RESEARCH ARTICLE

Diminishing Voice and Consciousness: An Analysis of the Fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa

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ABSTRACT

Being a writer is a great responsibility of telling the truth, but it becomes more significant when the one is writing not only to unlock their heart but also to give voice to their cultural heritage which is on the verge of extinction. As a Parsee Bapsi Sidhwa, a Pakistani-Punjabi-Diaspora has achieved a great success to give the voice to her diminishing Parsee community. Yet her feminine consciousness is dominating her fiction, which provides a new colour and horizon to her narratives. Her all five novels and a short story collection are deeply steeped in romanticism but her feminine heart never allow her to lose the focus from her responsibility to do the justice not only with her gender but also to her about to diminishing religion.

Keywords: Bapsi Sidhwa, Parsee consciousness, Diaspora, Immigrant, Extinction, Voice.

“I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. (Psalms 116:1-2 NIV)” – Holy Bible

Literature is an influential device in the hands of creative and prolific writers, to compel the society to change its social fabric and stereotypes. But it must be the reflection of life; and related to a social consciousness of a society. Consciousness which in fact is synonymous to life is constituted by series of experiences that one has in one’s life; but this so called disease became more complex when it connected with diaspora and diminishing culture which haunted them to realize the problem of double consciousness. This is specifically true for the immigrant writers; they try to synthesize with their consciousness of the past and the experiences they undergo in the new situation, and Bapsi Sidhwa is no exception to this as well. As a prominent literary Parsee figure, in all her works, where community foregrounds as the protagonist, wants to immortalize the hopes and despair, disillusionment and craving for root, her search for identity, her struggle for home etc. are highlighted. All of the books are basically the reflection of an author and their interpretation of life; as E. B. White talks On the Role and Responsibility of the Writer, he says: “Writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life [...] I do feel a responsibility to society because of going into print: a writer has the duty to be good, not lousy; true, not false; lively, not dull; accurate, not full of error. He should tend to lift people up, not lower them down. Writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life” (White).

Sidhwa followed this unspoken but binding responsibility of being a writer very admirably, she knows to be true to her consciousness is the only key to continue with. Her feminine heart and Parsee consciousness never let her go alone while writing the novels or short stories. The New Statesman has justified this by describing her as “An affectionate and shrewd observer and a born storyteller”.

Bapsi Sidhwa, born on August 11, 1938, is a Pakistani-Punjabi-Parsee writer dealing with women’s issues. She has written five novels and one collection of short stories.
Some of her works reflect her personal experiences in Pakistan. As a child, she suffered from polio which kept her away from social life. Consequently, her primary schooling was done at home. She was deprived of the company of other children. Most of her time was spent in listening to the stories told by the servants or in daydreaming. Distinguished international writer, Bapsi Sidhwa, was brought up in a traditional environment in which girls had lot of restrictions. She did not like it. It is depicted in her novel An American Brat through Zareen, the mother of Feroza. She was worried that her daughter was backward. What she could do in 1950 and 1960, her daughter could not do even thirty years after. Even the Parsee children of Lahore could not mix up with the Parsee children of Karachi or Bombay. She was afraid that her daughter was growing conservative while the Parsees are modern and progressive. Consequently, she thought: “Travel will broaden her outlook, get this puritanical rubbish out of her head” (Sidhwa, 199).

Sidhwa with all her ups and down, experiences of marriage and divorce, social works, and travels, really broaden her outlook and compel her to go by her own. She made a conscious decision to write in English though she speaks four languages. It was partly due to the probability of worldwide exposure to the issues that had assumed ominous significance in the subcontinent. At that time, there was no English language novels published in Pakistan. So, after Sidhwa finished writing her two novels, she had to publish them herself. All her novels, The Crow-Eaters (1980), The Pakistani Bride (1983) and Ice-Candy-Man (1988), An American Brat (1994), and Water (2006) are experimentations in imagination with an aim to achieve artistic synthesis.

Sidhwa considers herself a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsee woman. She tells that all this combination of Punjabi culture, Pakistani milieu and Parsee religion influenced her. To her, it was wonderful because the combination made her the writer she is. Once, when she was asked if her Parsee religion had any impact on her career aspirations when she was in Pakistan, she remarked that she felt marginalized as a Parsee in a Muslim-dominated society. Some people were confused about her nationality and racial identity and would often ask her, “Can you be Pakistani if you are a Parsee?”(Montenegro).

To Indians, she was a Pakistani. She believes if she had been a Parsee in India, she would not have felt so marginalized. It is simply because there are so many Parsees here. But reality is, their numbers are down to a critical 61,000 in India, and diminishing by the day; another 40,000 are scattered across the world with an even greater struggle to hang on to their distinctive identity. Parsee numbers have declined by 12% every census decade - India’s population increases by 21%. They are projected to plummet to 23,000 in the near future, reducing this sophisticated, urbane community to a ‘tribe’.

Sidhwa is also aware to this critical situation of her on the verge of extinction community. Therefore, talking about Parsee community, Sidhwa makes appropriate statements: “The endearing feature of this microscopic merchant community was its compelling sense of duty and obligation towards other Parsi-sis…There were no Parsi beggars in a country abounding in beggars... Notorious misers, they are paradoxically generous to a cause” (Singh, 8).

This expression of Sidhwa can be observing in her all books; one of them The Pakistani Bride is about Muslim community and one realizes that Parsees are more stabilized and privileged and organized than the Muslims. Sidhwa made an honest attempt to explain Islamic sanctity about marriage: “We take marriage and divorce very seriously. It involves more than just emotions. It's a social responsibility” (Sidhwa, 1983).

Sidhwa wants to preserve all possible details of her community through her books. She always takes pride for being a Parsee, and never misses a chance to admire this as well; in one of her interviews she claims: “As a Parsi, I always belonged to a distinct community. The Parsis were liked and respected [...] The Parsis are so few in number that their presence poses no threat to any country. Although they have maintained a low political profile, the community has done well in business and various professions. Parsis have earned the trust and respect of the countries they live in. Since the Parsis have no land they can call their own, their allegiance belongs to the country they inhabit” (Moza).

Most of the Parsees seem to have portable roots, and as a Parsee She knew the feeling of being dislocated and uprooted. They are mostly migrating or emigrating from one country to another, which makes them a more
cosmopolitan citizen than others. Still, she never denied the impact of newness whether it is cultural or political as she herself says in an interview with the DAWN newspaper: “When you change your geographical location, naturally, the new culture and geography influence your characters. The politics of a new country will influence your character” (Jafri).

Although Sidhwa seems well aware of her classy and well-educated community, her feminine mind never accepts the restrictions on women on the name of culture and religion, her rebellious feminine heart breaks all such things, and inspires her female readers to go against such inhuman practices. According to her, she was brought up in a very strict Parsee family. She knew that the women of her class had still a long way to go to gain full possession of their rights. Sidhwa did not like the restrictions imposed on girls and through Zareen, the mother of Feroza, expressed her resentment in her novel An American Brat. Her worry about the freedom of the Parsee girls is also expressed by Zareen when she remarks that her daughter, Feroza, cannot wear frocks, even fifteen years after partition. There were restrictions clamped on girls by mullahs.

Truth is always rewarded, so that it is easier to speak the truth than to lie that motivated Sidhwa to write the truth without any fear. The brilliance of her writing deserves to be honored by the widest possible readership. There are certain issues which can be better tackled by women as she has done in her novels. That is perhaps why once Sidhwa said: “Certain books can be written by women only. A woman’s experiences can only be translated by a woman....Women can deal more easily with emotions and their writing is more intuitive and compassionate” (Valentina).

Sidhwa knew that soon such madness has worn her down; It’s easier to do what it says than argue. But her consciousness never let her give up and make her realize that she no longer knows where it ends but begins with her feminine zeal. As Michael A. Singer says in his The Untethered Soul: The Journey Beyond Yourself: “There is nothing more important to true growth than realizing that you are not the voice of the mind - you are the one who hears it.”

Sidhwa is the best example of this, who not only realize this but also embrace it within her consciousness. I think it would lose what value it may have if Sidhwa would have surrendered, as a matter of principle, and consciousness to accept the warming rays of the sun. It is always easy to think that one of the most significant role of the writer today is to sound the alarm; and Sidhwa aptly observes: “The Parsi community has been on the brink of extinction ever since I can remember, but it seems to be holding its own and still flourishing in Mumbai, Karachi, and recently in America and Britain. Of course, Parsi youth are marrying outside the community and many of the children born to these marriages are not accepted as Parsi, but this too is changing. I think this dodo bird of world religions will continue to exist -- at least I hope so!” (Moza).

With all these arguments I could say that Sidhwa is not only having hoped but a living consciousness which gives the voice to the feminine issues as well as to her diminishing community. She is fulfilling her duty of being a writer by sounding the alarm to the society. I would like to conclude all with W. H. Auden’s quote which can describe the consciousness of Sidhwa’s writings. “All I have is a voice.”
References


