EXISTENTIAL DIMENSIONS AS PROJECTED IN SELECT WORKS OF BAPSI SIDHWA AND ROHINTON MISTRY: A THEMATIC EVALUATION

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SYNOPSIS

The present doctoral research aims at revealing the journey of successful novelists like Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry. The study aims at exploring the issues of struggle for identity and socio-cultural conflict. The objective of the study is to introduce the readers to the existing issues like the role of parsi community, gender, religion and culture portrayed by the two renowned novelists whose study is undertaken by the present researcher as a part of Ph.D. programme.

In this age of globalization, it is usually very difficult to categorize some writers and Bapsi Sidhwa is one of them. She belongs to India, Pakistan and the United States simultaneously but she likes herself to be described as a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman. All her four novels *The Crow Eaters, The Pakistani Bride, Ice-Candy-Man* and *An American Brat* are about her perceptions of life as a Parsi, Punjabi, Pakistani and American woman respectively. Sidhwa believes that all of her works have some degree of autobiographical elements.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s works have aroused a variety of reactions. Her interests are vast and she cannot be easily categorized as just a comic writer or a Parsi novelist. 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, the Parsi milieu, social idiosyncrasies of the small minority community, the theme of marriage, women’s problems, patterns of migration. Her treatment of such wide ranging themes is a testimony to her growth as a powerful and dramatic
novelist who is both an affectionate and shrewd observer of human society and a keen
teller of stories. She is perhaps Pakistan’s finest English language novelist. There is a
complex sprinkling of themes in her novels which defy any simplistic interpretation.

Through her every work Bapsi has tried to show experimentations in imagination with an aim to achieve artistic synthesis. In Sidhwa’s works themes diverge from the traditional to the contemporary. Thematically Sidhwa’s novels are rooted in the subcontinent where she was born and brought up yet they simultaneously possess a cosmopolitan appeal which readers can feel as a palpable presence beneath the characters. Thus, racial, regional, national and cultural issues of historical as well as topical significance form the core of her novels. This thesis takes a bird’s-eye view of Sidhwa’s all fictional works with due emphasis on the author under study due credit has been given to the predecessors, the harbingers of Parsi novel in English who set the stage and prepared the soil for the contemporary novelists.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s first novel *The Crow Eaters* could be read as a satire on the ways of the Parsi life. The criticism by a section of the Parsi community is the result of an assumption that the major thematic concern of the novel is the life of the Parsis. What Bapsi Sidhwa attempts to establish is that the Parsi community is like any other community with its own strengths and limitations. Bapsi Sidhwa’s second novel *The Pakistani Bride* deals with one of the pivotal concerns in feminist discourse, viz. the oppression of women in the patriarchal set-up. The narrative depicts the struggle for the survival of Zaitoon, a tribal girl. Through Carol, an alien, Sidhwa speaks against the oppression of women. In the ultimate analysis, Zaitoon emerges as a shining symbol, an emblem against oppression. The narrative celebrates the will, resolve to resist evil and the struggle against oppression of women.
Ice-Candy-Man Which is known as Cracking India by Sidhwa’s American publisher, is her third novel which possesses several layers of connotative and enigmatic interpretations. It is her most serious political novel till date and is written on the theme of Partition. The Ice-Candy Man is a re-inscription of male texts on the Partition which valorises objective reality in the narrative and ignores the experiential realm of the woman. In this novel Sidhwa again draws our attention to the facts of victimization of women but here the victimization is a result of collective action viz. the communal riots that followed the Partition.

An American Brat deals with the intercultural theme which has assumed vital significance for many postcolonial novelists. In this narrative, the West is depicted as a set of values in conflict with the value system of the East. Here, quite significantly, the conflict between the two cultures is discernible not only on the social plane but also on the personal level leading to a quest for identity. Bapsi Sidhwa evinces keen interest in the interaction of two cultures that exist side by side. The Zoroastrian mode of life of Feroza, the Parsi protagonist, clashes with the modern American way of life with its emphasis on material prosperity. The resultant friction compels her to make a moral choice in life. This fate is shared by many expatriate today. Thus, racial, regional, national and cultural issues of historical as well as topical significance form the core of her novels.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s fiction reveals recurrent patterns of major themes of Parsi life, plight of women, Partition crisis and cultural differences. Sidhwa diligently researches every aspect and situation in her works. She is a realist and she portrays life as she knows it. She does not provide unnecessary details and even avoids passing judgement on her characters. But she always sympathises with her characters in their trials and tribulations in her works. She is not a didactic writer who preaches about
anything but undoubtedly she is a good moralist. Hers is above all a unique individual voice and it is this individualism and sense of humour which makes her one of the finest writers of sub-continental English fiction.

Thus, Bapsi Sidhwa draws her subjects from widely different aspects of life. She has dealt with issues ranging from history to contemporary reality. Ironic but objective 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 is a realist and she portrays life as she knows it. She does not provide unnecessary details and even avoids passing judgement on her characters. But she always sympathises with her characters in their trials and tribulations in her works. She is not a didactic writer who preaches about anything but undoubtedly she is a good moralist. Her humorous tone, irreverence to established traditions, sense of fair play, subtle characterization and taut presentation of events impart a very specific charm to her novels. The fact that her novels have been translated into several languages and published in numerous European and Asian countries shows her popularity across the world and also the adaptability of her art. Though her literary output is meagre, she holds a very special place among contemporary writers of English fiction in the subcontinent.

Rohinton Mistry is another prominent writer who has captured Parsi-life in all its hues. Born in India in 1952, Mistry grew up in Bombay and received a Degree from the University of Bombay in Mathematics and Economics. Only in 1975, he immigrated to Canada, working in a bank. This helped him to study English and Philosophy at the University of Toronto. Mistry was an immigrant, an outsider in Canadian society and he realised that he belonged to the Parsi Community. He started writing stories and gained attention, receiving two Hart House literary prizes and
Canadian fiction Magazine’s annual contributor’s prize in 1985. Post – Independence Parsi writing in English is highly ethnocentric.

Their literature is characterised by both ethnocentric and minority discourse features. As a chronicler of Parsi community, Mistry observes keenly and very much conscious of his community’s predicament that is referred to as ethnicity or ethnic atrophy. His fiction is culture specific. The factors that are responsible for ethnic atrophy are the Parsi’s single minded pursuit of prosperity, extreme individualism, craze for urbanization, late marriages, low birth rate, etc. In Mistry’s novels all these ethnic atrophy syndromes are clearly depicted. They are rightly regarded as a domestic, social and political commentary concerning the Parsis. They throw a clear vision on the dwindling community in India to which Mistry himself belongs. They depict authentic accounts of the life styles, customs and traditions of the Parsis.

*Such a Long Journey*, Mistry’s first novel is a moving domestic tragi-comedy that introduces the readers to Gustad Noble, a devout Parsi and a dedicated family man who becomes enmeshed especially in the political turmoils of Parsi and Indian culture. Mistry creates a middle class Parsi Man in Gustad Noble. *A Fine Balance*, the second novel of Mistry highlights the sufferings of outcasts and innocents, trying to survive in the state of Internal emergency of the 1970’s. *Family Matters* is Rohinton Mistry’s eagerly anticipated third novel, following the success of his highly acclaimed *A Fine Balance* which won several major literary awards internationally. The novel is set in the city of Mumbai, where Mistry was born and grew up, and tells the story of a middle class Parsi family living through domestic crises. Through one family, Mistry conveys everything from the dilemmas among India’s Parsis, Persian – descended Zoroastrians, to the wider concerns of corruption and communalism.
Mistry’s presentation of oppositions and parallels between cultures, forms and geographical locales construct an identity that centres on the ambivalent position of the victims of diaspora. All the stories of Mistry are about Bombay. He also remembers every little thing about his childhood, he is thinking about it all the time though he is miles away. He does not write any stories from Canada, because he has not been able to assimilate in the new atmosphere. In the depiction of the Parsis, Mistry shows that all the Parsi families are poor or middle class. His description of the Parsis is authentic. He achieves this authenticity by emigrating to Canada. Mistry also explains the Canadian weather. He points out that the expatriates are quite sensitive to it.

Mistry describes the socio economic conditions of the two countries. He presents the wealthy condition of Canada and comments on the poverty and corruption in India, the black market and people who wait at the ration shops. A Fine Balance gives a vivid picture of India during the colonial and postcolonial period and it appears that geographical distance is cancelled in the cartography of his mind. Moreover his migration to a foreign land is at certain level, more a home coming than an act of expatriation.

Thus, his novels prove Mistry’s quest for home and family from the basic structure of humanity and mankind. Mistry like diasporic writers is plunged in an emotional dilemma between the heart and the mind. Emotionally he yearns, is drawn towards the land of his birth but reason does not allow him to return. He thus becomes a divided self- rooted in India, living in Canada. Moreover, Mistry through his characters reveals this quest for home and family. His novels show how successfully Mistry and most of his characters transcend the barriers of religion, caste, time, space in their quest for family, love and home. Like other diasporic writers, he too watches India from an outsiders’ point of view, even though his heart remains in the land of his birth.
Striving to offer a Parsi Discourse is a challenging task for a diasporic writer. Because, most of the Parsis are subjected to diverse diasporas and receive fragmented images that reflect the glorious past, reduced present and their insecure future. This thesis provides a comprehensive picture of the variegated predicament of Parsis as portrayed in the selected novels of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry. Both these writers have provided interesting insights on the predicament of Parsis from female and male points of view respectively. The significant achievements of Parsis, their crises of identity and survival strategies of identification and withdrawal as revealed in the works of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry form the main topic of this thesis. Both writers portray the life style and culture of the Parsis and the crises and upheavals they have passed through.

This research has been conducted to make an indepth study of the life style of Parsis as portrayed in the selected novels of Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry. Both these creative writers are Parsis; as ‘insiders’, they have a thorough knowledge of the Parsi-life. While Sidhwa deals with the fortunes of the Parsis in Pakistan and elsewhere, Mistry deals with the Parsis of Bombay. The first chapter Introduction explores the lifestyle of parsi community with reference to Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry. The second chapter deals with the Theme of Identity in Bapsi Sidhwa’s Novels. The third chapter is about the Portrayal of Parsi Community in Rohinton Mistry’s Novels. The fourth chapter throws light on Multi Cultural Issues in Bapsi Sidhwa & Rohinton Mistry’s Novels. The fifth chapter focuses on the Marginalization of Women in Rohinton Mistry’s Novels and the sixth chapter, Summation sums up the themes employed by the two eminent novelists Bapsi Sidhwa and Rohinton Mistry.