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Portryal of Socio-Political Conditions of the Period in the Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry

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Abstract

The present paper tries to find out the various accounts of socio-political conditions of the period that have been infused in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry. As it is known that both these novelists are in Diaspora—Bapsi Sidhwa presently living in America and Rohinton Mistry in Canada, they have huge knowledge and experience of societies and cultures they have come across since their birth. They have thus gathered the experiences of not only the country of their birth but also the knowledge and experiences of culture, civilization and heritage of the country of their adoption. It is therefore expected that they will by and large, cast the instances of such happenings in their works too. However the paper has picked up *An American Brat*, *Ice-Candy-Man*, and *The Crow Eaters* of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* for the purpose.

Key Words- *Radicalism, Cultural Resistance, Chamaars, Hanging, Restrictions, Evils.*

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As we are aware that Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry are nearly contemporary writers writing from foreign land about their respective homelands i.e. Pakistan and India. Bapsi Sidhwa was born in 1939 at Lahore in Pakistan while Rohinton Mistry was born in Indian city of Bombay. (Now known as Mumbai) Before partition in 1947, the people of both countries had a common culture and heritage of living centuries together as co-habitant of the sub-continent. It is pertinent to acknowledge that they share a lot of social and political ideas and incidents and have fully portrayed in their novels since both of them are contemporary. After thorough perusal of their works, we find certain commonality in their portrayal of themes, cultural values and Parsee ethos as both of these writers are Parsee by religion. Almost in all their works we come across some prominent political and social happenings which have played important role in deciding their acumen.

In Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, we witness the political turmoil of 1977 when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had been dethroned by General Zia -ul-Haq. After Zia took control of power, things began to change drastically in Pakistan. He had introduced a new ordinance called Haddood Ordinance which gave rise to Islamic fundamentalism and dogmatism in Pakistan. Through the story of Feroza, the protagonist of the novel Sidhwa has explained in detail how deeply the political development in Pakistan had affected the society. Her parents think that she should be saved from being further influenced by the Muslim government and its policy of implementing the *shariya* laws in Pakistan. In an interview to Naila Hussain, Bapsi Sidhwa says that "the book deals with the subject of culture shock, the young people from the sub-continent have to contend with when they choose to study abroad. It also delineates the clashes the divergent cultures generate between the families back home and their transformed and transgressing progeny bravely groping their way in the New World."

The heroine of the novel, Feroza, a sixteen- year- old girl has been carefully brought up in the small but prosperous Parsi community in Lahore. Her mother Zareen is perturbed

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because Feroza is becoming more and more backward everyday and behind this drastic change of behavior and attitude is the installation of a fundamental government under General Zia-ul-Haq, a military dictator who had overthrown the popular democratically elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This development in Pakistan had bewildered the people but they could not resist against the dictator. This situation has been described by the novelist through Zareen:

It is absurd how things have changed. I was really hopeful when Bhutto was elected. For the first time I felt it did not matter that I was not a Muslim, or that I was a woman. You remember when he told the women in Peshawar to sit with the men. (*An American Brat* 11)

The above quoted lines show that Bhutto was a liberal leader who believed in secular values and socialism and gave freedom to all creeds and religion without any bias. He also had staunch faith in gender equality. On the other hand, General Zia was a dictator who mocked all these values and thought them harmful for a Muslim country like Pakistan. He believed in totalitarian rule and did not have any corner for ethics. Even Feroza was a big fan of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and after reaching America she had hung a big portrait of him in her room. Manek, her uncle objects this move of Feroza condemning Bhutto and his secular policies and equates his socialist ideas with those of communists. Feroza retorts Manek's views about Bhutto and says: "Don't you dare say something about Bhutto. Aren't you ashamed, speaking ill of someone who is facing death just because he is voice of masses?" (*An American Brat* 124)

Bapsi Sidhwa expresses resentment and concern over the growing Islamic Fundamentalism which has started to pollute the young minds and empowered the *mullahs* to explain things afresh. It was very difficult for girls and women to venture outside their houses. To think of going to school by riding bicycle was even more blasphemous. It is stated by Zareen, Feroza's mother: "Could you imagine Feroza cycling to school now? She would

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be a freak! Those *goondas* would make vulgar noises and bump into her, and *mullahs* would tell her to cover her head. Instead of moving forward we are moving backward. What could I do in 59s and 60s my daughter cannot do in 1978! Our Parsee children in Lahore would not know how to mix with Parsee kids in Karachi or Bombay” (*An American Brat* 11)

The novelist has full accolades for Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who according to her was victimized for his liberal leanings. He was a charismatic leader who enjoys the affection of all Pakistani society and intelligentsia. In the novel a character Zareen has eulogized him in the most convincing way: “Zulfikar Ali Bhutto riding the crest of his popularity had dared to fault the gender segregation practiced by his volatile tribal supporters in the Northwest Frontier.”(*An American Brat* 12) Zareen’s husband Cyrus describes the anguish and awe in these terms: “Everybody is feeling frustrated, not only women.”(*An American Brat* 13)

All these developments affected the people very much and Feroza, a young Parsee girl in her teenage is no exception. During her college hour she often heard about all these Islamic fundamentalist propaganda of General Zia and was drawn towards it. She began to behave like a fundamentalist with her own mother Zareen. Her mother was very disturbed at this sudden change in her daughter and begins to explore ways to keep her away from being caught by all this new ‘cultural renaissance’ of Pakistan under new regime of Zia. In the novel it is also brought to light that the promulgation of General Zia’s Hadood Ordinance had given new impetus to the forces of radicalism in Pakistan. The option to send Feroza to America was sealed upon as it would broaden her mind which has been filled by the narrow fundamentalist ideologies. So the solution is to send her for a holiday to the USA. Says Zareen: “Travel will broaden her outlook; get this puritanical rubbish out of her head.”(*An American Brat* 14)

In *An American Brat*, in addition to political situation in Pakistan, the novelist has thrown light on American society and its various the transformation it was undergoing. When Feroza lands in America, contrary to her hopes she has to undergo thorough tyrannical interrogations

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by the American air port authorities to be further followed by the department of customs. During the interrogation, she felt so humiliated that tears roll down her burning cheeks and she abruptly blurts out: "To hell with you and your damn country. I will go back."(*An American Brat* 64)

This outrageous behaviour of the American Immigration authorities towards a foreigner could be esteemed as callous and indecent. It cannot be called proper and hospitable. But the Americans say it is part and parcel of their internal administration. They cannot part away with it as it is related to their security. However if we look at the American society, we find that despite being a superpower, there is other side of America where we find a lot of crime like smuggling of drugs, the lookouts, runners, drug dealers, male prostitution and hubs of poverty, shabby colonies abounding in filth, open drains very much like in Pakistan. Those were smells and sights Feroza was used to. However she struggled to adjust to the poverty and stench of the First World. (America and other developed nations)

This was an alien faith, compost reeking of vomit and alcoholic belches, neglected old age and sickness, of drugged exhalations and the malodorous ferment of other substances she could not decipher. The smells disturbed her psyche; it seemed to her they personified the callous heart of the rich country that allowed such savage neglect to occur. (*An American Brat* 81)

Along with these social evils prevalent in American society, certain other malpractices very much common in American society are homosexuality and lesbianism. These social evils are extensively discussed by the novelist. When Feroza decides to marry David Press, her mother flies to America to cajole her so that the Parsi community may not excommunicate Feroza. She asks Feroza to follow the example of Shirley and Laura who share the same apartment. She suggests Feroza that she should forget about the men and concentrate on her studies. "Why cannot she be like the two women who share her apartment? Busy with studies, says Zareen, they are not bothered with men. No, says Feroza,

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because they are lesbians. Zareen does not understand. She has come across the word in magazines, but has never heard it used. Zareen is surprised. Why? They are pretty, and there is no dearth of man around.” (*An American Brat* 29-30) Feroza elaborates:

Some women just prefer other women. Others are fed up. American boys change girlfriends every few months. All boys are not like my David. The girls cannot stand the heartache. It takes them months to get over it. Laura says: “If Shirley gets my juices flowing, why should I mess around with boys?” Either way, they get on with their lives. (*An American Brat* 30)

Another prominent theme elaborately examined in *An American Brat* is the controversial issue of prohibition of marriage outside the community among the Parsis. By raising this issue Sidhwa has hinted that though the issue has been hugely debated, it is yet not resolved. She cautions the Parsi community that they will extinguish in the days to come and in order to salvage their community from being extinguished, they need to find out a universal remedy. However, the first Parsi novelist to highlight the contentious issue of inter-community marriage is Perin Bharucha in *The Fire Worshippers*. In her novel Bharucha tries to reject the concept of ethical purity through Nariman, an idealist, who wants to marry outside his community. Nariman’s father Pestonji Kanchwalla resists disintegration of his community beginning from his own family through the proposed mixed marriage of his son with Portia Roy, a non-Parsi girl. The younger Parsis revolt against such artificial restrictions. Nariman’s sister Rhoda supports her brother’s marriage. She tries to explain and interpret new times to her parents: “And that is not your fault or Mama’s or anyone’s, it’s the fault of the times we are living in. Everything is changed. The age of miracles is gone. . . .Zoroastrianism is no longer a faith to be lived; it’s just a unique cultural heritage.” (*An American Brat* 194)

Bapsi Sidhwa has hinted this social problem of inter-community marriage in her first novel *The Crow Eaters* also. Yazdi the second son of Faredoon Junglewalla is very sensitive

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and peeved at the conspicuous commercialization and sycophancy of the Parsis. He revolts against the ills of the system and leaves his father's house and property when his father refuses his proposal of marrying Rosy Watson, an Anglo –Indian. Sidhwa has shown how Faredoon, Yazdi's father instantly rejects his proposal challenging the progressive views of his son:

I believe in some kind of a tiny spark that is carried from parent to child, on through generations...a kind of inherited memory of wisdom and righteousness, reaching back to the times of Zarathustra, the Magi, and the Mazdiasnians. But what happens if you marry outside our kind? The spark so delicately nurtured, so subtly balanced, meets something totally alien and unmatched. Its precise balance is scrambled. It reverts to the primitive. (*The Crow Eaters* 28-29)

The political drama in Pakistan seems to be very serious as the most popular leader of the Pakistanis was going to be hanged. It has created panic and people are engrossed in the debate about the repercussions of his hanging. But 'what is destined is destined' is also true in the case of Bhutto. The drama that ensued with General Zia's usurping the throne of Pakistan, reached its climax and the world came to know about the shocking news of Bhutto's murder by All India Radio first. General Zia succeeded in his plan and a popular leader was no more. His hanging is described as follows:

Bhutto was hanged in the Rawalpindi jail at 7 o'clock in the morning. All India Radio was the first to announce the news. . . .The larger tragedy was that General Zia had support open or covert, of all the major political forces in the country and all the country's major institutions-the military, the civil bureaucracy and the judiciary. (*An American Brat* 178)

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy- Man* is her first novel written on the theme of partition. The novel shows that in the beginning the non-committal attitude of the Parsi community

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towards Indian struggle for Independence in which the various communities of India found themselves in the beginning of the twentieth century, it distills the love hate relationship of the Hindus and Muslims through the consciousness and point of view of Lenny, an unusually precocious five- year-old Parsi girl. The talk of separate Pakistan has changed the pattern of communal relations of the people and society which till now lived harmoniously together had developed fractions. As the novel moves forward it is seen that the pattern of communal amity that existed in rural India, between the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs. But it was ephemeral. After the declaration of partition of India into Pakistan and India riots, arson and killing of people on the communal lines permeate the atmosphere of the novel. The social fabric is dismantled and this sentiment is evident in caution of Sharabat Khan, a character in the novel: "These are bad times-Allah knows what is in store. There is big trouble in Calcutta and Delhi: Hindu –Muslim trouble. The Congress-wallahs are after Jinnah's blood."(*Ice-Candy – Man*75)

Thus it can be categorically said that Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* has shown the impact of India's Independence and its partition in two countries--India and Pakistan as the partition is based on religion. It shows the social impact as there has developed a big chasm between Hindus and Muslims. It also displays the communal amity between Hindus and Sikhs, on one hand, and Muslims on the other hand in the pre-Partition era, a growing impatience and mistrust between them on the eve of partition culminating in the pattern of utter communal discord in the breaking of the dawn of understanding between them in the distant horizon during the post- Partition era.

In Rohinton Mistry's novels too the political and social occurrences are abundantly described. In his novel *A Fine Balance*, we are apprised of the events spanning over the pre independent India to the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 by her own security guards at her residence in Delhi followed by massive genocide of the Sikhs. The novel deals with many controversial policies of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who imposed Emergency in 1974, and launched

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several new schemes like- Removal of poverty and Family Planning. In this novel the novelist has presented some characters that are vociferously supporting Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. Mrs. Gupta, the owner of Au Revoir Textiles, asks Dina Dalal, the protagonist of the novel: “Isn’t that good news? . . . No more strikes and *morchas* and silly disturbances” (*A Fine Balance* 73)

However imposition of Emergency may be boon for few but it proves very costly for many people likes of Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Om Prakash Darjee and Maneck Kohla. All of them are aware of something stifling their lives though they cannot link it to the existing political scenario of the country. Their struggle for survival has become difficult but they don’t guess that it has a political angle. They all believe that the oft- heard word Emergency is a short of game played by the power centre and it would not really affect them but very soon their dreams get thwarted and they are reduced to beggars. Their social status as humble tailors is no more with them; rather they have to pass through many menial ordeals. They are dragged to a construction site and forced to work without any wage and when they demand their due wages, they are threatened with dire consequences. They are subject to inhuman treatment in the truck and are dragged as animals taken to abattoir. The situation is thus described in the novel:

The tailors climbed on to the truck bed, and then the tailboard was slammed. The men assigned to escort the transport took their seats in the police jeep . . . The truck, recently used for construction work, had clods of clay stuck to its insides. Underfoot, stray gravel stabbed the human cargo. (*A Fine Balance* 326)

On the other hand, the contemporary society is also described as fragmented. There still exist the evils of caste system, ditch between upper classes and the lower ones and the scourge of untouchability and the poor and lower classes being deprived of their right to vote. Even if someone dares to cast his vote he endangers his life. When Narayan, a *chamaar* by caste, tries to assert his democratic rights and cast his own vote instead of abetting the

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process of rigged elections, he and two other *chamaars* are forcibly gagged, flogged and tortured for their defiance. He is not only killed along with his entire family, but also their dead bodies are displayed in the village square by Thakur Dharamsin and his henchmen. The novelist has described it as in the following words:

In the evening, after the ballot boxes were taken away, burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, and then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away. . . The bodies were displayed in the village square. (*A Fine Balance* 146)

To conclude, it can be said that in regard with Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry's writings the saying that 'literature reflects the society' comes true. Along with social environment their novels also give the apt account of the political happenings of the time. As both the novelists are from a marginalized Parsi community, and their ancestors being the victims of social and political persecution at the hands of the Arabs in the past, it is their natural proclivity to bring out an analogy of those events in their writings to make their offspring to be aware of those happenings and prevent their recurrence .

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