Minister instructing him to pay the handsome amount of money to a messenger. This was never accepted by the Prime Minister's office and Nagarwala was charged with embezzlement and arrested later to die in a mysterious circumstance during the trial of the case. This money was also connected with the 1971 war between India and Pakistan which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. In the novel Major Bilimoria is presented as a RAW agent who has been assigned the task of assisting the Mukti Bahini of East Pakistan financially in their fight against the brutality of Pakistani army though secretly. It is for this purpose that the cash of 60 lakh was drawn by Major Bilimoria.

However this incident drew Mistry's attention because in his novels we find him to be pioneering the cause of the Parsis whose survival is on the brink. As Sohrab Nagarwala was a Parsi and falsely implicated by the Indira Gandhi government in the so-called fraud case, Mistry has defended him and tried to make the Parsis know the reality of the case through the character of Major Bilimoria in the novel who is supposed to bear the real-life character of

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Sohrab Nagarwala. He has reflected the agony and angst that the Parsis were forced to sustain. This incident symbolizes the fear and torment that the Parsis of India were gripped by and its repercussion were felt by their brethren across the globe. This feeling of betrayal and alienation by the Parsi community in general is vindicated by the confession of Major Bilimoria as expressed here: "But ... I was mistaken. They came for me ... arrested ... made a case based on my confession ... Gustad, it has been tried. Everything is in their control ... courts in their pockets. Only one way ... quietly do my four years, and then forget about it." (*Such a Long Journey* 280-281)

In Rohinton Mistry's another novel *Family Matters*, we witness similar feelings of alienation and disgruntledness by Yezad, the protagonist of the novel and his employer Mr. Kapur who always mourns his displacement from Punjab after the Independence in 1947. Here Mistry has based the central action on the situation arising out of Shiv Sena's agitation for the so-called 'sons of the soil movement' in Bombay. According to Yezad (Mistry), such type of political bungling presents the stumbling block in the way of the Parsis' healthy adjustment in Indian society thus pushing them to a grim condition of pain and penury. Shiv Sena has created a damning atmosphere in Bombay and even takes the life of Mr. Kapur, for whom Yezad has high regards. Yezad is shaken by the murder of Mr. Kapur by Shiv Sainiks. In the novel Mistry symbolizes the fanaticism of Shiv Sena to increasing sense of insecurity among the Parsis. It is thus stated in the concern of Mr. Rangrajan, a character in the novel: "These days you never can tell who might be a Shiv Sena fanatic, or a member of their Name Police. It is my understanding that some Shiv Sainiks have infiltrated the GPO, subjecting innocent letters and postcards to incineration if the address reads Bombay instead of Mumbai." (*Family Matters* 53)

These feelings are further evoked in *Family Matters* where a character Inspector Masalavala voices concerned regarding the future of the Parsis: "We were chatting about the future of the Parsi community ... Vultures and crematoriums both will be redundant, if there no Parsis to feed them ... We have been small community right from the beginning. But we

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have survived and prospered Those were different times, different world, said Inspector Masalavala, not in a mood to tolerate the optimism. The experts are confident that fifty years hence, there will be no Parsis left.” (*Family Matters* 412) Commenting on the theme of alienation and their depleting numbers in the world veteran jurist Nani Palkhivala says: “They will become a decadent community with a glorious past, a perilous present, and a dim future.” (*We, the Nation: The Lost Decades* 320)

It also necessitates mentioning that Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels also revolve around the theme of alienation and marginality like her co-religionist writer Rohinton Mistry. In Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Bride* we have another dominant theme of denigrating the role of women in a patriarchal society where they are confined within the narrow framework of rules imposed in general by the patriarchal society and the male figures of the household in particular. They are not allowed any pivotal role in the significant decisions even though their feelings and their whole being might be at stake. This aspect of their suppression is abundantly evident by the treatment meted out to young Zaitoon, Carol and Miriam. The rules for them are very strict. The women become spaces on which the status of their men is marked. Sakhi, a tribal young man to whom Zaitoon is married, becomes furious after watching her talking to an army jawan while crossing the river. He avenges Zaitoon for this ‘audacity’ of her and peeved Zaitoon runs away his home as she could not adjust her according to the hill culture as she belongs to plains of undivided Punjab. Miriam is also a very confined creature whose job is only remaining in the *pardah*. Her situation is described as: “...reflecting her husband’s rising status and respectability, took to observing *pardah*. She seldom ventured out without her veil.” (*The Bride* 51) Carol, an American sales-girl, who is now married to Farukh, a Pakistani army engineer, is also unable to adjust herself with Farukh as her culture and civilization become a stumbling block in her marriage. Her open mindedness is quite contrary to that of her husband. She starts flirting with another person Major Mushtaq but this courtship is short-lived as she comes to know that Major Mushtaq is already married. Her life has totally been ravaged and she shares this mental anguish and loneliness with Pom, a friend

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of her in a letter, “The darling of her isolated camp deep in the Himalayas—venturing where no white woman had ever gone before—protected by pickets” (*The Bride* 114)

In Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Crow Eaters*, the theme of alienation and dislocation is prominently delineated in the very beginning where the protagonist Faredoon Junglewalla, embarks on a journey in search of greener pastures from Central India to Lahore leaving everything behind, with his mother-in-law Jerbanoo, pregnant wife Putli and an infant daughter Hutoxi, on a bullock cart. He however, braves all the challenges that arise on the way. Lahore proved very lucky for him as he started to sail leaps and bounds there. It was a meteoric rise for Faredoon in a hitherto unknown city. With his proximity to the Britishers, he attained huge property and wealth. But the struggle for freedom was also going on and the Parsis maintained balance. Toeing the line of the majority of the Parsis, Freddy did not support the talk of rebellion. Rather he condemns the treachery of a few Parsis like Dadabhoy Naoroji against the Britishers. He is disturbed the developments taking place where the Hindus will have one part, the Muslims the other. But he is very cryptic whether the Parsis will also have some part in the country dominated by the Hindus, Muslims and the Sikhs or not. This doubt is expressed in the speech of Bobby Kartak who had come from Karachi to spend his time with his departing father-in-law Faredoon with his wife Yasmin: “But where will we go? What will happen to us?” (*The Crow Eaters* 283) Sinking back in the pillows Faredoon replies: “Nowhere, my children. . . We will stay where we are . . . let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever, rule. What does it matter? The sun will continue to rise –and the sun continues to set-in their arses . . .!” (*The Crow Eaters* 283)

Award winning novelists Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry are recognized as one of the most important contemporary writers of postcolonial literature. Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels are based on Indian and Pakistani history, politics, and cultural identity.

Bapsi Sidhwa writes from the perspective of a minority community. She is known to have autobiographical elements in her works up to some extent. She picks up some significant incidents from her own life or from the lives of other people and flashes them to

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create a larger reality of fiction. Her works are remarkably different from one another in both subject and treatment. One can find variety of themes in her fiction such as the partition crisis, emigrant experience, and the Parsi milieu, social ethos of the small minority community, the theme of marriage, women's problems and patterns of migration. Bapsi Sidhwa's first novel *The Crow Eaters* has a unique place in history of English fiction which also provides the different aspects of the Parsi life in detail. Sidhwa's first three novels focus on Parsi families and the Parsi community in the city of Lahore. Some reviewers have compared Sidhwa's narrative device of relating major political events through the eyes of a child to Salman Rushdie's narration in *Midnight's Children*.

Sidhwa has also been regarded as a feminist post-colonial author who effectively addresses issues of cultural difference and the place of women in Indian and Pakistani society. Critics have noted both *The Bride* and *An American Brat* for their examinations of cultural conflict and their strong characterizations. It is very natural for a writer to give room to his own culture and social background in one's writing. Bapsi Sidhwa is deeply rooted in her own Parsi culture, values and beliefs and completely adopted it in her novels. The characters in her novels are initiated into a self-awakening or self-realization or at other times an awakening into one's own culture. Thus, Sidhwa's characters are all strong reflections of the sub-continent people who have attained awakening and have come to terms with the time testing ruthlessness of the culture they are living in. Thus in the novels of Sidhwa, we find that there is sometimes a clash also between Parsi identity and mainstream Indian identity. This conflict produces a sense of cultural differences. Due to this clash Parsis are believed to have a strong sense of group identity and cohesiveness. Along with it, there are deep rooted reasons behind this desire for distinctiveness in communities. Thus Bapsi Sidhwa draws her subjects from widely different aspects of life. She has dealt with issues ranging from history to contemporary reality. Ironic portrayal of the Parsi community, oppression of women, religious fundamentalism, unjust evaluation of historical events, cultural difference weave different kinds of thematic patterns in her novels. She does not provide unnecessary details,

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but she always sympathizes with her characters in their trials and tribulations in her works. Bapsi Sidhwa's mode of perception is ironic. She has employed almost every word and phrase of the native language in *An American Brat*.

Rohinton Mistry is known as an international man of stories in diasporic literature and as a writer in a new country and in a different social and cultural milieu, he faces many challenges. He has to make sense of the various spaces he occupies as a Parsi, Indian and Canadian. His first book *Tales from Firozsha Baag* is a collection of 11 short stories about the residents of Firozsha Baag, a Parsi dominated apartment building in Bombay. The stories give portraits of the lives of the members of the fictitious residential block Firozsha Baag. The characters represent Parsis at odds with their religious beliefs and the larger community, and also convey the common human issues of spiritual questions, alienation, and fear of death, family problems, and economic hardships.

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