

Bapsi Sidhwa Biography

Nationality: American (Pakistani exile, emigrated to United States, 1984). Born: Bapsi Bhandara, Karachi, Pakistan, 1938. Education: Kinnaird College for Women, B.A. 1956. Career: Conducted novel writing workshops, Rice University, 1984-86; assistant professor of creative writing, University of Houston, 1985. President, International Women's Club of Lahore, 1975-77. Pakistan's delegate to Asian Women's Congress, 1975. Agent: Elizabeth Grossman, Sterling Lord Literary Agency Inc., 1 Madison Ave, New York, New York 10021, U.S.A.

PUBLICATIONS

Novels

The Crow Eaters. Lahore, Pakistan, Imani Press, 1978; London, Cape, 1980; New York, St. Martin's Press, 1983.

The Bride. New York, St. Martin's Press, and London, Cape, 1983.

Ice-Candy-Man. London, Heinemann, 1988; as Cracking India, Minneapolis, Milkweed Editions, 1991.

An American Brat. Minneapolis, Milkweed Editions, 1993; London, Penguin, 1994.

Critical Studies:

Configurations of Exile: South Asian Writers and Their World by Chelva Kanaganayakam, Toronto, TSAR, 1995; The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, edited by R.K. Dhawan and Novy Kapadia, New Delhi, Prestige Books, 1996.

With the publication of her third novel, Ice-Candy-Man (or Cracking India), Bapsi Sidhwa established herself as Pakistan's leading English-language novelist. Pakistan is the location of Sidhwa's first three novels, and in each there is a strong sense of place and community which she uses to examine the post-colonial Pakistani identity. In her novel The American Brat she shifts the predominant locale of her fiction from Lahore and Pakistan to various cities across America as she explores the Parsi/Pakistani diaspora. Multiple alternative voices are heard in Sidhwa's fiction through her choice of narrators and characters from Pakistan's minority communities—members

of the Parsi religion, Kohistanis from Pakistan's Tribal Territories, and, perhaps most importantly, women.

Sidhwa's first three novels, although very different from one another, share what Anita Desai has described as "a passion for history and for truth telling." And in each her desire to understand the terrible events of the Partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 and the subsequent birth of Pakistan as a nation is evident. Her first-published novel, *The Crow Eaters*, is a delightfully rambunctious comedy in which Faredoon Junglewalla tells the story of his life and times from the turn of the century to the eve of Partition. In common with such a writer as Salman Rushdie, Sidhwa believes that in order to understand any single event it is necessary to consider the many events which led up to it. Like the author herself, Faredoon is a Parsi and his story takes the reader to the heart of that minority community. The focus on the Parsis, their rites, and customs, not only provides a rich subject in itself, but also an ideal vehicle for observing the history of India, and in particular the events played out between Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, from a detached yet intimate insider/outsider perspective. Through the contact Faredoon and his family have with other groups in India (including the British) a picture of the whole is skillfully created. But always, behind her panoramic canvas, history ticks away and moves the reader gradually but inexorably towards 1947.

Whereas *The Crow Eaters* ends with the horrors of Partition still to come, *The Bride* (or *The Pakistani Bride*, her second published novel, but actually written before *The Crow Eaters*) uses those horrors as its starting point, and thus focuses on the first chapter of Pakistan's history as an independent nation. In this novel Sidhwa again makes use of a detached and marginalized character from one of Pakistan's minority groups. She uses Qasim, a Kohistani tribesman, as her window onto the period of history she treats. After witnessing a brutal attack on a train of refugees (a common Partition motif), Qasim adopts a young girl left orphaned by the massacre. When, years later, he takes Zaitoon to his ancestral village to be married, Sidhwa demonstrates the extent of the cultural divisions which exist within the newly drawn political boundaries of Pakistan, and in doing so raises questions about the construction of national identity. Her focus on the relationship between dominant and minority communities in Pakistan is extended specifically to include gender relations, which indeed is a strong theme in all her fiction.

In both *The Crow Eaters* and *The Bride*, Partition is a significant event without being the main subject of either novel. But in *Ice-Candy-Man*—which is revisionist history of Partition from a

Pakistani perspective, and major contribution to the growing list of novels which treat Partition—Sidhwa meets that terrible event head-on. Here Sidhwa returns to the Parsi community and chooses Lenny, a young Parsi girl with polio, as her narrator. The political and historical consciousness of her previous novels reaches a pinnacle in this novel, and the young narrator, naive, innocent, and free of the various prejudices an older narrator would be subject to, proves to be an ideal means of exposing the complexities of the period. The frequent intertextual referencing in *Ice-Candy-Man* is testament to Sidhwa's dual literary heritage, but more significantly, her use of Eugene O'Neill's play *The Iceman Cometh*, which provides both the title and the framework for *Ice-Candy-Man*, insists on the importance of fiction as a shaping force of history, and lends one more twist to Sidhwa's exploration of the nature of truth.

In her richly comic novel *An American Brat*, Sidhwa chronicles the departure of Feroza Ginwalla—a member of the Junglewalla clan first encountered in *The Crow Eaters*—from an increasingly fundamentalist Pakistan of the late 1970s and her subsequent exposure to American culture. More than simply the tale of a young girl coming of age, it shows Feroza coming to terms with her identity in the increasingly diasporic climate of the late twentieth century. Sidhwa convincingly handles the personal growth of her central character and the difficulties that arise when two cultures come into contact. This novel, with its focus on diaspora, is a logical extension of the interest in displacement and the clashes between communities which is present in all her previous three novels.