Tales of Oppression and Liberation in Feminine Fiction and Film Texts from the Indian Subcontinent: Case Study of the Works of Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Deepa Mehta, and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy

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This thesis is presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy of
The University of Western Australia

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

School of Humanities
English and Cultural Studies
2015
Abstract

This research interrogates the issues of subalternity and marginality in the Indian Subcontinent through in-depth analyses of the works of four post-colonial women artists: Arundhati Roy and Deepa Mehta; and Bapsi Sidhwa and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, each pair representing a filmmaker and a writer from India and Pakistan, respectively. Mehta and Chinoy are diasporic filmmakers, whereas Roy and Sidhwa are writers from minority communities. Roy is a Syrian Christian, and Sidhwa is a Parsi. The dissertation covers Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Sidhwa’s five novels, Mehta’s films of her famous *Elements* trilogy, and Chinoy’s two award-winning documentary films, *Saving Face*, and *Pakistan: The Children of Taliban*.

Although English fiction texts from India and Pakistan have been studied together, yet no elaborate academic investigation has, so far, been carried out to analyse representative film texts from the two neighbouring countries. This thesis, however, envisages enquiry into the socio-cultural mores of India and Pakistan through the study of symbolic fiction and film texts which have adopted complex post-colonial subject-categories and discursive positions. The texts analysed in this thesis adopt a transnational perspective which reflects on the corresponding socio-cultural and historiographic developments in the countries after the Partition in 1947. Seemingly very different in their medium and content, the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy uncover the complicity between Western Imperialism and the Third Worldist nationalism/neo-colonialism in their countries. The thesis argues that this particular perspective enables these women novelists and film-makers to devise new representational strategies or to improvise on certain creative paradigms adopted in popular fiction and film forms in India and Pakistan by the artists who primarily work within the nation space.
It further shows that Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy go beyond traditional chronotopes to critically examine the political imperatives of day-to-day religious, cultural and domestic activities which are meant to define specific communal identities in India and Pakistan. In that problematization of the general and the particular, these artists educate and enlighten their protagonists as to what oppresses them from within and from without. Their objective focus obtains from an acute consciousness of approaching and detailing through art a virtually inseparable geography, history and culture that in both India and Pakistan is tried to be (re)articulated through nationalist/religious/communal rhetoric. The knowledge of the intricacies of culture, and politics of their countries and of the region imparts to their works an emotional relevance. The works of these women artists share certain thematic and representational perspectives also in being temporally context-specific, as they explore the fundamentalist trends in their respective societies either working in or reverting to the vulnerable decades of the 1970s and 1980s, or revealing impact of the politics of these decades on current politico-cultural situations. It also leads us to understand how these women artists negotiate the difficult terms of their art to describe/cultivate subversive alternative ethos of/in their respective societies, and address globally heated subjects from their peculiar minority or diasporic perspectives.

The research draws on the strategy of the Subaltern Studies group of Indian scholars and historians who adopted Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of ‘subaltern classes’ during the 1980s for their interventionist enquiry in the South Asian historiography. In post-colonialism, studying marginality and subalternity is a complex enterprise because the theory imposes epistemic limitations to approach both these concepts. The issues of subaltern identity and agency have particularly been discussed as contentious in Bhabha’s and Spivak’s works and in responses to these works. For clarity in this regard, the thesis conscientiously retains critical focus on the
agency of Eurocentric colonialism, which to begin with was the theorists’
advice when they launched their literary undertaking to keep track of one’s
real concern as a post-colonial critic. Also, the theorists still aspiringly
maintain that the discourse has the potential to provide ‘the language and the
conceptual categories with which the subaltern voice speaks’.

The texts chosen for this thesis, therefore, represent the tangible
evidence that the post-colonial critics stress is crucial to foreground the fresh
claims about the abiding relevance and currency of the post-colonial discourse
in the current scenario. In its critique, this thesis relies primarily on the
deconstructionist strategies suggested by the exponents of the cultural
contexting approach in post-colonialism, as they advise to study the subaltern
as a ‘shifting signifier’ which ‘does not inhabit a continuous space at all’.
Interestingly, the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy already
dramatize the social and political implications of imperialist agendas for even
those ordinary beings as well as working classes who previously remained
unrecognised among the subaltern categories.

The thesis uses Roy’s and Sidhwa’s fiction not to read specifically the
pathos of alienation, which the discourse of minority artists generally evokes,
but to embrace the humanist critique of domination in their majoritarian
societies that both these women launch from a position of objective non-
identity. Sidhwa and Roy risk putting the image of their own communities at
stake by showing characters which represent the privileged and beleaguered
sensibility like that of the members of their majoritarian societies to urge
people that they may reflect on the societal ills and take their share of blame.
Likewise, the film texts of Mehta and Chinoy have been studied not from the
perspective of aesthetics but for the cultural and political functions that film as
a popular social practice performs to shape up the public imaginary. In view
of post-colonial film theory being an evolving paradigm, the observations of
certain critics such as Vijay Mishra and Fauzia Afzal Khan, who strategically adopting nationalistic as well as post-colonial positions offer crucial insights regarding Indian Hindi cinema and Pakistani cultural productions, fairly complement the theoretical underpinnings of the subaltern scholars to provide the requisite interpretive formations for this thesis.

Moreover, the gendered consciousness of the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy poses a direct challenge to the oppressive patriarchal attitudes, and phallocentric material and symbolic cultural structures in their respective societies. It is considered virtually impossible in post-colonial theory to artistically enunciate the agency of the gendered subject, especially of the female subaltern. Avoiding several pitfalls in this regard, Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy approach patriarchy as a manifestation of religion and culture. This again is an artistic venture into an interpellated liminality where, it is demonstrated, new-found collaboration between post-colonial and feminist scholarships offers complementing assumptions for a proper purview.

Settling the argument as to how well these women artists have performed their post-colonial and feminist responsibilities, therefore, necessitated a thorough enquiry into the corresponding politico-cultural developments in India and Pakistan that evolved contemporaneously to these artists’ works. Such in-depth analysis of individual texts unearths startling affinities in the material conditions of production and consumption of their works, and reveals subaltern and feminist awakenings in the region that have skipped critical attention so far.
For

Shaukat Ali
Shabbirana Bibi
Mohammad Bilal
Anaya Aqeel
Acknowledgements

In the name of The Almighty, the beneficent, the merciful.

I wish to express my heartiest gratitude to the University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, Pakistan and the University of Western Australia for providing funds (UAF-Pakistan-SIRF Scholarship, and PhD Completion Scholarship) for my PhD. My gratitude is also due to the School of Humanities, and the department of English and Cultural Studies for providing the ideal facilities and environment for conducting research. I shall always remain indebted to Prof. Siddique Kadambot, who extended much needed support throughout my stay in UWA.

I do believe that gratitude to the people, who break their bodies to nurture us, and faith in the persons, who remain our ideals through the strength of their characters and abilities, must be cherished like religion while we pursue our destinations. But this religion falters, too. There is surely something divine in the benevolence of particular beings that the ordinary humans cannot pay their favours back. This is what comes to mind when I recount the efforts of my parents, siblings, and of my teachers who made my life so different. The support and faith I got throughout from my sisters Shahida Parveen, Shamim Akhtar, Asma Noreen, and Tahira Jabeen turned my ordinary life into an extraordinary one. They are my strength. My parents gave to me all they had, of wisdom, of love, of care, of morality, and of resources. I could never ask for more, neither from them nor from God. I feel greatly honoured and extremely lucky that I am a student of Emeritus Professor Gareth Griffith (English and Cultural Studies). I cannot find words to praise him for his knowledge and personal attributes and suffice to say: ‘I love him like a son’. I shall always regard Assistant Professor Shalmalee Palekar (English and Cultural Studies), my second supervisor, for the
kindness and patience she showed and for her invaluable feedback on my work.

Assistant Professor Tony Hughes-D’Aeth, Professor Van Ikin, and Professor Kieran Dolin from English and Cultural Studies also supported me at various tough times during the course of my studies, and I humbly thank them for their help. Kieran Dolin’s sincerity as a mentor inspired me right at the moment when I could appreciate and capitalize on it the most. I must mention that I hate borders. I shall leave Australia with a very heavy heart because my amazing friends Danau Tanu, Cathryne Sanders, Richard Martin, and Leah Maund will be here. Tariq Moj, Danau and Cathryne, and my office mates Charmaine Fernandez, and Amy Hilhorst also deserve special thanks for proofreading my thesis. Rizwan Zeb has been very kind to offer his books. And I found a younger brother in Mian Umair Khalid.

It is not possible to enumerate the names of all those individuals who have contributed to my success-story. I feel blessed when I recall the names of my mentors, Sister Ruqqayah (who taught me to recite The Quran), Miss Mehmooda Butt (at Government Christian Primary School), Mr. Tahir Mehmood, Mr. Hafiz Rasheed, Mr. Nawaz Akhtar, Mr. Chaudhary Sultan, Mr. Chaudhary Haji Muhammad Yousaif, Mr. Obaid Ullah Gondal (at Government Taleem-ud-Din High School), Mr. Syed Shazada Muhammad Ali Shah, and my most beloved Mr. Khalid Farooq (my English tutor), who gave me knowledge not only of books but also of my natural talents. Some of them are dead and others in old age. They devoted their so precious time, and energy just to see that I may shine in life. I owe them for every word of wisdom that I know, and for every comfort that came my way.

Stay at Government College University, Lahore, association with Nazir Ahmad Music Society, the patronage by inspiring individuals like Mr. Naseem Asghar Ginai, Mr. Sahibzada Faisal Khursheed, Mr. Tariq Salman
Farani, Mr. Yousaf Bashir, Mr. Ashfaq Sarwar, Mr. Khwaja Imtiaz, Madam Nabeela Kayani, and Madam Surrayya Shafi Mir, and friendship with very learned friends from GCU mark the brightest patch in my life, for which my gratitude grows every single day. As the bigger dreams are still ahead, I would like to end stating my conviction that I will retain ‘the courage to know’ and will continue ‘to seek wisdom’.

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March 2015
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INTRODUCTION

This research is primarily intended to highlight the history of oppression, and its different mechanisms that plague the Indian sub-continent through in-depth analyses of the works of four post-colonial women artists. The artists are Arundhati Roy, and Deepa Mehta; and Bapsi Sidhwa and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, each pair representing a filmmaker and a writer from India and Pakistan, respectively. Mehta and Chinoy are diasporic filmmakers, whereas Roy and Sidhwa are writers from the minority communities. Roy is a Keralite Syrian Christian and Sidhwa is a Parsi. The texts selected for this research provide stories of the resistance of the victims of oppression and the pragmatic or blind leaps of faith suggested to these victims by the four artists. In that, these texts not only educate their protagonists to put an end to their oppression or to subvert or defy it but also enlighten the readers/viewers to identify the wrongs being perpetrated in the very vicinity. These works portray the complexity of the phenomena, the diverse schemes and motives operative behind this oppression, a complexity commensurate with the diversity of the Indian subcontinent. The oppressions they narrate vary in their root causes from religion to philosophy, history to sociology, from racial and gendered prejudice to the oppressive results of cultural limitations, and the effects of broad forces such as neo-colonialism and globalization. The profiles of the four selected artists are given below.

Arundhati Roy (born 24 November 1961) is an Indian English writer and a well-known activist for social and economic justice. She won the Booker Prize in 1997 for her novel *The God of Small Things* (London: Harpercollins, 1997) and also has to her credit the Lannan Cultural Freedom Prize 2002 and Sydney Peace Prize 2004. Her nonfiction work includes two early career screenplays for TV films *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones* (1989) and *Electric Moon* (1992), and several collections of essays that she published after her
novel. Roy’s screenplays mainly influenced by her background in architecture, and in their basic level engagements with the postcolonial themes are relatively different in subject matter, and can be deemed warming up for the mighty career she was soon to embark on, but her non-fiction mirrors her fiction.

Roy’s works challenge the readers to conscientiously engage with a range of social and cultural issues that address gender, race, culture, history, politics, religion, and globalization. *The God of Small Things* has an extended reach. Embedded in Indian history and its age-old religio-mythic heritage, its story also provides strong links between the ongoing legacies of colonialism in the communal power politics and the oppressive mechanisms of global capitalism in India. Roy’s overwhelming commitment to social causes has clearly played a role in turning her attention to nonfiction. However, she does not make any compromises on her characteristic literary style and lets her emotions predominate even when writing to support various ecological campaigns, suffering humanity or to express gratitude for those who strive for the cause of humanity. There is a strong link between Roy’s sensitivity in fiction and her aggression in her essays, which shows how her sharp instinct is honed by the afflictions of humans, be they from any religion, race, community or nationality.¹ Her criticism of regional and global policies, including India’s nuclearization,² big dam projects affecting millions,³ and suppression of insurgencies by the Kashmiri and Naxalite Maoist people,⁴ as

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³ ‘Dam_Age_a Documentary about Aundhati Roy & the Narmada Dam Project’, a TV movie by Aradhana Seth, 2002.
well as her censure of corporate capitalism, US foreign policy and endless war against cultural fundamentalism is marked with the same urge for defiance that characterises her fiction. Thus her nonfictional works carry the revolutionary zeal established by her anchored-to-anguish fiction. Roy gives in neither to the tough demands of social activism nor to the daunting challenge of keeping up the spirit in the face of overwhelming controversies that her pen piles up. Her 2014 introduction to a new edition of The Annihilation of Caste written in 1936 by B. R. Ambedkar has been apprehended as ‘perhaps the most famous modern-day attack on India’s caste system’. Unflinching towards the cause of humanity, she also harbours aims for fulfilling a ‘last-commitment’, a novel, and one can only anticipate at present how revealing of the hard-core socio-political ‘complications’ Roy’s this final endeavour might be.

Bapsi Sidhwa (born in 1938 in Karachi) is arguably Pakistan’s finest English fiction writer who has authored five novels. Her parents Peshotan and Tehmina Bhandara belonged to the Parsi community which she has described with such warmth and humour in her novels, The Crow Eaters (London, Jonathan Cape, 1980), Ice-Candy-Man (London, William Heinemann, 1988; reprinted as Cracking India Minneapolis, Minnesota; Milkweed Editions 1991) and An American Brat (Minneapolis, Minnesota, Milkweed Editions, 1993).


Soon after Sidhwa’s birth, her family moved to Lahore. The city’s scenery and culture is central to her four novels, the above-mentioned three and *The Bride* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1983). Her fifth 2006 novel *Water* is based upon Deepa Mehta’s 2005 film *Water*. Readings Lahore also published *Jungle Wala Sahib*, the Urdu translation of her novel *The Crow Eaters* by Mohammed Umar Memon, and *Their Language of Love*, a collection of Short Stories by Sidhwa in 2012 and 2013, respectively. Her next book *The Illustrated Beloved City: Writings on Lahore* will also be out for print in due course.

Sidhwa’s noteworthy awards and honours include Bunting Fellowship at Radcliffe/Harvard (1986), Visiting Scholar at the Rockefeller Foundation Center, Bellagio, Italy, (1991), Sitara-i-Imtiaz (1991, Pakistan’s highest honour in the arts), Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Writer’s Award (1994), and Premio Mondello for Foreign Authors for *Water* (2007). She was also inducted into the Zoroastrian Hall of Fame in 2000. Her work has special significance with reference to the truthful narration of her region’s history, and is informed by a strong sense of place and community. Sidhwa’s lens focuses on the marginalized position of different individuals and groups as well as the harshness and brutal ways of the customs and norms (political, social, ethnic or religious) they are pitted against. She is also responsible for enriching international awareness of the Parsi community and religion. Parsis in India have always sought to mix with other communities, maintaining their religious identity only as a private affair. Sidhwa’s novels, for the first time, have voiced their concerns and motives with ingenious ribaldry. In so doing, Sidhwa has highlighted that sticking to their much private disposition is the Parsis’ strategy of survival and a method of preserving their religion in a communal and global context. It may be worthwhile to mention briefly that by applying assumptions of the Zoroastrian religious discourse, this research

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explores very unique aspects of Sidhwa’s art of characterization and thematic handling that present an entirely different perspective of her oeuvre than what has been understood of it so far.

Deepa Mehta (born 1 January 1950 in Amritsar, Punjab) is a Genie Award winning and Academy Award nominated Indian-born Canadian film director and screenwriter. She is most known for her Elements trilogy, Fire (1996), 1947: Earth (1998), and Water (2005). The Elements trilogy deals with controversial issues of social reform on the Indian subcontinent. Mehta’s depiction of women’s plight in India triggered several public demonstrations and drew negative criticism about her films, especially Fire and Water. In their search for choices to survive, Mehta’s protagonists pose certain questions that threaten society’s sacred beliefs and cultural norms and reveal its guilty conscience. The Elements trilogy, from the perspective of diasporic identity, transnationality and the particular moment of globalization, reviews British colonial and Hindu nationalist ideologies, as well as religious myths about genders, and places them in the context of the shifting discourses of politics and modernism in India, which confoundedly confesses its aspirations for education and emancipation, amid fears of cultural annihilation.8

Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy (born in 1978) is a Pakistani-born Canadian journalist and documentary filmmaker. Chinoy became world-famous since her film Saving Face won the Academy Award in 2012. The documentary chronicles the struggles of the acid attack victims and of the actors for change as they put up a united front to eradicate the scourge of violence against women through institutional reform in society. Success at the Oscars not only reflected new-found interest in her earlier works, especially the Emmy

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Award-winning documentary *Pakistan: The Children of Taliban* (2010), but her contribution to the cause of the distressed is also being hailed with extended projects offered to her, like a six-part mini documentary series *Ho Yaqeen* (Self-belief) by media and corporate industry in Pakistan, and with support by such iconic figures as Madonna and Salma Hayek. Chinoy’s documentaries relate to the actual situations and the people represented in them. Chinoy retains inspiration from her own words of gratitude that she expressed at the Oscars for the ‘heroes of change working on the ground’ in Pakistan. Therefore, in her documentaries Chinoy not only highlights the sufferings of her brave protagonists who take a stand against their oppression but also acknowledges the selfless struggles of those motivated stalwarts who help these victims and make efforts to reform society; yet do not claim any fame.⁹

The scope of this research is limited to the study of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, Bapsi Sidhwa’s five novels, Deepa Mehta’s films of the *Elements* trilogy, and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy’s documentary films, *Pakistan: The Children of Taliban*, and *Saving Face*. The production of films *1947: Earth* and *Water* in Mehta’s *Elements* trilogy was also part of a collaborative work with Sidhwa. Mehta’s two other important films *Videsh/ Heaven on Earth* (2008), and *Midnight’s Children* (2012) also appear relevant given their thematic thrust, yet taking them up here would have been complicated. The focus of the larger analytical debate in this research is on the subterranean affinity between the marginality and subalternity of various subject categories from India and Pakistan, whereas *Videsh/ Heaven on Earth*, and *Midnight’s Children* engage rather with the overarching narratology of nation and nationalism, and Indian diaspora. Chinoy’s early career documentaries, i.e., *Terror’s Children* (2002), *Reinventing the Taliban* (2003), and *Pakistan’s Double Game* (2005) which also present a close coverage of the violent outcomes of the

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ongoing war within Pakistan and the neighbouring Afghanistan, and her documentaries under the ongoing series *Ho Yaqeen* which relate stories of the heroic struggles of ordinary people against day-to-day problems in Pakistan have not been covered. In fact, *Pakistan: Children of the Taliban*, and *Saving Face* have proven to be the best of her works so far, as these documentaries put Chinoy’s larger concerns, and her vision most effectively before her viewers.

Despite the heterogeneity of their origins, Roy, Mehta, Sidhwa and Chinoy share a comparable perspective as they are either from a minority community or analyse issues of subalternity and marginality from the viewpoint of the South Asian diasporic community. This distance imparts to their gaze the essential neutrality and objectivity. It also accounts for the universal overtones in the message intrinsic to their works, thus serving as an effective criterion, simultaneously, to comparatively analyse the cultural and historical transformations in India and Pakistan after the partition of territory by the British in 1947 as well as to study the interplay of global and local histories, and politics through translocal context.

It is, however, imperative to mention that this thesis uses Roy’s and Sidhwa’s fiction not to read specifically the pathos of alienation, which the discourse of minority artists generally evokes, but to embrace the humanist critique of domination in their majoritarian societies that these writers launch from a position of objective non-identity. Such visionary conception obtains from the fact that both Roy and Sidhwa in their fiction present an intimate enquiry into the ethos and experiences of the dominant culture through exploiting the elite connection which defines the majoritarian psychic make-

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10 So far Chinoy has premiered the first part of the *Ho Yaqeen* documentary series in Pakistan, and another part named *Humaira: The Dream Catcher* at the *Chime for Change* campaign press conference on behalf of Gucci to raise funds and global awareness for girl’s and women’s empowerment in March 2013. These documentaries highlight the endeavours of ordinary women like Sabina Khatri, and Humaira Bachal who laid the foundation of education in their own localities fighting many odds.

up of the characters from their respective communities, and thereby deliberate over the afflictions of ordinary humans at large. Likewise, the film texts of Chinoy and Mehta have been studied not from the perspective of aesthetics but, as the contemporary academic research in Cultural Studies suggests using them as ‘a group of texts’, to understand the cultural and political functions that film as a popular social practice performs to shape up the public imaginary.\textsuperscript{12}

The most important and interesting point in this regard is the way each artist approaches and records history. Roy’s reference to the historical roots of the incidents of oppression exhibits a spiral pattern. This is true of both her fiction and non-fiction works. She chooses some important moments of history from the lives of individuals, revisits them time and again, and each time develops the context through which a complete historical narration takes shape. Roy also builds a sense of historical pattern between the disregard for human values in the politico-religious acrimony of the past centuries and the continuing ruthless negation of humane concerns in the deceit of neo-colonial and global power systems of today. Sidhwa’s fiction on the other hand, records history event by singular event, the way she witnessed and experienced various historical developments as they existed in her own lifetime. She has interwoven tales of individuals with the wider tragedies that are rooted in the history of intolerance among different communities and their religio-cultural prejudices in the Indian subcontinent.

Deepa Mehta, contrary to both Roy and Sidhwa, reverses the historiography. She takes the predicaments of her protagonists in the present and links them back to the age-old religious and mythic traditions so that the link between history and the exploitation of individuals becomes clear. This is

also a way of unearthing history through the stories of common men and women much like the technique of the subaltern historians.

Chinoy’s spot-on journalistic-cum-artistic coverage of the historical present makes her work a perfect sequel to Mehta, Sidhwa and Roy’s artistic endeavour. Their varying literary strategies of historiography break the myths of historical objectivity, seeking to reveal the hidden personal face of history. The sequential nature of the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy is largely determined and justified by their personal, and so authentic, account of history. Dipesh Chakrabarty also advocates the effectiveness of such ‘a post-colonial history that rather than returning to atavistic, nativist histories, or rejecting modernism itself, should invent a narrative that ‘deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices’.13

The cultural make-up of the Indian sub-continent is complex and confusing. With divergent religious backgrounds, mythologies, societal traditions and historical affiliations, people have lived in a shared space but as segregated communities for centuries. Given these differences, people have always responded differently to various historical occurrences and indigenous and imported philosophies. Their lives have always been directed by strict codes to guard the distinctive identities of their communities. Attempts to maintain their identity led dominant communities, mainly the Hindus, the Muslims and the Sikhs, to divide the shared territory, wage wars and wreak carnage against one another. However, history has brought them to a point where they must learn to understand the feelings and sensitivities of one another if they are to survive. It is at this point that the role of creative artists such as Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Deepa Mehta, and Sharmeen

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Obaid Chinoy starts, as their unprejudiced observations may hopefully help dispel propaganda and biases in communal rhetoric and national histories.

Presenting history in retrospect and documenting the struggle of suffering men and women alike, Roy, Mehta, Sidhwa and Chinoy have tried to inform the collective consciousness of their people on the most urgent issues. Their stories of real flesh and blood have recognised gaps and silences that remain un-sayable or unsaid and ravage the lives of their protagonists by harbouring tragedies in the shared space of mixed cultural influences. These artists have expressed their disillusionment with conspiracies of orthodox ideologies, cultural, racial, and religious rigidities or repressive codes, myths about genders, power structures with their unilateral policies of all kinds and of corporate globalized culture, economy, and imperialist war.

They have shown how wrong religious exploitation of individuals is, especially through manipulated interpretation or practice of the sacral. It is important to fully understand the wisdom inherent in their works that might help reshape societal values and inter-religious and inter-communal relationships and incite people to revolt to rid themselves of every kind of oppressive power politics. Thus, this thesis has evaluated how the dialectic of repression and resistance in the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy shapes a visionary plurality that not only reassesses or redefines the subaltern agencies, giving to them authentic voices, but also seeks to define the possibility of new realities in the sub-continent. Thus to conclude that such works successfully fulfil the cause of post-colonial literature: by serving as an alternate history from the subaltern perspective; by helping people recognise their real problems, by promoting understanding and tolerance among communities, and by marking a peaceful transition from tradition to modernity. A thorough understanding of the efforts of creative artists along with faithful propagation of these efforts is equally crucial.
CASE FOR THE METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

Admittedly, it is a daunting task to conduct a case-specific inquiry into the socio-cultural mores of prominent religious communities from the South Asian subcontinent, that too, through bringing together a complex mix of fiction and film texts by creative artists from ideologically antagonistic states of India and Pakistan. The stated objective of the research is to unearth common perspectives on, and phenomena of oppression of the ordinary people in both the countries, irrespective that these oppressed people belong to any minority, ethnicity, race, socially downtrodden group, or suffer from collective cultural or individual violence due to their class, gender, or faith-based affiliations. These oppressed people are now commonly referred to as the subaltern(s) groups/subjects/individuals in epistemic terms, and this term will be adopted in this thesis. The ‘subaltern’ category was popularised during the 1970s by a group of Indian revisionist historians, the Subaltern Studies Collective, whose work is critically outlined below, and who appropriated the term from the political writings of Gramsci.\(^\text{14}\) The heterogenous category of the subalterns is distinctly different and oppositional to an equally diverse category of the elite which is made up of dominant groups, both foreign and indigenous/local.

The study of the plight of the subalterns is made difficult by several factors that range from their silencing in the elitist and nationalist versions of history in both India and Pakistan to the blurring of their agency through mutual imbrication of religion, culture and power. In fact, the exploitative strategy is designed through such a discreet appropriation of the paradigms

of imperialist discourse and action in nationalist histories, and neo-colonial practices, respectively, that not only are the elites able to perpetuate their control on the subalterns but the entire blame for the ills prevailing in societies of both India and Pakistan can also be summarily ascribed to the arbitrary use of violence by the Raj.

In this backdrop, the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy, though seemingly very different in their medium and content, offer very particular insights to lay bare the complicity between Western imperialism and the Third Worldist nationalisms/neo-colonialisms in their countries. These artists also highlight the political imperatives of day-to-day religious, cultural and domestic activities which are meant to define specific communal identities in India and Pakistan. In that problematization of the general and the particular, Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy educate and enlighten their subaltern subjects as to what oppresses them from within and from without. With diverse religious affiliations and varying diasporic outlooks, these artists have a strongly felt experience of the intricacies of culture, and politics of their countries and of the region. This knowledge and shared historical background of the countries of their belonging imparts to their work an emotional and contextual relevance which translates into their commonly aspired motive, i.e., of giving voice to the silences and struggles of the suppressed groups and individuals. The works of these women artists share certain thematic and representational perspectives also in being temporally context-specific, as they explore the fundamentalist trends in their respective societies either working in or reverting to the vulnerable decades of the 1970s and 1980s, or revealing impact of the politics of these decades on current politico-cultural situations.

Roy envisages a microcosmic representation of Indian society through the caste-ridden community life in Kerala in 1969 and extends debate to the 1990s and afterwards in *The God of Small Things*. Mehta and Sidhwa revive the
memory of the Partition, and the affinity between their artistic muse and focus is reflected and takes shape from contemporary conditions of the communal and majoritarian fervour in both India and Pakistan. This notion of their artistic affinity is further established by the fact that both Mehta and Sidhwa adapted each other’s versions of traditional stories of the region in their seemingly divergent art forms. Chinoy’s documentaries depict the 2000s, but both Saving Face and Pakistan: Children of the Taliban are essential sequels, obtaining substance of their debate from the politico-cultural situation and aftermath of the fundamentalist and majoritarian politics of the 1970s. Above all, it is the specific focus on the gendered subaltern, i.e., the predominantly feminist aspect of the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy, that provides strong justifications to study these artists together. Diverse and nuanced artistic perspectives of these artists highlight several undiscovered aspects of the oppression of women in the region.

It is in a relentless pursuit of similar and corresponding attributes and impacts of the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy that an interesting mix of print and media fiction, and viable strategies of bridging national boundaries come to the fore. Such an enquiry also reveals reciprocal significance of the context-specific literary texts and of postcolonial theory for each other. Post-colonial theory both derives and confers its ongoing interpretive relevance while being applied to study these texts. In that, postcolonial theory also seems to offer an elaborate paradigm and broad-base, in its complex and fulfilling encounter with Subaltern Studies and feminism/post-colonial feminism, to collectively view the subaltern and feminist concerns of the selected Indian and Pakistani artists that individually are, perhaps, very difficult to adequately address.

It seems a paradigmatic imperative, therefore, to cite this ongoing relevance of post-colonial theory here both in its cultural contexting approach
which relies on close reading of the ethnographic material, and in a more
politicised reading practice in the domain of the paradigm that seeks
expressions to define identity politics of the colonized subject, or else indicates
any activism shaping up on that account. Post-colonialism as a disciplinary
discourse calls into question the differentials of power, seeking to bring about
decolonization, or control on ‘representation’ in cultures and societies of ‘the
post-colonial state’ by examining and exposing ‘the processes and effects of,
and reactions to European colonialism’ as well as to neo-colonialism of the
present day. Post-colonial literary works and their reading seek to undo
canons and canonical thinking by demonstrating as to what extent these texts
in their narrative design and politics contradict ‘the underlying assumptions’
which reflect colonial attitudes, ideologies and processes. Post-colonial
reading practices also seek to revalue activist writing, especially the writing
based in non-British cultures.\textsuperscript{15} The paradigm of challenging power is shared
by the theory and creative cultural texts, and in that also is formulated and
strengthened the reciprocally beneficial relationship between post-colonialism
and post-colonial literariness.

The theoretical formations of post-colonialism as a subject introduced
novel practices of readership which entailed a whole-scale repositing of
normative attributes ascribed to literary texts with such subversive norms that
revolutionised ways to understand literariness.\textsuperscript{16} Nevertheless, it could be
possible, in the first place, only through a systematic analysis of the
aestheticism, literariness, and literary forms of cultural texts from the
previously colonised societies that post-colonialism evolved as a distinct
discipline. As such, enquiries into the specificities of certain cultural and
historical contexts from which literary texts originate help determine the

\textsuperscript{15} Aschcroft, Bill, Griffiths, Gareth and Tiffin, Helen (eds.), ‘Post-colonialism/Postcolonialism’, and ‘Post-colonial
\textsuperscript{16} Sorensen, E. Park, ‘Introduction’ in Postcolonial Studies and the Literary Theory, Interpretation and the Novel, England,
political imperatives and disciplinary idiom of post-colonial critique. This concern with the literary, and culturalist approach, being its epistemological lynchpin, do also nuance, foreground, and make the ongoing relevance of post-colonial theory felt, especially in the presence of other assertive disciplines, such as Globalization, American Studies, and International Relations which engage with certain peripheral concerns of post-colonialism, and provide alternative critiques of global power hierarchies and relations. And most precisely, it is post-colonialism’s central concern with the issues of race, ethnicity, class, caste, and community mostly through life-like characters which incarnate these divisions and ideas in literary texts, that makes its interventionist enquiry specifically objective compared to that of Globalization, American Studies, or IR, each of which obscures and neutralises the marginalized categories while critiquing power.

Regarding politicised and context-specific reading of the post-colonial texts, Homi K. Bhabha’s and Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak’s critical stances not only highlighted many crucial aspects of the theory but also contributed in terms of introducing significantly diverse methodological assumptions to enrich the discourse and its relevance. Both Bhabha and Spivak problematize the idea of essentialism in their search for the individual, cultural, and national identity of the colonised subjects. Bhabha bases his stand on the ‘liminal’, i.e., ‘the overlap and displacement of domains of difference’, and of ‘historicism’, where, instead of ‘pure cultures interacting’, emerges the ambivalence of the colonized (read compliant) subjects, culture and nation, which provides narrative strategies to subvert the colonial discourse.

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18 Chordhry, Geeta, and Nair, Sheela, ‘Introduction - Power in a Postcolonial World: Race, Gender, and Class in International Relations’ in Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading, Race, Gender, and Class, London and New York: Routledge, 2002 at P.1.
Spivak’s approach on the matter, influenced by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, is very deconstructive, especially when she critiques representation of the colonized subject by citing “political” examples from the histories of subaltern agency and resistance in the Third World. Spivak proposes even to take a step further from Derrida’s ‘deconstructive model of thinking beyond the framework of Western philosophy’ in seeking to ‘dismantle’ the very tradition of Western thought that had provided the justification of European colonialism. In that, Spivak questions the limits and ability of not just the colonial but also of the post-colonial discourses to interact with ‘disparate cultures’. Having relevance as being the narratives of representation, Bhabha’s and Spivak’s works in certain convergences and divergences also outline some distinctive aspects of their respective contributions to post-colonial theory.

Bhabha and Spivak have been severely attacked by those post-colonial exponents who subscribe to the Marxist identity politics approach. For Bhabha the political agency of identity is a given of the ‘hybridization process’, and ‘ambivalence’ which are revealed in the ‘antagonist space’ of encounter between the colonialist and native traditions, and which in turn enable ‘a form of subversion for turning ‘the discursive conditions of dominance into grounds for intervention’. He also asserts that ‘the postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive “liberal” sense of cultural community’. Aijaz Ahmad objects to Bhabha’s postcolonial perspective as ‘irresponsible’ and ‘rather more limited than Bhabha will allow’, also because Bhabha does not reject the

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totalization of colonial discourse. Likewise, Spivak maintains that ‘there can be no return to a pure nativism “after the planned epistemic violence of the imperialist project”’. However, where Bhabha rejects the symmetrical antagonisms of colonial relationships, Spivak claims to be critical of them, especially to ‘disclose the complicity of the two poles of that opposition, as it constitutes the disciplinary enclave of the critique of imperialism’. Benita Parry takes issue with both Bhabha’s and Spivak’s divergent deconstructive approaches which are admittedly so nuanced that ‘the charge of political quietism cannot be levelled against their work’, but which leave one wondering as to what is their actual politics. Bhabha’s and Spivak’s analyses do not ‘allow for the possibility of of a subject-position that is radically heterogeneous with the colonial episteme’ because the colonized cannot respond to their subjugation other than in terms already defined by their masters. The Marxist post-colonials like Ahmad and Parry are, therefore, more interested in the real world.  

Despite such objections, the fact remains that Spivak’s and Bhabha’s works have devised very valid strategies for deciphering textual politics of postcolonial texts, thus also expanding horizons of/for the discipline. However, there has been a growing concern among some scholars that instead of focusing on the ‘literature proper’, post-colonial literary critics, lately, have been involved in incessantly assuming self-congratulating gestures, using literary texts as a device only to legitimize the ‘dogmatic, and prescriptive

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concepts' of the theory, like syncretism, hybridity, homogeneity, in-betweenness, etc. The resultant effect is that theory is undermining the literary, and the discursive approaches of the field have become homogenised. The remedy being suggested, therefore, is return to the literary, but with such a balanced approach that both the theory and the literary may enrich each other.\[22\]

Part of the problem is being ascribed to a sense of melancholia among the post-colonial writers and thinkers who want to protect their disciplinary affiliation with whatever has remained of an endangered subject as a result of the onslaught from critics.\[23\] Yet, the imperatives of legitimizing theory have also been urgent and important. It is because not only have objections to the field been raised from different disciplinary perspectives but academic locale of the subject, geo-political spectrum of its exponents and critics, and its crucial discursive domains and appropriations have also been challenged very forcefully.

For example, Anthony Appiah calls postcolonial writers and thinkers ‘a comprador intelligentsia’ which is trained in Western ways to deal in ‘cultural commodities of world capitalism’.\[24\] R. Radhakrishnan considers that postcolonialism with its ‘double consciousness’, i.e., as ‘a historiography in its own terms’ and as a ‘critical perspective on metropolitan goings-on’, encroaches upon the domain and agenda of the Third World – itself an


interpellated ideology coerced by colonialism and modernity because of its concern with the past and the aftermath of colonialism.25

Arif Dirlik, responding predominantly to the US adoption of postcolonial analysis, posits that post-colonialism, like postmodernism, is also an intellectual manifestation of the poststructuralist revolt against the very real inhibitions imposed by Eurocentric modernity, and by ‘globalized capitalism’ which has crucially disorganised the earlier comprehended binarisms of colonizer/colonized, first/third world, or the West and the rest.26 Walter Mignolo refers to post-colonialism’s appropriation in its radical mould of ‘the subaltern forms of rationality’ which were born naturally out of the conditions in the final stage of globalization in the 1970s, and were used to theorize subalterity in terms of racial/ethnic, and class issues. Mignolo blames that in post-colonialism subalterity has been theorised by such critics who are ‘implicated in the very forms of subalterity’ which need be deconstructed. The question being raised by Mingolo pertains to the geopolitics of knowledge, specifically with reference to the race and class affiliations of the field’s Western and those Third World thinkers who have now established themselves in the First World academia.27

Again, Neil Larson opines that post-colonial theorists from the bourgeoisie of erstwhile colonised countries mostly take to the poststructuralist stance celebrated in Western academia which valorises revolutionary potential of the discursive power over material or historical reality.28 Ella Shohat reads the absence of any reference to post-colonialism in the academic responses to Gulf War, which centred largely on imperialism,
neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism, as a sign of some inherent inadequacy in the theory. She contends that the contours of post-colonialism’s political cultural analyses that took shape in the 1980s and the epistemological currency that the subject gained were rather a given of the turmoil in the Third World, and of the eclipse of the old interpretive paradigm of its namesake. Thus, Shohat claims that post-colonialism is a singularised ahistorical abstraction, and the element of temporality inherent in the prefix post (itself proclaiming the end of colonialism) has also hindered the theory to geo-politically link critique of the situation in Gulf to its universalist claim of addressing anti-colonial, anti-neo-colonial struggles and discourses.  

Perhaps, the founding thinkers of post-colonialism had timely anticipated and warned that the term may not be loosely deployed so as to avoid interpretive pitfalls, such as the one Shohat is entrapped in. In fact, ‘the term “post-colonial” is resonant with all the ambiguity and complexity of the many different cultural experiences it implicates’, and Shohat’s objections lose emphasis, as she does not posit strong arguments to relate the neo-colonialisms in the Gulf with the neo-colonialisms the actual theory situates within the ‘“historical fact” of European colonialism’.  

In fact, objections related to territorial imperialism sometimes are so exasperating that a deft theorist like Gayatri Spivak also finds herself confounded sometimes to declare as uncritically as Shohat does:

Neo-colonialism is not simply the continuation of colonialism; it is a different thing. That is what I call ‘postcoloniality’ and I find the word postcolonialism just totally bogus.

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Collectively reviewed, in their very nature all the above-given objections and reservations regarding post-colonialism (more importantly the treatises in which these appear) are designed primarily to denigrate either the theory or the theorists, and these objections can as smartly be dismissed using the theory itself as vehemently have these been expressed. Making a case-in-point, Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams comprehensively argue:

We do not think that post-colonialism as an historical period is best understood as a phase of imperialism, but that it is not simply or everywhere reducible to these categories. This means that post-colonialism has an inescapable global dimension, but it does not mean that post-colonial theories are inevitably totalizing in an overweening effort to master and explain everything (totalizing in its ‘bad’ sense). Nevertheless, part of being involved in such periods and processes means that some critics and theorists do want to try to understand or explain as much of what is going on as possible, but in a non-reductive way. 32

Shohat’s line of thinking, though deviated from the epistemological context of post-colonialism, seems to carry certain preponderance after a decade to have alluded towards the grey area that calls forth resharpening the positionality of post-colonialism. In fact, post-colonial theory (the word post-colonial itself) preserves the colonial as a fixed point of reference when it should be doing away with it, and in that perhaps, refuses to benefit from its own self-generative potential that it obtains from theorizing the dominant and the hegemonic in terms of the ‘contingent occurrences’ of those historical conditions and processes of cultural exchange and production that shape up as a result of the imperial actions. Peter Childs and R. J. Patrick Williams,

again argue as to how well this epistemic stance of the writers of *The Empire Writes Back* might link up to what Stephen Slemon articulates thus:

Definitions of the post-colonial of course vary widely, but for me the concept proves most useful not when it is used synonymously with a post-independence historical period in once colonised nations, but rather when it locates a specifically anti- or post-colonial discursive purchase in culture, one which begins in the moment that colonial power inscribes itself onto the body and space of its others and which continues as an often occulted tradition into the modern theatre of neo-colonialist international relations.33

This discursive potential of the theory can, in fact, be post-colonialism’s ultimate claim for relevance today. No wonder, therefore that even a staunch critic like Walter Mignolo has to admit that the abiding value of post-colonial theory ‘resides in its capacity for epistemological as well as social and cultural transformation’. Besides, Mignolo also testifies that introducing gender and feminism into colonial cultural studies confirms the epistemological dynamism. Specifically now when the aftermath of 9/11, the spillover of the ongoing global war against terrorism, and the material and cultural effects of America’s commercial and military imperialisms have started revealing themselves alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) across continents, and regions. Discussions about the legitimacy of reflecting upon the hegemonic role of US culture through post-colonial lens have also been around because the discourses around civilizational differences are once again alluding towards recognising in the patterns of the new-imperialism of

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today a reinstatement of the nineteenth century-type colonialism by Britain and France.\textsuperscript{34}

As it is being stressed, lately, that ‘the post-colonial theory has developed an implicit oppositional critique to Eurocentricism’, post-colonial critics have also started deftly circumventing the arguments to shift focus from the ‘Eurocentric’ historical facts of colonialism to the more generalised but imminent issues of local concern, most importantly of the ‘epistemic violence of neo-colonialist and neo-nationalist modes of history’. The contemporary discourse of violence have not only reinvigorated investigations into the transformation of culture and religion into militancy but also into the intricacies of the secular which is proving itself as just another facet of the ‘vertiginous’ imperial acts.\textsuperscript{35}

In such expanding of the notion of imperialism post-colonial theory set itself a new goal of revealing the complicity between European imperialism and Third World neocolonialisms/nationalisms. The agenda here is obvious and itself being offered by conditions prevailing in the Third World countries because hopes of the people for participation in their own governance, and development remained unfulfilled even more than half a century after independence from the Raj. Their independent states, having all the outward trappings of international sovereignty, got more and more dependent and involved with time both economically and politically on the Western-dominanted world system than these countries ever had been under the colonial rule. The neo-colonial elite perpetuated their power by reproducing many oppressive structures of the foreign colonizer. This situation provides post-colonial theory with chances of applying its epistemic

\textsuperscript{34} Schueller, Mallini Johar, ‘Postcolonial American Studies’, \textit{American Literary History}, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 2004), pp. 162-175.

tools to probe the imperatives for complicity between imperialism and neo-colonialisms. Simultaneously, the theory lays bare the methods and legacy of neo-colonialism, which in effect are much more varied and subtle, as the perpetuating operation here is not limited to the economic realm only but is set to seek hegemony over other public domains, i.e., politics, religion, ideology, culture, and (nationalist) history.

Again, the objections of Marxists, like Parry and Ahmad, are very significant, as they question the validity of the theory either in its essence or in its method to expound the phenomena of neo-colonisation(s). The issue here is to theorise the local for its best representation. Parry holds that post-colonial theory/theorists cannot altogether ignore ‘anti-colonial and nationalist writings (which) were central in the struggles against colonial rule for a long time before postcolonialism ever appeared in Western universities’. Doing that, the theory becomes gradually indifferent ‘to the specific qualities of struggle in disparate times and places’. Ahmad, ‘who is always resistant to the empire-nationalism binary formulated by poscolonial critics’, wants to interrogate and understand literary questions through history of materialities, and insists upon conceiving the global unity in terms of the universality of class division. He argues ‘that only Marxism brings to the fore and hybridizes social formations in areas designated by the West as a singular heterogeneous Third World’. For Ahmad ‘problematic issues are not so much of class, nation and states as much as ways of talking about class, nation and states’.36

In the face of such objections by Marxists, the strategic connection forged between post-colonialism and the Subaltern Studies project of the Indian revisionist historians presents itself as the best argument to defend the theory which shows capability for searching out avenues to explain

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properties of a complex whole (Third World classes/nations/nationalisms) by exploring more exact subject locations, i.e., the sites of identity and struggle. But it needs to be understood at length as to how the theory plays the trick, as Subaltern Studies also adapts the theory’s subversive spirit, and make itself available, in turn, to enrich post-colonial discourse.

Subaltern Studies Collective is a group of South Asian scholars and historians who emerged in the 1980s, and were interested in post-colonial and post-imperialist societies, and ‘aimed to promote a systematic discussion of subaltern themes in South Asian Studies’.37 The group was influenced by the scholarship of Eric Thomas Stokes38 and Ranajit Guha.39 It attempted to formulate a new narrative of the history of India and South Asia, where official and elitist accounts have no place for the struggles of the poor and the outcasts. To make its take stronger on the South Asian context, the Subaltern Studies project displaces Europe as the centre of history. The group, though, adopted its name from the term coined by Antonio Gramsci in his ‘Notes on Italian history’, and darws upon Gramsci’s writings ‘for an understanding of the concept of hegemony, the role of intellectuals in civil society, and the theme of reactionary and fascist modes of thought and power’, it yet does not align itself with Marxist ideology.40

Guha in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* set a
clear agenda for the Subaltern Studies group and defined the subaltern as ‘the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite’. The elite is made up of dominant foreign groups (the British colonial officers, missionaries, and industrialists), dominant indigenous groups operating at all India level, and dominant indigenous groups working at regional and local levels. Later, the collective extended the description of the subaltern to include all oppressed groups such as peasantry, millworkers, women, and ‘tribal’ people. Thus, subaltern history can also be considered as ‘history from below’.

The real interest of the subaltern historians is to explore the indigenous voices which do not constitute part of the native elite, and which have been silenced by elitist historiography. The subaltern does not have any control on their representation, and the accounts of resistance detailed in elitist historiographies overlook or efface the variety of strategies and modes of resistance that define agency of the subaltern in their day-to-day grapple with power. The striking difference of the Subaltern Studies project from Marxist post-colonial approach, as Gyan Parakash proclaims also, is its shifting emphasis from the fixed universalist construct of the ‘class’ to that of ‘the subaltern’. This shift of emphasis/focus helps the subaltern historians envisage subaltern consciousness through the effects of hegemonic relationships which reveal themselves in linguistic, economic, social and cultural realms.

So, the subaltern actually becomes a ‘shifting signifier’. Since their project seeks to probe subalternity in local context(s), the subaltern historians (like Guha does) replace the autonomous subject of ‘the nation’ with the ‘subaltern’. But the subalternist scholars repudiate any tendency to take the subaltern as a ‘unitary consciousness’, as Marxists want to suggest. Spivak also claims that the idea of the subaltern ‘does not inhabit a continuous space
at all’. She sees subalternity as a ‘position without identity’, i.e., something like a strict understanding of a class, and suggests that ‘subalternity to an extent is that kind of a thing, no one can say I am a subaltern’. This helps to understand the notion that the subaltern in one context can be member of an elite group in another. In this aspect, subalternity can be studied to differentiate between the both the pre and post-colonial forms of oppressions, especially as it explains the traditional subaltern-elite formations of societies as well as the phenomena of colonial patronage.  

Further, in the postcolonial and neo-colonial contexts, this nuanced theorization of the subaltern has led the historians to unearth even those aspects of subaltern oppression, where the subalterns themselves perpetrate and are affected by violence, too. A case-in-point is Urvashi Bhutalia and Ritu Menon’s revisionist history of Partition violence that analyses issues of rape, mutilation, kidnapping, and exploitation of women during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Roy, Sidhwa and Mehta also incorporate nuanced representations of the subalterns in their fiction and film texts. Their works seem to engage, in particular, with the above-mentioned idea of the subaltern as a ‘shifting signifier’.

A thorough understanding of the category of the subaltern has been possible, as Bishnupriya Ghosh summarizes, because the subaltern group ‘looked inwardly self-reflexively at the process of knowledge production both by the postcolonial metropolitan elites and by colonizers, coupled with concerted attempts to situate the heterogenous modernities in different postcolonial contexts.’ Therefore, the critical insights offered by the

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subalternists ‘become implicit critiques of political structures and movements, as well as of existent historical accounts seeking to document all forms of oppression, violence and exploitation’. The Subaltern Studies project does not (re)introduce the subaltern as a ‘sovereign subject’, envisages power not in its entirety but in constellations, and creates a critical space in which diverse and contesting discourses, that are free from prejudice found in colonial knowledge and paradigms, can experiment to present a balanced theorization of the subaltern.43

Despite several achievements the Subaltern Studies project has been criticised. Usually, it is alleged that Subaltern Studies is contaminated by post-modernism; that it is incapable of writing the history of great men because it condemns us only to write about various rebellions or subaltern groups; and that it presents no plan to write history of the nationalist movement as a whole. About the geopolitics of the Subaltern project, and about the role of Western and Third World thinker in First World academia, it is also objected (as Walter Mignolo also claims) that the post-colonial thinkers, in order to painstakingly theorise the historical categories of the subaltern in the perspective of the grand narratives of the West, put local histories in a position of subalternity to the global mechanisms. Perhaps more relevant to the concern expressed by Mignolo is the question of feminist historiography because critics remain particularly sceptical about the place of feminism within subaltern history.44

The most challenging critique of the project came from Spivak through her seminal essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Out of Spivak’s several objections to Subaltern Studies, one most particularly mentionable (for the purposes of this thesis) is her putting up the case for an unproblematically

constituted subaltern identity which has ‘a clearly identifiable voice as such’ because the concerns of the subaltern always have to be articulated through an already available discourse. Subaltern historians’ stress on the subaltern as a group of people (no matter there might be a range of such groups), who are different from the elite, is also a largely unidentifiable category whose very notion entails dissolving of unities into complex heterogeneities which undermine the subaltern’s search for identity. The gendered subaltern, especially Indian woman is ‘more deeply in shadow’ because she is represented as an independent subject neither in colonial historiography nor in her ‘ideological construction’. The crux of Spivak’s critique is that the subaltern cannot speak because there is virtually no category which is capable of the speech act which it can perform in its own language. The post-colonial theorists (Bill Ashcroft et al) do offer that ‘clearly, the existence of post-colonial discourse itself is an example of such such speaking’, but the objection stays.45 Despite certain reservations, it must be acknowledged that Subaltern Studies have considerably influenced (and been influenced by) post-colonial discourse. Without Subaltern Studies, perhaps, it could not be possible for post-colonial scholars to capture and engage with the immense cultural diversity of South Asia. However, it needs to be kept in mind that post-colonialism, essentially, is a literary enterprise, whereas Subaltern Studies is an historical one, and the theory must retain its focus on the literary.

Apart from objections to Subaltern Studies, in essence, the project remains a history of the history, so post-colonial literary texts are the most reliable and viable means to properly understand the peculiar social and political experiences of the subalterns in their local contexts. The creative texts also help trace converging experiences of the subalterns in different settings and how these are leading to formulations of the new strategies of resistance

to imperial acts. Simultaneously, the need of setting aside dogmatic and prescriptive ways to read these texts is also stressed as an imperative. In this regard Bill Ashcroft maintains that the role of the reader’s ‘reconstructive’ experience and ‘gifted creative insight’ are very crucial, and that only an ongoing process of (re)interpretation by readers, especially the insiders, can lead to novel discursive breakthroughs. This would help undermine the notions of melancholia being ascribed to the theorists because their contribution has been crucial if they insist on maintaining a genuinely critical and radical stance which is the very epistemological identity of post-colonial discourse. Ranjana Khanna also suggests that such a radical stance borne out of the melocholic impulse of post-colonial discourse also offers the possibilities of critical and political engagement, both in regards to writing and reading of creative texts. Therefore, Byrne concludes that the acts of memorialization of the traumatic histories of colonialism, and tracing the predicaments of the subalterns under the nationalist and neo-colonial regimes of the present day, i.e., ‘moving restlessly between past and present, should be understood not as self-defeating but as always orientated towards the future, to an imagined and hoped for freedom’.

Since literary texts do not ‘necessarily correspond to the modernist ethos’, therefore objections by post-colonial critics that the theory promotes certain ‘socio-political dogmas’ can also be reviewed by seeing how the reality of life that literary texts make available corresponds to the paradigms of interpretation that the theory provides. Admittedly, ‘realism’ as a literary form was largely ‘misread’ and ‘caricatured’ but the theorists have been aware of this pitfall and concerns have been expressed to deal with this issue

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by promoting those texts which depict genuine life.\textsuperscript{49} In the current state of global affairs, the recourse to the literary is imperative more than ever to critically review and re-examine the notions about the other cultures, especially on the part of the educated people from both the Western and the postcolonial societies, if they want to play their role to normalize the relationship between the West and the rest of the world.

Richard King advises the academic/reader to play his/her role with a strong ‘commitment to self-reflexivity’, being fully cognizant ‘of the way in which one’s own prejudices impinge upon the representation of that which one is examining’. For that, one must also adopt a ‘firmly anti-essentialist stance’, and be willing to think beyond traditional paradigmatic and cultural boundaries, especially of the nationalistic modes of analysis so as to dispel ‘the cultural parochialism that such approaches encourage’.\textsuperscript{50} Spivak also offers the same strategy to the subalterns/oppressed, and to the readers that they muster up courage (no matter even) to doggedly refuse to accept an essentialist subjectivity which is framed by totalizing discourses and institutional practices, and by limited history so as to take that ‘impossible step’, i.e., ‘to think beyond the epistemic violence of colonialism’. This is the only way that post-colonial scholarship can keep exploring ‘the creative space between a utopian idealism and the pragmatic requirements of politics at the local level’ as King demands, and can work to materialize what Spivak claims should be its grand agenda for putting an end to the subaltern exploitation:

If we engage ourselves not only in the end of exploitation of our own community, but for the distant and impossible but necessary horizon of the end of exploitation, then we will not be confined within fantasmic and divisive cultural


\textsuperscript{50} Refer to King, Richard, ‘Beyond Orientalism? Religion and Comparativism in a Postcolonial Era’, op. cit.
boundaries.⁵¹

In the process of deciphering the texts and their strategies as a context specific practice, King claims, that attention must also be paid ‘not only to what is said and by whom (the social location of the speaker) but also where such speech goes and how it is processed’.⁵² The question of audiences is particularly relevant with regards to interpreting works by diasporic artists. It all transpired as a coincidence that there continued a steady flow of migrations to Europe, Canada and America during post-colonial period, resulting in a significant category of diasporic community of artists whose works gained reach to foreign audiences and critical circles, and led to theorizations regarding the diasporic art. Post-colonial discourse has been able to cash in on the diasporic theorizations, again to establish its political significance and growing relevance.⁵³

Further in regards to the question of audience/critic (both local and foreign), the significance of film (including romanticized/imaginative versions like Bollywood films, realist presentations like those of Satyajit Ray or Deepa Mehta, and the documentary category in which Chinoy moulds her art), and other media, especially Television, has specifically increased. Local or diasporic work in film and other media, especially if it is produced in English, has great potential for subversion because such work can cross national boundaries far more easily than literature. Besides, this work is also discursively categorized as ‘Third Cinema’ or ‘indigenous media industries’ in discussion by First Nation peoples. The examples of the state-sponsored Bollywood industry and Doordarshan in India, and of Pakistan Television prove to be a case-in-point, as these film and media industries have been varingly employed to promote state versions of nationalism, and realism, or to

integrate the region’s culture into one nation. Therefore, against-the-grain reading of ‘Third Cinema’ or ‘indigenous media industries’, comparing simultaneously how their politics is subverted by visionary works by artists such as Mehta and Chinoy is most pertinent to the redefined and wider aims and objectives of post-colonial theory today.54

In fact, texts in English by women from post-colonial societies present the best case for a literary and critical intervention, as they have the potential to reflect upon validity of the discursive political modes of post-colonial theory. Texts in English by women may or may not directly deal with politics of the empire, yet these texts address a social archive with a personal outlook to history, and thus highlight the issues which automatically link with globally heated debates. Most of the women artists from post-colonial world deal with the issues of religious fundamentalism, nationalism, and development in their societies with a deep understanding of how the subaltern subjectivity shapes up out of major changes in the larger cultural scenario. The women artists scrutinize the heterogeneities of power structures not only to point out the discriminative and coercive measures against their own gender, but they also empathise the oppressions meted out to the other subaltern subjects and groups, such as the racial and cultural minorities, children, working classes, the lower castes, etc. Mrinalini Sinha, articulating her view on the matter, points out that ‘since the experience of gender itself is deeply implicated in other categories such as class, caste, race, nation, and sexuality, an exclusive focus on gender can never be adequate for a feminist historiography’.55

Most importantly texts in English by women negotiate terms of existence for the subaltern subjects, engaging with specific notions of

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54 Harper, Graeme, ‘Film and Other Media’ in Ibid, pp. 179-185.
secularism, democracy, liberalism, and modernity in their peculiar societal set-ups. The different contexts of women’s lives, their subjectivities, sexualities and rights are the particular discursive domains of colonial and neo-colonial discourses as well. Therefore, texts in English by women give the best insights into relics of the imperialist politics as it pervades the particular versions of nationalism and communalism, and in the particular forms of cultural and religious patriarchal tendencies in the post-colonial societies. Also, women have been the worst hit victims of the American war against terrorism, if considering their loss only in terms of how disturbingly they have been deprived of their right to education in tribal societies of Afghanistan or in war-hit areas of Pakistan that they grapple directly with death in case they choose to continue studies. The texts which deal with the social dimensions of a sudden spate of violence often address the most recent concerns of the post-colonial theory. In this regard, not just the literary texts but the films and documentary texts have assumed far greater importance than before. The film and documentary texts, specifically those which achieve global significance by using English language as a medium for communicating their message are easily accessible and more effective in their metaphorical import to impress upon the need of a global campaign for eradicating oppression.

The guidelines for making the task of getting the message across cultures easily have been set out through a very concerted effort by the post-colonial critics under the rubric of post-colonial feminism. Post-colonial feminism has proved quite an epistemic break for feminism because it critically interrogates the White middle class feminism located in the First World. As an interventionist project, the contribution of the feminist theory to help revise certain assumptions of the post-colonial theory has already been duly acknowledged by the theorists. In fact, it maintains a mutually corrective relationship with post-colonial theory because both these disciplines, apparently having overlapping rubrics, have been engaged in a constant
endeavour to redefine their respective domains. Post-colonial feminism questions the detailing of gender roles and citizenship in new liberated politics offered by post-colonial theory in its critical investigation within disputed domains of the nation, nation-state, and nationalist historiography. Above all, post-colonial feminism has helped post-colonial theory redefine its terms of reference with Subaltern Studies project which fails to adequately answer the specific questions regarding voice, agency, and resistance of the gendered subaltern or more generally of feminist historiography within its fold. However, it must also be noted that in view of any malformation taking place due to the troubled relationship between post-colonial feminism and Subaltern Studies historiography, post-colonial theory itself serves as the link and moral platform to dissuade any tensions arising therein. This, again, is a statement on the ongoing relevance of post-colonial theory.

Post-colonial feminists are discovering ‘hitherto uncharted arenas of struggles’ by handling the questions of voice, agency, and resistance of the gendered subaltern quite elaboratively and in a much satisfying manner. For instance to detail ‘identity formation’ of female subjectivity (from both creative and critical perspectives) by tackling the ‘unquestioned ideology of imperialist axiomatics’, and the ‘debates between essentialism or constructivism’, Mohanty urges readers to observe certain principles. Mohanty advises them to consider ‘the strategic location or situation of the category women vis-à-vis the context of analysis; ... [not to make] uncritical use of particular methodologies in providing proof of universality and cross-cultural validity; ... [and ascertain that] male violence must be interpreted and theorized within specific societies, both in order to understand it better, as well as in order to effectively organize to change it’.

Mohanty’s approach also reveals that focus on the categories of sex, ethnicity, race, education, class, religion, community, law and citizenship helps avoid pitfalls of falling under the trap of universalizing tendencies of Western feminism, which in comparative analysis tends to categorise oppressed women as ‘Third World Women’ and their life in terms of ‘Third World Difference’; of conceiving as ‘naturally related to being feminist’ of such works which happen to be produced by female artists; and above all of structuring ‘the world in Manichean terms’, i.e., by considering men as an already constructed dominant group which institutes patriarchy through ‘religious, legal, economic and legal systems’, and considering women as an oppressed group which, by virtue, is ‘collapsed into suppressed feminine’ and is perennially on the receiving end. In fact, two very basic objections, one of the post-colonial feminism on Western feminism and the other on post-colonial feminism itself, are being hinted at here. Spivak articulates the former as Western feminists’ taking of ‘The Third World Woman’ as a ‘hallowed signifier’ which is merely ‘an object of knowledge’ for them, and Mohanty elaborates the latter as postcolonial feminists’ search for ‘sisterhood’ on the basis of gender.

Mohanty maintains that this search for ‘sisterhood’ from a global perspective, in assuming an international gender solidarity or humanist cosmopolitanism’, can impose the First World assumptions on ‘The Third World Women’, and in the regional context, can result in artists’ endeavouring to ‘cross national, racial, and ethnic boundaries’ by producing and reproducing ‘difference in particular ways’. In turn this can result in such ‘historicising and locating feminist agency’ which can be divisive (as Bulbeck claims) by rejecting ‘Western feminism to ask new questions about ourselves’, and thus be detrimental to the cause of a united front that women against their oppression can present worldwide. Mohanty, therefore, is of the view to observe caution by focussing on ‘an analysis of the status of experience and
difference’, and quotes de Lauretis to stress her point:

Feminism defines itself as a political instance, not merely a sexual politics but a politics of everyday life, which later … enters the public sphere of expression and creative practice, displacing aesthetic hierarchies, and generic categories, and … thus establishes the semiotic ground for a different production of reference and meaning.\(^{58}\)

So, the paradox remains because a contentious space is left in between as to how to make it viable to link the particular with the global. Again, Mohanty provides on the matter:

To talk about feminist praxis in global contexts … grounding analyses in particular, local feminist praxis is necessary, but we also need to understand the local in relation to the larger, cross-national processes. This would require a corresponding shift in the conception of political organizing and mobilization across borders.\(^{59}\)

This entails that for Mohanty taking up Third World feminist politics as an analytic category ‘allows for coalition alliances between progressive theorists and activism across the world’. That is why, despite reservations, Mohanty ‘insists on post-colonialial feminisms (in the plural)’ to devise and present strategies of reading ‘both politically progressive (e.g., white feminist,

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postcolonial or Third World nationalist), and regressive (e.g., racist, imperial, or sexist) discourses against the grain, and constructing new understandings, histories and agendas’. Mohanty’s stress to concretize the feminist geopolitical sites was also taken to be one of the most cogent and defining postulate of post-colonial feminism.60

Mohanty’s post-colonial feminist stance sounds like Spivak’s advice on the ‘strategic’ use of essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest’ which can be explored best through the reading of the Third World creative texts by the First World/Western critics on the terms of equality and respecting the difference and by ‘un-learning our privilege as our loss’, and through ‘more assiduous and historical research and collaborative activism by the Third World artists and critics, especially the postcolonial woman intellectual’. For Spivak, strategic essentialism (which appears to overlook but does not sacrifice the question of agency of an authentic pre-colonial/post-colonial subaltern identity) offers the potential for a radical critique. Spivak argues that such an approach of treading ‘a middle ground between fundamentalism (/traditionalism) and communitarian claims’ might help the artists and critics discover further emancipatory strategies in regards to feminism, and to determine the proper political goals of the global and post-colonial feminist theories. It is basically ‘the practical politics of open end’ that ‘requires and implements infrastructural change’ not through ‘some kind of massive ideological act’ for ‘drastic change’ but through ‘everyday maintenance politics’. Strategic essentialism helps find answers to Spivak’s intial questions of gendered subaltern’s ‘political (who speaks for whom)’, and ‘aesthetic (how is she spoken of)’ representation, as it engages with the essentialized notions of race, ethnicity, and nationality. Besides, it envisages and takes account of ‘the reader/s/agent’s cooperation to look to the emancipation of the oppressed subject, and in that helps develop a significant

archive on different understandings, histories, and agendas on the pattern that Mohanty cherishes. It is also a fact constantly acknowledged that the works which are concerned with gender ‘issues concerning the most backward parts of the world’ often impart ‘the most advanced understanding of the contemporary reality’.61

Such an approach to analysing the fiction and film texts from the Indian sub-continent can be rewarding, especially to underpin the legitimate claims of the ongoing relevance of post-colonial theory. The fiction texts of Arundhati Roy, and Bapsi Sidhwa and the film texts of Deepa Mehta and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy have taken a particularly subversive approach not only towards the critique of the politics of religion and culture through nationalist histories, and artistic genres, but these texts also engage with the global dynamics of power hierarchies. The critical approach of the four artists also comes perfectly true to the touchstone prescribed by King for reliable revisionist post-colonial scholarship in the Sub-continental context:

What is required of the study of Indian culture and religion in a post-colonial context is an attempt to think across or beyond traditional orientalist representations by not treating it as an isolated cultural phenomenon, not divorced from social, political, and economic relations of power. It does not exist apart from political.62

The works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy also depict refinement in resistive strategies of the subaltern subjects/protagonists, and

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simultaneously reflect upon the evolutionary changes in their societies, things that the post-colonial critics are most interested to investigate at the moment. These texts approach their particular debates not by rejecting but by embracing the ‘essentialist’ categorizations of religion, caste, class, and gender, i.e., these works stick to the paradigm that the post-colonial feminists are considering as most appropriate for enquiry into the diverse cultures of post-colonial societies. Diverse feminist approaches offered by Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy in their study of the regional culture and religion also help ‘remove the fear of heterogeneity of perspectives’, as the goals of their varying feminist takes also fulfil the requisite criteria (set for the purpose by King) of remaining ‘reasonably consonant with each other (that is, the critique of patriarchy and the end of masculinist oppression of women and men), however differently conceived’. Therefore, for all the understandable reasons this thesis particularly focuses on the texts and the stories of the subaltern subjects detailed in there. In order to approach the particular stories of these subalterns, the thesis has also borrowed theoretical and methodological perspectives from cultural studies, history, gender studies and religious discourse. Such an investigative approach seemed imperative at times, as R.S. Sugirtharajah also provides in the article ‘Post-colonizing Biblical Interpretation’ that:

Post-colonial critical procedure is an amalgam of different methods ranging from the now unfashionable form-criticism to contemporary literary methods. It is interdisciplinary in nature and pluralistic in its outlook. It is more an avenue of inquiry than a homogeneous project.

The creative works from the Indian subcontinent often subvert genre

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63 Ibid
64 Sugirtharajah, R.S. From The Bible in the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters, (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p537
to approach societal ideology, as Fauzia Afzal Khan, in her criticism of the works of R.K. Narayan, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, and Salman Rushdie, also notices ‘the tensions in these works between ideology and the generic fictive strategies that shape ideology or are shaped by it.’

Therefore creative enquiries of Roy, Sidhwa and Mehta and Chinoy through film and fiction seem very legitimate efforts, as these provide an objective outlook on history of the region.

Envisaging a critical enquiry through the complex configurations of Subaltern Studies and post-colonial feminism under post-colonial rubric, this thesis offers, at first, a detailed analysis of the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy in the first four chapters. Chapters five and six then draw out the recurring themes and insights into the politics, sociology, and history of the various societies in which these works were produced and received, and thereby attempt to highlight some common threads for a post-colonial subaltern, especially feminist analysis of the works of the four artists. Chapter No. 7 concludes the discussion by evaluating Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy’s visionary pluralism. The conclusion also outlines some of the new lines of work that come to the fore having adopted an experimental and comparative outlook on apparently disparate print and media texts, and that can further enrich and enhance the significance of post-colonial theory despite all challenges to its integrity.

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CHAPTER 1

TRADITION AND THE TRAGEDY: LIFE IN FICTION, THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

1.1 Roy and Her Art

Arundhati Roy is one of the most celebrated contemporary Indian English writers. *The God of Small Things*, her only novel, published in 1997, fetched her the prestigious Man Booker Prize the same year. The follow-up of the Booker has been intriguing as well as enthralling. The novel proved a huge commercial success that, in turn, occasioned enormous media and academic sensation focused on the author herself. Roy’s rise to stardom was so sudden and so overpowering that certain critics cast aspersions on her art. Partly owing to the mixed response, in thorough critical reflections, Roy’s journey to glory is also accounted for along with elaborations of the socio-cultural, geopolitical, and disciplinary contexts that underpin her novel’s cultish appeal, and its literary impact. Nevertheless, the haze caused by diverse critical responses has not settled even after a decade and a half, as Roy’s critics and readers still find it hard to classify the text exclusively in any of its discursive contexts, be it cultural, historical, or even disciplinary.

Partly, the confusion about Roy’s fictional magnum opus was also caused by her immediate involvement in politics, and later on, through an elaborate academic-cum-journalistic corpus, and grand scale social vis-á-vis ecocentric activism. Therein, Roy maintains a very tough stance regarding societal injustices, and neglect of the environmental, civil and human rights in India. She also harshly condemns the global politics of corporate economy, education, media, and war industries. Roy offers a very personal perspective on fundamentalism, democracy, neo-imperialism, and her assertive opinions on state-controlled local and global terrorism not just denigrate the State but
also confute the ideals of patriotism and nationalism. These aspects proved quite disconcerting even for Roy’s admirers. Adding to this complication are the facts that The God of Small Things is a semi-autobiographical novel, and Roy is a member of the Syrian Christian community, a minority in Kerala. Therefore, it becomes imperative to see how much Roy’s background or her larger concerns in her non-fiction are reflected in her fictional perspective, as the possibility of a logic connection between her art and life is inevitable. This relevance is also stressed by Roy’s own statements about her life history as well as assessments by others of her literary and activist engagements. Sometimes outrightly claimed while often not, an integrated approach, inclusive of the above mentioned factors, has largely been resorted to in the comprehensive guides, anthologies, significant academic interpretations, opinion pieces and the theses related to the novel. The confusion about Roy’s fictional perspective, however, persists still.

Three main impediments complicate the critical view in this regard. First, the artistic representation and the suggestive strength of the novel, especially in terms of the myth-and-reality collage that the novel offers, have been inadequately explored even in truly engaging debates, where it is more appropriate to relate these aspects to Roy’s societal commitment. It is imperative to mention for clarity here that some of the other aesthetic aspects of the novel, e.g., its language, form and symbolism, have been discussed elaborately in several critiques, though. Second, some analyses of the text

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appear to be overextend discussions about hugely broader contexts. For example, Tickell, and others offer very valid challenges to the realist aesthetics of *The God of Small Things*,\(^6^9\) as they find out links between postcoloniality and global capital that underpin Roy’s success story; case-specific historical ambiguities due to Roy’s textual digression into the history of communism in Kerala; and the imaginative failure on Roy’s part to perfectly represent through her characters the complexities of the subaltern subjectivity that a deft critic like Gayatri Spivak conceives in her elaborate body of work. The third impediment is the resultant impact of the above two approaches. Criticism of the novel generally leaves behind an impression that Roy, with her success manipulated by the ‘cosmopolitan alterity industry’ (which deals in the exotic only to galvanize its other more rewarding capitalist campaigns), appears to be in a fix of owning and promoting her art which is equally manipulative in its offering.\(^7^0\)

Owing to critical bias, the humanist link between Roy’s sensitive past and the troubled present life and between her heart-aching fiction and non-fiction also remain unexplored. In fact, it is Roy’s uncompromising altruism that connects her angst at the loss of the tradition and her tragedy in being misunderstood to teach her society the liberal ethics through her work. Being the most valid criterion as to the faithfulness of her work, therefore, Roy’s altruism has itself to be scoped out first so that it can later be employed to

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\(^{69}\) Refer to Tickell, Alex, (ed.) *Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things*, op. cit., the first two sections titled: ‘Texts and Contexts’ and ‘Critical History’, pp. 3-59 and pp. 67-99, respectively. Also refer to the articles in *ibid* by Padmini Mongia, Brinda Bose, and Aijaz Ahmad whose groundbreaking assessments of the novel triggered debates about Roy’s politics of art.

\(^{70}\) Padmini Mongia in her seminal essay ‘The Making and Marketing of Arundhati Roy’ has examined the international promotional campaign which packaged the novel and Roy’s literary celebrity. Mongia has highlighted how cultural politics and corporate interests are amazingly reconciled even in their utterly diverse ends, only to make sure that the artistic merit, exotic appeal, and the retail value of a novel like *The God of Small Things* could be equally transacted for gainful strategic opportunities in the resourceful India. This essay (appearing in Alex Tickell’s *Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things*, Op. Cit. pp. 103-9) was first presented at the ‘India: Fifty Years After’ conference in Barcelona in 1997.
invalidate the objections regarding the way Roy blends the tradition and the tragedy in *The God of Small Things*.

In her essays, speeches and interviews, Roy engages with very diverse issues. Her treatment of the subject matter is essentially artistic, and her conviction to deride power and promote dissent is undeniably unfettered. She puts up an absolute pitch protest against common injustices in an inspired language, combining anger and compassion. All these factors fairly justify that the moralistic and emotional relevance between Roy’s fiction and non-fiction is neither accidental nor contrived.\(^71\) That is why she proclaims that fiction and non-fiction are just two ‘different techniques of story-telling’, and that the selflessly and perceptively discovered truth is more valid than the facts:

Good fiction is the truest thing that ever there was. Facts are not necessarily the only truths. Facts can be fiddled with by economists and bankers. There are other kinds of truth.\(^72\)

However, the reality is that very few people properly understood Roy’s vision about the artistic truth. *The God of Small Things* had, no doubt, made Roy the darling of all the proud Indians who hailed the novel because it evoked local ethos in global circles. No matter, if it appeared a little-too-exotic, Roy’s presentation was, to them, ‘a keeper of India’s conscience’. But her


political prose, at the other extreme, turned Roy into ‘the tormentor of Kashmir’s Hindus, [and] the denigrator of India’. Many of the country’s bourgeois started considering her a hypocrite, poseur, phony, pseudo-intellectual, and anti-India. Some people blamed that she ‘unfairly, and needlessly, rubs dirt in the country’s face’. So, the general impression about Roy is that she confuses her global audiences, as she declares India’s clamping down of the insurgency in Kashmir unjust, while still holding the acts of violence by Indian Maoists legitimate.\textsuperscript{73} The hardline critics say that ‘all the responses she elicits are personal – aimed at her ideology, her personality, her life-choices’, and are ‘hugely significant threats’ to the well-being of the Indian nation\textsuperscript{74}.

Undeterred by such thanklessness, Roy on her part has been using her aura to make her voice heard at global forums with Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. She tries to mobilize the world’s civilized communities against the centres of powers which operate in their very vicinity to encroach upon the rights and resources of the already destitute people of India. Roy seems to have developed a stoical disregard for attacks against her person. Exhibiting her full control on very complex emotions, such as her patriotic feelings for India whose future she stresses ‘has to be local: [in] decentralized economics; decentralized control; handling some measure of power back to the people’\textsuperscript{75}, Roy maintains an uncompromising allegiance to the cause of the downtrodden who live not just within India but also across borders in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Pakistan. Therefore, opposing power, injustices, and cruelty is the only religion which Roy follows and invites others to it, too.


In places like Pakistan or in India now it has come to a stage where none of us can oppose these things without suffering serious consequences, and I think that time is gone now where you can call yourself a person who resists without inviting consequences. So, I think, all of us have to move to another stage, now, where we are not frightened of the consequences.76

No matter, therefore, if a media watchdog like Cecelia W. Dugger blamed Arundhati for writings which are ‘vain, shrill, unoriginal, oversimplified, hyperbolic, and lacking any voices but her own’77, Roy’s message still reached the multitude to jolt their conscience. The misgivings of an ordinary reader, especially a non-Indian, apart, interestingly even the opinions of Roy’s fans among celebrity Indian and foreign intellectuals also appear very diverse when these admirers try to interpret the dynamics which nurture and engage with Roy’s art. For example, Javed Akhtar, a poet, lyricist, and mainstream scriptwriter for Bollywood in India, lauded Roy’s linguistic prowess in an interview:

Immaterial of whether one may agree or not with her view, but the way she puts it as a writer, I admire her for that. Her bold statements have time and again made me aware that we live in a democratic and liberal society.78

In contrast Howard Zinn enlightened Roy’s readers about the seditious outcomes of her compassionate fiction and ‘mature non-fiction’, as

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76 In a memorial for the deceased historian Howard Zinn, Roy briefly touched upon the issue of American government’s onslaught on the tribal people in Afghanistan, and India or on Islamist Arab world in the name of war against terror, free market, growth, development and democracy before Noam Chomsky’s address in the Left Forum conference titled as ‘The Center Cannot Hold – Rekindling the Radical Imagination’ at Pace University in New York on March 21st, 2010. Video-links both to Roy’s remarks and Chomsky’s speech can be reached at youtube.com: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuJKn9dF68&at=50 and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xYqVTfJN4.
he effected sarcasm in his criticism of the Indian Supreme Court which moved to contain her to certain limits:

She was defying the Supreme Court of India. Anybody who defies a Supreme Court is worth-listening to, [laughter] you see. The Supreme Court referred to her as ‘that woman’ [laughter] and she was held in contempt of court, which of course, is an honour [laughter].

It is obvious how diverse intellectual and societal allegiances may often lead to oversimplifications regarding the sort of an artist Roy is. Herself very perceptive, Roy knows how her work is taken generally and analysed professionally. She adroitly attributes the pre and post publication ‘country-wise’ response to her novel (and her political work) to the peoples’ complacence with regards to the societal norms or to the politics of knowledge and power. According to her, *The God of Small Things* is disturbing for the people:

Because the way I see the world does not allow people to let themselves off the hook. It leaves little space for pleading innocence. And it is uncomfortable to face the fact that all of us are complicit in what’s going on – victims as well as perpetrators … Estha and Rahel, though they were only seven years old knew, and were honest enough to admit that they were in some way complicit in the violence that was unleashed on Velutha. Adults find that hard to do.

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To Roy, corporate media, the specialised educational system, and its maniac advocates are all accomplices in the acts of oppression, as they ‘prevent people from understanding what is really being done to them’. She admits that it is no use ‘speaking truth [only] to Power’: you need to speak it to society at large so that Power has ultimately to listen. Given that Power can no way act ‘differently unless it’s in its own self-interest’, or else that it can be provoked to act in public interest because Power does need to manage its ‘fears of public opinion’, Roy believes in educating the ‘ordinary people [who] do have a conscience’. To fulfil the edifying purpose, she speaks in the language of emotions, since the ‘obscure jargons’, and compact ‘discourses’ of experts do not let the ordinary people understand those ‘horrendous things that have been carried out in their name’. Roy’s communicative fiction and fictional-prose is the right challenge to Power. Nevertheless, the exact understanding of a largely suggestive text, like The God of Small Things, is not an easy task, especially across cultures investigation about the scope and capacity of a literary piece demands strong commitment, both intuitional as well as personal.

It is imperative to mention that the novel’s readily recognizable theme that the ‘love laws are wrong’ often obscures the vision. In fact, it yet remains to be seen how Roy also relates, at a highly philosophical level, the predicaments of her protagonists to myth, and religio-cultural politics played through history and societal complicity, i.e., things which operate as mechanisms to oppress ordinary human beings. Hence, with the intention of abstracting the novel’s message from the intricate socio-political and mythic landscape it details, this critique evaluates The God of Small Things and its import, applying primarily the aesthetic parameters which strongly link the

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story’s evocative truth with Roy’s didactic vision that she herself states as under:

To love. To be loved. To never forget your own insignificance. To never get used to the unspeakable violence and the vulgar disparity of life around you. To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair. To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple. To respect strength never power. Above all, to watch. To try and understand. To never look away. And never, never to forget.83

Such an absolute faith cannot be an inventive feat. Roy says that it is a practical lesson she learnt from life. That is why the people, when they meet her in streets, express gratitude for saying what they have been ‘so scared’ of to speak out84, or what appears to them ‘but it’s about my childhood – how did you know about it?’ Roy also admits that it is a ‘most intimate joy to watch the myriad, infinite ways in which people can love a book, a story, a character, and hold it to their hearts’.85

1.2 The God of Small Things

The heart-rending tale of *The God of Small Things* seems an exquisite blend of the modernist tradition of English tragedy with the ancient Indian drama. The novel details the peripheral existence of the Ipes, a Syrian Christian family, in the caste-ridden community life of Kerala. The narrative account is restricted only to two weeks in the December of 1969, and a


glimpse into the historical present in the summer of 1992. The focus is on a few events that devastated the lives of the twins, Estha and Rahel, their mother, Ammu, and her lover, Velutha. Ammu is divorced and lives with her son Estha and daughter Rahel in her parents’ house in Ayemenem. The Ipes also own Paradise Pickles & Preserves, a jam and pickle factory, where Velutha, a handyman from the untouchable caste community, is employed. The tragedy unfolds as Sophie Mol, the daughter of Ammu’s brother Chacko, dies by drowning in the River Menaachal. The blame for Sophie’s death is largely put on Estha and Rahel, as everyone thinks that they took Sophie to the river. Coincidentally, the discovery about Ammu’s sexual relationship with Velutha incites such an aggressive response from the Ipes, that Ammu and Velutha end up dead, and Rahel and Estha are separated. The twins lead a reclusive life for the next 25 years until they come back to Ayemenem, finally learn what afflicted their existence, and unite once again.

In its surface appeal, the story forges a tragic link between an individual’s extreme acts of defiance to the society’s living norm and the spiral loop of its history which demand an individual to submit absolutely and unquestioningly to a dictated vision of life. Such that, even the persistent obligatory, psychic and biological needs of an individual are also treated as utterly destructive if they clash with the norm and the society ruthlessly punishes the offenders, lest the challenge to tradition should become a trend. However, in its cathartic unfolding, the tragedy reveals a deep understanding of the power of pure human emotions which Nature has bestowed upon man to come into his own by defeating despair. The story also leaves behind the message that the only chance of the survival for the small things, after their gods and goddesses die, is in staying united.

Ammu married out of community with a Bengali Hindu, who is referred to as Baba in the text. Baba was as an assistant manager in a tea estate
in Assam. Ammu met him in a wedding ceremony in Calcutta, where she shortly visited a distant aunt while Baba came to spend holidays with his family. For Ammu, the marriage was not at all a matter of finding the love of her life. It only offered her escape from her desperate existence in Ayemenem. The prospects of a normal wedding for Ammu were rather low, since her ill-tempered father, Pappachi, and long-suffering mother, Mammachi, would not offer sufficient dowry without which Ammu could not expect a proper match.

The marriage, however, proved a grave mistake. Baba was irredeemably alcoholic. Ammu was distressed, but she tried being herself by dressing up boldly and smoking openly. Although sensuality and a sense of freedom natural to a woman of Ammu’s age and constrained background could be compensating, and her beauty and cheekiness made her ‘the toast of the planters’ club’ in Assam, too, yet Ammu was secure in her humanity. She endured Baba’s incessant lies and brazeness. Ammu returned Baba’s violence only once, when he proposed that she sleep with his English boss, Mr

86 Ayemenem is a small village in Kottayam District, Kerala India.

87 Pappachi had retired as a senior entomologist. His life-long regret was that the particular species of moth that he had discovered could not be named after him. After Pappachi retired, and the family came to live in Ayemenem, Mammachi started her jam and pickle business which instantly thrived. Pappachi resented the attention his wife suddenly got as a successful working lady. He also felt jealous of her youth and stopped her violin lessons, despite knowing that she was exceptionally talented. Quite hypocritically, he was very civil with guests, more so if the guests were the English, and took extreme care to build his public profile as a thorough gentleman. But alone with family, he was utterly brutal. Mammachi had on her scalp the scars from the brass flower vase with which he used to beat her every night. Ammu had stark memories of how he would drive her and Mammachi out of the house at cold nights, especially how heartlessly he had shredded Ammu’s ‘new gumboots’ right before her eyes. Pappachi’s beatings were forcibly stopped once for all by Chacko when he came home for summer vacation from Oxford. But Pappachi never spoke to Mammachi afterwards. He would sit on the veranda in the evenings when guests were expected, and pretend to sew buttons on his shirt just to malign the image of the working women. To seek his revenge, Pappachi also bought the Plymouth which he would not allow anyone in the family to use.

Roy, Arundhati, The God of Small Things, New Delhi: IndiaInk (1997), Pp.47-50, P.166, and 180-181, all textual references from now on have been included within the text of this critique.

88 Mammachi’s character portrays the consciousness of the traditional Indian femininity. She suffered her husband’s brutality throughout her life, even after she earned the family expenses single-handedly. Mammachi staunchly believed that having a husband, no matter as a figurehead only, was crucial to the feminine identity of a woman. The divorce deprived a woman of all the rights and prestige in society, and tainted her motherhood. Perhaps, Mammachi had somehow persuaded her heart about Ammu’s decision to marry out of the community. She believed that in wedlock Ammu would anyway be better off than as a destitute and powerless daughter in Ayemenem house. Besides, the precedent for Ammu was set by Chacko, as he had married an English girl, too. But when both Ammu and Chacko ended up divorced, Mammachi was distressed the most. It led her to a firm belief that the offenders of community laws, like Chacko and Ammu, were accursed, either in committing the sin of ‘inbreeding’ or in suffering the torment of ‘divorce’. Of all her character traits, Mammachi’s sense of pride in the racial superiority of her Syrian Christian lineage has been purposefully stressed by Roy to signify the traditional Indian female consciousness which is borne out of the gendered countenance of the country’s history.
Hollick, to save his job. The twins were two years old. Ammu persevered to stay with Baba, despite Baba’s shameless badgering her for obliging Mr Hollick’s demands, and violent behaviour fell into a pattern. But when Baba’s violence extended to the children, Ammu came to live in the Ayemenem house.

In 1969, Estha and Rahel were seven years old. Largely ignored in the Ayemenem house by their maternal relatives Mammachi, Chacko, and especially the jealous grand-aunt Baby Kochamma, and missing paternal affection, Estha and Rahel had grown very intimate with Velutha. The family was expecting their English relatives. Chacko’s ex-wife, Margaret Kochamma, was to come to India with Sophie Mol. Chacko married Margaret while he studied at Oxford. He was the biological father of Sophie Mol, according to Margaret, as she also informed Chacko about her boyfriend, Joe, just three weeks after Sophie Mol’s birth. Chacko came to India. Now, Joe died in a fatal roadside accident. Margaret Kochamma was distressed and she accepted Chacko’s offer for celebrating Christmas in India to escape from her grief. The coming of Margaret and Sophie Mol was, in fact, the first most important happening which established the momentum for the subsequent chain of tragic events. Roy, however, links the tragic chronology to the pre-history, i.e., to the centuries long before the arrival of the British, the Marxists, or the Syrian Christians, perhaps, when the humans established the civilization

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89 Roy has crafted all the characters as types. Through Chacko’s character, Roy brings out that hardcore countenance of the patriarchal culture which, despite genuine qualification or highly receptive conscience that Chacko had, can never be modified or atoned. Like his father, Chacko also was a downright egoist. His scant and expedient morality was driven by self-love. Chacko’s personality and his ideologies were equally unpalatable for himself as for the others, especially Ammu. Roy has psychoanalytically interwoven his acutely anglophilic, racial, and social consciousness with his personal weaknesses, and thus interpreted his indifference towards ethics and human relationships.

90 Navomi Ipe or Baby Kochamma is also a highly symbolic female character. In the descriptions of her unfulfilled love and life, of her bitter attitude and grudge against Ammu, Velutha, and the twins, numerous socio-psychological details and factors emerge that form the discursive content of the novel. Baby Kochamma, in fact, possesses that conflicted feminine consciousness which is the outcome of the multiple effacements of her gender’s history through the centuries of oppression at the hands of, both, the indigenous as well as the colonial patriarchal ideologies. That is why Baby Kochamma could associate neither completely with the Indian culture nor wanted to be identified as an anglophile.
through ‘the Love Laws’ – a euphemism Roy devises to refer to the caste division in India.\textsuperscript{91} 

Estha and Rahel were specifically trained to behave well in front of their English relatives. A day earlier than the guests’ arrival Chacko drove Estha, Rahel, Ammu and Baby Kochamma to Cochin in Pappachi’s sky-blue Plymouth. On the way to Cochin, Rahel saw Velutha, marching among the communists. Velutha was an accomplished carpenter, a profession he was not supposed to opt for being an untouchable. His acute engineering insight also earned Velutha the approval of Mammachi and Chacko. The other factory workers from the upper castes resented this, but Velutha continued enjoying the patronage of the Ipes. His presence among the Communist protestors was, however, a worrisome matter for Chacko because Velutha’s involvement in the revolutionary struggle for economic rights might infect the other workers in the factory, too. The matter was of no concern to Baby Kochamma, but for a brief offending coincidence. A protestors opened the door of their car, and made Baby Kochamma wave a red Communist flag, and say ‘Inquilab Zindabad’ (long live the revolution). Some other protestors also made fun of her over-anxiousness. Unable to do anything about her tormentors and forced by her revengeful instinct, Baby Kochamma was quick to associate her current humiliation with Velutha’s unseemly conduct that she had noticed of late, and warned Chacko to watch over him. A trifle more concern on her part could not particularly impress anybody, but Baby Kochamma’s anger at her public humiliation later transformed into an intense hatred for Velutha.

\textsuperscript{91} Roy complicates the tragic chronology of the story for multiple reasons. She stresses her reference to the caste system which has been practised in India for the centuries unknown. The societal regard to the mythic laws of division is very rigid. The Hindu Myth of Creation premises the division of the humans into superior and inferior castes from the very moment they had sprung from certain specific parts of the Divine Body. This sure knowledge about the superiority of some and the inferiority of the other fellow beings, Roy sarcastically tries to suggest that, the humans had preserved as the inviolable ‘Love Laws’ even before they knew or established the religion (Although Roy refers to Christianity in the text, yet her caustic way of narration links the reference to Hinduism). Roy advances the logic, and also implies a tacit critique, as to why the societal division of the humans is regarded even more sacrosanct than the religion. Through this allusion, Roy also establishes the timelessness of the ‘Love Laws’, and the reference, in turn, helps her conflate the tragic time of her story with the eternal mythic time. In this, Roy also bids challenge to history itself in order to reclaim the truth from its very bones. (The God of Small Things, pp.32-33.)
Shrewdly enough, however, Rahel sensed Ammu’s anger and Estha’s apprehensions that the revelation would not bode well for Velutha. She became less reassuring every time Chacko asked her five times afterwards to confirm if she had really seen Velutha. Estha tried to save the situation, too, and mentioned in a timely fashion that he had seen Velutha at home before they left. But the fact that Velutha’s Communist connection was revealed to the family members, as the backdrop of the tragedy, had very grave repercussions for Ammu and the twins. During this visit to Cochin, the family also planned to watch *The Sound of Music* in Abhilash Talkies, a cinema house, and to stay for one night at the Hotel Sea Queen before going to receive Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol next morning at the Cochin airport. Estha started singing during the film, and the audience was disturbed, so he was allowed to go to the lounge in Abhilash Talkies. There, the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, a vendor, made Estha masturbate him by offering Estha a free drink behind the counter. Ammu’s behaviour became cold towards Rahel due to her silly suggestion to Ammu for marrying the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, so Estha kept his secret, too.

In fact, Estha and Rahel’s intuitive knowledge about all that happened to them separately in each other’s absence, and how they felt or reacted about things made the twins very sensitive. They were conscious that their actions elicited a peculiar attitude in others. They did not understand exactly, since they were small, that it meant a constant reminder to them, as they ‘lived on sufferance’ of the family in the Ayemenem House (TGST, p.45). Ammu fully grasped her fatherless children’s sense of insecurity and their recoiling within themselves at being ignored. Ammu knew how Rahel felt after recklessly remarking that Ammu should marry the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, but she had to harden her heart before the children. Yet, she was quick to return in due terms others’ considerateness or prejudice towards her children.
That is exactly what Ammu did, requiting Velutha’s love, instantly. Rahel ran into Velutha’s arms, as she felt ruthlessly ignored during the grand welcome staged by the family and the factory workers for Margaret Kochamma and for Sophie Mol back at the Ayemenem house. Rahel’s exuberance both surprised and troubled Ammu. She wished, at the same instant, for Velutha the rage she harboured against the world because it ignored innocent children, and offered just one choiceless opportunity of living life as an individual. Disenchanted and confounded, Ammu could not decide whether it was Rahel’s happiness or the untouchable Velutha’s power over her daughter that she should envy. However, it dawned on Ammu at that very moment that the ‘history was wrong-footed’. Later in her nap on the day, she had a dream about a man, who:

*If he touched her, he couldn’t talk to her, if he loved her he couldn’t leave, if he spoke he couldn’t listen, if he fought he couldn’t win.*

*(TGST, p.217)*

By the night, Ammu was at the river, where she and Velutha, as lovers, broke all the shackles of the religion, society and history, and made love to each other.

Ammu and Velutha’s love had bloomed for two weeks only, when finally Velya Pappan, Velutha’s father, disclosed the secret to Mammachi. Ammu was detained inside her room, and Velutha was banished by Mammachi with threats of serious consequences to his wellbeing. In a fit of frustration, when the twins came to her bedroom door to ask why she had been locked up, Ammu called them ‘millstones’ around her neck *(TGST, p. 253)*, and blamed them for the loss of her freedom and for whatever was happening to her. Disheartened, the children planned to live in The History
House across the river. Not aware of their original motive, Sophie Mol pestered her cousins for leaving her out of their pleasure trip, and insisted she go with them. Unfortunately, the boat capsized. Estha and Rahel swam across, but Sophie drowned in the river.

After his confrontation with Mammachi, Velutha hoped that his communist party would support him, as the caste divisions were being downplayed in the politics of those days. But Comrade K.N.M. Pillai, the Communist leader in Ayemenem, hypocritically refused him any help saying that the Party could not support him for ‘indiscipline’ in the private life. Velutha felt disillusioned, yet his disappointment was not complete. He went to the only refuge he had, The History House, to have a recuperative nap, as if he was to get ready for his final argument with the world to show that there still existed one such religion, i.e., the religion of the stark affections and of overt biological love, about which ‘he knew, had known, with an ancient instinct’ that it could never betray humanity. But what Velutha did not know was that he only hurried to be ‘well in time for his blind date with history’ (TGST, pp.282-83) in The History House. Finding the children missing, Baby Kochamma registered a case against him in the Kottayam police station, and accused Velutha of molesting Ammu, and kidnapping the children. When the police arrived to arrest Velutha, Estha and Rahel were already there as a proof of the crime. Later, Sophie Mol’s death, too, was blamed on Velutha. Estha was tricked into giving testimony for the crime, and already brutalised Velutha was ruthlessly killed.

The History House was the abandoned dwelling of an Englishman, Kari Sapu. In the novel, he is referred to as ‘The Black Sahib’ or ‘Ayemenem’s own Kurtz’ because he had ‘gone native’ who spoke Malayalam and wore mundus. By the time Estha and Rahel came back to Ayemenem, The History House had been transformed into a big restaurant, named God’s Own Country, for the foreign tourists. The restaurant’s appeal had been specifically enhanced to inspire exoticness by the abridged performances of the traditional Kathakali dancers, near the pool, where the tourists could flaunt their nakedness as they bathed, as well as shower on the performers their ‘imported’ spans of attention, in case they watched the dance. Roy refers to the restaurant as The Heart of Darkness. The History House/The Heart of Darkness bears an enormous metaphorical significance regarding Roy’s subversive take on the country’s history, religious mythology, and globalization. Roy makes its symbolic reference very rich, too, as she shows how Estha and Rahel’s childhood memories shape up in the story.
The story is a common one in Indian society. Roy, however, intertwines the incidents in such a complex form and elaborate plot of the novel that a whole brigade of characters appear, and a plethora of psycho-social details unravel as a tragic narrative whose reach extends beyond centuries. The multi-perspective orientation of the events, through the non-linear plot, reveals not one but several tragedies. Even Estha and Rahel’s several predicaments, resolving which is Roy’s main objective in the novel, seem but just one aspect of the grand tragic plot. The twins knew the secrets that even the adults did not know. Rahel knew about Estha’s molestation at the Abhilash Talkies. Estha had sensed Rahel’s fear that Ammu loved her a little less. The twins were clear that Sophie Mol herself had insisted on going with them to the History House, and only they had seen Velutha beaten brutally by the police there. The particular motives and intentions of the different people, like Mammachi, Baby Kochamma, and Chacko, were also no enigma for them. Yet, it cost the twins an entire loss of happiness ever since childhood to come to terms with their existence.

Finally, the twins did discover the reality, not merely by relating things with the history and tradition, but by deciphering the lessons their goddess Ammu – the transgressor, and their god Velutha – ‘The God of Loss’, had left for them in their deaths. Ammu and Velutha had defied all that had been wrong, ever since ‘the Love Laws’ were made. The twins only had to emulate these divines to learn how never to give up on their right to exist in happiness. However, Roy manages to keep this inspired vision into reality so buried until such a moment when the twins as well as the readers are just ready to undergo the cathartic purgation, together at the same time. In an interview with Alix Wibur, Roy claims that ‘for me the book is not about what happened, but about how what happened affected people’. She further elaborates:
I have to say that my book is not about history but biology and transgression. And, therefore, the fact that you can never understand the nature of brutality until you see what has been loved being smashed. And so the book deals with both things – it deals with our ability to be brutal as well our ability to be so deeply intimate and so deeply loving.93

Although here Roy provides the gist of the humanist theme of The God of Small Things, yet, in the novel’s epigraph she quotes John Berger’s claim that the novel resists ‘a single exclusive perspective’. In this regard, Tickell warns that ‘we must remember that authorial perspectives are sometimes contradictory and changeable and do not exclude other interpretations or stand in for the novel itself’.94 Tickell also debates about Roy’s claim that the novel is ‘not about history but biology’, as Roy herself presents the ‘socially sanctioned oppressions under the umbrella term, history’. Whereas, somewhere else, Roy claims that ‘the theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless circular conflict they are engaged in’95. So Tickell argues that:

Her equivocation is revealing because it shows us how the term ‘history’ can signify a number of related things in TGST including, variously, an ‘inchoate past’, or the ordering of past events or, alternately, ‘the weight that tradition imposes on the present, predetermining actions and interpretations’. If we concentrate on the last of these definitions we realize that the

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weight of tradition on the present is always intimately bound up with power...  

No wonder, therefore, that the novel’s different readings have occasioned conflicting critical reviews, and are still open to new conclusions. It is arguably so, as it is not just in its human connection, but also in the contentious domains of religion, history, society, culture, environmental space, psychology, and literature that The God of Small Things demystifies the dichotomies of the personal and the political such that the distinctions between the exceptional and the commonplace blur, and reality is born. Again, Tickell interprets this blurring of boundaries to reiterate that ‘Roy’s novel resists categorization and draws together elements of the fairy tale, psychological drama, pastoral lyric, tragedy and political fable’  

The narrative consistently switches over between the present and the past, through the ramification of the events that took place in 1969 into the consequent sufferings of the main characters in 1992, but Roy’s message reflects in a refrain that ‘things can change in a day’ (TGST, p.32). The contending depictions of the grotesque in brutality and of the grotesque in sexuality, further stress that the change has to be brought even through annihilating all order. In fact, it is the merging together of these contentious depictions that the novel seems to approach its diverse ends which the critics and readers explore and appreciate. Paradoxically though, it is the treatment of the grotesque that makes Roy liable for charges of preferring the exotic and the fictive to the real and the historical. This confuses the critics who sometimes remain unable to identify or to prove how Roy builds the distinct

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subaltern agencies of Velutha, and Ammu, as two self-determining individuals who inscribed in the memory of their deaths the lessons Estha and Rahel would need to beat ultimately whatever oppressed them in life, too.

The question of the subaltern agencies of these four main characters is crucial to understand also to determine the goals of Roy’s politics of art. This critique contends that Roy’s politics is rooted in peculiar representations of the protagonists, and their personal dilemmas which are detailed as the thematic thread of the novel. The quest is also intended to apprehend as to why Roy opts to exploit commonplace caste and gender issues, that too, through an all too-familiar story of the doomed love affair between two individuals sharing common humanity. The objections to Roy’s approach range across reservations to her engaging with several subaltern categories whose subjectivities seem further charted through their lesser or more destitute situation according to various criteria of caste and gender, class and wealth, race and religion and social/personal and political standing.

Most specifically, it needs to be clarified that the novel does not face the dilemma of the impossibility of escaping from the discursive circles it details, i.e, getting stuck in the caste and gender issues. Instead, Roy uses these discursive/imaginative barriers to approach a highly structured society, and its politics from a perspective which takes the reader by surprise being simultaneously microscopic about the personal and panoramically contextual of the history and culture. Roy’s perspective in its dualistic effect is as highly political as the subject it targets. When she crafts the personal, i.e., the figure of her subalterns, she appears outlining subalternity in essentialist terms that makes her liable for ‘imaginative failure’, too; whereas it is her highly political act. The way Roy actually details the identity and agency of her subalterns she not only presents them as realistically ‘inarticulate’ but also projects their resistance to ‘power(s)’ on a mega political scale. It is because her subalterns
as men, women and children, though, suffer humanly, yet are oppressed politically. The motives of this oppressive politics are apparently diverse, too, yet Roy explicates its single agenda by exposing the intersection, where variously deployed or rank ordered ‘powers’ vie for taking credit and precedence for contributing to keep the wheel of oppression going in multiple social domains. It is crucial to take an overview here also of what the critics say on these matters, or how they falter to understand or represent Roy’s realist politics of art through her highly imaginative fiction.

For Tickell, for example, Roy’s end goals are to highlight ‘the oppression of women’ and ‘the most enduring form of social inequity’, the caste system in India. He maintains that ‘Roy’s sophisticated critique of caste in TGST encompasses both the social history of its proscriptive “crawling backwards” rules and its latter-day perpetuation in the prejudices of characters such as Mammachi and Inspector Thomas Mathews.’ However, when Tickell analyses how Roy particularly treats the concerns of the oppressed social groups to question tradition in India, or how much Roy’s characters resemble ‘the conceptual figure of the “subaltern” which have concerned Indian revisionist historians (Subaltern Studies group) and postcolonial critics’, he identifies certain problems that other critics have noticed, too.

100 The Subaltern Studies group of the Indian historians stress in their project to speak for oppressed groups and individuals, such as the minority or ethnic groups, low class/caste individuals, working class people, women, etc. Gayatri Spivak criticises that by virtue of limits imposed by the methodologies of discourses such as those of colonialism/postcolonialism, and (to that matter, by that of) the Subaltern Studies project, it is rather impossible to retrieve ‘the self-determining consciousness of the subaltern’ (especially that of the gendered subaltern) that has anyway to be expressed/interpreted in the terminology provided by the dominant discourse(s). However, Spivak advances the concept of ‘strategic essentialism’, as a remedial paradigm shift to clarify the difference between the ‘conceptual’ and ‘concrete’ definitions of the subaltern. She professes that the subaltern must be rethought because there can be no category that can be permanently stipulated as the subaltern. Moreover, it is so because ‘S/he [the subaltern] is no longer cut off from lines of access to the centre.’ Tickell borrows largely from Spivak’s logic to study the characters, and the relationship of Ammu and Velutha. Refer to Spivak, Gayatri C., ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, op.cit.; ‘The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives’, op.cit.; ‘The New Subaltern: a Silent Interview’ in Chaturvedi, Vinayak, (ed.) Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial, op. cit.; and ‘The Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work’, a lecture uploaded on youtube by University of California Television (UCTV), op. cit.
In relation to Velutha, for instance, Tickell relates various arguments that Velutha, as an untouchable, might represent ‘a fictional representation of the subaltern, especially because the social structures he inhabits allow him only to ‘speak’ in limited ways, and he often simply appears in the novel as a body, or as the object of other characters’ fears and desires.’\(^1\) This inhibited representation of Velutha, owing to his ‘lack of articulacy,’ has also been looked at in two different ways: as ‘an imaginative failure on Roy’s part’, that she sketches Velutha out as ‘a wretched stick of a character, a good-hearted prole with a six-pack for a stomach;’\(^2\) and as Roy’s ‘creative choice’ that she highlights ‘the lack of political agency’ available to Velutha as ‘the subaltern’.\(^3\)

As regards Ammu, Tickell refers to Gayatri Spivak, who in her work generally identifies women from the middle and upper classes as within the gendered female category of the subaltern. Tickell sees Ammu as more qualified as a subaltern figure than Velutha because she is ‘locked in her stultifying social role as a divorced woman in the highly patriarchal Syrian-Christian community’. Yet, he maintains that ‘by staging Ammu and Velutha’s affair as one of the central events of TGST, Roy either seems to suggest a possible commonality in their – differently experienced – subalternity’, or she tries to ‘figuratively represent the oppressive intersection of historically sanctioned forms of subordination (in this case caste and gender) that make up the theoretical category of the subaltern’\(^4\). Further in this regard, Tickell notices that sometimes her critics present Roy as the subaltern, too, because of the way she advances debate around female gender, or else blame her for being ‘elitist’ in exercising power for ‘representing’ and

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\(^2\) Quoted from Philip Hensher, ‘Eastern Promise’, Mail on Sunday, 8 June, 1997 in Tickell, Alex, Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things, Op. Cit. p. 84

\(^3\) Tickell, Alex, Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things, Op. Cit. p. 84

‘potentially silencing’ the subaltern herself, i.e., depicting the caste identity of Velutha.105

As for the third prominent sub-category of the subalterns, i.e., the children, it is the complex form of the novel, according to the critics, that confuses Estha and Rahel’s agency. For example, Alice Traux maintains that ‘The God of Small Things is an anti-Bildunsroman106, as Estha and Rahel never really grow out of their childhood consciousness. Deepika Bahiri observes that ‘the use of the third person and the lack of a strictly progressive narrative divest it [the novel] of the effect of Bildung’.107 Tickell also concurs that having no first personal account, and no conventional linear plot, and also often unfolding as a process of reminiscences, the novel is ‘repetitious, digressive and continually triggered by “little events, ordinary things”’.108

The subaltern debate in the novel, according to Tickell, is also problematized because of the fatalist handling of the popular cultural theme of the forbidden love. He asserts that Roy experiments in the story, borrowing from the devotional bhakti literature as well as European tragic romance, and both of these traditions celebrate absolutely self-effacing narratives. As a result, Roy ends up with an utterly ‘uncompromising’ moral vision which persists in her crafting of such representation of the characters, their emblematic traits, and their looming fates that reflect ‘the dramatic conventions of Kathakali’. Finally, this fatalist vision leads Roy to include in

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107 Bahri, Deepika, Narrative Intelligence: Politics and Postcolonial Literature, Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p 207.

her story a number of unhappy and contrasting sub-romances, all of which ‘cross the boundaries of the Syrian-Christian community and threaten its caste identity, but none is proscribed as severely as Ammu’s unthinkable affair with Velutha’. On top of that, Roy enshrouds ‘romance and sexuality’ with Ammu, Velutha and Sophie Mol’s deaths, as if to reinscribe ‘the biblical warning about the wages of sin’.109

The fatalist impression of the story impacts the feminist aspect of the novel, too. The critics affirm this notion, noting certain weaknesses of the text. For instance, Madhumalati Adhikari opines that Roy ‘has desisted from making a woman’s powerlessness the central crisis [of TGST…].’110 Traux argues that ‘Ammu’s status within the family is tenuous because of her marital disgrace’, so assumedly there is nothing extraordinary about her that may distinguish Ammu from her other family members. Traux says that ‘a certain aura of eccentricity and defeat clings’111 to different characters112 that, according to Tickell, explains also how the diverse situational paradoxes ‘condense in their differing reaction to the forbidden liaison’.113 Adhikari concludes her study of the various unhappy marriages in the novel by asserting that besides the gender-based ‘”confinements, … role reversals, situational challenges, traditional social norms [and] moral codes” also contribute to the social restrictions in Roy’s novel.’114

Aijaz Ahmad asserts that the novel betrays its own political cause. He lauds the narrative form and the language of the text almost unconditionally,

112 The reference here is to Pappachi’s regret about his discovery of the species of moth that could not be named after him, Mammachi’s experience of the domestic violence, and to Baby Kochamma and Chacko failed loves and later infatuations.
while mentioning how Roy misrepresents, ideologically and fictively, the social realities through the content and plot of the story. He points out the three ‘drastic failings’ of the novel, i.e., its over-written prose, lack of realism, and its misplaced ‘focus on eroticism and sexual transgression’ instead of ‘the actually constituted field of politics’ in the text. The stress on the erotic, Ahmad opines, particularly confutes even Roy’s end-goals which she tries to pursue through the unity of the family chronicle in the ‘two plot outlines: one that narrates the growing up of Rahel and the strutting of Estha, and the other which brings their mother so fatally close to Velutha’. Ammu obviously grudges the tradition. Rahel, like Ammu, grows up ‘into the world’ estranged from the caste ‘gentility of her family’. The adult Estha agonizes over his ‘traumatised into silence’ childhood, and retains his guilt that he was made to bear a ‘fatally false’ testimony against Velutha. The novel could exploit a rich political landscape, but Roy prefers eroticism. In Velutha and Ammu’s case, more stress on the erotic than the political aspect of their defiant sexual act, causes her to lose the opportunity of critiquing the beleaguered gendered history of the caste-ridden society of India, whereas, similarly mishandling Rahel and Estha’s case through incest, Roy again surrenders to ‘the conventional idea of the erotic as that private transgression through which one transcends public injuries.’ Finally, Ahmad pronounces a fatalist statement, too, that ‘The God of Small Things is heartbreakingly tied to love, loss, and remembrance’.

It might be interesting, however, to mention here how the argument that the focus on the erotic vitiates the political impact of the novel elicits very diverse readings of the novel, given the ideological perspectives that Roy’s critics bring to scrutinize her fiction. Feminist Brinda Bose, for instance, advances that Roy’s concern with the erotic cannot be simply dismissed as being utopian because ‘utopias [, too,] are not devoid of politics’. Besides,

erotic is ‘as viable a politics as any other’. Hence, Roy’s exploration of two very dissimilar sexual transgressions – one due to natural ‘desire’ by Velutha and Ammu, and the second due to conscious ‘political judgement’ by Estha and Rahel – cannot be denigraced as an enquiry into personal choices of the protagonists. Here the personal is political also because individually assertive acts to come out of the personal dilemmas by Roy’s characters have potential to ‘become public causes’. Whereas, Ahmad, who is a male and an old-school Marxist and rather more concerned with grand revolutions than with interpersonal relationships, is very unlikely to approve of a writer like Roy subordinating class issues to ones of gender.\(^{116}\)

In fact, all the above-stated objections and observations oversimplify Ammu’s and Velutha’s agencies, defining their subalternity through the equation of love/sexual defiance. It is imperative therefore, to reconsider some of the specific objections that the critics express against these two characters, and to counter them effectively with arguments from the text itself. Vindication of Roy’s artistic vision, which is hazed by the superabundance of diverse critical opinions, is important also because otherwise numerous people, like Estha and Rahel, keep tumbling to understand Roy’s simple philosophy of life. The story reveals that an honest and happy life has to be chosen, defying all that is wrong and exerting the full force of one’s ‘insignificance’, no matter even if the death is the cost. The God of Small Things is such a rich text, as Roy herself claims, that ‘not a single sentence in the book is there by accident’.\(^{117}\) By virtue of this logic, not just the thematic, figurative, and representational aspects but the intertextual references, and the performance acts of the Kathakali artists must be considered equally crucial. Only together, these attributes of the text help find the interface between the


\(^{117}\) Arundhati Roy discusses The God of Small Things on Book Club, BBC Radio 4 Book Club, Uploaded on Oct 4, 2011, video available on youtube.com: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAADoKmnSHg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAADoKmnSHg)
tradition and tragedy, and thus connect the dots to see how Roy shapes up the subaltern agencies of Velutha, Ammu and of the twins in the novel. To reiterate, it is only an elaborate take on all these aspects of the text that might help the reader grasp the politics of Roy’s art.

The question of determining subalternity in *The God of Small Things*, in the first instance, is a matter of defining Ammu and Velutha’s separate subaltern identities, showing clearly how assertively they enacted their deeply personal motivations, as they forged an impossible relationship. Second, it is to decipher Roy’s subversive politics, as to why she builds such an obvious contrastive role and relationship reversals. In that, no doubt, she depicts how some of the subalterns complacently suffer oppression but also are the complicit oppressors. Yet, it needs to be seen how this obvious politics of the text links the metamorphosis of the twins’ childhood trauma into their mature sensibility at adulthood. For this, the narrative itself offers the paradigm that Roy designs through ‘the structures of memory’ which Estha and Rahel inhabit, through the intertextual appropriations from the well-known English texts and from the stories of Indian mythology with which the twins get acquainted, and through the (re)interpretation of the actual predicaments of life which haunt Roy’s protagonists. This will prove that the act of incest by the twins, not by any manner of means outrageous, was instead a cathartic deed to find peace with themselves, to unite for setting each other free from ‘Quietness’ and ‘Emptiness’, to mourn the loss of humanity, and finally to reclaim it.

Durix stresses that in Velutha’s plain characterization and the depiction of his obvious fate, Roy ‘explicitly condemns the evils of conservatism and of caste system in particular.’\(^{118}\) Obviously fair, but oversimplified explanations such as this, ultimately lead to enormous

misconceptions about Velutha’s subjectivity. Most of the critical inferences, for instance, delimit Velutha’s subaltern and political subjectivity to his inarticulateness, and to the depiction of his sexually desirable body. These essentialist illustrations, which are mostly drawn from Ammu’s dream, mix up Roy’s explication of Velutha’s expressive agency in the novel with his impressionistic image, devising which in an ominous dream was just as necessary for Roy to incite Ammu for an all-out initiative. Besides such representation of Velutha’s character can be understood, as we mentioned earlier on, as one of Roy’s deft narrative strategies for detailing an identity which is ascribable to a truly inarticulate subaltern (i.e., the ideal conception of the subaltern). In Ammu’s dream, Velutha does appear a man who ‘left no footprints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirrors’ (TGST, p.216). Admittedly, Velutha ‘speaks in limited ways’ and spaces, too, in one or the two scenes when he does speak (to Pillai as a political agent and to the children, for instance). He appears a less subaltern at such instances, though, because as an untouchable, i.e., as a small thing, he can only survive by lying low and saying little. Arguably, it has to be looked carefully, further in this regard, where it is Velutha’s speech, or alternately his speech act, that Roy actually stresses variably through the third person narrative voice.

Yet, again the stereotypic import of Velutha’s character is stressed by the critics. Durix observes that despite his ‘silent rage’ against the ‘patronising generosity’ of the Ipes who even treasured ‘his technical gifts’, and despite the fact that ‘he is “The God of Small Things” to the children’, Velutha in the end becomes ‘a mere pawn in a game which consists in saving the family’s honour’\textsuperscript{119}. Cabaret claims that Velutha ‘epitomises the three stereotypes’ that make him ‘responsible for the threat of mimetism\textsuperscript{120} which sparks off persecutions’: Velutha is an active Naxalite; an ‘indispensable’ Untouchable


\textsuperscript{120} Most likely, ‘mimetism’ here refers to the projection of Velutha’s character and his special attributes that stress mimeticism or virtually signify his identification with the members of the upper castes.
carpenter who ‘displays all the signs of assimilation and undifferentiatedness which will be turned against him’; and ‘as Ammu’s lover, he commits the fatal undifferentiating crime which will unleash the rage, cowardice and opportunism of the protagonists’.

Durix and Cabaret, rightly acknowledge that Velutha is not a typical subaltern, yet they just fall short of identifying how consciously the untouchable Velutha nurtured his difference throughout his life, and for that matter, how he eventually expressed his agency through an amorous relationship with a ‘Touchable’ woman. He had acquired trade training, built political ties, and was guilty of visioning even more that he knew would get him into trouble. Hence, Roy does not make him an easy bait to be swallowed by the custodians of the tradition, rather Velutha wilfully tests the strength of his free spirit as well as of the political ideology he subscribed to.

Initial reference to Velutha is made in the first chapter, as Rahel hallucinates at the time of Sophie Mol’s funeral. Here, the image of his death is entrenched in the tragic mode of the narrative. In the second chapter, Roy addresses him as ‘Vellya Paapen’s son, Velutha’ who ‘disappeared deftly’ (TGST, p. 71), as Rahel spotted him among the Marxist protestors, and the impression of his inconsequence is conveyed. Only a little later, at the end of the second chapter, Roy subverts this image altogether, by furnishing details about Velutha’s childhood visits to the Ayemenem house with his father when they were not allowed in. Roy also refers to the troubled history of Velutha’s ancestors who could not ‘escape the scourge of Untouchability’ (TGST, p. 74), despite converting to Christianity. Thereon, Roy sequences several instances to highlight the fomenting of Velutha’s inner rage at the societal injustices which he considered himself not at all deserving of.

At only fourteen, Velutha became a skilful carpenter, yet he had to be patient, as ‘Mammachi, with impenetrable Touchable logic’, pestered him often saying that he could have been an engineer, only if he were not a Paravan (TGST, p. 75). Vellya Paapen, however, feared for his son, as Velutha asserted his will, offered unsolicited suggestions, and disregarded suggestions ‘without appearing to rebel’ (TGST, p. 76). Vellya cautioned Velutha about being overly self-assured, but Velutha considered his father’s ‘nagging and bickering’ so unjustifiable that he left home for four years (TGST, p. 76). He was so headstrong that did not return even when Chella, his mother, died. Later, he became a Naxalite, and came back a year after his elder brother, Kuttapen, became paralysed. Mammachi rehired him. Velutha showed no reaction when she paid him less than a touchable carpenter, and put up with her ‘Touchable logic’, yet his father feared for him ‘now more than ever’ (TGST, p. 77).

Nowhere else in the text, Roy gives any impression that Velutha ‘sinks back to the rank of minor characters’. It is Velutha, whose tragedy devastates Estha and Rahel more than their own; more than even Ammu’s or Sophie Mol’s death. It were only the three of them, the twins and their mother, who were ‘bonded by the certain, separate knowledge that they had loved a man to death’ (TGST, p.324) because the rest of the world had always counted only ‘what counts’ (TGST, p. 218). It is the guilt of betraying Velutha to ‘Save Ammu’ that perturbed the twins and ‘they would replay this scene in their heads to understand: Had they been deceived into doing what they did? Had they been tricked into condemnation?’ (TGST, pp. 318-19). And it is the lingering charm of his ‘swollen face and a smashed upside down smile’ (TGST, p.32) of some ‘unhurt part of him’ (TGST, p.320), as he lay dying in Kottayam police station, that Estha retained to embrace ‘Quietness’, just like

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‘the memory’ of ‘the Loss of Sophie Mol’ had ushered Rahel through childhood into womanhood’ and into ‘Emptiness’ (TGST, p. 16).

Roy also objects to the idea that Velutha is ‘the most blameless, natural, and the happiest character in the book’, since he ‘was a political person, and was accused of being a Naxalite, [as] they [the Naxalites] are far from being happy, far from being blameless’ in India. Before much was known of Roy’s current support of the Maoist insurgency in India, her critics felt confounded as to why a mainstream Indian text, that exploited the exotic for mass appeal, too, disturbingly empathised with a Naxalite Velutha, who had even been to prison (TGST, p. 77). Roy crafts a very sharp contrast of Velutha’s character with Vellya Paapen, ‘an old world Paravan’ who ‘had seen the Crawling Backwards Days’, and Kuttapan, the crippled ‘good, safe Paravan’ who ‘could neither read nor write’, and lain in ‘the corner of his home that Death had reserved to administer her deathly affairs’ ((TGST, p. 206). Even Chacko could not believe that Velutha could implicate himself with the Marxist Party, since he ‘had too much going for him. He was a Paravan with a future’ (TGST, p. 119).

And it was Velutha, whose ‘ridiculous, disobedient brain’ did not let him ‘hate her (Ammu)’, knowing ‘she’s one of them, just another one them’ because he had noticed ‘she had deep dimples when she smiled. Her eyes were always somewhere else’ (TGST, p. 176 and p. 214). Thus Velutha had recognised in Ammu another thinking, and free-spirited rebel just like himself. Later, as a true gambler who even ‘if he fought he couldn’t win’ (TGST, p. 217), Velutha played and enjoyed his fight. He did not pity but showered genuine love and affection on the twins. He so honestly expressed his resolve to protect them from the world, offering all his worth as a man to their mother, too, that not only did the twins feel him ‘instinctively colluding’ in the conspiracy of their

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‘fiction’ of a happy childhood (TGST, p. 190) but their mother also considered him worthy of the ‘gifts’ she possessed (TGST, p. 177 and TGST, p. 332).

Ammu is as tragically ruined as Velutha, yet her tragedy is very different. In the text, it also has been approached much more elaborately than that of Velutha. Interestingly, however, it is Ammu’s tragedy that the critics invalidate, arguing that it is not ‘the central crisis’ in the story. For example, Aijaz Ahmad acknowledges the enormous significance of Ammu’s character. Her oppression and subsequent transgression form a separate plotline along with the one in which Rahel’s growth and Estha’s strutting have been described, whereby Roy finds the ‘opportunity to end the novel not once but twice’. Yet Ahmad objects that her tragedy is merely an exotic fabrication in which the author’s ‘ideological prejudice masters and makes nonsense of the Realist’s commitment to verisimilitude’. Also, Ammu’s own conduct sometimes appears to resemble the behaviour of the other female characters. But arguably in the story’s wider context, the other females regard patriarchy much differently than Ammu, and are even complicit to support it. Their complicity is reflected even in their kinship roles that Roy assigns to them.

Regarding Ammu’s transgression, Ahmad objects that Roy depicts Ammu first as an inviolable woman who struggles hard to ‘create an autonomous self in her own way, against all odds’, but when it comes to her ‘phallic encounter’ with Velutha it seems not ‘decision’ rather mere ‘fatal attraction’ that drives her. On the other end, Bose proclaims that ‘apparently Ammu is not dismissive of Velutha’s red politics, but sees in its inherent anger a possibility of relating to Velutha’s mind, not just his body’, so ‘it is not only sexual gratification that she seeks, she seeks also to touch the Untouchable’. Implied here, according to this line of thought, is also the suggestion that Ammu is probably complicit in exploiting Velutha’s body, irrespective of the

fact that she does not get much of a chance to do better than that. Referring to yet another perspective, wherein Ammu and Velutha’s affair is taken ‘as an idealized “re-envisioning” of the actual families in TGST’, Tickell suggests that Ammu’s ‘fatal attraction’ signifies not ‘a transgression of gender politics but as a utopian moment’ when Ammu’s imagination worked and she rather grabbed the opportunity, which was just in hand, ‘to form a family unit in which women and children are freed from long-established patterns of subordination’.125

Ahmad’s objections, regarding what he calls Ammu’s choice of her fate being an ‘arbitrary’ act, and her death ‘being’ contrived by Roy, have been well taken on by Bose also. But a reader feels intrigued, as Bose herself resorts to jargon of the ‘politics’ to describe what she rightly identifies as Roy’s strategy to probe into ‘interpersonal relations than grand revolutions’. Bose’s argument abides well, though, as it advances the further claim that sometimes ‘personal dilemmas can also become public causes’ and she concludes ‘that erotics can also be a politics’.126 Nevertheless, venturing on to prove Roy’s larger than life portrayal of the purity of human emotions, premising that characters may also be part of the bigger ‘politics’, as they develop ‘instinctive’ relationships, seems an improper analytical assumption. Politics and human emotions, by no standard whatsoever, can qualify mutual compatibility.

The answers, regarding the question of Ammu’s assertive agency, her ‘decision’ to transgress, or Roy’s handling of the erotic, actually lie in a realm which exists in-between what Tickell calls ‘utopian’ or Bose identifies as the domain of ‘politics’. In Ammu’s character, Roy also leaves the psychoanalytical clues which support assertions about an individual’s ability

to be brutal and deeply intimate or about the complexity of desires in him/her to love as well as to destroy.\textsuperscript{127}

Roy balances Ammu’s ‘unsafe edge’ with Baby Kochamma’s unfulfilled infatuation(s), Chacko’s flawed ideologies, and with Mammachi’s blindness to the reality of her pride in the familial prestige. All these textual aspects so obviously correlate, and effectively prove that Roy makes Ammu’s predicament the lynchpin to hold together the intuitional as well as structural intricacy of the twins’ tragedy which is the heart of her story. In fact, Roy lets Ammu face all that goes and comes around; understand the pros and cons of a woman’s invisible existence in the chauvinistic society; and weigh all odds as a mother before deciding that she take the final leap of faith. Even Roy’s own life history, her mother’s ordeals, and brought up in the factual setting of Kerala (which is the fictional world of her characters) also reflect upon the real life paradoxes that shape the novel.\textsuperscript{128} Above all, the story reflects Roy’s personal philosophy that, instead of ‘speaking truth to the Power’, she speaks to the ordinary people. Roy connects ‘the smallest things to the biggest […] amidst] the huge political forces that are waging through this wild’\textsuperscript{129}, and puts all records straight using the language of pure human emotions. Thus, she ventures to educate the common man.

Ammu is a rebel. Roy refers to Ammu as ‘just that animal’ (TGST, p. 180) with an ‘air of unpredictability’ which ‘she had battling inside her’ (TGST, p. 44). She was a headstrong person who sought out troubles, and ‘did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations.’ (TGST, p. 182). She is an ‘unmixable mix [:] the infinite tenderness of motherhood and reckless rage of a suicide bomber’ (TGST, p. 44), and at only twenty-seven years of age, ‘in the


pit of her stomach she carried the cold knowledge that for her, life had been lived’ (*TGST*, p. 38). The family ‘sensed somehow ... a woman that they had already damned, now had little left to lose, and ... just Let her Be (*TGST*, pp. 44-45)’. Even Rahel also reflected that she was ‘Little Ammu who never completed her correction’ (*TGST*, p. 159). Since childhood, Ammu had sought wisdom from real life. She disregarded ‘Father Bear Mother Bear stories’, as she observed and endured Pappachi’s violence, and ‘as she grew older, [...] She developed a lofty sense of injustice, and the mulish, reckless streak that developed in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big’ (*TGST*, pp. 180-82). Ammu resented patriarchy so much, not for having seen its downright violence, but for its hypocrisy whenever Chacko reminded her that she had ‘no Locus Stand I’ (*TGST*, p. 57).

Despite the fact that Ammu had realised that ‘choosing between her husband’s name and her father’s name didn’t give a woman much of a choice’ (*TGST*, p. 37), she even then raised voice to protest. She used clear feminist logic to confront Mammachi when Mammachi would consider her son ‘one of the cleverest men in India’ (*TGST*, p. 55). She was specifically caustic when she referred to Pappachi as ‘an incurable British CCP, which was short for *chhi-chhi poach* and in Hindi meant shit-wiper’(*TGST*, p. 51). She blurted Chacko’s shortcomings at his face, never got intimidated by his high qualification, and slighted his interest in communist revolutionary activities as: ‘just a case of a spoiled prince-ling playing *comrade!* *Comrade!* An Oxford avatar of the old zamindar mentality – a landlord forcing his attentions on women who depended on him for their livelihood’ (*TGST*, p. 65).

In her seasoned judgment, Ammu also had grasped that the ‘vapid, vinegary fumes that rose from the cement vats of the Paradise Pickles ... wrinkled youth and pickled futures’ (*TGST*, p. 224). That is why she easily realised in a single moment of revelation that Velutha’s asking look promised
to transport her to ‘where the Love Laws lay down who should be loved. And how and how much’ (TGST, p. 177). Ammu’s history proves, that her eventual decision, could be impulsive, but it does not support, by any chance, the proposition by Ahmad who rather overrules the possibility of any ‘decision’ here, being intent on proving the Ammu-Velutha relationship as a case of the ‘fatal attraction’ only.

Roy incorporates evidence to this effect in Ammu’s own character. Ammu was downright pragmatic, and she taught the practical wisdom to her children also, through such examples as they could easily relate to. When Mammachi wept profusely at Pappachi’s funeral, Ammu explained to the twins that Mammachi was crying more not because she loved her husband but because she was habituated to his violence, and ‘that human beings were creatures of habit, and it was amazing the kind of things they could get used to’ (TGST, p. 50). However, Ammu ‘smacked’ Rahel for ‘being so insensitive’ (TGST, p. 51) when Rahel asked Mammachi if, she (Rahel) could inherit Mammachi’s pipette in which she kept her contact lenses after her death.

Ammu resented Chacko’s ‘Oxford moods’ because he was overbearingly anglophile and narcissistic, yet due to her care the twins were rather ‘precocious’ with reading English texts. When Chacko complained that watching ‘The Sound of Music’ in cinema was ‘an extended exercise into anglophilia’, Ammu countered him by saying ‘oh come on, the whole world goes to see The Sound of Music. It’s a world hit’ (TGST, p. 55). And she did not mind at all when she tried to procure some prestige for her children by ‘casually’ mentioning before the Orangedrink Lemondrink man that ‘their cousin is coming tomorrow from London’ (TGST, p. 109). She made sure to remind the children how the story of Julius Caesar ‘just goes to show […] that you can’t trust anybody. Mother, father, brother, husband, best friend. Nobody’ (TGST, p. 83).
With an acute motherly instinct Ammu realised that her twins ‘a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other’s company’, needed to be over-protected (TGST, p. 43). She tried everything in her power, ‘she was quick to reprimand her children, but even quicker to take offence on their behalf (TGST, p. 43), and even the twins acknowledged that she loved them double, to prove wrong ‘everybody [who] says that children need a Baba’ (TGST, p.149). That was why she was excessively angry when Estha could not greet Margaret Kochamma properly.

Again, Roy seems to be making Ammu’s fictional representation as a subaltern to optimally bear on the reality of the situation of Indian women. Ammu had her vulnerabilities, too. Even Estha and Rahel understood their mother’s vulnerability behind her strong womanly face. Estha knew why Ammu hated their making spit bubbles because it brought back memories of their father (TGST, p. 85). He even sensed what annoyed her from ‘just a hint of a pause in the rhythm of Ammu’s breathing’, when Rahel suddenly asked her: ‘D’you think he [Baba] may have lost of our address’ (TGST, p. 221). Rahel had also witnessed how desperately fearful Ammu was when Chacko battered down the door of her room to drive her out of Ayemenem house, and how stoically Ammu believed in starting life with her kids again. She was extremely destitute, yet Ammu kept her humanity as faithfully as a traditional woman would. Even the fear of looming death could not force her to embrace the only option of turning into a Veshya (prostitute). She ‘died alone’ in the Bharat Lodge in Alleppey, and ended up as ‘receipt No. Q498673) in a crematorium in which ‘nobody except beggars, derelicts and the police-custody dead were cremated’ (TGST, pp. 159-163), yet her tragedy lives.

Roy keeps no secret in Ammu’s tragedy, rather patterns it on the plot of ‘the Great Stories’ in which:
You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don’t. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won’t. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn’t. And yet you want to know again. (TGST, p 229).

Ammu in her entire being – her perceptions and actions – never loses her integrity as an individual. Her over-consciousness about cleanliness, probably, followed the same logic with which she explained to her children the difference between the clean and dirty things, and made them understand how The Kathakali Man, who ‘tells stories of the gods, but his yarn is spun from the ungodly human heart’, is yet ‘the most beautiful of men because his body is his soul’ (TGST, p. 230). It is highly improbable for a woman, who had such a clear vision, and who guarded reserve every time she had options to be extremely independent, would throw herself at a person like Velutha only because ‘he had six pack for a stomach’. 130

She had always been an independent and liberated soul. Satiating her sexual desire could not be her motive, that was what she was offered, but instead she decided to leave her unmanly husband. Ammu knew the value of her ‘Touchable’ body and of its warmth because she had kept it pure and ‘it was hers’. She was a woman who preferred ideological purity to familial prestige and honour to such an extreme that, even in her dream, she offered her body to a man (Velutha) only after she had realised in real life that the one going to possess her, possessed his soul in his body, too. She would have her body back even from her children when she realised that ‘she’s had enough of them’ (TGST, p. 222).

Ammu kept her sexuality so private that she did not even let the children see her with a man, though she was conscious of their ‘faces hanging over her dream’ (TGST, p. 217). But now was the moment to decide. The one-armed man’s kisses demanded response. She could not betray her heart because she was the kind of a woman who believed that even ‘if in a dream you’ve eaten fish, it means you’ve eaten fish’. As she beheld her naked body in the bathroom mirror, she also wondered about ‘the madness’ that ‘Mammachi said it ran in their family’. No matter what bolder options the people in her line of heritage might have tried, and no matter what ghastly future her naked body reflected in the mirror, she would not budge because ‘she was not the kind of woman who wanted her future told’. ‘The end’ was meaningless because it is always open for the bold, but the only difficulty was that ‘for The God of Small Things [and] for the sugar-dusted twin midwives of her dream’, not ‘the end’ but ‘the nature of the road itself’ could be dangerous (TGST, pp. 215-224). The decision had to be wholly hers, but it would finally determine whether or not she was ‘only one of them’ (as Velutha had thought), and it would make her children believe that not only what ‘counts count’ but the dreams and ‘if you’re happy in dream’ count as well. And this would be her last lesson into practical wisdom that the children could learn only when they themselves reached the same ‘viable die-able age’ at which Ammu had died (TGST, p. 3).131

For the twins, the tragedy was not that they had caused Sophie Mol’s death, or that they did not know why Velutha and Ammu had died. Rahel immediately figured out through childhood logic that ‘Sophie Mol died

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131 Interestingly, Ammu’s putting her subjectivity foremost to that of Velutha’s, or that of any the twins also define the link between tradition and modernity from the perspective of women in India of today, as Roy claims in an interview:

A lot of women who are involved in resistance movements [...] are also defining what ‘modern’ means. They are really at war against their community’s traditions, on the one hand, and against the kind of modernity that is being imposed by the global economy, on the other. They decide what they want from their own tradition and what they will take from modernity. It’s a high-wire act.

Please, see Roy, The Chequebook and The Cruise Missile, pp. 125-126.
because she couldn’t breathe’ (*TGST*, p. 7). She had seen Velutha brutally beaten at the History House, and thus hallucinated about his falling from the roof, only to make a right guess whether he would die, too. Likewise, prudent Estha had already thought ‘Two Thoughts’ before the terror struck Ayemenem that ‘(a) anything can happen to anyone, And (b) It’s best to be prepared’ (*TGST*, p. 194). Later, as they were coming back from Kottayam police station, ‘Ammu’s tears made everything that had so far seemed unreal, real’ (*TGST*, p. 8). Rahel also vividly remembered how Ammu just pined away. It took them years, but Estha and Rahel finally understood ‘Ammu’s part in what had happened’ back in 1969 (*TGST*, p. 324).

Rahel, who grew up bearing Baby Kochamma’s grudge, and Mammachi’s and Chacko’s indifference, could now reflect properly as she watched Estha utterly silent that although ‘Ammu, Estha and she were the worst transgressors’, yet others also ‘tempered with the laws … The laws that made grandmothers grandmothers, uncles, uncles, mothers mothers, cousins cousins, jam jam and jelly jelly’(*TGST*, p. 31). And to Estha, as he watched his dog Khubchand dying, ‘steeped in the smell of old roses, blooded on memories of a broken man – the fact that something so fragile, so unbearably tender had survived, had been allowed to exist, was a miracle’ (*TGST*, p. 12). Yet, it was not others’ injustices, indifference or their own sense of fragility that they considered the bane of their life because for them:

The confusion lay in a deeper more secret place. In those early years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was For Ever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually, as We or US’. (*TGST*, p. 2).

Life had solved every riddle as they had grown up, yet they did not know why one of them had acquired ‘Emptiness’, and the other ‘Quietness’.
The twins expert, whom the family had consulted before returning Estha to Baba, had advised that in case the twins were to be separated, ‘they would certainly suffer the natural distress that children from broken homes underwent, it would be nothing more than that. Nothing out of the ordinary’ (*TGST*, p. 32). But Estha and Rahel’s life had lost all meaning. Chacko had explained to them the theory of Earth Woman’s life, much earlier, and they deduced ‘that in terms of geological time, it was an insignificant event’ that had come and passed away just like the ‘blink of the Earth Woman’s eye’, yet ‘history’s smell … would lurk forever in ordinary things’ (*TGST*, pp.54-55).

While tracing the answers, Roy makes Estha and Rahel as well as the readers inhabit together many worlds of different individuals through a layered story, allowing memories, and details to unravel themselves from each character’s own perspective, and thus enabling the protagonists and the readers to undergo their own catharses.

Estha and Rahel had not seen each other after they were separated. Rahel’s childhood memories were vivid, and kept her attached to Estha, yet Estha did not even speak to her when they first met. Yet, Rahel ‘could feel the rhythm of Estha’s … scrambled world inside his head’ (*TGST*, p.21). And for Estha, too, ‘the world locked out for years, suddenly flooded in’ after Rahel came:

...now Estha couldn’t hear himself for noise. Trains. Traffic. Music. The Stock Market. A dam had burst and savage waters swept everything in a swirling. Comets, violins, parades, loneliness, clouds, beards, bigots, lists, flags, earthquakes, despair were all swept up in a scrambled swirling. (*TGST*, p.15)

Rahel felt ‘her life had a size and shape now’, and with ‘half-moons under her eyes and a team of trolls on her horizon’, (*TGST*, p. 155) she could
also see that Estha’s ‘obsessive cleanliness’ was ‘the only faint suggestion that he had, perhaps, some Design for Life’ (TGST, p. 91). Rahel did realise how ruthlessly their connection had been severed by the adults. When Ammu had died, Mammachi asked her to write a letter to Estha, and Rahel could only write ‘my dear Estha, How are you? I am well. Ammu died yesterday’ (TGST, p. 163). Since that day, she had known that ‘there are things you can’t do – like writing letters to a part of yourself [,] to your feet or hair [,] or heart (TGST, pp. 163-4). There was nothing that could ever alienate her from Estha. Yet now, as Estha stood before her with naked limbs, Rahel felt confused. She wondered if Estha was still ‘the one she had known before Life began’, if he, too, had in himself a child engrossed in the troubled past like herself, and if it were possible to relive the past ‘when they had never been shy of each other’s bodies’. She couldn’t decide if Estha was really mad, or just so estranged that he appeared like ‘a naked stranger [whom she] met in chance encounter’, or, if he had he grown ‘old enough to know (together) what shyness was’. She was on the alert for the slightest indication that Estha’s reserve was penetrable, and readied herself, summoning her every instinct up that Nature has endowed a woman with, to respond understandingly however the distressed Estha might like to seek solace in her, and revive their long-severed connection, as:

Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching her wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin. (TGST, pp. 92-3)

Estha recoiled as Rahel tried to pick a raindrop from his earlobe. When Rahel tried taking him down memory lane by reading aloud from his Wisdom Exercise Notebooks, Estha appeared only to be ‘an Estha-shaped hole in the Universe’ (TGST, p. 156). Nevertheless, Rahel could instinctively realize that there still remained something between them that nobody had been able
to steal away from them – the predicaments of their childhood. She grasped that they both had to come out of these predicaments, unscathed not by wearing ‘the tragic hood of victimhood’, or to ‘seek redress’ or to attempt to ‘exorcise the memories that haunted them’, but by allowing their long-severed connection to rebuild, since they knew no other panacea to keep life going:

> Anger wasn’t available to them and there was no face to put on their Other Thing that they held in their sticky Other Hands, like an imaginary orange. There was nowhere to lay it down. It wasn’t theirs to give it away. It would have to be held. Carefully and for ever. (TGST, p. 191).

Both of them actually experienced this inspired vision into reality as they watched the Kathakali performance at the Ayemenem Temple together after many years. They recognised how The Kathakali Man tried to ask pardon of the gods for ‘corrupting their stories’ in the Heart of Darkness’ (TGST, p. 231). His performance appeared ‘madness’ (TGST, p. 235) to them, as if his utter abandonment was his desperate effort to reclaim his own body. Ammu had told them that the Kathakali Man’s ‘body is his soul’ (TGST, p. 230), as if it is in the body that the Divine and his art combine. Yet, The Kathakali Man was in despair because his nakedness had been mocked, and his divine connection severed at the Heart of Darkness. Estha and Rahel could now understand what differed between their and The Kathakali Man’s struggles, as his struggle to relive an obvious story could liberate him while theirs could never:

> Ironically, his struggle is the reverse of an actor’s struggle – he strives not to enter a part but to escape it. But this is what he cannot do. In his abject defeat lies his supreme triumph. (TGST, p. 231)
And only now Estha and Rahel finally grasped Ammu’s predicament which ‘exasperated her and sometimes made her want to hurt them – just as an education, a protection’ (TGST, p. 43). Now they understood why their mother had done what she had to, embracing an utterly humiliating end. For Estha and Rahel, the mythic story of Kunti, performing which The Kathakali Man struggled to relive, was ‘joined by a story [...] and the memory of another mother’ who had transgressed because she, too, desired a godlike Kunti had. Kunti’s story lies at the heart of Mahabharata, and defines all the ethical dilemmas that various characters face at critical junctures whenever they have to choose either to die in honour or live in ignominy.

As a young woman Kunti, the princess of the Kunti kingdom, in the epic of Mahabharata was given a divine mantra by sage Durvasa who was pleased by her service to him when he was a guest in her father’s house. The sage foresaw in his yogic wisdom that Kunti was barren. The mantra was to be such a blessing to her that Kunti could call upon any god repeating it, and the god would be obliged to give her a son equal to him in glory. Out of curiosity, Kunti chanted the mantra while looking at the sun and Surya (The God of Day) appeared before her. At first, Kunti got afraid, and wanted Surya to return because she was still a virgin. However, being under the power of the mantra, Surya could not leave without giving her a son, and Surya’s grandeur bewitched Kunti, too. Kunti conceived Karna. When the child was born, she had to seal it in a box and set afloat a river. Karna was found, and raised as a son by a childless charioteer.

Later, Kunti was married to Pandu, the ruler of Hastinapur, and became a co-wife to Madri. Pandu accidently killed sage Kindama and his wife, but before dying the sage cursed Pandu that he would die whenever he had any sexual relationship with his wives. Kunti turned again to her blessing. She not only conceived three sons, Yudhistira, Bhima and Arjuna, for
herself, from different gods, i.e., the god of Dharma, of Wind, and Indira (the lord of Devas), respectively, but also shared the blessing with Madri who had Nakul and Sahadev as twins from Ashvins, the divinely twin horsemen. The five brothers collectively referred to as Pandavas got involved into a long-struggle for throne against their jealous cousins Duryodhana and Duhsasna, the Kaura brothers.

The Pandavas had very superior martial skills which they displayed in a friendly kingdom-level tournament. Particularly, Arjuna was declared a gifted archer whose skill was unmatched by anyone. Karna was also there to witness the tournament because he also had acquired training of advanced archery from a great guru, Parashurama, and challenged Arjuna for a duel. Karna’s challenge was declined because, being of low birth (i.e., the son of a charioteer), he was ineligible to fight a prince. Karna was particularly ridiculed in this regard by Bhima, the second of Pandava brothers. Duryodhana, however, recognised in Karna the powers he himself lacked to counter his Pandava cousins, and befriended Karna, raising him in rank also by offering him the kingdom of Anga. Karna helped Duryodhana to have the Pandavas banished from the kingdom for a certain number of years, and become the crown prince.

Karna had another grudge against the Pandavas later on when Draupadi, the daughter of King Draupada, refused to marry him for his low caste, even when he displayed high skills in wielding and stringing the bow to impress the princess in a tournament arranged in regards to Draupadi’s swayamvara. Arjuna, however, participated presenting himself as a Brahmin and won Draupadi. The Pandava’s reached home with Draupadi and

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132 Swayamvara was a practice of choosing a husband for a woman of noble descent, i.e., a princess, in ancient India. The kings would usually spread word to hold the ceremony at some auspicious occasions, and all the worthy suitors would present themselves on the appointed day at a certain place. Sometimes, a competition was held to display some special skills and attributes to make it easy for the bride and her family to decide about the groom who proved himself to be the best among all the suitors.

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informed Kunti, who was busy in some household chore, that they had great alms. Kunti simply asked them to share the alms among themselves equally without even bothering to look at what they had brought. This was how Draupadi became wife simultaneously to the five Pandava brothers. After serving the stipulated years of their exile, the Pandavas returned to their kingdom and were given a few cities which they developed quickly into a rival kingdom to Duryodhana’s.

Failing in merit, Duryodhana tried deceit again. Duryodhana tricked the Pandavas to loose everything, including their kindom, themselves and even Draupati in the game of dice. Draupadi was treated as a slave. Duhsasna dragged her into the court and started undressed her. Vikarna, a brother of Duryodhana protested but Karna declared that Draupadi was not a chaste woman because she maintained wedlock with five husbands, whereas a woman could marry just one man according to dharma (religion). Draupadi was saved by lord Karishna, and King Dhrithrasrtha, the father of Duryodhana, intervened to give back Pandava’s their kingdom and freedom. At that, Bhima vowed to personally slaughter Duryodhana and Duhsasna in battle.

Lord Karishna, whose sympathy now was with the Pandavas because of Duryodhana’s treachery, tried to persuade Karna to change sides, and help the Pandavas in fight against Duryodhana. Krishna even revealed to Karna that he was the son of Surya, and the eldest brother of the Pandavas. Karna still refused to dishonour his friendship, though he was elated to know about his divine lineage. Then Kunti visited Karna and revealed her to be his mother. She implored Karna in the name of the love laws not to fight, and kill his brothers in fight. Karna did not seem to be yielding. When he alluded to his intention of killing Arjuna, informing that she would still have her five sons after the battle, Kunti exacted a promise from Karna of not using his
celestial weapon twice in war. This promise finally led to Karna’s death. Once caught up in a desperate situation, Karna had to use his weapon against Ghatotkacha, a tough rival in the battle. Karna spared all Pandava brothers because he wanted to kill only Arjuna, yet delimited to exercise his right of choice by promise to Kunti, Karna was incapacitated. Without using his celestial weapon, he could not defeat Arjuna, and was killed by the latter finally. Bhima exacted his family’s revenge on Duryodhana, too. Bhima was in a rage that even murder could not quell but all he could do was to inflict a fatal wound to Duryodhana. It is related that both Karna and Duryodhana were killed by their opponents in battle against the rules of war. Mahabharata mentions that after his death Karna’s soul ascended to Surya’s abode and he attained the status of a ‘god’. It is also narrated that Duryodhana also was able to purge his past sins by choosing only the rightful tactics of warfare, whereas sensing defeat Bhima had ignominiously hit him in the groins. The war, however, was followed by ‘the lament of women’ over the funerals of relatives.133 The epic was adapted to screen in the 1988 Television series Mahabharata on the national Hindi channel Doordarshn.

Roy makes her protagonists, Estha and Rahel, so critically reflect on the epic of Mahabharata in a moment of revelation that it becomes self-evident for them how Ammu, their transgressor mother, had subverted through her actions and choices in life, the story of Kunti, a divine mother. If Kunti ‘gave herself’ to Surya, ‘The God of Day’, ‘bewitched’ by his physical beauty, Ammu, otherwise, like ‘a witch’ or ‘an insect following a chemical trail’ sought to unite with ‘The God of Small Things’ whose spiritual beauty had

overpowered her. Each of these mothers had invoked the ‘Love Laws’ for ‘revealing herself’ (*TGST*, p. 233) to her children and leaving them distressed.

Now Estha and Rahel realized what clear vision Ammu had left for them, exercising her power of choice to teach her children how, thus, to connect with small things no matter what risks could be involved. Ammu cared not for the world, not even for the children’s well-being. She had to desert them to familiarize them with the pain which would bring them a true understanding of life and destiny, and hence of eternal bliss. Whereas, Kunti left Karna ignominious in a greater predicament than in which he already was. Despite the fact also, that, being a human, Kunti had been able to make her son, Karna, a demi-god. Karna had powers of a god, too, but by extracting an oath from him not to use his celestial gifts, Karna’s mother had yet deprived him forever of the right to exercise choice in life. Karna’s could neither enjoy the bliss of kinship nor redeem his self-belief through fulfilling the oaths which were so necessary to him for self-actualization in worldly life. However, Ammu’s one lesson was enough for Estha and Rahel to grasp Karna’s trick of overpowering the suffering by perennially dwelling in it, and defying it in all manifestations; only Karna had been handicapped to employ his boon to his profit.

Immediately afterwards Kunti’s story, the Kathakali performed *Duryodhana Vadhum*, the story of the death of Duryodhana and his brother Dushasana. Watching The Kathakali Man in such a rage, ‘that even murder cannot quell’ (*TGST*, p. 235), Estha and Rahel realised what ‘madness’ it was that, years ago, they had seen unleashed upon Velutha. Again here, too, was a crucial lesson for them. The Kathakali Man’s rage was an act of purgation, but the Touchable policemen’s madness was profanation. These policemen, like Bhima in the epic, inflicted more [pain] than they had intended to’ on their fellow human being only because they considered that the biological
connection between them ‘had been severed long ago’ (TGST, p. 309), little knowing what salvation had their opponent achieved by suffering in a moment of extreme purity. Estha and Rahel returned from the temple as ‘We and US’ (TGST, pp. 228-237). They had to mix blood, committing incest, as there was nothing to say, and perhaps that was the only way left to revive their relationship, and to reclaim their humanity in its utmost purity, being the only requisites also that could erase any sin, and bring eternal salvation. Estha and Rahel did not know what had devastated their whole lives. They could neither name what inflicted them nor blame it on anyone:

Only that what they shared that night was not happiness, but hideous grief. Only that once again they broke the Love laws. (TGST, p. 328)

Indeed, Estha and Rahel shared an enormous grief. It was the grief of their mother, too. Perhaps, she knew that someday her children would be separated, so she desperately tried that Estha and Rahel could learn their lesson before she died:

‘Promise me you’ll always love each other,’ she’d say, as she drew her children to her. (TGST, p. 225)

It was Devi Kunti’s grief, too. Karna was a divinely being. If he promised to spare his brothers’ lives once, Kunti knew he could not falter. Moreover, Divinely Karna could survive alone, and Kunti’s other sons were not his real brothers, too. Yet, Kunti insisted that the god Karna must keep his humanly connection with his brothers:

They are your brothers. Your own flesh and blood. Promise me that you will not go to war against them. Promise me that. (TGST, p. 233)
Thus, it was the whole humanity’s grief because humans are eternally divided, too. Roy intends to stress that humanity is not blameless in regards to what inflicts them collectively. The people every day ignore several stories like that of ‘The God of Small Things’. They do not realize, but they themselves are doomed. However earnestly they might try now, they cannot revive their relationships, as their history has been lost, and just the ‘the Love Laws’ remain. The only option left to redeem, perhaps, would be to bear the ignominy at first, like Estha and Rahel had to.

Roy’s power as a writer lies in her ability to maintain the suspense of this simple moral of her story through which the twins finally realized that happiness and grief reside in the same place in the world, where small and big things have to live together. The big things would always threaten, might encroach upon, and even annihilate, yet the small things have to defy them by mocking their power through retaining their mutual bond. The secret of life lies in giving big things the constant challenge of conspiring against, despite considering the small things insignificant as they possibly are, but never to let the big things take away prerogatives like those of defiance and of happiness which the small things can always enjoy but the big things will ever envy.

Apparently, too-familiar a tragedy, The God of Small Things, in fact, subverts history with tradition, and religion with politics. Roy discredits the secularist claims of India’s state-imposed nationalist ideology which, on the one hand, downplays race, caste, and class divisions, and on the other hand incites communalist fervour to such extremes that an individual’s survival becomes impossible if s/he fails to maintain and politically express a religiously sanctioned social identity. India’s post-independence constitution aimed to uplift the situation of the backward minorities and low-caste people. However, the majoritarian overtones introduced in politics mainly by the conservative BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) but sanctified unvaryingly even by
the professedly liberal Congress also led, in the larger communal context, to the socio-cultural estrangement of the Hindus from other religious minority communities. The ensuing changes within majoritarian Hindu community were equally disruptive, too. There were introduced certain legislations which obviously benefited the previously insecure lower sections of Hindu society, and brought them into open competition with the advantaged sections/ upper caste people. Quite paradoxically, liberal political measures elicited a rigorously regressive socio-cultural response from traditional upper castes. There emerged the trend of an ever greater assertion of caste identities not only in traditional rural but in thoroughly urbanized centres also. The motive was that the people of one upper caste could strengthen their interal caste ties, and find associations with the people of other upper castes. Being apprehensive, the people of lower castes started organising, and became politically active and explicit, too. Driven to extreme, the societal rifts manifested themselves into the phenomenon known academically as caste fued/battle or genocide during the 1970s. These caste wars gradually assumed an all-India dimension.

The worst aspect of this caste politics was sexual violence against women, and assertion of patriarchy among both the upper and lower castes. Caste and gender issues remained hallmark of the conservative BJP’s religious politics in the 1990s.134 It is this socio-political landscape that Roy utilizes as background to launch her elaborate critique on caste and gender issues in the novel. Estha and Rahel’s tragedy (as they were the hybrid offspring of a Syrian Christian mother and a Hindu father) is intrinsically linked to these socio-political phenomena. Therefore, Velutha, and Ammu; Estha, and Rahel; Mammachi and Baby Kochamma; Pappachi and Chako, and Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathews, all suffer either being henchmen of a

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wronged history or bidding challenge to it. Most of them prefer also to
swallow their guilt of being in the wrong side of the battle, yet they dare not
defy the tradition. Only Velutha and Ammu set the precedent through a
conscious act of defiance, and only Estha and Rahel followed in their elders’
footsteps, yet Roy tells their story, keeping hope that some day people would
understand that either oppression has to be stopped or else humanity be
relinquished for ever. In details, *The God of Small Things* is clearly realistic, and
in suggestiveness highly fictive. Its message is as sublime as that of a pure
religion or philosophy. Its politics is evocative like the sudden urge of human
biology, and it seeks to perform psycho-analysis into the realm of spirituality.
It is a story of the childhood traumas of common human beings, but it
invalidates the mythic stories of the gods.135

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135 *The God of Small Things* is a story which many readers can relate to at a very personal level, reasons for which Roy
herself explains as:

As a child I know there was such a struggle to come to terms with the world is about to do to you. I was an unprotected child in some ways and I felt that one was always trying to anticipate the world, and therefore, was trying to be wise in some ways. Often I think if you have a sort of strange childhood two things happen. As a child you grow up very quickly but obviously the part, i.e., a child remains a child. And when you become an adult, there is a part of you that
remains a child. So the communication between you and your childhood remains open.

CHAPTER 2

ENLIGHTENED THROUGH SUFFERING: THE VISIONARY SUBALTERNS OF DEEPA MEHTA

2.1 Mehta and Her Art

This chapter focuses on the *Elements* trilogy of Deepa Mehta. The trilogy includes the films *Fire* (1996), *1947: Earth* (1998), and *Water* (2005). All the three movies have been written and directed by Deepa Mehta. However, *Earth* is an adaptation of Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel, *Cracking India* (1988, England; 1991, U.S.), and *Water* was transformed into *Water: A Novel* (2006, U.S. and Canada) by Sidhwa. Mehta’s depiction of the women’s sexuality and their plight in India triggered several controversies, and drew negative criticism about her films, especially *Fire* and *Water*.

Within weeks after *Fire* was released in India in 1998, Shiv Sena activists, and its women’s wing, the Mahila Aghadi, attacked the cinema halls in Mumbai and Delhi. At that time Shiv Sena, led by its firebrand leader Bal Thakeray, enjoyed a lot of political clout because it allied with the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) which led the coalition government at the centre. Both these parties have been notorious for breeding Hindu-chauvinist ideologies. As a result of Shiv Sena’s violent opposition, the film was voluntarily withdrawn by distributors from cinemas in Mumbai and New Delhi. *Fire* was resubmitted for censor review, but the Censor Board passed it uncut second time only demanding to change the name of one of the protagonists from Sita (who is a goddess in Hindun mythology) to Nita. At that Bal Thakeray announced that he had no objection to the film’s screening if the names of both the protagonists were changed from Radha and Nita to Shabana and Saira, respectively. This change of names from Hindu to Muslim names Shabana and Saira had been particularly demanded to provoke Shabana Azmi, who
was playing the role of Radha in *Fire*, and Dilip Kumar, who was publically supporting the screening of the film, because the name of Dilip’s wife is Saira.

Contrary to the expectation, Shiv Sena’s bigotry elicited an overwhelming interest in the film and in the whole country, including southern as well as the BJP-ruled northern states, the film ran to packed-to-capacity houses, even though the tickets were available only on the black market. Such developments ushered in a new era of debate and activism around the issues of women’s sexuality, homosexuality, and traditional vs modern culture in India through media and public protests by the cinema icons, feminists, intellectuals, and gay and lesbian groups. Where people like Swapan Dasgupta (a deputy editor with *India Today*) maintained that the ‘claim that lesbianism is part of Indian heritage’ is ‘an IPC-defined offence along the lines of thievery, deceit and murder’, Carol Upadhya (a sociologist at SNDT women’s university in Mumbai) urged that the ‘Hindutava’s discourse must be attacked at its base’ by putting ‘the issue of female sexuality at the centre of debates’.

On their part, gay and lesbian activists found an opportunity to mobilize being publically visible for the first time. S. L., a lesbian activist, fondly recalls demonstrations outside New Delhi’s Regal Cinema on 7 December, 1998. Although many feminists, individuals and human rights groups protesting on that day to protect Mehta’s rights of freedom of speech and expression were conspicuously uneasy to see the lesbians being so visible alongside themselves demanding similar democratic rights, yet for lesbian protestors the protest itself was a milestone because it sowed the ‘seeds for the Campaign for Lesbian Rights’ in India. L.S. wondered, though, ‘why did the mere announcement of one’s existence cause such a cacophony?’ In fact, *Fire* controversy led to serious deliberations that the Hindu Right’s ‘discourse about Indian culture’ to which the country’s middle-classes and diaspora
mostly subscribe was actually derived from certain Brahmanical practices which were codified in colonial era. Traditional values, like *kanya dan* (marriage accompanied by dowry), tightening of control over women’s social freedom and authority by withdrawing them from work outside the house or forbidding remarriage of widows, were transferred from the elite feudal Hindu families to the non-Brahman and non-Hindu castes only in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{136}

Despite very enlightening public debate, Mehta faced more vehement opposition than she tackled for *Fire* from the Hindu right in 2000 for screening *Water*, a film about the plight of the Hindu widows. The film had to be screened in Varanasi, a holy city on the banks of the river Ganges in Uttar Pradesh. Two days before the screening, around two thousand protestors stormed the ghats, and burned effigies of Deepa Mehta, extending to her life-threats as well. These protestors belonged to differed right-wing parties, including the BJP, the VHU (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), the KSRSS (Kashi Sanskrit Raksha Sangharsh Samiti), and RSS (Rakhsha Sangharsh Samiti). Mehta humoursly refers to all these right-wing parties as Hindutva Brigade. She was asked to get the content of the film cleared from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting prior to screening. Once it was done, the local government withdrew location permits, citing concerns over the possibility of disruption in law and order situation.\textsuperscript{137} The film had to be screened, eventually, in Sri Lanka. However, Mehta inspired a unique chemistry in cinematic representation by bringing such themes to screen as were consciously avoided before she made her *Elements* trilogy. Bollywood


filmmakers owe it to her that set the trend. Mehta’s films not only triggered public debate but they also made available newer approaches to Bollywood cinema for self-reflection and reform.

The real-life impact of her film *Fire* largely reflects well on how concern for homophobia and attitudes towards homosexuality have taken a slight shift, and discussions on these topics have ceased to be treated as a taboo in India, so much so that many Hindu intellectuals in India now publically support LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trangender) civil rights. In fact, the *Fire* controversy does have a symbolic worth because *Fire* seems to have played a significant role in paving the way for the current day open activism regarding gay and lesbian rights in India. Within months of the controversy the lesbian and gay organizations ‘formed coalitions with feminists and left organizations to establish the Campaign for Lesbian Rights with the express purpose of repealing the anti-sodomy laws’. Not surprisingly, therefore, this activism acquired enormous momentum after December 11, 2013 when the Supreme Court ruling reversed the landmark 2009 Dehli High Court order which had decriminalised homosexual acts. Lesbian activists had actually become so emboldened in demanding their rights (ever after they campaigned for *Fire*) that Kapil Sibal (the former law minister of India) had to advance assurances to protestors that the government would take judicial review regarding the Supremem Court ruling. The critique on Mehta’s oeuvre in this thesis, however, draws on the fact that Mehta represents a liberal voice as a female artist who takes on sensitive religious, socio-cultural, communal, and historical issues to question the traditional trends and mindset, and offers change.

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In their search for choices to survive, Mehta’s protagonists pose certain questions that threaten society’s sacred beliefs and cultural norms, and reveal its guilty conscience. The *Elements* trilogy, embraces a deeper historical background, documenting the formation, evolution and resistance of the subaltern consciousness. In particular Mehta engages with the representations of family, class, ethnicity, gender and community, and projects the stories and her analyses of the resistance of the subaltern subjects in transnational, diasporic and global public spheres. Admittedly, feminist concerns in the *Elements* trilogy prefigure Mehta’s auteurist agenda, yet she invests much more in it. She draws the issues and representations for her films from India’s vast cultural landscape. Irrespective of their gender, Mehta’s characters are caught up in conflicting situations and traumas which problematize their agency, by implicating it also, in view of the myths of nationhood and of religio-cultural traditions, and the stranglehold of these myths on society. For instance, Mehta severely attacks patriarchy as a societal system, but she also reveals those limitations that subject men’s freedom to its grind as well. In there, Mehta also deftly touches on the manipulations of the religious and neo-colonial elite.

The *Elements* trilogy subverts in a very subtle manner the rhetoric of secular India through showing the fundamentalist trends that are deeply embedded in the political imagination, and reveal the majoritarian nexus which exploits the national culture in the name of protecting it. Having a strong agenda of its own also allows the trilogy to put aside certain cinematically appealing and politically viable options that for the most part define and determine the disposition and role of the popular Indian film. In this regard, the diasporic and transnational outlook of Mehta’s films affords them further autonomy to posit how political ideology maintains its totalitarian control also on the popular media, which has to follow suit in appropriating certain socio-historical antecedents of the nationalist rhetoric,
either unconsciously or at the behest of the ruling class. Mehta shows how disruptive are the notions of the identity politics of the elite, and how paradoxically the victims and the victimizers are the common men only. Her message to the ordinary people is sympathetic; her paradigm is provoking, though.

The way of Mehta’s crafting stories does leave an impression that she provokes the political response intentionally, both to reveal the ugly face of tradition as well as to educate those fanatics in the laity who in their blind devotion or for self-interest offer themselves for exploitation, and incur afflictions upon their fellow beings. The miscreants who protest against societal reform bask either in their heightened sense of religiosity (though they often ignore its core ethics in their everyday dealings) or in the patronage of their political apostles who manipulate every volatile situation in the name of religion, culture, or nationality. The Elements trilogy shows that the exploitation of the system not only works through ordinary men but also reverses its wrath upon them, and the wheel of oppression keeps rolling. In whatever she depicts, Mehta not only apprehends the fundamentalist backlash in the local context but also proves her understanding of the modern global forces and liberal discourses which engage with the politics of her own art.

The films of the Elements trilogy represent the voice of difference. The context of their production and reception does indicate also that the policy of confrontation to artistic efforts, such as Mehta’s, aborts the opportunity of bringing inevitable topical changes in societies. Such a situation, in turn, leads to the disruption of the internal harmony of a multicultural and multiethnic society, such as the one India is. The discussion in this chapter engages with the issues of politics that the films of the Elements trilogy particularly incited.

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For convenience with regards to the chronology of the issues raised in the *Elements* trilogy, specifically as they reflect simultaneously upon the evolution of history in general and of the subaltern consciousness in India, this chapter deals with Mehta’s films in a different order than in which they were released. The following discussion would first consider *Water*, secondly *Earth*, and lastly *Fire*. Mehta’s approach to history is that she reverses the historiography, i.e., she captures the sufferings of her protagonists in the present and links the predicaments of their everyday lives to the age-old oppressive phenomena. Mehta’s disillusionment with the normative ethics and the depiction of sexuality, especially the sexuality of women, also borders more on grotesque. Through this particular stance on ethics and sexuality, Mehta lays bare the confusion of the Indian nation that is desperate to embrace globalization but only retaining its national terms.

*Water* (2005 film) is set in the India of 1938. Impressionistically, the film is a blend of melodrama and realism, and it focuses on an impoverished group of Hindu widows who live a life of renunciation in an *ashram*. The film’s cinematic time is very important, as the action breaks the rigid space-time continuum of the contemporary world and takes the viewer back to the critical epoch when the colonial empire was expending its last phase in India. This critical moment of history was defined, on the one hand, by the forceful assertions of anti-colonial nationalism by seeking to break the caste and communal barriers, and on the other, by the crises and ideological ambiguity of the Indian secularism.

The decade of 1930s was also the collapsing point of the self-perpetuating premise of the Europeans who, among many other colonizing pretexts, mainly used the image of Indian women as feeble and destitute creatures who were in desperate need to be saved by the White men from the clutches of a domineering and tyrannical patriarchal system. The colonizers
did enact legislations for women’s protection, but the altruism of the rulers went only to a certain extent. The British dilemma was obvious, especially in case of the women’s protection legislations which could never be applied in letter and spirit because the British wanted to avoid every possible danger to their rule but despite good intentions they had ended up enraging the patriarchal sentience of the Hindu males by hurting their pride in their cultural bearing.\(^{141}\)

Mehta’s choice of the 1930s for projecting women’s cause through the medium of film is significant from the feminist and cinematic perspectives, too. During the decades of 1930s and 1940s feminism was theoretically founded in India, though Indian feminism at that time was ‘not marked by male-hatred’ as was predominantly the case in Western feminism.\(^{142}\) Again 1930s and 1940s were the decades when, in the Western cinema, the film themes were ‘foregrounded in women who pass across barriers’.\(^{143}\) Both these perspectives offer a comparable scenario to Mehta’s Western viewers to relate women’s sufferings in India to the condition and representation of women in the West and the Western cinema.

\textit{1947: Earth} (1998 film) captures the moment of the Partition in 1947, and gives an insight into the plight of the lower and working class people. In \textit{Earth}, Mehta dramatises the account of events by a Parsi girl Lenny, whose memories of childhood are haunted by the tragic fate of her Hindu ayah and the group of ayah’s friends from different religious communities, as they all invariably fell victim to the communal and gendered violence at the time of

\(^{141}\) They conducted legislation against barbaric practices like suttee/sati (widow burning), and widow remarriage and child marriage. The British had, in fact, prohibited suttee/sati making it a punishable crime in 1829, had passed Widow Remarriage Act in 1856 disallowing enforced widowhood, and the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929, stipulating fourteen as the minimum age of marriage for a girl. However, these laws proved to be just a face-saving move by the colonizers who could never press hard on their application being apprehensive of backlash from the Hindu males.

\(^{142}\) Anagol, Padma, ‘Women as Agents: Contesting discourses Marriage and Marital Rights’ in \textit{The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-1920}, Hampshire and Burlington: Ashgate, 2005, pp.181-226

division. The protagonist, Ayah, was also betrayed by one of her friends from the same group who orchestrated her abduction by a hostile mob of the rioters. Through the eye-witness impersonal account of Lenny, Mehta breaks several myths regarding the anti-colonial and nationalist struggle that permeate the official accounts of history.

*Fire* (1996 film) is set in contemporary India. It unfolds sensitive debates about history, culture, religion, nationalism, globalization, sexuality and gender, and follows up Mehta’s feminist agenda she pursues through *Water* and *Earth*. Utilizing the theme of homosexuality and employing the trope of the failed utopian urban life as plotline, this film devises an assault on the repression and representation of women. *Fire* seeks to create a new modern space which affords Indian women an existence beyond traditional religious and cultural structures. Devising a politics of its own through artful interaction of character, narrative and human emotion, and utilising certain stylistic devices, *Fire* also exposes such class and culture-based frustrations and alienations as render men’s and women’s lives equally tragic.

While analysing Mehta’s particular ideological stance the question of her credibility as a diasporic artist also appears crucial, so the ensuing critique provides for that, too, in the context of relevant issues regarding each film of the *Elements* trilogy. The views of diasporic artists are usually considered not to merit an objective category. These artists are neither taken as socially pluralists nor as ethnically absolutists. Likewise, their views are rejected, for conflating outmoded cultural trends with religious practices owing to the nostalgia for the homeland and their own past, or on the other hand, for being ‘exclusively anti-nationalist’, and ‘specially resistant or radical’.

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144 Please refer to David Morley’s discussion on the ideas of home and homeland and their relation to a specific past, tradition and location in the chapter “Heimat, modernity and exile” in Home territories: media, mobility and identity, London, USA, Canada: Routledge. (2000), pp 31-55

However, Mehta’s diasporic artistic position is different from the general diasporic categories. She ‘resists the expectation that as a diasporic film-maker she must present her nation in positive ways for viewing and consumption by the West’. Instead, film texts of the Elements trilogy provide ‘counter narratives to immigrant assimilationist narratives’.

This difference marks the distinction of Mehta’s films from those of Mira Nair who is also a very impressive contemporary woman filmmaker of the Indian diaspora. Mehta’s lens cuts across diverse communities to provide an impersonal history. Mehta takes essentialist cultural complexities of India and blends them with modern day dynamism of the contemporary society and diaspora. Thus, she shows how individual identity and sensibility is split between the old and modern ideologies of culture. It is understandable that such an artistic offering is surely beleaguered, as it tends to portray the bitter truth and, perhaps, a bit more of it. That is why Mehta earned but objections to her work. Particularly, her feminist diasporic vision was branded as culturally bifocal and idiosyncratic not only by the extremist Hindu organizations but, quite paradoxically, by radical feminists like Madhu Kishwar as well. Therefore, the Elements trilogy needs to be analysed with an academic and a culturalist approach combined.

2.2 Water: 2005 Film

Deepa Mehta’s Water (2005 film), so far, is considered the most controversial of her movies. Mehta admits that she doesn’t take a fancy to be described as a ‘controversial filmmaker’. To assign a trade mark ‘controversial’ context to her films, she claims, is only the ‘Hindutva brigade’s’

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146 Banerjee, Bidisha. "Identity at the Margins: Queer Diasporic Film and the Exploration of Same-Sex Desire in Deepa Mehta’s Fire." Studies in South Asian Film & Media 2, no. 1 (July 2010). (p. 22)
agenda to malign her image as an Indian. However, Water’s plot executes a tragic tale with a suggestive ending, leaving many open questions for which tradition has to be held accountable to a level that even the strongest of its opponents seem faltering by taking sides with it, and criticise Mehta. Mehta’s challenge to the most sacred beliefs of her deeply religio-cultural society has drawn to her but only two responses: an artist par excellence; or on the contrary, a naive trader of the honourable heritage of values. That is why it is unusually strange not to find a single critic reaching a middle ground regarding Mehta’s confrontational politics in Water.

It is really hard not to be judgemental about Mehta’s taking up a project like Water, given also the extent of monetary stakes and benefits involved therein. However admissibly, filming a sentimental script has to be an equally impassioned, ardent and vehement attempt. Mehta proclaims that she felt motivated by an earnest artistic concern to project on screen the sufferings of poor widows, as she happened to visit a widow ashram in Varanasi while helping an old widow. Or, even if she egoistically pursued pure mercenary objectives by cashing in on the Western audiences’ disposition for Indian exotica, as Mehta’s critics object, the involvement of artistic passion has to be inevitable. Discussions on these lines can actually lead nowhere. As it is prudent always to take things of worth individually and the intentions behind them on their face value, the case of Mehta’s Water might best be dealt with accordingly.

Water, as a text, can best be approached through two predominant perspectives it offers. In its cinematic appeal it is an impressive, influential
and unique representation of the subject it deals with. Whereas, its subversive agenda makes it an emblem around which the dirty politics of oppression is perpetrated.

*Water’s* story and characters evolve simultaneously at a sensate and a philosophical level. The film reveals Mehta’s microcosm, consisting of fourteen distressed and destitute *Brahman* widows of different age groups and dispositions. Mehta introduces her main characters within a few minutes after the action starts. Eight-year old Chuyia (Sarala Kariyawasam) enters the *ashram*. In a cursory glance she could manage to cast on the two widows there, while she decides and informs her father that she doesn’t want to stay in the *ashram*, Chuyia apprehends a dooming fate. The scene offers a reflective prompt to the viewers as well to understand Chuyia’s predicament. This is how Mehta translates in plain depiction of the widows’ chaste life of ‘long suffering’ and ‘self-restrain’ the wording of the laws of Manu which appears at the screen when the film starts. Mehta’s style of resorting to such a manner of exposition regarding the laws of Manu in *Water* resembles Arundhati Roy’s narrative strategy of referring to the love-laws in the introductory chapter of *The God of Small Things*. It is as if both Mehta and Roy intend to underscore first how domineering is the force of these customary laws in the public imaginary, in order to take the challenge upfront as very compelling stories of their protagonists ensue to prove that the sacred notions attached to these laws are but a prejudicial cultural phenomenon, being refutable by all logic of godly discourse and tradition. The opening scene in *Water* is also a prelude to Chuyia’s subsequent taming into the required code of the *ashram*, as Dharamshastras prescribe.¹⁵²

¹⁵² A widow should be long-suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste. A widow wife who remains chaste when her husband died goes to heaven. A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal. ‘Laws of Manu’ – chapter 5, verse 156-161. Dharamshastras (sacred Hindu texts).
In the virtually dilapidated setting of this ashram, where widows in general survive as no-particular-beings, Mehta also weaves together two contrasting stories that evolve in a parallel fashion. Kalyani (Lisa Ray) cherishes Narayan’s (John Abraham’s) love and Shakuntala (Seema Biswas) is involved in a doomed spiritual pursuit. On the one hand, the stories of these two particular women help viewers forge an emotional connection with the tragic themes highlighted in the film. On the other hand, these define Kalyani’s and Shakuntala’s agency as the subaltern subjects of history.

The film ends with Kalyani’s death as expiation for fate’s toll and for her transgression. Chuyia’s initiation into prostitution, at that, reveals all ironies. The reality of widows’ situation is inevitably debasing, but they must persevere to attain spiritual purity. Shakuntala emerges triumphant after the initial shock of utter disillusionment. The film’s message is conveyed, since it starkly exposes the true nature of the oppressive societal system which is so indifferent to the sufferings of these widows, yet its demands from them are so particular.

The underlying theme of changing traditions develops simultaneously as the nationalist struggle for freedom is shown gaining pace. In that, the ideological conflict in society is elaborated. The situation pits nativist tendencies of the nationalists against the obvious lure and sense of loss regarding colonial culture among the elite, while both regard freedom as their common objective, too. Mehta exposes this tension through the contrasting characters of Narayan and his friend Rabindra (Vinay Pathak). The discussions between Gulabi (Raghuvir Yadav) and Madhumati (Manorama), and Narayan and Rabindra also unfold anxieties of the deprived populace and the educated sections of society, as their lives are going to be variously impacted in tangibly practical and ideologic ways if nationalist struggle

succeeds and traditions change. Kalyani’s brief exposure to this free world promised by the nationalist ideologues through Narayan’s love lasts only as an unthinkable dream which breaks finally with her utterly resigned act of suicide. However, Chuyia’s suggestive rescue at the end of the film underscores many apprehended, but yet unrealized hopes and promises which future might hold.

Mehta plays each character at pace with the evolution of plot in a way that the psychological, intellectual and spiritual developments in characters correspond to the changes at successive age levels in human life. Chuyia, the young narrative motor of the film, represents adolescence. Her sensuous vitality is characteristic of her age. But even Chuyia is shown tamed to the ways of the ashram within a few days, as Mehta tries to suggest how ruthless is the force of the sacred (the holy writ of Manu, a sacred Hindu text) to which one is bound to submit even without understanding it. Chuyia does not even remember when she got married. Her father is dumbed momentarily also at her innocent question as ‘for how long’ she would stay a widow. It highlights the human helplessness against the stronghold of tradition which must be embraced as an evil necessity.

Since Chuyia is a child, she holds the licence to reason things through senses. If suffering is made for her, then why not for others, yet the tradition demands that she must learn it the hard way. That is why Chuyia only meets with rebuke by all the widows in reply to her simple question from Shakuntala about the house of widowers in the presence of the Hindu pundit (Kulbhushan Kharbanda). Suffering also makes Chuyia understand that her father has averted the emotional and financial burden by depositing her into the ashram. She cannot articulate all these things clearly, but retains her belief of going back home with her mother like the mortal hope all of us need to keep life going.
Later, this illusion is gone, too. In one scene, obviously distressed at the death of Patiraji (the oldest widow in the ashram), Chuyia is busy in the mock act of going home in a paper boat. Shakuntala approaches to scold her for being long absent from the ashram and for her naivety. Chuyia’s gentle accusation at Shakuntala’s blunt and ever-exasperated attitude causes Shakuntala’s anger to subside. But the way Chuyia resignedly acknowledges that she knows she cannot go home greatly evokes viewers’ empathy. It also doubles Shakuntala agony, finding in Chuyia another innocent being like herself doomed for the sin of widowhood.

Shakuntala is the strongest character that evolves gradually but completely in the film. She wields an unquestioned authority in the ashram. Shakuntala in mythological Hindu texts is described as an epitome of beauty, patience and virtue. This mythological significance does bear hugely on the way Mehta has conceived and projected Shakuntala’s character in Water. Understanding Shakuntala’s character here, we are acquainted with the ideological aspect of widowhood, whereby the upholders of this institution are accorded veneration for fulfilling high spiritual demands. Shakuntala’s authority in the ashram may, therefore, be deemed as an entitlement due to her earnest spiritual pursuit.

Throughout, Mehta seems to have put her whole effort in developing Shakuntala’s character and making it prominent. This character is Mehta’s only argument against the rebuke of fundamentalists who contend that Mehta has ignored and altogether failed the selfless spiritual pursuit (tapasya) of the really chaste widows. For this, Shakuntala’s character also variously contrasts with all the other meek and suffering widows. Regarding the film’s intellectual debate, however, most noteworthy is the way Mehta articulates

155 Ibid
challenges to Shakuntala’s spiritual understandings of the sacred texts through the purely sensuous outpourings of Chuyia.

In a way Chuyia leads Shakuntala to the real intelligence of her predicament. Shakuntala assumes the care-taker role for the child widow, and Chuyia’s first impulse also is to love Shakuntala who saves her like ‘Mother Durga’ (a Hindu goddess) when Chuyia runs after biting Madhumati in the opening scene. Yet, it is Chuyia only who dares express disdain to Shakuntala, at one particular instance, as they beg outside a temple. This small incident expands elaborately upon the thematic context of the film. Conspicuously, Chuyia is agonised over Shakuntala’s inability, or negligence for allowing herself to be humiliated, whereas, it is the spiritualistic uplift that Shakuntala is so earnestly after.

Again, it is through Chuyia’s simplistic questions that Mehta lays bare the tragic conflict in Shakuntala’s mind, putting her spiritual strength at odds with the instinctive demands of flesh that she has not yet been able to smother altogether. Or else, through Chuyia’s questions Mehta has problematized the ‘I can have it, but I won’t have it’ doctrine used to allude to the availability of ‘choice’ to widows who practice self-denial.156 Shakuntala’s spiritual strength specifically appears waning, as Chuyia asks as to why Kalyani couldn’t marry again. Shakuntala has no answer to this question. She has yet to learn to articulate the hypocrisy of the social system and its oppressive mechanism which could wink its eyes at Kalyani’s prostitution but would never allow her to live life again, even if Kalyani luckily finds the love of a man who himself volunteers to marry her.

Shakuntala is chaste, and earnestly surrenders herself to the faith in tradition by trying to subdue all temptations of flesh. That spirituality demands sacrifice may be understandable to her, yet her conflicted mind tries

156 Ibid
to find some logic behind the justice of a ‘god’ who has ordained a life of ‘no other choice’ except utter renunciation and self-abnegation for the widows. Chuyia’s question breaks Shakuntala’s spiritualistic reserve. For the first time, her heart approves to utter words of blame against the unquestionable tradition and she replies, ‘ask god’.

From now on, Shakuntala tries to find meanings of her existence and of spiritual truths in only what life brings forth as reality, like it looms large in Chuyia’s commonsensical questions. The philosophical injunctions of the religious texts now seem to Shakuntala those unachievable ideals that stand in sharp contrast to the abject position and condition of an ordinary widow. This is the predicament that Narayan tries to make Kalyani understand also. He tells Kalyani how impossible it is to aspire for the ideal life, like the mythic god, in utter disregard to one’s vulnerability to weaknesses as a human being.

Mehta alludes to the contrast of ideal and real life by drawing upon the mythological analogy of the lotus flower, as referred to in the Bhagavad Geeta. God Krishna in the Bhagavad Geeta says that one must persevere contentedly under sorrows and testing situations (‘Padma patram ivaambhasaa’ untainted by sin, like the lotus flower keeps its purity from the clayed and marshy land where it grows. Mehta has used this allusion of the lotus flower at two levels: one, to suggest that manly weaknesses are in themselves the antithesis of the godly attributes; and second, to accentuate the difference between the ideal and the real in figurative terms.158

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157 These Sanskrit words are ascribed to god Krishna in the famous Shloka (song) of the Bhagavad Geeta which has been given in the following with translation and has been quoted in Chinmaya Smrithi: A Bi-Monthly Newsletter of the Chinmaya Mission Washington Regional Center (CMWRC), Volume 19, November 5, September 12, 2009. P.11. [http://www.chinmayadc.org/Smrithi/CSSep09v1.pdf]

158 In Hinduism the lotus is the symbol of truth, auspiciousness and beauty. Therefore, various aspects of The Lord’s person are compared to a lotus (i.e. lotus-eyes, lotus feet, lotus hands, the lotus of the heart etc.).
During their buggy ride through the British section of the city, Narayan also asks Kalyani whether ‘it would be very difficult’ to live like a widow. Profoundly earnest, Narayan’s question yet seems simplistic like any of Chuyia’s questions. However, the conversation that ensues between Kalyani and Narayan does, both, elaborate and critique the idealistic demand of a chaste life from a widow. Kalyani’s apologetic acknowledgment of her suffering, as she has full tragic awareness also that outer purity is bound to be defiled even if one’s whole being stands pitted against the corruptive surroundings, shows the extent of her grief. Even more pitiable at that is to see Kalyani muster all confidence in her inner purity to resolve to live like a lotus flower. Whereas, this poor creature really does not understand that Krishna was a god, he could afford to be promiscuous and still remain a divine, but ‘everyone cannot live like a lotus flower,’ as Narayan puts it.

Mehta has drawn a wonderful spectrum of youth and age through the tragic theme in Water. Chuyia is infused with the energy, wit and mystic vision of childhood. Kalyani’s idealism for purity, in utter oblivion of the reality of her situation, becomes a characteristic tragic flaw of her fully blossomed youth. Past disillusionment, mature and pragmatic Shakuntala is ready to take on idealism through the blind leaps of faith (e.g., she sets Kalyani free to go to Narayan, and decides to entrust Chuyia to Gandhi – acts which are the only redeeming features of the film towards the end).

Mehta is not forgetful at all, however, of hinting at the negative aspects of human growth as well. Madhumati, the ripe-aged chaperon and patron of the ashram widows, is thoroughly degraded, as her idealism got long buried under the brash concern for existence. She became a widow on the first night of her marriage, when her husband, an old hog, died in the effort to make love. Her brothers-in-law raped her for days on end before depositing

ibid.
her to an *ashram*. There again she faced the brute grind of a system that itself breeds corruption. As Madhumati’s hard-heartedness in perverting Kalyani, and later even Chuyia, is not any enigma, likewise the widows’ unquestioning submission to Madhumati’s hawkishness is not any matter of choice, since the driving force in both cases is the sheer dread of existence.

An exquisite depiction of Patiraji’s (Vidula Javalgekar’s) character with her childlike eccentricities and wistful demand for a ‘*laddo*’ (an Indian sweet) in extreme old age also show how subtle Mehta is to maintain her take on the life and story of the widows. In old age, when one, due to waning faculties, is no more able to hold even onto the idealism and maturity gained till ripe years, the child in man returns, so Patiraji wails for a ‘*laddo*’. She must have been countlessly disillusioned regarding her rehabilitation and surely have endured unfathomable grief in going over and over again the memories of her loss after becoming a widow, only a glimpse of which viewers get, as self-indulgent Patiraji recounts her marriage scene. Yet, the desire to live will remain, up until the mortal mind can remember the taste of a ‘*laddo*’ that Patiraji may taste any lucky day. Mehta plays Patiraji’s character foil to that of Chuyia’s. Their contrasting ages but similar longings help Mehta approach the theme from purely the sensuous perspective, and thus critique the ruthlessness of a system that demands to sacrifice even the taste of tongue.

Symbolically, Mehta’s reference to the patronage of corruptive societal system may also be understood through the elevated hovel of the bread-earner Kalyani’s on the roof of the deteriorating two-storey building of the ashram, where all the dependent widows live in the ground-floor rooms. So, the setting is conceived to reveal the hidden faces in the decay of the building as well of spirituality, which inevitably require redress in the material, but the system makes sure that the situation remains so.
Madhumati’s dialogue, as she calms Chuyia down in the opening scene, that ‘in grief, we are all sisters and this [ashram] is our and Mittho’s (the name of Madhumati’s parrot) home’, also suggests a very fine analogy in the routine of a widow and a parrot. A parrot kept as a pet can be easily trained to memorize and speak a few fine words, but in affliction it only squawks instinctively, like Madhumati’s Mittho does while Chuyia kills it. Similarly, every widow in her long wait for death in the ashram does memorize many devotional mantras (magical chants) and keeps chanting them day and night. But there always surfaces up one grief that lingers in the subconscious and that no one else can understand except the one who is afflicted with it. Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala, Madhumati, and Patiraji do stand out among the other widows, yet it is not just their agency that has been stressed in the film. Little glimpses of the listless faces of other widows at the critical scenes convey a lot about their abject situation as well.

All the fourteen characters in the film appear to be types. Also, they are the agents whom burdens of life, of history and of tradition make tragically helpless by drawing boundaries beyond which they lose both identity and power. Shohini Chaudhuri applauds Mehta to have effectively represented a virtually nondescript gender category through memorable characters of different widows in Water. These widows terribly fail to turn into the avatars of chastity and spiritualism, not because they do not have the ability to do so but because they cannot use this ability for higher pursuits when it is wasted only in the fight for survival:

Mehta’s films, arguably, have enlarged the discursive boundaries of what can be represented in Indian cinema. Just as

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159 Patiraji often comments that ‘zindagi bohut nirash kr gai’ (life has brought an utter dejection). Madhumati’s pet dialogue in the film is about the regretful death of her husband who couldn’t even consummate. Kalyani chants ‘Jay shri Krishna’ (victory to lord Krishna) 108 times daily, cherishing the silent hope that one day someone would come and she would flee away. She also urges Chuyia to do it. Only Shakuntala seems to be at peace because her quest is spiritual. However, even she denies when the Hindu pundit inquires whether she has been successful to achieve moksha. It reveals that the predicaments of these widows might be different only in as much as they allude varyingly to the sensuous, idealistic or philosophical ends being pursued; yet grief is the essential given.
Fire engaged openly with lesbian sexuality, Water has permitted the oppressions and disempowerment that real women experience daily -- real women, rather than the chaste wife or celibate widow ideals beloved of Hindu ideologues – to emerge onto the screen.160

Mehta has also captured the tension of tradition with modernity at crossroads with the struggle for nationalism and nativism, and blended it beautifully in the life of the characters. Shakuntala, who seeks truth to pacify her misgivings against tradition, is told by the learned priest ‘never to let loose of belief’. Kalyani, who is content even if the things do not change, ignorantly invites tragedy upon herself, enraptured by Narayan’s idealism that ‘all traditions and blind faiths were breaking down’. Rabindra, the ‘brown sahib’, who criticises nativism and loves the English ways, retains a deep scar in his heart like a conservative Indian that his father flagrantly disregards the tradition by exploiting widows. Whereas, the nationalist Narayan, whom education abroad made able to discover real worth in the traditional, got so tragically entrapped to choose between the traditional filial veneration for his liberal father and tying the platonic relationship with his wronged love that he had to lose both. Interestingly Narayan’s mother, who is a traditional Indian lady, approves of Narayan’s conduct and decision to marry Kalyani, after hearing her husband’s shameless confession to have exploited Kalyani. Mr. Dawarkanath, Narayan’s father suggests Narayan to keep Kalyani as a sex slave, though.

The Hindu pundit who benevolently instructs widows to save their faith against the blind following of rituals also appears hypocritical, as he conceals the advanced knowledge that widows have the choice of marriage, both according to the sacred texts and the newly implemented law. On

Shakuntala’s response as to why widows don’t know about this law, the *pundit* maintains that ‘the things that don’t benefit us, we don’t know them and even if we know, we don’t acknowledge them’. Later, when the same *pundit* urges Shakuntala to listen only to the voice of her soul, giving her the example of Gandhi, Shakuntala’s puzzling remark, ‘what if the voice of the soul goes against our religion’, renders the *pundit* unanswerable.

The appearance of Gandhi at this critical juncture is crucial regarding the theme of tension between the tradition and modernity. Shakuntala has been through several ordeals, and has witnessed Kalyani’s and Chuyia’s tragedies. Her belief in religious texts and spiritual pursuit has also been shaken. She feels disillusioned, and must find the real ‘truth’. Finally, she hears that ‘truth is God’ from Gandhi’s mouth.

In fact, Mehta plays her subversive politics at its zenith through invoking Gandhi’s image as a saviour and liberal leader. Gandhi’s popular figure most effectively articulates Mehta’s message through *Water*. The ultra-conservative religious chauvinism against which India struggled once, and which had caused death to the nation’s most beloved leader Gandhi has now become the hallmark of popular politics in India, paradoxically.

Mehta has so meticulously applied her technique of reversing historiography within the structure of the film by converging ‘the mythological time of the millennial tradition and the historical time of the India on the eve of major changes towards the end of the 1930s’¹⁶¹ that the whole logic behind the struggle of a slave nation for self-rule and change to make amends for the ruthlessness of baseless traditions becomes fully evident. This is from where Mehta’s *1947: Earth* takes on complementing her fictive historical narrativity. Writing about *Water* Steve Gravestock has also

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mentioned that ‘the historical sweep and its emphasis on a culture going through seismic shifts is very much in line with Mehta’s other work, most notably, *Earth*.’

Expectantly though, *Water*’s release caused a huge controversy in the Indian society, and resulted in agitation and many protests by fundamentalist Hindu religious organizations. The manner in which public response to *Water* seems to have been politically manipulated also sheds light on the critical role of film as a popular medium in India. It offers interesting explanations for the role that Bollywood has played or has been made to play in India since the Partition. It then foregrounds the status of independent Indian filmmakers and directors of the diaspora, like Mehta, whose work cashes in on popular paradigms of India’s national cinema, but simultaneously challenges politics through art as well as through history.

The widely divergent critical reception of *Water* does hint, as well, at the complex ‘relationship of the sacred and sacral in the new century’, and in the case of India the situation is attributed to the ‘tension between the emergence of ‘fundamentalist ideas’ and “Hindu communal identities”’ (as a postcolonial protest in the society) and ‘the secular tendency both in the intellectual elite and the suffering masses’.

Rather, the *Water* controversy explores further avenues even in this complexity.

There are a few narrative flaws in the rendition and depiction of widows’ tragedies along with the hard luck coincidences and ironic twists at the end. Such contrivances seem to be an artistic necessity in films like *Water* whose genre occupies the in-between category of romance and realism, but these are generally perceived as manipulated selling aspects of extremely

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163 Elaborate discussion on the role of Bollywood and film in India is part of the debate in chapter No. 6.

religious forms; hence the controversy. For example, some critics object that the widows in Water seem too fragile at times to the point that they are denied the ‘presence of an agency’—rather an exaggerated refrain in the film about Patiraj’s longing for a Laddo and Kalyani’s sadistic exploitation and death are a case-in-point. The chauvinistic response of the hordes of religious organizations and zealots recorded in news articles and criticism about Water was an instant answer to Mehta’s transgression. Despite all sympathy to Mehta’s undaunted production of Water, even her staunch supporters also found faults with the film:

Mehta’s film effectively dramatizes the human cost of these harsh and dehumanising ‘traditions’, it also contains elements of Bollywood conventionalism and melodrama, which are at odds with the movie’s challenging subject matter and tend to take the edge off its dramatic impact.166

Interesting however, primarily vehement response to extremist response of the Hindu revivalist organizations and political parties came only from the filmmaker, and her associates. The tone of all the newspaper reports and articles did imply a certain measure of reprobation, aversion, rather repulsion, from the fundamentalist reaction to the film. Yet, a candid approval to Mehta’s effort was absent. The situation explains the kinds of risks that one might involve him/herself into by meddling with the domain of the sacred and sacral, not because that genuine public sentiments are affected, but because the narratives of fundamentalism and modernity, and of forming or reforming societal norms and ideologies are also adopted, only at the whims and urgencies of the political forces. Therefore, the nature of these forces

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needs also to be researched while studying texts like those of Mehta’s. *Water* controversy itself highlighted these socio-political paradoxes.

The nationalists, who followed Gandhism and who have been represented in the film as saviours of the native women from oppressive traditions through the character of Narayan, in the post/neo-colonial set-up, seem to have transformed themselves into the custodians of the same fundamentalist forms of religion which once they themselves criticized. *Water* seems to have problematized the debate around the ‘woman’s nationalist construction’, especially in this postcolonial context in India. Enormity of the confusion in this regard can be gauged by, again, referring to the majority response, including that of the intellectuals, that Mehta brought extremely private cultural issues regarding gender into the public sphere of contested politics. Whereas, only a few upheld Mehta’s right to freedom of expression in as much as she jolted public conscience by making people shameful through ‘exposure of [their] guilt’ as to how ruthlessly they allow innumerable tragedies to happen in their society;\(^\text{167}\)

Since Mehta happens to be a woman director, her courage in the face of intimidation by the largely patriarchal forces must be acknowledged as the immensely relevant preface to her film *Water."

– Tutun Mukherjee\(^\text{168}\)

And the editorial board of the World Socialist Web Site thus applauded Mehta’s artistic effort:

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\(^{167}\) Sheleyah A Courtney in her article ‘The Storm of Deepa’s Water: From Violent Tempest in Varanasi to Glacial Account of Hindu Widowhood’ in *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*. Sydney: 2007 (Vol. 18, Iss. 1; pg. 115, 6 pgs) has effectively built a debate around all these points by referring to Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid’s (1989 *Recasting Women, particularly referring to Partha Chatterjee’s essay on the nation and its women in this collection and, drawing reference from some other interesting works, has interpreted the phenomenon of shame that, according to her, incited criticism against Water."

The most serious filmmakers and artists deeply explore the world around them. This creative process poses a danger to the powers-that-be because all honest artistic work forces its audience to more carefully examine social reality and its contradictions. Creative freedom, the basic democratic right to artistically explore any phenomenon, is a threat to those attempting to impose their own retrogressive political and social economic agenda. A conscious population aware of its own history and social rights is a stronger political opponent than a superstitious or confused one.169

2.3 1947: Earth

1947: Earth, the second film in Mehta’s Elements trilogy has drawn a lot of impressive critical response, especially from India. The film is generally regarded as less controversial than Fire and Water. However, an overview of the critical material discourages at times because bias on the part of critics, due to certain consciously or subconsciously consumed ideologies, is too obvious. In corollary, it is not surprising to find a tint of sharp (rather harsh) reproof of Mehta’s cinematic excellence and adventurous liberty, especially with regards to the theme in Earth.

Our critical position draws from the fact that, while elaborate paradigms applied to review the film do enlighten about various perspectives from which the subject-matter in Earth can be approached, lamentations that the film does not meet certain (over)expectations are disconcerting. Whereas, it must be pretty obvious that bound by the limits of its genre Earth had only to allude to rather than pictorialize its subversive agenda to every bit.

Particularly in this regard, Mehta’s acute artistic reserve also needs be
c onsidered as an essential attribute of the film’s thematic politics. *Earth*, in
 fact, is one of the most important films that have ventured into the
problematic domain of opposing sub-Continental politics, especially during
the vulnerable 1990s, when the adverse impacts of fundamentalist and radical
ideologies were already revealing themselves through heightened communal
sentiments in both India and Pakistan.\(^{170}\) Devising an impersonal thematic
plan in *Earth* over and above revealing the ugly aspects of communal rhetoric
through stark depiction of violence remains Mehta’s sole prerogative also in
comparison to all other filmic representations of the Partition before and after
it. The film urges the viewers to rationalise things by showing such real-life
characters whose urgencies of existence and coexistence came first than with
their allegiance to any religious or political ideals.

It is also imperative to reference here as to why, paradoxically, the
critical response to *Earth* somewhat confuses as well as it enlightens though.
On the one hand, we find very compelling analyses of *Earth*, of its contexts
(with reference to India’s history, the Jewish Holocaust\(^{171}\), and decolonization
of the British from Palestine, Egypt, Ceylon, Burma, etc.), of its stylistic and
cinematic comparisons and contrasts with the works of other past and

\(^{170}\) Partition has been one of the important themes for cinematic representation both in India and Pakistan. Films in
Pakistan like *Kartar Singh* (Saifudin Saif - 1959), *Behen Bhai* (Hasan Tariq - 1968), *Pehli Nazar* (Islam Dar -1977), and
*Khaak aur Kahun* (Masud Pervaiz – 1979), and those in India like *Challia* (Manmohan Desai - 1960), *Garam Haat* (M. S.
Sathyu – 1977), and Govind Nihalani's television serial *Tamas* (1989) enjoyed great success commercially,
underscrong the fact that the Partition theme has always attracted viewers' attention. However, *Earth* is Mehta's
invaluable contribution as a sequel to hard-hitting Partition-themed television and film productions during and after
the 1990s, such as *Train to Pakistan* (a 1997 filmic adaptation by Pamela Rooks from Khushwant Singh’s 1956
historical novel by the same name), *Khanosh Pani* (Subhiha Sumar – 2003), *Pinjar* (Chandra Prakash Dwivedi -2003),
*Toba Tek Sing* (a 2005 tele-film adaptation for *Doordarshan* by Afia Nathaniel from Saadat Hasan Manto's 1955 short
story by the same name), and *Partition* (Tariq Ali and McMullen – 2007). In the backdrop of the heightened
communalism after the demolition of Babri mosque and Babay riots in the 1990s, these films hold special significance
for confronting the trauma of the communal violence rather directly and less melodramatically, as has been done in
some of the popular films of the time, like *Gadar* (Nitin Kenir and Anil Sharma – 2001), and *Veer Zara* (Yash Chopra -
2004).

Refer to Gita Vishwanath, Salma Malik, ‘Revisiting 1947 through Popular Cinema: A Comparative Study of India and

\(^{171}\) Mehta has herself admitted that the partition of India was also like Holocaust. For reference Richard Phillips,
1999/meh-a06.shtml>, and also see Barenscott, Dorothy, “‘This is Our Holocaust’: Deepa Mehta’s *Earth* and the
Question of Partition Trauma”: <http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring05_ScreenAngst.pdf>.
contemporary directors like Satyajit Ray\textsuperscript{172} and Meera Nair\textsuperscript{173} and of its complex thematic, figurative (tropes, metaphors, etc.), and semantic engagements (e.g., intertextuality). On the other hand, we observe rather an unwitting intolerance to different aspects of the film, including criticism for following some hidden agenda because \textit{Earth} was foreign funded and Mehta was blamed for trying to sell out to the West the way she designed the aesthetic, emotional and political appeal of the film.\textsuperscript{174}

Whereas, starkly noticeable, in the criticism of the film, is also a missing link with the historiography of the intricate class, gender, and religious divisions in India. As a result, one apprehends an abruptness, even when most of the critics have effectively tried to spell out the thematic continuity of the film along with \textit{Water} and \textit{Fire} in the \textit{Elements} trilogy, so the hypothetical chronology envisaged at the beginning of the chapter may help the purpose of coherence as well as of explicating Mehta’s predominantly feminist agenda through an extended context. To avoid any pitfalls, we have specifically made it a point in the following discussion to evaluate the artistic value of the film \textit{Earth} at par with its connotative strategy, lest either should monopolise the discussion, while still maintaining our primary focus on the poor victims of the tragedy of Partition.

\textit{Earth} does carry on with some of the themes attended to in \textit{Water}, marking Mehta’s very visionary penchant. But there is much more complex here with which she leads off with her genre’s challenge to the metanarratives of opposing histories, religions, nationalisms and the socio-cultural constructs of ethnicities and genders in India and Pakistan. In that, Mehta risks an


inevitable grapple with the politics and sociology of reception and perception, sprouting out of the resultant inexorably intolerant dichotomies thereof.

However, abstaining from going deep down into the core, Mehta manoeuvres *Earth* to make us re-visualize the pernicious and magmatic potential of land, once its foundation has been disturbed. She takes after those intellectuals who have rather taken up the cudgels to ‘dwell on the anguish of Partition’. In this effort, she does utilize certain popular tropes and signposts, e.g., the scenes depicting angry communal processions, mob violence, people departing with their belongings, trains full of dead bodies, etc. But Mehta moulds the appeal of depicted incidents to implicate violence which in its dual capacity of being the ‘revenge of the Raj’ and the insanity of the tragic times generated the lethal momentum to annihilate all memories of centuries-long traditions of friendships and peaceful coexistence.

As such, Mehta has set the juxtapositions and parallels of particular events in the story, and contrasts in the variety and behavioural variations in her characters to utilize them all together to the situational advantage of turning an inter-faith love-story of pre-tragic times into a tragic-tale of civil war. Mostly, such adaptive and creative improvisations by Mehta have been mistaken as the hasty run of the film towards the most powerful scene of Ayah’s abduction which is regarded as the central trope of Mehta’s politics in *Earth*.

The foremost focus should, therefore, be on those commonplace core messages that, perhaps, Mehta herself intends her viewers to take home after watching *Earth*. That is why she even eliminates certain personal details of Lenny’s life as well as the sub-plots from Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel, *Ice-Candy*.

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Man/Cracking India, while adopting the story for Earth. Mehta might seem to have reduced the humorous flavour of the novel and the author Sidhwa. Yet, in choosing the moment of the Partition only as her subject and its violence as medium to put her message across, Mehta has been able to effectively assert her own artistic and creative potential. In this regard, appreciation and testimony by Sidhwa herself of Mehta’s credence regarding Elements trilogy, particularly the film Earth, is worth-consideration. Further, it is enough evidence that Earth potentially explicates, and complicates as well, the debate it banks on, little impacted by its being barred or banned from screening.

For this, Mehta has also treated details on balance. For example, she takes characters from all the major societal factions whose interests were directly at stake during the Partition, and duplicates through scenic parallels atrocities committed by communities against one another. And the film criticizes only individuals, not any religious tenet, in keeping with Mehta’s neutral stance on the emotional cost which entailed the Partition. Despite such attributes, Earth still remains a very difficult text to analyse.

Sequentially considering, it is interesting also to watch Mehta’s characteristic method of coming round through artlessly building her characters against the grain of her critics’ objections. As in Water, Mehta’s characters in Earth have likewise been subject to severe criticism for being stereotype. Whereas, Mehta is again subtle in infusing nuance to the portrayal of those silenced subjects of history whose very agency even, not to speak of their plight, remains contested as yet.

Earth’s major characters have an earthly appeal just like they have their menial associations. Mehta has accordingly orientated their roles to the

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historical moment of the Partition so that the race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity of the characters are made to represent themselves simultaneously with their subaltern positions in both society and history. This unique (re)presentation of the life-story of characters through the first-hand account of Lenny, whose sensibility was shaped actually seeing things happen, corresponds interestingly to the method of the subaltern scholars. However, the most important challenges in resorting to such an approach are the questions of authenticity and neutrality, given the diverse ethnic attachments of the characters that the film details.

To handle these challenges, Mehta maintains a voice-over of adult Lenny as the omniscient observer to fill the factual political details which, by default, had to be missed in eight-year-old Lenny’s narration. Mehta has also used Lenny’s innocent and neutral position in the film as a strategy to camouflage and distance her own ethnic diaspora viewpoint about the Indian history, society and its traditions by maintaining an aura of curiosity and suggestiveness in Lenny’s narrated events and details. Lenny’s Parsi descent and her compassion and concern for the assorted community of her friends obviously help, but Mehta makes Lenny’s memories of the past and of her friends the critique of history in their own right.

On the surface, Lenny has been shown confused in the story, just like her parents, because of the qualms of fancy and reason to retain neutral (referred to in the film with the clichéd Swiss) position with regards to her friends. Whereas, closely observing it becomes evident that Mehta maintains Lenny’s narrator integrity attending to certain small but very crucial details. For example, the masseur, Ayah’s chosen lover Hassan measures more in reasonableness than the lesser Ice-Candy-Man, Dil Nawaz, in adult Lenny’s story. This is despite the fact that as a young girl in the story, Lenny is so lured by the fancy hero charm of Dil Nawaz that she even offers herself to
marry him, ignoring the savage beast within him after the Ayah recognizes it and turns down his proposal. In this respect, a possible justification of mature Lenny’s narrator stance is also implied in Mehta’s obviously different take from Sidhwa on Dil Nawaz’s character, especially after he betrays when Lenny pledges Shanta’s fate in his hands.

Again, it is through mature Lenny’s reflections that Mehta provides an outside viewer an insider’s impersonal perspective of the situation. The troubled position of the Sethna family also serves as the vantage point Mehta offers to her viewers. Caught in the midst of their identity crisis, of being subordinate to the majority population’s cultures in India but still latching onto their privileged status in being aligned with money and colonial power, the Sethnas are simultaneously the first subaltern as well as a member of the privileged elite who, though involved and vulnerable, yet rarely experience the violence so commonplace during the turbulent times of the Partition. Likewise, Lenny being elite in her family and class membership has access to members of the English ruling elite and the local upper class in the circle of her parents’ friends, but being subaltern by virtue of her gender, age, and disability she becomes privy to the most compelling concerns and intimate interactions among her and the ayah Shanta’s poor friends. Mehta’s so places the Sethnas’ predicament to survive the situation of crisis in perspective of their listlessness when confronted with the affairs of the Partition, and Lenny’s familial connection in the backdrop of her loss of innocence and her emotional shock that these attributes act both as the objective criteria and cathartic strategy of the film.

For a comprehensive take on Earth, it is inevitable, however, to consider Mehta’s handling of the plotline, the aesthetic and thematic modes, and the characterization of this film all at the same time. In that, we contend that Mehta has rather bypassed different colonial and racial stereotypes and
ploy while playing upon the motif of the Partition foil to every scene, situation and character in the film in order to effectively punctuate its message with the reconciliatory tone, which not only is the artistic objective but also a historical necessity. Impressionistic use of the stereotypical and biased elements in the story is only meant as an argument to separate the original culprits from the victims of violence. This is how Mehta revives the memory of collateral emotional and spiritual loss that so baffle, even decades after the Partition.

To start with, let us take the example of the Sethna household, which consists of Lenny, her parents and their six servants (Imam Din, Yousaf, Harry, Moti, Muccho and Ayah) from different religious communities. Being Parsis, a minority community in India, Lenny’s parents display typical communal attitude of serving their own needs first and foremost. During colonial rule, Parsis have been playing second fiddle to the ruling strategy of the elite because the patronage of the British was necessary to maintain a better and safe position. At the time of Partition, nonetheless, Parsis hypocritically become a neutral partaker of the profusely religious society of India.

The communal distresses of the Parsis are very diverse, but Mehta has so linked them with the embittered situation of Lenny’s parents that all complexity becomes self-revealing just through a few related scenes. In one instance, while making Lenny exercise, Lenny’s mother explains the Parsis’ chameleon-like behaviour, saying that centuries back, the Parsi ancestors had pledged to the prince of India to remain as invisible in the land as sugar dissolves in water, still adding its flavour.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Mehta refers to the famous story of Parsis’ seeking permission to live in India from the India prince when centuries back they reached its soil leaving Persia, fleeing their Islamic conquerors.
Being Parsis, Lenny’s parents obviously enjoy position in society through their friendship with the English. They maintain ties with the native elite families also, but the story of this friendship is linked to the arrival of the British in India. Their servants who are, in a way, part of the same family and mostly are also from minority communities cannot claim any privilege that is available to Lenny’s parents. Yet, the irony is not lost on Lenny’s parents, as their situation might so drastically turn on themselves after the British leave that they remain no better off than underlings like their servants. Only a century ago in pre-colonial times, the Parsis lived in a destitute situation in central India, and their social mobility was restricted among the other communities along caste and communal lines. The British were not all embraceable as well, since they mixed freely but never treated the Parsis as racially equal to themselves. Deeply ingrained psychological fears and grudges of the Parsis due to their vulnerable history since antiquity have been exquisitely dramatized by Mehta in the dinner scene.

Mehta shows how hypocritically self-delusional is Lenny’s father’s attempt, as he launches his ‘emergency-measures-jokes’ to tease his English guest Mr Rogers, the inspector general of police at the dinner table. Mr Rogers is obviously ill-disposed to feign hawkishness because the British authority in India has already waned. Besides, there is none to side with Mr Rogers from among the natives at this moment. The troubled times are now the Parsis’ only little chance to settle some accounts. These jokes do serve Lenny’s father to give vent to his pent-up grudge against the British masters and to flatter his native Sikh friend, but do not express any genuine solidarity with the cause of independence.

Sidhwa has used this expression in her novel Cracking India to describe Lenny’s father’s jokes during the dinner scene.

Particularly mentionable is the joke about the gora soldier’s drinking of a native soldier’s urine in a train. Lenny’s father uses the implied irony in the joke to blame the breaking out of syphilis in India on the British. His assault on the racial superciliousness of the British is too obvious.
The position of the Parsis is genuinely vulnerable. Lenny father tells the guests that they are ‘too-few in Lahore to take any sides’, so they cannot afford to be any losers in the ongoing war of interests among the major stakeholders of the imminent catastrophe. They have to hold their scruples back shamelessly even in public. Lenny’s parents immediately manage to make amends for the offence they might have risked in taunting Mr Rogers and souring his situation with Mr Singh by harping on the favours of the British on the Indian people. They even suppress their emotive urges at abandoning their very intimate neighbours even in extremely private moments, like Lenny’s father pacifies his wife’s conscientious enquiry in this regard by arguing, ‘Hindu, Muslim, Sikh – who do we not betray?’

Mehta has contrasted Lenny’s parents’ complacence that they would cast their lot with whoever governs Lahore from among the Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs with their servants’ groping and thankfully/grudgingly yielding to the disrupting options they were let to choose from. The Parsis’ subaltern position would remain intact and hurt them only in as much as this ‘partition nonsense’\textsuperscript{184} would deprive them of their \textit{g}ora friends whose tastes they have adopted as an eager way of life. Or else, they would be condemned to live only among the natives whose hatred they must smother in their hearts if they have to survive or secure societal immunity as a minority community. Mehta has dramatized this predicament in two contrasting scenes: one, where Lenny’s mother expresses to Lenny her deep love for English ball-room dancing\textsuperscript{185}; second, when Lenny’s father contemptuously abuses a native who might get run-over by their car, as they enjoy their leisure ride through Lahore city\textsuperscript{186}. Immediately afterwards in the same second scene, Lenny’s father has to

\textsuperscript{184} This is how Lenny’s mother refers to the Partition during their pleasure ride through Lahore city.
\textsuperscript{185} Besides this reference, at other instances in the film Parsis’ taste for English language and foods has also been mentioned.
\textsuperscript{186} Due to their changed social standing after the British came to India, the Parsis had started to regard themselves as superior to the other natives of India. We witness an instance of this hatred towards the natives when in one scene Lenny’s father impulsively rebukes a man who happens to jump before their car during their ride through the Lahore city.
bear the shock of a narrow escape for himself and his family being stranded in a protest procession for Pakistan.

For Lenny’s parents the life of prosperity is still a safeguard. Their daughter Lenny can also cherish the hope of relieving her father of the burden of going to office when she grows old. However, Harry, their Christian gardener, will have to become a Muslim, Himmat Ali. Moti and Muccho (low caste Hindus) will become Mr and Mrs David Masih (Christian), as the local priest would entice them to arrange the marriage of their eleven/twelve years old daughter, Papoo, with a wealthy old and ugly pigmy. Of course the Hindu Ayah will pay the highest price of losing her love, honour and possibly even life being thrice-a-subaltern by virtue of her gender, religion and low status.

All this is not an overnight transformation that the otherwise so serene lives of characters in the film should change this drastically. Before the story takes shape, various characters assume identities, and commonplace interactions among them become retrospectively meaningful, Mehta introduces the film’s thesis through a symbolic scene. Lenny cracks a plate on the floor to learn in her own childlike way how the Britons would break India. Imam Din tries to humour the situation, saying that he thought as if the Americans dropped a bomb on Lahore. The Ayah also informs Lenny’s mother what rumour has as to how the British would divide India by digging a canal by placing India on one side and Pakistan on the other if they want to avoid bloodshed. Mere interjections or simplistic perceptions, these remarks still express haunting fears and apprehensions of the ordinary people whom the film presents as a protagonist category. Realising Shanta’s naivety in putting sensitive things so plainly, Lenny’s mother hushes the Ayah but can barely conceal her own agitation.
So setting the serious tone, in the next scene Mehta offers a quick peep into the easy-going interaction among the servants of the house. Hindu Harry is shown plucking flowers from the garden to hand over to Muslim Yousaf and Muslim Imam Din serves *chapatti* to the Hindu Ayah. The sinister bile of ill-will and hostility seems not yet to have found way to embitter the ethics of their mutual coexistence, as it has already maligned friendships among the ruling English and the would-be rulers from the native elite while they contend for power. The dinner scene again serves the relevant explanation.

Although lesser, there was some warmth of friendship in the symbiotic intimacy between the *goras* and the native elite, so the emotional shock and feelings of guilt also came naturally in the moments of estrangement. Mr Singh leaps at Mr Rogers’s throat at provocative remarks about the popular Sikh leader, Master Tara Sing. Mr Rogers apologizes, but exasperatingly utters ‘Jaswant’, Mr Singh’s name, as if to convey his shock as to how could an erstwhile friend behave thus to him. Mr Rogers even disdainfully mutters having owned an alien land as his home: ‘This bloody country, it’s the only home I know’, as if all Mr Rogers’s emotional bonds with the Indian land have been severed after there has remained no love lasting among the English and the natives.

All these opening scenes and dialogues are very well thought-out inclusions. By underscoring the inadmissible agony of the English, and of the native elite, Mehta sets a panorama of contrasts with the subsequently developed theme of betrayal in the friendships of the Ayah’s friends. Ayah’s poor friends are bonded by pure human emotions of comradeship, so their pain at uprooting and expulsion from their homelands is many-fold. Yet, the pity is that they would suffer the irredeemable losses caught in the midst of communal frenzy, while those in elite, like Mr Rogers and Mr Singh, make safe prior arrangements to cross borders.
As the story moves out of this household, an idyllic pre-partition scenario of a park in Lahore is depicted with 1946 blockbuster song Jawan hey Muhabbat (love is in full bloom) from the film Anmol Ghadi in the background. The camera moves with Hassan and Lenny entering the park gate for the cover shot in which the Ayah is shown sitting encircled and doted upon by her Muslim, Hindu and Sikh friends. The camera also captures women enjoying their walk in hijab (Muslim veil), men with Sikh turbans busy talking and children running around in carefree mirth to establish a proper context for this scene and to highlight a soon-to-be-disturbed routine-run of life in the later dramatic structure of events.

Among many other of its possible symbolic interpretations this park scene, at a level, also asserts Shanta’s affinity through the literal import of her character as an ayah (a nursemaid) with the Indian land. This land fosters the needs of all her lovers (the Hindus, the Muslims, and the Sikhs) alike as long as it is dowered with love and taken as a shared trust by all, provided also that none proclaims to exclusively possess it.

The actual subject of the Partition offhandedly emerges here into the friendly discussion of the characters. Viceroy-house gardener, who is a Hindu, remarks that ‘I’ve heard Gandhi, Nehru, and Mountbatten are really tight’. At that, Dil Nawaz humorously wonders that Master Tara Sing will be the only one left to help Jinnah along with his hoard of ‘bleating goats’. All this turns into a happy joke, although Sher Singh, the Sikh friend sitting there feels he has been taunted because of his stuttering habit. The Ayah is offended, but Dil Nawaz says that such jokes are meant to purge friends’ hearts of any misgiving that may persist.

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187 This song was sung by the legendary diva Noor Jahan, the-then-most cherished iconic figure of the Sub-continental cinema. Noor Jahan shifted to Lahore after Partition and ruled Pakistani film and music industry by dint of her unmatched acting and virtuosity in singing till she died in 2002.
From here on Ayah’s love life is brought to focus. Dil Nawaz and Hassan are her most devoted lovers. The Ayah does allow Dil Nawaz to flirt with her and even visits his house on Basant (Lahore’s famous kite-flying festival), but her relationship with him cannot even be surmised as infatuation. At most, this flirtatious behaviour may be deemed as Shanta’s method to save her comradeship with Dil Nawaz. She belongs to the downtrodden class whose members usually measure their safety in terms of the love they accumulate from the people in their vicinity. Whereas, in her relationship with Hassan, it is instinct as well as reason that guides her. The Ayah’s relation with Hassan does not really exist as such from the beginning, rather takes shape with the evolution of the story into the tragic mould.

This complexity in Shanta’s amorous relationship with Dil Nawaz and Hassan is the essential conflict through which Mehta has conceived the simultaneity of the themes of love and betrayal in the film. It also serves as an exposition to judge the contrasting roles of Dil Nawaz and Hassan, as the tragedy begins to unfold. Symbolically envisaging, Shanta’s growing inclination towards docile Hassan – ‘the only voice of reason’ in the story—against her shrinking to estrangement with mischievous Dil Nawaz may suggest earth’s (read Indian land’s) increasing fondness for a possible saviour and waning affection for a rogue exploiter, respectively.

However, Mehta still does not undermine the charm of the character of Dil Nawaz. It is to pose an imposing intellectual challenge to the critics of the choices Dil Nawaz makes in the face of the predicament he faces. The question here is of determining if Dil Nawaz is solely responsible for the wrongs he commits. He has to bear the ruthless assault against his honour, as his sisters are brutally raped and murdered on the train coming to Lahore from Gurdaspur. Their mutilated dead bodies lie scattered in the train and their severed breasts dumped in a sack. The Ayah also refuses Dil Nawaz’s
last-ditch entreaty when he asks for her hand to restrain his savage and lusty vitality. Can he not, therefore, be likened to the runaway lion whose imagery has many times been used in the film to symbolize terror or unleashing of the wrathful inner rage? Such details, in fact, are Mehta’s arguments to rationalise the situation of all the good and bad characters which she has so painstakingly created in the film. Like a classical tragedian, Mehta invokes jealousy/envy as the tragic flaw in Dil Nawaz to illustrate his villainy towards the end of the film.

Again, it serves as an argument that the characters in the film must not be dubbed as outright stereotypes, rather be taken as real living characters whose disposition and orientation has much to do with what they would ultimately do. That is why, in contrast to Dil Nawaz, Hassan’s character gradually assumes a righteous aura. The aspect of the plight of the migrating people he so closely observes hones Hassan’s demeanour, whereas the reality of the Partition that Dil Nawaz encounters demeans him.

However, the element of sheer brutality cannot be over-ruled from the general conduct of the masses at large, as they are driven to compete in rascality with similar emotive thoughtlessness which moves them in felicity. The two contrasting scenes viewed from the rooftop of Dil Nawaz’s house elaborate this notion. First, is the Basant scene, in which the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs all are shown carried away in the rapt enjoyment of outshining one another in kite-flying. The second scene depicts the murder of a Muslim man whose body is torn apart by a horde of unruly Hindu protestors in the middle of the street using two oppositely driven police jeeps.

Outwardly, the horror of this murder scene and Dil Nawaz’s disillusionment determine the tragedy’s advance towards its denouement. But a lot more actually transpires before this episodic turn that sabotages all earnest efforts of the group of the Ayah’s friends to sustain their friendship
even when the scene in the park changes and the people of various communities begin to involve deities in their petty quarrels.\textsuperscript{188} Bitterness does finally bite the unflinching commitment of Ayah’s friends to stand by each other when the time comes, so much so that the inter-communal jokes, which once humoured, now begin to heat up the situation, and the friends pounce upon one another’s throats.

The whole shift of emotions in the conduct of these friends is summarised through a scene that bears sharp contrast to the earlier dinner scene in the Sethna house. All the friends get together in a small restaurant inside the walled area of Lahore. They start discussing in a casual manner as to who among the Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs have the right to the possess Lahore. Interestingly, each friend offers his community’s stance when variably proposing to consider the mercenary, numerical or material strengths of the communities. Soon, they start contemptuously criticizing the sacred elements of each other’s belief system, as if breaking an erstwhile silent commitment which must never be transgressed at any cost.

This is how Mehta generalizes the ambiguous outbreak of the violence. Quite dramatically, she problematizes the causes of violence by pitting the natural, emotional and ethnic bearing of her characters against the conflicting situations they were in. The Butcher’s character best explains Mehta’s insightful handling of this. The Butcher is the one who always delivers offense through his speech and bodily gestures, and can be easily identified with the conspicuously stereotypical mob of the Muslim men who come to abduct the Ayah, so his character and its presentation are worth-scrutinizing. If Hassan in his conduct represents Dil Nawaz’s cunning

\textsuperscript{188} This refers to the fight between Sikhs and the Muslims in the park, where Dil Nawaz appears in the guise of a saint with a telephone to directly contact God about solutions to the problems the people put before him. When a Sikh requests Dil Nawaz to ask God about the outcome for the Sikhs when the British leave India, Dil Nawaz wisely pretends to avert the topic by declaring his call with God got disconnected. The Sikhs become furious that for them, even the Muslim God hung up. The insulting remark leads to a fight between the Muslims and the Sikhs in the park.
apparent self, then the Butcher through his coarse manners and blatantly quarrelsome attitude represents the real inner bestial villain, which Dil Nawaz actually is.

But the Butcher does have ability to feel, too. When he comes to deliver the news of massacre in the train from Gurdaspur, there is an undefined wrath in his eyes on spotting his Hindu and Sikh friends sitting with Hassan before the radio. His voice chokes with grief when he adds that Dil Nawaz’s sisters were also among the passengers. The Butcher is a really dangerous man. He has not been named in the film, yet his actions are not attributed anonymity.

In general, the Butcher represents those zealots who have nothing in terms of familial connections, ethical standards or true understanding of the religious ideals to rein in their potential to annihilate. Besides, such people are unruly, and naturally disposed to assert their scant religiosity. In psychological terms, the violent acts of the people like the Butcher only serve to satiate their own predatory spirit. Whereas, in the heightened sense of religiosity during an anarchic situation they might console their hearts that whatever they do is to seek revenge on behalf of their brethren in religion. If Mehta wished to manoeuvre, she could easily project the Muslim characters as stereotypes, especially in the most powerful scene of the film when the Ayah is abducted. Instead, here Imam Din comes forward to rescue Himmat Ali and the Ayah. To save the Ayah, Imam Din even falsely swears in the name of Allah, a very solemn oath which a Muslim never betrays.

The abduction scene specifically highlights how well Mehta knows and portrays here the intricate socio-political and communal motives behind such instances of violence against women. Depicting the general outbreak of violence against hapless women during the partition through Ayah’s abduction, Mehta has shown ‘how women’s bodies can be made the contested
ground, the very territory upon which notions of subjectivity and communal frenzy are constructed during such turbulent times’. In that, Mehta has also served her gender in highlighting its plight and subaltern position in the subcontinental society(ies), culture(s) and history(ies). Thus, she has urged upon the need of documentation/(re)presentation of the women’s history in the backdrop of the Partition.

Invoking the most contemporary historical approach of the subaltern scholars, Mehta also seeks to prove rape and sexual violence against women to be the ‘strategic weapon of war’ that different communities used against each other in 1947. The film shows just one incident of the transgressions against women, but in its symbolic appeal the Ayah’s abduction belies the claims of the traditional Indian historiography which simplifies and dispels gender violence ‘as private acts, the ignoble conduct of perverts and regrettable excesses of communal violence’. 189

Hassan’s character is another example to counter the objection that Mehta stereotypically portrays characters in Earth. Hassan is the one who makes arrangements for Sher Sing’s family to flee safely from Lahore despite being a Muslim. He also offers to marry the Ayah by relinquishing his belief and becoming a Hindu. Hassan’s heroic character and Imam Din’s positive role towards the end are Mehta’s strong claims to neutrality in Earth. However, Hassan and the Ayah, both are the special cases of the violence through which Mehta actually ‘personalises the global issues of sexuality and nationalism via this bloody history, and thereby situates epic topics at the level of ordinary mundane people’. 190

Overall, Mehta effectively proves through the breaking of bonds among the friends in Earth that the insanity and brutality of the tragic time,

though spontaneous, was yet phenomenally specific. Its causes might be even more complicated than Mehta could project, but her type characters provide several satisfying explanations. For example, in the film there are also those like the Parsis and their servants (Yousaf, Imam Din, Harry, Moti and Muccho) who represent countless others who relented to risk or heavily compromised, and hundreds of thousands of others who are shown to migrate and fortunately could manage to reach safely across the border to their new destinations.

Therefore, *Earth*, is an effective and impressive sequel to other historical works regarding the Partition of India. There are a number of issues that Mehta could not really engage with in detail, though. For example, she hurriedly presents the issues of the lost children, refugees and the fallen women through hasty narration of a Sikh boy Ranna’s account of rape and murder in his village, and through only a bird’s eye view of the sheltering place of the fallen women. All this appears to be more of a contrivance than a well-knit set piece story.

Despite shortcomings, the film obviously has its numerous merits. No matter, ‘the film doesn’t deal with escalating religious animosity pre-1947, but Mehta shows her awareness of territorial struggle’. Rather, Mehta’s use as a category of ‘the open spaces (that) contextualise the locale with its monuments and architecture and capture the past’ makes it a perfect film ‘about colonialism, violence and revenge – the total debasement of the human being’. No doubt, ‘Mehta has chosen to de-mythologize India using conventional narrative cinema, but her cinematic techniques do fit in with the concerns of many transnational filmmakers, especially in her emphasis of the ephemeral and liminal’, and to some extent the film seems to exploit the blend of

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‘melodrama and trauma’. Yet, the creative use of ‘several literary devices ... to subvert realism and to move beyond it’ along with the film’s ‘subtle art of suggestion’ effectively highlight ‘the futility of violence in terms of human loss (which) is not merely in the death toll but the destruction of all finer emotions of life’. The scene with which the film ends leaves but just chaotic memories and feelings:

It is not Shanta’s captive body being dragged out in Earth that is the ending. The image in itself is a powerful one of rapacious hunger and extreme helplessness and lingers in memory. But the real ending is Lenny’s feeling of guilt. A guilt which is not only Lenny’s but should be everyone’s, including Dil Nawaz, the British, the political leaders and the frenzy-driven masses. The individual is superseded by a felt collectivity of guilt at a very human level which is passed on to the viewer.

The basic debate which Earth triggers and revolves around is about the contest over the Indian land and the nature of violence it evolved. It is a very complicated undertaking for a film. In asking a question of space and place, Earth actually problematizes a question of life and of the meanings attached to this life. There are certain preconditions for such an investigation to be authentic. First, it necessitates that the life-history of the (one or many communities of) people be traced through the spatio-temporal organization of their everyday living. Also, it should be a faithful representation of the specific spiritual and normative values which define the distinct socio-cultural bearing of these people in the natural environment they inhabit. Given the religious diversity in India, where the enumeration of the sacred and sacral

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195 Jain, Jasbir, Op. Cit. pp. 54-74
196 Ibid
beliefs of different communities is a challenge, the depiction of peoples’
spiritual connection with land could be a very daunting task. Further
problematic is to evenly represent on screen the pains and sufferings of the
people belonging to different religious communities for a single physical
space (Lahore in Earth’s case), as they fear they may have to relinquish it. A
die-hard struggle is inevitable because such spaces are not merely some
fragments of spaces, as the people take these ‘spaces of the natural
environment as the indispensable other upon whom the(ir) human existence
is dependent.’

True to life portrayal of the people representing different religious
and cultural divisions, and of their spiritual and cultural values as well as the
real feel of the original places in which Mehta’s films are set are the hallmarks
of the Elements trilogy. Besides, consistency with regards to capturing these
attributes within the texture of each trilogy film is a proof positive of Mehta’s
superior creative impulse to covert her experience of real life into art. Yet in
Earth, Mehta makes all these representations possible through a single magic
trick – the Ayah’s symbolic character (as the Indian land), and the circle of her
friends-cum-lovers (belonging to all different communities), and their
commonplace discussions (which centre on genuinely emotional and spiritual
sentiments for the Indian land), and their consequent sufferings.

The notion about India, being a sacred space, is an integral part of the
Hindu mythology and religion. Likewise, the evolution of the Muslims’ sense
of identity through die-hard attachment with the Indian land on religious
basis is also an undeniable historical fact. The official version of Indian history
maintains that the Partition was a political necessity. On the opposite, the
Pakistani historical tradition adopted religion as paradigm to justify that
independence from rule of both the English and the Hindus was inevitable to

\[198\] Ibid. P.15
live according to the principles of Islam. In one of the theories of Partition, entire blame is also put on the ‘divide and rule’ policy of the British.

However, the take on the Partition through ordinary peoples’ notions of temporal and spiritual attachments with land is an insightful paradigm. And what Earth seems to project is also a serious subject of historical inquiry, i.e., when the British whimsically partitioned India, they in fact transformed the individual identities of all the places that got impacted by the end of colonial raj.\(^{199}\) That is why, the departure of the British, dividing India into two states (India and Pakistan), was perceived more ‘as a partition (vibhajan or batwara) rather than the arrival of independence of any kind’ by the majority of the Indians\(^{200}\) (and to an extent by common Pakistanis who saw their ideals crumble at the altar of politics in a state which was achieved in the name of religion).

In fact, what interests the modern historian is not the stress on violence whose character was ‘killing, rape and arson’ that happened at the time of the Partition, but afore and its aftermath. The legacy of the Partition is that of the ‘love-hate relationship, deep resentment and animosity, and the most militant of nationalities’ which translated as the instatement of ‘procedures of statehood, history and particular forms of sociality’\(^{201}\) by elitist individuals and groups. These elitists, e.g., the ‘politicians (or their advisors) or intellectuals of statecraft – in many cases geographers or historians,’ who either seeking ‘popular mandate or legitimacy’ for themselves or ‘posing as

\(^{201}\) Remembering Partition Violence, Nationalism and History in India by Gyanendra Pandey Jan Breman; G.P Hawthorn; Ayesha Jalal; Patricia Jaffery, Atul Kohli; Dharma Kumar, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp 1-20
sole spokesmen of the state or religious-cultural group they are out to serve, express their (own) ways of seeing things’.202

The elitist politics, especially around religion, is the greatest scourge to have befallen the post-colonial states of India and Pakistan. It parochialized history as a phenomenon through the fixed notions of ‘society, nation, state, community, (and) locality. And it beleaguered historiography as a subject in ‘justifying, or eliding, what is seen in the main as being an illegitimate outbreak of violence, and at making a case about how this goes against the fundamentals of Indian [or Pakistani] tradition and history; how it is, to the extent, not our history at all’. Therefore, in recent scholarship, i.e., in Subaltern Studies Project, the attempt is being made to approach violence at the time of Partition not as a trauma but as a locus and language through the personal narratives which relate particular experiences. This may finally help define communities and rediscover their histories through the lived experience of ‘body’ and ‘of a spatial vocabulary’ instead through biased and ‘discrete nationalist historiographies’.203

This is where Mehta intervenes to explore the tension in the flexible spaces, both of history and of communal domains. Earth has its crucial individual importance in the broader historical, nationalist and cultural context(s), which it re-explores from the perspective of the oppressed. Mehta’s choice of ending the film with a highly suggestive scene of the Ayah’s abduction makes this film a special link between the other two of the continuum of her trilogy films, Water and Fire.

203 Gyanendra Pandey, et al. Op. Cit. and “This is our Holocaust”: Deepa Mehta’s Earth and the Question of Partition Trauma’ by Dorothy Barenscott. (http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Spring05_ScreenAngst.pdf)
2.4 *Fire*

Deepa Mehta’s *Fire*, (1998, India; 1996, US, Europe) can be described as an auteur adventure film. It anticipates an extreme subversive radicalism to reorientate the social and historical spectacle of home life in India. *Fire* intentionally seeks to problematize notions of femininity, sexuality, homosociality, nationalism, religio-cultural chauvinism, and history by utilizing a queer plot which is out of shape with traditional representations of Indian womanhood, as it is defined specifically from a majoritarian Hindu perspective. In its realistic import, *Fire* questions the heterosexual idealism in India with regards to the women’s desire for opposite sex by ruthlessly attacking patriarchy. It also makes available the argument of living with one’s choices to other repressed sexual minorities, e.g., gays and lesbians, through the treatment of its content. Such an expansive discursive engagement with the film does not arise merely from the story of the film, but also from a whole sociological context that manifested itself around the post-release conditions and developments, and especially the way it ‘circulated in the public imagination’ in India.\(^{204}\) It also links up further with the current day open activism and ‘political organisation of the sexual minorities’, especially since December 11, 2013 when The Supreme Court ruling reversed the landmark 2009 Dehli High Court order which had decriminalised the homosexual acts.

A few weeks after *Fire* was released in India, the hostile mobs of Shiv Sena vandalized theatres to stop the screening of *Fire*, claiming that it scandalized the Hindu religion by subverting mythological narratives and denigrating religious figures. The film was resubmitted for censor review. However, the film was passed uncut again by the Indian censor board after a long controversial political and legal battle in February 1999 (it was first passed in May 1998). The film’s current stature might have long diminished

under the backlash of political and religious controversy, had it failed to
garner ideological support through initiating the debate on lesbianism and
raising lesbian activism to a level that the activists demanded legal rights. The
role and sympathetic stance of societal radical forces represented through
filmmakers, artistes (most notably the iconic cinematic figure Dilip Kumar),
feminists, and human rights activists have also been crucial in this regard. The
World Socialist Web also launched a campaign to defend Mehta’s
freedom of Expression, so *Fire* has successfully been able to holds up its social
message and impact in India. It puts the ‘judging habits’ of the spectators to
test, and highlights the tension between the forces of progress and tradition
within Indian cinema itself, as ‘cinema is an agent of both these forces’ in the
country.

*Fire* enjoyed huge success at the box office despite pressure and
protest from the Hindu extremist organisations, especially Shiv Sena. The film
was emblematically associated with Mehta’s right of freedom of expression.
Therein, the film reveals the epistemic and political tensions not only between
the diaspora and indigenous consciousness but also between the discursive
categories of the Third and First world nationalities. The transnational reach
of *Fire*, both with regards to its funding, and its post-production promotion
campaign by the director and world media underpin the intersection of the
sexist politics of neoliberal democratic West. This neoliberal democratic West
is forced to safeguard its growing market and political interest in the global
sphere.

In order to map the success of the discursive potential of the film, and
the extent to which it engages with the politics of Mehta’s feminine art which

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highlights the subaltern consciousness of various characters in the film also, it is imperative to anchor the critique of the film through an in-depth analysis of its text. This is important to analyse Mehta’s subversive approach on communal politics in the domains of religion, culture, and history – a commonality in Mehta’s oeuvre. Such an enquiry is most specific to the concerns of this thesis, too.

*Fire* is the story of Radha and Sita who are married to two brothers Ashok and Jatin, respectively. Their sexually capable husbands fail to oblige their sexual needs for various reasons that are revealed as the story progresses. However, Mehta replaces this aspect of their insatiate and failed marital life with the lesbian relationship between the two sisters-in-law who choose to keep their connection and leave their home. Mehta throws out a debate among the public, media and the intellectuals about sanctioning Radha and Sita’s choice in the face of none other if these women must preserve their rightful desire to have a fulfilled life in the tradition-ridden society of India. In that, Mehta does not seem to be aiming at a restive negotiation with the norms of society. She unapologetically depicts the sexual activities of her protagonists. Through such projection of the sexuality of Radha and Sita, Mehta dents the patriarchal hold of Ashok and Jatin who consider their wives incapable of matching their hopes of a blissful marital life. Ashok is indifferent towards Radha because she is barren, and considers that the only reason to maintain a sexual relationship with one’s wife is to have sons. Jatin’s emotional relationship with his wife is hampered by his idealistic delusion that marriage without love cannot be rewarding. He marries Sita only being pressurized by Ashok and their mother.

Deviating from the norm, both these brothers try seeking self-satisfaction in different ways. Ashok surrenders himself to his *Swaminji* (a religious teacher), and aspires to pursue his spiritual destination (*nirvana*) by
taking a vow of celibacy. Jatin, on the other hand, remains involved with his Chinese girlfriend, Julie. Within this context Mehta inweaves the story of Radha and Sita whose love, submission and service to their husbands is all too taken for granted. Radha and Sita sincerely play their roles as traditional housewives. Mehta challenges this concept of duty invested in womanhood and subverts it with Radha and Sita’s lesbian affair later on.

The subplot of the sexual excesses of the servant boy, Mundu, in the sacred space of the home is also an integral part of Mehta’s representational politics in the film. The film also broadens its canvass to include the minority perspective on the majoritarian outlook of the oppressive traditional culture through Julie’s promiscuousness, and socially deprived father’s hatred towards India. The case of Julie’s sexuality is interesting, as seemingly it is also an anomaly regarding Mehta’s commitment to the cause of the subalterns. Julie, being a member of the minority Chinese community, is a subaltern in India, and a liberal outlook or open expression of her sexuality might be her counter-strategy to cope with day-to-day harassment she is subject to. But instead of being given attention to certain aspects of her subalternity, Julie is ‘othered’ as a racial gender stereotype in the film. Given the constraints of the run-time of a film, Mehta has to be content only in showing Julie’s control over her sexuality as a woman from a minority to gain the most exchange value for highlighting the standard subaltern agency of Radha and Sita, and to criticize the majoritarian culture. It denotes the complicated challenge representative artists from Indian sub-continent sometimes have to face because they are often required to map subalternity against the discursive economy of their texts. Nevertheless, Fire involves itself outrightly neither in an anti-patriarchal nor in a pro-lesbian agenda for that matter. Instead, the film realistically posits a case for the humanist authenticity of only those individual choices which, no matter gratifying or
otherwise, must not afflict others, if particularly the fortunes and misfortunes of others are coeval and correlative to an individual’s own prerogatives.

Radha and Sita’s relationship is a lesbian choice, but Mehta builds a case for this relationship through the depiction of an assertive homosocial relationship which is suffocating within the interstices of a traditional and heterosocial framework. No wonder, therefore, the viewers also notice an erratic sympathy for individuals like Jatin (whose liberal viewpoint on spending a carefree life is unwarranted owing to the traditional conduct/lifestyle expected of him as a member of a respected bourgeois family) and Mundu (whose destitute class connection, and inability to hold responsibility of the noble task of raising a family obviously result in his virtual social rejection). Nevertheless, the film upholds a strong stance on the particular choices of the protagonists, especially because the assertion of their right for sexual gratification collides with the repressive politics of culture, and in denying this, the whole society becomes complicit. Mehta reveals this through the metaphorical and suggestive scenes in the film. Therein, the viewer finds Mehta’s stark criticism of India’s anxiety to maintain a dual stance regarding its cultural norms, which are obviously oppressive, and its tension to keep pace with the world outside by maintaining a liberal image. Mehta’s generic politics is an important aspect to study in this regard, as Fire is not only the first outrightly queer-themed film by an Indian director but also because the film’s sexist contrivance remains its framing strength to this day.

Fire proved a grand slam venture by Mehta who was not well-known at the time of the film’s release, though she maintained her artistic stature, and carved out a niche regarding the politics of her art through all her later films. Mehta has experimented with very bold themes in the other two films of her trilogy Earth and Water. Even in Heaven on Earth (2008), she appropriated
religious mythology surrealistcally into the theme of domestic violence, less
to chastise the oppressors than those women who suffer violence as their rite
of passage, perhaps waiting till such moments when gods would descend to
vindicate for them.

With regards to her generic politics in Fire, Mehta seems to have
cashed in on the queer theory’s bandwagon back in 1990s. The influence of
queer theory on Mehta seems stronger due to the fact that her depiction of the
sexuality of the women is overly revealing. Before Mehta only Satyajit Ray
could effectively attend to the homosocial theme in his 1964 film Charulata/The Lonely Wife. However, Mehta’s handling of women’s sexuality is much more
expository at a suggestive level than even the vivid descriptions of sexuality
in Indian culture by Meera Nair in her 1996 American drama documentary
Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love. Even Ismat Chughtai’s short story Lihaaf (The Quilt), from which Fire derives its queer plot does not celebrate the exposition of women’s sexuality the way Fire does. However, Lihaaf (The Quilt) does
signify the authenticity of the queer theme in the film. In fact, the way Mehta
projects the lesbian relationship in Fire serves as the thematic lynchpin
through which she derives authority to critically deal with the questions of the
cultural and nationalist identity of women in India. In this regard, she also
best utilizes some of the options to sugar-coat her bold and bitter take on
reality in the film. For instance, devising the dramatic conflict in Fire, Mehta
puts several essentially cultural dichotomies, such as deprivation, humiliation,
sexual isolation, denial, emotional neglect, threats, intimidation, and blame

During the early 1990s, Queer theory became a very involved subject of critical discussions within the departments of literature and film in the universities of the United States, the United Kingdom and Europe. This critical interest had emerged basically through reasoning about Foucault’s three volume work The History of Sexuality, published in English between 1977 and 1984. Two most important and seminal works regarding Queer theory during the 1990s are Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity, New York, London: Routledge, 1990, and Eve Kosofky Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the Closet, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990. Interestingly, Queer theory has been a controversial subject in Canadian universities and most of the major graduate schools in English across Canada have been averse to offer it to students. It seems even more interesting how possibly Mehta tried to make an attempt at divulging the cultural reserve regarding queer ideology both in Canada (her country of residence) and in India (her home country) by utilizing funds for Fire from Canada and filmic plot from India. Refer to Bruhm, Steven, ‘Queer Theory, Gone Tomorrow’. ESC, 29. 1-2, March/June 2003: 225-32.
versus the women’s lesbian revolt in the film. Further, she complicates the realist representation of the film by melodramatic conventions of the popular Hindi films of Bollywood. In that, positive suggestion of lesbianism is qualified by the pathos attending the women’s plight as well as by some sympathy attaching to the men who are also caught in tradition. This strategy works both ways, i.e, allowing the auteur to connect to her audience while breaking away from the tradition of a popular Hindi film in being explicit about sex, and allowing the people to relate to \textit{Fire} and to its theme rather than outrightly rejecting the film for its foreignness.

In the film’s opening scene young Radha is enjoying a picnic with her parents in a mustard field, and her mother relates to her the story of the mountain people:

A long time ago there were people living high up in the mountains. They had never seen the sea. Though they had heard about it, but never seen it. And this made them feel very sad. Then an old woman in the village said, ‘don’t be sad. What you can’t see, you can see. You just have to see without looking.’

Radha does not understand anything, but her mother’s laugh leaves behind a haunting impression. Immediately after, Sita and Jatin, a newly married couple, are captured in camera from a dark interior, standing face to face in its stone door. Finding Jatin unconcerned, Sita nervously walks away to sit on the stairs outside. But then she catches sight of something fanciful and the camera reveals it to be Taj Mahal built by the emperor Shah Jahan for his beloved wife Mumtaz. The story assumes its realist plan which would actually reveal the ambiguity dramatized in these metaphorical scenes. These two scenes introduce the protagonists, Radha and Sita.
The imagery of the first scene is the most recurrent feature, invoked at all critical moments in the film. It relates to Radha’s sense of ambiguity embedded in a moment of the past. It also establishes a hypothetical affinity between Radha and her mother’s respective views of life, especially because Radha’s mother refers to the difference between ‘looking’ and ‘seeing’ to educate Radha. The difference between ‘looking and ‘seeing’ is an important trope in the film’s suggestive context. This scene underpins typical Mehta style of reversing the historiography as Radha’s tragedy unfolds. Thus, Mehta foregrounds the tragic conflict of the film in history. The Taj Mahal scene reveals Sita’s matter-of-fact approach to seeing things. This is important regarding Sita’s character because Mehta conceives it to subvert the story of her mythical namesake in Ramayana (A Sanskrit epic in which Sita’s character is as an emblem of womanhood, and Sita is unconditionally devoted to her husband Rama). Sita in Fire, however, walks away from her husband and is fancied by a rather concrete evidence of conjugal love and desire, the emblematic Taj Mahal. Sita also confounds her husband by abruptly asking him, ‘don’t you like me’, as if she prefers her identity as a wife. The film establishes its subversive intent right in the beginning.

In Jatin’s home, the welcome is being arranged solely by Sita. She is shown attending to her routine chores, which include tending her mother-in-law (referred to as Biji), and assisting in the kitchen for the family’s take away restaurant business. Radha hurriedly prepares herself before the mirror without even looking into it. This trope of looking into the mirror has also been repeated with several characters in the story. The couple is welcomed into the family. With a very brief and desultory observance of ceremoniousness, Ashok offers a family photograph. He also expresses hope that Biji’s wish of seeing a grandson might be fulfilled finally. Then he abruptly declares that ‘all good things must come to end’. Jatin takes leave to go outside, and the new-bride Sita is escorted to her bedroom. Radha leaves,
requesting Sita to attend to Biji in case she rings the bell. Left to herself, Sita instead dons Jatin’s trousers, mocks puffing at an unlit cigarette, and begins to dance playing the tape recorder. Radha looks reserved more than bemused to look at Sita as she opens the door, and only mentions that Biji has been ringing the bell. Sita rushes along Radha to attend to Biji but the mother-in-law is offended by Sita’s attire. Sita retires to the room, and instead of showing any signs of wonderment or fear, resumes a seductive pose before the mirror.

This is a prelude to the rising action of the film. Mehta foregrounds the contrast of the budding mischievousness of the new bride with the repressed anima of the old bride of the house. Radha is only a silent and non-judgmental participant in this part of the film. She understands that Sita would learn the decorum of the house in due time, but Radha is mistaken. Sita is a different sort. Sita does not just think differently, but also does not take clues deliberately; she is affable, though. She has grown in a different time than Radha, and her sensibility has been shaped according to modern times. The tragic conflict is much bigger than the depiction of this generation gap between the two brides, nonetheless, and it starts revealing as Sita’s character casts its intended spark while the issues pile up for her disillusionment with the concept of marital bliss. Radha has already matured to finally accept her own suffering, yet Mehta re-plays her affliction in the married life as parallel to Sita’s, such that the different reasons of their distress portend a similar fate and unite them in a single cause of asserting their right to a life of their choice.

The focus of the story shifts and Jatin’s and Ashok’s extra-familial preoccupations are exposed in the two following scenes. Jatin is applying nail polish to Julie’s toes. Julie is an Indian-born-Chinese girl who runs her own beauty parlour. She was not willing to marry Jatin merely because, getting custom-bound, she does not want ‘all excitement’ to ‘fizzle out’ of their
relation. Julie through her get-up-and-go maintains her charm which renders Jatin non-committal about Sita. However, Mehta shows Sita’s character equally poised in traits to Julie’s. Sita will soon prove herself no less audacious than Julie. The only difference between the two is that Sita finds herself automatically bound to tradition while Julie is absolutely free to make choices in life.

Mehta, no doubt, is using irony in relation to the figure of Sita as the traditional perfect submissive wife/woman in order to show the gap between the mythic ideal and the present reality. But it is also interesting to note here that even in Ramayana, the mythical character of Sita also bears an extreme potential of asserting her will when she realises that her life of self-abnegation, sacrifices and commitment to her husband has been of no avail. Sita is abducted by Ravana and on being recovered by her husband, Rama, goes through the Agni Preeksha (trial by fire) to falsify slander against herself and prove her chastity and fidelity to her husband. She is yet banished into a forest by her husband who knows she is pregnant. Sita contains her indignation and obeys her husband’s commands silently. She returns after 14 years with her sons, Lav and Kush, but is offended to find the same lack of faith in her husband regarding her character, so she stamps her feet on earth which opens up and Sita requests the mother Earth to take her away. She no longer listens to the entreaties by her husband and enters the earth. Curiously though, this aspect of Sita’s character is less stressed in the readings and reviews of Ramayana. Mehta has included another particular instance (mentioned later on) to try projecting a re-reading of the Ramayana through Sita’s perspective in Fire. The screening of Ramayana is also an important motif in the film.

The next scene shows Ashok in company with the Swamiji, listening to a sermon about ‘desire night’ which is ‘the love of power’ and ‘aspiration
light’ which is the ‘power of love’. This is a glimpse of how Ashok has been getting his training for his years-long practice of celibacy. Ashok’s character is shown as a benevolent, generous man. He fulfils all his familial duties, being ceremoniously religious and claiming a lot of respect as well. Even Sita is inspired by his kindness, but is just curious about his obsession with having a baby. When Sita learns from Radha that she is barren, Sita is even more impressed by Ashok, and calls him a saint because he did not marry a second wife to make Radha’s life insufferable. Radha cannot but concur.

Attached to the Kapoors’ take-away restaurant is Jatin’s video shop where he illegally sells porn movies to selective customers. Only Mundu knows about this side business, but none of the Kapoors except Biji knows how Mundu defiles the sanctity of their home by masturbating to these porn videos in front of her whenever she is left into his charge as none is home. Biji can only agonize over his act unable to convey to others that Mundu plays porn instead of Ramayana, as he is instructed to do. The familial ethics are so strongly implemented in this house that Sita cannot apprehend such an offense being committed even when she finds Biji perturbed and Mundu overly sweating upon entering the room. Mundu refers to the Agni Preeksha scene running on the screen that might have perturbed Biji.

Radha and Sita join each other at the terrace, overlooking the road beneath. Nothing very crucial happens in this scene except that Radha notices Sita’s frustration about Jatin’s habit of coming late. Next morning, Ashok talks Julie’s matter over with Jatin who was given full authority to marry Julie, yet he consented to marry Sita after Julie refused his proposal. But Jatin refuses to take the blame because his life was made unbearable by Ashok and Biji to get married and have children. He even refuses to accept that he does not fulfil his duty as a husband, or does not give ‘a chance to Sita’ because he was rendered choiceless, by virtue of which the liability of Sita’s plight does not lie
with him alone. Instead, Jatin provokes Ashok about ignoring his own duty to Radha by being overly devoted to Swamiji. Although Ashok’s practice of celibacy is not mentioned, yet Ashok slaps Jatin for his insolence.

Arguably, Jatin might have suffered an emotional loss in that he could not marry Julie, yet he is conspicuously satisfied that he married a traditional girl whose future subsistence, at least, is secure in his home, and that is exactly what it finally comes to mean. That is why both Ashok and Jatin seem to have no scruples at all. The emotional and sexual gratification is the prerogative of men only. Nevertheless, conscience is the only quality in man that cannot be conditioned, so Ashok asks for forgiveness from Radha, admitting that his choices made life difficult for her. Radha selflessly consoles Ashok, saying ‘what is there to forgive’. Radha’s selfless attitude reflects her faith in tradition, which demands sacrificial and sacred devotion to patriarchy.

After all Jatin does take chances with his wife. He callously makes love to Sita, dutifully informs her that she might bleed, and sleeps. Sita scrubs blood from the bed-sheet. On the other end in Ashok’s bedroom, Radha is being utilized for practicing self-control by her husband, an ordeal of a different kind of violence against her body she has been experiencing for thirteen years of her married life. Radha, as an object of Ashok’s desire, lies next to him every night so that Ashok can resist all temptations of her body to gain spiritual purification. Radha’s desire does not matter. Ashok is only ‘turning a misfortune into fortune’ because Radha, anyway, is a barren woman. The viewers do notice indifference to Radha’s suffering on Ashok’s part, as if his vow of celibacy is a scourge that Radha herself half invoked upon them as a married couple. After the ritual Radha leaves for her separate bed, and the image of the mustard field juxtaposes, as if all Radha’s dreams of conjugal bliss are ascribed to this image at the moment. Radha asks her mother ‘when’, and her mother’s replies, ‘very soon, Radha’.
Compared to Radha, Sita behaves differently, though she takes her time to understand things before she can react. Sita does not suffer silently. She confronts Jatin. Considering her virgin charms must have left some impression on her husband, she asks Jatin if he will come early. Jatin’s response is as cold as ever. Instead, Jatin offers her unsolicited suggestions to try wearing mini-skirts, implying sarcasm that perhaps she might find him attracted to her then. Sita is obviously dishumoured, so she directly asks if he is occupied somewhere else. Pricked by her bold enquiry of his independent way of living, Jatin offers Sita to occupy herself with ‘knitting, taking up some needle work or beauty course’. Sita hurls his wallet at him in which Jatin keeps a photograph of Julie. Jatin is least concerned about the exposure of his extra-marital affair to his wife. But he is mistaken about Sita. She also laughs all her concerns away. She even heartily enjoys Swamiji’s affliction with his ‘too-large testicles’, as Jatin and Ashok argue over Ashok’s decision to give money for Swamiji’s operation. Here Jatin confronts Ashok audaciously because the matter under discussion affects him monetarily. He hopes to voice Radha’s concerns for this extra burden on family’s income, yet Jatin is so blind to what really plagues Radha. He knows well that Radha is unhappy just because of Swamiji’s teachings, but he does not challenge Ashok’s patriarchal authority because women’s plight is a given of his traditional upbringing. In fact, Jatin uses his idealism only to fend for his own wayward attitude otherwise he is utterly inconsiderate and selfish in his dealings towards Sita and Radha. The course of events will prove that the same is true for Ashok’s spiritual idealism, too.

The spectacle of the wrong being done to Radha is a very important point for the climax of the film. Radha may be earnestly helping Ashok in his struggle for his destiny because this is how the role of a traditional housewife is enshrined in Hinduism, and she does not show any obvious reaction to Ashok’s heartlessness. Therefore, Mehta establishes her subaltern agency to
record her response to her oppression through various metaphors she refers or reacts to in her speech. While shopping out in the market Radha refers to the proverb ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach’ as an English saying, implying she must have been able to make her husband happy if the proverb held any relevance to the Indian culture. But when Sita relates her mother’s favourite quote that ‘a woman without a husband is like plain boiled rice – bland, unappetizing, useless’, Radha readily admits it to be an Indian saying, adding also that she likes plain boiled rice.

Seemingly trivial, yet this talk between the sisters-in-law is a common day-to-day conversation where women do convey their various misfortunes to their fellows, assured that only here they will find sympathy and that their trust will not be betrayed by cross-questioning. Sita is left shocked and bewildered as to how unpretentiously Radha breaks her reserve. Only now, when the ritualistic performance of the night is repeated, the viewers understand that Radha is denied gratification of her desire even when she does not want to suffer on Ashok’s account. She poses a baffling question to her righteous husband if he would treat her the same way as he does now, in case she could bear children. Ashok is so clear on the point that without a single moment’s reflection he blurts out ‘no’, and later refers to a woman’s obligation, reminding Radha that as his wife she is helping him to realise his spiritual destination. He is concerned that he cannot fail the effort of his Swamiji who helps him every day to come closer to his destination, yet is so blind to even acknowledge how much sacrifice he has been exacting from his wife.

Radha and Sita again meet at the terrace. Radha feels sorry for Sita that Jatin is not home, yet Sita seems reconciled with her situation. Instead, Radha still consumes herself in her silent grief, and she shies away even from the exposure of what saddens her. Sita does not allow herself to be pitied
upon. However, both Radha and Sita are somewhat apprehensive by now of some affinity between their situations, so they again resort to metaphoric language. Sita remarks, watching a wedding procession on the road beneath that ‘someone is getting married’, and Radha responds, ‘yes, again someone’. They communicate a knowing glance, and in a moment’s reflection Sita grasps Radha’s predicament. In the next scene Radha finds Sita weeping. Radha tries to pacify Sita embracing her, thinking Sita is missing home, but Sita’s affliction is greater than missing familial affection. She kisses Radha’s lips with such an intense demanding look in her eyes that Radha reflexively submits. The sensation of strange emotions is strange for Radha who immediately releases herself from Sita’s arms and leaves. Alone, Radha touches her lips as she stands before the mirror. The trope of seeing and the image of mustard fields are invoked once again, and young Radha is agitated to visualise that her mother is crying. Radha’s father says that her mother is happy, but Radha’s mother insists: ‘Can’t you see what the fields have become?’ Young Radha fails to figure anything out, and the mother advises, ‘don’t look so hard, just close your eyes and then open them slowly, you’ll see’.

Afflicted by the instinctive desire, Radha tries to approach Ashok only to feel more ignominious as Ashok is asleep and would not honour her feelings even if he were awake. Radha remains woebegone. Next scene invokes the trope of seeing again. Sita requests Radha to oil her hair, and looks intently at Radha who naturally feels shy but returns Sita’s glance and even represses a smile. At the very moment Mundu opens the door to complain that Biji spat on his face. The scene dissolves into the next one in Julie’s beauty parlour where Jatin and Julie are vehemently kissing each other. Through these scenes the contrast of the exposure of one’s sexuality in the private and the public space is accentuated, with the danger of discovery attached to it. However, Mehta would show later how tradition winks at stark realities which must be actually more disturbing if sanction to societal norm is
sacrosanct. Here on, the film piles controversies upon controversies. Mehta sets a sequence of contrasting scenes, each one with built-in paradoxes. She exacts her focus on the notion of the religious rituals, and the first one she takes on to illustrate her stance is the ritual of *Karva Chauth*.²⁰⁹

Sita expresses her frustration regarding following the customs and rituals, and admits that she has to observe the fast as she has always had to follow traditions. She says, ‘Somebody just has to press my button, this button marked tradition, and I start responding like a trained monkey.’ Radha’s disbelief in the sanctity of the tradition is even greater, and she expresses it more elaborately. Radha relates to Sita the mythic story of the *Karva Chauth*, in which a selfless and devoted wife can reclaim the well-being as well as the love of her husband only because she observes the *Karva Chauth* fast. Mundu and Biji are listening to the story, too, but the impact of Radha’s sarcastic tone is lost entirely on them. Only Sita grasps the full intent and purpose of Radha’s narration, and that is why she keeps interposing with her comments and questions, like she admires the queen in *Karva Chauth* but declares the king ‘a real jerk’, and asks why the queen could not leave the king if he did not trust her loyalty. Mundu provides at that ‘once you are married you are stuck for ever, like glue; sad but true’. Radha, however, takes her question correctly and advances just a half approval to what Sita expects of her as an answer, saying ‘I don’t know, she didn’t have any choices’. At that Sita adds, ‘we can find choices’. She wistfully longs for a glass of water, apparently to amuse, but she immediately receives Biji’s scorn and Mundu’s remark that ‘Sita madam is too modern’.

²⁰⁹ It is an Indian festival of ritualistic celebration by married women with a daylong fast without water and food for the long life of their husbands. By suffering on their husbands’ behalf the women express their love and devotion for them. The fast is broken after sighting the moon and taking blessing from the husband. This annual festival is celebrated after the full moon in the month of *Kartik*. The month of *Kartik* overlaps October and November.
Mehta continues to demystify the ritual by juxtaposing the reality of *Karva Chauth* with the reality of the situation, as to how much value the male and female characters in the film attach to the concept of the tradition. Jatin is taking dinner with Julie’s family. Julie’s father, a member of the minority Chinese community, is scornful because of an unfulfilled life in India which is so poor, backward and custom-ridden. Mehta does refer to a possible reason that Julie’s father’s sense of inferiority, perhaps, was nurtured due to the wrong decision of his working class parents who migrated to India instead of Australia or Canada. Yet, Jatin instead of confronting him seems approving of Julie’s father’s views, whereas back at his home, the slightest self-reproach for being idiotically ritualistic by Jatin’s wife, Sita, did not go unnoticed by his mother, and even by their servant, Mundu.

Through Julie’s father’s remarks, Mehta passingly touches upon the obvious racial or territorial antagonisms that the people of a minority community face in day-to-day life in India. The Indians refuse to take blame for such prejudices on their part, ascribing these to the politics between India and China. Julie’s father’s concerns are genuine as they reflect the reality of his life in India which claims to be culturally liberal and politically plural. However, Julie’s sexual involvement with Jatin and her views about individual independence and ambitions have been employed by Mehta just to convey a different import on the film’s theme, i.e., rendering Indian women’s experience of their oppression more related to their ethnicity and race.210

Radha and Sita honestly observe their fast, and Sita even apologises if she sounded too profane to Radha when she unthinkingly comments that she...

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Ashok should also observe a fast for *Swamiji*. Sita does not regret it when Radha does not permit her to drink water without getting her husband’s blessing, as the time of the fast has already finished. Since Jatin is not home, so Radha herself offers Sita water from her own glass. The contrast of Jatin’s inability to defend India’s obvious backwardness in a public space with the way women preserve their spirituality, even in their extreme privacy, also adds to the figurative appeal of the film.

Mehta puts Radha and Sita’s transgression within this wider context of their oppression. Sita, in her deliriousness, goes to Radha’s bedroom. Radha, all too-clear about Sita’s intentions, gives in to the demands of the body as well. When Sita asks afterwards if they did anything wrong, Radha categorically rejects the notion, saying, ‘No’. Mehta dwells on the lesbian affair later to make it an independent plotline in the text. It must be noticed that Biji gazes apprehensively while Sita stops to button up her blouse coming out of Radha’s room. Next morning, Radha and Sita show excessive fondness for each other, as they put bangles on each other’s wrists, and Mundu only amuses himself watching them doing so.

Next, Radha and Sita perform a feat of sexual gaiety in a park during picnic with the family. Sita massages Radha’s feet seductively. Yet, it appears just a routinely affectionate act on Sita’s part to express regard to her elderly sister-in-law, and Ashok feels ‘lucky to have such a good family’. The depiction in public space clearly refers to the contrast between the private and public space, as if ironically it is the public space only where all the excesses regarding sexuality can be carried out without being noticed. Not always necessarily the case, however, Mehta does intend to impress her point also as to how easily the outmoded bourgeois norms of a repressive society can be/may have been twisted whenever men and women wished to accommodate their excesses which in Western societies are often taken as the
obvious signs of queerness. As if to gauge the extent to which her message can sustain and her audiences can empathise with the two characters or credit the women’s desire and defection as plausible in real life terms, Mehta even resorts to extreme eroticism in Radha and Sita’s lesbian relationship.

Radha and Sita grow so keen for proximity that they look for opportunities to be alone. They appear anxious for their husbands to leave the house. Sita lustfully licks a droplet of sweat from Sita’s leg, and they kiss each other overpowered by the frenzy of desire while playing hotch-potch on the terrace. They take a step further and expose their relationship when after a dance performance on a popular Hindi song, the camera shows them sink on the floor and captures Biji’s anguished reaction. The camera even captures Mundu’s feet behind the curtain, voyeuristically observing Radha and Sita involved, supposedly, in the sexual activity. Mundu’s sexuality which is actually considered non-existent in the household is another sequel to the theme of repression, regarding an individual’s sexuality, and reflects, not erratically though, on Mundu’s subaltern agency. Mundu is shown oppressed by his class and poverty. Therefore, the plotline is non-judgemental about Mundu’s sexual excesses, too. Mundu’s character in its suggestive import conveys much more about the possibilities of excesses within the private space of the home than what Mehta has depicted in the film. Sohini Ghosh has interpreted this dance performance scene, as Mehta has employed the trope of cross-dressing here, to signify the dominant and recessive roles of Sita and Radha, respectively, in their lesbian relationship. This dance performance scene in *Fire* in its suggestive appeal is intended to subvert the utopian import of the song and dance performances in the romantic Hindi films, too.211

However, the film balances its action carefully all the while, and the theme of disregard to ritualistic concept of womanly duties also develops

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parallel to Radha and Sita’s sexual affair. For example, Radha starts turning down Ashok’s demands. Radha’s concern for her own beauty conspicuously changes, too, as now she sits before the mirror to wear makeup. Radha also refuses, when Ashok asks her to feed Biji, demanding he do it himself. She even boldly conveys to Ashok that ‘the concept of duty is overrated’ when he inquires why she didn’t respond to his call. Radha’s changed behaviour is so unnoticeable that Ashok is not alarmed even when Radha refuses to lie beside him for his ritualistic performance to control desire. Jatin, on his part, is too dumbfounded to figure out anything out of Sita’s indifference which he is able to relate, at the moment, only to Sita’s coming to terms with the routine of married life. Ashok and Jatin’s lives continue unaffected. Ashok remains unconcerned and Jatin’s whole attention is taken up by his illegal business and extra-marital affair.

Only Biji and Mundu are aware of the women’s strange behaviour. Radha and Sita visit the shrine of a sufi saint, Nizam-ud-din Oliya, leaving Biji in the care of Mundu. On return Radha catches Mundu masturbating to the porn movie, and rebukes and thrashes him. He first pleads innocence for his offense, claiming it to be the only recreation he can afford for his tireless service to the family. When he cannot pacify Radha’s anger, he resorts to blackmail and conveys in undertone his knowledge about the ‘hanky-panky’ between her and Sita. Radha tries to get him out of the house, but Ashok is sympathetic, as he understands that ‘mistakes in our soul’s journey are inevitable’. But the fact remains that he does not oblige Radha’s opinion, and when Radha insists, Ashok is offended, as if his sense of judgment is being questioned, and refuses to sack Mundu. Interestingly, Ashok’s behaviour is very stern at the occasion to snub his wife, whereas he is never so assertive towards Jatin whenever the latter disregards Ashok’s familial authority on several occasions.
Mundu, contrary to the expectation, is only emboldened because now the women of the house know their vulnerability, too. He starts throwing clues about his chauvinist intent. Earlier on, Mehta revealed ‘a rare moment of [his] subjectivity’ while Sita narrated the Karva Chauth story. Mehta changed the narrative into a ‘kitschy visual narrative’, in which Mundu played the King as Radha’s husband in his imagination. That is the only indication in the text so far that Mundu had a crush on Radha, but Mundu never did anything that might amount to harassing the women. Now Mundu openly harasses Radha, finding her alone with him in the kitchen by singing a popular Hindi song Bol Radha Bol Sangam ho ga key hi (speak out Radha if we would be able to unite). Obviously, Mehta depicts how vulnerable the women become even at the hands of the destitute servants, if they happen to lose face by any means. Mundu knew Radha and Sita’s relationship all along, but now he is emboldened because Radha’s familial status is tarnished in his view, as her decision of sacking Mundu was turned down by her husband.212

However, Mehta concentrates on Radha’s feelings of guilt because Radha does not display any signs of being fearful. Musing on the terrace, she confides to Sita: ‘You know, Mundu did what gave him pleasure. He thought only about himself; not about Biji, not about any of us. Is it so bad to be that selfish? I am not so different from him’. Sita is already brave enough, and reminds Radha not to be terrorized by Mundu. This is how Mehta even brings clarity that Radha and Sita seem to have reached an unstated decision about their lesbian choice. Sita insolently rejects Jatin’s suggestion for having a baby when he forwards this suggestion after he is just back from a chastising session with the Swamiji. In fact, Mundu had disclosed Jatin’s illegal business to divert Ashok’s anger when he feared he might be sacked, so Ashok took both of them to Swamiji for moral purification. The impact of Swamiji’s

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212 So like the erratic representation of the Chinese characters, the film assigns both ‘vulnerability and agency’ to Mundu’s character as well. Ibid. Pp. 111-144
sermon is immediately lost when Jatin is provoked, but Sita fights back when Jatin slaps her. Radha defies Ashok outrightly as well after the secret is known to Ashok. Radha stands Ashok’s blames, but owns her crime boldly and tells Ashok clearly that she desires Sita’s body. Ashok tries to subdue her lust by kissing her, and finally leaves her to burn in flames when her sari catches fire. The image of the mustard field is invoked in its full intent now and Radha’s disillusionment with the tradition is complete.

The lesbian theme was severely attacked even by a staunch feminist Madhu Kishwar who launched several charges against Mehta, regarding the depiction, content, and her mercenary intentions behind the film. Kishwar claimed that Mehta not only attacked the ‘Hindu culture’, and Hindu family’ but also tried to tarnish the image of the sacred Hindu texts. Madhu even claimed that ‘the likes of Deepa Mehta are indeed playing with Fire, in a way not very different from Shiv Sena’s fireworks. The politics of both is cashing in on, or stroking the sense of inferiority among the Hindus’. Madhu’s remarks obviously seem to address the essentialist image of the film. However, different critics have dealt with the depiction of the lesbian theme, analysing it creatively through discourse and judgment. Two strong views prevail in this regard.

For instance Gayatri Gopinath argues, ‘That at least in the middle-class urban Indian context that Mehta details, it is precisely within the cracks and fissures of rigidly heteronormative arrangements that queer female desire can emerge. As in Chughtai’s text, the attraction between Radha and Sita is enabled by those spaces of sanctioned female homosociality legislated by

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normative sexual and gender arrangements’. Ranta Kapur, from the opposite perspective, holds:

I do not agree that the film is making an unambiguous statement that the women fall into a lesbian relationship as a result of bad marriages ... Mundu was there for the taking – he was ready and willing, if only Radha had made the first overture.

Sohini’s analysis is slightly different but seconds Ranta Kapur’s point, as Sohini claims that ‘the trouble with the ‘bad-husband-cause-lesbianism’ interpretation is that it casts Sita and Radha as victims to the total disregard of their will and agency in initiating and sustaining what turns into a passionate love affair’.

However, the best approach to deal with the stark exposition of women’s sexuality in Fire seems to read it as Mehta’s provocative politics of art. Mehta desisted herself from the pro-lesbian activism, and even criticised certain lesbian and gay organisations for hijacking the film’s message. In turn, she was criticised by gays and lesbians because their cause was betrayed by Mehta. Mehta had made it clear back in December 1998 that her film was not about lesbianism, when certain organisations, like Sakhi and Sangini, joining the protest for Fire seemed bent on advancing their cause of freedom and were claiming a lot of media attention, too. She is on record to have said that ‘I can’t have my film hijacked by any organisation. It is not about lesbianism. It’s about loneliness, about choices’. She even claims that she wanted to provoke the fundamentalists.

Despite such a categorical stance, the members of the gay and lesbian community felt ‘rigorously exploited and commodified’ and severely criticised Mehta. For example, V. S. blamed that outside the country Mehta was selling the film ‘through gay and lesbian channels’ and was collecting awards for the film’s ‘supposedly progressive depiction of women rebelling against hetero-patriarchal oppression’, but inside India, Mehta desisted from confessing that \textit{Fire} had any lesbian connection. For that matter, Mehta even reportedly said that ‘she would be devastated if her daughter turned out to be a lesbian’. These and other reservations of the lesbians, regarding the film’s failure to conscientiously depict the lesbian protagonists, their ‘immense frustration and tension’ caused in carrying on a homosexual relationship in a heterosexual society, etc., might be valid.\textsuperscript{218} Perhaps, the activists were demanding a ‘Western’ solution of triumphant individual choice that Mehta knew would not work in the Indian context. Thus, her injection of guilt set against the oppressive circumstances of the two women garners pity for them from an Indian audience despite the shocking display of overt female desire.

Assumedly, therefore, Mehta has herself confused the categorization of \textit{Fire} as tragic or trendy in problematically orientating the lesbian relationship against its consequences. She wants her characters to be pitied like the ones in a tragedy of fate. That is why she assigns her characters guilt as well. At the same times, she gives her protagonists a strong will to own their crime and stand by their choice. This may fall short of total vindication and salvation at the end in that it leaves the women in a victim position, but it also wins a partial victory for them in causing audiences to give these women their sympathy. Thus Mehta’s ‘politics of convenience’ (as the lesbians call it) is an integral part of the internal workings of the text and of her anticipations

regarding the likely effects of Fire on audiences, the latter discernible through reading the film in a socio-cultural context. In fact, the essentialist interpretation of the text is important, yet it needs to be informed by a perspective that combines the aspects of the discourse and of the culturalist approach. Otherwise Mehta’s true intent behind the text is not revealed. For example, Gayatri Gopinath seems to have missed Mehta’s point of view entirely as she discusses Fire from the perspective of the discourse only:

The dichotomies through which the film is structured – between Biji and Radha, saris and jeans, silence and speech, self-denial and self-fulfilment, abstinence and desire, tradition and modernity – implicate it in a familiar teleological narrative of progress toward the individual freedom offered by the West, against which “the non-West” can only be read as pre-modern.

Gopinath further elaborates on this point by commenting about Fire criticism, especially in US where the film has been used ‘as an occasion to replay colonial constructions of India as a site of regressive gender oppression, against which the West stands for enlightened egalitarianism’.219

On the other hand, Sujata Moorti sums up Fire’s culturalist image by pointing out how it was received in India:

The multivalent reception of Fire in India is most usefully seen as an arena wherein a number of discourses around femininity, sexuality, and modern nationalism intersect and feed upon each other. The various articles and commentaries presented radically polarized understandings of the function of cinema and of Fire’s representations of middle-class Indian women. These responses can be understood only in the context of the difficult shifts and

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uneasy negotiations that mark the construction of modern India; the different valences accorded to gender, sexuality, and religion in competing definitions of Indianess.”

It is the subversive power of Mehta’s politics of art that she has been able to elicit so divergent responses regarding her oeuvre, especially Fire. In any case, Mehta builds a very strong case of women’s suppression, and she does so by skilfully subverting art with genre, reality with tradition, and societal politics of patriarchy and religious culture through depiction. All these aspects of her subversive agenda are most notable in the way she uses the motif of Ramayana in the film. Mundu is always required to watch Ramayana with Biji and Mundu is the one who holds least regard for it. Again, Mundu is the one to be chastised through it and he cannot be. Ashok who loves Ramayana most can never understand it fully. The scene where the Agni Preeksha (trial by fire) scene in Ramayana is being performed in the presence of Swamiji who is sitting among his male and female disciples, Mehta even subverts the narrative’s interpretation from a purely patriarchal perspective as well. In this performance Sita is shown emerging unharmed out of the flames and her husband acknowledges her to be chaste, but even then banishes her. Swamiji cries and utters ‘poor Ram’, indicating that it was hard for Ram to separate from his beloved wife. In the same scene, a woman sitting among the audience is shown weeping as if for Sita whose plight is altogether ignored.

In general, an interesting thing to mention with regards to the Elements trilogy is as to how ruthlessly the same elements of nature, water, earth and fire, annihilate the same emotions which they nurture in the hearts of their cherishers in the films Water, Earth and Fire, respectively. Water takes

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the life of Kalyanai whereas its image always haunts the narrative as a redeemer from a life of sins, disbelief and dejection. Similarly, the passion of all the characters in the film *Earth* to safeguard the integrity of earth leaves their lives divided and hearts scared forever. The same happens in *Fire* as well. Fire’s metaphor used as the kindler of a life-sustaining desire is revoked as a self-contradictory force which ‘devours and destroys’ what to Radha was ‘the entire world’\(^{221}\).

The *Elements* trilogy, embraces a deeper historical background, documenting the formation, evolution and resistance of the subaltern consciousness in India. In particular Mehta engages with the representations of family, class, ethnicity, gender and community, and projects the stories and her analyses of the resistance of the subaltern subjects in transnational, diasporic and global public spheres. For this discursive investigation into particular categories of the subaltern, her work appears relevant to the most contemporary scholarship in Cultural and Post-colonial studies, as these discourses are particularly interested in identifying discursive domains and strategies which jettison the bounds of both nations and states. Therefore, Mehta’s films draw a lot of academic attention, especially by the diasporic critics of Bollywood.

\(^{221}\) *Sawamiji* preaches in *Fire* that desire devours and destroys the whole world.
DECIPHERING HISTORY; RELIGIO-CULTURAL POLITICS: THE
PHYSICAL ROOTS AND SPIRITUAL PURSUITS OF BAPSI
SIDHWÁ’S FICTION

3.1 Sidhwa and Her Art

Bapsi Sidhwa (born in 1938 in Karachi) is arguably Pakistan’s finest internationally acclaimed English writer who has given distinct identity to Pakistani English fiction.\textsuperscript{222} Even in times to come, Sidhwa’s works will continue serving as reference points in debates on the individual status of Pakistani Literature in English.\textsuperscript{223} Her work has special significance with regards to the region’s history, topography and ethos. It is mostly viewed with relevance to the creative representations of the traumatic incident of India’s partition in 1947 in the writings of those first generation writers who paid attention ‘to the human dimensions of this major historical event and to the huge human cost it entailed’. She could emotionally relate to the plight of those who suffered loss because as a child she had experienced the collective life-style of common Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in Lahore.\textsuperscript{224} No anthology on the English literary traditions in India and Pakistan, or for that matter on Commonwealth or World English literature can, therefore, claim to be quintessential if it overlooks discussions on Sidhwa works.

\textsuperscript{223} The term ‘Pakistani Literature’ was for the first time introduced by Dr. Alamgir Hashmi in the preface to his pioneering book Pakistani Literature: The Contemporary English Writers (ed.) Dr Alamgir Hashmi, first published in New York by World University Service in 1978 and later in Islamabad by Gulmohar Press, 1987. Although the book serves less to critically base its debate through the content of the represented works in it to highlight a coherent structure of Pakistani Literature in English, yet it survives as an important document to have initiated a cause for its own sake.
\textsuperscript{224} Urvashi Butalia, ‘Partition’ in Poddar, Prem & Johnson, David (eds.) A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literatures in English, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, (2005), pp. 374-377. Butalia also mentions the names of some of the notable writers who had directly witnessed and later faithfully documented the ordinary peoples’ trauma and their stories of afflictions during partition in a list which includes: ‘Saadat Hassan Manto, Mehr Niçar Masroor, Intizar Hussain, Arafat Fatima, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Khushwant, Amrita Pritam, Krishna Sobti, Bisham Sahni, Quratalain Hyder, Ismat Chughtai, Sabitri Roy, Sabitri Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Ashoka Gupta’. Sidhwa’s name among all these writers whose literary stature is unquestionably acknowledged is a proof-positive of the representative nature of her art.
Sidhwa is also responsible for enriching international awareness for the Parsi community and religion. The Parsis in India have always sought to mix with other communities, maintaining their religious identity only as a private affair. Sidhwa’s novels, for the first time, have voiced their concerns and motives. In so doing, Sidhwa has highlighted that sticking to their much private disposition is the Parsis’ strategy of survival and a method of preserving their religion in a communal and global context. In that, she has done her bit to promote the cause of her community.

She is admittedly not the first or the only renowned author of English works from Pakistan. There were other notable names like Ahmed Ali, Zulfiqar Ghose, and Hanif Qureshi with whom she joined efforts in bringing name and shape to the body of Pakistani literature and some younger generation compeers, e.g., Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie. The compassion, honesty and creativity which she has employed in her works to bring essentially Pakistani life to literature brand her primarily as a Pakistani, and then as a revisionist historian, staunch humanist, distinguished Parsi or a vibrant diasporic writer.

A thorough scrutiny of her work led to the discovery that Sidhwa is a fictional chronicler who subverts as she takes on in her work the tradition and progressive spirit of Pakistani Urdu Literature. Mainstream Urdu historical novels, best represented by the most read writings of Sidhwa’s contemporary Nasim Hijazi that focus on the Golden Age of Islam and chivalric-cum-militant attributes of Muslim warriors, especially those who ruled in India, were obviously a thorough distortion of history. This fiction supported the cause of the authoritarian narrative that Pakistani elitist and nationalist historiography had adopted. The main thrust of Urdu literature had also been

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225 The works of these other writers are centred largely on the issues of nationalism, race, immigration, sexuality, differences between Western and Eastern ways of life, and most recently on experimentation about exploring and defining self and collective identity both in the local and global framework through the cultural image that these works carry.
on entrenching traditional stereotypes of women and their appropriate social role in their various gendered capacities. Working within such a milieu, even the progressives were not free of bias. They, contrary to all ideological claims, did not accommodate among them even Manto who is considered the staunch most anti-partition artist both in India and Pakistan. Manto’s stark exposure of women’s sexuality in his writings was rejected for obscenity. Siddhwa got around the problem of acceptability by choosing English as the appropriate medium for her themes. Writing during the 1980s, the choice of medium and peculiarity of themes also helped Siddhwa embrace the evolutionary spirit of the English literary tradition in India, and thus cash in on its popularity, as Veena Naregal puts it:

The great visibility that South Asian writers in English have gained internationally since the 1980s is tied to their relationship with the subcontinent and ability to represent it for the multiculturally oriented global audience that exists in English.

Siddhwa inaugurated female authorship in English writing ‘with the publication of her first novel, *The Crow Eaters*, in 1978, hers was also the first English novel by a resident Pakistani since the partition to receive international recognition, regardless of gender’. This might seem to many an all-too easy success just to have happened, as in case of the other Pakistani writers who wrote before or after her. In this regard, the fact must not be overlooked that most of the other Pakistani English writers produced their

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227 Poet playwright and drama director Sarmad Sehbai, whose contemporary interpretations of Saadat Hassan Manto’s short stories on television are being acknowledged critically, derides the behaviour of Manto’s contemporary progressives who themselves acted as theologians to disparage Manto’s writings for being obscene. For reference see his interview by Farah Zia, *Manto is a Depowering Experience*, *The News*, May 6, 2012. <http://jang.com.pk/thenews/may2012-weekly/nos-06-05-2012/manto/depoweringexperience.asp>


works while residing in foreign countries. For Sidhwa the journey has been fraught with many challenges. She had a ‘very unschooled’, ‘solitary and lonely childhood’ because she had polio and such a situation sometimes results in over-imaginative eccentricities. Her first marriage failed. She also was heir neither to any ancestral literary legacy nor to any intellectual precedent which could facilitate recognition of her uniquely original work. It is a great credit to her ‘born story-teller’ spirit that she acquired a spark against all odds that situates her work first within the periphery, and later at the centrality, of issues that were most traditional and contemporary, and simultaneously invited attention and discourse that projected Pakistani Literature in English into regional and international literary circles.

Sidhwa’s novels surely have, as Anita Desai says, ‘a passion for history and truth telling’. She meets ‘head-on the bloody events which gave birth to her country’ because otherwise ‘Sidhwa cannot be true to her passion for history’. Reference to Sidhwa’s historical narration is reliable because she has witnessed the politics of the elite and the plight of ordinary beings from very close quarters. Her privileged Parsi family had contacts with elite British, Hindu and Muslim class of the pre-partitioned Lahore. She also saw people in Lahore migrating to and coming from Indian side of the territory and the images of loss surely left indelible marks on her mind that she incorporated in her life-like art. After her success as a writer, she represented Pakistan at the 1974 Asian Women’s Congress, and the former slain Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto also kept Sidhwa on her advisory committee on Women’s Development from 1994-96.

230 In fact, the international acclaim to Sidhwa’s work definitely paved way for the easy success of later fiction, notably those by Mohsin Hamid (Moth Smoke, 2000; The Reluctant Fundamentalist 2007), Nadeem Aslam (Maps for Lost Lovers, 2004) and by Mohammad Hanif (A Case of Exploding Mangoes, 2008).


232 Anita Desai, quoted on the cover of the Penguin edition of Ice-Candy-Man.

With a strong sense of place and community, Sidhwa objectively highlights the oppression of different subaltern groups, and ‘her concern ranges from a pre-independence social scene to partition and its aftermath’.\textsuperscript{234} She probes events by relating them to their roots either in history or in peculiar cultural traditions of the Indic heritage. Being aware of the religious and social sensitivities and having full understanding of the communal politics of her region, Sidhwa also established the transnational reach of her work by engaging with specific cultural, religious, political and socially oppressive phenomena in both India and Pakistan. She recovers the true face of history as well as of the age-old civilizational values by subverting the rhetoric of nationalist histories, communal and neo-colonial politics. So, instead of believing any historical propaganda, Sidhwa rather critiques history, and ‘as a Parsi she even appears, on occasions, to write against Pakistani interpretations of history’\textsuperscript{235} Sidhwa’s work seems politically less explicit because she deals with every serious issue of social, historical, cultural, or of sacred or sacral dimensions with enlightened humour, subversive irony, and corrective intention.

Her works also led the Pakistani feminist writing in English through example by casting about ‘the extreme edges of both English and Pakistani literatures’\textsuperscript{236} Sidhwa understood well that in a patriarchal society a feminist woman cannot be ‘heard’ other than as a marginal eccentric unless she modifies her critique so that it can be insinuated into general discourse under cover of a socially acceptable veneer. That is why she never humiliates or outrightly rejects the stated ethical principles of the majority Muslim population of the country. This fact is well established in her fiction by the way she depicts women’s sexuality. Sexuality is never vulgar, common or low in Sidhwa’s fiction rather it is as implicit as the public morality. She resorts to

\textsuperscript{234} Rani, K. Nirupa, ‘Gender and Imagination in Bapsi Sidhwa’s Fiction’ in Ibid, pp. 118-124.
\textsuperscript{235} Rani, K. Nirupa, ‘Gender and Imagination in Bapsi Sidhwa’s Fiction’, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{236} Samsie, \textit{And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women}. Op. Cit.
titillation or explicitness only as and when her creative impulse permits; keeping balance between aesthetic import and imbued interpretation in the depiction, which at a suggestive level is to ruthlessly deride oppressive customary societal norms.

Perhaps, that is why it is women’s sexuality regarding which Sidhwa’s work has been most misunderstood. It has either been over-read or altogether underrepresented. The depiction of women’s sexuality is Sidhwa’s special paradigm through which she conceives an overarching assault on religion’s misappropriation of politics. This is also the standout feat with which she claims authority to conflate ethnicities, races, geographies and histories, and thus envisions human affinities through analogizing cultures. In that, her work is informed by not only the hardline socio-cultural transformations, but also their ruinous outcomes in the form of several communal riots that happened contemporaneously both in India and Pakistan while Sidhwa struggled for her writing. It is regrettable that Sidhwa’s true literary stature could not be determined as yet. She not only subverted fallacies of history but also offered an alternate historiography that is pragmatic as well as viable to the cultural setup of the region.

Admittedly, in her work Sidhwa directly tackles how Pakistan, by taking on a majoritarian religious culture over the years surely becomes an ideological state, but forfeits its claims to being a secular democracy that Jinnah, the father of the nation, had envisaged. In that, rather more pronounced is Sidhwa’s censure of larger society’s complicity for disbelieving in the natural evolutionary progress of culture. The civil society hypocritically internalised certain historical untruths and nationalistic ideals that would inevitably turn the diversely ethnic, racial and religious communities in the

237 Refer to ‘Mr Jinnah’s presidential address to the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan’ on 11th August, 1947 in which he offers absolute freedom of practising their religions to minorities in a democratically secular Pakistan. <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/constituent_address_11aug1947.html>
country into mobs of veiled dispositions. This amounted to a virtual denial of the plural norms which existed centuries ago when the British had not even set foot on Indian soil to make different communities religiously self-conscious.

However, like many great artists, Sidhwa also had false starts before she came to this clear vision. She groped to balance the inner rage of an artist with the pleasure of achievement by writing The Bride\(^\text{238}\) (which was Sidhwa’s first written novel but published as her second). She had written this novel inspired by the true story of a runaway wife whose head was severed by her husband from the tribal region. She admits in her interviews that ‘I had a compulsion to write the girl’s story and the story of tribals hidden away in the beautiful part of the world’\(^\text{239}\), and that ‘I wrote it as a sort of exercise to please myself’.\(^\text{240}\) Conspicuously, her rather over-essentialist representation of the ethnic and racial divide and of patriarchal norms in Pakistan during early independence years of nationalist fervour was overlooked. Nevertheless, Sidhwa did make a justifiable attempt to suggest how excessive zealouosity among the general masses to hold onto symbolic religiosity also did not match with the actually acquired social character and sensibility that had evolved through mixed influences of centuries old shared religio-communal culture of the region.

She did discover the magic power of the clichéd axiom that ‘art lies in concealing art’ by producing her best loved, artistically most accomplished but least understood, and grievously underappreciated novel, The Crow Eaters. This was her first published but second written novel which she self-published in Lahore in 1978 and later it was published in 1980 by Jonathan

\(^{238}\) Sidhwa, Bapsi, The Bride (London, Jonathon Cape, 1987)


Cape, London. For Sidhwa, this novel again was a self-exploratory attempt. Through accomplished use of ribaldry as well as of verbal and situational irony Sidhwa describes the success story of an emigrant Parsi businessman in the pre-partition time Lahore. *The Crow Eaters* was written in just six months, as Sidhwa says that this book just ‘bubbled up’.\(^{241}\) The book highlights the private life of her talkative and humorous Parsi community which is ‘tucked away in the forgotten crevices of history’,\(^{242}\) but is so alive to safeguard its religious and cultural identity as a minority in pre-partitioned India.

Paradoxically, however, *The Crow Eaters* is the worst case and best example for proving the fact as to how radical socio-culturalist trends, perpetuated through politics and historiography, delude and confuse even the most refined sensibilities. On the one extreme, the fervour of Islamic nationalism in Pakistan and hegemonic Hindu culturalist trends in Indian politics were growing enormously during the 1970s and 1980s. On the other end, bloody riots were taking place to extricate minorities. For example, anti-Ahmadiyya riots had first erupted in Lahore in 1953 and later countrywide in 1974, likewise the Turkman Gate Tragedy had happened in India in April 1976. The Muslims who lived in the slums of Delhi were massacred during the ‘slum clearance’ campaign while Indira Gandhi’s infamous Emergency was at its peak.\(^{243}\)

Yet, a sensitive author like Sidhwa would respond by writing a most essentialist document about her religion. A thorough study of Zoroastrianism revealed how Sidhwa dramatised some of the most prejudicially guarded secret beliefs while conceiving plotline and characterization of the novel. Her circumventive handling of the narrative is so tricky that neither any of the


\(^{243}\) Kak, B. L., ‘A Nation’s Agony’ in *Z. A. Bhutto: Notes from the Death Cell*, New Delhi: Radha Krishna, 1979, pp. 84-95.
characters nor Sidhwa’s intention behind their certain portrayal has so far been correctly interpreted. Valourization of patriarchy and equivocal representation of femininity through endorsement of the traditional conduct of Parsi women and general cultural exploitation of women in India makes this novel a difficult link between its predecessor The Bride and successor Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India. However, Sidhwa inspired her original charm into an otherwise provincial story of her community, and produced a literal document which carries the worth of a scripture as well as of an archival historic document combined. The Crow Eaters also ‘preceded the work of other major South Asian English writers of Parsi origin’\textsuperscript{244}.

Considerable success of The Crow Eaters also introduced Sidhwa into international circles. Sure signs of her diasporic experience are reflected in her next three novels Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India, An American Brat, and Water. In her first two novels, Sidhwa seems to conflate culture and religion. However, in Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India, An American Brat, and Water she canvassed the rhetoric of beleaguered histories of communities, genders, nations, religions and of cultures. Ice-Candy-Man refocuses historical preference on the suffering of individuals who belong to different communities and creeds. Sidhwa’s purely humanist concern for the victims of the tragedy of partition has been amply appreciated both in India and in Pakistan. Yet, the feminist orientation of Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India has not been unearthed properly.

The feminist reading of Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India derives predominantly from contemporary critical debates on the representation of partition in Indian historiography. Whereas, Sidhwa’s feminist reading of Pakistani culture is un-understandable without linking the novel’s subplots and stories of certain crucial characters that have so far been ignored.

\textsuperscript{244} Shamsie, Muneeza. ‘Bapsi Sidhwa.’ Op. Cit
altogether. Lacking the same interpretive concern, *An American Brat* is treated as Sidhwa’s mediocre text, but her feminist voice is the strongest in this text. Through an elaborate purview of the reality of women’s existence, as life choices permit it and not as religion, culture, history, or society frames it to justify as ideal through law and tradition, Sidhwa argues for bias against women through misinterpretations of scriptures.

The thematic relevance between *Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India, An American Brat* and *Water* underpins Sidhwa’s heightened sense of concern to deal with the issues of marginality, agency and resistance of the female subjectivity in South Asia. Particularly, she brings history, culture and religion at crossroads in the tragic story of the Hindu widow Chuiya in *Water* and in the adventurous story of the Pakistani Parsi girl Feroza in *An American Brat*. It is interesting to note how Sidhwa positions the protagonists in the diverse environs of America, India and Pakistan, in terms of both time and space, and a link develops between the subject and object of debate in an age-old tragedy of *Water* and the progressive narrative of *An American Brat*. Such a transnational and trans-regional feminist vision of Sidhwa is in itself a comment upon the broad reach of her work.

In corollary, Sidhwa’s stories present a dual stance: in one, Sidhwa establishes the physical roots of her work by narrating tragedies of the ordinary men and women that often go unnoticed in societies like India and Pakistan; superjacent in the second, she carries out her spiritual pursuits by subverting the politics of history, and of religious culture through these tragedies.

### 3.2 The Bride

Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Bride* is an all-out attempt to expose the core patriarchal, ethnic and racist prejudices in Pakistani society, that derive from a
cultural longevity which precedes even inception of the polity. These prejudices are, however, downplayed through rhetoric of the nationalist as well as religious ethics that the society largely cherishes and moderately practices. In fact, the customary ethos of diverse regions and ethnicities within the country differ enormously and pervade individual sensibility markedly through certain codes of personal honour, kinship prestige, sexual conduct, and through basic attitude to both familial as well as societal violence. Sidhwa reveals this beleaguered sensibility, focussing mainly on the patriarchal mindset of men as well as the repressed and marginalised personae of women in Pakistan through the life story of Zaitoon, a Punjabi orphan girl.

Zaitoon lost her parents in the bloody riots of the partition in 1947. She was adopted and raised by a tribesman, Qasim, in Lahore. Afterwards she was married in the tribal region with Qasim’s kinsman who savagely tortured her. Zaitoon finally succeeded to flee from her husband’s house by risking her life. Primarily highlighting how rigid cultural norms affect the lives of not just ordinary but all women across social strata, the novel also touches the refugees’ abject struggle to exist in the newly independent Pakistan. The dramatic tension of the story reveals the hypocritical face of the Pakistani society which aspires to retain an ethereal profile without compromising its egoistic and prejudicial antecedents. Sidhwa’s posited didactic intention for showing society in a self-defining grapple is to let the people recognise the true barbaric and impulsive face of tradition, so that they may eventually develop genuine tolerance for difference.

Gendered existence of women in Pakistan is so foiled between the societal regard to religiosity and allegiance to rigid cultural codes that even their nationalist image ascribes to them only a provisional identity. In general, their social image corresponds to the relevant status of their husbands, fathers, and brothers and is changeable according to socio-political or economic clout.
of the family. Within the family, even this shadowy identity is denied almost altogether, as women have neither control nor any considerable say in such decisions that change their destiny. The decision about marriage is the most important case-in-point. Mostly arranged by family elders without or nominally consulting the girls, marriage, instead of proving one of the most blissful turns in life, sometimes entails so many sacrifices, adjustments, and compromises that contradict the very logic of a girl’s upbringing and early-life fantasies. The situation is specifically aggravating if marriage changes a girl’s class from rich to poor, like Zaitoon moved from the life of poverty to penury. That is why Zaitoon’s tragedy is a common folk narrative, hence admittedly a social reality, but not exclusively representative of every Pakistani bride’s story. Everything it highlights is true to the core, though. Nonetheless, Sidhwa conceives rather a grandiose and grandiloquent critical framework to focus her agenda in the novel.

Sidhwa has situated Zaitoon’s tragedy in a particular historical reference and cultural precinct, where instinctive harshness and emotive impetuosity is an existential dilemma for the inhabitants, but she draws contrasts and comparisons from the larger societal set-up in Pakistan. *The Bride* is not at all a scathing portrayal of the Pakistani society as essentially primitive and regressive. Bonds of love that the story’s characters discover through experiencing their common afflictions and sharing the fate of the downtrodden in newly independent Pakistan are an unqualified approval of the genuine worth in society’s stated morality. Sidhwa only shows the vulnerability of this morality by scanning the impacts of ethnicity, race, and class as well as broader regional and geographical cultures on it. Thus, *The Bride* is also an authentic literary document about the socio-cultural environment, history and topography of Pakistan.
Qasim is a *Kohistani* (an inhabitant of mountainous land)\(^{245}\) from the tribal territory which acceded to Pakistan after its creation in 1947.\(^ {246}\) He found Zaitoon at the time of the partition, migrating to Lahore from Jullundhar where Qasim worked as a watchman in the National and Grindlays Bank. The train on which Zaitoon’s parents and Qasim were travelling carried the refugees from Ludhiana and those on its way to Lahore. It was, however, ambushed by the Sikhs at about a forty-five minutes distance from the Pakistani border. The Sikhs slaughtered all the passengers, looted their valuables as well as abducted and raped young women. Qasim luckily survived. He was young, alone and apprehensive. Sensing danger, he had jumped off to hide himself before the attack.

*Munni* \(^ {247}\) (later named Zaitoon by Qasim) is the only surviving member from the family of Sikander, a Punjabi farmer. Her father, mother Zohra, and a baby-brother were all killed in the attack by the Sikhs. Qasim saw Sikander valiantly embrace death, desperately fighting and calling out Zohra to run with *Munni*. When Qasim prepared to leave the site in dark night, *Munni* clung to him crying. The girl bore striking resemblance with his real daughter who years ago had died of smallpox, so Qasim took this girl to Lahore with him and named her Zaitoon.

Qasim’s own life-story had been no less tragic. He had experienced the warmth of familial relations as well as the pain of their loss much earlier in life in the remote Himalayan reaches of Kohistan. Before he was thirty four, Qasim had lost two of his children to typhoid, and one in a fall off a ledge.

\(^{245}\) Kohistan is a Persian word which means ‘land of mountains’. Therefore, the inhabitants or the language of the mountainous land are also referred to as *Kohistani*.

\(^{246}\) The semi-autonomous tribal areas in the Northwest of Pakistan, generally referred to as Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), acceded to Pakistan at the time of its creation in 1947 but have remained largely free from the general legal writ of the state since the times of British rule in India. These areas are administered through the Frontier Crimes Regulations promulgated under the colonial rule in 1901, but the power is still vested in the hands of local *jirga* (tribal assembly of elderly nobles) system. For details refer to Ali, Shaheen Sardar; Rehman, Javaid, *Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Minorities of Pakistan: Constitutional and Legal Perspectives*, Richmond, Surry: Curzon Press (Routledge), 2001. Pp. 52-53

\(^{247}\) Usually small girls are lovingly addressed as *Munni* in the sub-continent.
After a while, his only daughter Zaitoon, two other sons and wife Afshan died of smallpox one after another. That is why Qasim had gone to Jullundhar to escape his grief. In the refugee camp in Lahore, Qasim met Nikkah, a Punjabi pehalwan (wrestler). Nikkah was impressed by Qasim’s simple and moral bearing. He respected Qasim because he had taken up Zaitoon’s responsibility even if she was not his real daughter, and genuinely respected Nikkah’s wife, Miriam. On his part Qasim regarded Nikkah’s winsome and assertive masculinity as the most worthy quality. They befriended each other and struck a business-cum-familial deal. Qasim lent money to Nikkah to establish his business, and in return, Nikkah promised to Qasim accommodation and care of Zaitoon by Miriam. Their chance friendship turned into a life-long relationship.

Qasim earned just enough through labour to keep life going for himself and Zaitoon, but vibrant Nikkah grew his business and political influence in locality as well as maintained a very good family life. Being childless, Nikkah and Miriam also treated Zaitoon as their real daughter. After Zaitoon learnt to recite the Quran and could read and write in Urdu, Miriam insisted that she quit school. Miriam then trained Zaitoon to be a prospective wife by teaching her cooking and sewing, giving her bare minimum sexual knowledge, and by mixing her with the women folk in their neighbouring houses.

All the while that Zaitoon grew up; Qasim remained nostalgic about his tribal life. He finally pledged Zaitoon in marriage to a kinsman Misri Khan’s son Sakhi in his native place. Details about Zaitoon’s blissful upbringing present only the benign face of societal ethics, the harsh and fragile history of which Sidhwa links with Zaitoon’s future tragic life by knitting certain realities about the past of Qasim, Nikkah and Miriam.

Qasim had been brought up under the strict tribal code of Pakhtunwali, comprising those norms and behavioural consciousness that put extreme
demands on the males to exercise their masculinity, especially in matters of enmity or social conduct for preserving izzat (honour). The same code of Pakhtunwali subjugates women absolutely to the masculine control, and a slightest lapse regarding their sexuality or prescribed sociableness leads to sure death. Often it is the family’s eldest female who enjoys the actual clout to establish the writ of the patriarch in the family.

The whole tribal society is the custodian of Pakhtunwali, and rallies together to punish the offenders. Pakhtunwali is thus also the established customary law of the tribal society, and is practiced along the whole range of Kohistani races residing in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Generally conflated with Islam, Pakhtunwali diverges considerably on certain points that fundamentally impact upon the situation of women. However, the tribesmen prefer ‘doing pakhtu’ in full consciousness even if the matter in hand conflicts with religious precepts. This harsh way of life reflects in the tribesmen’s typical simplicity and guarded cynicism due to which their certain stereotypes are often ridiculed publically as well.

Qasim was only ten when he was given his first rifle, and fifteen years old Afshan in marriage, as recompense of a loan her father Resham Khan could not return to Qasim’s father. Despite being young, he knew he could be harsh to his woman and taunted and threatened Afshan that he was her husband. After he moved to Jullundhar, he used to think that men of the plains were effeminate and women brazen as they walked freely in streets with one another. Before migrating to Lahore, he killed Girdharilal, a Hindu clerk in the National and Grindlays Bank. Girdharilal had made fun of his tribal habit of using stones instead of water to clean himself after defecating, and had called him ‘filthy son of a Muslim mountain hog!’ (p22).

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After his whole family died, Qasim had hardened his heart not to make any further bonds of love by remarrying. Qasim had witnessed the whole carnage wreaked against his religious brethren when the Sikhs attacked but felt no qualms to defend them or sacrifice his own life in the name of honour because the people being killed were not his people, as they were the Punjabis. Rather he had thought, at first, of cutting Zaitoon’s throat himself when she clung to him screaming before making his mind to take her along. Although Qasim had liked Nikkah for Nikkah’s assertive masculinity, yet Qasim would not offer Nikkah money for business until the later had proved his reliability and shown discreetness in offering to pay interest on the loan. Thus, Qasim was a thorough tribal with ‘fierce capacity to love or hate, to lavish loyalty or pity’ (P.30). But for him life existed only in the mountains.

Together with each other in good old days, Qasim and Nikkah had done much evil, too. Nikkah was struggling to build business and political influence in his locality, and cared little what depravities he was plunging into. Qasim stood by Nikkah at every occasion. He was Nikkah’s accomplice in even murdering a known political figure to oblige Nikkah’s influential benefactor, referred to as Chaudhary Sahib in the text. Later, Nikkah had taken Qasim along to the red light area of Lahore, where they both got drunk and watched striptease by a dancing girl, Shehnaz, spending half of the reward money for the murder. Interestingly, the politician whom Nikkah murdered used to visit Shehnaz. Qasim was sent for reccy of the man when Qasim discovered that men were drinking inside the house of Shehnaz, so his ‘puritanical feelings were hurt’, he felt furious and mumbled ‘what Muslims!’ (P.67). Perhaps, therefore, Qasim felt no qualms to help Nikkah in the murder. Yet, Qasim visited Shehnaz, kept watching her dance and drinking alcohol

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249 Chaudhary is regarded as a high social caste in Pakistan, and sahib used to be a form of respectful address for a European man in colonial India. These days the particular connotation of the term sahib seems to have been lost to memory, as sahib as a title refers to the social prestige of a person. So, the people often tag the sahib with a person’s name to show their respect.
when Nikkah could afford to pay for their spree. Miriam took full charge of Zaitoon’s care after that day, but she also kept revelling under the growing respectability of her husband by studiously observing veil to reflect on her husband’s rising status.

Despite all this, Qasim, Nikkah and Miriam had been able to keep their reserve from each other and form a family through a most symbolic as well as unlikely combination of the Punjabi and Kohistani ethnicities and cultures. Qasim’s expectation was that this combination would smoothly work even in the case of Zaitoon’s marriage as well. Matter-of-factly though, as Punjabi Nikkah’s polished roguishness and Kohistani Qasim’s instinctive hardheartedness were no match, similarly Zaitoon’s ethnic bearing and delicate training in Lahore by Miriam was never meant to survive the hardships of life in the mountainous region of Kohistan.

After Qasim pledged Zaitoon’s hand to a kinsman, Miriam confronted him with the rage and audacity of a wronged mother. She sat with Nikkah and Qasim out in the street without her burka (Muslim outer garment). When Qasim did not give in, she even called his people savages who would make Zaitoon a slave. Qasim got furious. Exasperated, Miriam even offered to make Zaitoon her co-wife by marrying her to Nikkah. Qasim was touched but rejected Miriam’s pleas ruthlessly, declaring that he had given his word. Nikkah had kept silent all the while, and Miriam’s life-long service was worthless.

On her part Zaitoon, given her younger years and scant knowledge about the enormous social liabilities that marriage entails, and momentarily under the charm of her budding sensuality, could wish nothing more in life. Having no sense at all of the ethnic and racial prejudices of her society, Zaitoon also had no grudge against her father’s decision. So, she overlooked the earnest requests by Miriam, the only mother she had known, to review
Qasim’s decision. Instead, Zaitoon decided to honour the decision of her father who had so loved her all her life.

While leaving Lahore, Zaitoon had every omen that her life was going to change but she persevered. On their way to Kohistan, Qasim and Zaitoon came across Ashiq Hussain, a military mechanic. Ashiq offered them a ride to Dubair and a night’s stay at a Pakistan Army camp which operated under major Mushtaq to facilitate construction of bridges on Karakoram highway. Qasim and Zaitoon were also introduced there to Carol, an American girl, who was married to Major Mushtaq’s friend, Farrukh, and was shortly visiting the military camp with her husband. Carol later developed an extramarital affair with the Major.

A few hours encounter with the people at the army camp made Zaitoon sufficiently aware that her life in the tribal region would not be happy. Qasim also told her the tragic reality that she was not his real daughter. Yet, she hardened her heart to betray reality. The next day, she resumed her journey towards the mountain destination only to meet the tragedy she had by now sensed in the very air she breathed. Zaitoon was appalled to see the abject poverty the tribal people lived in, and tried to persuade Qasim to take her back. However, it was too late to repent over her decision. Even Qasim would not let her revoke his decision since it was a matter of his honour. Zaitoon was married to Sakhi finally.

Zaitoon laboured hard and helped her mother-in-law Hamida in different household chores to appease her husband. She suffered poverty and domestic violence. When she decided that she could bear Sakhi’s bullying no more, she made attempts to escape. The struggle proved a grapple with death itself, but finally Zaitoon made it to the bridge at Dubair after several days’ blind and lost journey against all odds posed by human and natural perils in the mountains. Sakhi’s brother and other tribesmen pursued Zaitoon, and
Sakhi himself kept watch at the bridge. However, Zaitoon was discovered hiding under the bridge by Major Mushtaq. He transported her inside the camp, wrapping her blanket around her. Major Mushtaq also showed reckless courage and rather forced Sakhi to believe that his wife was dead. Sakhi was emotionally disturbed, so his father and brother did not press the matter to claim Zaitoon’s dead body. Major Mushtaq, on his part, hoped that either Carol would take care of the girl or Ashiq Hussain would propose her for marriage.

Zaitoon’s tragedy seems a commonplace story from a traditional society, but Sidhwa exploits multiple critical avenues to underpin her thematic stance on the patriarchal culture in Pakistan. Several other stories from the past and present of different characters present very forceful contrasts and parallels both of characters and situations regarding the novel’s feminist take. In particular, each story in the sub-plot brings to focus the oppression meted out to a certain female character, reflecting simultaneously on the ethical bearing of the class and societal category, or the ethnic and racial stock she belongs to. The stories of women like Afshan, Shehnaz, Carol, Miriam, Hamida (Zaitoon’s mother in law), and many other women whose plights have been mentioned in absentia in the novel reveal societal and cultural hypocrisies that belie the rhetoric regarding the nationalist profile as well as religious identity ascribed to women in Pakistan.

Sidhwa shows different facets of patriarchy – the barbaric, normative and highly sophisticated – through the conduct of her male characters. Simultaneously, she dramatises how the male conduct is understood, analysed and consequently utilized by the female characters in the novel to shape their lives. Qasim and his father, Afshan’s father Resham Khan, Zaitoon husband Sakhi, his brother Yunus Khan and his father Misri Khan, and all the other Kohistani males have essentially a tribal and brutal sensibility when they
oppress their women. Yet, these people subscribe to the tribal code of honour which binds them to display an exemplary gentleness.

On the other extreme, there are educated and cultured males like Carol’s husband Farukh and Major Mushtaq who have very cunning strategies to keep women suppressed. These men pose to be the custodians of women’s democratic rights in society. Yet, the manner in which they provide a sense of freedom and liberal life to their women, by mixing them with the female relatives and male friends in large gatherings, is just a clever utilization of the same societal and cultural sanction which simpleton tribal men apply by making their women conscious about its brutal force. In between, there is a normative category of the bourgeois class of men, like Nikkah and the Muslim males whose houses Zaitoon used to visit with Miriam to learn the social and routine life of their women. Miriam and other women in the neighbourhood observed veil, realizing well that their husbands regarded the cultural value of religious practice.

Keeping a peculiar narrative pattern, Sidhwa interweaves a continuum of the female strata in society, tracing in there also the impact of the economic and societal class structure upon the gender experiences of women. On the one extreme, there are women like Afshan and Hamida who suffer under abject poverty. On the other extreme, there are women like Carol, the Pakistani women among relatives in Farukh’s rich family, and the other foreign girls married to the Pakistanis, whose oppression has rather subconscious and ideological dimensions. Both these kinds of women learn to have power over their fanciful delusions. They either emerge sturdy against adversity from which there is no escape for them or succumb to the lure of comfort in luxurious lives (as Carol tries to reconcile herself to her current situation).
However, the worst situation is that of the women like Zaitoon. The bourgeois background affords these women little independence but enormous wild fantasies. Residing on the margin of privilege and poverty, the position of these women remains largely vulnerable between extreme respectability and utter inability to control their lives. Like Zaitoon had no say in the matter of even her marriage. She as an outsider standing on the roof was just wondering about the nature of a seemingly very argumentative discussion among her elders, which so obliged Miriam to sit outside the house without her burka with men. Zaitoon’s opinion could be relegated inconsequential for her younger age and experience. But even Miriam’s age, her social and married-life experience, and the respect she earned through devotedly serving Qasim as his sister and his daughter’s mother proved of no avail. Sidhwa only caricatures her point through Miriam’s hysterical offer to accept Zaitoon as a co-wife, as a last ditch attempt, to save her from becoming the wife of a tribesman. Yet, Miriam’s offer reflects the practical wisdom by a mature woman who knew well how her society works. The possibility of such an eventuality was not even beyond imagination, considering Qasim’s background, and provided Miriam had made the request before Zaitoon was pledged for marriage.

Girls from poverty-ridden households in Pakistan seldom get a proper match. The genuine concern of a father is only to ensure the girl’s future economic security or mere subsistence. Nevertheless, the custom-ridden tribesmen often do not care about a woman’s well-being or biological pleasure. Like Qasim’s father had thought of marrying Afshan himself first, but then out of a sudden surge of paternal love he bestowed the girl on Qasim despite he was a minor at that times. Afshan was shocked, as her first impression on seeing Qasim on wedding night was that her husband had
probably sent his younger brother to tease her. But then she had to accept her fate as a vani\textsuperscript{250}.

In Zaitoon’s case, Qasim apparently seemed to have understood how agonising his decision had proved for Miriam and on Zaitoon’s account for himself as well, because by now he had himself realized that Zaitoon would not be happy in his native land. But it was a matter of his ego now. He had already given his word. In contrast to Qasim’s decision, the decision of his wife Afshan’s father Resham Khan was made in extreme humility and purely dictated by his abject situation. That is why Resham khan was willing to offer ‘any girl’ of his house as reparation of an unpaid loan. Resham Khan could not be sure of his girl’s good future as he was marrying his daughter with an enemy’s son.

From the opposite perspective, Afshan or Zaitoon’s situations are no different from each other. Whether Afshan married an enemy’s son or Zaitoon a friend’s, both these women had been treated as a commodity. Their happiness had been least considered and sexual pleasure was only the prerogative of their husbands. Afshan’s fantasies of youth had collapsed finding her groom so young on wedding night and she had to wait till her husband was old enough to oblige her instinct. Whereas, Zaitoon’s anticipations about the delicate soothing touch of her husband on the first night were dashed when he least cared about her pain while gratifying his desire. Eventually, when these girls could dig goodness out of their husbands through their labour, sexual piety and extreme devotion, the society’s demands hardened the male heart. A male is to keep his reserve lest any public display of kindness for women should be construed as his weakness.

\textsuperscript{250} Sidhwa touches upon the barbaric custom of \textit{Vani} in her usual witty style. \textit{Vani} is a tribal custom of forcible child marriage, practised in the tribal areas and some parts of the Punjab in Pakistan. The young girls are married, sometimes, either with much older men or with very small or precocious boys to avoid family feuds between individuals and clans. Although outlawed, yet \textit{Vani} and similar other customs like \textit{Swara} (marriage of a girl as a reparation for murder, adultery, abduction, and kidnapping committed by the men of the family) are still practised. However, lately the law enforcing agencies in Pakistan have started serious crackdown against the offenders. Media’s role in this social campaign is more commendable, though.
That is why Qasim used to tease Afshan because he thought he had right over her. Similarly, Sakhi beat Zaitoon, and even his mother, because he did not want to be considered a lesser male by his brother, Yunus Khan, or by the society around.

Sidhwa, in full consciousness of her subject position as an insider but as a cultural and religious outsider, only harshly questions the exploitative strategies, but does not distort by any manner, the essential image of the institution of marriage in Pakistani society. Oppression and exploitation through customary morality, which the girls cannot or do not question out of their traditional reserve, is undeniably against the most fundamental Islamic principles which Pakistani society idealizes. No doubt, women’s life in the tribal territory had always been oppressed due to centuries-old pre-Islamic barbaric customs, but in larger society also nothing has been able to change their position, not even gory experiences of violence that women like Zaitoon’s mother underwent during the Partition. In fact, women have failed, as yet, to attain a truly respectable status in the ideological state of Pakistan. This is what Sidhwa has specifically highlighted.

In its feminist aspect, *The Bride* engages with another very important aspect of postcolonial feminism, i.e., the question of violence against women’s body. The violence committed against the female body during the Partition is part of a much bigger debate in religious, communal, transnational and postcolonial context. In *The Bride* Sidhwa develops her stance, especially problematizing the discourse of culturalist ethics regarding women’s gendered construction. A woman’s body in Pakistan has very sacred notions attached to it, like the piety it signifies to reflect her family’s societal image. Yet, in the actual cultural practice these ideological notions seldom matter. In the matters of marriage, especially in the poor families, a woman’s body is scrutinized both for its sensual worth as well as useableness to perform the
routine household chores. Specifically after marriage a woman’s education, manners, religiosity, even her family’s financial and social status become secondary attributes, and she cannot claim respect in a family unless she relentlessly performs her household duties. When Qasim’s father decided about Afshan’s marriage with Qasim, he also made sure that the girl he chose carried more worth than the loan due from her father.

Sidhwa has also criticised the tribal custom of bride’s price/gift money, as Sakhi’s father paid it to Qasim for Zaitoon’s hand or that Hamida reflects her youthful body had made her father rich when he married her to Misri Khan. The bride money is again a cultural tradition, especially determined according to the physical and aesthetic worth of a woman’s body. The societal custom of dowry is even greater an offense against women in Pakistan, a tacit critique of which can also be found implied in the text of The Bride.

Including details about the hunt which went on to find and kill Zaitoon, Sidhwa finally uncovers the greatest scourge that afflicts the life of tribal women, i.e., honour killing. The whole society, men and women alike, stand against any threat posed by an individual’s defiance to the cultural sanctity because it is the unifying and sustaining principle of their social life, and Zaitoon had challenged their societal decorum. The tribal women had their natural grudges against men or against patriarchal oppression they suffered in general, yet they could not wish for the system to collapse because any act of dishonour, no matter by a male or a female, might break their families. After Zaitoon left, the young tribal girls glanced at Sakhi with pity.

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251 Gift/price money paid by the groom or on his behalf by his family to the bride’s family, mostly practised as a tradition in tribal areas of Pakistan.

252 Dowry includes money, goods and estate that a woman brings to the groom’s family at the time of marriage. Dowry is the biggest societal menace in the whole society of Pakistan because countless well-educated, able-bodied, young, pious and even very beautiful girls suffer from this societal disease. Sometimes women grow old in their parents’ house. Rebellious acts, like love-marriage and elopement often end up in the murder of the couple, or their families.
only to make him jealous that if he had not married a Punjabi girl, one of them would have made him a subservient and honouring wife. The mature women thought that the Punjabi girl had some special gifts that they did not posses and now their boastful men would have a worthy challenge to prove their masculinity. Even Hamida also had a surge of resistant feelings at reflecting about her own and Zaitoon’s oppression, but she wished Zaitoon could be hunted down soon so that her family returned to its routine life.

Sidhwa also deliberates upon the effects of inter and intra racial, ethnic or geographic prejudices among men on women’s identity. She explains these complexities through the male gaze on female body. In an instance from Qasim’s early married life when he was still young, he got excited at the view of Afshan’s wet body. He gripped her breasts when she was taking bath at a stream. Afshan obviously felt annoyed and reprimanded him for such indecency in public space. A stranger from the next village was passing by, and he considered Qasim a culprit. So, he beat Qasim in the outrage of his ‘tribal sense of chivalry,’ but when Afshan explained that Qasim was her husband, the stranger started leering at her body and Qasim had to show the man his capability to defend his woman, hitting the stranger with a stone. Thus, a male’s capability to save the womenfolk is equally important with strict observance of customary reserve by women, and these aspects denote relics of the primitive predatory culture which totally contradict the stated morality, and religious idealism of society.

When Zaitoon reached the army camp with Qasim and Ashiq Hussain, her gendered body caused quite a commotion among all men. Zaitoon became so conscious of her womanly self that she covered herself tightly with her shawl. Strikingly, the tribal men, who usually gave a lot of regard to the women doing labour work at the camp, kept carelessly gazing at Zaitoon only because she was a brown woman. They did not care even when Aashiq
Hussain warned them, but they dispersed when Qasim rebuked them. They kept wondering, though, as to why Qasim, a tribesman, was protecting a brown woman. In contrast, Qasim always lowered his gaze when he was in the company of Miriam, and Aashiq Hussain cast but only a respectfully adoring glance at Zaitoon. All these examples present a complex scenario regarding women’s vulnerable gendered construction.

Carol’s outsider opinion and also her honest articulation about the impact of the male gaze – the benign and the brutish one – present a better view of the situation. When Carol apprehended that Major Mushtaq peeped through his glasses at her white belly ‘she was warmed by an exultant female confidence’. However, at another occasion, when a tribesman scrutinised her body when she was coming back with Mushtaq from a trip across the bridge, Carol felt extremely humiliated and terrorised. The lewd glance of the man made her reflect as if the male gaze deprived her of her identity, and transformed her into an exploitable object. It was like a visual rape. Zaitoon actually went through the experience of rape by two tribesmen when she wandered in the wilderness after fleeing home because she was obviously alone, looked beggarly, and was not even a tribal woman. At that moment, Zaitoon also reflected about a mad homeless woman who suddenly came across when once Zaitoon was enjoying a walk in a park in Lahore with Miriam. Now Zaitoon realised what might have afflicted this homeless and destitute woman. Thus Sidhwa signifies how such an adulterous male gaze falsifies all religious and cultural notions of women’s respectability in a hypocritical society which ideologically aspires and even boasts a collective national identity.

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253 In fact, the plight of the countless homeless women and children who are conspicuously exploited in all manners of oppressive means, such as begging, sexual exploitation, cheap labour, etc. even today puts question marks on the guilty conscience of Pakistani society.
The societal hypocrisy and the real face of its idealism are specifically highlighted, as Sidhwa turns her feminist gaze upon a classless category of women. These women are referred to as the dancing girls (twaifs/courtesans), one of whom is Shahnaz. These women are so doomed that they can neither claim any identity nor any sanctuary in the sacred space of society. They are allowed to exist in the red light area of the city for a single purpose that their sexuality could be exploited. Sidhwa describes Shahnaz as a ‘prostitute who lured respectable men through temptation and ruined them, financially, morally and psychologically’. Shehnaz, being a refined dancing girl, was visited by influential political figures, like the one Nikkah murdered, or by the wealthy people who could afford to visit her, like the American who watched her dance when Nikkah and Qasim went to see Shahnaz’s dance. Through the example of Shahnaz, Sidhwa has particularly focussed on the possibilities of violence against the female body once it is stripped of any cultural or religious identity. Sidhwa first explains Shahnaz’s artistic attire and the elegance she carried in her persona. Then Sidhwa creates visual pictures of her calculated physical movements. Finally when Shahnaz performs striptease, her body becomes a free and grotesque territory available to be exploited or violated by the male gaze.

Sidhwa also sifts through the local context of women’s oppression, appropriating Western feminist perspective through the impressions and reflections of Carol in the novel. Carol’s vision first remains deluded to apprehend the violence which is committed against her body and sensibility by Farukh, and Major Mustaq. Later she becomes aware of the repressive feminine environment in Pakistan, where all caution to segregate the sexes in public gathering, or cathartic expression through gender centred talks with kinswomen and friends can do nothing to check the sensuality that develops all over in an individual’s heart and mind. The cruelty is that men feel free to partially or fully avail themselves of any chances to satiate their sensuality,
but women are expected to guard themselves even against their wild thoughts. All this starts seeming suffocating to Carol suddenly. She then muses about the natural law of the oppression of women that has existed ever since the world’s inception:

Carol meanwhile lay in her room, staring into the dark .... ‘asked for it,’ isn’t that what Farukh had said? Women the world over, through the ages asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved to get importunately impregnated, beaten-up, bullied and disinherited. It was an immutable law of nature.” (*The Bride*, 226)

However, even Carol concluded that the kind of violent and subtle forms of oppressions that are meted out to women either in the tribal areas or in the sophisticated and adorable city houses in Pakistan could not be comprehended by her through any justification she could think of. So, she decided to quit this society and go back to the States.

*The Bride* projects the case of women’s oppression only at the cultural level. It does not directly involve itself in any criticism of the polity’s complicity through laws, institutions, or religio-cultural politics to perpetuate patriarchal control. However, given the nature of her later works, Sidhwa’s censure of culture obviously emerges from her misgivings regarding the public policy for women in Pakistan. Pakistan has a very enthusiastic Islamic society, but its cultural and historical roots give its society a distinct identity that is similar and yet different from other Islamic countries. Postulates of the feminist discourse from Islamic societies are relevant, yet the question of

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254 Discussions around feminism in Islamic societies highlight how the questions regarding women’s private and public life in terms of their rights, gender equality and social justice can be dealt with utilizing the Islamic framework as well as the secular and European or non-Muslim discourses. For reference please refer to works like those of Raja Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the work of Fatima Mernissi*, Leiden: Brill, 2010; Haifa, A. Jawad, *The Rights of Women in Islam: An Authentic Approach*, US (St. Martin’s Press, Inc.), UK (Macmillan Press Ltd). 1998; Leila Ahmad, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992; and
women’s status in Pakistan cannot be dealt with appropriately out of the country’s regional cultural and historical context. Sidhwa’s oeuvre shows an acute awareness of the region’s history and culture. Therefore, she tries to devise a suitable paradigm in *The Bride* to project the cause of women in Pakistan in an international language. Shahnaz J. Rouse, in her article ‘Gender(ed) Struggles: the State, Religion and Civil Society,’ recommends Sidhwa-like approach to deal with the concerns of women in Pakistan if their agency is to be defined, as she notes:

At the cultural level, religion informs our notions of sexuality, marriage, the family, appropriate roles, work and so on. These aspects of everyday life are all too taken for granted and seldom subjected to close scrutiny. Yet it is precisely here that the socialisation of both men and women as individual agents has been rooted, historically; and it is these continuities, as well as the discourses and institutions that reproduce these practices that must be challenged if system changes are to be achieved in women’s status and social location.

Regarding the role of economics in how women’s subordinate agency shapes up across ethnic cultures and societal class divisions, Rouse also notices that:

The process of development undertaken in Pakistan has tended to exacerbate regional differences. This variation has critical implications for gender relations and women’s location in different parts of the country. Thus women in the tribal areas are situated differently from those living within the system in Baluchistan Tribal gender relations in turn differ from those in

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urban centres and in settled agricultural areas. Second, class differences directly impact on women in a fashion that differentiates among them and informs their sense of self. In other words, women of all classes do not experience their subordination identically.\(^{255}\)

As Sidhwa appropriates the stylistic impact of Urdu literature, especially Urdu poetry, often in her work, her strategy reflects in the feminist paradigm of *The Bride* as well. It is evident by the way Sidhwa portrays oppression of the women’s gendered body and exploitation of their sexuality. In that, Sidhwa shows the hypocritical patriarchal culture that germinates, as well as becomes a tragic link between the sufferings of women from the upper echelons of society and of those from the classless categories, such as the dancing girls like Shahnaz and others in the red light area of Lahore. The dancing girls or courtesans have been a part and parcel of the cultural tradition of the Mughal courts. However, the emblematic character/figure of a dancing girl like Shahnaz is represented in the classical Urdu literature of the Aligarh days,\(^{256}\) especially in poetry as *kafir* (infidel, to wit a temptress), *sanam* (sweetheart), or as *saqi* (the women who amuses men with dance and serving wine in a male gathering) and in such novels like *Mirat-ul-Arus (The Bride’s Mirror)* by Nazir Ahmad. Although this image of a refined courtesan was incorporated in Urdu literature from the Arabic poetic tradition, yet it had a particular societal and cultural purpose in its Indian context.

The women’s image as a courtesan in classical Urdu literature gradually assumed the shape of a whole discourse. Ayesha Jalal claims that


\(^{256}\) Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India was the first Muslim university founded by Syed Ahmad Khan in 1869. This university played a major role in the uplift of the educational level of the Muslim elite in India.
this discourse, in fact, had been developed to inform, in turn, the discourse on the Muslim identity to counter colonial stereotyping of the Muslim male as a sex seeker and of the Muslim female as a coy sexual object. This image of the courtesan in Urdu literature generally inspires fancy, but its original import was quite different from what is intended by it now. In undertone, it was meant to signify the hypocrisy of the women like Shahnaz, and the Muslim men were warned to stay away from such women. Similarly, for the Muslim women the image of the courtesan served as a corrective influence and a threat because such a temptress could beguile their men unless they corrected and improved themselves through education to ‘perform their roles as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters in conformity with the norms of respectability in polite society’.

In fact, being Sidhwa’s first written novel, _The Bride_ has several shortcomings of a debut that interestingly can also be construed as well thought-out feats of her genius mind whose control grew less and less effective on its own contrivances once it unleashed its pent-up rage. The problematic textual attributes figure up intermittently. The most pervasive malady seems to be Sidhwa’s stereotypic conception of the narrative, especially through the choice of diction, plotline and the impressionistic portrayal of characters. Such an essentialist strategy then infects Sidhwa’s own critical vision also. It deceives her to plunge into imaging the gendered, ethnic, racial, class strata, geographical and economic oppressions of her characters through the typical situational and notional foils. The post-colonial theorists hold that getting influenced by the colonial and local ideologies cannot be very unusual. Gareth Griffiths maintains that most of the writers of postcolonial English literatures have faced this problem in their works, as they ‘have so often fallen into the political trap of essentialism set for them by

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imperial discourse'. In *The Bride*’s case the problem of justifying Sidhwa’s handling of the local and colonial stereotypes is particularly challenging.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work specifically guides to deal with such problems in the post-colonial texts. Spivak has radicalised the interpretation of subaltern women’s histories by urging critics to look into the exploitative role of the powerful patriarchal institutions, such as the family, state, education, law, and media. Spivak also seeks to deconstruct the image of the Third World women as it is presented through the Western feminist terms. Rather, she has stressed to shift focus of the Western feminist thought to the specific feminie needs of the lives and material histories of the Third World women. In that Spivak provides also to utilise even the essentialist texts about the Third World women for debate, only if these texts are earnestly interpreted to effect forging a genuine global feminist activism. Like Spivak other post-colonial critics such as Chandra Talpady Mohanty, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan also challenge ‘the universal claims of feminism to speak for all women’, as they emphasize ‘the importance of respecting difference in race, class, religion, citizenship and culture between women.’

However, as we learn from Homi K Bhabha about the strategies which colonial texts employed to represent the colonised people, Sidhwa also makes use of some local and colonial stereotypes, most importantly often to humorously exploit the anti-religious, and racist sentiments. For instance, Sidhwa specifically accentuates the representations of the Muslim male’s

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virile and vigorous masculinity and Muslim female’s ‘earthy’ sexuality which is also even preyed upon at times, despite a woman being religiously idealised as virginal or asexually mothering. Sidhwa has exploited these stereotypes by highlighting the segregation of sexes in all sections of the society, especially the way she has depicted the world of Zennana, and the brutal tribal and sophisticated urban ways to suppress women through constructing different local stereotypes of patriarchal males. Sidhwa has also made several uses of the images of the ‘brown’ and red bodies of the Punjabis and the Pashtoons, respectively, to highlight the racial and sexual prejudices in the multi-ethnic society of Pakistan as well.

However, the most problematic stereotypic construction lies in the feminist paradigm of the novel. Sidhwa’s creation of Carol’s character to project her own feminist voice poses serious challenges to the objectivity of her feminist stance. Sidhwa has conceived Carol as a foil to Zaitoon. However, by expressing her own feminist voice through the character of Carol, Sidhwa has alternately perpetuated conflicting stereotypic, though earnestly invented, notions regarding local women in the text, i.e., their orientalist image as the ‘other’ or ‘inferior’ women. This is an artistic mistake on Sidhwa’s part, and

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261 One particularly mentionable anti-religious joke is in the beginning of the text, where Nikkah related to Qasim his experience of enjoying sex with the childless Hindu women who came to the temple of Shiva, as he was hired to perform this task by the Hindu priests. Nikkah also mentioned the vulnerability of the Hindu women, and the lack of masculinity of the Hindu males. Sidhwa also utilises the colonial construct of the Muslim female that denotes her piety and submissiveness and her essentialist anatomical role as the bearer of children. In one instance when Zaitoon heard the story of a ten year old girl who got pregnant, Zaitoon wondered how so young a girl could get pregnant. Then she thought it was a miracle of the Zennana, and wished the miracle could touch her as well. Later Carol referred to her submissiveness, remarking ‘why these women be so goddam coy’. When Farrukh sarcastically mentioned that ‘our women, particularly the young girls, are modest, you know’, Carol immediately returned his rebuke curtly: ‘really! One would imagine they achieved one of the highest birth rates in the world by immaculate conception!’ Major Mushtaq’s comment is relevant to this stereotypic conception of Zaitoon’s character, as he tried to relieve the tension, saying, ‘beneath their shyness, these little girls can be delightfully earthy, you know.’ There are also numerous references to signify the local stereotypes of the tribal men both as simplistic and as cunning and barbaric. For instance, Qasim’s act of lending money to Nikkah on interest is a reference to the centuries old custom of the tribal region, despite the fact that people know that taking interest is against the Islamic law.

262 Zennana is a particular colonial stereotype of the inner place of a Muslim home and refers to the segregated feminine space for begetting and rearing children. Sidhwa exploits this colonial construct through Zaitoon’s impressions that she felt like entering a world of the womb while going inside the Zennana in Muslim houses of her neighbourhood.

263 ‘Othering’ is again a colonial notion that often problematizes the questions of authenticity and agency in the context of the postcolonial literatures. Gayatri chakravorti Spivak coined this term and defines it as ‘a process by which the empire can define itself against those it colonizes, excludes and marginalizes. [...] The business of creating the enemy...in order that the empire might define itself by its geographical and racial others.’ For details about the
it is a problem about which post-colonials also seem often concerned with. Or otherwise, this stereotypic conception of the local women simply highlights the duality or diversity in Pakistani English literature that, Muneeza Shamsie points out, emerges as a problem in the works of Pakistani English writers while they deal with the ‘issues of gender, cultural duality, war and violence which link mythology and legends with modern times’. Shamsie further clarifies:

Pakistani English Literature shares with the other South Asian English literatures a regional dynamic as well as long colonial history, but the Pakistani imagination is also linked to the wider Islamic world.264

Therefore, The Bride does not present a viable post-independence feminist theory from Pakistan. Through Carol’s character and her experiences with men and her impressions about the condition of different women from many social classes she was exposed to in Pakistan, Sidhwa in fact tries to sketch out a wider context of critique, but it results in certain flaws in the text. In the first place, Sidhwa casts Carol’s character in its very stereotypic image as a white female, and then further foregrounds this impression by highlighting Carol’s expressive sexuality in the novel.

Carol got married to Farukh. She was very impressed by the way Farukh showed extreme care for her in the beginning. But afterwards when Carol is disappointed by Farukh’s jealous and sceptic nature, she becomes unfaithful in retaliation and develops an extramarital relationship with Major Mushtaq. Carol’s sexual indulgence with a male other than her husband is an obvious stereotypical act for which a white female is considered morally

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depraved in the Indian sub-continental region. Further, Carol is shown brazenly falling for Major Mushtaq. She even irrationally urges him to marry her by divorcing his wife, knowing he has children as well.

Despite all these weaknesses with regards to Sidhwa’s elaborative feminist paradigm, Carol again emerges as an ideologue. She suddenly assumes Sidhwa’s feminist voice. Carol as an objective observer in the novel is cast in very positive colours. She fantasises to become truly loyal to Farukh after rationalising Major Mushtaq’s inability to marry her. She even resolves to serve the tribal people through educating or helping them in any way she could. This decision is what she half-compels on herself, though, as she does not want to go back to the United States leaving the comforts and so many relations that she found in Pakistan.

Next, to make her critical stance stronger, Sidhwa completes Carol’s disillusionment with the patriarchal system. Carol visits the bridge in a very pleasant mood with Farukh, thinking in her heart that she will now reform their relationship. But Farukh’s comment ‘probably asked for it’ on spotting the severed head of a woman, who presumably was killed in the name of honour, shocks her. Later when Carol mentions it to Major Mushtaq to ask his opinion if Farukh would kill her if he knew she had been dishonest by having an extramarital relation in his absence. Major Mushtaq immediately replies, ‘I might if you were my wife’. Carol appears very honest when she slaps Major Mushtaq at this occasion and says, ‘You make me sick, all of you’. This is how Sidhwa portrays the patriarchal mindset of all men, sparing Ashiq Hussain, as the only ray of hope in the novel.

All the idealistic notions attached to Carol’s character, again are conceived through her colonial image as a superior (white) female. Carol herself admits in the novel that she was not actually impressed by Farukh but was overpower ed more by her attraction for the exotic when she decided to
marry him and came to Pakistan. Therefore, she stops loving him. Later, when
she decides to leave Pakistan, she is brimming with a sense of loathing for the
brutal and patriarchal society here. She expresses her contempt by regretting
over her fantasy when she imagined acting as ‘minister to these savages’, and
tells Farukh: ‘I think I am finally beginning to realise something... your
civilization is too ancient... too different... and it has ways that can hurt me ...
really hurt me... I am going home’. (p.229)

Thus on one hand, American Carol’s fantasies are equated with the
fantasies of Zaitoon, for whom the tribal environment is as exotic as the
Pakistani culture is for Carol. This relevance between their characters
enhances the tragic appeal of the novel. On the other hand, Carol’s image is of
a geographical and racial other, not only for Zaitoon but also for all the other
women characters in the novel. The resultant impression left by the text is of
the uselessness of Zaitoon’s courageous defiance, of Hamida’s
disillusionment, and of other tribal women’s resentment of patriarchy because
they cannot or might never be able to break themselves fully free from its hold
like Carol could by outrightly rejecting it and quitting the country.

Gareth Griffiths points out that in ‘overwriting the actual complexity of
difference’, sometimes the post-colonial texts write out the resistive voice of
the indigenous people in the manner similar to the ‘earlier oppressive
discourses of reportage’ employed by the colonial masters. It only further
complicates the case of the indigenous people, as it makes difficult for them to
‘evolve an effective strategy of recuperation and resistance’.265 Perhaps,
Sidhwa’s overly expressive position on the subject is also indicative of the
deficiency of a viable feminist framework in the indigenous anthropological
and literary resources from Pakistan that she could subscribe to or emulate.266

266 Overall the Pakistani feminist ideology posits a bleak picture. Anthropologists in Pakistan largely subscribe to the
feminist discourse by Muslim researchers, mostly by those from the Middle East. However, the debates coming up
The Bride also contains certain other readily recognizable shortcomings, such as the exaggerative tone of the text, and the Bollywood-type contrivances of fights, drama and suspense. Perhaps these textual weaknesses hampered the acceptance of The Bride as an authentic text, as Sidhwa was also quite unknown as a writer when she wrote the novel. However, The Bride vindicates Sidhwa’s genuine concern regarding oppression of the Pakistani women. Besides, the text has some other praiseworthy attributes. The novel occasionally moulds the narrative to highlight the early problems of the migrants when they were settling in Pakistan, the poverty of the tribal people that they have endured since centuries, and the ethnic prejudices that eventually harm the national solidarity. The analysis of all such noteworthy aspects is also made difficult by Sidhwa’s stereotypic conception of the narrative, though.

3.3 The Crow Eaters

Sidhwa received rejection slips from publishers for seven long years in the 1970s for The Bride. She had to self-publish her second written novel The Crow Eaters as her first in 1978, but like many great writers, Sidhwa also vindicated an infallible belief in her genuine creative impulse and her commitment to art by honing her literary prowess in the novel. The bawdy humour and piquant wit, she rather over-utilized in The Bride, assumed a measured delicacy and poignance in The Crow Eaters. Sidhwa inspired such thorough stylistic and paradigmatic reforms, utilizing an ordinary tale of the stereotyped image of the Parsis as ‘the greatest toadies of the British,’ that The thereof seldom reflect upon the reality of life of the Pakistani women. A few notable literary artists whose works have still contributed to shape the feminist ideology include names like Urdu prose writers Ismat chughtai, Jameela Hashmi, Saadat Hassan Manto, Bano Qudsia, Fehmida Riaz, among Urdu poets in this regard the most prominent name is of Parveen Shakir, and in Urdu journalism of Kishwar Naheed. Nevertheless, the works of some of these writers even cannot be exclusively branded as feminist. Whereas, in English texts by other authors, it is difficult to find an equally vocal feminist concern for the common women as we find in Sidhwa. Sara Suleri’s and Muneeca Shamsie’s have valuable feminist contribution, though. Nonetheless, the role of English print media, especially the newspaper Dawn, and lately of both English and Urdu Television channels after the media boom at the start of the 21st century is mentionable to have infused a new awareness of their rights among women. Moreover, the women’s own role as professionals, and as activists, and lately as filmmakers is defining the new dimensions of the feminists awakening in Pakistan.
Crow Eaters became an internationally acclaimed fictive piece. This evolutionary embrace is also an integral part of the gradually widening scope each successive novel of Sidhwa’s. The conspicuous impact of success of The Crow Eaters is reflected in how later on even The Bride was ‘well received and continues to be widely read’ as Sidhwa’s accomplished first written novel.267

The Crow Eaters is seminal because many other prominent Indian as well as Parsi writers took up Parsi characters, community, and their problems in their works only after Sidhwa wrote this novel.268

Being the first ever novel to have Parsi characters as protagonists, The Crow Eaters exposes the secret family life and religious beliefs of the Zoroastrian/Parsi community in an exclusive manner269. The Parsis follow one of the world’s oldest religious traditions.270 Sidhwa situates the story of this ‘smallest’ but commercially and politically ‘most influential minority community’271 of the Subcontinent in British-controlled Lahore of the nineteenth century. A multicultural metropolis of India, Lahore was the microcosmic abode of the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs alike. Sidhwa conceives


268 We witness the first appearance of two minor but significant characters, Cyrus Dubash and Homi Catrack in Rushdie’s 1980 book Midnight’s Children, and Rushdie’s later novel The Ground Beneath Her Feet in 2000 deals with the life of a world renown Parsi rock star, Omrus Cama. Then we find stories of the Parsis characters and their social lives in the multiethnic and multi-religious society of India in the works of Rohinton Mistry, like Tales from Ferozeshah Bagh (1987), Such a Long Journey (1991), A Fine Balance (1995) and Family Matters (2002), Firdaus Kanga’s 1990 brilliant novel Trying to Grow also delineates the life-style of the Parsi community as it unveils several paradoxes in the life of the handicapped child narrator Daryus Brit Kotwal. Afterwards, we have Boman Desai’s 1988 novel The Memory of Elephants (later published in US by the University of Chicago Press in 2000) which vividly presents three generations of Parsis living in Navsari in India. Sidhwa herself wrote again about the Parsi community in her most acclaimed 1991 book Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India. Dine Mehta in her 1992 novel And Some Take a Lover also chooses to tell the story of Roshni, a Parsi girl of the forties, when the Quit India Movement was in progress. As the impact of The Crow Eaters can be traced in many novels of the later period, Sidhwa’s success as a writer surely had its influence on the Indian film as well and the child narrator in her Ice-Candy-Man became one of the main of characters of Deepa Mehta’s 1998 film 1947: Earth. Thrity Umrigar’s 2005 film The Space Between Us deals with the life of a Parsi woman and the customs and practices followed by the contemporary Parsi community in Mumbai. Homi Adajania’s 2006 English language Indian film Being Cyrus is also about a dysfunctional Parsi family. In fact, Being Cyrus was originally titled Akoori which refers to a traditional Parsi scrambles-eggs-like side dish.


270 Parsis confess their fidelity to Zoroaster or Zarathustra, a prophet from the eastern part of Ancient Iran of the pre-historic times. His exact date and place of birth are unknown, but evidence suggests that he possibly lived between about 1700 and 1500 BC. Zoroastrianism as religion was the state religion of three great Iranian empires, which flourished almost continually from the sixth century B.C. to the seventh century A.C. Boyce, Mary. Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices, London, Boston and Helney: Routledge & Kegan Paul. P. 1-2, Fangborn, Cyrus R., Zoroastrianism: A Beloagued Faith, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, PVT LTD. (1982). p. 1.and Hinnells, John; Williams, Allan (eds) Parsis in India and the Diaspora, USA, Canada: Routledge (2008). P.1

an elaborate representation of the Parsi community through the ‘hilarious saga of a Parsi family, which is not just the social mobility and value system of a man and his family but the movement of the times’. The patriarch of the family is the protagonist Faredoon Junglewalla, or Freddy for short.

Faredoon’s character and its aura dictate the story and all the turns in major events described in the novel. Lives of all the individuals in his family, including Putli, Jerbanoo, Faredoon’s daughters and sons (Yazdi and Behram), and his only daughter-in-law Tanya, depend entirely upon Faredoon’s discretion. Faredoon shapes up their respective roles to fulfil the purposes he has set for the family’s private and social life. Sidhwa interweaves the challenges and hazards Faredoon faces regarding his social, political and religious ambitions into his accomplished success-story of rise in commerce and eminence. Faredoon’s greatest concern, however, is to cope with the perils of the multicultural society of India to preserve the religious faith and identity of his family. In fact, saving the Zoroastrian religion and identity was the only reason for the Parsis’ migration to India when they first left Iran in the eighth century after a tough struggle to survive under the Arabs, and is the main source of the community’s conspicuously sycophantic attitude. This critique claims and appraises that a reminder to her

273 Allan Williams translates and interprets a late sixteenth century Zoroastrian poem in Persian, known as the Qesse-ye-Sanjan, a narrative about Sanjan to highlight certain aspects of the Parsis’ history. Sanjan or Khorasan was a historic city in present-day Turkmenistan from where the Parsis had originally migrated to India in the eight century and later these Parsis named their place of settlement in Gujarat, India as Sanjan. Initially, the Parsis were also known as Sanjans or Khorasani in India. William claims that if one applies ‘the tools of literary, religious, and social, as well as historical criticism’ to study Qesse-ye-Sanjan, which is considered ‘a quasi-religious’ text having traits more of a typical ‘religious myth’ than of a historical text because of ‘the casual account of history and the passing of time’ in it, it can serve as a document of the early-modern tradition of the Parsis in India. William’s translation of the Qesse-ye-Sanjan shows that the only motivation behind the Parsis’ migration to India was religious one (For reference please see Alan Williams, ‘The structure, significance and poetic integrity of the Qesse-ye-Sanjan’ in Parsis in India and the Diaspora. Op. Cit. Pp. 15-34). This claim about the religious motivation behind the Parsis’ migration to India has been repeated by Alan Williams and John R. Hinnells in the introduction’ to the Parsis in India and the Diaspora as well, though here they have mentioned the availability of ‘trading opportunities on the coast of north-West India’ as another possible reason for this migration as well. (For reference please see “Introduction” in Parsis in India and the Diaspora. Pp. 1-11. The concern for livelihood can obviously not be overruled but the way John R. Hinnell has mentioned the Parsis’ way of obscure living in his article ‘The Zoroastrian Diasporas’ in South Asians in the Diaspora: Histories and religious traditions (eds) Jacobsen, K.A., Kumar P.P., Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004, the impression about their only concern to save their religion and identity is strengthened. Hinnell claims: ‘In the tenth century CE a band of Zoroastrian faithful migrated from Iran, or the province of Pars, to India where they are known as the Parsis. For centuries they lived in the security of the obscurity in Gujarat. But with the arrival of the British traders in Bombay
community of this liability of preserving themselves is one very basic purpose, among a few other religiously motivated imperatives, which drove Sidhwa to profess her calling through *The Crow Eaters*.

Faredoon Junglewalla is a fictitious character, but Sidhwa has created it with such indulgence and austere devotion to his condition and cunning that he appears life-like. She has invested a lot more to detail this character’s life than her instinctive knack to story-telling. In fact, Sidhwa’s so particular effort to delineate Faredoon’s vibrance seems more of a revivalist’s than of a writer’s strategy. Sidhwa’s crafting of Faredoon is so par-excellence that his figurative persona will always stand out while counting upon achievements of the prominent Parsis in the Indian history. Sidhwa’s personal achievement lies in depicting Faredoon as a staunch Parsi who not only ruled the roost in worldly affairs but served his religious cause better than any preacher could do.

The time of the 1970s, when Sidhwa wrote *The Crow Eaters*, was marked on the one extreme by fervour of religious nationalism in Pakistan and hegemonic Hindu culturalist trends in Indian politics. On the other end, bloody communal riots, especially against minorities, had become a routine in both countries. Evasive of this broader political scenario, *The Crow Eaters* rather intimates Sidhwa’s engaging relatively more with an historical imperative, i.e., of the dwindling fate of the Parsi community in the after-Partition scenario. The Parsi community has lost its position of eminence that it once enjoyed under the Raj. The onus for this failure is put on the largely they increasingly settled in what became the main commercial capital of India.’ It must also be noted here that there persist many doubts about the exact time of the Parsis’ arrival in India, e.g. in some of the accounts (in Qesse-ye-Sanjan according to Williams) the Parsis are reported to have arrived in the eighth century and Hinnells seems to have agreed with Williams upon this time while jointly writing the ‘Introduction’ to *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, but he (Hinnell) reports their migration to have happened in the tenth century instead of the eighth in his own article ‘The Zoroastrian Diasporas’ in *South Asians in the Diaspora: Histories and religious traditions*. Rukhsana Nanji and Homi Dhaalla have referred to this confusion as a genuine ‘vague idea’ which even the Parsis also have ‘about their history, almost all of which is an oral tradition, frequently distorted in the telling’ *(For reference, please see Rukhsana Nanji and Homi Dhaalla, ‘The Landing of the Zoroastrians at Sajan: The archaeological evidence’ in Parsis in India and the Diaspora. Pp. 35-58.*

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effeminate and disillusioned Parsi youth which lacks both the vision and character of the erstwhile ancestors. Sidhwa, an insightful Parsi artist, apprehended and took on this challenge well in time and tried to address it through her conception of Faredoon’s emblematic image as an illustrious Parsi patriarch in *The Crow Eaters*.274

Through Faredoon’s life, Sidhwa provides diverse justifications, at once, of the genuinely cosmic and spiritual imperatives of her religion’s preservative strategy. Accordingly, she reasons about certain consciously acquired eccentric attitudes and genuine attributes of the Zoroastrian community with an accomplished sense of reverence to the steady course of history without distorting facts at all. Sidhwa also unpretentiously incorporates regular feeds of information about the ritualistic aspects of Zoroastrianism. What we get in the end is a beautiful document, resembling a compendium of Zoroastrian beliefs and practices with rational account of the troubled history of its followers in the Sub-continent.275 Thus, *The Crow Eaters* attempts to rightly orientate the reader about the social and historical facts as well as expressing Sidhwa’s genuine concern for the Zoroastrian community. Regrettably, these contentions have remained under-appreciated so far because neither the novel’s reading has been holistically contextualised nor Sidhwa’s obscurantist and subversive ploys have been properly deciphered by her critics.

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274 For a brief discussion about this point, please refer to T. M. Luhrmann’s ‘The Good Parsi: The Postcolonial “Feminization” of a Parsi Elite’ in *Man*, New Series, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Jun., 1994), pp. 333-357. Luhrmann has analysed the situation of the post-Partition Parsi youth to present her case in this regard. It must be noted that given the Post-colonial nature of her art, Sidhwa’s strategy in *The Crow Eaters* works also as a resistive ploy to position her revivalist politics both to challenge and reform the historical representation of her community in India.

275 In a way, *The Crow Eaters* seeks to link antiquity with the present through a panoramic overview of the changes felt, embraced or resisted by the Parsis to survive as a religious entity in the general struggle to be the fittest only for advancing the cause of their religion, contrary to any worldly or political ambition whatsoever. Further in so encapsulating the logic behind the cosmic, humanistic and divine purposes of her religion, Sidhwa not only enlightens the general reader of the unique divine aspects of the world’s oldest religion but also reminds its current adherents of the lofty purpose that is theirs to fulfil now because that was why their ancestors chose to defy death by rebelling against the onslaught of early Islam, and by sacrificing their homes and belongings to find prosperity of their religion in the unknown lands.
One rarely finds a literary artist choosing and projecting seemingly a villainous character as the protagonist. For such an undertaking to be successful also, perhaps, a writer requires *jeu d’esprit* as sharp and vigilant as of the classical English poet John Milton whose portrayal of Satan’s grandeur and character in the first book of *Paradise Lost* is unmistakably deferential. However, Sidhwa takes this daunting risk. The novel opens with the mock-epic-like picturesque description of Faredoon’s character:

Faredoon Junglewalla, Freddy for short, was strikingly handsome, dulcet-voiced adventurer, with so few scruples that he not only succeeded in carving a comfortable niche in the world for himself but he also earned the respect and gratitude of his entire community. When he died at sixty-five, a majestic grey haired patriarch, he attained the rare distinction of being locally listed in the “Zarathusti Calendar of Great Men and Women”… – they include the names of ancient Persian kings and saints, and all those who have served the community since the Parsis migrated to India. Faredoon Junglewalla’s name is invoked in all major ceremonies performed in the Punjab and Sind – an ever present testimony to the success of his charming rascality.276

Satire and irony juxtaposed, Faredoon’s description is just a prelude to the humorous encounter that shortly ensues. Yet, the reader is left wondering about the value system of the Parsi community. Hardly are these conflicting notions streamlined in the mind that Sidhwa presents Faredoon’s philosophy of *need* he is preaching to his progeny and relatives while recounting his life-story to them:

‘The sweetest thing in the world is your need. Yes, think on it. Your own need – the mainspring of your wants, well-being and

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contentment…. Need makes a flatterer of a bully and persuades a cruel man to kindness. Call it circumstances – call it self-interest – call it what you will, it still remains your need. All the good in this world comes from serving our own ends…. What makes you tolerate someone you’d rather spit in the eye? What subdues that great big “I” that monstrous ego in a person? Need, I tell you – will force you to love your enemy as a brother….I followed the dictates of my needs, my wants – they make one flexible, elastic, humble. “The meek shall inherit the earth”, says Christ. There is a lot in what he says. There is also a lot of depth in the man who says, “Sway with the breeze, bend with the winds,” he orated, misquoting authoritatively. (The Crow Eaters. p. 2)

Fareedoon also recounts such an obviously objectionable self-seeking creed of life, which helped him enjoy success in society and business and fulfil his religious obligations. He mattered a lot to the people in society, and it perturbed him little if he had to painstakingly stooge the English Colonel Williams because he could also carry on his business of smuggling goods between Peshawar and Afghanistan. Fareedoon was not at all a downright sycophant only. As he could secure means, he also generously donated money to construct an orphanage and a hospital. His circumstances condemned him to afford only interest-based friendships, yet Fareedoon admittedly invested enough into his friendships:

I’ve made friends – love them – for what could be called “ulterior motives,” and yet the friendships so made are amongst my sweetest, longest and most sincere. I cherish them still. (The Crow Eaters. p. 11)
An example is Faredoon’s friendship with Mr Charles P. Allen, a junior officer in Indian Civil Service. Mr Allen’s position was ‘strategic’ to Faredoon’s business, but the two served each other’s need for good friendship, too. Faredoon was generous to Mr Allen as a good friend, and installed a water pump dedicated to him. Mr Allen could also confide his private distresses to Faredoon. Faredoon’s description of how he cured a private ailment of Mr Allen is interesting in this regard:

‘He (Mr Allen) was a pukka sahib then – couldn’t stand the heat. But he was better off than his memsahib! All covered with prickly heat, the poor skinny creature scratched herself raw. One day Allen confessed he couldn’t get his prick up. “On account of this bloody heat,” he said. He was an obliging bastard, so I helped him. First I packed his wife off to the hills to relieve her of her prickly heat. Then I rallied around with a bunch of buxom dancing-girls and Dimple Scotch. In no time at all he was cured of his distressing symptoms! (The Crow Eaters. pp. 10-11)

So exultantly harping on the achievements his yes man wisdom and way of life showered on him, Faredoon makes clear for his progeny the real objective of his servile behaviour:

There are hardly a hundred and twenty thousand Parsis in the world – and still we maintain our identity – why? Booted out of Persia at the time of the Arab invasion 1,300 years ago, a handful of our ancestors fled to India with their sacred fires. Here they were granted sanctuary by the prince Yadav Rana on the condition that they did not eat beef, wear rawhide sandals or convert the susceptible masses. Our ancestors weren’t too proud to bow to his will. To this day we do not allow conversion to our faith – or mixed marriages. (The Crow Eaters. p. 11)
Faredoon advises his progeny also to follow suit of their wants and needs by explaining to them the predicament of safeguarding their social position if they must preserve their religious identity:

‘And where, if I may ask, does the sun rise? No, not in the East. For us it rises – and sets – in the Englishman’s arse. They are our sovereigns. Where do you think we’d be if we did not curry favour? Next to the nawabs, rajas and princelings, we are the greatest toadies of the British Empire! These are not ugly words, mind you. They are the sweet dictates of our delicious need to exist, to live and to prosper in peace. Otherwise, where would we Parsis be? Cleaning out gutters with the untouchables – a dispersed pinch of snuff sneezed from the heterogeneous nostrils of India! Oh yes, in looking after our interests we have maintained our strength – the strength to advance the grand cosmic plan of Ahura Mazda – the deep spiritual law which governs the universe, the path of Asha.’

(‘The Crow Eaters. p. 14)

This is where the physical roots and spiritual pursuits of Sidhwa’s art diverge in *The Crow Eaters*. This attribute is common in her other novels also, wherever she brings the matter of Parsis religious identity to focus. Her justification of the Parsis self-seeking and hypocritical strategies incites one to question here the subaltern position she ascribes to this community in the history and society of the Indian Sub-continent. The Parsis, as being quite prosperous during colonial rule and being racially ‘second-rank’ to the British,

have generally been perceived as anything but subaltern. Nonetheless, Sidhwa wants her readers to view the Parsis’ subalternity as a vulnerable minority whose members have always been facing multifarious challenges to keep up their religious ideals and identity amidst compelling socio-cultural, political, and assimilationist influences of a motley collection of the dominant religious communities in the Subcontinent. Despite all this reading the above quoted reference from the novel, one feels confounded about the community’s sense of morality, more sombrely, about the very religious integrity and identity which Parsis seem to safeguard so grudgingly. Faredoon’s portrayal as an unconscientious patriarch and the exemplification of his dubious political and business career as a survival strategy for his children are obviously objectionable, yet Faredoon talks about advancing ‘the grand cosmic plan of Ahura Mazda – the deep spiritual law...’ Ironically, Sidhwa proclaims in the author’s note to *The Crow Eaters* that ‘because of a deep-rooted admiration for my community – and an enormous affection for its few eccentricities – this work of fiction has been a labour of love.’

The reader finds no clue as to where from so much negativity creeps in then in a work which has been so endearingly accomplished.

The first four pages of *The Crow Eaters* leave a vague impression of the oppressed condition of the Parsis. Whatever we learn about an ideal Parsi, Faredoon, casts his life only in dark colours. As the story proceeds, the other details, such as Faredoon’s heartless treatment of Jerbanoo and attempt at murdering her by arson to acquire insurance money, his use of altruistic and coercive ways to acquire social status and imperial connection also brand Faredoon as an utterly hypocritical patriarch whose only aim in life is to gain wealth and position. His heinous most crime is the rape of Rosy Watson, his son Yazdi’s Anglo-Indian class fellow and a part-time dancing girl, just to shame her for letting Yazdi fall in love with her knowing well her half-caste

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racial as well as professional background. Faredoon’s moral integrity apart, even his paternal instinct appears a psychological enigma, seeing that he is overwhelmingly concerned for all his children, but gradually deserts Yazdi, especially when Yazdi embraces an ascetic way of life. However strongly may one assert that the book is exceptionally humorous, artistically sound, contains such memorable characters like Faredoon, rogue Jerbanoo and docile Putli and Rudabai, and inspires such mirth when Sidhwa describes Jerbanoo’s rivalry with Faredoon or lampoons Yazdi’s excessive altruism and Behram’s parsimoniousness, *The Crow Eaters* appears but a black comedy at the most,\(^{279}\) rightly considered initially a maligning treatise by several Parsis as well.\(^{280}\)

Sidhwa, as a staunch adherent of Zoroastrianism surely could never think of discrediting her community, or her religion. Therefore, the proper categorization of the Parsi milieu and characters is crucially important. Otherwise, the case of the Parsis’ subaltern agency as a vulnerable minority community, which has never been acknowledged in the region, cannot be established. It is evident even from the inadvertent disregard to Sidhwa’s effort for establishing it so starkly by subverting in *The Crow Eaters* the normative discourse of the regional history which is replete with stereotypical notions about the community, branding the Parsis in general as opportunists, sycophants, and toadies of the British. Improper contextualization of the text has also been mainly responsible that the critics could never fill the existing

\(^{279}\) All the reviews the novel received both from the country and abroad (America and the Great Britain) and quite a few interpretations of the text in critical books seem excessively bent upon appreciating only the comic and satirical elements related to the funny disposition of the characters and the incorrigible practical logic behind the self-aggrandizing actions of characters like Faredoon and Behram. Or else, Sidhwa’s sense of history and her courage to have exposed many secrets of her community-life have been lauded greatly. However, in all such critiques commonly stressed is the need to generate tolerance for accepting, and justifying the darker aspects of the characters’ acts or intentions as the doomed imperatives of their condition. For reference, please see the link (http://www.bapsisidhwa.com/book-crow-eaters.html) about *The Crow Eaters* from the official website of Bapsi Sidhwa. Please, also refer to Dodiya, Jaydipsinh, ‘Within the Sub-continent and Beyond: A Critical Study of Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Crow Eaters, The Pakistani Bride, Ice-Candy-Man* and *An American Brat*’ in *The Parsis and Parsi English Writing*. Pp. 79-118; and Hashmi, Alamgir, ‘*The Crow Eaters: A Noteworthy Novel*’ in *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa*. Op. Cit. Pp. 136-139.

\(^{280}\) Many Parsis objected that Sidhwa had disfavoured her community by the way she unfolds the ethical bearing of the community for the readers. Besides, Sidhwa also made many secrets of their extremely private life public. There were even rumours of a bomb attack during the launching ceremony at a private hotel in Lahore and the place had to be evacuated.
interpretational gaps regarding *The Crow Eaters*, as it automatically shifts the
critical stress from the actual political imperatives of the novel’s production to
its apparent artistic attributes. ‘The Parsi Paradox in *The Crow Eaters*’ by Novy
Kapadia, so far the best written article on the novel, serves as the best example
to understand all these anomalies. Novy Kapadia premises his critique of the
novel on the quest about ‘the motivating factors which make this smallest
religious minority in the world strive for excellence, instead of being wrapped
in the throes of survival’, and proceeds by hypothesizing:

Are the answers to be found in the social code and value
systems of the religion (like the Protestant work ethic, which
encouraged thrift and hard work and led to the rise of capitalism
in eighteenth century England) or the socio-economic conditions
in India or the status of a limited minority being strictly loyal to
every ruling authority or a mix of all these factors? In her novel
*The Crow Eaters*, Bapsi Sidhwa attempts an answer to these
queries, by recreating a fictional saga of a Parsi family and the
corresponding social milieu. It is the only novel of its kind, as it
is the first account of the workings of the Parsi mind, social
behaviour, value systems and customs.

Closely analysing, one realises that Kapadia enumerates only the
cosmic and topical objectives, and none of the religious ideals, that the
Zoroastrians pursue. The Protestant work ethic, no doubt, was partially
adopted by the Parsis during the British Raj. But the fact that Kapadia
overlooks is that this adoption of the Protestant work ethic along with getting
overly Westernized (through learning English ways and most importantly
English language) was only a clever resistive move by the Parsis to keep their
religious identity safe. An all-out embrace by the colonial power was a mixed
boon, it uplifted the social status of the Parsis but the religion of the masters
posed them the most imminent and unavoidable challenge ever in India. Adopting the Protestant work ethic, the Parsis displayed remarkable adaptability and universalism of the Zoroastrian religion against the possible threat of assimilation into Christianity. Thus, only dwelling upon, instead of, logically scrutinizing these factors to find their roots, which Kapadia’s own observation about the Parsis’ quest for excellence alludes to having religious connection, he immediately rather misplaces emphasis on the protestant work ethic and Parsi community’s Westernization as a means only to prove their loyalty to the British to gain wealth and status. As such, whatever Kapadia concludes about the story’s execution results in unexplainable or dubious amenities of the novel.

For example, from the very start Kapadia limits the scope of the novel’s historical reach (which actually extends to antiquity), and of his own understanding of its depiction in the story by claiming that *The Crow Eaters* ‘traces the attempts of Parsis, migrating from the West coast and settling in the more salubrious climate of North Indian cities, in the late nineteenth and the turn of this century’. He also takes it for granted that this migration of the Parsis had obvious mercenary motives. Kapadia claims that Sidhwa, being a third generation descendant of these Parsi settlers and ‘reared on tales both fictional and otherwise of the entrepreneurial skill of the elders of her community, just adapted the stories she heard in childhood to narrate the exploits of Faredoon Junglewalla and his family. Thus, she turned ‘autobiography into art by the clever use of irony’.

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281 For detailed discussion about this point please refer to T. M. Luhrmann, ‘Evil in the Sands of Time: Theology and Identity Politics among the Zoroastrian Parsis’ in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Aug., 2002), pp. 861-889. Luhrmann has mentioned the colonial politics by the British, in this concern, for suppressing the indigenous religions, especially those of the minorities, as weaker and inferior faiths both to justify the civilizing mission of the Raj and to make grounds for the propagation of Christianity. Parsis being the smallest minority but intensely religious community were the easy and eager target for conversion, so Luhrmann writes that ‘as the British rose to dominance and their missionaries strove to teach Parsis that theirs was an inferior, weaker faith, Parsis began to represent their religion as similar to that of the Protestant Christians, even while steadfastly refusing (for the most part) to convert’. 
Rather uncritically, Kapadia himself pays no attention to the way Sidhwa invests so much energy to showcase the get-up-and-go of her Parsi protagonist, just to signify Faredoon’s unaltering determination to safeguard his religious identity. Instead, Kapadia hurriedly concludes that ‘wealth and status is the ultimate aim for Faredoon Junglewalla’. Finding no lofty purpose in Faredoon life, Kapadia even downgrades Faredoon’s successful business life by such statements that ‘he achieved his ambition but at what cost’ or ‘the achievement of Freddy is stupendous, yet doubts are raised about it’. The real artistic merit of the novel is vindicated right here. Sidhwa turns the tables on her critics in intriguing them by foregrounding what we are heading towards to prove she specifically subverts in *The Crow Eaters*, i.e., the stereotypic notions about the Parsis; thence to register and vehemently voice their subaltern agency.

Having himself problematized, at first, any spiritual significance of the story by stressing upon Faredoon’s worldly ambitions, Kapadia self-assumedly discovers that in the novel ‘the maintenance of identity ... is shown as mere public relations, bordering on sycophancy’. Arguably misquoting textual references, Kapadia then tries to prove that this sycophantic material pursuit is Parsis’ special ‘need to exist and neither lauded or condemned’ in the novel. Obviously for want of a better evidence to support this argument, Kapadia falls prey to the obscurantist trap of the ‘protective irony’ that (we contend and have proved later) Sidhwa has varyingly employed throughout the novel to complement her subversive strategy. However, Kapadia misconstrues the use of the ‘protective irony’ as Sidhwa’s way of ‘balancing personal inadequacies against the contradictions of life itself’, or as ‘a mode of acceptance – a type of philosophy’ that the novel by virtue of its realistic depiction of life seeks to merit.
So, the rest of Kapadia’s article deals with Sidhwa’s realistic and accurate depiction of ‘the behavioural pattern of the Parsis, ranging from quest for excellence to eccentricity’ in their blind-folded loyalty to the British. Kapadia discusses the social and religious history of the Parsis that being loyal to the British they wanted to ensure their ‘legal security, peace, and economic prosperity’ so ‘that they were not hindered in the practice of their religion’. Given the thrust of his main argument, Kapadia rightly mentions that the British gave ‘a special status as a broker and reliable trading partner’ to the Parsis, but his claim that the government granted them ‘religious autonomy and protection’ is falsified by the fact already established quoting T. M. Luhrman above that the Parsis were also being considered an easy target for conversion to Christianity.282 That is why Kapadia even misconceives the Parsis’ allegiance to the British akin to the community’s ‘pre-Islamic Sessanian’ concept of loyalty to the ruler.

Obviously, there had to be pitfalls because the English and Parsi value systems were different. Kapadia praises Sidhwa for accurately depicting ‘the changing social milieu and identity crisis’ through the conduct of the two successive generations of the Junglewallas. For example, he refers as to how Putli, an older generation Parsi woman, felt ‘revolted’ when she had to walk one step ahead of her husband during formal tea-parties in the Government House. Putli was even more scandalized by her daughter Yasmin’s deliberate irreverence to their societal custom of walking three paces behind her husband. Whereas, Yasmin protested that it was old-fashioned, ‘stupid’ and ‘servile’. Putli ‘adapted to what she considered new-fanged customs’ and was ‘cajoled’ to attend functions in the Government House only for Faredoon, as it

282 T. M. Luhrman also talks about a charismatic Scots Presbyterian missionary named John Wilson, who arrived in Bombay in 1829. Wilson vehemently criticised the dualist orthodoxy of Zoroastrianism. To highlight the community response on the matter of conversion by Wilson, Luhrman quotes Karaka: ‘The Feelings of the entire Parsi community were never more outraged, nor were the Parsis ever more excited since their arrival in India, than when two Parsi youths named Dhanjibhai Naorozji and Hormasji Pestanji were induced by the later Rev. Dr. Wilson to change their religion for Christianity’, Karaka, D. F., ‘History of the Parsis. Vols I and II, London: Macmillan, 1884, quoted in Ibid.
was ‘an opportunity for advancing contacts and consolidating friendships’  
(*The Crow Eaters*, pp. 187-191). Kapadia also refers to how Sidhwa underscores 
the difference between the increasingly westernized life-style of the youngest 
son of Faredoon, Billy/Behram and his wife Tanya from the life-style followed 
by Faredoon and Putli:

They [Behram and Tanya] entertained continuously at small, 
intimate, ‘mixed’ parties where married couples laughed and 
danced decorously with other married couples. ‘Mixed’ parties 
were as revolutionary a departure from Freddy’s all-male get-
togethers at the Hira Mandi, and Putli’s rigid female sessions, as 
is a discotheque from a Victorian family dinner. (*The Crow Eaters*, 
p. 245)

Here, Kapadia notices what still perturbed Billy who had adopted 
double standards. Billy wanted his wife ‘Tanya to appear Westernized and 
talk English’, yet argued with her ‘not to reveal her midriff so glaringly or to 
look boldly and mix freely with other men … (and) at home, he wants his wife 
to be servile and domestic, always at his beck and call’ (*The Crow Eaters*, pp. 
245-47, and p. 275). Kapadia maintains that this identity crisis ‘was distinctly 
visible among Parsis in British India and is a social problem for many in the 
community, even in contemporary India and Pakistan’. From all such details 
Kapadia does infer that ‘the scope of the novel is large, it shows the reality of a 
whole family and its networks of friendship’, or instead, that the Junglewallas 
‘do not consider Westernization as a conscious abandonment of their own 
group identity’. But he does not take this logical clue vindicating Sidhwa’s 
painstaking effort to have so tenaciously proven, through the life history of 
the liberal and successful Junglewallas, the Parsis’ resolve of adhering to their
religious roots even in the midst of this identity crisis. Though this idea is supported by very reliable, and rare, historical evidence as well.283

Thus, on the authority of his arguments that over-Westernization turned out to be such a problem for the Parsis ultimately that they failed to find ‘an independent identity of their own, free from both the English (who never took the Parsis as one of their own kind) and other Indians (with whom the Parsis, urged by their leaders like Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy284, had developed a kind of ‘mental estrangement.’ So, Kapadia declares the Parsis ‘a schizophrenic community’. In so concluding, Kapadia confuses Sidhwa’s actual thesis of registering the subaltern agency of the Parsis through their desperate struggle to preserve their religious identity at all costs with what he (rightly) perceives as the ‘shrewd’ depiction of their ‘human fallibilities’ and the ‘identity search in several situations and aspects in The Crow Eaters’. Not surprisingly, therefore, he fails to interpret several aspects which underpin the story’s subversive and sublime import.

For example, Kapadia takes Faredoon’s ‘vehement protests against the nationalist movement and exhortations to his offspring to remain loyal to the

283 Please refer again to T. M. Luhrmann, ‘Evil in the Sands of Time: Theology and Identity Politics among the Zoroastrian Parsis’ in The Journal of Asian Studies. Op. Cit. Luhrmann citing examples of the Westernized Parsi community in the British India (which deliberately manipulated meanings of the theological texts that once formed the core of their ancient religion of the Zoroastrianism just to counter the British repressive communal politics and to forge an imperial connection) and of Khaje Hoju Mistree, ‘a charismatic, brilliant teacher’(who did gain considerable attention and following by the Parsi youth when he began to teach in the late twentieth century that ‘the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism is strikingly different from either Christianity or Hinduism, and that the Parsis must claim the distinctiveness of their own tradition’ by ‘reaffirming identity in the face of diffusion’) develops a case for the opposing centrifugal/ assimilationist and centripetal/inward impulses in the South Asian Parsi diasporic community regarding adherence to their religion. Luhrmann further elaborates upon how these opposing religious impulses among the Parsi community have served the purpose of debate in anthropological and Post-colonial discourses. For example, about the Parsis’ assimilationist desire which in anthropological parlance is also referred to as ‘the native identification with the colonizer’ Luhrmann reports that ‘the structure of that elite identification and its complex socio-psychological consequences have been presented, in differing ways and with distinctive contexts, by Mannoni (1956), Memmi (1965), Fanon (1967), Kelly (1991), Suleri (1992), Bhabha (1994), Stoler (1995), and others’. Luhrmann’s way of mentioning of Bhabha’s take through his theorizing of the ‘hybrid consciousness’ about the same tragedy of identity crisis (which alternately leads Kapadia to adduce the Parsi characters in The Crow Eaters as a ‘schizophrenic community’) does open up rather unique and yet untried vistas to inquire about and interpret this text. However, more relevant to our concern at the moment is Luhrmann’s acknowledgment that the centripetal/inward impulse of adhering to the religion in the face of adverse change among the Parsi community ‘is less well studied, at least in the ethnography of South Asia’.

284 A self-made Parsi leader and Bombay businessman who rose situation from poverty ridden background through trade of cotton and opium, and incessant charity for all communities, including the Parsis, Christians, Hindus and Muslims, to such an eminence that he was bestowed upon the knighthood in 1842 and baronetcy in 1858, the very first distinctions of their kind conferred by Queen Victoria upon a British subject in India.
British Empire’ to be another striking manifestation of the Parsis’ identity search. According to Kapadia this textual reference highlights how eager the Parsis were to keep their political alliance with the British, for which they also endured ‘three anti-Parsi riots in Bombay and other cities in 1851, 1874, and 1921’. Then self-refuting himself Kapadia brings another historical reference, a little later, to strengthen his argument about the hypocrisy of the Parsis that ‘the Parsis on realising the inevitability of independence altered their allegiances’. Whereas, this is also a well-established, but historically misrepresented, fact now that the Parsis did not change allegiances rather ‘held a religiously and politically neutral position’ in the strife for winning stakes during the Partition. That was the only reason they were spared of the violence committed by different communities. Faredoon’s confession: ‘we will stay where we are .... Let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever, rule. What does it matter? The sun will continue to rise – and to set – in their arses’ (The Crow Eaters, p. 283), that Kapadia thinks ‘hints at the necessity of changing allegiances’ is in fact Faredoon’s statement of neutrality on the subject. This argument is proved by Faredoon’s other remarks in which he reproaches the politically active Parsi leaders Adil Mama and Dadabhai Naoroji, and expresses his concerns regarding the partition:

The fools will break up the country. The Hindus will have one part, Muslims the other, Sikhs, Bengalis, Tamils and God knows who else will have their share; and they won’t want you. (The Crow Eaters, p. 283)

It also brings us to yet another strong assertion about the subversive strategy of the novel. Sidhwa has used the power of her representative art to stress here that the partisan approach of few Parsi leaders branded this

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285 The universally acclaimed story in Sidhwa’s Cracking India/Ice-Candy-Man of how Lenny’s Parsi family gambled their fate for neutrality, caught amidst the turbulence of violence during India’s partition in the then most volatile city of Lahore, is a proof positive in this regard as well. For a brief reference, please also see online introduction of ‘Bapsi Sidhwa’ at http://www.english.emory.edu/Bahri/Sidhwa.html
community biased by some and hypocritical by others\textsuperscript{286}, while majority of the Parsis had been all too much concerned about their own fate in the altered state of affairs at and after the time of the Partition. The contrived debate-like discussion which seems to dramatically end the novel on a note of reconciliation regarding the Parsis’ position on India’s partition bids Sidhwa’s dauntless ambition and risk of using her artistic credibility to correctly direct the historical discourse from the region, i.e., both from India and Pakistan.

Further, missing the sublime reach of the novel, Kapadia identifies two very serious gaps, in the depiction of Yazdi, the second son of Faredoon Junglewalla, that he claims again are a facet of the identity crisis depicted in The Crow Eaters. Yazdi definitely gets disillusioned after losing all prospects of marriage with the non-Parsi Anglo-Indian Rosy Watson, due to uncompromising opposition of his family and Rosy’s rape by his father in Hira Mandi (Diamond Market)\textsuperscript{287} and his elder brother Soli’s death in prime youth. Yazdi becomes selfless to such an extreme that he gives as charity his money, even his clothes to the beggars and homeless people, assists lepers, and severs contact with his family. Kapadia’s assessment that Yazdi is ‘aggrieved at the conspicuous commercialism and sycophancy of the Parsis’ seems appealing. Kapadia is also right in identifying that Yazdi’s character manifests a kind of identity crisis, and it ‘adds to the richness and variety of the novel, as it shows all Parsis are not types, nor do they have stereotypic reactions’. Yet, Kapadia opines that a fuller depiction of Yazdi is ‘deliberately or accidentally left vague, which is slightly jarring’, hence he propounds:

\textsuperscript{286} The image of the Parsi community in the historiography of the struggle for Partition is often ignored and sometimes even tarnished both in mainstream Indian and Pakistani historiographic traditions by criticising the Parsi leaders. For instance Madame Cama, who spent much of her life in exile for her involvement in Indian Nationalist Movement, is hardly mentioned and other Parsi leaders, such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozshah Mehta, who played an active role in the creation of the Indian National Congress, are callously branded as hypocritical and biased in history books in both India and Pakistan.

\textsuperscript{287} Also called as Shahi Muhallah, Hira Mandi is a red light district inside the Taxali Gate of the Old City of Lahore. It housed courtesans who offered traditional and classical dances to cater to the nobility in the Mughal era, but later turned into a centre of prostitution under the guise of dances, such as mujhira, a branch of South Asian classical dancing.
There is a structural flaw in the presentation of Yazdi. The Crow Eaters is a very complex novel and though it shows a network of human relationships and reality of a whole family, there are no loose ends in the plot. The exception is Yazdi.

The fact, Kapadia grievously misses here is that Yazdi declares himself to be a follower of Mazdak by formally embracing his religious philosophy of asceticism which, as we see it later, is a reformist extremism stemming from Zoroastrianism. The misreading of Yazdi’s character is mainly the reason why critics like Kapadia have not been able to correctly interpret the peculiar way Sidhwa has described Faredoon’s altruism. Yazdi’s character is one of Sidhwa’s most remarkable feats in The Crow Eaters, as it is in Yazdi’s person that she has embodied and elaborated the contrast of Zoroastrianism with Mazdakism by conceiving the dissenter Yazdi as foil to the staunch Parsi Faredoon Junglewalla. No matter, Faredoon’s acts of charity seem to Kapadia ‘mingling of generosity with self-interest’ and ‘self-promotion’, and he appears utterly heartless by deserting his son, Sidhwa yet embellishes her art and retains her sympathies with the rogue Faredoon, and celebrates him as a great Parsi.

The gravest injustice to Sidhwa’s effort in The Crow Eaters is done not so much by Kapadia’s misconception conclusions (that are often quoted eagerly in other critiques of the novel) but by the very fact that such an approach to interpret the novel leads one to overlook the indices of resistance, both suggestive and stark, that the text’s language and actions of the characters made available to the matrix of present day Postcolonial theory. It is also a fact that The Crow Eaters is such a complex text which cannot be

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288 Mazdak Bamdad, referred to as a 5th century Iranian reformer or activist, was originally a Zoroastrian mohad (missionary) who claimed to be a prophet and established the religious and philosophical tradition of Mazdakism. Mazdak’s reform movement in Zoroastrianism was the result of his strong criticism of mainstream Zoroastrian clergy who had oppressed the Persian population to make them destitute. Reference: ‘Mazdakism’ 1999, in Late Antiquity: A Guide to Postcolonial World, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, USA, Viewed 3 August 2012, <from http://credo referencia.com/entry/hulpa/mazdakism>
understood without a thorough understanding of some of the Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. Applying the precepts of the Zoroastrian religious discourse, all the major aspects and episodes of the novel, and actions and intentions of the characters unfold an entirely different reality which Sidhwa fictionalized as well as kept down-to-earth to the extreme. The extensive discussion about Kapadia’s observations, which more or less represent the general perception of *The Crow Eaters* so far and of the Parsi milieu in it, was however imperative. It will also help now on keep track of, and skip scrutinizing, the aspects which Sidhwa has utilized as an obscurantist trap in *The Crow Eaters* and to focus on those textual attributes which have not been highlighted by any critic yet.

Traditional Zoroastrian theology, liturgy and ethics are inspired by a theistic orthodoxy which is strikingly different from that of the dominant monotheistic traditions. Zoroastrianism has persisted for centuries in perpetuating the cosmic plan of an all good God who needs man’s active and supportive role in His divinely struggle to perfect Himself against an aggressive adversary and to purge the world of all evil that this opponent perpetrates.

According to Avesta, the Zoroastrian God is called Ahura Mazda or Ohrmazd, the principle of all good, light and life. Ohrmazd is faced with an adversary Angra Mainyu or Ahriman, the principle of all evil, darkness, death, deceit, and destruction. Both Ohrmazd and Ahriman are pure Spirits which exist since infinity (having sprung from the eternal principle Time); as such there are two First Causes, both antagonistic and irreconcilable to each other. This very precept about the nature of God and the Devil forms the basis of the unique dualist orthodoxy of Zoroastrianism. Both Ohrmazd and

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289 The Sacred books of the Zoroastrians, collectively called Avesta, consist of three kinds of texts: Gathas, songs or odes ascribed to Zoroaster; Yashts or sacrificial hymns addressed to various deities; and Vendidad or Vidvedat, which is treatise dealing mainly with ritual purification. Even Sidhwa has referred to these texts at various instances in the novel.
Ahriman have a beginning, yet only Ahriman has an end; not that he would die but could be made irredeemably and eternally inactive. So, Ohrmazd, being infinite only in time, shares the space with Ahriman where sooner or later a struggle for dominance is inevitable. Ohrmazd, the all-knowledgeable, is cognizant of Ahriman’s vulnerability. However, it is Ahriman’s blind self-assertive aggression which incites Ohrmazd to declare a cosmic battle against him (Ahriman) for a stipulated period of time. For this purpose, Ohrmazd created the world and the mankind as a weapon to foil Ahriman’s attack.  

The creation is necessitated for Ohrmazd to smite the Evil, and to finally become infinite in space as well. Man is vanguardist in choosing to aid Ohrmazd against Ahriman, not by any divinely dictate but by his own volition. Seeking the success of the Godly cause, man actually struggles for his own eternal existence in the natural abode, the paradise. However, if a man prefers evil over good, he betrays the natural law of obeying his Creator, Ohrmazd. Zoroaster’s compact theology also elaborates upon the cosmic dichotomies wherein every perennial enigma characterises devil’s doing in

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290 In Zoroastrianism stipulated time of the cosmic life is one year (12,000 calendar years). Ahriman first attacked Ohrmazd. In self-defence Ohrmazd recited ahunvar (a key Zoroastrian prayer) to cast stupor on Ahriman and to show him that his end was certain. So, Ahriman remained unconscious for three thousand years. During this period Ohrmazd created the two worlds, i.e., of the world of the spirits and that of the matter. It is also conjectured that Ahriman’s first attack was rather successful, and he had already forged his weapon, the demons, before going into stupor. Afterwards, Ohrmazd offered him peace, but Ahriman rejected. Hence is the battle between the two Supreme Spirits at the end of which Ahriman will be defeated for ever. Zoroaster, the prophet of the Parsis, was a priest-turned-prophet who had rebelled against the priests and ruling class to reform the religion in the pre-Vedic pagan society of ancient Persia, so in his original teachings this battle was a very realistic fight against evil in which man is required to cooperate with the supreme deity Ahura Mazda and his created attendant powers (the six Amahraspandh/Amesha Spentas or Bounteous Immortals including the old gods of Rig Vedic times later reintroduced into the system) to bring to nought Angra Mainyu/Ahriman and his demonic hordes including the class of deities called daeva which Zoroaster also declared as demons. While the Bounteous Immortals can roughly be equated with angels, most of the demons appear to be personified vices like concupiscence, anger, sloth, and heresy. Sidhwa has enriched the mythic relevance of the text by referring to divine and demonic figures from time to time in The Crow Eaters. Doing so, she has also metaphorically amplified the spiritualistic dimensions of the day-to-day conduct and concerns of a typical Zoroastrian family and individuals. Please see R.C. Zaehner, ‘The Two Primeval Spirits and Creation’ in The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs, London: Sheldon Press, 1975. Pp. 29-41.

291 According to Zoroastrianism, man works with Ohrmazd not as His created slave but as a co-worker. The religion also preaches that the future of life is happy in the natural paradise. When the cosmic time ends, all the souls, both of the righteous ones and of the sinners (after these sinners have passed through the punishments of their wrongs in the hell), would resurrect, and their bodies will participate in infinite body of God. It would be like the mixing of two macrocosms. There is also mentioned of a Saviour, like the one believed to appear according to Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, under whose rulership the transformation for perfection would begin. Thus, man also seeks eternity through the infinite Body of God, and an ultimately blissful, the paradise. So, in Zoroastrianism the relationship between Man and the Creator is accounted in terms of its beneficent reciprocity for both. Please see R.C. Zaehner, ‘The Necessity of Dualism’ in Ibid Pp. 52-59.
bringing corruption onto the Godly creations, like darkness to light, pollution to purity, evil to good, and death to life.\textsuperscript{292} And the sense of importance that the religion imbibes in its adherents of being the helpers of Ohrmazd to establish the natural order ultimately translates into a life-affirming ethical system which is predominantly worldly in outlook.

Tersely phrased as ‘good thoughts, good words and good mind’\textsuperscript{293} what Zoroastrian ethics actually requires man to apply is only common sense in pursuing a moderate morality of neither extreme of turning one’s other cheek in love to the enemy if one is slapped (as in Christianity) or forsaking all material prosperity as in Mazdakism and in the sufi tradition of Islam, both of which actually represent extreme opposition to Zoroastrianism by equating spirit with good and matter with evil. Mazdak beliefs have very subtle but crucial differences from those of Zoroastrianism.

Mazdakism or Manichaeanism also preaches the dualistic cosmology or worldview, i.e., there are two primal spirits or original principles of the universe: one, Light; and the other Darkness. Both these principles got accidently mixed up and the material world was created with its three Light elements: Earth, Water, and Four powers of the god of Light – Discernment, Understanding, Memory/Preservation, and Joy became embodied in humans,

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    \item \textsuperscript{292} Ahriman, coming out of his stupor, first afflicted the Primal man with ‘concupiscence and want, bane and pain, disease and lust (varan) and sloth’. Then, Ahriman befouled the material creations with various pollutions. It is due to this concern for pollution that Zoroastrianism is often referred to as a green religion. Ahriman made water brackish, brought darkness to the world, and spread reptiles all over the earth, and in the end he attacked fire and polluted it with smoke. He attained his highest powers when he attacked fire. Since the prophet Zoroaster had witnessed Holy Flame during revelations, he chose it as an outward symbol of the Zoroastrian faith. Ahriman finally entered the earth, digging a hole, which is the location of the hell. Now limited in the space, between the earth and the heavens, Ahriman is condemned to fight with God’s sepoy, man. R.C. Zaehner, ‘The Devil’s Onslaught’ in The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs, op.cit., pp.42-51, and Sidhwa, Bapsi, The Crow Eaters, op.cit., pp. 49-50.

    \item \textsuperscript{293} Zoroastrians believe that Ohrmazd carved in man’s body three roads which are watched over by three menoks (translated as gods) while three druji (demons) look to waylay. Good thoughts are watched over by Vahuman (the good mind) and Wrath may beguile, good words are protected by Wisdom and Heresy (varan) may waylay, however, in good deeds Ohrmazd (the Bounteous Spirit) himself has his dwelling so these are endangered by the Ahriman (the Destructive Spirit). Please see R.C. Zaehner, ‘Select Counsels of the Ancient Sages (Pahlavi Texts, pp. 41-50)’ a subheading of the chapter 1 ‘A Catechism’ in The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs, op.cit., pp. 20-28.
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so Mazdak, the reformer, preached that it is the role of each human to act upon strict morality to free the powers of Light trapped inside his/her body. For this Mazdak prohibited eating meat so that the body could not get further entangled in matter and preached a life of asceticism and strict moral conduct with little stress on formal religious practices. Instead, he stressed upon the correct understanding of the principles of the universe. He preached that all the resources of sustenance placed by the God of Light on the earth must be shared. This sharing includes sharing of wealth, possessions and even of women. As Mazdakism proposed the sharing and redistribution of wealth and possessions equally among all the humans, it is sometimes referred to as early communism, as Sidhwa also calls Mazdak ‘the first communist’. However, Zoroastrians believe Mazdak’s teachings to be heresy.

The Parsis define proper Zoroastrian ethics/belief as ‘order, righteousness, and the mean’. Man is required to make his worldly condition thoroughly satisfactory and enjoyable by seeking material prosperity, and to live a useful life by doing good. This religious ethics bears striking resemblance with ‘a gentleman’s ethical code of moderation and good conduct’, or ‘the morality of an aristocratic and urban society’ or with that of ‘the better type of British public schools’. There is prohibition to plot evil against evil and to sin out of vengeance lest one should suffer blight in the eternal life in Heaven. Yet, clear instructions regarding preserving oneself

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294 As Mazdakism, and other renunciatory traditions, i.e., asceticism, mysticism, or the Islamic Sufism, preach the superiority of spirit to the matter, and profess that the matter has been constructed from the substance of Satan, so Zoroastrianism strongly opposes them all. Zoroastrianism’s greatest opposition is to Islam because of the absolute unity Islam ascribes to God. In Zoroastrians belief, the body is not without its special dignity, the soul may be superior though, as man’s body would be glorified by taking part in the ‘final body’ of Ohrmazd/God after resurrection. Therefore, Zoroastrianism acknowledges dualism only of good and evil, but not of matter and spirit. All religions other than Zoroastrianism are considered varan (heresy), lie or distortions of the truth, therefore, lying is considered against religious ethics by Parsis as well. Please see R.C. Zaehner, ‘The Necessity of Dualism’, and ‘The Good Religion’ in The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs, op.cit., Pp. 52-59, and pp. 80-96, respectively, and also see Reference: ‘Mazdakism’ 1999, in Late Antiquity: A Guide to Postcolonial World, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, USA, Viewed 3 August 2012, <from http://redoreference.com/entry/hulpa/mazdakism>

295 Interestingly, the later Zoroastrians when came to know of the idea of Aristotelian mean, they promptly believed it because it corresponded exactly to the injunction by their religion. They even claimed this Greek idea to be specifically Iranian. Please see R.C. Zaehner, ‘The Good Religion’ in The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs, op.cit. pp. 80-96.
against evil are also quoted in the sacred texts. Injunctions in this regard also prohibit from occupying one’s mind with the thoughts of the dreadful reckoning on the day of Rashn (the god appointed to question man’s deeds on the day of his death), like a religious saying reads as:

Far from it. ‘On the day of Rashn’, says Adhurbadh, ‘life is gay. Do in holiness anything you will. What admirable advice’.²⁹⁶

This is how Zoroastrian ethical system devises its simple working principle of dealing with evil in a matter-of-fact way, and this is what actually means to cooperate with nature on the natural plan to overcome Evil (sometimes also personified as ‘Lie’) by treading the Path of Asha to accomplish the cosmic plan of Ahura Mazda. However, this is also the key point where the core misunderstanding or understanding about Zoroastrianism may spring from. One may wonder that the logic for this ethical precept could easily be misappropriated by the followers to ‘draw justifications of absurd length for misconduct in the arena of practical life’.²⁹⁷ That is why it might mislead one to conclude that the Zoroastrians compromise virtue for need (despite the practical evidence against this argument)²⁹⁸ as Faredoon’s arguments in the novel have generally been perceived by critics of The Crow Eaters to convey this notion. In principle, however, the purity of one’s intent is stressed as a precondition before performing any deed. This is how Zoroastrianism empowers its followers to such an extreme that the judgment to differentiate their own religious/natural

²⁹⁶ Adhurbadh, the son of Mahraspand, is mentioned as the final exponent of the Zoroastrian orthodoxy in Sessanian times. He was zealously religious and volunteered to stand the ordeal of molten brass to confute many anti-Zoroastrian sects that emerged during his time, especially the fatalists (the Zervanites) who denied the basic Zoroastrian belief of the freedom of the human will to assist God against evil. Zoroastrians, therefore, regard Adhurbadh as a role model and aspire to emulate his religious zeal. His counsels and sayings are also considered very sacred in which he outlined the parameters or a proper code of conduct for the Parsis. Please see R.C. Zaehner, ‘The Good Ethics’ in The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs, op. cit., pp. 97-118.
²⁹⁷ Sidhwa seems to have conceived the character of Faredoon Junglewalla on the authority of this religious precept.
²⁹⁸ Practically speaking, the Parsis’ truthfulness, sobriety, honesty, industry, prudence, trustworthiness, rectitude, charity, diligence, and stewardship, are very well-established and time-tested qualities which are acknowledged and appreciated throughout India and Pakistan by the people who know them from close quarters.
or irreligious/unnatural conduct becomes the followers’ extremely private prerogative.

It is a very serious matter for a Zoroastrian because s/he can exercise an absolute freedom in this regard only at the cost of failing his/her highest purpose in life, which is the pursuit of the religion. Utilizing tactics to defeat evil may actually strengthen a person’s belief in the basic tenet of their religion, i.e., dualism of divinity and what it entails as man’s duty towards his Creator, Ohrmazd. Therefore, virtue for Zoroastrians is also an altogether unique concept. Virtue is ‘synonymous with fruitfulness’. The more fruitful a person’s actions are, the more virtuous he might be considered. One would expect that such thorough injunctions must be very intricate, meticulous and extremely guarded religious secrets of Zoroastrianism. But as a matter of fact these lessons of practical religious wisdom are an integral part of Zoroastrian catechism pledged of every follower at the time of his/her initiation into the religion at puberty. Certain injunctions of the catechism also present a holistic view of the Zoroastrian practical ethics by specifically stressing upon the proper conduct during such retrogressive and oppressive times as may endanger the existence of the religion and of its followers:

(When) the law of Ohrmazd (all) good creatures will despair on account of wicked tyrants (azhidahākān), – then every man must add to his (inner) peace through (the power of) Vahuman, (The Good Mind), consult with Wisdom through the Religion, search out the way of holiness by wisdom, rejoice his soul by means of generosity, show honour to rank by benevolence, seek a good name by manliness, collect friends by humility, make hope acceptable by long-suffering, store up (for himself) goodness by temperance (khēm), and prepare the way to bright heaven by
righteousness; for there shall he enjoy the fruits of his good works.²⁹⁹

Self-preservation is the foremost thing that pragmatic Zoroastrian theology demands, and then one is required to think of the welfare of one’s community or neighbours who according to the best interpretations of religious texts, again, are the other Zoroastrians. Marriage is the second most important religious duty of a Parsi after professing the faith³⁰⁰. However, marriage out of faith has lately been a subject of much controversy as it involves another very sensitive but closely connected dilemma of conversion into or out of Zoroastrianism – a debate which Sidhwa has invoked more comprehensively in An American Brat than in The Crow Eaters. Interestingly like Hinduism, there are also references about the existence of the four castes among the Parsis, namely the priests, the warriors, the peasants and the artisans, but nothing alludes to any societal order of superiority of one caste over the other, except that the poor Parsis be patronized³⁰¹.

There are very lively decrees found in Adhurbadh’s advice to his son much similar in tone and intent to the Machiavellian political maxims in The Prince. A few other injunctions are essentially characteristic of the Zoroastrian code of ethics only, e.g., the ones prescribing drinking of wine in moderation to sober oneself, taking stock of expenses before building a house, or prohibiting from giving alms out of season, boring others – literally meaning to ‘afflict by speaking’—, and sinning against ‘water, fire, kine, or other domestic animals, or against the dog and the dog species’. However, the most

³⁰¹This is a reference that we also find in The Crow Eaters when food and provisions were sent to the two hundred poor Parsis who were not invited to attend Billy’s marriage ceremony. Sidhwa, Bapsi, The Crow Eaters, op. cit., p. 224.
enlightening advice of Adhubadh’s counsels regards the matter of pursuing culture:

Be zealous in the pursuit of culture (frahang), for culture is an adornment in prosperity, a protection in distress, a ready helper in calamity, and becomes a habit in adversity.\(^{302}\)

All these references highlight how Zoroastrianism’s exponents have taken account of the minuteness of life for convenience of its followers by combining divinely edicts with practical ethics. Such exegeses make possible reconciling of men’s material concerns with expediencies dictated by the times and societies in which they exist, thus imbuing the religion with its essential evolutionary and adaptive feasibility, i.e., all that Sidhwa’s life-like fiction has attempted in sequels situated in actual historical and cultural contexts).\(^{303}\)

Given the facts that hardly any Zoroastrian sacred text can be categorically ascribed to Zoroaster himself and that most of the sacred texts were composed long after his time (in cases spanning even over centuries), surprisingly enough, the scholars usually report to have identified through these texts only a single matter of controversy which relates to animal sacrifice\(^{304}\) along with the sole sensitive issue of women’s status within Zoroastrianism. A feminist may readily blame male chauvinism on the religious texts, finding scant as well as intimidating references to Godly discourse about or addressed towards women. Zoroastrianism, however, claims to ‘exalt the virtues of the housewife’; at the same time, making a valid case against the objection as to why ‘woman was held in slight esteem by the Zoroastrians or at least by a sect of them’. The reference goes back to the myth of creation again.

It is related that Ahriman’s demonic creations kept reviving him from his stupor in vain, while Ohrmazd created Gayomart, the Primal man. So holy was Gayomart and virtually unsusceptible to any attack that Ahriman would not be comforted, until Whore (the first woman who is also referred to as Demon Whore of the evil religion) appeared on the scene and claimed to ‘take away the dignity of the blessed man’. Whore was not Ahriman’s creation. She was created by Ohrmazd but she chose to play harlot with Ahriman and afterwards joined herself to the blessed man in order to defile him, virtually to defile all the females. To all appearances, this only reference to the Demon Whore in the Zoroastrian myth of creation, and her identification with women as man’s adversary who beguiles him from his ‘proper work’ (the religion) is a very obscure subject. Failed by the limitations of articulating argument to defend an assailable religious assertion, even a scholar like Zaehner has rather preferred to bank largely on such quotations from the ‘Selections of Zātspram’ as:

When Ahriman rushed into creation, he had the brood of the demon Whore of evil religion as his companion even as a man has a whore woman as his bed fellow, for verily the whore is a demon.

Again, Zaehner quotes from the same text:

I created thee whose adversary is the whore species, and thou wast created with a mouth close to thy buttocks, and coition seems to thee even as the taste of the sweetest food to the mouth; for thou art a helper to me, for from thee is man born, but thou dost grieve me who am Ohrmazd. But had I found another vessel from which to make man, never would I have created thee, whose adversary is the whore species. But I sought in the waters and in the earth, in plants and cattle, in the highest mountains and deep valleys, but I did not find a vessel from
which a blessed man might proceed except woman whose adversary is the whore.

Obviously these lines are ascribed to Ohrmazd, the Zoroastrian Deity, bespoken through the mouth of the prophet Zoroaster, yet the euphemism (probably induced into the description) of the dictate of the benevolent God is not lost on the readers. These details might also make it easy for a non-Zoroastrian to understand and tolerate Zoroastrians’ particular abhorrence of women’s situation during menstruation as the myth describes it clearly to be the highest impurity caused by the defiling kiss of Ahriman. However, one is alarmed as prejudice towards the female gender seems to get pronounced in the extended interpretations of the myth. For example, Zoroastrians claim that Ahriman’s timely victory to defile mankind turns out to be his ultimate defeat ‘for only does the union of man and woman make the reproduction of the race of men possible’ which literally means ‘the reproduction of males, not of females’ as it is considered the essential element in the defeat of Ahriman, justifying simultaneously as to why ‘woman remains forever subject to man’.305

This knowledge about Zoroastrianism reveals that as a Parsi Sidhwa’s art is informed by her community’s culture. Such an informed religious aspect plays the major stylistic trick by rendering nuanced perspectives to Sidhwa’s stories with such subtlety that no perspective is left unaccomplished or less attended to, and the real context lying deep down provides life force energy to the surface narrative like soul to a body of flesh and bones. Knowledge about Zoroastrianism also helps differentiate the appearance and reality themes or

305 Whatever justification may be extended, but the fact remains that the demonic of image of the woman haunts the Zoroastrian psyche. That is why the religious laws, particularly pertaining to the out-of-community marriage are admittedly prejudicial towards women. Sidhwa audaciously challenges these religious laws, questioning unequivocally ‘how could a religion whose prophet urged his followers to spread the truth’ could throw women out of faith. The whole debate, which Sidhwa has developed to challenge the prejudicial politics of the religion against women in An American Brat, ultimately seeks to rectify the image of women. Interestingly in this context, Sidhwa’s use of word ‘Brat’ in the title of her novel also appears euphemistic to address the demonic image her protagonist symbolises. Sidhwa, Bapsi, An American Brat, India, Penguin Books, 1994, p.287, and R.C. Zaehner, “The Devil’s Onslaught” in Ibid Pp.42-51.
decipher the physical roots and spiritual pursuits of Sidhwa’s work. Sidhwa interplays these dichotomies within the text of *The Crow Eaters* by concealing religious secrets behind cultural and historical specificities. It is imperative to reinterpret some of the characters, their motives, and certain aspects of the novel discussed earlier on, that have been grievously misunderstood, so that Sidhwa’s artistic worth could deservedly be revalued.

At first, let us consider Faredoon’s character. Faredoon’s story unfolds through the act of his migration. He had to leave his ancestral village in remote Central India, as it offered no prospects. So, Faredoon came to find prosperity in ‘the hallowed pastures of the Punjab’ which according to Sidhwa is one of the sacred lands mentioned in the Vendidad. The land promised Faredoon chances of both religious and economic prosperity; which prosperity exactly had he considered more is the real point to understand because Sidhwa deliberately confuses it. She excessively exploits sarcasm and humour to narrate Faredoon’s journey, his constant nagging and occasional bickering with his truculent mother-in-law Jerbanoo, and his clever manoeuvring for the sacrifice of the rogue cock which thrice impeded his rare enjoyment of sexual bliss in tented cart with Putli. This strategy so bewitches the reader to altogether miss the point Sidhwa herself circumvents all along by understating what really motivated Freddy’s decision to stay in Lahore:

Faredoon Junglewalla fell in love with Lahore straightaway.... Freddy toured Lahore all day and each hour strengthened his initial love of the ancient city.... The muezzin’s cry, suppliant, plaintive, and sensual, rose in the hushed air among the domes. Bells tinkled in a diminutive Hindu temple, snuggled in the shadows of the mosque. A Sikh temple, god-plated, gleamed

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like a small jewel in the jewels and Freddy, responsive to all
religious stimuli, surrendered his heart to the moment.307

So Faredoon’s decision of staying in Lahore was actually motivated by
the plural and multi-religious outlook of the city, not by what Sidhwa stresses
to entrap her readers with exploiting the culturalist trope of traditional rivalry
between a bullying son-in-law and an assertive mother-in-law that spices life
in every second household in Indian society:

She (Jerbanoo) wrinkled her nose at the bazaar smells assailing
her nostrils and, fanning herself into a froth, mutely advertising
her displeasure of the city. Freddy’s heart trilled in his chest.
Jerbanoo’s disfavour set the seal on his inspired decision. Like
hens settling on eggs, Freddy mind settled on a smug clutch of
smiling thoughts. Right there he took a silent oath that he would
never leave Lahore so long as he lived.308

The tug-of-war between Faredoon and Jerbanoo in the first fourteen
chapters of the novel has largely been perceived to provide relentless and
naïve humour. But, in fact, it projects the very subtle subversions around
which Sidhwa would knit her story to demonstrate as to what following ‘the
path of Asha’ actually means. Faredoon and Jerbanoo are no ordinary
antagonists. Sidhwa makes their representation larger than life as two very
staunch Parsis whose mutual vying for power turns into a real battle of wits
for self-preservation. Corrivalry between Faredoon and Jerbanoo is symbolic
of the eternal struggle between Ohrmazd and Ahriman, i.e., the struggle of the
good against the evil. In Faredoon and Jerbanoo’s case this symbolic struggle
is ironised on both sides of the conflict, as each of them tries to afflict the other
considering him/her the evil incarnate. Sidhwa makes Jerbanoo’s coercive

excesses and morbidity to ruin Faredoon’s prosperity and happiness coincide with his earlier failures and losses in business that Faredoon had to contemplate arson to claim insurance and to murder Jerbanoo.

Freddy’s strategy was always task oriented. He did or achieved, by hook or by crook, whatever he must. The tone of the text remains non-committal or non-judgemental on any impressions of amorality being conveyed by Faredoon’s actions, neither Sidhwa offers any comment to actually put Faredoon’s moral bearing in question. Instead, Sidhwa vindicates Faredoon’s judgement in every single matter. He displayed exemplary patience in the face of troubles. When he felt prompted to act, Faredoon first made sure to exhaust all means to avoid any violent eventuality. However, he responded most recklessly and ruthlessly whenever his family’s well-being and religious integrity were threatened. Yet, there always accompanied remorse or atonement. As for his benevolence, especially towards his community, no critic would disagree that he was the most reliable stalwart.

The first instance that highlights how Faredoon tackled evil is his hypocritical act of sacrificing the family’s favourite rooster. Zoroastrians do not sacrifice or harm the domestic pets, but Faredoon offered to sacrifice the rooster because Jerbanoo had a narrow escape from the attack of a stampeding domestic buffalo. The descriptions of the rooster’s crime and his sacrifice are obviously meant to laugh, but Sidhwa also justifies Faredoon’s intent and purpose showing that he acted exactly on the natural plan. Faredoon had spared the rooster’s life for the first and the second time when it rode his buttocks during sex. Considering it a chance happening, that provided rare laughter to his wife as well, Faredoon had tied the flaps to prevent the rooster to enter the tent. When the rooster repeated the performance again, Freddy was alarmed that the pet bode him evil by interrupting his religious duty of procreation. Besides, he had genuinely felt
pity for Jerbanoo, though for the first and the last time in his life. Apparently, his act seems hypocritical and sinful, but Faredoon possibly aspired for double divinely reward by defeating an evil rooster.

In contrast, Faredoon did not venture to offer anything when ‘the child had dysentery, Jerbanoo got cram bathing in a canal, and Putli, stung by a scorpion, almost fell into a well’ (The Crow Eaters, P. 19), given the fact also that Zoroastrians despise the reptiles with which Ahriman polluted the earth. Rather Freddy made do by feigning anger at his wife, as the tactic also suppressed Jerbanoo whose outbursts at such occasions maligned his repute by exposing his shortcomings to the populace around. FAREDoon’s behaviour deviates way far from the norm, yet it is never out of the natural course of action because he sticks fast to his belief in ‘good thoughts, good words and good mind’.

While the reader enjoys quality humour in the depiction of FAREDoon-Jerbanoo rivalry, Sidhwa keeps underpinning how a staunch Parsi’s everyday life is profuse with consciousness of his/her grand struggle against the forces of Evil. Jerbanoo surely was a bane of FAREDoon’s life. She maliciously enjoyed needling and irritating him with incessant complaints, moans, and quarrels, and gluttonously ate the choicest food from the table. She plundered his shop to serve the neighbourhood ladies with whom she gossiped and shared stories of her son-in-law’s tyranny. Urged by these neighbours to take stand, even Putli ganged up with Jerbanoo. Freddy silently endured. He grew fearfully alarmed when he felt that Jerbanoo ‘wished him ill’ because he coincidently suffered set-backs in business whenever Jerbanoo cursed or created scenes. FAREDoon, an ambitious Parsi, could not let someone threaten his personal happiness and prosperity, and the ready remedy that came to his mind was ‘to consult a mystic’.
Sidhwa effects humour through describing the manners and hypnotic appeal of the fake mystics, also called fakirs. But she again signifies through this incident that Faredoon, a staunch Parsi, deviating from the norm, although adopted a sinful course (as the Zoroastrians strongly oppose mysticism) to remedy evil, he yet put up a hard fight against all misgivings creeping in his heart.

The fakir had instructed Faredoon to get a lock of Jerbanno’s hair to cast a spell on it. Faredoon miserably failed, Putli concerned about Faredoon’s abnormal behaviour and sanity took full control of the domestic affairs. However, the incident terrorized and restrained Jerbanoo. She turned overly religious after that, and affected being exceptionally awed by Faredoon. She became excessively concerned with protecting herself from the evil eye and took to pressing two large spots of soot on her temples or often made Putli offer meat membrane to the crows, circling it seven times over her head. Now, she prudently vented her anger on servants only. Again very humourous, but Sidhwa meticulously utilises these details about various superstitions practised in India, setting apart, simultaneously, purely Zoroastrian beliefs and practices regularly feeding specific information about the religion. When Freddy reflected about things, he realised that instead of doing any good to the family, Jerbanoo’s religiosity damaged his pocket. Jerbanoo had only

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309 Consulting mystics or fakirs, and visiting shrines and temples is a common day to day practice of the people of all religions in India. On the surface level, Sidhwa exploits the incident for the humour it provides in the narrative and sarcastically highlights hypocrisy of fake mystics, but this reference bears great significance in overall plan of the novel. Freddy fidgeted in the presence of the fakir, as practising magic or following fakirs is prohibited in Zoroastrianism. Fakiri magic is also a beleaguered form of Sufism, and Faredoon, being a staunch Parsi and a descendant of the Magi, just wanted to serve his timely need of warding off Jerbanoo’s evil. Faredoon was ‘convinced of the man’s terrible powers’, yet ‘a faint warning signal flashed in his buffled mind: what if the man disposed him of his soul’, and he determinedly ‘fought a pitched and fiendish lonely battle’ to save his belief. And when out of the fakir’s tenement Freddy’s heart again beguiled him to think that ‘it would be foolish to discredit him (the fakir) entirely’, he premonitorily ‘bumped into a decorated cow’ i.e., a sacred animal to remind him about keeping his thoughts pure. After a moment, when he reflected again that ‘the Fakir was not a phoney’ and that ‘a little ordinary magic would not be amiss under the calamitous circumstances’ because he would only be required to provide a lock of Jerbanoo’s hair, and ‘what the divine did with it thereafter was not his worry’. At this thought ‘Freddy just missed being impaled by the spokes of a tonga’. (The Crow Eaters, pp. 32-36) Such minute details, on the one hand, serve the novel’s didactic purpose of instructing the Parsis about very acute principles of their religion, and on the other hand, show how perfectly Faredoon understood the working of the institution of Sufism which is against the spirit of his life-affirming religion. That is why Freddy could readily recognise his son Yazdi’s transformation to Mazdakism, and had to abandon him to his fate because Yazdi’s soul had got thoroughly misguided.
changed her tactics. A superstitious belief settled in Faredoon’s heart that Jerbanoo was an irredeemable miscreant, and he could not do anything about ‘this lachrymose and jinxed monster’ (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 44).

In the meanwhile, that the cold war between Jerbanoo and Faredoon had reached its eruptive potential, an interesting incident occurred. Jerbanoo caught the servant boy smoking a *bidi* (a thin flavoured Indian cigarette) in their kitchen. Describing the incident briefly, Sidhwa dwells elaborately upon the importance of *Fire* in the Zoroastrian faith. It only signifies how deeply the ‘sacrilegious act’ of smoking hurt everyone in the Junglewalla’s thoroughly religious household, where no one even blew over candles or extinguished the cooking fire.\textsuperscript{310} The incident brought even Freddy closer to Jerbanoo and he took his family out for a pleasure drive at the Ravi Bridge:

Freddy had not felt so tolerant of his mother-in-law in a long time. That afternoon they had been united in a cause and agreed upon principles. She wasn’t such a miserable so-and-so, he mused with whimsical magnanimity…\textsuperscript{311}

The very moment Faredoon thought all this, Jerbanoo’s turned morbid, sighting vultures on the top of a tree. She referred to them as angels who would escort her to heaven after she died. Freddy got stricken, but amused everyone quoting English proverbs that he had memorised, often inaccurately, from the ‘Famous book of English Proverbs’. Switching the subject abruptly, apparently to describe Faredoon’s love for English, Sidhwa informs the readers of his genuine penchant for religious knowledge and reverence for sacred symbols of different faiths:

\textsuperscript{311} Sidhwa, Bapsi, *The Crow Eaters*, Op. Cit. p. 50. This seemingly very insignificant incident, which has surprisingly been overlooked by critics, in fact, casts enormous overtones on and contrasts with the approaching major event when Freddy set his shop on fire both to kill Jerbanoo and to claim insurance; thus committing most obvious sins of harming another Zoroastrian and of sinning against Fire – a symbol of his faith. As the text sets mood towards this incident, a lot of details that Sidhwa has so systematically inserted in text become overwhelmingly important but have inadvertently been missed by the critics.
It [Famous book of English Proverbs] stood on a shelf right above the prayer table, snug between the Bible and the Bhagavad-Gita. Other books on the shelf were a translation of the Holy Quran and Avesta (the holy book of the Parsis), the complete works of Shakespeare, Aesop’s Fables, Das Kapital, and books representing the Sikh, Jain and Buddhist faiths. Beneath the shelf, on the prayer table, burnt the holy lamp with a likeness of the Prophet Zarathustra stamped on the glass shade… it is a little wonder that Faredoon Junglewalla’s heart discovered an affinity with all religious thought. A picture of the Virgin Mary was framed with an insect of the four-armed, jet-haired goddess Laxmi. Buddha sat serenely between a sinuous statue of Sita, provocatively fixing her hair, and an upright cross supporting the crucified Christ. 312

Where the above details establish Faredoon’s religiosity, these also show that it is his faith that Faredoon is going to put at stake a little later while sinning against Fire through arson and planning to murder Jerbanoo, another Zarathustri. Of late, Faredoon had also been worried that Jerbanoo’s morbidity was affecting the children who started taking it as a commonplace amusement. The repercussions, from religious perspective, could be heinous more for his children than for Freddy himself. For a Zarathustri life must be a pleasure, and it can only ‘glide on the joyous wings of hope’. 313 To find a solution Freddy became obsessed with the fortune tellers, and met a gypsy whose prediction touched him the most:

312 Ibid. P 52.
A tall, slender charmer will come your way soon. The person will have a very fortunate influence on you and change the course of your life.\textsuperscript{314}

Noticeably, this prediction was not from a \textit{sufi} or \textit{fakir} but from a gypsy. Gypsies are known to practice magic, a knowledge that Sidhwa later reveals in chapter twenty six, was initiated by the Zoroastrian faith but was now lost to the Parsis.\textsuperscript{315} Faredoon dreamed about ‘a willowy angel’ who ‘came to him in a hundred different ways from a hundred places’ and ‘touched their hearts; Freddy’s, Putli’s and the children’s; but not Jerbanoo’s. Oh no, that flinty heart was impervious to love.’ Finally, the angle, Mr Dinshaw Adenwalla, an insurance agent, came from Karachi. Mr. Adenwalla was warmly welcomed and graciously treated during his stay in Lahore by all the Parsi families. Freddy was facing hard times, and Mr Adenwalla was very persuasive. So, Faredoon insured everything, even Jerbanoo because Mr Adenwalla had ‘made it sound as if Jerbanoo’s flight was just round the corner’. Later on, calculating the figures, it dawned on Freddy that ‘they had unwittingly harbouried a snake’. (\textit{The Crow Eaters}, pp. 49-58)

Plunged into despair and debt, religiously a stigmatised and loathsome situation, Freddy got so obsessed with the looming doom that he hardly noticed Jerbanoo’s presence or her gluttonous behaviour at the eating table:

He was sure her malign intent and ill starred tongue were at work undermining all his efforts. She was the jinx. (\textit{The Crow Eaters}, p. 59)


\textsuperscript{315}That is why even here Sidhwa briefly mentions why the Parsis believe in the \textit{janam patris} (casting of horoscopes by Hindu \textit{pandits}) and record of the exact time of birth of Parsi children are kept with ‘the precision of Olympic contests’. \textit{The Crow Eaters}, Op. Cit, p. 53, and p. P. 159.
And Jerbanoo herself helped germinate the thought of arson in Faredoon’s mind. One day, addressing Putli, Jerbanoo complained how little she hoped to see her siblings living in India, as Freddy was so utterly inconsiderate that he would not even care if she lived or died. Her words gripped Freddy’s attention so sudden that he turned pale and felt thoroughly shaken. He had genuine qualms at the thought, though:

The havoc wrought by the soundless detonation in his mind had shaken the foundations of his being. He felt sapped and dazed ... and Freddy spent a restless night quarrelling with his conscience. The die was cast ... his relentless brain worked beside himself ..., and it did not take him long to connect the gypsy’s prophecy with the insurance agent’s visit’. (The Crow Eaters, p. 61)

A thoroughgoing Parsi, Faredoon obviously was required to act to change his wretched situation, and to ensure his family’s wellbeing and prosperity put to risk by the sinister forces in his environment. Faredoon adhered to the Path of Asha, and concluded that ‘the idea had come to him with a devastating impact, and God would take care of the rest’ (The Crow Eaters, p. 61). He perfectly executed his plan and received a befitting recompense for his loss. Jerbanoo survived but was ‘subdued beyond recognition’. (The Crow Eaters, p. 100)

From here on the narrative is exceptionally poised between its surface and philosophical import. The reader is incessantly deceived by Freddy’s manoeuvres for establishing his economic and social credentials, especially the way he ‘hobnobbed with Maharajas and Englishmen’, whereas, Sidhwa

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316 Here the readers might perceive Faredoon’s inclination to believe the gypsy’s prediction under an impression that he anyway needed to latch onto something hopeful to cope with the desperation brought on him by slackness in business and that he undertook such a dangerous course to change his lot only owing to his reckless nature. However, the full implications of the working of Faredoon’s mind dawn upon the readers when they compare Faredoon’s recklessness at the spur of this trivial prediction with the extreme caution and hard fight against disbelief at later stage after prophecy about his eldest and favourite son Soli’s death.
delves deep into Freddy’s personal and family life. This narrative ploy mainly leads the critics also to attack Faredoon’s dubious achievements, and they fail to fully appreciate the real significance of even the surface textual attributes. Passingly, here Sidhwa exposes the real face of the colonial and local indigenous elite, and highlights Freddy’s tacit resistance to the working of their power nexus. Freddy, no doubt, ground his own axe wherever possible, but his main objective was to enhance his capacity to do more and more good to others, especially his own community; thus to advance ‘the grand cosmic plan of Ahura Mazda’ by defeating evil and become His righteous and endearing slave. This pattern in Faredoon’s strategy is revealed as we come to know that he first expanded his business to Peshawar, Amritsar and Delhi, and built influence in society, and later as a good Zarathushtrti took to charitable and welfare activities:

Faredoon Junglewalla, toady, philanthropist and shrewd businessman, was renowned for his loyalty to his community and friends. People came from afar seeking his help in begging prime jobs, securing licences, contracts, permits and favours. They travelled two thousand miles from Bombay, expecting Faredoon to extricate them from ‘tight spots’. (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 150)

Faredoon would extend advice, benevolence and reference to every person, no matter a Parsi or otherwise. Obviously, such magnanimity cannot go single-handedly if some sort of reciprocity is not maintained. So, if Faredoon helped the Sikh police officer regarding admission of his in St. Anthony’s School, he took favour from when Mr Paymaster’s son was caught in a brothel. And if the matter involved his community, Freddy cared little about the damage done to his own pocket. Mr Adi Sodawalla came to him from Bombay because his brother, Mr Polly Sodawalla, had been arrested in
London for smuggling opium. The arrest had happened due to Mr Polly’s own negligence. Freddy felt enraged because the stupid Polly had wasted a golden opportunity of making almost fifty thousand rupees, but agreed to help:

Not for that indolent bastard’s sake but for the name of our community. We can’t let it get around that a Parsi is in jail for smuggling opium. *(The Crow Eaters, p. 152)*

Faredoon sponsored the rescue from his own pocket because he knew the Sodawallas were not well off. He sent a special emissary to London, and persistently employed entreaty and coercion to his influential connections until Mr Polly Sodawalla was released without any charge.\(^{317}\)

However, he robbed Mr Kartak, a diamond merchant from Karachi, of money with quite good conscience. Bobby Kartak, Mr Kartak’s son, had crushed a blind beggar under his new Silver Ghost Rolls-Royce. Freddy demanded fifty thousand rupees, of which he only paid ten thousand rupees as bribe to his friend Mr Gibbons, the Inspector General of Police. The rest of the amount he ‘stowed away the remaining forty in his special kitty’ *(The Crow Eaters, p. 154)* which was his main source to help others, and sometimes, to help himself. Besides, Freddy so handled the pressure of the case, that Mr Kartik accepted his proposal to marry Bobby with Yasmeen, as Bobby seemed to have liked her at the dinner Freddy had arranged in Lahore. The crux of the matter is that Freddy followed the ‘ethics of the mean’ which his religion enjoins.

Despite having a successful social and business life, Faredoon faced certain ill-fated incidents in his personal life. These incidents also clearly

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\(^{317}\) This instance is an obvious reference to opium trade that the Parsis were involved in those days. Sidhwa’s protagonist seems to approve it as the community’s surviving strategy. Freddy had felt disturbed not so much by the fact that Mr Poly had tried to smuggle opium but by his sluggishness that he couldn’t accomplish his undertaking which could have made him very rich.
reveal the novel’s original thesis – the Parsis’ struggle for safeguarding their identity and their subaltern position in the multicultural Indian society. During his lifetime, Freddy coped with various situations of belief and disbelief. Sidhwa turns his ordeals into a wholesome parchment of the Parsis’ vulnerable social and religious history in India. Freddy’s situation was most dilemmatic when Soli, his eldest and favourite most son, died, and when Yazdi, the younger son, rejected Zoroastrianism to embrace Mazdakism. As one enters this part of the novel, the story starts appearing indulgent into the Parsi culture to a point of pointlessness. Even the humour starts feeling induced here. Sidhwa takes pains to impress upon her readers the implications and the sensitivity of the conflicted situations which her protagonist is going to face.\textsuperscript{318} Freddy was left at the whims of fate which could do all to destroy but to defeat him.

Soli, the most promising of Faredoon’s three sons, was the prospective heir and custodian of the Junglewalla dynasty. The younger son Yazdi, being overly sensitive and poetic in nature, was treated delicately. He was sent to a coeducational school, where he fell in love with the non-Parsi Rosy Watson. The youngest son Behram Junglewalla or Billy was very ugly, much to his own and his both parents’ chagrin.\textsuperscript{319} Faredoon had best survived his turn as a successful Parsi, now was the time to transfer this legacy to his future generation. He had nurtured his sons and daughters with love and

\textsuperscript{318} Alamgir Hashmi in his article ‘The Crow Eaters: A Noteworthy Novel’ in The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, Op. Cit. (pp. 136-139) more or less expresses the same view by relating this aspect of the narrative to Sidhwa’s ‘characterization of time through the ethnic consciousness’ of the Parsi community. Hashmi opines that such characterization permits a unique ‘view of the Parsi code of feelings and behaviour. This must be the reason the author has continually halted the actual narrative to incorporate passages that in an academic paper would be consigned to footnotes’. On the other hand, views about this aspect of the text by critics like Huma Ibrahim (in her article ‘Transnational Migrations and the Debate of English Writing in/of Pakistan’ appearing in Ariel: A Review of International English Literature, 29:1, January 1998.) seem to spring from sheer misreading of the textual details, as she claims that ‘The Crow Eaters was full of subtle humour at the expance of her (Sidhwa’s) own people’.

However, contrary to Huma’s views, the specific details about Zoroastrian religion in the text highlight certain aspects of the Parsis’ problems as a community. For example, if Sidhwa seems too much taken in by lengthy descriptions of The Tower of Silence, the narrative undertone also highlights that the Parsis did not have even the means to fulfill proper funeral requirements but they lived happily in India without complaint.

affection, providing them a thoroughly religious environment as well. There was only so much he could do. A part of the responsibility to act upon his legacy and to practice the religion had to be taken by the children themselves.

Soli was adored by Faredoon, but he died in his youth. Yazdi insisted to marry Rosy Watson. Freddy tried both force and persuasion to dissuade Yazdi, and finally changed his school. The whole family vehemently prevented him from meeting the girl. Freddy even had a chance to vent his rage on Rosy. He raped her in Hira Mandi. After raping her, Freddy even revealed Rosy’s reality to Yazdi, calling her a ‘whore’. Yazdi was hurt beyond redress. Sidhwa takes Faredoon and his most philosophical son Yazdi through similar ordeals of losing the loves of their lives to prove as to what it requires to follow the Zoroastrian religion, and what it entails to lose to disbelief such an heir as Yazdi could be.

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320 Faredoon had never struck his children, therefore, even his censure could be very ‘unbearable and humiliating’. Thus, ‘the children were conditioned to obedience; more out of love and an ingrained sense of respect peculiar to their training than to any authoritative endeavour on Freddy’s part’. This is how Sidhwa depicts the Junglewallas as an ideal Parsi household. *The Crow Eaters*, P. 124, P. 125, and P. 147.

321 Here the text introduces particular details about the Parsis’ Navjote ceremony just before Yazdi’s dissent. *Navjote* stresses on a child’s ‘Freedom of choice’ to choose faith. (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 124) Sidhwa’s didactic intent and particular execution of the plot of the story is not lost on the readers when only a little later Faredoon and his family, as good Zoroastrians, let Yazdi try a different faith, realizing he had already made up his mind on the subject. (*The Crow Eaters*, pp. 105-113) The irony, however, is revealed when Sidhwa shows later on as to why a person of Freddy’s discernment and religious bent turns so much against his son’s marriage only to save Yazdi’s faith after knowing about Rosy’s non-Zoroastrian and professional background.

322 Faredoon had a very valid reason to object to Yazdi’s marriage with Rosy because she was prostituted by her parents. Even then, the arguments Freddy gave to persuade his son were entirely based on his concern as to how marrying a non-Parsi could ultimately bring an enormous harm to the tradition of faith their ancestors had so grudgingly warned to guide. (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 128-9)

323 This mythic reference to ‘Whore’ to refer to a woman (Rosy Watson) is the only deviation in Sidhwa’s entire work that does not become its empathetic spirit. Although the overall narrative plan of the glorification of traditional values of Zoroastrianism, and including references about tolerance towards other religions put a liberal face on Sidhwa’s extremely fundamentalist intention of writing such a novel about her own community, yet Rosy’s character is one such flaw that shows how introvert must Sidhwa have been while creating this character. No matter how much she has tried to empathise with Rosy later in the text, and how much sincerity her arguments carry for her situation, Sidhwa fails to satisfy a critic’s genuine objection to her artistic vision which must remain utterly unobtrusive and unprejudiced. However, this devilish perspective given in the text to Rosy’s character for serving Sidhwa’s purpose of extending her opposition to out of faith marriage provides the strongest clue and link to trace Sidhwa’s evolution as a writer and a religious historians when she deviates from this stance in an absolute manner in *An American Brat*. 

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Faredoon was introduced by Mr Bottliwalla to a Brahmin, Gopal Krishan. Gopal was a scholar of Sanskrit and ancient languages, and proclaimed that he was the fifth incarnation of the scholar Rabindranath, a famous Hindu pandit. Prior to describing how Freddy came to know through Gopal’s prediction that Soli would die before completing his twenty-one years, Sidhwa elaborates at length that Faredoon, considering himself a descendant of the Magi, staunchly believed in magic and astrology. Sidhwa reciprocates the sub-textual import of this incident with that of the incident of arson in Freddy’s early life. She shows how at that time Freddy had endeavoured every bit to benefit from a gypsy’s prediction, and how hard he fought now against all the misgivings that challenged his belief in Ohrmazd, the All Good God.

Faredoon had immediately proclaimed the prophecy ‘rot’ and ‘nonsense’. Quite resiliently, he persuaded his mind not to ponder over such a possibility, and severely criticized the Indian saints, soothsayers and mystics when Mr McReady from the Planning Commission came to see him. Despite all this, it was not ‘easy to shed a life-time of instinctive faith in irrational beliefs’. (The Crow Eaters, pp. 165-6) Later, Faredoon found himself falling into the abyss of disbelief by thinking even of trying black magic, obviously a demonic assistance not to be beguiled by which was the purpose of his existence. Freddy’s mind kept reflecting about different miracles and remedies he had learnt and believed to exist in his entire life:

Had not Christ risen from the dead? Weren’t there miracles? ...He tried to recall the particulars of story in which a Mogal emperor had taken his son’s death upon himself by praying. He would pray. There was black magic ... the dark moments in Soli’s stars could be transferred to some other member of the family. And all at once Freddy put a stop to this trend of
thought. It harboured the insidious ingredients of faith – his deadliest enemey since that stricken moment when he had believed the Brahmin. *(The Crow Eaters, p. 167)*

He could not sleep when Soli just complained of a headache. Yet, he did not let himself go to pieces. But his heart was perturbed and his inordinate concern about Soli infected Putli and Jerbanoo as well. He visited Gopal again, and broke down before Putli at night with imaginary fears. Once more he composed himself, and started persuading his heart of the impending loss. When Gopal finally told him that Soli would die in three days, Freddy wept for a while, but later ‘red-eyed’ and ‘chastened face’ merely thanked the *pundit*, and three days after Soli’s funeral, he made the proclamation of charity, as a good Parsi.

The developments surrounding Soli’s death constitute the most sensitive part of the text. This is where the philosophical roots of the novel lie, as Sidhwa creates such a representative image of the All Good God, a belief which is the sum total of the Zoroastrian faith and defines man’s relationship of gratitude and assistance to this Deity. The Zoroastrian God originates only good, therefore, Soli’s death had to be endured with patience and bravery. A part of Gopal’s prophecy was that Soli would be born again in his family. Soli’s death was Freddy’s greatest test in the truth of this belief, and he persevered. It was only after Soli’s death that disbelief would have touched him the most, but Freddy devoted ‘himself to the cause of those who needed his assistance’, ‘was mellowed and enthused with altruism’, and took so much interest in religious studies that he became a renowned religious scholar. *(The Crow Eaters, p. 175-83)* However, Yazdi failed to understand the very nature of the Zoroastrian dualist orthodoxy which defines evil as a separate principle:

Yazdi’s acutely heightened sensitivity was strained beyond bearing; something within the boy was irreparable wounded.
There was so much of the world he could not reconcile himself to; there was so much that was pointless, fiendish and unjust: like Rosy Watson’s sordid profession – his father’s unthinking brutality – and Soli’s death. (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 181)

So he became a follower of Mazdakism, a very different tradition of faith than Zoroastrianism. When Yazdi insisted to ‘live by the dictates of his conscience’ by leaving the life of prosperity and spending his share of property on the poor, Freddy tried hard to persuade by imploring: ‘give yourself a chance, son, I will show you ways to be useful’. However, seeing him adamant, Freddy became ‘sad with comprehension’ of the change in him and had to abandon Yazdi to his fate. (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 184-6)

The final chapters of the novel revolve around Billy, Faredoon’s youngest son. Billy had honed his avariciousness and frugality being brought up in a typical Parsi household since childhood. After Soli’s death and Yazdi’s leaving home, Putli loved him the most. Despite the fact that Billy was quicker than Soli and Freddy was impressed, ‘it gave Freddy no more pleasure than if he had been instructing a uniquely gifted clerk’ (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 182). Even with this meagre persona, Billy’s proved a huge success in commerce, and felt himself like a ‘queen’ to ‘the uncrowned king of Lahore’ (Faredoon). He reaped all the benefits of being Freddy’s son. Billy was married in the renowned Bombay family of Khan Bhashdur Sir Noshirwan Jeevanjee Easymoney. Tanya, his wife, was a woman he would not even dare hold in his dreams. While Billy reflected how ‘infinitely lucky’ (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 212) he was holding Tanya’s hand on way to the Chowpatti Beach on spotting a vagabond, who happened to be his own brother Yazdi, Sidhwa presents the

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325 This is how Billy referred to himself to impress Tanya and Roshan about the influential position of his father. (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 202). Along with stressing Freddy’s altruism, Sidhwa specifically highlights his influential position, and worldly renown. In fact, Faredoon’s extraordinary success and its benefits, both to his own children and the other people around have been incessantly contrasted with Yazdi’s failure and way of life which not only made him socially invalid but utterly unbenefficial as well.
contrast of Yazdi’s destitute situation with Billy’s prosperity. Yazdi had failed to understand the theoretics of religion while Billy was reaping the benefits of his staunch belief in Zoroastrian practical ethics. Faredoon’s legacy survived, after all, through the most despairing situations and the least promising son. Towards the end, the reader just wonders about the vulnerable situation of the Parsi community, which faces innumerable crises, including those of identity, disillusionment and even death, until a suitable heir can be nurtured to keep up their unique Godly tradition.

In retrospect, all incidents in the novel reveal Sidhwa’s plan of differentiating the pure Zoroastrian beliefs, practices, and prohibitions from the acquired cultural and superstitious notions. In seemingly an extremely orthodox story, she takes the most liberal stance of forwarding her understanding of the limits of ‘the Path of Asha’ through creating the character of adorable Faredoon. She teaches her readers as to what extent Zoroastrianism adapts to man’s nature or vice versa. The Crow Eaters beyond doubt will survive as a fundamentalist Zoroastrian text and as a historical record of the Parsis’ troubled history in India.

But the novel’s working wonders does not end here. The novel appears to be yet another enriching phenomenon from the feminist perspective it reveals. Each female character in the novel has its own standing and a point of difference due to which any attempt at generalizing Sidhwa’s concept of femininity can not only be beguiling but will also limit the scope of her reach on the subject. If Putli and Rodabai are praised as housewives in the novel, their characters have been conceived entirely differently from those of Yasmin and Tanya. If modern Yasmin’s different conduct has been shown to

Showing that Faredoon strictly adhered to the ethical code of his religion, Sidhwa justifies her protagonist’s moralistic standing and dispels notions of notoriety about his character. As extended evidence to this effect, all of Freddy’s seemingly evil actions turn out to be fruitful eventually not only for his family but also for his community at large. And in the end, Faredoon dies a content patriarch who established a perfectly religious household, inculcated in his children the value of moderate ethics, and served his community and humanity in the best possible manner he could.
deviate from the norm, it has been made to represent an evolutionary process in religiosity as a function of societal change. And if Tanya, born to a life of affluence and extreme protection from care, has been shown facing difficulties in reconciling herself with and learning the traditional way of life, an exclusively cultural explanation in the Indian context serves as reference.\footnote{It is very important to interpret Sidhwa’s feminist perspective in this essentialist text from the particular perspective she brings to it. For instance, the text novel exalts the virtues of the Parsi housewives at numerous instances, especially in the descriptions of Putli’s and Rodabai’s characters (The Crow Eaters, pp. 23-24, and p. 199), to the point of highlighting that Putli even enjoyed her segregation in the ‘other room’ during menstruation (The Crow Eaters, p. 70). Similarly, textual descriptions show that deviation from the feminist social norms by Yasmin and Tanya in the very religious household of the Junglewallas is their strategy to adapt to the changing times, that also completely accords with their husbands’ social and moral bearing as well as with the above illustrated Zoroastrian precepts of The Path of Asha and of zealously pursuing culture. Besides, if Tanya, having been raised in the traditional Junglewalla house, behaved differently to please her husband (The Crow Eaters, pp. 190-1), Putli also had to adopt to new customs from time to time (The Crow Eaters, pp. 187-9). Likewise, despite her liberal upbringing ‘Tanya made a valiant effort to accommodate’ to Billy’s wishes (The Crow Eaters, p. 246), even if she felt secure in her humanity and her religion also prescribed observing no veil (The Crow Eaters, p.206, and p. 240). In fact, friction between Tanya and Behram and her nagging by Putli and Jerbanoo towards the end have been portrayed through the purely cultural context of Indian society that again seems to be one of Sidhwa’s clever narrative ploys. Therefore, applying a generalized feminist perspective to The Crow Eaters can be very misleading. Refer to, Priyanka Sing’s ‘Invisible subordination: Reading The Crow Eaters through a Feminist Lens’ in Language in India: Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow, Volume 12: 3 March, 2012. (ISSN 1930-2940) or Najia Zaidi’s ‘Glimpses of New Women in Sidhwa’s Novels’ in Pakistan Journal of Women Studies: Alam-e-Niswan, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2011, Pp. 63-72, (ISNN: 1024-1256).} The plight of Anglo-Indian Rosy Watson is an altogether different tale of the societal and racial injustices, whereas that of her fellow Punjabi dancing girl needs to be looked at within the particular context of discourses on Indian femininity.\footnote{These particularities within the similar situation of both Rosy and the Punjabi dancing girl are specifically highlighted through Mr Allen’s mixed response in pitying and pinching Rosy Watson, and through Prince Klamuddin’s assertiveness to claim the exclusive attention of the Punjabi girl, as if each male had had a prerogative to exploit the girl who belonged to his race. (The Crow Eaters, pp. 126-9, and pp.132-6) \footnote{Please refer to Review of Ice-Candy-Man by Tariq Rahman in World Literature Today, Vol. 62, No. 4, Raja Rao: 1988 Neustadt Lausreate (Autumn, 1988), pp. 732-733, published by University of Oklahoma (http://www.jstor.org/stable/40144786). Sara Suleri Goodyear’s introduction to Ice-Candy-Man written for the Oxford University Press. Both versions of this introduction, i.e., the earlier and later one, along with Sidhwa’s conversations}.

3.4 Ice-Candy-Man/ Cracking India

Ice-Candy-Man (US edition Cracking India), undoubtedly Sidhwa’s \textit{piece de resistance}, deserves to be reckoned among iconic works of the South Asian Partition Literature, produced both in English and in Urdu because its creative potential draws upon and simultaneously contributes to their repertoire.\footnote{328} The discursive and metaphorical significance the novel

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constantly exerts in the major revisionist historiographic, literary and sociological discourses both from India and Pakistan, and the overwhelming trans-national empathy its story has evoked from different continents across the world denote a rare phenomenon regarding a creative text, especially when it challenges the metanarratives from the position and perspective of an obscure marginality. Regrettably however, the full scope of Ice-Candy-Man, like Sidhwa’s other works, has not been properly investigated yet.

Sidhwa’s identity as a Pakistani English writer, and her insistence to be recognised so seem to be the most readily recognisable factors which impeded the proper understanding of her genuine humanist achievement through Ice-Candy-Man. The actual reference, in this regard, goes back to the disadvantaged status of Pakistani English fiction.

The novel’s US reviews repetitively brand it as ‘a masterful work of history’ which renders ‘calamitous historical events with deeply felt personal meaning’, and is praised for its ‘originality’, and realistic and magical evocativeness. In European reviews Sidhwa’s ‘language and humour’, ‘wit and wisdom’, ‘precise imagery and descriptions, and inimitably exclusive < Joycian insight into child psychology’ and into ‘the odd tastes and unpredictable behaviour of real characters’ find focus. In the Indian reviews, there is an obvious urge to own this work, particularly because it reveals ‘the dehumanising effects of communalism’, ‘seen through the innocent, naïve eyes of a child, who has no Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh axe to grind’. These reviews appear in the republished edition of Ice-Candy-Man by Penguin Books in 1989 after one year of its publication by William Heinemann Ltd (UK) in 1988. All the references here are from the same Penguin Books edition (1989). Different reviews and introduction to the novel are also available on http://www.bapsisidhwa.com/book-cracking.html.

Writers of the English texts have been able to garner but a very limited readership in Pakistan until recently. When Sidhwa wrote her early novels, the situation of authorship in English was particularly bleak. Pakistani English writers are now being internationally acclaimed to have engaged certain burning global issues in their works. Within the country, however, these authors are still considered, even by majority of the bourgeoisie educated class, to lack moral authority for commenting upon cultural specificities of Pakistan, i.e., the very debate Ice-Candy-Man extensively seeks to explore. Given also that she belongs to the minority Parsi community, it was rather very audacious on Sidhwa’s part to anticipate acceptability, if not outright hostility, rejection or indifference, for her overly cultural take on the subject of violence in Ice-Candy-Man, faithfully calling for redressing the extremist religious, and communal historical discourse in the region.

In her interview in Massachusetts Review, 1990, Sidhwa’s remarks not only best express how attributive her art is to reflect the Pakistani ethos but also make clear how strongly she values her allegiance to her country:

I feel if there’s one little thing I could do, it’s to make people realize:

We are not worthless because we inhabit a country which is seen by Western eyes as a primitive, fundamentalist country only … I mean we are a rich mixture of all sorts of forces as well, and our lives are very much worth living.


Neither the Pakistani English fiction nor its critique has succeeded in establishing so wider recognition as traditions that the Indian English fiction and its criticism already have had. For an overview of the subject, refer to Cara Cilano’s “Writing from Extreme Edges”, Pakistani English-Language Fiction’ in ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature 40.2-3 (2009): 183-201, Muneeza Shamsie’s article ‘Rich Offerings: Pakistani English Literature, 2004’
critics are well recognised, nor has Sidhwa’s work been attended to in detail in Pakistan. There are only a few handy reviews of the text by notable Pakistani scholars who could have adequately explained the nuances of the text from their sociological and historical viewpoint if they had tried. Thankfully though, the thematic relevance of Ice-Candy-Man to the sub-continental context fetched it critical acclaim from India. It definitely helped bring the indispensable Indian response to Sidhwa’s treatment of the collective memory of the pre-partition times, and of the events leading to the tragedy in 1947. The tragedy had provoked communal and gendered violence at an unprecedented scale in the sub-continent. Women from the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities were raped and murdered, and their bodies were brutally mutilated. Sidhwa’s portrayal of the atrocities unleashed upon the bodies and souls of women, and of the dilemma and heartrending fate of the abducted women received special critical attention by Indian critics.

No matter, if some critics do not find the subject matter of Ice-Candy-Man altogether objective, the parochial attitude as to the scope of this largely experimental text in insisting that it presents the Pakistani or otherwise the Indian perspective only is very misleading. The ordinary readers fail to understand message of the novel, especially when some critics attach their own biases with the interpretation of the text to criticise, for example, Sidhwa’s minority status, or Lenny’s naïve perspective without developing a proper understanding of the objective significance these aspects collectively achieve. These critical biases only complicate the novel’s case to carry its cherished message of goodwill across borders and hearts.334

334 Pakistani hardline critics object as to why Sidhwa chose to emblematize women’s victimhood through the atrocities committed by the Muslim men on the Hindu Ayah. Huma Ibrahim suggests in this regard that Ice-Candy-Man ‘debunks its own fine purpose of seeing the advent of Pakistan as a relentlessly cruel beginning by implicating a
Paradoxically, the standard response by Indian critics somewhat particularised the novel’s interpretation, too, as forceful arguments were rightfully drawn from relevant ongoing debates in Indian literary and historiographic circles. Theorizations of the Subaltern historians, especially Ranajit Guha, helped some critics readily recognise Sidhwa’s subversive take on the ‘elitist’ history in India. Sidhwa’s handling of the depiction of violence, not through ‘instrumental’ force of the communal ideology but through ‘expressive’ acts of identifiable characters also corresponded to research findings of certain scholars, like Veena Das and Gyanendra Pandey. Das and Pandey revisit history of the partition to unearth the ‘living truth’ and ‘little histories’ of those who actually suffered violence and the findings of these scholars reflect in critiques of the novel.

Gayatri Spivak’s timely warning that the Subaltern scholars were missing out on the feminist agenda also expedited research to recover women’s voice from history of the partition. Reference to Sidhwa’s version of history was, therefore, considered inevitable by Urvashi Bhutalia, who

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vindicated importance of the ‘oral histories’\textsuperscript{338}, by Jil Didur, who adviser to
turn to the ‘literary texts’\textsuperscript{339}, and by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, who
suggested to devise ‘social narratives’\textsuperscript{340} for countering totalising discourse of
the nationalist histories.

This India-centric focus of the critique on \textit{Ice-Candy-Man} definitely
identified omissions with regards to the real subaltern history in Pakistani
nationalist narratives as well. Consequently, not only just Indian but also the
foreign as well as Pakistani researchers obsessively tend to prove how
truthfully Sidhwa brings history to life by starkly depicting the atrocities
inflicted on women during the partition. \textit{Ice-Candy-Man} is treated as a very
influential border work which, being rightfully so, may help address trauma
of war in the communal societies not only of the sub-continent but of other
parts of the world as well.\textsuperscript{341}

The point where most of Sidhwa’s Indian critics falter is that they
delimit discursive scope of the novel by showing its relevance mainly to the
past. They fail to understand how Sidhwa conflated tragedy of the partition
with the similar turbulent impulse, aftermath and abiding legacy of the time
of the decades of the 1970s and 1980s while drawing, thereof, on the thematic
affinity regarding violence. The time was not only marked by the height of
religious fervour and perpetuation of Islamic nationalism in Pakistan but the
communal rhetoric and hegemonic Hindu culturalist trends in Indian politics


\textsuperscript{341} Rastegar, Kamran, ‘Trauma and Maturation in Women’s War Narratives: The Eye of the Mirror and Cracking India’, \textit{Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies}, Vol. 2 (3), Fall 2006.
were also becoming conspicuous. Persecution of the minorities was on the rise as a natural consequence of majoritarianism in both post-colonial societies.\textsuperscript{342}

However, Sidhwa presents a microscopic analysis of the situation from a deeply personal perspective. Without meddling in a quagmire of antagonist faiths and communal ideologies, Sidhwa epitomises a collage of the oppressive societal norms within the feminist paradigm of the novel. She elaborates on the inner workings of societal relationships which detail the behavioural conduct of males and females as individuals in both the countries that, in turn, extends over their family, clan, community or faith-based affiliations to generate such socio-political and human repercussions as manifest themselves through extremist biases in general and at sensitive occasions through the insanity of religio-communal violence, as it happened at the time of the partition, or during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, or as it continues even today. Thus, she offers her Pakistani and Indian readers a locus to reflect upon their every day personal behaviours, and recognise their complicity in nurturing cultural violence that is bound to bring colossal tragedies which are a recurrent feature of the region’s history.

Sidhwa dovetailed expansive canvass of the novel into Lenny’s ‘coming of age’ story through highly suggestive inventiveness in the text. In so doing, Sidhwa makes her protagonist, the Ayah, speak the sensibility of the women who suffer indelible scars of violence on their bodies and souls. Admittedly, it is impossible to transcribe the anguish and pain of the victims of violence, though.\textsuperscript{343}

\textsuperscript{342} During the turbulent 1970s and 1980s, bloody riots were also taking place to extricate minorities in both India and Pakistan. For example, anti-Ahmadiyya riots had first erupted in Lahore in 1953 and later countrywide in 1974, likewise Turkman Gate Tragedy had happened in India in April 1976. The Muslims who lived in the slums of Delhi were massacred during the ‘slum clearance’ campaign while Indira Gandhi’s infamous Emergency was at its peak. Refer to Kak, B. L., ‘A Nation’s Agony’ in Z. A. Bhatti: Notes from the Death Cell, New Delhi: Radha Krishna, 1979, pp. 84-95.

An intense reading of the text reveals that Sidhwa deliberately tones down the thematic thrust of the surface narrative which deals with event of the partition. She keeps her focus very limited on a few characters. Widening communal rift is occasionally referred to only by certain characters, and Sidhwa does not offer any particular details in this regard. Sidhwa even lets Lenny sense reality of the bigger drama only through the naïve impressions she herself formulates. However, the deeper structure of the text is where Sidhwa gets Lenny through the same meditative experience she herself undergoes. Also, this is where Sidhwa entrenches her multifaceted feminist plot to edify Lenny about the agency of the Ayah, the protagonist of the story.

The feminist paradigm of Ice-Candy-Man did occasion good critical response from critics like Ambreen Hai, Veena Das, and most importantly Madhuparna Mitra. These critics rightly point out that Lenny not only gains sexual awakening but also knowledge of the religious, class and sectarian differences in her society through witnessing plight of the Ayah. However, by default Hai’s, Das’s and Mitra’s critiques convey a sense as if the novel places its cathartic appeal in the fatalist acceptance of the brutality which was unleashed against women during the partition. Hai claims that Lenny watches ‘Ayah become an object to violation’. Das ends up arguing that ‘if one’s way of being-with-others was brutally injured, then the past enters the present not necessarily as traumatic memory but as poisonous knowledge’.

Mitra holds fast to Didur’s piece of advice about the need as well as implications of ‘tracking the epistemological assumptions about representations embedded’ in the literary texts, and limits her purview of the novel’s context to discuss social realities of the pre-partition time Lahore during 1942-1948 only. Admittedly, Mitra is the only critic so far who has clearly identified the feminist paradigm of the Ice-Candy-Man. Yet even, Mitra rather too-early concludes that ‘Lenny’s sympathies are pulled in opposite
directions’ as she reflects about the Ayah’s thraldom by the Ice-Candy-Man (Dil Nawaz) who afterwards degenerates into a destitute fakir, renouncing the world for the Ayah. So, Mitra also pronounces her verdict to denote the novel’s fatalist approach: ‘The novel thus implicitly presents a society … [that] accept[s] male sexual dominance as the natural status quo.’

It is, therefore, important to reconsider Lenny’s coming of age narrative, and analyse through it agency of the Ayah who decides to fight her fate. It would prove that Sidhwa does not end the novel on a fatalists note. Also, it is in Lenny’s fully matured consciousness as a female that Sidhwa incorporates her own evolution from a subject of the regional history to a revisionist artist. In Lenny’s social and sexual awakening, and in the Ayah’s resolve to fight her fate we also find justifications as to what possibly drove Sidhwa for outrightly an extrovert act of writing about communal violence in India after extremely introverted attempts at producing two essentialist texts, The Bride (about the patriarchal society of Pakistan) and The Crow Eaters (about her own Zoroastrian community). In Sidhwa’s extreme paradigm shift from a point of valorising religion in The Crow Eaters to confronting patriarchal politics of the religious culture through the Ayah’s story in Ice-Candy-Man (and later through Feroza and Chuyia’s stories in An American Brat and Water), we also find the logical and sequential correlation that elaborates predominant feminist thrust of Sidhwa’s oeuvre.

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345 Regarding Sidhwa’s oeuvre, one finds a great diversity in the opinions of critics. Those who appreciate Sidhwa often acknowledge that Sidhwa’s prose is ‘largely realistic’. Reena Mitra considers that Sidhwa makes her fiction ‘true to life’ by ‘tracing the compelling force of historical events on individual lives’, and Randhir Pratap Singh maintains that that ‘like Jane Austin, she confines herself within the field of her own first-hand intercourse with the world and never allows herself to stray beyond it’. However, both Mitra and Singh do not comment upon any common strain that might explain how a sequence of experiences in a particular historical context and writing fiction might have shaped up Sidhwa’s oeuvre. Instead, Mitra opines that Sidhwa’s novels are notably diverse ‘in content and form, in subject and treatment,’ Singh also asserts that ‘Sidhwa draws her subjects from widely different aspects of life’. Crane thinks that Sidhwa’s novels are equally poised for Indian or Pakistani perspective. In Ice-Candy-Man she not only challenges the Indian and British versions of the Partition but also ‘appears, on occasions, to write against the Pakistani interpretations of history’. Crane rightly points out that set in Pakistan Sidhwa’s first three novels (The Bride, The Crow Eaters and Ice-Candy-Man) carry ‘a strong sense of place and community which she uses to examine particular aspects of Pakistan’s postcolonial identity’. Yet again Crane loses the clue she herself discovers to link the
Lenny is more attached to the Ayah and the Godmother than she is to her mother. The impact of the Ayah and the Godmother on her sensibility is also the strongest of all other influences from the environment in which Lenny grows up as a child. Lenny so clearly decipheres instinctive responses of these two women as they interact with the other characters in the story that she learns to understand even those realities of life that elders are able only to rarely perceive. Lenny’s relationship with her parents is quite formal. They use soothing tactics with her, and keep exact knowledge of things like parents often do with the children. However, Lenny’s sensibility is more receptive than her parents can anticipate. She views things that go around her quite critically, and recognises the rogue in herself far better than a child can do.

The greater role in shaping up Lenny’s critical sense is played by the Ayah and the Godmother. The Ayah lets Lenny perceive life sensuously, presenting her own case as a free and independent individual who takes full charge of her humanity, and successfully deceives the predatory instinct of men in a society which promotes and nurtures patriarchal ideals. The Godmother, on the other hand, argues things out with Lenny, whenever Lenny is disgruntled or confused. However, the respective living principles of the Ayah and the Godmother derive from the extreme ends of societal notions that are ascribed to depravity and respectability.

The Ayah is an individual who, in full awareness of the lustful ogling eyes of her onlookers, flaunts her sexuality ‘with the unconcern of the Hindu goddess she worships.’ The Godmother, in contrast, is so cautious even in old age that Lenny can never see ‘the natural shape of her breasts’ (Ice-Candy-Man). Creative maturation of these works with Sidhwa’s own intellectual development in Pakistan of early independence years. Instead, Crane reaffirms that Sidhwa’s early novels are ‘very different from one another’. Refer to Mitra, Reena’s ‘Bapsi Sidhwa’s Ice-Candy-Man: A Reassessment’ in Critical Response to Literatures, New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors 2005. Pp. 110-117; the ‘Conclusion’ in Randhir Pratab Singh’s Bapsi Sidhwa, Delhi: IVY Publishing House, 2005. Pp. 85-90, and Crane, Ralph J. “A Passion for History and Truth Telling”: The Early Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa in The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, op. cit.

Sidhwa, Bapsi, Ice-Candy-Man/ Cracking India, op. cit., p.3. From here on all references from the texts are incorporated in the text of this critique.
Both these women are the monarchs of their realms, where they exercise such absolute powers, that they wipe out every chance of rebellion on the part of their slaves. The Ayah controls her slaves, the group of her friends who belong to the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities, by lavishing on them the treasures of her womanly self. The Godmother controls her slave, the Slavesister, through oppression and rebuke so that the Slavesister’s sensibility remains suppressed and she may continue living as ignorant as she is. Yet both the monarchs only desire the well-being of these serfs, no matter if one of them has to incite and the other to suppress the human instincts of their slaves because these monarchs know that true face of reality is ugly to a devastating extreme.

Sidhwa is a great obscurantist who deceives her readers by the outward significance of her stories to put sensitive debates in the heart of her narratives, much like the appearance and reality facets of life. Sidhwa knits the story of Lenny’s sexual awakening around the persona and tragedy of the Ayah. However, Sidhwa inspires intuition in Lenny such that, by the time Lenny’s journey towards maturity is complete, she can recognise that the Ayah is as innocent a woman as any traditional girl who naturally adopts sensuality from the indulgent culture all around. The Ayah is as promiscuous as any other woman, like Lenny’s mother, or Lenny herself, but the only difference is that the Ayah is not a hypocrite. The Ayah lives her life on her own terms. When the Ayah rejects to accept her fate as wife of the Ice-Candy-Man, Lenny realises the difference between the Ayah and all the other women who can never retrieve their true selves because they unconditionally believe that women are born to suffer.

Lenny recognises traces of the Ayah’s sensibility when she passingly refers to the influence of her mother’s ‘touch’ on men at various occasions in the novel. She learns to relate that the Ayah’s heart cherishes the same
emotions of love which inflame the spirit of Gita, the wife of Shankar who is a tenant in Lenny’s house. The Ayah and Gita become equally exuberant on occasion as they relate to Lenny similar folk tales of the lovers in India. Lenny grasps how the Ayah keeps her individuality intact by becoming economically independent. She does not wear traditional dresses, instead chooses to wear **saris** because her attire fetches her more pay than the other Punjabi Ayahs. Thus, being strong, the Ayah possibly averts the fate that, speaking in symbolic terms, even a fiercer animal than her, i.e., Pappo, is made to embrace.

The Ayah knows the essential character of her society in which only men hold sway. She does not look any different to Lenny when the Ayah dotes on Adi, Lenny’s brother, and feels proud of his fair skin. Lenny perceives that boys are treated differently, as a little aberrant behaviour on Lenny’s part is instantly censured by her parents while Adi is spared even if he abuses. Even the Godmother takes serious notice when Lenny steals Rosy’s glass jars. Lenny learns from the predatory excesses of ‘the catcher in the kitchen’, Imam Din, and from the movement of the Ice-Candy-Man’s toes (which often creep under the Ayah’s *sari*) as to how persistently the Ayah faces the challenge of existence as a free woman every day. The Ayah beams in the manly presence of Sharbat Kahn with the same warmth which Lenny feels in her heart while she herself crushes on every second man on the roads of Lahore. Yet, the Ayah allows only the Masseur to exercise ‘the secret rhythms of creation and mortality’ by massaging her legs. (*Ice-Candy-Man*, p.19)

Imam Din says that no one should mind his harmless excesses because he only amuses himself with a little fun. The Ayah subverts this predatory politics of men. She asserts her individuality and, instead of being intimidated, keeps all men in their limits. As time of the partition draws near,
the Ayah behaves very mature. Even the presence of Sharbat Khan does not move her as it did before. The Ayah declares her attachment with the Masseur, as she knows that being no man’s woman she will be at the greatest risk. Quite unfortunately though, none other but her own trusted friend, the Ice-Candy-Man, betrays her by killing the Masseur and orchestrating her abduction.

Lenny finds each act of the Ayah exactly calculated, as she becomes conscious of her own growing maturity in terms of her carnal perceptiveness with age while also receiving adequate sexual education from her cousin after the Ayah’s abduction. Lenny’s cousin always remains after some chance to gain benefit whenever he and Lenny are alone. It amazes Lenny how a boy of such younger years as her cousin (or for that matter even Adi) can be so knowledgeable about sexuality. Lenny’s cousin teaches her everything, except rape, as he postpones this enterprise for some future time. The cousin applies coercive measures to test Lenny’s patience as well. He ignores her deliberately when he fails to inspire love, and enduring his indifference Lenny learns how the Ayah pined for the masseur after he was killed.

The narration of Lenny’s nightmare about a German soldier on the night when her cousin gives her a ‘lesson in gullibility and shock’ that according to Lenny ‘connects me to the pain of others’ is also very suggestive in regards to her perceptiveness about a woman’s vulnerability in the predatory culture all around. Before narrating this nightmare, Lenny makes a coivoluted reference to her Electric-aunt, ‘a resourceful widow addicted to quick decisions and swift results’, who shares a bedroom with her son (Lenny’s cousin). While Lenny and her cousin are asleep in the sitting room next to the bedroom on that night, Lenny hears the alarming sound of a siren, coming from the compound of the Salvation Army adjacent to the Electric-aunt’s house. Lenny is haunted by the image of a ‘German soldier on a
motorcycle. Roaring up the drive the engine stops, as I know it must, outside Electric- aunt’s doorstep’, Lenny apprehends, ‘he comes to get me’. For Lenny this image stays in nightmare after nightmare, as if foreboding of developing the instinct to be on guard because ‘no one had taught me [Lenny] to fear an immaculate Nazi soldier’ (Ice-Candy-Man, pp. 21-22). From her experience with her cousin, Lenny learns how private a woman’s sexuality is because no one can claim it rightfully unless a woman herself decides it to submit. Lenny guards her budding breasts even from her mother. However, the cousin does succeed in teaching her to some extent that the Ayah is in real danger, as he demonstrates just a semblance of what all the people do to her after that she is helpless having been abducted.

It is not just the expressive face of sexuality that Lenny learns. She becomes equally aware of the deceitful nature of Dr. Manek Mody, the ‘cannibalistic’ brother-in law of the Godmother and the Slavesister. Dr. Manek Mody is married to Piloo, the middle sister of the Godmother and the Slavesister, and frequently visits the Godmother’s house. Perhaps for face-saving whenever he comes, the Godmother arranges his meeting with some medical students from the King Edward Medical College that the students can benefit from his experience. Lenny notices that libertine and excessive tactics of Dr. Manek Mody are only bit more sophisticated and difficult to notice than those of Imam Din. Dr. Manke Mody exploits, though marginally, the moral authority he exercises in the Godmother’s house by taking only a little advantage of the Slavesister’s ignorance about things.

The character of the Slavesister is an ingenious contrivance on Sidhwa’s part. In fact, the Slavesister provides the most sophisticated contrast to the character of the Ayah in story. She appears to be such an oppressed being that Lenny never even learns her real name. The Slavesister is as ignorant about sexuality as the Ayah is conscious about its charms. She is also
an unmarried woman like the Ayah, but she neither recognises the ugly face of men’s predatory spirit nor knows any tactics to avert it. Therefore, the Godmother has to protect her. From the Godmother’s general behaviour with the Slavesister it appears as if the Godmother oppresses her. The Slavesister is seldom allowed to express her opinions, as the Godmother severely reproaches her instantly for any display of stupidity.

However, all the particular incidents that Lenny records from her memory indicate that the Godmother always watches out for the Slavesister, no matter even if the latter considers Godmother’s behaviour objectionably intimidating. The Slavesister often laments that she is insulted by the Godmother before Lenny and develops a habit of mumbling, but the Godmother is always right. In this regard, Lenny narrates such aspects and details as survive through the childhood conscious to later becoming a part of one’s mature sensibility. For example, Lenny informs that the Godmother keeps vigil when Dr. Manek Mody is staying at night. When he hugs the Slavesister in the Kitchen once, the Godmother prudently reminds the Slavesister to be careful for not cutting her finger. Thus expressing her concern for the Slavesister, the Godmother tactically throws a request to Dr. Manek Mody for staying away from the Slavesister.

At one occasion the Slavesister expresses her preference to be buried than being left in the Tower of Silence, where the Parsis deposit bodies of the dead for the vultures to eat. The Godmother takes her to very serious task. The reader gets the clue that the Godmother does not want Lenny to absorb any false notion about her religion, as she is small. However, the Godmother approves when the Slavesister pacifies Lenny’s cousin’s frustration over Lenny’s indifference towards him by telling him to wait as to how much longer his passion for Lenny would last until he notices more girls after growing old. The Godmother ignites the gas stove herself every time as the
task may be too dangerous for the Slavesister, and does not take her to see the Ayah in the red light area, though Lenny notices that the Godmother herself looks nervous undertaking this adventure.

This knack for deciphering basic human behaviours and emotions, in turn, helps Lenny grasp the trauma of the tragedy of partition. During the course of her narrative, Lenny describes her two visits to Pir Pindoo, a remote village near Amritsar in India, with Imam Din whose relatives live there. Imam Din visits the village to caution his fellows about the vulnerable situation already brewing up in the cities in view of the impending political crises. In her first visit, Lenny notices the bonds of love that exist between the Muslims of Pir Pindoo and the Sikhs visiting there from the neighbouring village. She also witnesses the coy and demurred behaviour of Hatija and Parveen, the daughters of Imam Din’s nephew, and their brother Rana becomes Lenny’s friend. Lenny witnesses how affectionately men in the delegation of the Sikhs treat Hatija and Parveen, and express their solidarity to defend their Muslim brothers in Pir Pindoo in case the Akalis, the militant followers of Master Tara Sing, attack them.

Lenny’s second visit to Pir Pindoo coincides with Vaisakhi, a festival that the Sikhs celebrate. This time, Lenny is able to sense the danger in the environment that portends an ill fate. Later, Rana reaches Lenny’s house after he escapes the gory attack of the Sikhs on the village. He narrates to Lenny how the women were brutally raped and murdered during the attack. He even recalls that those Sikhs who killed men and raped women of his village kept mentioning the names or identities of their victims. Rana’s story, therefore, relates things to Lenny’s account of the incidents in which she highlights the predatory instincts of men, and ugly face of the hypocritical societal ethics in the region.
By now Lenny has already learnt to recognise men’s animalistic proclivities to the core. She has been well aware, living in the company of the Ayah’s friends that the people like the Ice-Candy-Man and the Butcher, would brazenly resort to the ‘time-honoured remedies’ (*Ice-Candy-Man*, p.122) when they need to ’put the fear of God up the rich Hindus’ dhoties’ (*Ice-Candy-Man*, p.128) to expel them from Lahore. The Ayah’s friends betray her because they are uncouth, but now even bigger questions lurk ahead. The Ayah’s presence in Lahore after her abduction is reported to Lenny by her cousin. When Lenny herself watches the Ayah in a taxi, she asks the Godmother. The Godmother is unaware because according to her the Ayah was sent to Amritsar to her relatives. Learning about her mother’s involvement in the Ayah’s rehabilitation, Lenny even confronts her mother, and blames her for putting the city on fire by carrying cans of petrol in their car. Lenny’s misconception is removed by her mother. However, Lenny is left in the lurch when the enthusiastic search for the Ayah abruptly stops. Lenny is not informed that the Ice-Candy-Man marries the Ayah, instead of relinquishing her.

In the meanwhile Lenny is provided with a new ayah, Hamida. Like the Ayah, Hamida also was abducted and later her husband refused to take her back. Hamida remains an enigma for Lenny because she also carries grave wounds but keeps them buried so deep under her tragic persona that she does not let anybody notice her grief. Yet, from time to time, Hamida’s reserve gives in. Lenny notices how vulnerable Hamida feels, as she is always eager to serve Lenny’s mother, and goes to the park with Lenny despite she hesitates to sit with the other people around. Then one night she is entirely consumed by her grief, and in agony tells Lenny that she is a fallen woman. Lenny childish curiosity about a fallen woman is later satisfied by the Godmother with a fairly twisted explanation. Yet, there are curiosities about which Lenny neither digs deep nor discloses them to others. Lenny remains curious as to why her mother scuffles with her father who leaves home in middle of the
night, and her mother pleads that she will not let him ‘go to her.’ Lenny never asks her mother about the bruises on her back, or why her father has to talk to walls when he means to address Lenny’s mother. Lenny just mentions as she observes that Hamida always keeps her eyes averted from her father.

All of Lenny’s curiosities are resolved in a single moment of revelation, when the Godmother also decides to impart to her knowledge of the harsh social realities. The Godmother puts all her cultivated reserve aside, and confronts the Ice-Candy-man to talk the Ayah’s matter over as he sits before her in her lawn. The Godmother faces the Ice-Candy-Man with such relentless fury that the ‘treacherous, dangerous, [and] contemptible’ man (Ice-Candy-Man, p. 249) becomes ‘raw with despair’, and at that moment Lenny finds out that:

The innocence that my parents’ vigilance, the servants’ care and Godmother’s love sheltered in me, that neither cousin’s carnal cravings, nor the stories of the violence of the mobs, could quite destroy, was laid waste that evening by the emotional storm that raged round me. The confrontation between Ice-Candy-Man and Godmother opened my eyes to the wisdom of the righteous indignation over compassion. To the demands of gratification – and the unscrupulous nature of desire. To the pitiless face of love. (Ice-Candy-Man, p.252)

Later when Lenny meets the Ayah and finds her a different individual than she used to be, and the Godmother demands the Ice-Candy-Man to free the Ayah, Lenny can tell:

He is a deflated poet, a collapsed peddler – and while Ayah is haunted by her past, Ice-Candy-Man is haunted by his future:
and his macabre future appears to be stamped in his face. (*Ice-Candy-Man*, p. 265)

The greatest lesson of life, however, Lenny is yet to learn, and she will learn it from her best teacher, the Ayah, as their connection revives after the Ayah is recovered. The Ice-Candy-Man hovers around the rehabilitation camp, and incessantly pleads the Ayah for forgiveness whenever she comes out to visit Mr Phailbus for homeopathic treatment. He degenerates into a decrepit *fakir*, yet the Ayah is not affected a little, and there are moments when even Lenny admits:

He has become a truly harmless fellow. My heart not only melts – it evaporates when I breathe out, leaving me only faint with pity. (*Ice-Candy-Man*, p. 277)

But the Ayah goes to her family in Amritsar at last. The Ice-Candy-Man follows her across the Wagah border. The Ayah’s resolve to face an unknown future by leaving the Ice-Candy-Man is an act that expresses her agency, and denotes that she kept her spirit alive despite she went through a crushing tragedy. She always was a free soul, submitting never to anyone except her true lover, the Masseur. Her body was like a territory that she always knew men would pounce upon whenever they get a chance. Thus, Sidhwa not only speaks the sensibility of the fallen women through the Ayah’s story but also conveys a message to women in general neither to repent over what they have not done deliberately, nor to accept it as their fate. And Lenny also wants to tell:

I have seen Ayah carried away – and it had less to do with fate than with the will of men. (*Ice-Candy-Man*, p. 214)

Despite such clarity in message, the text leaves many questions, especially about which Lenny does not deliberately reflect in the story. She
leaves the task for the better brains of the elders to enlighten her about these observations. Lenny notices at the rooftop of the Ice-Candy-Man’s house, as she and the Ayah are invited to witness ’tmasha’ (Fun) when the Shalmi is put to flames by the Muslims to expel the Hindus from Lahore. Lenny observes that both men and women on the roof ‘are slapping each other’s hands, laughing, hugging one another’ (Ice-Candy-Man, p. 137). Even the Masseur is present among the onlookers. Lenny knows that Imam Din is not morally upright, yet he is a respected elder in his village. Lenny understands that the Godmother is hampered for being upfront with the hypocritical Dr. Manek Mody, and that she has to make every effort not to displease her brother-in-law. There are moments when even a person like the Oldhusband, the Godmother’s husband, cannot stand Dr. Manek’s hypocrisy. The Oldhusband speaks only once in the text when he is exasperated by Dr. Manek Mody’s ‘soulful sighs’ about the beautiful eyes of the ‘pretty’ Sikh girls whom people abducted, and about the green eyes of Rosy-Peters American mother who migrates to India. The Oldhusband explodes:

‘What’s all this business about Eyes! Eyes! Eyes! You can’t poke the damn thing into their eyes’ (Ice-Candy-Man, p. 170)

And the Godmother extends her passive disapproval, standing by her husband because his objection is justified. Yet later again, the Godmother rebukes the Slavesister very harshly when she only casually mentions to invite Dr. Manke Mody to tame Lenny who is being stubborn. The Godmother retains her authority over the Slavesister so complete that she will never even let the Slavesister call her, Rodabai. The Godmother is even more offended when the Slavesister addresses her only as Roda. If ever by chance the Slavessister tries to express her disapproval, she is threatened to leave the house, and thus reminded of her destituteness. Sometimes the Slavessister does talk silly, yet instead of being given the knowledge about men’s frailties, the
Slavesister is probably kept ignorant lest she should get awareness of the sensual charms of her own body. Thus, despite her middle age, the Slavesister is required to remain a child who can be rebuked for every single fault.

Perhaps, Lenny leaves a hint for the readers to guess about the brazenness of her father who might also be one of culprits along with Sharbat Kahn, Ice-Candy-Man, Imam Din, Cousin’s cook, the butcher, and the other men to shame the Ayah who counted them all ‘among her friends and admirers’ (*Ice-Candy-Man*, p. 254). Yet, Lenny does not deliberate why her strong mother who could face alone an unruly mob of men that came to her house to abduct the Ayah, and who can beat Imam Din to bleed just to save a cat he wants to kill, feels so helpless to accept her oppression as her fate. There seems no difference between Lenny’s mother and Hamida’s philosophy of life, even if Hamida watches helplessly as Imam Din kills the cat, or Lenny’s mother saves the animal. Perhaps, Lenny’s mother is trying to expend her pent-up rage over her husband’s betrayal, which she has to accept as her fate because Imam Din, though lesser in class, is still a man who should and can be punished. No act of Lenny’s mother seems daring enough, as it is her better societal position that privileges her for exercising her will upon her inferiors. Even the wider influence the Godmother wields and her heroic deed of saving the Ayah, all look sham because the Godmother also believes like all other women that all the fated realities either ‘can be forgiven’ or only suffered (*Ice-Candy-Man*, p. 262). Only the Ayah is a woman who lives up to the philosophy she believes.

In fact, *Ice-Candy-Man* is an outstanding feat of Sidhwa’s genius, and presents a rare aspect of the human causes of the partition of India. Yet, it is not about the partition. It lays bare the whole history of violence in the region of the sub-continent. People blame history, or they blame only the rogues who carry out atrocities during the times of disruption and turmoil, but they do
not understand that violence germinates in one’s sensibility from a person’s
day to day experiences and interactions with one another. No matter, those
who become part of violence may not be habitual offenders. They may just be
emulating others, like Lenny repeats the performance with her doll when she
witnesses the ripping of a man’s body from the middle with the help of
oppositely driven jeeps in the street while standing on the rooftop of the Ice-
Candy-Man’s house. Yet, once what is done is done. Even the guilt is futile, as
Adi can tell his sister why to do such a thing in the first instance for which she
weeps. But the people pay no heed. Thus, everyone is complicit. Sidhwa urges
the people to look into and amend their behaviours which define the character
of their communities, by conveying to them her belief that it is neither the
lofty ideals nor the fabricated histories that can avert tragedies, unless men
and women question their egos and strive to better humanity. Silence is not
the option, and endurance is hypocritical. The Slavesisters need to be
answered, so the Oldhusbands need to speak because the world abounds in
the Ayah’s and the Godmothers are themselves aggrieved.

3.5 An American Brat

An American Brat, Bapsi Sidhwa’s fourth novel, was first published in 1993. A
Houston-based non-profit professional theatre, Stages Repertory Theatre, also
produced An American Brat, a Play, based on the novel in 2007. Unlike
Sidhwa’s first three novels, The Bride, The Crow Eaters, and Ice-Candy-
Man/Cracking India, which are set entirely in the Subcontinent, An American
Brat is set partly in Pakistan and partly in America.

The story of An American Brat mainly revolves around a young
Pakistani Parsi girl Feroza Ginwalla’s expatriate experience in America.
Feroza’s mother Zareen and father Cyrus for their various concerns felt
compelled to get her out of Pakistan for a short while during the rising tide of
ultra-conservatism, and religious fanaticism in the late 1970s which was not
only sweeping over the political arena but also aiming for cultural overhaul in the country in the name of religion. However, the decision of sending her to America turned on the family when Feroza, instead of remaining a protégée out-learned the parochial attitudes of Manek, her uncle and chaperone, only six years her senior who was himself a student at MIT.

Once out of Pakistan, Feroza’s stay in America got prolonged, as she decided to study. Later, she fell in love with a Jewish American, David Press, but their decision to marry incited a severely conservative response from Feroza’s Parsi family. Feroza’s parents were under intense social pressure, as their tiny ethnic religious community allowed no mercy for the dissenting members, especially women. The Parsis in India have largely adhered to endogamy throughout centuries to keep the ethnic purity of their community intact. However, in the instance of inter-faith marriages, stark bias in the purity laws to favour men over women generated controversy in the 20th century because these laws ‘regard identity, both ethnic and religious, as inherited from the father’ only.

In fact, a much heated debate was in progress during the 1970s for revival by bringing about overall reforms. The thinking Parsis criticised that by sticking to excessive orthodoxy the community was only revelling within a ‘self-woven cocoon of past glory’. The multifaceted crises, such as the sheer survival problem due to migration drain to the West (and Iran), lower birth rate than the death rate, also because most of the educated women had been opting to marry late or not marry at all in case of not finding suitable matches, and the problem of not allowing conversion to Zoroastrianism, now demanded thorough rationalising.347 The question of Inter-faith marriage was only one of these more pressing concerns of the Parsis. Yet, Sidhwa so handles

it, as the complexities involved in Feroza and David’s relationship take a serious turn, that various issues the Parsis have lately been concerned about find faithful and adequate mention for critical overview in the novel.

The outcomes of the debate, ironically, were the exact opposite of what was being considered inevitable. Instead of much anticipated reforms, custodians of the faith reinforced rigid conservative norms. Regarding the marital/purity laws, for example, two major religious organizations in Bombay, one Athoran Mandal, the Parsi priest’s association headed by Dastur Feroze Kotwal and the other called Zoroastrian Jashan Committee, issued fresh warnings and notices to excommunicate those who might dare defy age-old marital laws of endogamy. Feroza’s mother Zareen flew to America, and successfully deterred David from marriage with Feroza. But Feroza, by then, had thoroughly assimilated liberal values of the American society, and her outlook towards life and spirituality had fundamentally changed, and that was difficult to perceive by any means even by her fairly liberal family living in Pakistan.

However, immediate analytical context of the story is shaped by the deepening political crisis in Pakistan in the 1970s. The civilian government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto had been toppled in 1978 through the then military chief General Zia-ul-Haq’s coup d’etat. The masses could associate with Bhutto because he had the knack of seeking support for his political decisions through direct appeal for public mandate. Suppressed social groups, such as the urban and rural poor, especially minorities, women, etc., valued his education and liberal political philosophy of Islamic socialism as Bhutto’s most endearing features.348

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348 Z. A. Bhutto was a complex mix, combining the charisma of a political genius with arbitrariness, and proclivities of his lordly persona. His first term, as the President of Pakistan (1971-73), was successful because he had been able to introduce in his democratic government various social groups and economic interests that were not represented in the earlier military regime of Yahya Khan. But during his second term as the Prime Minister of Pakistan (1973 to 1977), he made many unpopular decisions, and manoeuvres which pitied him against the strong military, and
When General Zia had Bhutto hanged a year after his arrest, the whole populace was left listless and bereaved. Ever since his takeover, Zia had also carried out a ruthless conservative agenda with abiding cultural implications. Zia’s usurping power from Bhutto was perceived to be a deadly blow to the liberal disposition and character the society had been able to maintain during earlier post-partition years till Bhutto era. General Zia conspicuously ushered in the ideology of militant Islam and promulgated the Hudood Ordinances\(^{349}\) in 1979 that would ever after problematize situation of the women in Pakistan.

Sidhwa uses political background of the novel to serve various contextual purposes in *An American Brat*. She employs Bhutto’s popular image of a liberal leader, and his fall as a motif in the story to signify defeat of the liberal ideals Pakistani society once stood for. Highlighting the ensuing indifference a few years after to memory and martyrdom of Bhutto that got degenerated into peoples’ initial fervour of the Hudood Ordinances, ‘without anyone knowing what they were’ (*An American Brat*, p. 236), Sidhwa brings to

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\(^{349}\) The Hudood Ordinances were the laws promulgated in 1979 by General Zia in Pakistan based upon the Islamic Shari’a law. Derived from the Quran and sayings of the fair Prophet Mohammad, Shari’a law enforces punishments for four major crimes: *zina* (extramarital sex), *qazf* (false accusation of *zina*), offence against property (theft), and alcohol consumption. *Zina* is further categorised as *zina* with consent, and *zina* by force or rape. The postulates related to *zina* in Hudood Ordinance have always been deemed problematic because, having been misapplied by the courts in Pakistan, the law often goes beyond what is required by Shari’a and often led to implicate victims blaming them as adulterous. According to Shari’a law the condition set for proof of *zina* (extramarital sex) is that the victim or the one who blames has to present before the judging authority four witnesses who have seen the actual act of penetration happen, so as to give maximum chance of defence to the accused as well, because prescribed punishment for the crime, especially in case the offender(s) is/are married, is a sure death sentence – like in Pakistan, or stoning to death publically as in Saudi Arabia. Many international and Pakistani organizations still protest for the law to be repealed, but the conservative religious parties resist any such move. General Pervez Musharraf, however, proposed reform of the ordinance in 2006. On November 15, 2006 the National Assembly passed the Women’s Protection Bill which was ratified as week after on November 23, 2006 by Senate, allowing rape to be prosecuted under civil law which in Pakistan is largely based upon British law. The human rights groups and activists criticised that ‘the so-called Women’s Protection Bill is a farcical attempt at making the Hudood Ordinance palatable’ because thousands of rape cases remain unreported because the victims consider that they would be treated as criminals. For reference please see, Zahid Hussain, ‘Musharraf Retreats on Rape Law’, *The Times* (London), 14 September, 2006, available at <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/asia/article2610497.ece>, and also ‘The Offence of *Zina* (Enforcement of Hudood) Ordinance, 1979, ordinance No. VII of 1979, February 9th, 1979, available at <http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/zia_po_1979/ord7_1979.html>.
focus Ruthlessness of the cultural shift that had taken people unawares, and had made them complacent in sanctioning the ultra-conservatism which, by all means, would prove regressive and detrimental to disfigure religious face of the society. Sanctity of the Hudood Ordinances in Islamic faith in place, and any effort to repeal them out of question due to violent socio-political backlash in Pakistan, both liberal as well conservative factions of the society have practically found themselves at utter loss whenever these laws have been wrongly implemented to turn victims into culprits, which in most cases are women.

Sidhwa conflates politico-cultural context of the pre and post-promulgation period of the Hudood Ordinances in Pakistan with context of the stricter enforcement of Zoroastrian marital laws regarding endogamy despite call for their revival, using and adducing both as parallel paradigms, and phenomena to reflect upon the reality of women’s life in the religiously motivated Subcontinent of the 1970s. Within these elaborate comparative analytical contexts which project the cause of increased victimization of Pakistani and Parsi women alike, Sidhwa’s visionary diasporic stance on Feroza’s expatriate experience in America further highlights how urgencies of demanding times and situations around the world call for changing of the traditional mindset. Notably in this regard, Sidhwa makes her protagonist Feroza’s, both, Pakistani and Parsi identities very pronounced throughout the novel. It is because certain aspects of the novel have not so far been investigated properly, therefore, neither the paradigmatic reach of the novel could be gauged effectively, nor its thematic and discursive relevance could be established with Sidhwa’s earlier works.

Sidhwa’s each novel is unique in subject matter, and poses interpretive challenges of varying sorts. If the story of a Pakistani refugee girl Zaitoon in *The Bride* demands a thoroughly culturalist approach, celebration
of the cause of the Parsis’ religion in *The Crow Eaters* cannot be understood without knowledge of specific Zoroastrian tenets and beliefs. Enigmatically, historiographic take on the violent outcomes of excessive religiosity in her next novel *Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India* reveals to be such an ironic shift of paradigm than Sidhwa’s perspective in her first two novels that one finds it hard to thread together her works in a thematic conglomerate. In fact, Sidhwa projects her stories in so divergent and complex discursive domains that to essentialize them is to belittle their scope. However, finding the missing links in Sidhwa’s creative odyssey is extremely important because her feminist vision takes precedence over most of her other larger concerns, both as a humanist and as a representative minority artist, especially from an *Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India* onwards to her fifth novel, *Water: A Novel*.

These missing links lie in the annals of history. Although this assertion has been innumerably made by Sidhwa’s critics that her work is tightly connected with history of the sub-continent, yet thorough reinvestigation to this effect seemed pertinent to appraise some overlooked, but very crucial, aspects of Sidhwa’s works. It is through such an approach, and also only after reaching her fourth novel while studying her works in continuum, that one discovers how Sidhwa’s natural response to different immediate historical contexts led to her choice of writing seemingly divergent stories.

Before *An American Brat* was published, Sidhwa’s earlier work had already established her repute as an acutely observant critic of cultural and communal aspects of the Indian sub-continent that she directly experienced having grown up as a child in Lahore, a cosmopolitan city deemed to be a melting pot where various communities had been living together for centuries to evolve a pre-partition folk culture. *An American Brat* was also readily acclaimed to be yet another phenomenon that Sidhwa’s receptive sensibility
had occasioned through her creative response to globalization as a result of her expatriate experience in the US. Sidhwa’s own remarks in her 2000 interview also bear out the general impression as to how her living in America had impacted her sensibility to write this novel:

Being in America has given me access to an entirely different and dynamic culture. I feel I am a much more confident, self-reliant and cosmopolitan woman as a consequence. *An American Brat* evolved out of my and my family’s experiences and observations in America.\(^\text{350}\)

So far, critics of Sidhwa’s works, in general, had rightfully identified that her authorial credibility stems from her ability to have ‘aroused a variety of reactions’ to her works because ‘her interests are vast’, and she has been able to maintain ‘a distinct Pakistani yet Parsi ethos in her writings but above all a unique individual voice’.\(^\text{351}\) The thematic variety, historiographic approach and genuinely artistic aspects of her works, such as humour, linguistic inventiveness, and distinct prowess in character portrayal do also confirm various critical assertions about Sidhwa to regard her as a great writer of fiction and story teller.

Expectantly, *An American Brat* came in to complement the evolutionary sequence of Sidhwa’s social chronicling from *The Bride*, and *The Crow Eaters* to *Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India*, as in each successive novel her artistic and ideological stance gains strength, and envisages an expanded horizon from its predecessor. With *An American Brat*, Sidhwa again proved her calibre by producing another novel which its cover describes to contain ‘an enormously satisfying story and characters’.\(^\text{352}\) Novy Kapadia, a much

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quoted critic of Sidhwa’s works, also admits that ‘this novel reveals all [of] Bapsi Sidhwa’s major qualities as a writer, her rich comic powers, keen observation, heightened sense of story and character and her moral vision of her community.’

Quoting Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the renowned Pakistani poet who commended Sidhwa’s ‘caustic wit and ability to blend humour with social realism’, Kapadia also observes that in *An American Brat* Sidhwa is ‘at her best, using parody, raucous humour and hilarious language to present her various themes’. These themes, Kapadia identifies, range from ‘community consciousness’ among the Parsis; their ‘residual colonial mentality’ to the ‘underlying identity crisis’ they face in the fundamentalist and patriarchal society of Pakistan. And the central debate in the text, according to Kapadia, is on out of community marriage of women which has triggered one of the most contentious and contemporary debates among the Parsis.

Since great focus was laid upon the diasporic aspect of *An American Brat*, most of the critics tried to evaluate Sidhwa’s strength as a writer relative to her experimentation on the subjects of her choice in an entirely different setting of America. Carol Fleming Lumpkin, for example, praised the novel in his review to be ‘a paean to freedom’ while Adam L. Penenberg saw it as ‘a sensitive portrait of how America appears to a new arrival’. Suman Bala reaffirmed through studying the immigration theme in *An American Brat* that Sidhwa lets her protagonist Feroza expose not merely the opulence and grace of America but also the ugliness that its hollow socio-cultural environment nurtures by default.

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Edit Villareal also suggested that Sidhwa subtly handled ‘coming of age’ of the female protagonist along with the immigration theme in the novel: ‘Coming of age is never easy. Coming of age as a woman is even harder. But coming of age as a female immigrant in a foreign country may be the most difficult of all. For any woman born into societies with restrictive social and political codes, however, immigration may be the only way to come of age’. Sidhwa own comments also sustain this impression as she says that ‘the book deals with the subject of “culture shock” young people from the subcontinent 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’.

Again Niaz Zaman noted that An American Brat is not just ‘the story of a Parsi girl’s Americanization and reflects the new American theme’ but Sidhwa also ‘interweaves a commentary on Pakistani politics, an exposition of Parsi society and religious rites’. Whereas, Cicely Havel maintained that ‘with each of her novels the extent of the community she can be seen as representing has expanded: in The Bride, both Islamic Pakistan and the international community of women; in Ice-Candy-Man, all India, and in An American Brat perhaps simultaneously not just the Parsis, or Pakistan, or South

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357 Villareal, ‘Feroza Goes Native’, Washington Post, December 16, 1993. It might be good to clarify here that Villareal’s claim seems intended to convey the idea that for ‘any woman’ (who assumedly can also be type of a woman who being privileged might never have had any bitter experience with oppression in her home county prior to migration in an advanced country, like the protagonist Feroza), ‘immigration may (and not necessarily) be the only way to come of age’, that in literal sense of the expression means to gain full and successful development in terms of maturity. I think Villareal’s argument also vouches for the presumption that ‘coming of age’ especially from the aspect of someone’s developing her mental/intellectual faculties to the fullest also entails as to what sort of experiences the woman being discussed has been through and how differently and critically she analyses them to consider them appropriate enough to be a part and parcel of her sensibility. Feroza herself mentions about several Asian students, especially girls from India and Pakistan, who did not look mature enough, though they were conspicuously going through the ‘cultural shock’ and were trying to negotiate terms for a new beginning in their lives in a different world.


Asia but the whole goggle-eyed mass of the not-necessarily poor and huddled who dream the American dream'.

Despite having so much merit in it, the novel still failed to satisfy most of the critics. Ambreen Hai described *An American Brat* as ‘less successful because of its unlikely plot, dialogue, and uninformed accounts of student culture…. The humour is often dubious, at the expense of South Asian students who are depicted in some cases as cheats and frauds’. Huma Ibrahim who hardly sees any merit in Sidhwa’s entire fiction proclaimed that among Sidhwa’s works ‘*An American Brat* is the worst; it seems more like a disjointed, naively written television programme rather than a novel. Niaz Zaman opined that ‘*An American Brat* fails to come up to the level of *The Crow Eaters* or *Ice-Candy-Man* because Sidhwa does not seem to handle her writing on America with as much ease as she displays in describing subjects like the politics of her home country or the oppression of women.

Robert L. Ross argued about this objection by other critics as well pointing out that through very nature of the story Sidhwa avails the chance to translate her expatriate experience as a Pakistani in the United States ‘from her own perspective’. Ross rather appears praising Sidhwa for ‘defining the American experience, first as Feroza views it, then as her mother reacts to it’ and for vividly portraying attributes of her very different religion ‘the exotic qualities’ of which critics often miss. However, Ross, too, apologetically quotes Sidhwa’s own humble confession that ‘it is not easy to portray the nuances of a culture one is not born to’. Particularly belittling, though, is Ross’s comment that the kind of search for community Sidhwa is engaged in

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being herself an expatriate in the fix of constantly looking back at the world left behind and the new one she has to cope with ‘provides ready-made fiction’.\textsuperscript{365}

Parul Kapur viewed the novel’s dual perspective on America ‘forced or superficial’ because Sidhwa seemingly equips Feroza with rose-coloured glasses to see the country’s good side and a socialist agenda to see the bad’.\textsuperscript{366} While about highlighting Feroza’s agency as a female, Kapadia concluded that ‘the novel ends ambivalently, the mature Feroza, despite an estranged love affair and general feeling of depression, prefers the struggle for freedom and self-fulfilment at the USA instead of the settled life, family and easy contentment at Lahore’.\textsuperscript{367}

All these objections stand valid, not just given the general perception of Sidhwa’s work but also because of the inherent interpretive restrictions of the three analytic frameworks, namely the diasporic, minority and feminist discourses that Sidhwa’s critics seem to have mainly subscribed to. As we know, for example, that ‘recent theorizations of diaspora also seek to represent (and problematize) the lived experiences (in all their ambivalences, contradictions, migrations, and multiple traversals) of people whose lives have unfolded in myriad diasporic communities across the globe. Diasporic subjects are marked by hybridity and heterogeneity – cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national – and these subjects are defined by a traversal of the boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora’.\textsuperscript{368} Sidhwa’s own Parsi religious background as a writer, and the particular feminist take she has adopted in


the novel by making Feroza a Parsi Pakistani expatriate in America, viewed from the perspective of the minority discourse in the postcolonial context, again imply and signify both national and diasporic demarcations: ‘Minority discourse is, in the first instance, the product of damage, of damage more or less systematically inflicted on cultures produced as minorities by the dominant culture’.  

Critics have presented interesting explanations as to how Sidhwa has adopted some of the above mentioned diasporic attributes in various contrasts appearing in the novel. Consider in this regard for example the contrasts of the cultures of America and Pakistan (while documenting Feroza’s development, or Manek’s assimilation of American ways), of characters (by comparing ‘polite Feroza and brash Americans’), and of the uses of English language by highlighting as to how language serves the purpose of laughter as well as of reading through the gap of societal norms in America and Pakistan, as in one particular incident, Feroza’s formal way of enquiring about a bottle of spray (‘may I have this, please?’) is misunderstood by the abrasive lady shopkeeper to be a plea for charity by a foreign girl.  

And in some of the objections discussed above we find Sidhwa’s critics struggling to latch onto one or another paradigmatic notion to offer explanation, but Sidhwa’s discrete culturalist approach, elaborate realistic plot of the novel and her strong historical sense challenge the readers to think in terms different from ordinary conventions of character, situation, or generic analyses. It is, therefore, important to deviate a little from the formulaic approach of these paradigms to dispel certain generalised notions about the novel, the most important being of mediocrity given the fact that Sidhwa wrote this novel after her chef d’oeuvre, Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India. It is

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because Sidhwa has envisaged much grander in scale a debate in An American Brat than in any other of her previous novels. Simultaneously putting forth a unique blend of the diasporic and indigenously cultural aspects of highly sensitive issues, i.e., of acculturation and of women’s oppression through inchoate internalization of religious orthodoxy within the essentially patriarchal Parsi, and Pakistani community life reflects upon the novel’s achievement in terms of its discursive scope.

Sidhwa’s feminist focus has always been very strong, both as an insider and as an objective social historian of the Indian Subcontinent. In The Bride, Sidhwa presents a scathing critique of the deeply entrenched patriarchal mindset in Pakistan. In Ice-Candy-Man again, besides, overtly analysing menaces of the extremist majoritarian politics or communalism, Sidhwa covertly lays bare essentially heinous, hypocritical, and patriarchal face of the collective culture of India in which social and sexual exploitation of women exists by default, so that the brutish vast scale violence that erupts during tragic times (like the Partition of India or other sporadic incidents of communal riots) should not be considered an unusual/exceptional phenomenon only. However, Sidhwa still remains an artist whose work seems to have many anomalies, especially regarding the projection of religion and of an impersonal feminist vision.

Of course, we have to tolerate, in this regard, Sidhwa’s seemingly excessive valorisation of religion in The Crow Eaters (as we discussed above while analysing Ice-Candy-Man) that she had written this novel under the influence of certain mixed socio-historical stimuli. And Sidhwa did herself vehemently disapprove of narcissistic regard to religion in Ice-Candy-Man. Her subversive sense regarding history and societal norms did improve after sensing the repercussions of excessive religiosity during the ten years gap she took to write Ice-Candy-Man in 1988 after The Crow Eaters in 1978. That is why
the treatment of religion underwent an extreme paradigm shift, yet no where even in Ice-Candy-Man, too, does Sidhwa appear questioning the established religious orthodoxy/norms.

On the one hand, such an approach of writing, especially about majoritarian religions of her society by a minority artist that Sidhwa is, conforms to that of an individual whose heart glows with genuine belief in divinity, and grieves to see fellow beings misinterpreting and misrepresenting the divine messages to wreak havoc upon each other. On the other hand, Sidhwa thus proves how acutely she perceives the notions like patriotism, peaceful co-existence, and religious tolerance that nothing in her works is derogatory to either Pakistan or India. Her non-partisan critical position on essentialist modalities of the communal and patriarchal culture within India and Pakistan is so strong that one tends to disagree with Sidhwa herself when she insists to be recognised as a Pakistani Punjabi Parsi writer or to agree with those who find it hard to categorize her entirely as ‘a comic or Parsi novelist’.371

However, talking particularly about Sidhwa’s feminist vision, it seems rather difficult to defend Sidhwa’s position. Sidhwa merely depicted, with very well meaning mild sarcasm, inner sanctum of zenanna of the Muslim households in The Bride. And she obviously valorised Parsi women’s observance of religious rites, like observing veil, staying away from the family during menstruation in the ‘other room’, etc., or vehemently debated about keeping the purity of religion by assumingly justifying heartless treatment of Faredoon Junglewalla of his second son, Yazdi, and his non-Parsi lover, Rosy Watson, whom Yazdi wants to marry. While reading Ice-Candy-Man, though one appreciates Sidhwa’s vicariousness in recounting oppressive realties of the womanly self (be that done through the exploitation of the Ayah, Hamida,

Lenny, or the Slavesister), even then one feels that Sidhwa accepts gender subordination to be an inherent attribute of femininity as if it were dictated by divine law, too.\textsuperscript{372}

From such an earlier conservative stance on religion and femininity, \textit{An American Brat} is a giant ideological leap. It is because for the first time in \textit{An American Brat} Sidhwa directly brings to focus the most controversial religious debates regarding the Pakistani Islamic regulations (Hadood Ordinance) and the Parsi community’s marital laws, both of which in their application have proven to be discriminatory against women. Thus, Sidhwa’s approach to handle, and correlate the religious debate through the predicament of Feroza and the cultural debate through constant references to political strife in Pakistan need be understood with regards to the visionary position she maintains as a versatile writer whose art also has universal overtones.

Sidhwa as a religious thinker, revisionist historian, and (in this novel’s context) most specifically being a social realist and female feminist writer represents that rare sensibility of artists whose works, though overtly critical, never suggest dissent. Therefore, the discrete nature of her work and her own assertions regarding her writing also offer valid criteria to see how some of the complexities in there might unravel. As an individual Sidhwa believes that ‘we are deeply linked to the spirituality that sustains all life and matter’.\textsuperscript{373} Regarding the role of a writer of a fiction she, rather self-reflectively, opines that ‘a writer of fiction cannot really alter social reality or change the world ...

\textsuperscript{372} Previously, we discussed in detail while studying \textit{The Crow Eaters} that Zoroastrianism does valorise the virtues of a housewife, yet the Zoroastrian religious texts offer somewhat ambiguous explanations about the role of the First Woman (whose name is referred to as Whore) in the myth of Creation for bringing upon defilement on the women species in general. As such, a woman’s status is defined subordinate to that of a male in Zoroastrianism. Please see R.C. Zaehner, ‘The Devil’s Onslaught’ in \textit{The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs}, Op. Cit. Pp.42-51. Given her staunch belief in divine dictates of her religion, that reflects from Sidhwa’s overall writing coupled with the historical fact that female subjectivity, according to almost all the religious orthodoxies, has often been shaped by the patriarchal explanations regarding the Fall of Adam, Sidhwa’s feminist vision seems rooted in the same contentious domain, where fundamentalism, and feminism come to essentially encounter each other.

but I do think that a writer can at least place facts so that people can recognise
themselves and stop taking themselves too seriously or start seeing
themselves in a more realistic light. We are all so prone to see ourselves as
better than the other person. Yet paradoxically, spirituality and sense of
justice seem vying for preference in her mind when she admits:

Sometimes in pitch-black moods, I try to broach a hopelessly
inflating dread of the injustice that encircles the globe: that
always has. The will to subjugate lies so hard at the core of
man’s nature that neither education nor civilizing influence has
so far tempered it. Then again, I sheepishly wonder who am I to
question God’s Will, when, undoubtedly, everything is steaming
ahead as ordained? Or question the arbitrary dictates of what we
sometimes call the Supreme Being, and sometimes Nature, thus
invoking the illusionary spectre of Natural justice, and so, of
hope?

The question of the out of community marriage of women is an
extremely sensitive issue given the certain fundamentals of both Islam and
Zoroastrianism with clear religious injunctions for excommunication. Where
Islamic precepts permit marriage of a Muslim male or female to a non-Muslim
if s/he can convert the intending partner to Islam, Parsis allow this privilege of
accepting the converted partner of only a male Zoroastrian. A Zoroastrian
woman who marries a non-Zoroastrian by implication rejects faith, so not
only is she excommunicated but her husband and children are not accepted
into the community as well. Alternately, there are innumerable examples of
marriage between Muslim males with convert females from other faiths, but
instances of Muslim women marrying convert males might be very rare, less

so in case of the women from an extremely patriarchal society like Pakistan. In majority of cases such marriages entail gross consequences for women, i.e., complete severance of family ties, and even murder, no matter even if they were born to expatriate parents and were raised in the West.

Of course, Sidhwa’s exact focus is unequivocal on patriarchal outlook of the Parsis’ marital laws, against which she builds very strong arguments on both empirical and religious bases through Feroza’s expatriate experience. With just a passing comment on Pakistani politics which ‘with its special brew of marital law and religion, influenced every aspect of day-to-day living’ (*An American Brat*, p.11), nowhere else does Sidhwa bring in any debate about the Islamic marital laws. However, she involves discussion on the Pakistani Hudood laws as the story progresses towards climax. And recurrent references to Bhutto’s liberal image, and era, and to the conservative outlook of society during Zia’s rule signify Sidhwa’s special narrative strategy to stress upon the fact that perceptive women’s disillusionment about societal justice based on such regressive laws as Hudood Ordinances is but natural.

Sidhwa also makes Feroza’s Pakistani identity very pronounced that predominates her initial behavioural reluctances in America she is not supposed to display as a Parsi whose religion itself prescribes acculturation as a strategy to survive. Thus, Sidhwa suggestively equates Feroza’s expatriate experience in America with that of any Pakistani girl to prove how finding a conducive environment inevitability would lead to the emancipatory assertion of female sensibility which deeply entrenched patriarchal system (like in Pakistan) might only repress, not subjugate altogether.

Perhaps, *An American Brat* is such a representation of femininity, like the one in Thomas Hardy’s novel *Jude the Obscure* or in Henrik Ibsen’s drama *The Dolls House*, the tragic feminist overtones of which reverberate on particular histories centuries afterwards. Since globalization’s lure and pace
has overridden many delayed occurrences these days, so implications of what Sidhwa suggestively depicted through the novel have already started revealing themselves at the start of the 21st century when Parsi diasporic community is facing the identity crisis more acutely than ever. Likewise, not only have the issues related with the assimilation into Western societies of the progeny of expatriate Pakistanis have started creeping up for a while now, but also the debates around religious identity, along with plethora of other socio-economic factors would surely emerge, as an ever larger number of Pakistani students, including girls, are gaining access to foreign education and culture away from the immediate parental or societal vigilance. Sidhwa astonishingly was much advanced to have anticipated future accurately so early through An American Brat.

It is important to notice how Sidhwa broaches the subject of Feroza’s conservative attitude by highlighting Zareen’s and Cyrus’s different reaction to it at the start of the novel. Zareen believed that Parsi women never faced most of the social inhibitions, specifically segregation from males, and observing modest dress code, that the Muslim women had to in Pakistan. So, she objected that Feroza was becoming ‘more and more backward every day’ (An American Brat, p.9) because she did not answer even phone calls, and felt

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576 Among the Shia faction of Islamic faith *mut*‘ah or temporary marriage, which used to be a valid option for the long travelling Muslims in early days of Islam but was banned by the Second Caliph Umar, is still widely practised. The shias, however, represents a minority, and the *sunn*ī faction that constitutes majority of the Muslims around the world usually do not subscribe to certain practices prevalent among the *shia*, *mut*‘ah or temporary marriage being one of such practices. There are, however, very tough legal preconditions to be fulfilled even in the case of this temporary marriage contract also like *nikah* (contract) for proper marriage. Critics of *mut*‘ah, including both *sunn*ī as well as *shia* scholars, maintain a very strict stance that such marriage should not by any means be used to cover up prostitution or exploitation of women by Muslim males using it as a pretext to have several sex partners. According to recent reports, there has been witnessed a rise in *mut*‘ah cases among the British *shia* Muslims using this temporary marriage as a way of balancing their religious beliefs with their modern Western lifestyles. To determine the legality of such marriages under the *shariʿa* law might be a very sensitive religious matter, but the fact that these marriages are being contracted between males and females who have been born or raised in the same country is a clear departure from the very first requisite that such marriages used to be allowed to only long travelling Muslims in far off places away from homelands. Please see, Shabnam Mahmood and Catrin Nye, ‘I do… for Now. UK Muslims Revive Temporary Marriages’, BBC Asian Network, 13 May, 2013, available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22354201. Talat Hussain, a very prominent journalist, and political and social analyst from Pakistan, covering for the TV channel *Dawn News* of the top media group *Dawn*, have also revealed certain tough economic situations faced by the Pakistani female students living in Europe (specifically UK). Hussain reports that due to work restrictions for students on study visas, and difficulty in finding jobs, a number of girls are forced to live with boys without marriage. Please also refer to ‘Girls in London on Student Visa and Problem’ covered by Talat Hussain for *Dawn News*, available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--YzS2W7-Rc, uploaded on September 16, 2011.
uncomfortable about Zareen’s sleeveless sari-blouse. Zareen rather unleashed an endless list of societal injustices levelled against Feroza, and all women in general, by the religion drunk *mullahs*\(^{377}\) during Zia era:

> When I was her [Feroza’s] age, I wore frocks and cycled to Kinnaird College. And that was in ’59 and ’60 – fifteen years after Partition! Can she wear frocks? No. Women mustn’t show their legs, women shouldn’t dress like this, and women shouldn’t act like that. Girls mustn’t play hockey or sing or dance! If anything corrupts their pious little minds so easily, then the mullahs should wear burqas and stay within the four walls of their houses. (*An American Brat*, p. 10)

Cyrus, who issued a pointed comment at that, ‘Zia or no Zia, I’d much prefer she stay narrow-minded and decently dressed than go romping about looking fast and loose’ (*An American Brat*, p. 12), was worried on another account. He thought that ‘his daughter was if anything too forward’ (*An American Brat*, p. 9), and ‘Feroza’s sulks and translucence’ (*An American Brat*, p. 23) probably had more to do with her rather ripe sexuality than just concern over the political upheaval in the country. He had sensed Feroza’s hesitation in not being able to categorically refuse a Muslim boy, whom Cyrus had asked to expel from home because, sitting in their drawing room a few days ago, the boy was persuading Feroza to act in the annual play of Government College Lahore. Cyrus even grudgingly wondered about the boy: ‘couldn’t he take “no” for an answer? Would he ask his own sister to act in front of that mob of that sex-starved hoodlums’ (*An American Brat*, p. 15).

Cyrus also remembered from his own student days at the Hailey College of Commerce how boys used to comment about bold girls who

\(^{377}\) The term is originally meant to refer to the head of a mosque, but sometimes it is rather derogatorily used to refer to the rigid Muslim religious preachers.
performed in Government College plays. He felt happy that Feroza had not discussed the matter with Zareen, nor did he himself bring it up because in ‘her sudden crusade to champion “forwardness”, Zareen might be complacent about Feroza’s taking part in a play, believing their daughter would come out of the experience unscathed to marry a suitable Parsi boy at the proper time’ *(An American Brat*, p. 17).

Zareen’s spate against women’s repression, and fundamentalism in Pakistan to make grounds for conveying to her mother the decision about giving Feroza a little exposure of liberal America, however, met harsh reproof from Khultibai who blamed that Zareen’s had been ignoring, both her motherly and religious duties with regards to Feroza’s upbringing. Khultibai chided Zareen for not minding to teach prayer to Feroza, and for not wearing her *sudra* and *kusti*, but instead showing her skin at the waist. Sidhwa complicates the novel’s thesis by bringing in obvious references to the Parsis’ fear of identity crisis, especially through older generation Khultibai’s remarks, taken in by which, the readers, however, altogether miss her obvious stress on the stark gender bias in Zareen’s and Cyrus’s attitudes to perceive and take the impact of societal change in Pakistan. Whereas, pointing out the stark cultural changes, and their impact on the people’s sensibility, because of fanatic recourse to religiosity, too, remains Sidhwa’s very specific purpose in the first two chapters, though.

Sidhwa further tones down the poignance of her audacious argument (which she would finally knit around the subject of the Hadood Ordinance) by turning discussion on Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s popular image as a liberal leader whose policies had generated mass awareness about women rights. Like all of Sidhwa’s novels, the beginning of *An American Brat* is extremely important because it is where she is most ironic, and simultaneously, most elaborate about her thesis.
With so wider a focus in the beginning on the debate she would pursue in the coming chapters, however, Sidhwa does not skip even any minor details which will be thematically important. For example, Sidhwa mention through Cyrus and Zareen’s reflections that ever since her childhood Feroza had been so stubborn, antisocial, and headstrong that Zareen found it prudent to live in her ‘good graces’, and Cyrus kept his ‘hands, and will, off their daughter’. However, under the influence of ‘her resourceful genes’, and excessive care showered on her by Khultibai, Feroza had grown ‘into a wise, winning, and, at least overtly, malleable child’ (An American Brat, p.24).

Sidhwa also dedicates a whole chapter (No. 4) to detail Feroza’s passionate association with her religion which she adopted as she had ‘the colour of her eyes and the length of her limbs’ (An American Brat, p.40). Feroza’s unflinching belief in the Zoroastrian prayers, and scriptures, and her uncomplicated perceptions regarding divinity have also been purposefully highlighted, as Sidhwa would reassert at the end her thesis of religion being an intensely personal, and so thoroughly ingrained an inspiration in one’s sensibility that no outer influence can wipe its marks from one’s consciousness. What Sidhwa stresses here is that despite her childlike maladies, and romantic awakenings natural to her age, Feroza still was a genuinely conscientious girl who not only felt ‘secure in her humanity’ but could also perceive the ‘divine depths’, and ‘pure energy’ of the Godly existence, like she did in the warmth of the fire in the Parsi temple she visited before leaving for America (An American Brat, p.42).

Thus, Sidhwa chooses the right protagonist who carries all traits of a repressed dual sensibility, i.e., both of a Parsi and of a socially privileged Pakistani girl, as would reclaim its full potential naturally responding to the liberating stimuli in America. Of course, an observant artist like Sidhwa is acutely considerate, and careful not to have directly stated such analogizing of
the situation of Feroza and of Pakistani Muslim girls because the kinds of experiences Sidhwa makes Feroza get through are rather left undiscussed in Pakistan. Yet, the suggestion for this comparison in the text is obvious at a particular intellectual level.

It is very important, however, to approach analysis of the serious issues dealt within the novel with as discerning an instinct as Sidhwa has employed to present them because what brings them to focus, apparently, are Feroza’s ‘misadventures’ during student life in America. Reading about the ordeals, and coping-up strategies of the South Asian, and other foreign students, and about proclivity of the American students towards unbridled sexual behaviour, one does get an impression as if Sidhwa maintains rather a censorious outlook on some circumstantially or culturally vulnerable aspects of their lives, to serve the purpose of humour, and to seek justifications to strengthen her feminist stance about Feroza’s deeply involved relationship with David Press. However, in-depth analysis reveals that Sidhwa’s plan of getting her protagonist acquainted to certain kinds of friends, or letting Feroza have unique experiences, at each successive step is a highly contemplative act in view of where Sidhwa wants to head to with the story.

Feroza always had someone to mentor her through different stages of her advent into social life in America, yet largely she banked on her own judgement, and constantly reviewed her moral standards as to what was or not appropriate to adapt to. Manek, Jo, Shashi, Gwen, Rhonda, Laura and Shirley all, despite their shortcomings or eccentric grudges against the world,

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380 It is also a fact that all the students whose interaction Sidhwa reports to have shaped up Feroza’s journey towards self-actualization happen to be exceptions with regards to the striking aspects of their unique experiences, life-styles, or influences that Feroza definitely would have missed in other Indian, and Pakistani friends whose lives, being at the same transitory stage as her own, would, anyway, not offer much to learn, hence have not been elaborately mentioned in the novel. Besides, making such a strong case of Feroza’s achievements in terms of personality traits and self-fulfilment, Sidhwa has amply accommodated the experience of the multitudes of those students whose normal backgrounds and circumstances seldom drag them further into the conflicting situations that Feroza had to confront because of her particular cultural and religious background.
had contributed positively to what, for the most part, turned out be Feroza’s very enriching and gratifying expatriate experience until her pleasure was finally plundered by interference from her mother. When one looks at how sympathetic Sidhwa is in her strategy of providing her protagonist the opportunity of a detached but cathartic understanding through observing the vagaries, and bitter aspects of other students’ lives in America, such objections as the novel contains ‘uninformed accounts of student culture’ seem utterly baseless.

In fact, the novel is a very remarkable contribution in diasporic literature, especially with regards to the negotiation it brings about between the mutually exotic cultures of America and Pakistan. An American Brat provides psychologically and behaviourally very accurate information about the American students among Feroza’s friends, as the details in Feroza’s coming of age story in America unravel not through ordinary perspectives of race and gender, or First-Third World dichotomies, but through the real emotional contact between characters that is essentially on human basis. Again, this attribute owes to clever contrivances on Sidhwa’s part of Feroza’s character, and of her advent into America at the age when her impressions about peoples’ behaviours were rudimentary based upon her little social contact with the outside world in Lahore, and when her mind had not yet started perceiving, or reacting to certain racial and cultural reservations that erect insurmountable walls between humans once they become conscious of these differences. This inability for predisposition made her experiences particularly different from Manek.


Interestingly, Sidhwa rather sarcastically mentions American culture as an exotic one at several occasions in the novel, especially to effect irony in her argument. We often see this term utilized to refer to the strange aspects of the Eastern or Indian cultures that usually are understandable by the Western people, and are hence relegated to the category of exotica. But Sidhwa applies this term to describe not only how Jo felt about Pakistan but also what Feroza perceives to be strange in the American culture. (For example, see pages 171, and 215 of An American Brat, Op. Cit.).
As expected of him customarily by his Parsi family, Manek was genuinely endeavouring to make use of his expedient genius, and sense of propriety to acquire valuable education in America, fighting all odds, and was all set to acquire certain status in his community. Sending Feroza to his exclusive care for having an exposure of the American way of life reflected the level of newly-reposed confidence of his family in Manek, as he was an American lad now, and by that very virtue qualified most of their standards of maturity. On his part, Manek also understood the nature of responsibility bequeathed to him, as he had instantly realised after meeting Feroza that in his three years absence from Pakistan she had grown to be quite a woman who he had to look out for in America. Feroza also seemed to have been fairly intimidated after seeing the opulence on the Fifth Avenue as well as gaining from Manek the knowledge (which was forbidden to her in Pakistan) about the downside of New York as they came across drug dealers, and transvestites walking along the Eighth Avenue.

However, Feroza’s all too take-for-granted attitudes offended Manek a little. Enjoying the benefits of having a knowledgeable uncle who was taking troubles to make her stay easy in America, Feroza did not seem to accord Manek his due gratitude. Caught in the fix of satiating his own psychological need of getting his superiority acknowledged as an adult from Feroza, who as a child had also usurped from him much of Khultibai’s attentions, Manek felt equally compelled by his genuine wish to groom the outlook of his niece by giving her a crash course into the American way of life. When Manek principally decided that Feroza should study in America, he made sure to teach her all the survival skills that he had learned the hard way without telling his family what he had gone through in America.  

383Manek told Feroza that he had managed to subsist on the meagre amount of money Pakistani government allowed the families to send to foreign students. He had emerged sturdy through calamities like an accident in Southbridge, where hit by a car he had lain ignored, and injured on the road in the snow, and had to walk six hours with broken ribs and elbow to reach the hospital. Not to speak of the agony he had suffered in the South by selling Bibles in which
But Manek’s judgements about Feroza were as half-conceived, as his impressionistic outlook on America. Of course, his presence in America proved to be Feroza’s biggest advantage, yet she was rather more insightful than her years, and her female self and sensibility instantly helped Feroza grasp certain advantages, and disadvantages of being in America that Manek could never ever conceive of. The ‘sudden awareness’ of being ‘suddenly so free of the thousand constraints that governed her life’ in Pakistan (An American Brat, p.58) had dawned on Feroza on the very first day when nobody bothered about her female body on the airport. There are recurrent references to the male gaze on the female body that, in the first few chapters, are specially meant to underpin Feroza’s registering the impressions, as she was experiencing the cultural shift coming from Pakistan to America. Similarly, her indignation at being unreasonably treated by the customs officer at the airport, horrifying experience of taking the fire steps in YMCA, the tumultuous embarrassment in Salem (Boston), and Father Fibs’s ideological sermons all left very deep but different impacts on Feroza’s sensibility, and helped her shape up a balanced outlook.

As for understanding Manek, Feroza had grasped his sense of pride in America only in a few days time when she realised from his behaviour that while showing her America, Manek was in fact showing it off. She had also well perceived how ruthlessly America challenged people like Manek, urging them to prove themselves for availing the extraordinary possibilities that America offered, no matter even if they would have to stay in it forever, and the realization that he would never return to Pakistan saddened Feroza. Manek’s crash course had made Feroza aware of the toughness of the system, though.

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Parsis are mentioned among the heathen people. As Manek later related this ordeal to his family in Pakistan, he also mentioned that the motel in which he had stayed to get training for selling Bibles was owned by India’s Gujarati Biharis, whose instantly recognising him to be a Parsi had only added to his humiliation despite their well-meaning indulgent hospitality.
Feroza did have appreciation in her heart for how Manek had groomed himself. She did not disregard his over-concern he showed to admonish her for not using deodorant, for interrupting in conversations, for staring at people’s faces on roads and smiling at them, or for eating with fingers because his judgements were unquestionably irrefutable owing to his experience of the American society that people possibly minded these things, and she had occasions to recall his warnings while living in the hostel in Twin Falls. Yet, Feroza could never forget the disgrace she had to suffer when Manek took her for a dinner at an expensive Boston restaurant, and made a scene to leave without paying the bill.\footnote{Manek last lesson in his crash course to Feroza was the free dinner at an expensive Boston restaurant. Feroza thought it must be one of the special offers that other restaurants like McDonald’s, Burger King, and Kentucky Fried Chicken made from time to time. But Manek wanted to tell Feroza that she should learn only humility from the incident, as it was necessary to get over the cultural shock, and to learn to skim the system. (An American Brat, pp. 140-145)}

In fact, much of what Manek said or did was due to his acute colour consciousness as a South Asian.\footnote{Employing irony, Sidhwa accentuates Manek’s sense of inferiority by revealing its reality every time he taunts Feroza for overcoming her \textit{gora} complex. In one interesting incident, Manek hung back, pretending not to know Feroza as she threw up while aboard a bus full of Eastern European and Russian immigrants, coming back to YMCA from Forty-second Street. However, later when these passengers left, and a new lot of passengers, consisting of some tourists, and a racially impartial mixture of blacks and whites, boarded the same bus, Manek belched profusely only to prove himself a maverick before Feroza. (An American Brat, pp. 82-83)} Although the discrete racial prejudice he undeniably must have been meted out in America because of his colour and gender was partly a genuine cause of his grievances, yet Manek’s failure to open-heartedly take the challenge of disciplining himself to American ways was mainly responsible for his largely faulty view of the American society. And for premising his embittered judgments on overall conduct of the society, he was himself responsible in many ways because he also had had certain fond memories of student life, and of the kindness of the people whom he met while hitch-hiking with a friend across the country during his first summer in America. Ever after, his constrained financial situation, because he was struggling to make career in a distinguished university of a metropolitan city,
also definitely checked him to enjoy cherishing friendships, or an extended social life.

Deficiency in Manek’s personality particularly struck Feroza when she noticed his fickleness and diffidence at Twin Falls, in the company of her intending American roommate, Jo. Judging her by Jo’s first listless expressions, Manek had quickly instructed Feroza in an aside not to get too intimate with the white girl, as she might be a bad influence. However, together at lunch with Jo in a town restaurant, Manek’s reticent demeanour to please Jo surprised Feroza. On noticing how genuinely Manek was affected by ‘an unaccustomed social smile’ from Jo, Feroza finally ‘realised the dimensions of the \textit{gora} complex that constantly challenged his brown Pakistani psyche’ (\textit{An American Brat}, p.147).

Quite providential, however, proved Manek’s complex-ridden parting remarks about Jo to Feroza that ‘you’re lucky you’ve not been palmed off with some Japanese or Egyptian roommate. Jo’s a real American; she’ll teach you more than I can’ (\textit{An American Brat}, p.148). Stay with the White girls in hostel, especially Jo’s companionship and influence in the small-town environment of Twin Falls multifariously shaped up Feroza’s proper impressions about American culture, and Americans’ particular way of life, as she had had her share of the cultural shock in the meanwhile as well.

Their absolute indifference to nakedness, as Jo often undressed before Feroza in the room, or other girls took shower in the morning, was quite an ordeal to avoid for Feroza. Feroza took showers at odd hours of the night, and did not expose her body to Jo even, yet she deliberately fantasized bringing to mind the images of the white bodies the same way she used to dream about fully covered brown bodies of the men Feroza had crushed on in Lahore. And from certain evasive and ostentatiously emotive gestures of her class mates in
her presence, Feroza did register the reaction her brown colour elicited, and initially she did feel inferior, too.

At that, Jo’s friendship proved for Feroza a balancing distraction from such eccentricities. After Jo started sensing that Feroza was not at all ‘being sarcastic or pulling her leg by mimicking some fancy British actress’ (An American Brat, p. 148) through her formal English, she seemed to have some idea of Feroza’s predicaments. And once Jo broke through her customary reserve, saving the situation for Feroza by confronting the rude shopkeeper who took Feroza’s request in formal English a plea for charity, Jo took complete charge of her new roommate’s life. She helped Feroza improve her English, and change her dress habits. To Feroza, Jo herself, however, remained an enigma. Jo was quite considerate, and dependable, but appeared delinquent, especially regarding using expletives, drinking, and stealing necessities from shops.

Unique experiences started transforming Feroza life when she shifted with Jo, renting an off-campus apartment. Without being obtrusive, Jo proved herself relentlessly kind and understanding in letting Feroza to be at her own. Gradually, Feroza started shedding some of her moralistic and cultural inhibitions. She started visiting clubs with Jo and flirted with boys. Since Jo was otherwise honest and open, Feroza found no harm in abetting Jo in shoplifting, though Feroza remained as little convinced by Jo’s explanation of this act being a duty towards the unjust system as she felt dissatisfied with Manek’s logic about skimming the system. Jo’s respect for Feroza’s cultural and religious reservations was so acute that she did not explicitly lure Feroza for indulging in sexual hunt like herself. On one occasion, Jo even tried hard to dissuade a boy who coaxed Feroza to take puffs at cigarette by telling him Feroza worshipped fire and smoking was sinful in her religion.
Feroza became appreciative of Jo’s ease with boys at the clubs, as she herself learnt to engage their interest gradually, and she got used to Jo’s habit of bringing boys home as well. But Feroza could never get over her guilt when she flirted with boys, and particularly hardened her attitude, finding herself alone, especially when Jo sometimes brought two boys at home and left one to accompany Feroza. Jo’s strange conservatism of not wearing strapless dresses, her vulnerability to crave for suffering in love with Mike (who was a drug addict and burglar, and did not even love Jo), and her conditioned attitude to believe news as they were reported confounded Feroza. Jo did learn to understand the bias in one-sided news by American media about Pakistan, as Feroza told her how deeply politics affected everybody’s life, especially of woman, in Pakistan. However, Feroza could not cure Jo’s sexual vulnerability regarding boys like Mike however much she tried.

Feroza’s misgivings about Jo’s promiscuousness and non-serious pursuit of her career were set aside only when she visited her family in Boulder. Not that there was no mentioning of Jo’s unrestrained behaviour when Feroza met her parents, but what really surprised Feroza was how intimately Jo and her parents could associate with one another. And when Feroza met Jo’s sister Jainine who flew from California for a week, and her brother Tom at his shabby home in Denver, the reality of the secret bond that tied them all together, despite what appeared to Feroza as their stark inadequacies, dawned upon Feroza. Each member of the Millers’ family lived his/her life being utterly unobtrusive and genuinely understanding of the others’ situation.

Sidhwa’s selection of details for investing multiple thematic suggestions in her works is her hallmark, and the pattern is particularly visible in An American Brat. Through very simple incidents, Sidhwa not only exquisitely identifies how certain exotic attributes of both the American, and Pakistani culture remained understandable for Jo, and Feroza, respectively (although the two girls had been able to learn a lot from each other) but also outlines the grey areas in which a possible cultural exchange could happen so easily. In fact, Sidhwa employs such details as smoke screens in the text only to underpin that certain fixed notions require a whole-scale shift of perspective from cultural point of view, a phenomenon that we may invariably call acculturation, transculturation or cultural negotiation with regards to different patterns observable in the development of various characters, particularly Manek, Feroza, and Jo, in the context of this novel.
Such a sense of belonging to family, and of regard for one’s personal freedom neither existed nor could be transposed to any community in Pakistan, be that Parsi, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh. By this time Feroza had matured enough to reflect that the Millers were not any exception the way they conducted themselves, rather they upheld that genuine face of liberal values their country promised to each one of its wooers.

However, Feroza would be tested briefly as to how well she had internalised the lessons learnt from this encounter with Jo’s family. Inspired by the place, Feroza decided to move to the University of Denver with Jo who quitted studies shortly afterwards, leaving Feroza at her own. Here Feroza would first rummage through the shocks of her failed infatuation with an Indian boy Shahsi, and of realizing the abject situation of her mysterious black housemate, Gwen, as these experiences mark crucial preparatory steps on her path towards self-actualization.

While getting Feroza through an experience of the real American life with Jo’s family, Sidhwa simultaneously starts engaging with the political mischief that was brewing in Pakistan because Zia’s plans to hang Bhutto were in the air. In the meanwhile, search was also on for a suitable wife, as Manek was visiting his family, and had hinted to get married to a traditional Parsi girl only, a decision which was most reasonable and much appreciated accordingly. Manek married docile Aban, and brought her to America with him.

Feroza, on the other hand, was going on an entirely different track. At the University of Denver, Feroza found herself less dependent on Jo, as she started making friends at her own for the first time in life, and Shashi, an indefatigably friendly Indian boy, also came into her life. By now Feroza had also started reading extensively, and had already started wondering whether Manek’s instructions, her exposure in Twin Falls, and friendship with Jo were
not but to prepare her for the happy course her life was taking. Shashi had been able to win over Feroza because his approach was unpretentious, and Feroza could pin on him her feminine hopes that every girl nurtured in India and Pakistan is told would be fulfilled after finding an understanding partner like Shashi.

When Jo left hostel, Feroza moved into an apartment with Rhonda and Gewen, the former a white, and the latter a black girl. Rhonda was a blond endowed with lovely features, and Gewen was strikingly beautiful, too. Feroza felt quite at ease with Rhonda because there was nothing much complicated about her, except that she was so kind as to hardly refuse an offer for date by even the less attractive boys pursuing her. But Gewen had certain mysteries about her character. She had a boyfriend, whom Gewen referred to as ‘he’ or sometimes as ‘J.M.’ None of Gewen’s friends ever met ‘J.M.’, but just conjectured that he might be a WASP, as he supported Gewen’s education as well. Gewen would often spend weekends with this boyfriend in hotels, camping in the mountains, or touring the countryside. Her most fond memory was of frolicking with ‘J.M.’ on Lake Como, where they had eaten pasta and trout.

Feroza knew of Gewen’s family only what Gewen volunteered to tell her, and it was not that she particularly concealed anything, especially when Feroza asked. At occasioned, Gewen had offered information even unasked that her past life had been a grapple with poverty. What particularly shocked Feroza as strikingly different in Gewen was the confession she made once that ‘she had been discriminating in her relationship with boys and that she had been careful not to get pregnant. “You know how it is”’ (Pp226-27). Feroza had also noticed that Gewen was able to affect intimacy even through very casual contact with boys. And after Feroza observed a Sikh boy utterly defenceless to guard his social reserves against Gewen’s charms even when he
knew that Feroza was around, and she became watchful also when Shashi visited their apartment.

Feroza did not know whether or not Gewen was flirting with Shashi, but Gewen had sensed wariness in Feroza’s haughty reserve with her. However, Gewen’s response was very appreciable when Feroza broke down accusing Gewen that she was meddling with Shashi. Gewen held Feroza against her chest to let Feroza feel the warmth of her pure broken heart, and told Feroza not to be serious about Shashi, saying ‘the guy just circulates’ (An American Brat, p.232). It was not just Gewen’s genuine kindness that affected Feroza at that moment, but Feroza could recognise the worth of Gewen’s well-meaning words of advice, which Gewen must actually have treasured as a hard lesson of life. Feroza could have dismissed Gewen branding her a slut, had she been naïve yet, and not had had learnt to differentiate between others’ essential goodness from their response to unfortunate circumstances. The understanding that Gewen’s life had been much deprived and different from her own privileged past life-style in Pakistan neither made Feroza conceited nor prejudiced her against this black girl. Gewen’s kindness had humbled Feroza, though.

Simultaneously, in spite of inciting anger, knowing about Shashi made Feroza sufficiently pragmatic, and immune to sentimentality. She did not stop seeing Shashi, and the obvious restraining of intimacy had no effect on their friendship as well. Shashi was shrewd enough to sense and quickly adapt to the hint of reserve in Feroza’s behaviour, likewise Feroza still held gratitude in her heart for Shahshi’s amicableness for introducing her to a number a good friends, and for imparting to her ‘the various knowledge’ she was hitherto ignorant of (An American Brat, p.232).

On the other hand, however much Feroza had felt disturbed been exposed to the dichotomous situations of the Western femininity, as extreme
felicity or grotesque destituteness seemed to her to be part and parcel of the lives of girls like Jo, Rhonda, and Gewen, yet the fact that the right to exercise their freedom of choice, no matter driven by sense of adventure or of necessity, was women’s sole prerogative, was an enviable feature of the American culture. Feroza would learn to appreciate it. A little after, she would perceive equally disconcerting and irreconcilable realities which rendered women from her part of the world utterly hapless, as she learnt about the plight of the rape victims in Pakistan, and about the deprivation of even very happily married women, like Mala (Shashi’s sister-in-law), and Aban (Manek’s wife), who exercised no control on their own lives.

In a brief chapter (No. 23), Sidhwa describes Feroza’s visit to Pakistan at the end of the Fall term in 1980 after two years that Bhutto’s government had been toppled. Very selective and rather hasty narration of the change in Feroza (reservations against which both Zareen and Khultibai had to prudently consume), and of the mounting sense of revolt that Feroza registered in her conscious as she learnt about the famously abhorrent cases of the rape victims (who had shamelessly been convicted due to the wrong application of the Hudood laws) obviously point out the level of caution Sidhwa has maintained, recognising the sensitivity of the discussion, of her own position as a minority artist to indulge in it.

Meeting her old school mates Feroza realised how estranged she felt to associate with the issues involving marriage and relations that, she knew so little of, had occupied the lives of her friends in Lahore. She also felt betraying her filial and kinship emotions, as her sense of dislocation kept deepening, being unable to identify what about her was particularly annoying, especially for her mother because Zareen would not mention at all. Feroza could see how telling were her friends’ and family’s surprised reactions to her talk about the poverty, job insecurity, and deprivations of blacks and Hispanics in
America, which to them symbolised only prosperity. And the galloping poverty observable in the mushrooming jhuggees (camps of the nomadic people) on the outskirts of Lahore saddened Feroza but, to her own astonishment, made her defend America. Despite its unilateral foreign policy with regards to the vulnerable nations and its countless shortcomings, America still appeared great to Feroza because it did not discriminate in welcoming the destitute and discarded from all over the world.367

Thinking that marriage could be an enticing option to rein-in Feroza, and to deter her from going back to America, Zareen had floated a comment that she had some good boys in mind. Feroza’s refusal could be expected, but Zareen felt particularly slighted by Feroza’s arguments to plead her case for education. Feroza had said that an earning career would make her husband respect her, for which Zareen countered immediately by providing Feroza her own and other relative women’s example as to how effectively they kept their husbands intimidated. But Zareen could understand that Feroza’s offhanded comment, ‘you don’t know how thrilling it is to earn your own money’, conveyed more than said, if not about Zareen’s naivety necessarily, but surely about Feroza’s sense of control on her own life that Zareen had never experienced. Zareen gave in for the moment; Feroza also assured that she would come back and marry a handsome Parsi boy after finishing education. However, this brief visit had made Feroza acutely aware that ‘she had outgrown her family’s expectations for her’ (An American Brat, p. 240). Yet, none was aware what lay in the offing.

On her arrival back at America, Shashi introduced Feroza to his affable and affectionate sister-in-law Mala, and his brother Deepak. The

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367 This reference to the benevolence of America to accommodate ‘the destitute and the discarded’ can also be surmised as an implied remark on (especially in such an important chapter as this one) discrimination towards the religious minorities, like Ahmadis, Parsis, etc., that subconsciously prevails in the peoples’ minds in Pakistan, to get free from which the people of minority communities flee to countries like America. America has been most generous of all the Western nations to grant refuge/asylum status to the applicants of the minority communities in Pakistan, especially to the Ahmadis, and perhaps to the Parsis also.
couple had come to America only to make their newborn eligible for the American citizenship. Mala was in the eighth month. In the meanwhile, a chance meeting for buying his car led to Feroza’s deeply involved relationship with David Press. Feroza’s falling in love with David was not entirely a case of being carried away by his youthful charm that she could ever have dreamed to possess, rather, it was David’s honesty and openness with which he divulged details about his plans to ease his father’s burden of his studies. Feroza could identify with his sentiments, but for the great part Feroza was won over because of David’s eagerness to impress her, as if he were being guided by the instinctive understanding Nature endows to every being for eliciting favourable response from the right mate when the moment comes.

Before Sidhwa dwells further on Feroza and David’s intimate relationship, she briefly narrates the enormously telling story of Mala’s prematurely born baby-girl. Deepak had no money to pay the fifteen thousand dollars bill to the hospital. He tried to bargain hard. Mala suggested Deepak to ask his father for money, but he refused saying she could deliver thirty premature babies in that money. Agonised over his own bizarre bargaining that exasperated the hospital staff as well, Deepak left the baby at hospital saying they could keep her. Shashi called Feroza to their apartment, where she found Mala hysterically weeping and blaming that Deepak had given the baby away only because it was a girl. The matter was, however, resolved, as Rhonda’s uncle was a surgeon at Denver General, and he helped get Deepak’s bill reduced to only one thousand dollars, that too, had pained Deepak and he wept when the overly conscientious hospital staff now happily returned the baby.

Sidhwa keeps the comic and the serious equally poised at this part of the story to withhold detailing grotesqueness that as stoically touches a reader’s heart as it affected Feroza’s highly receptive sensibility. Feroza was
through the most blissful experience of being in love with David, and everything revealing of conjugal relationships, however insignificant, would ultimately influence her to count upon the merits in David:

It was one thing to love. But to be loved back by a man who embodied every physical attribute of her wildest fantasies, with whom she could communicate even without speech, who understood the sensitive nuances of her emotions that were so like his own insecurities, was akin to a transcendental, fairy-tale experience. (*An American Brat*, p. 255)

Naturally, sensuality was to ensue, but even then David’s and Feroza’s care about each other’s ‘otherness’, and respect for ‘certain sexual reticence’ (*An American Brat*, p. 256) on each other’s part was all a seriously intending traditional girl like Feroza could expect, if not help, awash in desire. David never wandered naked in rooms before Feroza like he would have before an American girl, nor did he watch her naked, and Feroza, too, undressed and dressed under cover in the bed. Besides, David’s seriousness in relationship was clear enough, as he took Feroza to Boulder for a Sabbath meal with his parents, Adina and Abe Press.

Observing David’s father Abe perform Jewish worship rites and sensing Adina’s nervousness and caution replying to her polite questions about Zoroastrianism, Feroza could sense that her and their religions were very different. Feroza also wondered that David must already have had discussion with his parents to dispel their concerns regarding her religion. As to the response of her own family, she was not sure because for the time being, David’s love was as sumptuous as the experience with Western classical music to which Feroza was introduced, again, by David.
Feroza told Manek and Aban about David when she spent the Christmas holidays with them in 1981. To offer a brief comparison to Feroza’s life, Sidhwa also mentions here that Manek seemed to have well-settled having a house in the outskirts of Houston, in Clear Lake, and job in NASA, and a submissive wife who took even a most casual reference to ‘divorce’ jinxing their marriage. Yet, he had neither been able to shun his student-life grudges against the system that was now graciously paying him back after he had survived its testing grind nor could he open his heart to win any genuine friendships outside the Parsi community.

How far Manek’s impressionistic approach, particularly regarding vulnerabilities of the brown skin, might deprive even his family from embracing adoptable American values or even mar their sense of belonging here was evident from his act of changing his name from Manek Junglewalla to Mike Junglevala. Both Feroza and Aban’s attitude was self-revealing of their intuitive understanding of each other’s situation. They let Manek keep up appearances. Aban would not mention any of her disillusionments about marriage, and Feroza maintained silence on the subject as well. And after Feroza broke the secret of her relationship with David, Aban left Feroza and Manek alone to discuss this highly personal familial matter.

Feroza shifted in one of the bedrooms in David’s apartment when a girl living there moved out. Two lesbian girls, Laura and Shirley, also shared another room in the house. David lived in the converted garage, but living in the same house led to far greater implications that Feroza had not perceived before.

Overtaken by her sense of guilt, Feroza had to send a letter to her family in Pakistan, informing them that she and David had already decided to marry. It was after this letter, that all of Feroza’s relatives in Pakistan gathered at their house to hold long and large meetings because the matter would not
just prove detrimental to the family’s social image but also result in exclusive communal banishments for Feroza. Besides, David’s picture in shorts with hairy thighs made a very different impression on both her parents from what Feroza had tried to convey through the casual tone of her letter.

Irony of the situation was revealed, as even the youngsters attending family conferences in Lahore could realise how naïve and ill-founded was the over-concern of their elders who themselves eagerly sent the youngsters to mix with foreigners in Western countries where Feroza-like cases would be inevitable. More so, when Bunny, a fifteen-year old seemingly self-aware cousin of Feroza, expressed her annoyance saying: ‘For God’s sake! You’re carrying on as if Feroza’s dead! She’s only getting married, for God sake!’ (An American Brat, p.268). Not only was Bunny reprimanded for such revolting remarks but was also asked to apologize Feroza’s parents for hurting their feelings.

Even the boys sitting there were not spared, and were accorded angry frowns when an aunt mentioned that girls could not be blamed for trying their options when the boys from the community were freely marrying the non-Parsi girls. Such chastisements were necessary because these children were the only hope of the tiny Parsi community. Incapacitated, as they knew they were, to pacify their modern youngsters through intimidation or reasonable arguments, the elders, therefore, also resorted to sentimental blackmail. To discredit the youngsters’ genuine misgivings as childish, the elders themselves sound specifically undiscerning as they quote oft-repeated tragic fates of the dissenting girls, Perin Powri (whose body was not allowed to be placed in the Tower of Silence in Karachi for marrying a Muslim male), and Roda Kapadia (who married a Christian and was not allowed to enter the room her grandmother’s body was placed).
As for persuading Feroza, Cyrus sent Zareen to America with bribe money for David to let their daughter free. Here, Sidhwa nuances Zareen’s arguments and thoughts about the interfaith marriage through several ironic reversals that she (Sidhwa) incorporates within Zareen’s fleeting impressions about America, and about Feroza’s lesbian housemates, Laura and Shirley. *An American Brat*, in fact, is a very rich text, for covering not just the metamorphosis of Feroza in America but also for discreetly marking the fault lines that impede propriety of value exchange as in transculturation, as Sidhwa makes evident through the impressionistic outlooks of Manek and Zareen.

Preoccupied by her mission in America, Zareen was caught up in a heated argument with Feroza the very next morning of her arrival. She not only blamed Feroza for being utterly irresponsible and selfish in her demand for marriage with David but also scornfully called her ‘an American brat’ (*An American Brat*, p.279). Recoiling a little by sensing Feroza rage, Zareen would listen to Feroza’s all appeasing allusions to David’s character and to his get-up-and-go (that Feroza considered would impress her Parsi parent), but Zareen did not let her heart soften at the moment. Zareen had promised Feroza that she would be objective, but inwardly she had gauged that Feroza had fundamentally changed and David was not an easy adversary. David possessed all the qualities that Parsis wished their sons to have.

However, it was the luring taste of ‘the seductive beat of the New World’ (*An American Brat*, p.286) that momentarily made Zareen’s forget about her far-away family’s concerns. She also found genuine personal merit in David, winning, and reasonable outlook of Feroza and David’s friends, charming. Zareen was also forced to think in entirely feminist terms about Feroza’s state of fix. She felt revolting as to why a Parsi boy could while a girl could not marry a non-Parsi, and why a non-Parsi mother would not be
accepted into the community while her children were. Yet, the community expected from the non-Zoroastrian mothers to raise their children as proper Zoroastrians. She even wondered if the teenagers, especially Bunny, in Lahore were right, and that moving ahead with the times the Zoroastrian Anjuman (committee) should introduce minor reforms in conversion and marital laws.

Zareen’s attitude, however, changed altogether when the family sent her reminders, including with letters the copies of two pamphlets in which the Parsi Anjuman had warned both male and female Zoroastrians to strictly adhere to the religious purity laws, or else face excommunication. Zareen immediately felt the surge of religious passion. However winsome David was, he would still deprive Feroza of her faith. Coincidently, Zareen also discovered Feroza out of bed at night and for the first time realised that her daughter might have been sleeping with David. So, she confronted David, trying to convey to him how big a sacrifice he was demanding of her daughter. David regarded Zareen’s allegations as irrelevant because Feroza was an adult and obviously able to make her own decisions. Feroza, too, was conspicuously insolent afterwards, when Zareen directly pointed to her intimacy with David by referring to her absence from the bed at night.

To distressed Zareen, as she lay alone in bed, Shirley’s kindness particularly struck when the girl offered to get Zareen a glass of milk. And in her contempt of Feroza’s amoral, irresponsible and irreligious behaviour Zareen readily concluded that Laura and Shirley ‘were not like Zareen’s preconceived notions of promiscuous American girls, even if Feroza had made that crack about being the only twenty-year-old virgin in America. These pretty girls did not have boys hovering around them’ (An American Brat, p.294). Such thoughts could enrage her further, but Zareen now decided to deal with David and Feroza rather discreetly.
Zareen assured Feroza that they could marry if David would consent to marry observing traditional Zoroastrian rites. Feroza had misgivings that David might get disturbed by talk about rituals, but she brought him before Feroza. Feroza felt concerned noticing David dishevelled and dejected. It was obviously in reaction to Zareen’s incessant flaunting of religion that now David also prominently displayed the Star of David on his chest. Zareen’s confidence, however, was boosted, as David’s drunken and depraved profile exactly resembled the image that Cyrus and Zareen had first gathered of him from his photograph in shorts sent to them by Feroza. Zareen little cared of Feroza’s loathing, as long as she triumphed in exasperating David through her over-drawn references about Zoroastrian marriage, and burial rites.

Sidhwa makes both Feroza and Zareen simultaneously recognise how wide a chasm divided them, now, as two women whose sensibilities had been conditioned to entirely different social milieus. Zareen’s comment about Laura and Shirley that they were decent girls who bothered themselves with studies only instead of boyfriends drew a sharp retort from Feroza that they were lesbians. Oversimplifying the matter for her mother, Feroza had also said that all girls were not lucky to find good boys like David in America so they preferred to become lesbians to get each others’ ‘juices flowing’ (An American Brat, p.300). Zareen almost collapsed at the brazenness of her daughter. Zareen could never think of facing her husband that she had raised him a daughter who could shamelessly talk of sexuality in her mother’s presence, and lived with a boy and a couple of lesbians. Feroza knew how much she had pained her, but Zareen also had deliberately destroyed her pleasure.

The thought that she had herself caused unhappiness to her daughter perturbed Zareen but she could not help what she had done. Besides, David had not been able to put up a show of any exemplary perseverance, rather he
over-reacted when Zareen tried to ritualistically burn jalapeno peppers on the stove to dispel the evil eye from Feroza. Betraying even all motherly affections, Zareen had only tried to defend Feroza:

From accusations of polluting the genetic structure of their race and dirtying the spiritual genes, if there were such things, and the purity of their religion: mighty charges no young girl could withstand, not even if she professed to be irreligious. It dawned on Zareen that exhilarating strength she had felt when confronting David, as of some subtle power directing her brain, was not a supernatural force come to help her as she’d thought, but the reflexive impulse of her own dread. (*An American Brat*, p. 306)

Zareen was now able to clearly recognise the deeply rooted fears of her female psyche that had ever suppressed misgivings in her heart about the patriarchal traditions followed in her community. She wondered if a prophet, such as Zoroaster, who preached to spread his message of love (religion) to whole humanity, would have wanted its followers to adopt a regressive legacy, as of conversion and purity laws. Zareen also reflected that the ‘educated custodians of the Zoroastrian doctrine were no less rigid and ignorant than the *fundos* in Pakistan’ (*An American Brat*, p. 305).

Feroza had been saddened by the realization that David’s feelings for her had undergone change, yet she decided to take the difficult course, preferring to stay in America, as Zareen also had realised Feroza would. Luxurious life-style she had become habitual of in America would not crush her freedom and sense of privacy, at least, as would the growing fundamentalism in Pakistan. Besides, she still had thirst for knowledge. Although Feroza’s thoughts sounded selfish to herself even, yet she had been able to grasp that:
God knows, there was enough cause: in the pious platitudes, in the narrow vision of a world seen through the cold prisms of self-interest and self-pity (An American Brat, p. 313).

These seemingly emotive realizations on Feroza’s part did shield her from getting ambivalent, even when Gewen disappeared all of a sudden and nothing could confirm of her whereabouts or of possible death. To deserted Feroza, the daily accounts of sexual assaults and murders of women could also be very intimidating, but she persevered. Feroza observed Aban and Manek constantly bickering when she visited to see her newborn cousin, Dilshad. Listening to Aban’s disillusioning outpouring how her dreams of happy life in America with her prince charming had been crushed by endless domestic responsibilities she could not cope up, Feroza doubted not only her own readiness for marriage as yet but also wondered if David would have remained keen of her after even a single baby.

Returning back to Denver Feroza searched for her sudra and kusti and invoked Ahura Mazda’s blessing. Feroza found peace, as she persuaded herself:

There would be no David, but there would be other men, and who knew, perhaps someday she might like someone enough to marry him. It wouldn’t matter if he was a Parsi or of another faith. She would be more sure of herself, and she wouldn’t let anyone interfere (An American Brat, p. 317).

Sidhwa emphasizes Feroza’s reviving of contact with religion at an extremely personal level, making her process of self-actualization complete. It is as if one undergoes the proverbial purgatory experience in Sufism of attaining the unification with the divine as a result of earnestly seeking the
carnal at first. Sidhwa’s message seems specifically transcendental, as its reality dawns upon Feroza:

As for her religion, no one could take it away from her; she carried its fire in her heart.... There would be no going back for her, but she could go back at will. (*An American Brat*, p.317)

Sidhwa’s nuanced character portrayals, matter of fact scenic illustrations and picturesque articulations in *An American Brat* also seem to have achieved a degree of novelty, not realised in any of her earlier works, as a consequence of her relentless artistic pursuit. One wonders, nonetheless, at her mastery with which Sidhwa restrains her penchant for dwelling on authorial descriptions and depictions because whatever unravels of America before Feroza’s eyes has to be narrated as Feroza processed it in her imagination. That is how a travelogue, and more so a novel with coming of age theme must proceed. Perhaps, it is again a very gross misreading of text’s thematic import that hampers some readers to apprehend why Sidhwa withholds the ease of expression while writing on America, and they presume it to be a weakness in the text.388

Perhaps, the faulty perceptions about *An American Brat* that have persisted all the while since its production are an outcome of the reviewers’ approach to pattern their views according to certain established critical practices in the field of Postcolonialism. Clear vision on Sidhwa’s work is lacking also, as we have tried to discover through in depth analysis of her works, because she is an revisionsist. Simultaneously, she has shaped her art to be palatable to general readership, still highlighting very sensitive and controversial issues, especially regarding religio-cultural traditions, and politics in the Indian Sub-continent. And she does offer the exotic, especially in her capacity as a diasporic writer, but not in terms readily conceivable

through such concepts as hybridity, syncretism, and mimicry, etc., hence the difficulty in understanding her historically and culturally rooted texts. Gabriella Collu also stresses the importance of deviating from the use of trite frameworks, especially to read the works of South Asian women diasporic writers in Canada and North America:

... because they place the South Asian diasporic writing in a marginal position in relation to Western writing and because they do not consider these texts as emerging out of particular contexts and experiences. I think it is very important to look at these writings by South Asian women in Canada and the United States within their particular historical, social, cultural, and literary context and to theorize about these texts from within the texts and their contexts.389

The complex politics of identity in *An American Brat* – Feroza’s identity as a Pakistani Parsi girl – and expression through it of her visionary stance by Sidhwa as a feminist writer representing Pakistan, again offer perspectives that most of the female diasporic writers from other countries are also exploring through their works. Collu maintains that the diasporic writers through their stories search a ‘new’ identity. To clarify the position of the diasporic writers, Collu quotes Arun Mukherjee from the introduction to *Her Mother’s Ashes*: that “people do not leave their histories and cultures behind when they migrate,” rather they build on these histories and cultures, taking and leaving, borrowing and adding on them’. About the nature of the ‘new’ identity, Collu argues, therefore, that it is a complex, and potentially empowering, but not a fixed, rather an ongoing representation, which is ‘cross-cultural or transcultural, rather than fragmented, schizophrenic, or

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hybridized’. Collu, thus, concludes that ‘South Asian women’s writing of the diaspora is transculturation’.

Contrary to this notion of the smooth adoption of a ‘new’ identity, Minoo Moallem’s argues in terms of the ‘crisis of identity’ which individuals, societies, and social groups have, in the past few decades, been suffering from as a result of the spread of global culture, and the forces opposing it, especially in the aftermath of the erosion of nation-state, decolonization, and globalization. The ‘crisis of gender’ in this ‘crisis of identity’ is central, according to Moallem. Generalisations by Moallem regarding this ‘crisis of gender’ (as may be surmised, that Sidhwa has highlighted through Feroza’s sense of shock and of detachment from cultural backlash regarding women in Pakistani society as a result of the wrong application of Hudood laws, and through Zareen’s abhorrence of the stricter enforcement of the purity laws in the Zoroastrian community) also offer interesting explanations regarding Sidhwa’s comprehensive feminist stance in *An American Brat*.

For example, Moallem’s maintains that the clash between the forces of global culture and the forces opposing it materializes into a ‘war of representation and position between dominant and dominated ethnicities as
well as hegemonic masculinities and emphasized femininities’. ‘These changes’, as Moallen furthers in argument, ‘have intensified gender identification across class, race, and ethnic lines, and contribute to the identity politics’, elaborate upon the situation Feroza’s was caught in as a Parsi girl. It explains also Feroz’s extended Parsi family’s communal response to resist her relinquishing of the faith by marrying a non-Parsi.

Furthermore, Moallem’s extended arguments about the war of position between fundamentalisms and feminisms are specifically enlightening, regarding the promulgation of Hudood laws in Pakistan to counter liberal forces after Bhutto era, and rigid recourse to patriarchal purity laws in Parsi community to counter the challenge of extinction due to exodus and exposure to the West:

Feminisms and fundamentalisms are among those growing forces that attempt to deal with both individual and communal identities in global and local conditions. A war of position between advocates of fundamentalist and feminist worldviews is being waged in the cultural sphere at both local and global levels. Feminisms and fundamentalisms are now competing global forces, both attempting to find means to control the mechanisms of cultural representation.

Moallen, however, opines that in the backdrop of the global cultural encounters of feminism and fundamentalism that were inevitable in the situation, ‘many fundamentalist women have started to negotiate and renegotiate their place in society within fundamentalist discourse, by using mainstream feminist concepts and ideas such as patriarchy and male chauvinism’. This seems to be a perfect explanation of the shift in Sidhwa’s feminist stance in An American Brat from her earlier works as we noticed above in this critique. It also serves to prove how successfully Sidhwa has
been able to simultaneously attack ‘patriarchy and male chauvinism’ in the matters of interpreting and applying religious laws by Pakistani Muslim and Parsi societies by defining Feroza’s strong agency, both, in her capacity as a Pakistani and a Parsi girl.³⁹¹

3.6 Water: A Novel

We may lay down as a general rule that nothing is so tenacious as a religion, nothing more obstinately defies proscription and all attempts to extirpation, nothing resists with more constancy the contradictory demonstrations of palpable reality. History supplies examples of these, which are most appalling.³⁹²

Water: A Novel is Bapsi Sidhwa’s fifth novel. Things naturally come one’s way, and are specifically divining when one is inspired to achieve a just cause with pure intentions. Perhaps, there is no better explanation than this to justify Sidhwa’s writing of her novel Water after An American Brat. Sidhwa’s oeuvre reveals a particular stance on the religion’s appropriation of politics, especially with regards to the oppression of women. Sidhwa revisits the communal history of the sub-continental region, and develops her personal version of it, ‘endowing small domestic occurrences with cosmic drama’. Therefore, Sidhwa’s version of history is invested with ‘deeply felt personal meaning’.³⁹³ In An American Brat, Sidhwa scrutinizes the community laws of the Indian Zoroastrian community, and Pakistani Hudood laws, and in Water she turns her gaze on the Hindu community laws of the sacred religious texts to reveal the reality of the women’s life in the Indian sub-continent. The story of the novel derives from Deepa Mehta’s film Water. Mehta requested Sidhwa to develop story for the novel from a rough cut of the film. Sidhwa had to

write the novel in just three months to time its completion with the release of the film, so the novel and film were both released on April 28, 2006.

Sidhwa had already collaborated with Mehta who directed the 1998 film *Earth* based on Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India*. The artistic concerns of Sidhwa and Mehta are so well-matched that Sidhwa admits:

> We have a very good rapport. People often ask me if we have a spiritual connection. I can say this much – we agree on intuitive levels.\(^{394}\)

Earlier on Sidhwa had only novelized her personal experiences in life, but creating a written work from a popular movie is obviously a daunting task. Sidhwa mentions about her reluctance in her acknowledgements: ‘I was hesitant because I had never written within the confines of a structured story.’ Although the film’s dialogues and story are mainly by Mehta, Sidhwa has inspired original charm, and has added to the version in her novel by infusing it with her nuanced characterization and light humour and by providing the background of many rituals and customs, and details of the religious laws, things which the film, given its running time, could not do. Sidhwa spiritualizes as she relates the ordinary tales, and this artistic attribute also predominates in *Water*, as Nora Seton says: ‘Her stories are simple, [but] their subtexts are richly instructive. Her lively characters thrash out personal and political issues’.\(^{395}\) The narrative time is 1938 during the colonial rule in India, yet the thematic relevance of *Water* with Sidhwa’s earlier works is astonishingly coincidental, so the chronology subsides and the discussion follows smoothly from the story of Feroza (in *An American Brat*) to that of Chuiya (in *Water*).

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Before proceeding on with critique of the text, it is important to situate Sidhwa’s particular stance within a wider religio-historical context regarding Hinduism, so that the validity of her arguments could be evaluated according to some objective criteria and the relevance of her debate could be established with the present state of affairs. Since the Stone Age period the ancient Indian civilisation has been a religio-mythic complexity, as it survived and evolved through the contests and admixtures of great heathen and religious civilizations of the world. Religion, however, is regarded as the very unaltering edifice that ensures preservation and continuation of this civilization.

Bajor Avari details two very important aspects of the ancient Indian civilization and Hindu religion – the mythic attachment to the territory itself, and the irrevocable reverence for the interesting myths of antiquity — that have endured the entire course of history. The case of the myths is interesting, as these are taken as the ‘psychological laws (that) govern the intellectual activity of mankind’ and as the uncompromising religious positions that surround the whole life:

The Hindu myths consist of everything encompassed within human, divine and cosmic universes: nature, creation, planets, the earth, gods, animals, birds, reincarnation of the soul, heroism, mortality, lifestyle and countless themes besides. These myths have been transferred in India, by the word of mouth over four millennia; but the public appetite for them has never waned or fully sated, because the great storehouses of myth and legend, such as Ramayana and Mahabharata epics or the ancient texts of the Puranas, are interwoven in Indian life through folklore, festivals, literature, music, dance, drama and now the cinema, TV and the Internet. They are reflections of human
experience and aspiration, constantly worked through thriving media outlets. They occupy an inner sacred space. Geography has its boundaries but the human ‘inscape’ is limitless and infinite.\(^{396}\)

Interrelated with the concept of mythology is the age-old socio-cultural concept of the rights of human beings, that Romila Thapar suggests can be approached either through ‘the ethos of a society’ or by the ‘Law Books’. However, both these frameworks reveal the dichotomy between ‘the ideal’ and ‘the actual’ in the Indian religious and societal history. Hinduism does encourage man to seek a ‘moral consciousness’ that is wholly devout to ‘a quest for spiritual peace,’ withdrawing from all the cares of carnal life and demands of societal institutions:

(Hinduism is) primarily concerned with the ultimate destiny of man – a transcendental, spiritual state where the soul finds salvation or the individual consciousness attains extinction.

Thapar reports that the ancient Hindu sacred texts devised their spiritual agenda, premising ‘a purposeful ordering of life’, and these ‘Law Books’ strictly delineate the Hindu norms that man is doomed to follow. Only through such adherence to the norms of religion an individual can maintain his/her allegiance to one’s dharma or social duty, which is the first and foremost.\(^{397}\) It is in the idealistic pursuit for spiritual perfection (Nirvana) that man can aspire to attain salvation (moksa). However, the path to salvation becomes even more difficult if an individual has sins accrued from his/her past life, as in Hinduism man is supposed to pass through many lives and his soul has to undergo different experiences to attain perfection and cover


\(^{397}\) Manu, VII, 151-2; Vasistha, I, 4-5; Gautama, XI, 19 and Bhagavad gītā, XVIII, 40-48; Manu, X, 96-7; Gautama, VII, 1, 1-3; XI, 32-3.quoted in Thapar, Romila. ‘Society and Law in the Hindu and Buddhist Traditions’ in Ancient Indian Social History, Some Interpretations, New Delhi: Oreint Longman Ltd., (1978) pp. 26-39
different stages of self-realization or God-realization, thus becoming one with divinity:

Just as a man discards worn out clothes and puts on new clothes, the soul discards worn out bodies and wears new ones.\textsuperscript{398}

As regards the status of women in \textit{Shastras/Satras} and \textit{Smrtis},\textsuperscript{399} there is evidence that in Vedic times, women and men were equal as far as education and religion was concerned. Women participated in the public sacrifices alongside men. However, in general certain repressive religious and cultural practices denied to women the freedom to decide about their own life. Early marriages, often before puberty, were common. Women were always dependent on men whether as maidens, in married and old stage, or as widows. However, as the people followed \textit{Shastras} in olden times, so widows remarriage was allowed. Gradually, mainstream Hinduism started regarding women as inferior to men. \textit{Smrtis} clearly mention that women have been emasculated by gods, and cannot control themselves or an inherited property. Even a small boy takes precedence over women who are inferior to even bad men.

Most notably in \textit{Manusmrti} (the Laws of Manu) women are considered as ‘seductive, temptresses, voraciously erotic, and morally weak’. As Hindu religion ‘extols celibacy’, men are at greater risk. They have to control their own ‘wayward impulses’ as well as be responsible for controlling their women. Interestingly, the women inherit their lustful nature from their mother, whereas \textit{dharma} (the ability to perform social duties) from the father. The \textit{smrtis} ideally are secondary to the \textit{Shastras/Satras}, but in the case of widow remarriage \textit{smrtis} clearly overrule practice on the \textit{Shastras/Satras} which

\textsuperscript{398} The \textit{Bhagavad Gita}, \textit{The Path of Knowledge} 2:22.
\textsuperscript{399} The Codes of conduct given by the Supreme Deity to \textit{Rishis} (the seers). These laws are contained in the book of knowledge known as \textit{Vedas} and \textit{Upanishads}. \textit{Smrtis} codified opinions of the men of highest spiritual learning and deliberate on the philosophical practices and delineate acceptable cultural customs for a proper Hindu socio-spiritual conduct.
allow marriage. The smṛtis prescribe strict adherence to the societal customs. The social custom of not marrying the widows was actually practised in elite circles in pre-modern Hindu times. A widow was considered responsible for her husband’s death because of her inability to perform her pativratya (the concept that women exists to serve her husband), and she thus ‘represented death’. As it was necessary to control her sexuality, therefore a life of celibacy was imposed upon a widow and she was provided bare minimum subsistence and bland food. A widow had hardly any claim to her husband’s property and remarriage of widows was not encouraged. They had to give up all the comforts of life. They wore plain clothes, tonsured their heads, and had a separate place to stay. In the course of time ashrams became common to keep the widows away, as they were not only ‘inauspicious’ for their families but their sexuality was a potential danger for the community at large. Ideally, the family was responsible to provide for them but gradually they were left to the whims of fate, so the barbaric customs regarding them have prevailed.400

The story of Water reviews the status of women in Hindu society by focussing on a critical juncture of history, when anti-colonial movement was in full swing, the old customs and traditions of the smṛtis were breaking up, and caste and communal divides were being denigrated. The country was full of hope. The nationalists, represented in the text, by Gandhi and Narayan, were seeking to demolish all the oppressive customs and beliefs regarding women, especially the widows. Establishing this link with the past, the story of the widows in Water is presumed to reflect on the irony of their situation in view of the realities that have unfolded half a century after the independence of India. The traditional prejudices against women in India are still prevalent.

Paradoxically, it is the nationalists who have adopted the role of religious ideologues, and are now seeking stricter enforcement of the religious laws. It is also to be noted that *Water* primarily is the story of the *brahman* (high caste widows), as the laws of remarriage, and the barbaric practices, like *sati*, have been strictly practised in the case of these widows for obvious reasons of their worth, both in terms of their persona and inherited property. Yet, the destitute situation of widowhood makes all the rich and poor widows, ‘sisters in grief’. The plight of the *Brahman* widows has also been depicted before Mehta by Raj Kapoor in his 1982 romantic Bollywood flick, *Prem Rog*, and by famous Indian author Prem Chand in his Urdu short-stories, yet none of these artists have adopted the confrontational approach regarding the religious texts like Sidhwa has.

Sidhwa views changing pattern of the religion’s appropriation of politics to oppress women in India in terms of the chauvinistic nature of the Hindu religious texts. Political realities of the history, as such, justify the validity of her critical stance. Nevertheless, Sidhwa devises a holistic paradigm to offer the readers a proper purview. Chuyia’s story in Mehta’s film starts from the middle of the action, but the novel contains a prologue, in which characters have been placed in their proper background. In her typical narrative style, Sidhwa describes the setting and introduces her subject. Chuyia lives in a village on the Bihar-Bengal border. Her mother Bhagya and father Somnath are discussing the matter of her marriage. Hira Lal’s mother offers Somnath to marry Chuyia with her son who is forty six. Chuiya is just six. Somnath informs Bhagya that the family of Hira Lal do not require a dowry, and they will bear the expenses of the marriage as well. Bhagya is quick to apprehend that Somnath has already pledged Chuiya without consulting her. Somnath provides a simple justification at that, he could not refuse Hira Lal’s mother. Hira Lal’s family is very rich and has a noble Brahman lineage. Chuiya is anyway to be married, but with Hira Lal her
future will be safe. Somnath also mentions that Chuyia’s marriage will win them high caste connection.

This is the surface narrative, but Sidhwa readily turns her focus to the real debate. It is imperative to mention that keeping true to Mehta’s version of the story; Sidhwa does update the novel’s reference to history as well. However, unlike Mehta, who subverts the fundamentalist politics of the Hindu Right in India through highlighting the life and political philosophy of Gandhi, Sidhwa focuses on various texts of Hinduism. Somnath quotes from the Bhagavat Gita to dispel his wife’s misgivings:

A woman is recognised as a person only when she is one with her husband. Only then she becomes a Sumangali, an auspicious woman, and a saubhagvati, a fortunate woman’.

Momentarily, Somnath also thinks over the demonic and lustful nature of a woman, as described in the Bhagwat Gita. Here Sidhwa prevails as an artist and develops her stance on the complicity of individuals who, being religion-drunk, are totally blind to each other’s oppression. Sidhwa speaks the mind of her characters and puts so complex a debate in the subtext of the narrative as would lurk around every turn that the characters’ lives take in the story. Bhagya demands from her husband that by the time Chuiya’s womanhood will be in bloom, her husband will not be able to satisfy her desire. Bhagya’s question about the sexuality of Chuiya also triggers debate at the very outset about Sidhwa’s central focus in the narrative. The response by Somnath is as expected. Bhagya has not been able to control her lustful nature till this age, so Somnath is confirmed that the Brahman elders rightly pointed out that women cannot be trusted, and they need to be controlled. Thus, Sidhwa unpretentiously turns discussion with a reference from the Bhagavat Gita to the question of the tradition, as Somnath chastises Bhagya:
You are the wife and daughter of a Brahman priest. You know, outside of marriage the woman has no recognised existence in our tradition. A woman’s role in life is to get married and have sons. That is why she is created: to have sons! That is all.401

Thus, reminded of her inconsequence, Bhagya immediately understands that by questioning her husband she is questioning ‘the cumulative wisdom of gods and ancient sages’, so she apologises. Bhagya also brims with pride, as she already has sons, and at the time of Chuyia’s marriage she also feels elated that she would now be able to provide her sons larger quantities of ‘milk and fat and fish that had nourished Hira Lal’s body’ (Water: A Novel, p. 27). The prologue, therefore, sets the background not only to better visualise the characters but also to understand the perspective that Sidhwa adopts in the story. Gandhi is also referred to in one paragraph in the prologue, but Sidhwa’s main concern is the religious debate on women’s sexuality. It must also be noted that Sidhwa is spinning the narrative around her own interpretation of the Hindu religious texts, yet her stance is objective, only because her propositions mainly obtain from her culturalist vision, and from her sense of the history of the region.

The story takes the tragic turn, as newlywed Chuiya suddenly becomes a widow without even going to her groom’s house because Hira Lal dies shortly after falling ill. Hira Lal’s mother is contemptuous, but Chuiya’s father is ravaged with grief. However, nothing can be done, as Chuiya has some ‘kermic debt’ from her past life. It is interesting to note also how the customary narrative about the women’s ability to perform pativratya (service to their husbands) is twisted around the sins from a woman’s past life in case of the widows whose husbands die even before actually taking brides to their homes or consummating with them. Sidhwa provides details that Chuiya’s

head is shaved, as every drop that stays on a widow’s hair is believed to defile the soul of her deceased husband. Somnath’s then notices Hira Lal’s eldest son whom he did not see before, and who could actually have been a perfect match for his daughter. Chuiya is deposited in a widow ashram. Thus, Sidhwa establishes the whole background of Chuiya’s story to indicate how her parents, her in-laws, and the whole society are complicit in ruining her life. Yet, the basic question is not resolved. It is not just the people who are to be blamed; it is a beleaguered ideal that makes them complacent about their cruelty. The sanctity of this ideal needs be questioned, so Sidhwa brings in the tragedies of different widows in her narrative. As Sidhwa divulges details, the flavour of her language can also be noticed easily.

Chuiya bites Madhumati, the head of the ashram, and is saved by Shakuntala. Chuiya thanks Shakuntala, saying that Shakuntala saved her like mother Durga (a powerful Hindu goddess), whereas, Shakuntala notices as Chuiya sits with Patiraji, the oldest widow in the ashram, how similar they both are in their ‘innocence and their vulnerability’ (Water: A Novel, p. 56). The story follows a linear pattern hereafter. Patiraji explains that Madhumati’s family made a donation to a temple in Varanasi, therefore, Madhumati holds authority on the ashram. Chuiya wonders if a similar arrangement might also have been arranged by Shakuntala’s family. Chuiya also meets Kalyani, the stunningly beautiful widow, whose head is not shorn because she is prostituted to run affairs of the ashram. Apparently very common, but these details become very crucial to retrospectively reflect upon the totally divergent realities of widows’ lives, as these are revealed, especially through the conduct and lifestyles of Madhumati and Shakauntala. The social authority that Madhumati holds and the moral authority that Shakuntala’s character bears on the other widows in the ashram ultimately foreground how Sidhwa approaches the tragedy of Kalyani. The crisis of identity both Madhumati and Shakauntala manage till their middle age in order to survive.
lays bare the dichotomy of the ideal and the real life, and that also bears a sharp contrast with what is described in the religious texts. In this backdrop, Sidhwa tries to make sense of things through narrating the good and bad experiences in the past lives of widows in the novel.

Madhumati was born on the night of Maha Shivrati, the annual festival in celebration of lord Shiva, to the family of Thakur Nirender Ray who named her Madhumati: golden hued. Her father raised her like a son, and gifted her huge dowry. However, after her husband’s death on the very first night when he could not even consummate, Madhumati was doomed forever. Her in-laws took hold of all her wealth. When she protested, she was raped for a week by her brothers-in-law and was thrown in the wilderness. She was only fourteen and was initiated into prostitution by the elderly widow who was then in authority in the ashram. As she was shrewd, Madhumati soon established her authority on the other widows after the death of the elderly widow. She also took help from an influential client to force her in-laws to relinquish a part of her dowry as donation to the ashram temple. And Madhumati hardened her heart to survive as a widow.

Perhaps, Patiraji did not meet such a bad fate, but her life is stuck in the memory of her wedding day when she was full of mirth, ate sweets, and everyone was under the impression that she sobbed while she laughed. Patiraji’s mother-in-law was kind to her and she comforted herself in her husband’s love. After she became a widow, her own brothers sent her to the ashram because they did not want to give her property and her two young sons were sent to another village. Before detailing the life-histories of Shakuntala and Kalyani, Sidhwa provides a glimpse into their current life and their attitude towards it. Shakuntala is complacent in her belief in the dharma Shatras, and has accepted widowhood as a punishment of her past sinful existence without having much grudge against the world. Kalyani, on the
opposite end, is living life as ‘a whore’. She is sent to rich Brahmins of the locality, but Kalyani also is bearing her fate as a punishment for her widowhood. Kalyani has also ‘learnt to retreat to a place deep inside herself where her emotions could not be violated, despite what happened to her body’ (Water: A Novel, p. 90).

Shakuntala and Kalyani derive their strengths from different mythical sources and figures. Shakuntala reads religious texts like Manusmrti and Vriddha Hirata which confirm her beliefs that widowhood is fated because of her past sins, and remarriage would condemn her husband’s soul to hell. Shakuntala also puts her firm faith in her namesake who is mentioned in Mahabharata as the wife of king Dhushyanta, and is regarded as the greatest tragic heroine in Hindu mythology. Interestingly, in most of the Hindu myths, the human connection with godly figures is maintained through women’s sexuality. The Shakuntala mentioned in Mahabharata was also the daughter of a goddess Indra who, descending from heavens, distracted the great saint Vishwamitra and begot his child. Later, Indra left her daughter, Shakuntala, in the forest because she could not take her to the heavens. Shakuntala encountered King Dhushyanta in the jungle. They got married and Shakuntala had a son with him, but King Dhushyanta forgot her and his son when he returned to his kingdom. Shakuntala bore hardships for several years before a miraculous incident combined the family again.

As for Kalyani, she believes in lord Krishna who in Hindu mythology is portrayed as a young god, a model lover, surrounded by his gopis, the virgin cow-herding girls who are unquestionably devoted to Krishna. Lord Krishna treats these girls as dolls, and loves them all without being lustful, and the gopis also dance whatever way Krishna desires them to. In fact, all these myths in Mahabharata provide ‘a direct insight into the collective psyche or collective soul’ of a traditional society. Bhagwat Gita is also a dialogue
between Arjun and Krishna in *Mahabharata*, where these mythological figures deliberate upon how a man should take his existence in this world and how he should maintain his connection with the Lord. Thus, the myths contain everything that a person needs to keep life going idealistically, no matter how dejected or blithesome s/he is in real life.\(^402\)

Being an ideologue, Kalyani cherishes the love of Narayan who also plays flute like lord Krishna. Knowing well that she cannot achieve Narayan, her hope is actually pinned upon the godly figure of the lord Krishna. Such is the state of her delusion and despair that Kalyani asks if the lord Krishna appears as a human from Gulabi (the eunuch who pimps on Madhumati’s behalf and arranges for Kalyani’s ‘nocturnal journeys’), and when Narayan himself offers his love, Kalyani discourages him by saying that good traditions should not be allowed to die and he should marry with a virgin like his mother demands. Listening to Kalyani’s story, however, irony of the situation is revealed because whatever happened to her in early life, she cannot be blamed for it by any logic. Klayani was only nine when her husband died, and she never even met him. Kalyani was the youngest of her other two sisters and her beauty was known in the community. She was married to a man of sixty, and after his sudden death ended up in the ashram like Chuyia.

Shakuntala was brought up well, and her brothers taught her to read and write. She was happily married, and her husband doted on her despite she could not bear him any child. After she became a widow, her mother-in-law hardened towards her and Shakuntala was reviled. Her husband had left instructions for his mother to treat Shakuntala kindly by letting her stay in the

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house, but her sexuality was a danger and all waited for her to commit some mistake. Her brothers then arranged her stay in the ashram with a stipend every few months.

In possible success of Kalyani’s love with Narayan, Shakuntala’s hopes for remarriage also revive. She asks Chuiya to comment about her beauty but Chuiya, in a typical childish way, curtly remarks that Shakuntala looks old. Even then Shakuntala is happy for Kalyani. The societal hypocrisy is already in her knowledge because Sadananda (the middle aged swami who instructs as well as lusts after the widows) informs her about the new law about widow remarriage. The customary wisdom contained in the Smrtis had been clearly rejected in this law but nobody told the widows. The swami also admits the fact that the people hide or try to remain ignorant of the things which do not benefit them. Madhumati is also a culprit in Kalyani’s case because she knew about the widow remarriage law, but she does what she must, as Kalyani’s prostitution is the only option to run the ashram. Kalyani’s tragic end shakes Shakuntala’s belief in dharma Shastras. Narayan’s father also turns out to be one of the clients of Kalyani, and she commits suicide in despair. Therefore, Shakuntala takes all matters in hand after Chuiya is prostituted for the first time. Shakuntala hands over Chuiya to Narayan to make her a part of Gandhi’s entourage.

Sidhwa highlights through the life stories of these widows how hypocritically the society closes all options for them to survive as humans, and yet demands an exemplary superhuman behaviour from the widows. They can live like Madhumati who recognises the harsh realities of life much too earlier in life, and relinquishes her pursuit of moksha as an unachievable ideal. To overcome the crisis of identity realistically, Madhumati ironically

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403 Interestingly the Widow Remarriage Act passed in 1856 by the British to disallow enforced widowhood has been referred to as a new law in both Mehta’s film and Sidhwa’s novel, as if to heighten the ironic appeal of the reference regarding the imposed celibacy upon the widows even a century afterwards.
takes to doping. There are a few others who can persevere like Shakuntala, vowing to resolve their inner conflict through sincere effort for a spiritual destination that is bound to end up in disillusion. In comparison with Madhumati’s and Shakuntala’s ways of life, Kalyani’s act of suicide presents itself to be the most viable option to get rid of a hypocritical living. The highest ideal she wants to achieve is failed not by the gods (as she does find the love of Narayan), but by her own belief in the rigid norms of the society. The biggest culprit is the society which nurtures all the wrong beliefs.

During the course of the story Sidhwa keeps referring to complicity of the larger society in the oppression of the widows who are treated as outcast by men and women alike. Kalyani and Shakuntala experience prejudice of the married women, and even of the priests. The sweet vendor from whom Chuiya buys laddo (an Indian sweet) also is sarcastic that widows don’t eat sweets. The widows are provided only a handful of rice for their daily service to chant mantras in the temple to bless those who bring food in charity. If a widow is sick, she fails to get her daily ration. These widows are condemned to beg outside the temples, whereas most of them are from the wealthy landlord families around and themselves used to give charities when their husbands were alive. The most disturbing reality is that the story of oppression of these widows starts from their own homes. What Chuiya’s and Kalyani’s parents did, what Madhumati’s and Shakuntala’s in-laws did, or what Patiraji’s brothers did, all emboldened others to reject these women’s humanity also. Patiraji’s brothers thought that she shamelessly begged outside a temple, so it was not suitable for her sons to see her. Patiraji dies an unknown death in the ashram, and can only be cremated because Kalyani offers the money she has been saving for her own cremation.

Narayan is the only ray of hope. He dispels his mother’s all misgivings that his marriage with a widow will not affect his sisters’ future,
but his father’s hypocrisy fails his dreams. He is ready to embrace Kalyani even after knowing the truth, but cannot reach her because the ashram is inviolable, and Kalyani also does not wait. Kalyani’s symbolic death and Chuiya’s symbolic rescue leave very big questions for the followers of irrational beliefs which make them suffer as well as oppress. In their cumulative impact, tragedies of all the widows leave a message that history will always be twisted, the tradition will change faces, and even the ideologues will turn into brutes, but hopes lie only in the ordinary people that they refuse to be part of the oppressive game.

*Water: A Novel* is a very apt conclusion to Sidhwa’s creative and contemplative odyssey to find the human base of divine laws and designs, as these appear in the religious and sacred texts. In this search for truth, Sidhwa also lays bare the ugly face of such customary ethos of the Indian sub-continent that has oppressed the subalterns, both as individuals and groups, in the name of culture, history or tradition. Grappling with these oppressive phenomena, Sidhwa discovers that divine truth is not always as it is enshrined or interpreted to perpetuate the politics of control and power on humans; rather it is the pure voice of one’s conscience that always guides right and must be listened to. A detailed critique of her oeuvre shows that in her earlier novels (*The Bride, The Crow Eaters,* and *Ice-Candy-Man*), Sidhwa does seem to struggle to some extent to find the creative balance while she negotiates terms for transcribing her humanist vision into the mould of the divine principles as these are traditionally propounded. However, once she decides to set herself free of all notional prejudices, like a seasoned and great artist must, a new spirit is inspired in her thoughts and words. As such, her later novels (*An American Brat* and *Water: A Novel*) put forth an entirely different vision, where humanity takes precedence over spirituality. Here Sidhwa informs like a prophet that humanity is the only true religion which is
worth fighting for, and it is in this reformist call that Sidhwa also lays down her philosophy of the subaltern resistance.
CHAPTER 4

A PLACID PAKISTANI’S EXCURSION IN THE NARCISSISM AND EXTREMISM OF HER SOCIETY: SHARMEEN OBAID CHINOY REINVENTS THE FACE OF HISTORY

4.1 Chinoy and Her Art

The literary landscape in Pakistan has always been full of promise because of the stalwart artists whose works, in indigenous languages, especially in Urdu, and also in English have been providing intellectual inspiration to the educated elite. Rich in their traditions, since the pre-Colonial and pre-Partitioned times classical Urdu, Persian and Punjabi Sufi poetry done in India had much earlier provided an elaborately genuine linguistic, and intuitive corpora afterwards to the Pakistani creative writers and poets to make possible the advent and evolution of Urdu novel, drama, poetry and prose in general. The impact of the great literary traditions of Punjabi and Urdu cannot be overemphasised even on the sensibility of the main English writers (including those among the diaspora) who consciously or unconsciously struggle to produce competing narratives to the canonical Punjabi and Urdu texts or inevitably resort to the ethical culturalist flavour essentially established through these texts.

The Pakistani cinema, on the other hand, was not only influenced by the Indian Hindi cinema (which during its golden age after independence, from the late 1940s till the 1960s, ushered in a unique tradition, especially through early adoption on screen of historical legends of Mughal emperors, in films such as Anarkali, and Mughle-e-Azam) but also tried to rival Indian films by blockbusters produced during its own boom time under president General Ayub’s era up until the 1970s. Owing to brain drain as a result of the loss of Pakistani cinema’s Dhaka wing after the country’s eastern part separated as
Bangladesh, the Islamisation of the country under General Zia, and VCR culture, the Pakistani film industry could never thrive afterwards, though efforts to revive it were made during President Musharraf’s regime.

The sudden emergence of Pakistan’s first Oscar-winning documentary-maker Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy in 2012 was, therefore, regarded as no less than a phenomenon. Chinoy received enormous attention worldwide because of her film *Saving Face* which won the 2012 Oscar in documentary category. *Pakistan: Children of the Taliban*, which won an Emmy award in 2010, is Chinoy’s other film of her almost 16 hard-hitting documentaries to highlight some of the core issues Pakistan is facing to define its identity and justify its existence in today’s civilized world. Success at the Oscars resulted in new-found interest in her earlier works, especially the Emmy Award-winning documentary *Pakistan: The Children of Taliban* (2010). Chinoy’s contribution to the cause of the distressed is also being hailed with extended projects offered to her, like a six-part mini documentary series *Ho Yaqeen* (Self-belief) by media and corporate industry in Pakistan, and she has been able to garner support in this regard from such international iconic figures as Madonna and Salma Hayek. So far Chinoy has premiered the first part of the *Ho Yaqeen* documentary series in Pakistan, and another part named *Humaira: The Dream Catcher* at the *Chime for Change* campaign press conference on behalf of Gucci to raise funds and global awareness for girls’ and women’s empowerment in March 2013. These documentaries highlight the endeavours of ordinary women like Sabina Khatri, and Humaira Bachal who laid the foundation of education in their own localities, fighting many odds.

Although it is absurd to forge any link between Chinoy’s documentaries with the films produced in Pakistani mainstream cinema which is currently recovering from its worst ever stage, it must be acknowledged that the wide recognition accorded to her persona and work, if
not triggering a cult-following, definitely helped inspire independent filmmakers in Pakistan. In fact, the winning of international critical acclaim and accolades by the Pakistani feature film Lamha (also known as Seedlings) later in 2012 along with Chinoy’s Oscars feat greatly boosted morale of the independent filmmakers. The impact was evident in 2013 when independent filmmakers produced more than 20 films which presented ‘much-needed nuanced portraits of their country’. 2013 was hailed by Chinoy herself as the year when ‘Pakistani cinema was reborn’ at the time of selecting Zinda Bhaag (‘Run for Your Life’) to be Pakistan’s nomination for Oscar in the best foreign-language film category. With huge success of Main Hoon Shahid Afridi (‘I Am Shahid Afridi’), Josh (‘Against the Grain’), and Zinda Bhaag in 2013, and of the blockbuster Waar (‘Strike’), and the drama-thriller film Dukhtar (‘Daughter’) in 2014, suggestions and hopes are in circulation that Pakistani independent films might successfully make their mark in near future, developing on a pattern perhaps like the cutting-edge tradition of neo-realist cinema in Iran. Whatever work has been initiated so far in this regard, along with the competition provided by Bollywood films now being released in Pakistani cinema houses after decades of ban, it has indirectly impressed upon mainstream film industry veterans the need to match growing expectations of the socially conscious audiences. Chinoy’s achievement must, therefore, be taken overall more as contextually symbolic than merely typical, notwithstanding that the generic superiority of her works is already fast acquiring an iconic reception internationally.

Chinoy often recounts her appearance on the media scene at as early an age as seventeen through investigative journalism, a passion which


gradually transformed itself into a strong inclination to tell compelling stories of the marginalized communities and to address the plight of the unvoiced, and the oppressed people and individuals from all across the globe through her documentaries.

In her larger cultural activist role as a Muslim woman, she seems to have taken it upon herself to document lives and psychological traumas of not only the children, both boys and girls, in war-torn regions like Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan, but also to look at those religious spaces and the cultural bases on which women in some countries of the Islamic world, specifically in Pakistani society, are treated in extremely bizarre and more often in brutal ways in their households, and communities. Her diasporic exposure does lend her bent of mind to rebel against very deeply entrenched cultural norms and sacrosanct conventions. Chinoy also makes no pretence of hiding partiality in her reportage through story-telling embellishments which accentuate the miseries of her protagonists and subjects in documentaries. That is why her work sends mixed messages and invites mixed response from the local and the international critics.

Against this backdrop, it is important to rationalize objectively as to how truly or otherwise her main documentaries, i.e., Saving Face and Pakistan: Children of the Taliban relate to the actual situations and the people represented in them. It must, however, be noted that the difficulty in proposing critical criteria for Chinoy’s works is owing to the facts that her work primarily addresses the West/foreign audiences, and seems to seek redress through their support, while her angst over the oppression of her protagonists through patriarchal and political power hankering, and religious and combative extremism is characteristically postcolonial.

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406 Sharmeen believes that through her journey from being an investigative journalist to a story-teller, she realized that stories have to be different from reportage. Stories must be told from a perspective, so they must not be impartial. Refer to her talk “Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy: Forget Impartiality” in Four Thought broadcast on April 10, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01rr55f
Most naively conceived, and conveyed to outsiders through hasty-run of Chinoy’s documentary *Pakistan: Children of the Taliban*, according to conservatives, are her scathing generalisations about madrassahs, all of which (as depiction might be taken to suggest) exist only to breed religious extremism. Worth-scrutinising is also Chinoy’s take on the Pakistan Army’s offensive against the local Taliban that, far from being effective as an extension of the infamous American War on Terror, she opines fuels only further extremism. Also the fact that none of Chinoy’s works has so far been academically analysed, therefore, makes it even more important to analyse her films from an insider’s perspective. It may help offer faithful criteria to categorize a self-professed activist like Chinoy whose persona and works have contributed to alter women’s outlook towards their oppression and to bring legislative change in society, and for good reason would keep doing so.

Chinoy’s resolve to reinvent personal history of the subaltern subjects in her documentaries represents a direct challenge that every individual would have to embrace eventually in order to claim not only his/her own but also of his/her fellow-beings’ democratic rights and fundamental freedoms. The time has come, as Chinoy’s stance also clearly indicates, that individuals embark on new beginnings in life by breaking free from ill-imposed fundamentalist norms, misrepresented faith-based gendered, and confusing nationalist constructions of personal and societal conduct.

The actual task here is to decipher how Chinoy differentiates religious representations from the socio-cultural practices and violent belongings that fuel extremism and war, without going into the details of each. Obdurate notions about society, and religion have proved fatal for Pakistan because, due to political turbulence and circumstantial volatility in the war-torn and growingly polarised chauvinistic society, sentiments (no matter how faithfully

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407 The traditional religious schools often annexed to mosques where children are taught Islamic theology and law.
liberalistic or virtually conformist) are often easily manipulated to promote extremist agendas. In that, it is important to stress that Chinoy sees the various agents of political struggle, i.e., the society, religious ideologues, and the extremists not as different, but as all expressing the same mindset which prevails primarily to crush those who want to try options and defy order to carve out new destinies. This makes the task even more difficult not just by posing resistance to, but also by confusing, the voices of reason. Interestingly yet understandably though, as an ambassador and outright critic of the same confused situation and sensibility, Chinoy’s investment into her calling through a doomsday-sketching documentary like *Pakistan: Children of the Taliban* (2009) appears to some a false start. The documentary, originally being too-early apprehension of the later widely acknowledged violent outcomes of an extremist war tearing apart the lives of ordinary Pakistanis, at first impression seems to have been conceived by Chinoy only through sheer rage. So, proper understanding of this text is crucial.

We will, however, first discuss Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy’s 2012 documentary *Saving Face* because this was the most glorious feather in her crown through which she familiarized the world with the familial politics of violence which later extends at the societal and geo-political domain, as Chinoy had already unearthed such macro imperatives of violence in *Pakistan: Children of the Taliban*. Also, it is important to highlight this connection between the two films because, irrespective of the fact that Oscar achievement had suddenly caused a fresh interest in *Pakistan: Children of the Taliban*, the content of both these [and Chinoy’s other films] is intrinsically generative of closely linked issues that each documentary separately handles.

4.2 *Saving Face*

*Saving Face*, co-directed by Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy with Daniel Jung from Britain, is a 40-minute film about the women victims of acid attacks in
Pakistan. It won an Oscar as the Best Documentary in the short subject category in 2013. The film’s international acclaim was quickly followed in March 2012 by the bestowal of Hilal-e-Imtiaz by the State of Pakistan to acknowledge Chinoy’s bona fide attempt at projecting a disturbing social reality in the global circle. Along with receiving wide scale critical acclaim from the US, the UK, and India, Saving Face also bagged Julian-Baret Award and the 2012 Abu Dhabi Film Festival Audience Choice Award. The film’s fame also stood Chinoy in good stead to be named on the Time Magazine’s list of 100 most influential people in the world for 2012, to become the first non-American to win the Livingston Award for Young Journalists, the youngest-ever winner of Lux Style Achievement Award (widely regarded as a very prestigious honour in Pakistan), and the first ever Pakistani to have received an invitation to join the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences U.S.A. as a participating member. Saving Face also claimed two Emmy Awards simultaneously for the Best Documentary and Outstanding Editing in 2013.

No doubt, Saving Face was gratifying for the Pakistan government which obviously was caught up in much negativity because there were many internal and external challenges of retaining the soft international image of the country. But as for the public image of the film, it took time that positive overtones of the film’s message were dug out and highlighted by vibrant independent media in Pakistan and public view of the film gradually changed. Quite understandably, the diasporic position of Chinoy, and the facts that the film was produced as a joint-project with a foreign director, with foreign funding and that it was first screened internationally were the main causes of misgivings for ordinary Pakistanis. Certain other attributes of the film, such as the commentary in English by Chinoy, specificity of women-centered theme, and the choice of particular tones of music which sounded

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408 Hilal-e-Imtiaz is the second highest meritorious Award given to the civilian as well as the army officers by the State of Pakistan.
exotic, definitely were the limiting factors as far as viewership was concerned. The film circulated mostly in the educated circles of society. Even then, the film’s message was not lost, not at all imprisoned in middle-class emotional neutrality; rather it abided through much positive debate in print and visual media. The way the film could make access to the levers of social change, especially inspiring political leadership to act by introducing legislation to prevent acid attacks, hence enabling law enforcing agencies to punish criminals, helped ensure that Saving Face as a film about violence against women has become a constant for any kind of academic or media debate on gender relations in Pakistan.

The idea for Saving Face was initially conceived by Daniel Jung after listening on BBC Radio to Dr Mohammad Jawad who was being hailed as the hero for performing reconstructive surgery on Katie Piper, the former English model who had acid thrown on her face by her ex-boyfriend back in March 2008. On enquiry by Jung about the phenomenon of the acid attacks in South Asia, Dr Jawad related to Jung his extensive work during frequent visits to Pakistan with the victims of such attacks. Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy was then contacted by Jung to profile the women whom Dr Jawad was treating. It was out of this collaboration between Chinoy and Jung that a journalistic investigation ensued into the matter. The story that was to focus largely on Dr Jawad’s humanitarian and revolutionary surgery soon started revealing its potential as a sensational tale because the dismal statistics bore testimony to certain socio-cultural maladies, too, that contribute to the menace of such violence against women. Thus, using cultural violence as her paradigm in the film, Chinoy highlighted negative consequences of the ultra-conservative chauvinism in Pakistan. Even then, according to Chinoy, both she and Jung little knew where the film would take them.
Numerous other narratives also needed to be represented, e.g., the active struggle of well-meaning lawyers and doctors and organizations like Burn Centre and Safe House in Islamabad (which treat and rehabilitate the victims), vehement support at public forums by intellectuals and social representatives for legislation to criminalize acid attacks, and the actual proceeding by the Pakistani Parliament to instate such legislations. All these perspectives gave *Saving Face* its cutting-edge nuances to expand beyond its narrative. As such, the film records and represents the symbolical force of the individual and societal struggle for reflecting upon a revolutionary moment in Pakistani politics. However, all this could be possible only after the work on *Saving Face* actually started and progressed.

The story of the film takes the viewers on a journey. The exposition hits the right notes to highlight the gruesome scourge of acid violence in society, and helps forge viewers’ strong emotional link with the theme through detailing the psycho-critical confessions and frustrations of the victims. Later, depictions of the traumatic private spheres and destitute situations (e.g., dwelling places, family commitments, and legal struggles) of the acid attack survivors register the discursive context for viewers to self-analyse things without being influenced by the emotional nature of the subject. Inclusion of the actual proceedings going on in the corridor of power serves as a further test, such that the whole social and historical drama played out here as tangible evidence internalizes as well as externalizes the film’s message both for the actors and observers of change.

The documentary opens up with an abrupt mid-story entry into the main protagonist Zakia’s regretful reflections. Zakia sounds tragically nostalgic about her lost beauty, and wistfully wonders if her face might regain by human effort some of its lost grace that only God can create. *Saving Face*, the film’s title fades in and out, and Zakia is shown on her way to the Burn
Centre which offers free treatment to patients in a government hospital of Islamabad. As the caption that ‘there are over 100 acid attacks reported in Pakistan every year, many more go unreported’ appears on screen, viewers get to know of the film’s exact take on its subject.

Next, capturing viewers’ imagination are the four careful narrations in spectacular consecutive scenes by until-now unnamed women who have featureless pink-fleshed disfigured faces. The stories of these women highlight how the ethereal boon of beauty became a bane of their existence because of a woman’s obvious vulnerabilities in a chauvinistic society like Pakistan. In the first three narrations, the specific causes of violence are identifiable as acts of revenge by jealous husbands or males whose biddings these victims had rejected. The fourth story seemingly of a teenage girl, however, skips the description both of the cause and of the perpetrator. Suggestively, this story generalizes on certain viable explanations that range from abusive acts like retaliation by a perpetrator for a foiled rape attempt to honour crimes committed by male family members, possibly a father or a brother.

So canvassing the boundaries of human rights, gender crimes and women issues, the documentary brings into focus Dr Muhammad Jawad, a London-based Pakistani reconstructive surgeon. Apparently, a person of jolly disposition, Dr Jawad seems even purposefully boastful of his professional skills. The thing to be remembered foremost about Dr Jawad, and about all other characters in the film, is that *Saving Face* is featuring their real life, in which mirth and remorse is part of the human drama they are engaged in. The film has also recorded several instances, where the show of their social and emotional reserve gives in and reality reflects in these characters’ wet eyes or choked back outpourings of sympathy or agony.

As the documentary has set its central tone, it twists reportage into a narrative of personal histories. The focus is on two acid attack survivors:
Zakia from a relatively urbanized locality, Barakahu, a suburb of Rawalpindi; and Rukhsana from Muzaffargarh, a hinterland in Southern Punjab. The stories of Zakia and Rukhsana show how both of them have to resort to extreme options to normalise their lives. The inspirational value of Zakia’s and Rukhsana’s stories underscores the need to support the educational, familial, societal, and political infrastructure in Pakistan. It may also encourage other victims of the acid attacks to come forward, and share in the rewards and in the cause of a silent revolution for women’s empowerment.

Zakia had been trying to avert domestic abuse since the start of her marriage by financing her husband, Pervez, who was an alcoholic, and drug addict. She had to face violence as an eventuality after running out of resources, and decided not to take it anymore. She filed for divorce. Zakia’s resentful husband fulfilled his vow to make a spectacle out of her on the third hearing of the case, and threw acid on her face in the very vicinity of court. Zakia attributes it entirely to luck that Pervez got arrested on the day. Had he escaped like he supposedly hoped, nothing could have turned up against Pervez, according to Zakia. On the other hand, Pervez’s sense of impunity to have punished Zakia for shaming him and publically challenging his pride and authority also reflect upon the impaired writ and thoroughly corrupted state of the law enforcing agencies, and the pervasive patriarchal notions in society that lead to such eventualities.

Given the egoist misperceptions of manliness prevalent in society, Pervez on his part is reluctant even to disclose his wife’s name while sitting in custody with two policemen. Conspicuously provoked at being asked if he has divorced his wife, his blatant explanation that Zakia is his ‘honour’, which he can never relinquish through divorce, bespeaks his patriarchal mindset. His disjunct clarifications that ‘for all intents and purposes he had never wanted to do so’ and that it is not he who threw acid on Zakia’s face, rather he
is being framed, are but only un-instigated outpourings from a guilty heart
aching to confess the crime.

Zakia’s father-in-law, standing right there and being apprehensive of
the impact his son’s conversation is creating, immediately counters his son’s
‘honour’ narrative by blaming an extra-marital relationship on Zakia. His
taunting remark that the acid attack on Zakia was ‘bound to happen’, quite
obviously directed presently to ditch the female reporter covering the
interview for the documentary, amply elaborates on his usual rigid attitude
towards women. According to him, ‘being all over the place’, women are
doing ‘the good work’ of bringing disgrace to their families. It is a typical
version of the predatory ‘asked-for-it’ justification to kill or oppress a woman
like Zakia, who, even if she might supposedly have transgressed, by no logic
deserves the punishment she has been accorded. For a self-critical reflection
on the society’s stated and actual morality regarding womanhood, the camera
is made to juxtapose a scene in which men are shown intently watching
beautiful faces of female theatre artistes tucked into those of male artistes on a
hoarding alongside a busy road.

Zakia’s situation is, however, much better than many other helpless
women. Her decisions are perhaps supported by her father. Besides, her
children, a grown up son and a relatively mature teenage daughter, are the
more obvious source of her strength. Zakia’s son and daughter realize how
gravely their mother has been wronged. Zakia has an alternate anchor in life
while gambling to demand divorce as a last and only option to pressure her
husband. Whereas, Zakia’s choice to leave her husband, poses an unthinkable
threat to Pervez. A wife is the only person who is so vulnerable due to certain
socio-economic insecurities in Pakistan that even a thoroughly degraded man
like Pervez can claim absolute authority over his woman. He fully realises the
fact that the long-offered servitude from his wife that he took for granted, if
taken back, might as well instantly shatter his own peace. Pervez could never offer divorce so easily. When he was sure that he had no chance, he destroyed Zakia’s life ‘in a second’.

Contrary but complementary to Zakia’s story, Rukhsana’s plight is representative that of an utterly hapless woman. Rukhsana’s husband and sister-in-law poured acid and gasoline on her, and her mother-in-law lighted a match-stick leaving her to die locked in her room. Her father being extremely poor could not support Rukhsana, and her daughter also got sick. She had to reconcile with her husband and came to live in the same room where she was burnt. Dr Jawad cannot hold his tears back on listening to Rukhsana’s story. Rather baffled, Dr Jawad persuades himself that the only way to control his anger would be to desensitize himself to such stories because there is no end to them. Yet, his is a tough calling.

Rukhsana’s room in Muzafargarh presents a very dismal display of her abject situation. Realising her vulnerability, Rukhsana’s in-laws have now even separated her from her daughter building a brick-wall to close the room’s door only to coerce her into subjugation and to prevent her from disclosing their crime. They oppress her through excessive household chores to keep Rukhsana’s morale further down, obviously because she seems to have emerged strong through tragedy. In addition to the psychological trauma that she constantly undergoes living in the room where she was attacked, Rukhsana’s husband keeps threatening to divorce her or to marry another woman. Such a state of affairs must have inflicted Rukhsana with extreme temper and high blood pressure due to which Yasir, her husband, claims that Rukhsana herself set her alight.

Chinoy often mentions in her interviews how consistently she was persuaded to resist the temptation of blasting Yasir’s face when he brazenly denied all charges of emotional torture, battering, and acid attack on his wife.
The film records an even more provocative claim by Yasir that 99% women coming to the Burn Centre had themselves stubbornly set their bodies on fire. If it is hard for one to imagine as to what terrorist intentions a person like Yasir is capable of camouflaging under his smirky demeanour, especially after being compelled by his wife’s defiance to clarify himself through an interview with Chinoy, a direct look at Rukhsana’s mutilated face would be enough to have the necessary revelations.

From here on the documentary covers all those individual and institutional avenues of rehabilitative, educative, and legal support available to the acid attack victims to highlight how Pakistani civil society has girded up its loins to uproot this heinous crime against women. It is very heartening to see Rukhsana and Zakia getting psychological support and courage from visiting a Safe House in Islamabad being run by the Acid Survivors Foundation. The Safe House provides a private space and a friendly environment both to the previous and recent acid-attack victims to mix with and urge each other for hardening their mind to cope the trauma, embracing it, instead of developing a seclusive attitude. It is very hard, though, to understand the full extent of these victims’ grief over exclusion from societal life. Women’s social life in Pakistan largely centres on paying visits to friends and relatives, attending burials, marriages, and other familial and community gatherings, all of which these victims can ill-afford to do now.

Zakia’s lawyer Sarkar Abbas is a compassionate person who advocates the cases of victimised women in High Court, mostly without taking her fee. Being herself a lady who must be lauded, to viewers’ surprise instead, Sarkar Abbas praises Zakia for mustering up courage to fight for justice. At that, one can only wonder what frustrations are borne by active, educated and socially aware women, like Sarkar Abbas and even Chinoy herself, who have only rare opportunities to counter injustices against their
gender-folk because women largely take their oppression either as the decree of fate or as a rite of passage. The most frustrating attitude, against which Chinoy also vehemently preaches now, is that women often believe or are made to believe, due to their certain cultural upbringing, that they deserved their fate so they were punished. However, determined Sarkar Abbas keeps her hopes high because Zakia’s case has potential to set a legal precedent. Besides, Abbas mentions references from the Muslims’ holy book, The Quran, which, too, she will put before the court to prove Pervez guilty.

Perhaps, the rare distinction in filmic art that also made Chinoy Pakistan’s major celebrity is that she remained lucky in Saving Face by engaging with an already-in-place societal and institutional reform struggle which witnessed to her own positive intent behind the project. In virtue of this attribute, her claim of championing the women’s cause in Pakistan is fairly vindicated throughout the film as well. The film represents the public awareness and discussion campaign in society through the activities of actual existing organizations. For example, a significant gathering for the stakeholders, organised by the Acid Survivors Foundation to discuss potential acid crime legislation in Pakistan, gives the filmic narration its actual touch of reality. The acid attack victims and their sympathizers can be seen sitting side by side in the film, seeking criminalization of the acid-related violence for the first time in Pakistan. The emotions of the representative intellectual as well as reform-loving members of the society and of the victims are also conveyed as they all propose tougher and stricter penalties, ranging from death sentences to publically inflicting acid wounds on the perpetrators.

409 Perhaps, here or somewhere else in the documentary Chinoy should have included some details about the religious underpinnings of Zakia’s case, like in her conversations she vehemently speaks in favour of Islam and democratic environment in Pakistan which originally confer upon women all those rights available to them in any civilized society. She often expresses her regret in interviews, though, that hi-jacking of religion by conservative scholars to sanction patriarchal mindset in society makes it impossible for women even to claim these rights. Please refer to Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy’s conversation with Shoma Chaudhury on January 28, 2013, the last day of The DSC Jaipur Literature Festival 2013 in the session titled ‘Saving face’, video posted on youtube.com on February 21, 2013: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKu57gk0ZjI
Luckily, the heartrending appeal of the victimized women, like Zakia, Rukhsana and others did travel from this public forum across to reverberate in the corridors of power. Marvi Menon, a Parliamentarian, later shows up to personally console these dejected women with the tidings of proposing legislation to punish criminals with life sentence. Strangely enough, political response and reform is sometimes witnessed on the spur of a moment in Pakistan, especially when dictated by issues which are already in limelight globally and offer chances to the political class of correcting their image, that too, without having to compromise their vested interests.

It is imperative to mention here that the debate for legislation against acid crimes had been initiated after a 13-year-old girl, Naila Farhat, who was attacked in 2003, fought her case for six years to see the criminals behind bars. Following that The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Bill 2010 was drafted to be presented to the National Assembly. Given that the bill was drafted in January 2010 and it took more than a year while Chinoy waited to put it on record in the film that the Pakistani parliament did pass the law on May 11, 2011, arguably the expediting and coercing influence the film exerted also proved to be a corrective imperative of Saving Face that possibly made some from the country’s political elite conscious to act promptly. In fact, Chinoy’s active pursuit to see that the proposed legislation at least makes it to the floor of the Parliament even after months of delay, cannot be ruled out being a significant factor that the law would be unanimously instated there and then.\(^4\) For Chinoy, this turned out to be an act of capturing history in the process of its making, an undertaking which she would deservedly accomplish soon by making history at the Oscars.

In the meanwhile that all this mega-drama is happening and is being traced, Dr Jawad is busy planning to finally reconstruct Zakia’s half face, and save her eye or even the socket for a glass eye. All too sure of his ‘damn good’ surgical skills, the hardest task for Dr Jawad is to manage Zakia’s expectations from surgery, simultaneously making her understand the limitations of it. After a four-hour operation Dr Jawad becomes successful to restore Zakia’s lips, and for her irreparable eye he promises to devise prosthesis but only at a later stage. Although the scar on Zakia’s face has been effectively incised, yet the wound on her soul would never be healed, at least, until the attacker is punished. While Zakia’s hopes are high having the new law on her side, the agony of waiting is still very taxing.

On her part Zakia’s lawyer Sarkar Abbas, however, restrains her own anticipations because all depended upon the judges who, being habitual of deciding under the previous laws which favoured males, could extend any unexpected decision. Pervez, in fact, is the first perpetrator to be tried under the new legislation. Zakia feels she is at a constant risk because she has been receiving threats from Pervez that he will hurt her again when acquitted. Here one starts to appreciate Zakia’s courage and to recognise her children’s predicament.411

While Zakia is depending upon the instruments, skills and discretion of Dr Jawad and his associates to heal her wounds, Rukhsana has taken a step even further. Rukhsana puts her full faith in the divinely healing touch of love that Nature has blessed man with. Just three months ago when Rukhsana met

411 Perhaps, due to constraints of time the documentary could not detail Zakia’s children’s predicament in choosing to side with their mother. Suggestions to this effect have been made in the film, though. During a rare emotional discussion between the daughter and the mother, Zakia’s daughter says that it very painful to see her mother going through so much. The camera also occasionally captures the listless face of Zakia’s son who accompanies her to the Burn Centre, Lawyer’s office, or to the court. It must also be very hard for the children to subdue their natural filial affection for their father who would also suffer due to his heinous crime. There might be some compensation for Zakia in finding justice having her husband punished, but for her son and daughter there is loss at both ends. They obviously are looking forward to a day of relief, as Zakia urges her daughter to pray as well if she wants everything to be resolved soon. However, the grief on watching their mother suffer and sense of shame at their father’s crime would always haunt and trouble the hearts and futures of these children.
Chinoy in her room in Muzaffargarh, her frustration had reached a level that she preferred to die than live. But now when she comes to the Burn Centre for a physical examination before her first surgery, she astonishes doctors who discover her eight-week pregnancy. Things are a bit offending but understandable when Rukhsana admits that she is too helpless. Whereas, in choosing to impregnate Rukhsana, her husband might possibly have tried the tested weaponry of the traditional mindset he represents. Yet, Rukhsana’s genuine hopes for a positive outcome are worth praising. She wishes to have a son who would not suffer societal injustices like herself, and who might become a doctor like Dr Jawad to end others’ sufferings as well. Her wish granted, God perhaps bestowed upon Rukhsana a bigger blessing for her belief before her wounds would heal through the endeavour of conscientious humans in near future.

Zakia’s ordeal ended as well. The verdict was finally announced and Pervez was served with two life sentences. The documentary does indicate that there had been delays deliberately caused by several adamant absentees from Pervez’s advocates. This traditional tactic used by the losing party often results in delaying verdicts in Pakistan for literally a life-time, pertaining to cases as sensitive as even an impending death penalty, or as ordinary as inherited/extorted property. In most cases those affected would relinquish their rights getting frustrated by slow, inefficient, but expensive judicial process. On the other hand, sometimes those indicted or just accused serve longer terms under custody before actual verdict about the term of their sentence is reached. Speedy justice in Zakia’s case can be well surmised as partly, if not wholly, influenced by the fact that the case was being filmed. Even then, an optimist like Dr Jawad considered it a strong message, before finally admitting his moral crisis:
You know, in a way I am saving my own face because I am part of this society which has this disease. And I am doing my bit. But there is only so much I can do. Come, join the party!

However bleak is the film’s opening, it ends on a positive note. Even then Chinoy did not get a wholehearted acknowledgement for her attempt. She had to meet negative response from the bigoted sections of society which obviously accused her for globally promoting stereotyped notions about the negative aspects of life in Pakistan. But there are certain other facts that accounted for the general conscious embrace and celebrations of the film’s success by the public, media and state in Pakistan. For instance, Saving Face was filmed across the capital Islamabad, Rawalpindi and small towns of Punjab, often involving those locally-run humanitarian organisations, institutions, and professionals like doctors, lawyers, social activists and politicians, who cognizant of the film’s intended reach and purpose, had equally contributed to Chinoy’s effort.

Seen in entirety, Saving Face is a genuine expression of serious intent on the part of a growing society and its representatives to demonstrate the extent of their resilience that engulfing war and rampant negativity due to politico-economic disaster have failed to crush. Chinoy expressed this sombre intent quite categorically to The Times of India correspondent Vinita Chaturvedi on being asked as to how much glamour and networking play a part in getting at the arena for an Oscar:

For many people, the Oscars is an ideal gathering for networking and making connections for future projects. For others, it is an opportunity to share one’s ideas with people who have similar passions and aspirations. For me, I wanted the Academy Award to further the cause highlighted in Saving Face and to act as a platform through which the message could be
projected. I also wanted to represent another aspect of Pakistan: one that takes ownership of its faults and celebrates those who are fighting for justice through creative medium.\footnote{Chaturvedi, Vinita, ‘People Treat Me Like a Man: Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy’ in The Times of India, dated March 12, 2012. \url{http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-03-12/news-interviews/31152585_1_oscar-success-saga-hina-rabbani}}

Intensity and purity of cause projected at grand scale were not the only winning criteria for the film. Chinoy strongly believed that the realistic artistic appeal of ‘the colours, the textures, the language, the beauty, and the heartache could just transcend all barriers’.\footnote{Pakistan celebrates its first Oscar nod: NBC’s Pakistan chief correspondent Amna Nawaz reports on the significance of the first Academy Award nod for Pakistan, for Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy’s Saving Face, February 23, 2012, video available on web: \url{http://www.today.com/video/today/46496054#46496054}} Talk about art, medium, and truthful story is one thing, since many would forcefully argue against her belief that ‘story telling transcends [other] medium[s]’, yet her view that ‘it’s not the awards that matter, but the lives you change’ is what actually made Chinoy’s success at Oscars a worthy milestone.\footnote{Kulkarni, Sneha, ‘Changing the World through Storytelling’ for J. source.ca (The Canadian Journalism Project) posted by Nicole Blanchett Neheli on April 17, 2012, webpage: \url{http://j-source.ca/article/saving-face-changing-world-through-storytelling}.}

Unless it is such a clear vision and absolute belief in the cause that motivates an endeavour, big things seldom happen. Especially, when a short-subject documentary film captivates the world of films, television, journalism, and human rights in one go, the success can hardly be attributed to sheer chance. Secondly, the world seldom responds to a call which does not have serious global relevance. There is a challenge here, though.

The strongest argument the critics of Saving Face put forth is that the film is derogatory to Pakistan. The country has already been under much critical focus around the world, and Saving Face provides yet another pretext to the West/US which jumped with overbearing ingenuity at the opportunity of promoting further negativity about Pakistan, a third world country. Fair enough to be a little cynical, given that it is only being a little more assertive of
the very postcolonial logic about the West ‘othering’ an exotic nation to cast its agenda of justifying its own superiority. Simultaneously, very valid is also the objection as to why an Oscar for highlighting the issue of acid attacks which never even were recognized to be a crime in Pakistan, whereas the world little cares about the problems that really concern Pakistan. The World Powers heartlessly dismiss everyday killings and massacre of the scores of innocent Pakistani civilians as collateral damage of war in American drone strikes to hunt down the Taliban and in the Taliban’s counter terrorist offenses to pressurize the Pakistan government which is obliged to allow American attacks.

A little less cynicism is the only reasonable argument, going by the simple logic that you realize agony over a malady afflicting others more if you yourself have had any experience with that, otherwise being indifferent to it is the same as being ignorant of it. Again, the long held silence from the West over flagrantly scant reports on violence perpetrated by drone and terrorist attacks in Pakistan is the most apt case in point. It would also be quite naïve of critics to assume that acid attacks only happen in Pakistan because with pockets prevailing in South Asia, South America and Africa, and cutting across certain social strata in these and other countries around the world, acid attacks are a genuine universal problem.415

What Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy has done in Saving Face is that she has raised her voice to jolt her countrymen out of their cynicism by holding up a mirror to the scourge of acid attacks in Pakistan. And these are very simple questions that the film poses: Why should not societal ills, like brutal acid attacks, be removed to initiate a reformative process for perfecting the society?

415 To all possible effects, it is also a little unfair to be judgmental about the sense of concern a common Westener has, despite his/her limited knowledge about the atrocities going on all around the world. It surely entails a lengthy debate of how foreign governments and media handle external political undertakings and internal policy of public well-being, being selective and keeping checks about what to educate their masses; again a very genuine tactic that Pakistani government and media needs to learn most urgently in the current phase of the country’s history.
Why care more for the global image of Pakistan by winking at the menace which actually tarnishes the real face of its society? Why maintain silence over incidents of violence against women while these surely promote and nurture a culture of chauvinism? And why not let the world find little reason to criticize you by solving the problems, instead of letting them prevail?

Chinoy urges her critics to dispel their fallacy as if the world were blind to the presence of acid attacks, and other societal ills like backwardness, poverty, xenophobia, intolerance, paranoia, and corruption in Pakistan. Instead, her stance is that the film proved to the world that ‘Pakistan can solve its own problems’ by utilising its own and global resources. Also, that her success as a woman had already disarmed people even at the Oscars to criticise, instead leaving them wondering as to what crises and cultural leaps ethically conscious Pakistanis were actively handling to prove that Pakistan itself is the primary victim of evils the world blames on it.

Besides, it is in itself a historic achievement that the documentary acted as a catalyst for the instatement in 2011 by the Pakistani parliament of The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Bill 2010. Coincidentally again, the legislation was proposed by a woman lawmaker Marvi Menon. Undeniably, the legal actions against acid crimes have been expedited by the law enforcing agencies which now fear a backlash over negligence due to heightening public awareness because Oscar-winning documentary provides readily referential images. The credit also goes to Chinoy whenever media hype erupts over every fresh acid attack. Conspicuously, until a year almost after the release of Saving Face there was reduction in the occurrence of such cases, and it is very seldom that an acid crime would go unreported now. All these are very real

416 Please, refer to the exclusive interview of Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy with Geo News, one of the leading private media channels of Pakistan, aired on 31 March, 2012. Video-link available on: https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=sharmeen+obaid+chinoy+exclusive+interview+to+geo+pakistan&oq=sharmeen+obaid+chinoy+exclusive+interview+to+geo+pakistan&gs_l=youtube.3..33i21.454.11575.0.11911.57.49.0.5.5.1.383.7187.17j15j11.14.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.V2uFjMBq3Cs

effects of the film. Admittedly, eliminating the scourge of violence against women would always remain a hard task in Pakistan unless there is an overall change of mindset in society.

_Saving Face_ definitely challenges audiences, both at home and abroad, to reflect on the immensely complex irony of disparate identities that Pakistani women countenance. It also claims peoples’ support to manage this skewed situation so that gaps are filled and options created in society for women to reclaim their rightful womanhood. No doubt, the seeping impact of the film’s charm will remain a constant in feminist debate and activism in Pakistan. Hopes of reform are very high, since Pakistani women also have been exerting their presence in the public space most forcefully for the first time during and after the general elections in May 2013. Ramifications of this cultural shift were acknowledged to be equally relevant to the situation of women in India in a session organised under the film’s title for Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy at Jaipur Literature Festival, 2013. The pre and post-production contexts for the film’s debate were considered in the backdrop of the kind of outrage the people have been expressing against gender and sexual crimes after the Delhi rape incident in December 2012. This cross-border relevance of the film’s theme makes _Saving Face_ yet another effective sequel to the shared stories of violence that women in the Sub-continent witnessed at the time of Partition. It also denotes women’s gendered construct in the antagonistic histories and deeply religious societies of India and Pakistan.

4.3 _Pakistan: Children of The Taliban_

_Pakistan: Children of The Taliban_ is an unnecessarily loaded narrative, full of prophecies about a looming doom for Pakistan. It extends foreign qualified Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy’s all too advanced essentialist

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418 Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy’s conversation with Shoma Chaudhury on January 28, 2013, the last day of The DSC Jaipur Literature Festival 2013, Op. Cit.
generalisations about the civil-military crisis in Pakistan. The documentary shows the society crumbling as a result of the disillusioning war, and refugee influx within Pakistani borders. Selective and scathing narrations and depictions portray a total collapse of educational, health and support systems for rehabilitation, that the documentary claims give rise to trends for Talibanization in war-hit areas. These are a few of the objections that were expressed in Pakistan when the documentary came to a short-lived limelight in 2010 after winning the Emmy Award. Even lesser attention was paid to Chinoy’s earlier documentaries *Terror’s Children* (2002), *Reinventing the Taliban* (2003), and *Pakistan’s Double Game* (2005) in which Chinoy presents a close coverage of the effects of ongoing war within Pakistan and the neighbouring Afghanistan.

*Terror’s Children* follows eight Afghan children in a refugee camp in Pakistan’s metropolitan city of Karachi to highlight how abandoned these children find themselves at the whims of fate. They are reduced to a life of orphanhood, homelessness, hunger, disease, illiteracy, servitude, and even forced militancy. In *Reinventing the Taliban*, Chinoy visits Northwest Pakistan to document the call for legislation and mass activation by MMA (Muhatitahida Majlis-e-Amal), an alliance formed in 2002 comprising some predominantly ultra-conservative religious groups whose leaders and supporters wanted a traditional Islamic society modelled after that of the Taliban. The immediacy and imperatives behind MMA’s call might not be surprising now, but at the time Chinoy documented it in *Reinventing the Taliban*, the idea of Taliban’s closing in the adjacent tribal regions, that too, for nefarious designs against Pakistan was generally presumed to be an absurd one.

Similar was the societal indifference to Chinoy’s wake-up call through *Pakistan’s Double Game* in which Chinoy took on complacence of the ordinary
citizens who blamed that, in creating hype about the Taliban, President Musharraf was only selling out to the West. Chinoy even documented in *Pakistan’s Double Game* the genuine concerns of the army and police officials, for whom the growing strength and violent ideology of the Al Qaeda operatives was becoming difficult to handle, but the societal response to this revealing effort remained equivocal.

However, neither alarming should be such indifference from the ordinary Pakistanis nor should their revelling under the protection of the ostensibly invincible state army be wholly blamed upon them. According to the official versions of history, the Pakistan army had clearly won almost all battles fought with archrival India over six decades of the country’s history. Its relations with the Taliban through religious parties were also generally well perceived to be inevitable military imperatives to safeguard Pakistan’s interests by maintaining strategic depth in the Indian-held part of Kashmir and in war-ridden Afghanistan. However, now when the historical moment has come that the civil society has taken a unanimous stance against terror, it is important to have a cursory view as to how much history the ordinary citizens had to consume before coming to this realization.

There have been innumerable stories of unconditional embraces, betrayals, and degradation in Pakistan-West connection that the world media and history would surely witness but never report, or incorrigibly twist. For example, there were such glorious moments to extend regard when American populace would pour on the roads everywhere, every time and every day during President General Muhammad Ayub’s state visit to America in 1961, and the Western tourists would plan their itineraries during the 1960s up until
the 1970s through Pakistan’s major cities, enjoying flavours of culture and wine at sporadic bars and nightclubs.419

And a time eventually came when direct societal interaction with Pakistan was absolutely forsaken by the world community when it was got involved in the terrorist loop by America and Europe during Cold War with Russia through aid and support for Islamic militants who now are the Al Qaeda – Pakistan army’s Frankenstein and America’s biggest enemy. Even having Pakistan as the important most ally of the West outside NATO for the global War on Terror in current times, the absence of goodwill is evident from the fact that no humanitarian call from world media would urge for a political redress. Ignoring the country’s numerous sacrifices for global peace in the face of challenges within its borders and the region apart, nor even a formal apology would be offered, for example when CIA’s Raymond Davis blatantly videoed two ordinary citizens after shooting them on a busy road in Pakistan, or 24 Pakistani soldiers would be mistakenly killed by US-led NATO’s attack from across Afghanistan on Salala post on Pakistan-Afghanistan border on November 26, 2011. Of course, strategy about the US drone strikes in Pakistan’s tribal region would be the corrupt political elite’s final test to prove that their mandate represents the will of the people, and is not grafted by the country’s headstrong establishment at the behest of their Western masters.

It is within the contentious spaces of this troubled narrative that Chinoy’s Pakistan: Children of The Taliban brings to the surface such voices whose sound carries more poignance than that of the bullets and drones, and whose impact transcends that of the words of history and of politics. Unsuccessful in her earlier attempts420 to make her countrymen relate to the

420 The reference being made here is to the indifference meted out to Chinoy’s earlier three documentaries, i.e., Terror’s Children (2002), Reinventing the Taliban (2003), and Pakistan’s Double Game (2005).
distress of the Afghan refugee children, to the threats of growing fundamentalism in Pakistan, and to the terrorist activities of the Al Qaeda operatives that the majority of citizens being moderate followers of religion never considered to be their immediate concerns, Chinoy attracts the peoples’ attention through a rather comprehensive attempt in *Pakistan: Children of The Taliban*. The trick Chinoy plays by replacing in *Pakistan: Children of The Taliban* the Afghan children (like she showed in *Terror’s Children*) with the affected and internally displaced Pakistani girls and boys from the war-torn tribal areas. The fight between Pakistan army and the Taliban amidst American drone strikes, which indiscriminately kill civilians while pursuing terrorists, not only inflict upon these children unthinkable traumas at such tender age but also shatter their dreams of education and happy future.

The life of these children is in the lurch. They cannot even clearly tell their enemies from their friends. The Pakistan army and American drones fighting for them have destroyed their homes and killed their kinsfolk. The terrorists mourn with them with vows to seek their revenge by killing the Americans. The Army is their own, but is secular. Being involved with the Taliban, these children might have to sacrifice their lives in suicide attacks, but there is a befitting reward of paradise in the hereafter, at least thus they are told by the Taliban trainers. This life, anyway, has already been doomed.

The biggest victims of this war are the girls because it is for their honour that this whole war has to be won by every contending party. According to the Taliban’s stated hardline ideal of seeking the purity of faith, although modesty of women is a pretext or subordinate cause behind fighting or *jihad* as they presume it to be, yet ultraconservatives in all parts of the country share with the Taliban the notion of keeping the women suppressed. A revealing example of this ideological affinity is the similar stance of both the Taliban and the ultraconservatives that women’s education in schools and
universities (which are run on Westernised patterns) makes them neglectful of their only traditional role as chaste housewives. Chinoy amply highlights how the hardline ideology affects the lives of women and nurtures patriarchal instincts in men through the predicaments and views of Qainat and Shaheed in *Pakistan: Children of the Taliban*, and of Humaira Bachal in *Humaira: The Dream Catcher* which is an apt sequel to the documentary in this regard. For that matter, the story of Pakistani Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai’s struggle for the cause of education after escaping a deadly attack by the Taliban serves as the most elaborate example.\(^{421}\)

The deal here for the Taliban is that through a categorical stance on the matter an example has to be set to entice the like-minded radicals from the other parts of the country to tame all the women who, they believe, have mostly gone astray. Chinoy counters the ideology of the Taliban by highlighting the simple hopes and dreams of girls in the documentary. These girls want to be doctors and teachers, but their parents fear even to send them to school because the Taliban have decreed a ban on their education, destroying most of the schools. The offenders are publically beheaded.

Psychological traumas are the most challenging spoils of war which not only visit on the children but also on the common soldiers of Pakistan army. Wounded, disillusioned, and bedridden, their musings are confusing about the cause they are made to fight for. For their officials the losses in the war with the extremists are unacceptable, yet victory would be redeeming.

But for common soldiers the local insurgency is hard to tackle having the Americans in tow, as it is America’s agenda and strategies that the people hate and the terrorists cash in on to campaign for recruitment after every drone strike. In such an illusory state of affairs, nemeses are on the leash: both, the suicide bombers, all ready to be in the making; and their recruiters and trainers, all set to have their scores settled through the scores that will die in suicide attacks they plan on innocent civilians. This is where the film’s take on the nurture of a suicidal mindset is most disturbing both for the Pakistani, and possibly for the foreign audiences as well.

Chinoy, aware of how effectively the afflictions of the people from the war-torn areas need be represented, chooses children not just as her rhetorical ploy but also as protagonists in the documentary for getting her message across, and for engaging and educating both the local and the global audiences:

I think the children tell stories in a very interesting way, without any filters, without any prejudice. They just say as they see it. And I don’t think that adults can tell those kinds of stories. I chose children because I felt that they could look at anything including war, including abuses, and they could connect with the global audience.

Children obviously can ‘break that barrier’ erected through indifference of the people inhabiting one part of the world to the problems of the people in another part of the globe,

422 so Chinoy’s method is all too clear. The camera captures both the roadside and aerial view of the landscape while Chinoy jumpstarts her reportage from Peshawar with two brief statements

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422 A conversation with Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy at Karachi Literature Festival, February 12, 2012, Video links available on youtube.com: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ILD6jcmrIQ and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIT-LRP_yII
about Pakistan army’s ongoing operation in Swat region against the local/Pakistani Taliban who regularly attack police convoys, kidnap diplomats and shoot foreigners. Chinoy’s statement that ‘the city is on high alert’ is authenticated by the presence of army jeeps on roads, and listless faces of the onlookers who are obviously intrigued by the presence of a woman (Chinoy herself) along with a camera crew during such sensitive time. The exposition done, Chinoy immediately takes on the subject she predominantly deals with in the documentary, i.e., the material and psychological effects of war and violence.

Chinoy visits a rehabilitation centre in Peshawar, and interviews a 10-year girl, Qainat, from Swat. Qainat has been living in the rehabilitation centre for two months after the Taliban attacked her village in Swat. Qainat’s mother was inflicted with a spinal cord injury by a mortar originally ‘meant for the Taliban’ which, landing on their home, she recounts, had also killed her sister, sister-in-law, her cousins, aunts and their children all together. She and other children used to be scared when they saw the Taliban wearing masks. She also witnessed the dead body of a beheaded policeman tied to a pole, and the head hanging between his legs with a note saying, ‘if anyone moved the dead body, they would share its fate’. What strikes most about Qainat’s interview is her resilience even after directly facing death and destruction which she considers God had brought upon them; and her resolve to become a doctor even if the Taliban had destroyed schools and banned women’s education. When Qainat sat with her wounded mother and another injured woman, she seemed rather engrossed in the needlework the elderly women taught her and presumably had to be encouraged to respond to Chinoy. However, sitting alone with her interviewer, Qainat exuded confidence and candidly expressed herself. The scene is meant to suggest that the gap between the upbringing of a girl for existence according to the ethics of a male-dominanted society and her dreams as an individual is stupendous.
To authenticate Qainat’s account, Chinoy then reports on the takeover of Swat by the Pakistani Taliban, and the subsequent end to its thriving tourist industry because Swat is generally known as the Switzerland of the East. Chinoy refers to Pakistan army’s first operation (Operation Rah-e-Haq – In the way of truth) against the Taliban in late 2007 that was foiled because the extremist preachers from Swat were offering refuge to the Taliban. Emboldened by the support from Taliban, these extremists banned women (like those in Qainat’s own family) from attending universities, and girls from going to schools. Swati women and girls instead had to wear burqas (Muslim traditional outer garments) that they seldom used before.423

Chinoy then herself visits Qainat’s village to assess the situation. The camera catches a few glimpses of a destroyed school, and the threatening sermons of the Taliban are juxtaposed on the dismal scenes. Two nine year old girls, who came for an interview with Chinoy, protested that if the Taliban came to power, they would be confined to homes, forced to wear burqas, and deprived of education. Quite melodramatically, two consecutive explosions were heard as if like the ominous sound of background music, and this interview in a shelled and destroyed school came to an abrupt end. Their local contact confirmed for Chinoy and her crew that the area had been surrounded by the Taliban and they had been asked to leave. Live airing on radio of the solemn vows by the extremists for attacks on the transgressors are also not mere stories. The people witness public beheadings of the transgressors by the Taliban in Khooni Chauk (the bloody square). According to the father of one girl, the situation spread depression. The people were sad but silent, and he also feared that Swat was virtually under the Taliban.

423 Here Chinoy thoughtfully skips some details her foreign audience might find difficult to understand because of the complex theological interpretations the extremists extended behind their bloody acts, like announcing death penalties for barbers, music shop owners, and thieves along with launching an anti-polio-vaccination campaign.
Interestingly, a reality check as to the authenticity of reportage in the film also came only three weeks after Chinoy finished shooting _Pakistan: Children of The Taliban_. The government was forced to allow the extremists, apparently under its own supervision, to impose their version of the Sharia law through a deal. As for saving face, the government claimed that it was the demand of the people. The reason why Chinoy stressed upon the significance of this deal between the extremists and the government was that Swat Valley, being outside the tribal area and being part of mainstream Pakistani society, was going to be a new safe haven for the Taliban. Thus, unlike what Chinoy’s critics blame, it turns out to be an accomplished start for the documentary through which Chinoy seeks to enlighten her local and the foreign viewers as to what menace Pakistan is up against with all its military might useless because of the vulnerability of its innocent civilians.\(^424\) In its local relevance, the context so exploited by Chinoy was probably meant also to comment upon and bridge the gaps of inter-state racial and cultural divide in Pakistan. The people living in Islamabad and Punjab, though conscious of the active warfare images of which came to them through media, could hardly realize and relate to the ordeals of the people actually experiencing war in largely aloof primitive tribal areas of the country. Hence, it is not just Chinoy’s political vision which reflects through very discreet depictions but the documentary also becomes a visionary piece of work by a masterful filmmaker.

Chinoy has incorporated a pattern of reality checks in each aspect of the effects of war she highlights in the documentary through the

\(^424\) It was in February 2009 that Pakistan army had agreed on a ceasefire negotiated by the extremist preacher Sufi Muhammad, the founder of the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammad (a militant organization declared a terrorist outfit and banned in 2002). Sufi Muhammad was jailed in 2001 for sending volunteers to Afghanistan, but was released in 2008 after renouncing violence. However, when the terms of truce were reported to be violated, the army fought a second battle in Swat in May 2009 known as the Operation _Rah-e-Rast_ – In the way of the righteous – in which most militant commanders were captured and killed. UN reports also confirmed that millions of refugees returned home after the success of the operation in August 2009. For reference please see, 1.6 million Pakistani refugees return home: UN, _The Times of India_, August 22, 2009.
commonplace stories of the extraordinarily victimised individuals in the war-torn areas. Those who find Chinoy’s reportage as essentialist are met with intermittent surprises. Carrying the coincidental relativity, as if in a fiction flick, Chinoy’s coverage of the specific incidents of violence, actual warfare, and its aftermath itself serve the strongest arguments against criticism, and poses tangible intellectual challenges. It is necessary, too, as Chinoy contends, to strike an artistic balance, combining the skills of a journalist and of a social story-teller while still keeping to the strict legal and specific evidential limits of a documentary film.\textsuperscript{425}

Not surprisingly, therefore, Chinoy risks visiting war-affected Bajour and one of its hardest-hit towns known as Loisam.\textsuperscript{426} Loisam used to be the trading centre of Bajour due to its strategic position and proximity with Afghanistan. However hundreds of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, driven out of Afghanistan, had arrived here in 2001, and were offered refuge by the locals, being close relatives in most cases.\textsuperscript{427} The Frontier Corps had to force the militants out of hiding by demolishing the residences all around. The army took over the area killing more than 1500 Taliban, but the implications were huge and lasting.

\textsuperscript{425} Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy’s conversation with Shoma Chaudhury on January 28, 2013, the last day of The DSC Jaipur Literature Festival 2013, Op. Cit

\textsuperscript{426} Bajour is Pakistan’s smallest agency in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), but has been one of the most vulnerable places regarding violence. Only ten kilometres from Afghan border, it provided safe haven to the Taliban who moved freely in and out of Afghanistan. The militants here posed fiercest of challenges to the armed forces because in most of the operations even tribal militias and Pakistan Air Force had to aid the army for combating the Taliban. The situation had been so bad that the army demolished all residences in Loisam, one of Bajour’s towns, as a last resort. According to army, the militants, offered refuge by the locals, attacked security convoys inflicting heavy casualties upon the state forces.

\textsuperscript{427} Chinoy seems to have cautiously avoided inserting such details in the documentary. It is very difficult to explain to the foreign audiences the complexity of the tribal mindset, in which familial, and racial connections and societal code of honour to protect and assist each other are regarded as first and foremost. Bound by the centuries old social code, the tribal people support their kinsfolk from across the border. The Pakistan government and the army, at their own end, are in a perplexing situation because actions according to demands from the international community had to result only in such an outcome that they had ended up demolishing the homes of their own countrymen who erstwhile considered army their protector but now might take it as an enemy. Perhaps, only a few foreigners might know that the Frontier Corps (a federal reserve-military force operative under the paramilitary command of Pakistan) which also launched the Operation Sherdil – of the lion-hearted, mostly consist of soldiers who are also from the tribal villages and of the same racial stock as of the people from Bajour and Loisam. It is such a tough fight in which victory is only momentary because enemies might guise as victims and strike back to turn their defeat into victory again.
The most immediate issue was of handling the civilians who suddenly turned into refugees, compelled to flee both the army and the Taliban. This was the largest ever internal displacement Pakistan had seen, with almost a million people forced out of their houses into make-shift camps at the edge of the tribal areas. To report on some of the serious psychological damage this war has done to adolescents, Chinoy singles out Kachegori Camp which alone had thirty thousand refugees with an overwhelming number of barefooted children playing all around in the dirt.

Slyly, Chinoy gives slight shift to the narrative here to comment upon the US drone strikes on the tribal region by introducing two best friends, Wasif Ullah and Abdul Rahman who fled their village after their district was targeted with US missiles.428 Wasif Ullah’s cousin was killed in one such US attack in a madrassah. Chinoy also includes the footage of a similar incident on October 30, 2006. Early in the morning after bombing, the locals discovered 80 people killed mostly children among them. Chinoy’s own comment, that ‘a US strike becomes a recruitment rally for the Taliban’ better elaborates as to how earnestly she wanted to impress upon her foreign viewers the urgency of an appropriate response to the drone strikes. Therefore, it is not, necessarily, to be taken as cynical of her that she was able to coax two very different responses from Wasif Ullah and Abdul Rahman.

Wasif Ullah had borne a personal loss. He perceived as justified the Taliban’s call for Jehad against America, for that matter, against Pakistan’s secular army and, according to his standards, against the largely liberal civil society as well. So he wanted to join the Taliban and was very clear in the

428 US drone strikes in Pakistan’s tribal region are also part of many complex and contending narratives regarding international juristic domains of state sovereignty and combating terrorism that have not only divided the public and political opinion on the matter locally and internationally, but also hit a sour note in American policy towards Pakistan. There are even allegations of tacit agreements between Pakistan government and the US regarding drone attacks. However, there is no denying the fact that drones predate upon the militants and civilians without discrimination breaching Pakistan’s sovereign privileges as a front-line ally in the War on Terror. However, a unanimous voice, at least from the Pakistani nation, is fast building pressure on the government to put up resistance and clear strategy to stop drones.
head about killing his best friend Abdul Rahman even, if he did anything ‘wrong’— a word which to him obviously connotes everything bringing worldly pleasure or comfort to man’s heart. On the other hand, Abdul Rahman considered Al Qaeda and the Taliban responsible for the destruction of his village. He wanted to join army to kill the terrorists and was resolute to retaliate fiercely if Wasif Ullah tried to attack Army. All the while that the filming revolves around Abdul Rahman and Wasif Ullah in the Kachegori Camp, the camera keeps bringing to focus children playing around with mud-stained faces and dirty clothes, only to imply that these carefree souls were growing up in the world only to get disillusioned finally by the fact how the options of life had already been closed upon them.

The opinions of these two adolescents cannot be dismissed as Chinoy’s contrived evidences to suit her purpose. Chinoy’s extensive effort, research, and careful tracking of all real-life happenings positively reference that if her reportage is worth it, so are her such conclusions from the evidence of Wasif Ullah and Abdul Rahman: ‘the American missile strikes and army’s campaign are helping push Pakistan towards a civil war. One of these boys will join the army; the other will join the Taliban.’

Such inferences could not just be built on the accounts of two adolescent boys. So, Chinoy also highlights the contrast of resolve and resignation in the hearts of Pakistani soldiers whose abstractions about success and defeat have all to do with tangible and practical outcomes of war. She interviews Major General Tariq Khan who led the Frontier Corps offensive against the Taliban in the tribal region. Highly hopeful of military achievements (which he did accomplish, and for which he is also celebrated as a war hero for the success of the operation), Khan yet admits before Chinoy that the loss of civilian life and property was quite unacceptable, but worth it because army’s war strategy had at least prevented the Taliban from taking
away peoples’ children. However, at Chinoy’s reminder that many homeless people would like to join the Taliban, Major General Tariq Khan’s own equivocal comment suffices for evidence about the fragility, and short-lived effectiveness of military successes:

Yes, they probably were the Taliban. And they have run away from there, and are sitting out here, hiding in the refugee camp. Because you can’t tell, who’s where? Like what I said, those people who complain about it [the army operation], were probably part of the problem, and are not part of the solution.

Khan’s soldiers, however, think differently. Atif and Sher Murad got permanently wounded in this war. They opine that the Pakistan army had adopted American policies because of which the Taliban hate the army and soldiers suffer. They have seen death in the face in the battlefield, thus conclude that ‘if we keep fighting like this, it will be very hard’. The wounded and mutilated bodies of the soldiers along with a heart-rending depiction of the situation in which they are grappling with death on the hospital beds heighten not just the viewers’ sense of alarm and empathy but also bring the artistic poise to the film’s rather-exclusive journalistic tone at this stage.

Finally, Chinoy turns her viewers on the Taliban. She traces the trail of their violent philosophy right from the earliest refuge in the heart of tribal areas to their new safe haven in the slums of metropolitan city of Karachi. Being a woman, Chinoy was refused permission to herself visit the Taliban centre, but she managed to have filmed for the first time Hakim Ullah Mehsood, the former commander of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Mehsood was killed by the CIA drone strike on November 1, 2013 in North Waziristan. Perhaps more sure of his movement’s success and companions’ strength than General Tariq Khan was of the accuracy of his strategy or of the resolve of his soldiers, Mehsood directly challenged America and Pakistan. He vowed to
take Peshawar and other cities, and even every village. Chinoy confirms that Mehsood’s were not empty threats because the Taliban’s offensive in major cities had already started.429

Time has actually proved how accurate Chinoy’s observation that propaganda about their arms and rhetoric through openly inviting media in their fighting centre was a clear indication of the Taliban’s ‘sure strength’. Curious as to what resources virtually marooned in the tribal areas these Taliban possessed so underpinning this ‘sure strength’ which could not be weaned by Pakistani artillery and even by American drones, Chinoy wanted her investigative effort to hit the spot. The discovery was as startling to her as to any of her viewers. The lethal weaponry of the Taliban mainly comprises the child suicide bombers. And this weapon never runs out of stock for the lack of resources or expertise.

Activities of the Taliban in tribal areas are open secrets; especially the areas bordering Afghanistan abound in training centres for the suicide bombers who mostly are children aged five to seventeen. The Taliban easily entice into their trap these children whom poverty, war, the loss of family members, and the lure and threat of the Taliban’s weaponry make vulnerable.

429 At the time when Chinoy had shot Pakistan: The Children of Taliban, the Taliban’s offensive had not gained so much momentum and enormity which it exhibits now through incessant attacks on the members of civil society, and security agencies, prominent shrines of the sufis saints, public places and hotels. While the political and military elite always remain on the hit list and many of them do lose their lives in terrorist attacks, the poor populace is at the mercy of the whims of the Taliban. Their fanaticism has reached such extremes that the Taliban would kill people even praying in the mosques. The Taliban also destroyed the founder of Pakistan Jinnah’s residence in Ziarat on June 15, 2013. This act by the Taliban was a direct threat to the federation of Pakistan which Jinnah’s residence symbolised. An unprecedented massive armed attack by the Taliban that followed on July 30, 2013 on Dera Ismail Khan central jail from where they reportedly freed more than 175 militants fighting both the police and military troops was a clearer indication of what Taliban can do. Therefore, now the media campaign, political effort and civil opinion all seem poised for negotiating terms of peace with the Taliban, as America seemingly flopped by relentlessly unproductive armed offense is also trying peace talks with the Afghan Taliban. In the meanwhile, trust deficit between the civil and military administration regarding policy about terrorism, as well as Taliban’s apprehensions regarding Pakistan army’s underhand massive operations against them create an atmosphere of confusions and terror thrives. The implications of American withdrawal from the region in 2014 have already started showing up in much heavier repercussion. The gravity of the situation unravels every passing day with increasing numbers of deaths of the security personnel. Taliban would surely take American withdrawal as America’s defeat and Pakistan is already there for them as a greater prize than Afghanistan. Please also refer again to Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy’s conversation with Shoma Chaudhury on January 28, 2013, the last day of The DSC Jaipur Literature Festival 2013, Op. Cit.
However, what Chinoy discovered in the slums of her city of Karachi had more to do with the collapse of societal support and of education system than with any extraordinarily planned strategy of the Taliban.

Karachi’s slums not only are a safe haven of the Taliban but they also operate criminal networks from here to raise funds for their campaigns, obviously through loot, plunder and extortion. The poor people in these slums are forced to send their children for free food and shelter to traditional madrassahs, not all of which preach extremism, yet some do. In an amply reflective mode, the camera melds the distant view of Karachi slums from the playground where children are playing cricket into the inside scene of a local madrassah, notorious for preaching extremism. The faces of all the students, who are being raised here under the promise of a sure blissful life ahead, paradoxically reflect distress and dejection. Against this backdrop, Chinoy also endeavours to highlight the puritanic mind and character of Shaheed (the name literally meaning martyr), a 14-year old boy who lived in Karachi slums and was a promising student of this local madrassah. Shaheed’s character provides Chinoy a perfect example of the mindset that had circumstantially been developed to be suicidal.

While talking to Shaheed, Chinoy came across certain discoveries. Her startled expressions in the film clearly depict how hard it was for Chinoy to digest Shaheed’s ideas so complacently blurted out right to her face. When she questioned Shaheed about the place of women in Islam, he told her straightway that the women were only meant for domestic care and the only people who could keep women confined to their deserved place were the Taliban. Shaheed had obviously learnt all these things in his madrassah, where instead of science and maths he was specifically being taught about the place of women in Islam. Since he did not understand Arabic, his teacher might extend any interpretation of the verses of the Quran he believed to be true.
This is how the extremist teachers in some the madrassahs make their students absorb their philosophy. In fact, they are only preparing the fighting force for the Taliban. Shaheed was eager to join the Taliban, and even wished to be blessed with the opportunity of a suicide attack if his family permitted. He had already been fairly trained according to the Taliban’s extremist philosophy. Besides many propaganda, and glorifying videos of the child suicide bombers are also available to further inspire boys like Shaheed.

Chinoy had started off with hypothesising about the working of the extremist mindset through showing problems of girls like Qainat and her elderly relative women whom Taliban had banned from attending schools and universities. In Shaheed’s arguments, she found the perfect explanation as to what it was all about. This extremist mindset is not because of religion but because of the wrong interpretation of it. Society at large claims to be religiously moderate. Growing radicalism, on both extremes of religiosity and open mindedness, is surreptitiously denting this complacent composure, though. Simultaneously, cultural hypocrisy which promotes hatred of the women has started to be questioned. Chinoy’s trailblazer realist cinematic art logically reviews how the society itself provides the mindset, and not much effort is even required to nurture it to a level that it could explode. The Taliban are only making use of this mindset to grab power because that is all they need to force their interpretations of religious, social, and gender related practices.

Shaheed’s teacher’s personal views (which could only be recorded because he was mistaken that he was off-camera) about America’s sure defeat in the war because ‘we’ll never run out of sacrificial lambs’ are sufficiently enlightening, as his madressah was also known to provide recruits for suicide attacks. Particularly striking is also the likeness between the mindset of
Shaheed’s teacher and that of the Taliban recruiter of child suicide bombers, Qari Abdullah, who openly expresses before camera:

If you’re fighting, then God provides you with the means. Children are tools to achieve God’s will. And whatever comes your way, you sacrifice it. So, it is fine.

Towards the end, Chinoy juxtaposes several scenes, one after the other, showing the actual child suicide bombers who died for eternal glory and the victims who died in various suicide attacks. The gory depictions have been consciously averted, but the grotesque contrast of death at the hands of blooming youth leaves behind very harsh questions. Perhaps, Chinoy’s call in Pakistan: Children of the Taliban is more comprehensive than even a most sophisticated armed offense against the Taliban. For Chinoy, ultraconservative goals of the extremist preachers, the psychological reach of the Taliban into the minds of children, or even the commonplace hypocrisy of Pakistani patriarchal society, symbolize the same mindset. Longer-than-a-decade war has already proved that mindset cannot be defeated with weapons, but can be changed appropriately through education only when the society collectively takes the first step of looking into its own faults.

Pakistan: Children of the Taliban might definitely be a very loaded and complex narrative for some, so Chinoy tries putting her vision more effectively before her viewers through simpler tales as in her later documentaries like Saving Face, Humaira: The Dream Catcher, and some other filmed stories as part of a campaign Ho Yaqeen (Self belief). Through giving agency to her protagonists, she holds up a mirror to the society that it is only through defeating the patriarchal mindset that the biggest problems like poverty, education, and even violence can be eradicated. She portrays the effective fights of very strongly inspired individuals against their own plight and that of the other unfortunate fellow Pakistani men and women.
Highlighting these struggles, Chinoy stresses, is extremely important to educate people, and to immunize them against extremely underprivileged familial and rigid communal backgrounds, oppressive customs, and ignorant decisions dictating their lives. Then, they can also become part of the mechanisms for bringing change. Through her documentaries, Chinoy finally comes to extend a finer judgment on the converging avenues from where the scourge of societal violence and religious extremism largely emanate to sanction and strengthen the abiding value of oppressive cultural norms.

Chinoy’s profile as a staunch feminist representing vibrant Muslim womanhood in Pakistani culture has just started assuming dimensions, contouring which for academic and discursive purposes would be possible only in years to come. However, telecast of her documentary films during prime time on TV channels is already a proof-positive as to how seemingly subterranean cultural appeal of honestly recounted reality-based short tales is goaded to drive general reformative discipline in public in near future.
CHAPTER 5

CON/TEXTUAL, REPRESENTATIONAL AND THEMATIC RELEVANCE AMONG THE WORKS OF ROY, SIDHWA, MEHTA, AND CHINOY

The in-depth analyses of the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy in the preceding four chapters reveal that these artists deliberate about, and take a panoramic view of the transnational dimensions of the nationalist histories of their respective countries. They engage with the majoritarian mentality which obtains from the living traditions of the dominant Hindu and Muslim communities within their nation-states. Although they work in disparate media, i.e., print and visual, yet their approaches to uncover the complicity between Western Imperialism and the Third Worldist nationalism/neo-colonialism in their countries bear striking resemblances or intersect being focused on certain crucial thematic and representational aspects.

These turn out to be very daunting undertakings for the four women novelists and film-makers, as they either belong to the minority communities or to the diaspora of their countries. They dare negotiate the terms of their art either by risking allegiance to their sensitive minority communities or by rendering their patriotism questionable. In their revolutionary zeal for reform, Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy pose resistance to the corrupt state and socio-cultural institutions in their characteristically strategic ways. In their pragmatic diasporic overture, they re-visualize the elite-subalteran interface in politics through recasting the beaten and burdened bodies of their lowly protagonists in political categories and through re-invoking the romanticized and mythologized political and religious characters in life-like images.
Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy invariably expose the politics of sexuality, of nationalism, of religion, and of cultural fanaticism. The study of oppression and violence as a paradigm, especially as these artists seek to balance realistic portrayals of human situations against the cathartic fidelity, crucially informs their creative styles and the aesthetic inlay of their fiction and film texts. Therefore, the scrutiny of various con/textual, thematic, and representational similarities among the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy seems to be a sine qua non of the comparative critique envisaged here.

The texts of the four artists focus mainly on mega-scale events, sensitive situations or widespread happenings, an attribute which proves to be an in-built check on any excess of subjectivity that usually creeps into deeply personal tales. It is so also because Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy recast the merits of their realist approach by appropriating in it critiques on the predominant religio-cultural myths regarding societal institutions and traditions, genders and gender roles, and communities and nationalities. This is where these artists indulge in cultural reframing of their societies, and where the political and spiritual ends of their art combine.

Their works make available cross-cultural identifications, yet this does not imply at all that these artists conceive their critical paradigms on similar patterns. Even belonging to the female gender, and having predominantly feminist focus, Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy have also been able to address their other larger concerns which they aspire individually as members of their respective communities or nations. For instance, Sidhwa is never pungent. She does not even mock, rather amuses. Ever conscientiously aware of belonging to a minority community which owns and partakes richly in terms of culturally contributing to define an aspired Pakistani identity envisioned at the time of independence in 1947, Sidhwa is very elaborative about her stories both to her Pakistani and foreign audiences. She concocts
discussions, creates interesting foils of characters, makes people her mouthpiece, brings parallels or analogies for detailing critical situations, and symbolizes representations. However, the only instance where Sidhwa adopts clearly harsh viewpoint is in her rebuke of the Parsi community.

Roy, quite contrary to Sidhwa, makes an unbridled use of the poetic/artistic licence, and overlooks all communitarian concerns, including those regarding her own Syrian Christian Community, because the political message of her fiction is suggestively inclusive as well as revolutionary. However, Roy’s fiction also makes us aware of her unique religious community and its life in India as Sidhwa’s gives us a feel of the Parsi milieu. Mehta as a liberal ideologue challenges the cultural assumptions imposed on India by the Hindu right. Her films in their defiant stance towards the cultural politics of religion complementarily contribute to Sidhwa’s circumventive and Roy’s philosophical drive for activist awakening in the region through their fiction.

Chinoy is as fearlessly confronting in her documentaries as Mehta is in her films. She shocks and incites her audiences both at home and abroad for serious self-questioning and action. She engages with the politics of societal violence and global war, and highlights how her nation is afflicted by the negligence of the local and global societal and political elite. Chinoy’s intent for seeking reform, in several respects, is opposite to Sidhwa’s, and rather more coercive than that of Roy or of Mehta. One of Chinoy’s most outstanding feats in her documentaries is that she not only highlights social problems but also believes in follow-through for institutional change, exasperating the people in the high echelons of power to positively respond to her dynamism and revealing art. The focus in this chapter, however, is not on the differences within the works of these four women filmmakers and novelists, so we
Language and resistance to the Imperialist power(s) through language are two major themes in post-colonial literatures and societies. After the language and literature of the Britain was imposed on India during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it went through an evolutionary process of imitation, adaptation, assimilation and appropriation. Ultimately, it was used to write and speak ‘back’ to the Centre. That was the beginning of resistance through language. The writers in the Subcontinent kept on using English after the Partition of India. Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Deepa Mehta, and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy make very strategic and creative use of the English language to put up resistance to the Colonial/neo-colonial socio-political set-ups in their respective societies.

Without having to disparage the works produced in native languages, it remains a fact that English gives international reach to the subaltern voices which, projected in native tongues, remain mostly contained within the nation space where they are either stifled by the political rhetoric, or are appropriated in the nationalist discourse. For instance, there are artists of great stature in Hindi literary and cinematic traditions in India and in Urdu literature in Pakistan, but only a few outside the subcontinent would be familiar with names such as Munchi Premchand (whose writings in Urdu are perhaps more poignant and revealing of societal injustices than Roy’s), Satyajit Ray (who is obviously an uncrowned king of the realist tradition in Indian Hindi cinema that Mehta follows as a creed), Saadat Hassan Manto, and Intizar Hussain (whose depictions of the partition are as personally inspired as Sidhwa’s). Clothing subaltern tragedies in English does not make them sublime, though. Besides, often questions are raised about the artistic integrity of such writers and filmmakers who win awards overseas by virtue
of their use of English, or by their diasporic status, and in national criticism of
them for selling out in marketing to the foreign audiences, i.e., the issues we
already dealt with in individual critiques on the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta
and Chinoy in the preceding four chapters.

The notable attributes of the language of Roy, Mehta, Sidhwa and
Chinoy are its particular local flavour, and its emotional relevance to the
concerns of the politically and socially marginalized groups. The characters in
the stories of these artists are the ordinary men and women, members of the
lower castes, and ethnic and religious minorities, but English language gives
these characters ability to cross politico-cultural and racial barriers, and
acquire globally recognizable representational identities.

The lesbian subjectivity of the protagonists in Fire, the denial of
womanhood to the widows in Water, and the wounds inflicted on the bodies
and souls of men and women in Earth are rather the most topical concerns
regarding individualism, feminism and the violence of war in today’s world
that capture worldwide attention, and fetch the status of a global icon to
artists like Mehta. Chinoy, as a way of putting her message across in almost
all her talks and interviews, impresses upon her foreign viewers the need to
understand the problems of her protagonists, especially of her women
characters, on the terms of equality so that they may not relegate the concerns
raised in her films as merely Third-Worldist. Roy’s and Sidhwa’s fictional
worlds abound in characters whose situations and afflictions have been
contextualized within proper political categories, that too, often bring contrasts
from the lives and conditions of Western/foreign charcaters.

The unpretentious use of English language particularly helps Mehta
and Chinoy devise or improvise on the visual metaphors that heighten the
imaginative appeal of their film texts. Thinking through English language,
and imbuing it with the figurative import of the sub-continental culture, these
film-makers have proved that human emotions and experiences have their own universal appeal, language does make things easier but only as much as in translating cultures and thus facilitates the viewers as well as the readers. It is true that, sometimes, Mehta’s and Chinoy’s subalterns do not speak in English, but the fact that their awe-inspiring stories have been powerfully projected to the foreign audiences makes the English subtitles relatively a more gripping element in their films.

Roy’s language is as overpowering as her fiction. *The God of Small Things* delves deep into the malaise and malleability of human existence from the divergent extremes of politics, religion and biology. In a poetic whimsical style the narrative structure of this heavily autobiographical novel weaves back and forth from the present to past, but the disadvantages of nonlinear structure are easily removed with the message events in inventive and figurative language. Roy generates her exuberance by breaking the rules of the normative linguistic traditions. She dislocates the received rhythms and creates the language she requires. Roy’s creative expressive vocabulary, phrases and foretelling refrains also capture readers’ attention and provide stark images. The use of Malayalam words inspires charm in her anchored-to-anguish fiction. Roy’s language enables the readers to inhabit the minds of her characters. The readers revisit their childhood, its vulnerabilities, and wonderments. Her language speaks psychology; its inventive modalities are linguistic wonders; and its poetic appeal is inciting because it contains dangerous knowledge.

Bapsi Sidhwa has also successfully created a distinctive Pakistani idiom through inspiring the cultural flavour in the language of her representative art. One might argue that in comparison with Roy, who makes language a central issue of style and theme, Sidhwa just uses Standard English and throws in local phrases to lend local colour in rather sociological
treatments of the subject matter in her novels. But it needs to be acknowledged in critical spirit that Sidhwa’s forte is humour which is relished in being rather more communicative than just readable. Moreover, an engaged reflection on the subtleties of Indian and Pakistani usage of English would reveal that Sidhwa incorporates the essence of everyday Pakistani idiom of English into her characters’ speech while Roy relates the story of Estha and Rahel, invoking the poetic appeal and sonorousness so adapted to the understanding for Indian English speaking readers and audiences. Unlike Roy whose work has been amply scrutinised for its representational and stylistic qualities mostly by scholars of Indian origin, no thorough and effective linguistic analysis/critique of Sidhwa’s works has been advanced from Pakistan. Therefore, Sidhwa’s very original stylistic achievements in her works often get confusedly referred to, though in earnestness, as a manifestation of the phenomenal achievements of Indian English fiction. For instance, Anatol Liven writes about her language in *The Literary Review*:

Sidhwa’s Rabelaisian language and humour are enormously refreshing; especially in the context of modern Indian fiction … she succeeds in transmitting into English much of the spirit of Punjabi language and culture, which is nothing if not earthly.

Similar view about Sidhwa’s language was also expressed by Raj Kumar:

Writers like Bapsi Sidhwa enrich the English Language in their search for new means of expression by adapting native proverbs and phrases and weaving them into their writing, so that the whole language seems to receive a new rhythm. Bapsi Sidhwa … make[s] us realize the proper role of English in India as not merely that of ‘a window on the world’ but as ‘a medium
through which we could look in, and estimate and savour what this subcontinent has to offer'.

(Tribune, November 29, 1980)

Sara Suleri, a Pakistani critic and professor at Yale University, maintains that Sidhwa has an ‘unerring talent for representing the languages, that continually emerge from fresh definitions of gender, of immigration, and of loss’, that ‘there is a brilliantly funny explosion of convention in her language that is all the more resonant because it does not proclaim itself as the iconoclast. Instead, it deftly creates the space where more easy iconoclasms may be uttered’. Muneeza Shamsie notes that ‘Sidhwa’s use of multi-lingual cadence of Pakistani English is also significant’. Sidhwa herself explains that she uses ‘English as a Pakistani vernacular’ not only to effect the ‘exactitude and nuance’ it affords but also to give peculiar artistic significance and cultural authenticity to her work. She also acknowledges to have embellished this characteristic linguistic deviation with adapting ‘the poetry and delicacy of Urdu …; the comedy, farce and burlesque that erupts so spontaneously out of Gujarati as spoken by the Parsis; and the body of meaning encapsulated in many of the single words of these South Asian languages’.

Voice against the Raj or resistance to the authority of power through language is one of unique hallmarks of Sidhwa’s art. Sidhwa employs language in all its expressive facets to effect humour and critique. Some references from The Bride, The Crow Eaters, Ice-Candy-Man and An American

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Brat may serve a ready reference here. Sidhwa advances her personal view on the subject of the partition tersely, objectively and courageously in her very first novel:

Now that it was decided that they would leave, the British were in a hurry to wind up. Furniture, artifacts, and merchandise had to be shipped, antiques, curios, and jewellery acquired and transported. Preoccupied by misgivings and the arrangements attendant on relocating themselves in their native land, by the agony of separation from regiments, Imperial trappings and servants, the rulers of the Empire were too busy to bother overmuch with how India was divided. It was only one of the thousand and one chores they faced. (The Bride, p. 12)

The theme of resistance through language predominates in The Crow Eaters right from the beginning. Faredoon relates to his progeny the account of his ordeals how, in order to build his business and social-standing, he had to stooge the English masters, like ‘that bumptious son-of-a-bitch in Peshawar called Colonel Williams’ and Mr. Charles P. Allen a ‘pukka sahib’ who ‘couldn’t stand the heat’ (The Crow Eaters, p. 10). The intention behind using a nuanced language is so pronounced that even Sidhwa’s characters seem to grasp its force. Mr Allen was annoyed by Faredoon’s persistence in bestowing lavish titles like ‘My Lords’, ‘your honours’ and ‘your excellencies, realising it signified more than a desire to please’ (The Crow Eaters, p. 119). Mrs Allen also learns to decipher when Jerbanoo taunted her for her ‘treacherous degradation’ in England, where she was no more a commissioner’s wife:

Just as she could not relate the superior Mrs Allens to the inconsequential drudge doing all the dirty housework, so she could not reconcile her fantasies of England to the commonplace Londoners. She felt greatly betrayed. Her idols toppled, as it
were, with a thunderous crash, leaving nothing but a pulverised residue of contempt! Scorn that turned up her nose in the air and her mouth down at the corners! She maintained this disdainful expression throughout her stay in London. (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 254)

In fact, Sidhwa starts breaking the myth of Colonial power through the indignant feelings of Putli and Jebanoo right from the time they set foot in London, ‘a land of crowns and thrones’ and of their noble English rulers. The fancied image was so preserved in their minds that ‘had someone suggested to them that Englishmen, too, defecate ... their exalted opinions would have been touched by doubt’. ‘An orderly kingdom under the munificent authority of a British monarch’ crumbled when they watched the Englishmen scour the decks, wait upon them, sweep roads, clean windows, and cart garbage and when these women ‘met sales girls, clerks and businessmen; all English’. Particularly, in detailing Jerbanoo’s confrontations in broken English with the British characters in the final part of the novel Sidhwa resorts to neologism, by experimenting with tense, mood, voice and aspect of grammatical categories, and registers and grounds the epistemological reach of her representative art (*The Crow Eaters*, pp. 251-65).

Perhaps, it requires a thesis length presentation to detail how Sidhwa frames a collage of her own and her characters’ resistive voice against Colonial and neo-colonial elite through English language, and suits it as a medium of expressing Indian culture, identity and gender in *Ice-Candy-Man*. Sidhwa particularly inflects her language whenever she intends to effect sarcasm in her views on American foreign policy, especially towards Pakistan in *An American Brat*. In regards to the exotic views of the Third World, Sidhwa creates real images through language when she depicts and analyses the dichotomies of the situations in foreign countries and of the lives of English
characters in her novels. For instance, during her excursion with Manek through the Port Authority bus terminal, Feroza was appalled to sense that ‘the terminal was the infested hub of poverty’, and it did make her wonder about the ‘reek of poverty’ that ‘the poor in Pakistan had become inured to’:

But those were smells and sights she was accustomed to and had developed tolerance for. This was an alien filth, a compost reeking of vomit and alchoholic belches, of 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 savagery neglect to occur. The fetid smell made her want to throw up. (*An American Brat*, p. 81)

While going to visit Hira Mandi with Faredoon and Nawab of Panipur’s younger brother Prince Kamruddin, Mr Allen was ‘completely put off by the Prince’s impeccable Oxford accent’, lavish attire and sense of arrogance which diminished Mr Allen’s ‘meagre store of self-confidence’. Even then Mr Allen quite honestly reflected a little later:

The Prince is a dear old fellow, he thought, forgetting his earlier discomfiture in his presence. His heart brimmed over with adoration for the entire land and populace of India. The dilapidated buildings towering on either side, superficially decorated with trellises and carved wooden balconies, appeared to him incomparably beautiful. Bright lights pouring from the rooms flooded the darkening street with mysterious, sensual shadows. Mr Allen sighed, thinking he would have to leave all this in a few years and retire to his cold, damp, and colourless little country. He’d miss it – all these beautiful, tantalising,
bewitching creatures with shimmering clothes and large, darkly flashing eyes. (*The Crow Eaters*, pp. 130-1)

The same sense of loss made Carol find peace with her situation in Pakistan. She realized how absurd she herself had been to feel disgruntled by Major Mushtaq’s refusal to marry her by divorcing his wife:

She would not go back to the States. What, after all, did she have to go back to? Another store? More school – or something equally dreary? Her family would welcome her for a month or two; but then she would have to make a life for herself. Pam or someone like her would make room for her in the same barely furnished third floor walk-up, or another like it. And then she would begin all over again .... Her life in Pakistan was rich: it was exciting, and even glamorous. She had taken it too much for granted ... She had adjusted to the climate, the country, the differences in culture and the people – and had come to love them. It would be a shame to throw it all away. (*The Bride*, p. 218)

Mehta gives the same resistive quality to language, when she dramatizes the emotional shock at the loss of friendship of the native elite felt by the foreigners, and feelings of guilt which perturbed the *goras* when they were to depart from India. Mehta adds a particular dialogue in the film when she adopts the dinner scene in Lenny’s house from Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man*. Mr Rogers, the Inspector General of Police, was disconcerted not only by the fact that Mr Singh leapt at his throat at provocative remarks about the popular Sikh leader, Master Tara Sing, and he had to apologize, but also by feeling how completely his connection had been severed with India: ‘This bloody country! It’s the only home I know’.
About the theme of resistance in Roy’s language, Alex Tickell sums up inferences from Cynthia vanden Driesen’s, Alessandro Monti’s, and Anna Clarke’s views:

Roy’s language actually combines several modes of subversion, and her ‘feminist’ musicality and choreography operate alongside a child-centred linguistic resistance both to the adult world and to English as a colonial tongue .... Roy’s detextrously ‘hybridized’ lexical structures and her use of neologism and portmanteau words’ ...., and ‘experimental poetic effects’ ... denote linguistic and cultural heterogeneity in post-colonial theory.\textsuperscript{431}

Resistance to patriarchal structures of language is particularly visible in Roy’s descriptions of how Ammu grew up learning to ‘live with this [Pappachi’s] cold, calculating cruelty’ because of which ‘she did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations’ later in life (\textit{The God of Small Things}, pp. 181-2). Ammu was always confronting towards Chacko’s phallocenric banterings. She would question ‘on what basis’ Mammchi loved to claim that ‘Chacko was easily one of the cleverest men in India’, or that he was ‘made of prime ministerial material’, because she said:

(a) Going to Oxford didn’t necessarily make a person clever.

(b) Cleverness didn’t necessarily make a good prime minister.

(c) If a person couldn’t even run a pickle factory profitably how was that person going to run a whole country? And Most Important of all:

(d) All Indian mothers are obsessed with their sons and are therefore poor judges of their abilities. (The God of Small Things, p. 56-7)

This attribute of resistance in language is more daringly adopted by Mehta, as she endeavours to dismantle the male-centred interpretations of the cultural and religious myths in Fire and Water. For instance, the sense of inventive intonation is as acutely conveyed to the audiences as to Sita when Radha ends narrating the mythic story of Karva Chauth, saying: ‘so, now you know why we fast. To prove how loyal and devoted we are to our husbands’. Similarly, Chuiya’s simplistic questions in plain language are the hallmark of Mehta’s resistive ploys in Water.

Language, however, becomes a subsidiary phenomenon of the thematic, stylistic and representational similarities in the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy, as the resistance to power in these artists is best reflected through the figures of the subaltern subjects – an analytic category which is the paradigmatic focus of this research as well. We know that ‘the concept of the subaltern is meant to cut across several kinds of political and cultural binaries, such as colonialism vs. nationalism, or imperialism vs. indigenous cultural expression in view of a more general distinction between subaltern and elite’, i.e., the dominant most post-colonial objectives adopted by these artists in their works. Moreover, subalternity or marginality in post-colonial works, according to the concept, is read in the subaltern’s ‘inability, in his poverty, his lack of leisure and his inarticulacy, to participate to any significant degree in the public institutions of civil society, with all the particular kinds of power which they confer, but most of all, and least visibly, through his consequently weaker ability to articulate civil society’s self-sustaining myth’.

In order to understand how this myth can be subverted to make the subalterns articulate we need to study the ways in which various concerns such as regional, socio-cultural, or feminist issues are dealt by the artists of creative works, and to probe into the previously neglected areas of religion, politics and history. In other words, it is detailing and reading of the societies and their histories from the victims’ perspective. ‘Such calling into question the very stuff that society is made’ by artists and critics, O’Hanlon suggests, helps postulate a ‘proper site for resistance’, and also encourages looking for ‘resistance of a different kind’:

Dispersed in fields we do not conscientiously associate with the political; residing sometimes in the evasion of norms or the failure to respect ruling standards of conscience and responsibility; sometimes in the furious effort to resolve in ideal or metaphysical terms the contradictions of the subaltern existence, without addressing their source; sometimes in what looks only like cultural difference.

This approach actually takes into account not only the viewpoint of ‘those who properly insist on the subaltern’s capacity for an acute consciousness of the political’ but adopting it ‘our political project [also] runs into the subaltern’s fundamental otherness, which may render his consciousness of the political in forms alien or even antipathetic to us’. This makes possible to better grasp, in turn, how the artists of different media working on similar subject categories and issues, even when sometimes they view their relationship with their art quite differently, give meaning and shape to an elaborate politics of change. In her 2004 Sydney Peace Prize lecture, Roy briefed for her audience:

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I’m certainly not the ‘voice of the voiceless’. (We know there’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.). I am a writer who cannot claim to represent anyone but herself, so even though I would like to, it would be presumptuous of me to say that I accept this prize on behalf of those who are involved in the struggle of the powerless and the disenfranchised against the powerful. However, may I say I accept it as the Sydney Peace Foundation’s expression of solidarity with a kind of politics, a kind of world-view, that millions of us around the world subscribe to.434

On the contrary, Chinoy believes that her objective is to give voice to the voiceless through her work, as she also said while receiving the Oscar for Saving Face:

Daniel and I want to dedicate this award to all the heroes working in Pakistan, including Dr. Mohammad Jawad who is with us today, the plastic surgeon working on rehabilitating all these women, Rukhsana and Zakia who are our main subjects of the film, whose resilience and bravery in the face of such adversity is admirable, and to all the women in Pakistan who are working for change. Don’t give up on your dreams. This is for you.435

Quite similarly to Chinoy, for Sidhwa catharsis lies in being as intimately attached with the subject matter of her work as with its end goals:

My intention was to write about partition because very little had been written about it. There are certain images from my past which have always haunted me .... I was very young then, I saw chance killings, fires, dead bodies. These are images from my past which have always haunted me ... This history has to be dealt with.436

And Mehta tells how much she struggled to maintain distance from the characters, and their plight that she so emotionally detailed in Earth (and in Fire):

First of all I have to be engaged personally on an emotional level with all my characters. To make epic sweeps and have politicians representing the anguish that the ordinary people went through is not for me .... The difficulty for me was to keep a balance between the intimate and the epic, and to do that you must always give your characters the power to represent a point of view and not be scared of doing that. You have to trust your characters.437

Introspecting through the subject category of the subalterns, we discuss in the previous four chapters that the characters in the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy are all ordinary human beings. They are children, oppressed women, or the working class people. Ignored and marginalised communities and repressed racial and social outcasts like the gays and lesbians also find sympathetic representations in these women’s art. The tragic stories of these characters are not just didactic tales, but rather are sequelae of several unbeknown oppressive phenomena. These artists select their

subalterns whose lives are enmeshed in unique sufferings from a rich social archive, where subalternity is as visibly layered in structures of hierarchy as the oppressors can be found aligned in their respective blocks to perform their single task. A full representation of these subalterns is not as simple as it seems within language, textuality, or discursive practices, or through class and psyche alone because the lives of the life-like/real characters of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy are also shaped and controlled by rigid ideologies of nation, community, gender, race, ethnicity, the body and sexuality.

To carry out their mega agenda, these women artists retain focus on the chauvinistic values cherished in India and Pakistan, exposing also the complex-ridden and hypocritical face of the patriarchal mindset. On the surface level, Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy bring the reader into contact with the contrasting living norms of characters who are Christians, Communists, Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Sikhs, etc. However, within the heart of their narratives, the members of these communities are shown involved into a complex game of competing masculinities.

All the male charcaters in Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy bear striking resemblances. Chacko, Jatin, and Narayan and Rabindra’s fathers who exploit the widows, Farrukh, Major Mushtaq, Dr. Manek Mody, Cyrus, and countless males whom Chinoy warns through her documentaries have a beleaguered sensibility that cannot be corrected despite being educated and feigning liberal demeanour. Qasim, Sakhi, Dil Nawaz, The Buthcher, Chuiya’s father Somnath, Zakia and Rukhsana’s husbands are only brutally patriarchal but adhere to the same prejudiced mindset that men generally have in the region. The only difference between the oppressive strategies of the males in each category, i.e., the educated and working class, is that they have to abide by the ethics of their social class or status while exercising liberty to be less or more oppressive to the women.
The greatest complexity of the internal structuring of subalternity along the lines of class and social status exists among the women characters in Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy’s worlds. The false notions of privilege and social status sometimes make women blind to their own and others’ sufferings. Mammachi suffered violence of Pappachi for her whole life, and she built the family business without any help from her jealous husband, even then she lived and oppressed people with her ‘Touchable logic’. The consciousness of her class privilege had greatly tarnished her morality. She could never learn to ‘separate Sex from Love, or Needs from Feelings’ (TGST, p. 328). She was devoured by anger that Ammu ‘had defiled generations of breeding ... for generations to come, for ever now’ (TGST, p. 258), but Mammachi would dispel all indignant feelings at Chacko’s sexual exploitation of women factory workers, saying ‘he can’t help having a Man’s needs’ (TGST, p. 168). She remained indifferent to Estha and Rahel, her grandchildren, because Ammu was a divorced and disgraced woman, but she loved Sophy Mol because she was the daughter of her son.

Zareen’s outrage towards David was spurred by the similar reasons that made Mammachi hate Ammu:

Zareen knew what she must do. However admirable and appealing David was, however natural to the stimulating and carefree environment, he would deprive her daughter of her faith, her heritage, her family, and her community. She would be branded an adulteress and her children pronounced illegitimate. She would be accused of committing the most heinous sacrileges. Cut off from her culture and her surroundings like a fish in shallow waters, her child would eventually shrivel up. And her dread for Feroza altered her opinion of David. (An American Brat, p. 289)
Zareen is happy in trying deceit and cunning to defeat her enemy like Baby Kochamma. She also did not know how carefully and incessantly she had been trained to accomplish only such a gigantic task, which men often fail to perform. Faredoon had to lose his son when he tried to persuade Yazdi not to marry Rosy Watson, the non-Parsi Anglo Indian girl:

What kind of a heritage are you condemning your children to? They might look beautiful but they will be shells – empty and confused; misfits for generations to come. They will have arrogance without pride – touchiness without self-respect or compassion; ambition without honour … and you will be to blame. (*The Crow Eaters*, p. 129)

What Zareen thought and Fareedon specified to be the disadvantages of out of community love and marriage were exactly the things that happened to Ammu and her children. ‘The Church refused to bury Ammu. On several accounts’ (*TGST*, p. 162), and her children also turned into tragic souls.

On the contrary, the women of lower classes, like Zaitoon’s mother-in-law Hamida, Papoo’s mother Muchoo, or Chuiya’s mother Bhagya do not really oppress, nor are they totally blind to sufferings of their daughters or of the younger women of their families. They only try to prepare the younger women for unquestioningly submitting to the will of the males because violence is what they suffer on daily basis, and anticipate it coming for other women, too.

Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy have remarkably nuanced their narratives to handle the questions of patriarchy, and the complicity of males and females alike in sanctioning violence as an acceptable norm to keep the societal order. The societal view is so biased towards women that people like Yasir and his mother first tried to burn Rukhsana alive with an absolute sense
of impunity, and then are able to cover their crime telling around that Rukhsana being a patient of high blood pressure is herself impulsive and had attempted suicide by setting herself alight. Pervez’s father, in order to justify the acid attack on Zakia, and to avert discussion about his son’s heinous crime, blames an extra-marital relationship on Zakia also because there can be no questioning from him on this account. Besides, he is aware that peoples’ sympathies will surely be divided by his accusation.

In fact, patriarchal instincts are very deeply ingrained in the male psyche. The backlash to feminine awareness is always quick and hugely intense every time whenever there are efforts on women’s part/behalf to set them free from the control of men. The rise in acid attacks in Pakistan and in rape cases in India, especially after stricter enforcement of the legislations to protect women’s rights over the last two years, reflects upon the sad reality as to how ruthlessly men crush any challenge to their authority in society.

Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy have registered the protest of their protagonist women against the deeply hostile realities with explaining matters in the context. Their narrations come from positions where we see a constant struggle in which women find ways to survive through perseverance in silent sufferings as well as through adopting masquerade of womanliness so as to allay men’s fears of any challenge to their authority. This struggle with the environment around is visible in ‘Sidhwa’s portrayal of women’s shrewd adaptability’ to their situations, and in Roy’s depiction of Ammu’s control on her rage, Rahel’s acceptance of indifference to her femininity, in Mehta’s stress on Radha and Sita’s genuine sacrifices to carry on the decorum of their house simultaneously with protecting their humanity, and in Chinoy’s reportage on Qainat’s, and countless other girls’ dreams for finding their

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individual identities by carrying on their education in secret due to threats by the Taliban.

The forces of culture and politics remain always operative against women, so much so that obvious changes with regards to women’s social image, i.e., how liberally or traditionally they should represent themselves in the public space, can be noticed with every changing political set-up. The dichotomy of the situation for women, both privileged and unprivileged, can be apprehended by the fact that we find Chinoy wondering about the same issue today, that the men ‘want to do something that effectively ensures’ to restrict a woman to ‘the four walls of her house’, as Sidhwa advanced her protest through Zareen’s regret almost two decades ago in _An American Brat:_

‘Could you imagine Feroza cycling to school now? She’d be a freak! Those _goondas_ would make vulgar noises and bump into her, and the _mullahs_ would tell her to cover her head. Instead of moving forward, we are moving backward. What I could do in ’59 and ’60, my daughter can’t do in 1978! Our Parsi children in Lahore won’t know how to mix with Parsi kids in Karachi or Bombay’. (_An American Brat_, p.11)

Mehta’s and Roy’s narratives sift through the pre-colonial to the present times, and the lives of their protagonists, too, are engrossed in the similar dichotomies as described above.

Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy either themselves speak or make their women characters speak the sensibility of the oppressed women – the domestically repressed, divorced, widows, and all those who are subject to any kind of sexual, societal and psychological abuse. In fact, these artists treat women as an epistemological category, rather merely as a subject. The

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discursive position that particularly helps them envisage this paradigmatic stance in their works is the focus on the issues regarding the sexuality of women in the region. Women’s sexuality is a repository of tradition and culture in both India and Pakistan for which allegories of community and nationhood have even been entrenched within history to domesticate, control and exploit women. However, all versions of the familial, societal, cultural and religious ethics bear sharp contrast to what women experience of the patriarchal hypocrisy on day-to-day basis as they grow up, so their individual sensibilities and characters are often totally contentious with the morality imposed on them for a prescribed upbringing, or at least the relationship between their feminine self and the society is far from being straightforward. That is why Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy question the ideological basis of the representation of women in historical and cultural narratives. They offer their stories, instead, as alternate avenues both of escape and of discussion, wherein women speak the language of their true emotions and feelings, and where their wounded bodies and souls also become self-expressive.

Although only Roy and Mehta make the issue of women’s sexuality an outrightly contentious feature of their work, yet femininity in their works, too, is given a very logical and intrinsic exposition. Chinoy and Sidhwa’s cautious treatment of the subject of women’s sexuality is, as S. S. Sirajuddin observes, ‘due in part to the religious orientation of the state, [because of which] feminism is not [and never has been] an ideal plank in Pakistan. However, feminist concerns do exist’. Only recently independent print (especially English) and visual media (predominantly through Urdu drama, and crime investigation reporting) have started to touch upon certain taboo issues regarding domestic and societal violence against women, their sexual harassment, and other general issues of women’s identity and life-choices in the chauvinistic culture of Pakistan.
Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy have very minutely detailed the effects of inter and intra-racial, ethnic or geographical prejudices on women’s gendered identity in the sub-continental society. However, the most heinous and gruesome aspects of such prejudices against women were witnessed during the violence of the partition of India. In Roy, Sidhwa, and Mehta the history of violence during the partition of India is not just of metaphorically significant but it also has an epistemic import. Chinoy’s work, too, is informed by the collective memory of this history of violence, as her work equally reflects on the situation of women in both India and Pakistan as it stands unaltered more than six decades after the partition. Therefore, Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy unequivocally drive the public opinion to constitutional liberalism. They either denigrate or push for improving the already existent customary, mythological, religious, and political laws/precepts particularly regarding the women because definite redemption can only be possible through surely working measures.

Mehta’s films and Roy’s novel have significantly contributed to the women’s cause by advancing debate about women’s rights in India. The people have always been too complacent about their own and their familial morality, considering themselves too immune to change. However, the growing feminine consciousness which is emerging in the region is an ample evidence to prove that a whole-scale cultural shift is happening in the region. Women are coming forward very strongly to make their presence felt in the public space in society. Very diverse responses to Mehta’s and Roy’s works, and especially the public activism that has got precipitated over the past few years, shows that the debate on gender equality and violence against women seems to have entered the political phase of feminist activism. The widespread concern expressed over the growing ratio of rapes and sexual crimes against women since the December 2012 rape case has had very positive ramifications.
to direct public, media, and political attention towards these issues in Pakistan also.

It is amazing to observe also that the voice Sidhwa raised in *An American Brat* against the Hudood Laws (especially against the clauses which have always been wrongly implemented in Pakistan to make the raped women vulnerable to be implicated as adulterous) was heard so many years afterwards. Chinoy jolted the society and coerced the political elite out of their complacency to seek the similar legal protections for women with her Oscar feat in 2012 that Sidhwa had suggested to her nation to be inevitably important almost two decades ago for saving face. Chinoy was striving to develop consensus regarding legislation against acid crimes during the filming of *Saving Face*, and finally the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Bill was unanimously passed by the Pakistani parliament on May 10, 2011.

All the while since 2010, an intense debate and legislative endeavour had also been on the move to build anti-rape laws structurally into the country’s legal system. Recently, Pakistani Senate’s Standing Committee on Law and Justice approved the Anti-Rape Laws (Criminal Law Amendment) Bill of 2014, which was an attempt to amend the heavily criticized Hudood Laws. The new bill provides several added protections to the rape victims. For instance, previously, when the matter of consent rose, (Sidhwa also reports several famous rape cases in *An American Brat* to show that) the women were implicated for adultery due to the lack of evidence. The new bill, however, provides that if a victim claims she did not, ‘the court shall presume that she did not consent’. It is being hoped this new bill, if implemented properly, will bring the real change in Pakistani society. 440 In view of the facts and ground

realities of the current times, Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy significantly contributed to the women’s cause in their turns by detailing femininity in all of its beleaguered facets.
CHAPTER 6

HISTORY TO SOCIOLOGY: THE PARADIGM AND POLITICS OF
THE WORKS OF ROY AND MEHTA; SIDHWA AND CHINOY

The fiction and film texts of Arundhati Roy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Deepa Mehta and Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy collectively represent a subversive alternative ethos of the socio-political culture of the South Asian sub-continent. These artists have grappled with the issues of neo-colonialism, religious fundamentalism, and communalism in their societies, to see how these broader configurations of culture and politics materialize into certain core prejudices and rigid norms that problematize the questions of individual and collective identity of the people in both the countries. They have envisaged a macro-politics in their works through addressing the micro level cultural categories of family, gender, caste, class, race and ethnicity, and have shown how these private and personal associations of individuals have also been permanently politicized. These writers and filmmakers have been particularly lucky because their artistic struggles were matched against certain coincidental happenings in the regional as well as the global political scenario, and they could envisage very elaborate paradigms to approach their debates. They have been able to subvert the normative imperatives of history by appropriating the actual historical events as background to their creative stories of the common human beings whose sufferings and sacrifices after serving the politicians’ purposes become meaningless even to the historians. However, these artists do not absolve the larger society also of all the blame because everyone, the state, the institution, and the people are complicit in the total scheme of oppression.

Arundhati Roy discredits the secularist claims of India’s state-imposed nationalist ideology by subverting it with the humanist vision she presents in The God of Small Things, thus highlighting its hollowness also
through novelizing the Hindu communalist version of nationalism that the
majoritarian society practically follows. Deepa Mehta challenges the
fundamentalist politics of the Hindu right by invoking the liberal ideals of
modernity and globalisation which the State and society identify as the
international face of India’s modernised polity. Bapsi Sidhwa lays bare the
disruptive antecedents of socio-cultural ethics in Pakistan while she reviews
the polity’s religious nationalist drive. Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy speaks to the
moral consciousness of the people so that the victims’ resistance against
power can be mechanised. Coming from so diverse critical avenues, the
political objectives of the works of all these artists still combine by virtue of
the fact that they strive to find answers for their queries from the social
archive.

An overview of the narratives of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy
reveals that all of them revert to the same period, i.e., the decades of the 1970s
and 1980s, in the post-partition histories of India and Pakistan, when major
shifts occurred in the socio-cultural and political bearing of both these polities.
The decades of the 1970s and 1980s are generally recognised, by the
postcolonials as well as by scholars of the political history of religions, to be
the time when religious fundamentalism was on the rise in most parts of the
world. Deliberating upon the phenomenon, Karen Armstrong views this
global religious fervour as a reaction to the ‘dread of modernism’, in her study
of the rise of fundamentalism across particular religious denominations in the
US, Israel, Egypt and Iran.441 Admittedly the tension regarding modernity has
been one of the major causes for the rise of religious fundamentalism in India
and Pakistan. However, the traditional societies of India and Pakistan also
reveal a very different case to study the development of hardline trends in
both public and political domains. The decade of the 1970s was the time when
India was experiencing many social and political upheavals. Hindu

nationalism was gaining momentum, communal issues were ravaging the political harmony, and demonization of the Muslims and Christians as well as denigration of the West, Westernization and the Western values seemed to be the main concerns on agenda of the Hindu chauvinists.\textsuperscript{442} Most disturbingly, however, the caste question in society had emerged stronger than ever in the previous 300 years despite secularist claims of the Indian State on the one end, and propaganda of the faith-based ethno-communal nationalism by the Hindu right on the other.\textsuperscript{443}

In Pakistan, unlike India, the political changes during the 1970s at the centre were favouring the religious ideology to be adopted as the guiding principle of social life. General Zia-ul-Haq had usurped power from the elected Prime Minister of the country, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, and had initiated a massive drive for Islamization of the State and society through rigorous institutional and legislative reform. Since the State-imposed version was the same as of the majority \textit{Sunni} Muslim sect in Pakistan, so the expectation was that societal harmony would prevail because of the egalitarian teachings of Islam. The sectarian divide and rift between the minority \textit{Shia} sect and majority \textit{Sunni} Muslims, understandably, was bound to emerge as a social and political concern in time. Owing to being largely a religious society, additionally the class, caste, and ethnic differences also became conspicuously pronounced in general interactions and behaviours of the people and in the stories of political tensions across different provinces in the country.\textsuperscript{444}

The traditional Indian and Pakistani historians link history of the hardline, violent and militant religious factions and groups with the reactionary spirit in the different communities as the result of the British

colonisers’ drive for promoting ‘Orientalism’ or ‘construction of the other’ for
denigrating Indians, their cultures and religions as inferior to the Europeans
and the Western cultural heritage; and of the activities of the Christian
missionaries in colonial India. The subaltern historians ascribe the
fundamentalist trends in both societies to the manoeuvres of the contenders of
political power, and the major happenings and changes in the world scenario
since decolonization in 1947 to the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. The
religious nationalist movements, like in the other ex-colonies, in Indian and
Pakistani nation states are then also linked by the post-colonials and world
historians with the general state of despair that, during the last decades of the
twentieth century, had pervaded consciousness of the common man because
the independent states had failed to fulfil dreams and expectations of the
people regarding political freedom, economic prosperity, and social justice.

The blame largely remains on the policies and political objectives that both
Indian and Pakistani states pursued and carried out through promoting the
officially produced elitist histories that were only meant to perpetuate the
neo-colonial set-up in bordering regimes. The elitist histories of both the
countries overlooked the importance of detailing the cultural diversity, and
sensitivities of the people from diverse communities that need to be properly
understood, rather than being suppressed or evaded so that tolerant ethics can
be promoted in societies. Quite disturbingly, even the tragic history of
violence during the partition was also problematized. The Indian historians
elided the accounts of violence, pretending that it was an aberration, whereas
the Pakistani historians circumvented the particularities in violence by
generalising its causes to put the entire blame on the Hindus and the Sikhs. It

Refer to Pennington, Brian K., ‘Constructing Colonial Dharma in Calcutta’, and ‘Colonial Legacies: Some
26:2, pp. 129-135, Ali, Mubarak, Pakistan in Search of Identity, Pakistan Studies Centre: University of Karachi, 2009,
Lectures by Dr. Ali, Dr. Mubarak and Kamran, Dr.Tahir, ‘Tracing the Roots of Religious Extremism: A Seminar
Series’, available on youtube.com: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1QYoymbNcLk>, and also on <
http://peaceandsecularstudies.org/?p=790 >

Guichard, Sylvie, op.cit.
so transpired that the struggles of ordinary men and the heartrending sacrifices of women were given no representative voice, whereas the entire credit for the success of struggle for independence was given to the nationalist leaderships of the Hindu and Muslim communities in the state histories.

As a result, the official narratives of the histories of both nation-states preached false notions to create a cultural unity out of great diversity. Neither the real causes of the inter-communal discord, nor of the intra-faith and ethnic tensions in both the societies have been theorised properly. So, when massive level violence suddenly erupts, both the people as well as the states of India and Pakistan fail to provide viable explanations. The unknown rogues can never be identified. History is already silent on the subject. However, artists like Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy have made very effective interventions into the violent psychology of the people in their respective societies, as they narrate history from below.447

Roy has taken a retrospective view of the history of cultural violence through examining the caste question in modernised Indian society. Sidhwa, likewise, has investigated about the growing class, community and ethnic consciousness among the people in Pakistan during the last decades of the twentieth century. Mehta and Chinoy have taken issue with the complacent modernist ethos in their neighbouring societies scanning the existent wrongs perpetrated against the individuals and communities at large. Viewed in collectively, the findings of all these artists provide a true cultural history of the Indian region, having proper explanations about the root causes of the fundamentalist and violent trends in their respective societies.

The caste division of humans has always been a reality of the Indian social life since ancient times. In the traditional readings of Indian culture,
including those of the Orientalists, the caste structure and ideals have been associated with the religious scriptures only. Marxist historians in India, however, interpreted these caste divisions as the inter-dependent role and labour-based organizational structures in a traditional agrarian society. The current research by anthropologists has revealed various other forms of caste-like associations that existed over and above the faith-based affiliations. Using such findings, the modern historians of South East Asia also rationalize the peasant resistance struggles for combined economic interests that erupted against the Mughal and the Colonial rulers during the course of the time in which caste-like associations formed across the boundaries of region, language, faith and economic status.

However, the faith-based caste divisions have emerged as a nemesis in the post-independence society of India. The worst apartheid-like racist doctrines of the ideologues of both upper and lower caste communities have belied all secularist and faith-based claims of societal harmony and unity. Interpreting in political terms, it was the practice of promoting the representative ideals by Indian government that, quite opposite to what was possibly intended, made the people conscious about consolidating, and aligning themselves with, the religious caste denominations. India’s post-independence constitution promulgated legislations to uplift situation of the backward and deprived people of low-caste birth. These legislations, however, affected ‘the insecure’ and ‘the advantaged’ sections of society in quite divergent manners. There were opportunities for everyone to strive for better lives in a free economy, so the people started moving away from the traditional networks of interdependence in rural communities. Massive urbanization also changed the face of society. The ‘urgent moral mandate’ that

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the upper caste individuals could claim in their small localities was no longer available to them in the big cities.

Although there emerged a ‘creamy layer’ of well-educated and prosperous individuals from the scheduled and ex-untouchable castes also, yet the grievances of the majority lower caste people could not be addressed, despite the State also kept cherishing and promising liberal ideals. These lower caste people kept providing labour for menial work and those who were educated did not earn as much as the equally qualified people from the upper castes did. The members of the upper castes, on their end, also felt pressured. They started asserting their caste identities in big urban societies, as they had no other way to make others recognise their superiority. It was also a way of finding associations with the people of other upper castes. Interestingly, the class issues remained subsidiary, as caste-ties were more serviceable for good reason. The earlier generations of the upper caste people had not faced any competition in the matters of jobs and they had maintained steady profiles in public and private sectors. Now their children were faced with tough competition posed by the people from all classes. Socio-economic insecurities bred caste consciousness, and mutual vying for promoting interests among both the upper and lower caste communities resulted in so widened a societal discord that by the early 1970s, the phenomenon known academically as caste feud/caste battle/caste genocide ‘acquired a crucial all India dimension’. Violence was taken as justified by those who considered themselves being oppressed.

Traditionally the low caste communities were denigrated specifically because of the ‘sexual availability’ of their women and the inability of men to defend these women. Now was the time for men to teach old lessons or settle all scores on behalf of their respective communities. Therefore, the heinous most aspect of the caste wars, when feuds intensified, revealed itself as sexual
violence by men of one caste against the women of other castes. It also led to ever greater assertion of patriarchy within both the upper and lower caste communities. The reality of these caste wars, at times, is also very complicated to apprehend. Many of these feuds had class, faith or ethno-linguistic reasons, but oversimplification was an all too easy option to incite the public sentiment against the ‘murderous’ untouchables.450 The backlash from the lower castes became equally assertive. They engaged themselves in political struggle, getting organised both on the societal and constitutional fronts. As most of the upper and middle castes in Indian society have their particular caste stories, so the Dalits/untouchables also revived folk narratives of the past Dalit heroes, like the ones who fought bravely in the 1857 war with British. This political consciousness was then tried to be inculcated in untouchable men and women equally. The practical impacts of this strategy are now visible in India’s national politics. Women from the Dalit/untouchable community have emerged as very strong politicians. Thus, during the course of history especially after the 1970s, castes in India assumed the categories of the ‘imagined communities’, much like those of the adversary religious communities.451

All these disruptive developments within the Hindu community were happening coincidently with the communalist chauvinism that was launched against the Muslim minority in India before and after the incident of Ayodhya. Historians and cultural critics have made extensive discussions how differing policies of the liberal congress and conservative BJP were goaded to converge on certain points. The political manoeuvres by each party fomented fundamentalism and communalism in India, and took violent religious sentiments to such an extreme that erupted in the form of Gujarat


genocide of the Muslims. The Subaltern historians and post-colonial critics from India have not only minutely analysed the political dynamism of Congress and BJP through presenting the mindset of each party’s hardline members, but have also discussed at length how the war between political contenders was taken into history books to promote particular political philosophies and the populist image of each party, during alternative regimes, through cultural politics of the Television and filmic representations. Globalisation was already there to be unconditionally embraced as such. All the disruptive developments, manoeuvres, and expedient policies were bound to nurture a most radical society, confused by its bulk and baffled by its potential. Modernity was being offered to the people with one hand, and conservatism was being imposed on them with the other. It is this larger cultural landscape that Roy and Mehta have addressed in their works, and amazingly these artists have been exceptionally discerning to identify spot-on where the people actually go wrong to implicate themselves in the politics of violence. Both Roy and Mehta also analyse how the patterns of micro-level oppressions, as in intimate circles of families and communities, are also shaped by the macro issues defining the political imperative of a multi-community polity and nation. In this regard, Roy and Mehta’s focus on the issues of patriarchy and sexual violence against women is particularly revealing.

The cultural analysts in Pakistan hold that Pakistani society did not pre-exist, rather it evolved as a recognizable cultural entity through the fusion of overarching social institutions and cultural patterns of the historically rooted diverse and distinct communities living in different provinces of the

country. It is imperative to mention, however, that the underlying assumption about workings of the nationalist discourse goes unstated behind such assertions. Ethnic affiliations to members of the community, clan, and geography are apart and very significantly strong, but inter-ethnic and inter-provincial ties are defined by the bonds of religion of the majority population, i.e., Islam. Non-Muslim minorities, such as the Parsis, Hindus, Sikhs, Ahmadis, etc., partake in the cultural exchange, but enjoying only a negotiated and shadowed existence under the overarching cultural clout of the majoritary Muslim population. Mohammad Abdul Qadeer concisely describes the essential character of this traditional society:

Pakistani society is rooted in the social structures, and cultural norms of provincial/ regional communities, such as clan, religion, bazaar economy, corporate sector, ethnicity, class, occupation, and economic status as well as gender. The rural-urban divide and the modern versus traditional dichotomy are found throughout these structures and institutions.

One can easily recognise the fault lines that can disrupt the cultural fabric of Pakistani society on the issues of economy, class, clan (also read as caste) and race as well as of religious violence that ravage the harmony of Indian society, too. The situation never goes to extremes like in India, though, especially regarding caste/clan feuds or sexual violence against women. The economic and political disparities in the 1960s did result in power hankering manoeuvres between the Karachi’s Urdu speaking migrant population and Punjabi local ethnic majority. Ethnic disparities and class conflicts have also been conspicuous in the matter of Sindhi/Balochi and Pashtun representation.
in national affairs. And ethnic prejudices were the major cause above all for
the separation of the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971.\textsuperscript{453}

To counter multifarious disruptive cultural tendencies, religion was
appropriated into politics most ruthlessly during the 1970s. History and
textbooks were manipulated to advance nationalist propaganda. The debate
about the traditional and modernist identity of Pakistan, based upon
contending notions about the political vision of the founder of Pakistan
Mohammad Ali Jinnah, have continued unresolved from then onwards till
this day. The inter-communal riots and sectarian violence have been the major
political worries from the decade of the 1970s to the 1990s, and militant
politics has been part and parcel of Pakistan’s regional and international
politico-economic and cultural ambitions. Pakistan had to involve itself in the
global hegemonic drive of the US during the Cold War era for economic
patronage. Pakistan’s own security imperatives, given the rifts on the matter
of Kashmir and of traditional communal rivalry with India, also necessitated
continuation of the militant politics. 9/11 and the Afghan war again dragged
Pakistan into a bloody game. Now the country stands a rogue ally of the US
forces, and faces the wrath of the Frakensteinian Taliban. The society is
dramatically radicalized on both extremes of liberalism and religious fanaticism.

The religious political parties have always been denied electoral
mandate, but exert much moral authority on the mainstream political
landscape. The demands for the writ of sharia law have aligned the religious
political factions and parties with ranks of the Taliban, as their socio-political
philosophies are fairly identical. The populace is caught-up in the turmoil of
institutional failure and growing terrorism. The worst victims are women.
Their identity is divided by the tussle between liberal ideals and traditional

\textsuperscript{453} Qadeer, Mohammad Abdul, \textit{Pakistan: Social and Cultural Transformations in a Muslim Nation}, USA and Canada:
patriarchy. In this backdrop, Sidhwa’s analysis of Pakistan’s earlier history and sensitive debates about the vulnerable socio-cultural structures seem to be prophecies which Chinoy have seen materialised into reality when she links the familial violence against the women with the annihilative political objectives of the Taliban fighters. Interestingly, Sidhwa and Chinoy also focus on the feminist dilemma and the patriarchal mindset in their traditional society.

An analysis of the ‘distribution’ of non-sacralised and sacralised violence against women in India and Pakistan, respectively, through legitimizing ideologies of patriarchies, reveals that ‘patriarchies are not the rule of men over women but systematic structures’. Women have to consent to patriarchies because violence is all they either anticipate being always subject to it without any particular reason or witness in the instance of any intentional or unintentional offence on their part. The politics of men is so perfect that they keep women divided ‘within the same family, neighbourhood, caste or class as well as across classes, castes and religions’. Therefore, feminine artists such as Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy devise elaborate paradigms that can help forge alliances among the subalterns whose stories seems very different but tragedies end alike.

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CHAPTER 7

THE CONCLUSION: EVALUATION OF ROY, SIDHWA, MEHTA AND CHINOY’S VISIONARY PLURALISM

Creative arts of all kinds from India and Pakistan exhibit many comparable perspectives. This phenomenon owes to a shared cultural experience of the Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities over the centuries of mutual existence in the Indian sub-continent. Different art forms, especially the literary genres, music, dance, and film in both the countries are stamped with influence of the artists whose works are equally owned and cherished by members of all the major communities. Punjabi, Hindi and Urdu languages play a crucial role in this mutual sharing of the culture because the bulk of populations in both India and Pakistan understand and communicate in these languages. Punjabi and Hindi in India are written in Gurmukhi and Devanagari script, respectively, while in Pakistan Punjabi follows Shahmukhi script, using the same perso-Arabic alphabet in which Urdu is transcribed in Pakistan and in some parts of North India. Numerous Punjabi Sufi poets, Urdu classical writers, television and film artistes and singers whose names are difficult to enumerate in a short list are part and parcel of the sensibility of the people across the borders of India and Pakistan.

It is only the keen interest in the overarching modalities of most visibly shared cultural antecedents through art forms that the majority of Pakistani people (especially in Punjab) never miss watching any Bollywood film (even if it deals with the lives and tragedies of the people in South of India which is culturally very different), or Doordarshan and Zee TV Play, and likewise Indians always welcome broadcast of Pakistani Drama serials in their country. Availability of literature, especially Urdu and English, is limited though, even then Urdu writers from the past and present on both sides of the border are celebrated in each country. Likewise, Punjabi poetry of Sufi Muslim
saints such as Bullah Shah and Waris Shah, and poetry and writings of India’s Amrita Pritam are equally owned in Indian and Pakistani Punjab, respectively. English writers, among which Roy and Sidhwa are prominent most, specifically arouse empathy because their works engage with the human situation in the region.

Yet, creative arts in both the countries have their distinct flavours. India has been at a large advantage in establishing its cultural identity in the world by the sheer magnitude of its population and territorial expanse. The implications for Pakistan have been equally disadvantageous. Pakistani tradition of Classical Music serves as the best example to prove this case. The lovers and maestros of music in India recognise the fact very well that classical music artistes, especially singers, from the few known Pakistani families attached to this profession are unrivalled in the tradition which the world knows as Indian Classical Music. However, owing to India’s established cultural identity at the global scale, the identity of Pakistani artists remains confused out of the sub-continent. The same proposition applies in the matter of literary and film art forms. Pakistani cinema, locally known as Lollywood, has been struggling to establish its identity for quite a few years after 1947 by successfully producing as good films as those by Indian cinema, but gradually Indian Hindi cinema, patronized by the government became a globally recognized industry. Having the country’s culture disseminated worldwide through film and media and wide scale migration of the people, simultaneously India has also been able to provide a steady supply of great English writers, including Raja Rao, Rabindrinath Tagore, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and V. S. Naipaul to name only a few, whose works got overwhelming international acclaim. No wonder, therefore, that very original works of English fiction from Pakistan also struggled to establish the international identity of Pakistani Literature in English.
Cara Cilano presents a detailed analysis of certain drawbacks that afflict Pakistani English-language fiction to acquire a wider dissemination and critical acclaim. The first drawback that Cilano identifies is the attitude of foreign publishers, especially from the US and Europe. The foreign publishers prefer stories which are ‘sensational, reductive and stereotypical’, i.e., stories that accord perfectly to their concepts about Pakistan. Interestingly in this regard, Indian critics also level similar accusations that only the essentialist/orientalising work from that country receives overseas recognition. However, considering the aspects of acclaim and acknowledgment, literary endeavours from India have yet paid off while lack of faith in Pakistani writing is visible through the dearth of critical material or of research efforts to that effect. Cilano also opines that ‘in terms of the critical reception, the topic of Pakistani English-language fiction has yet to receive very much attention beyond examinations of single authors and texts in ‘new’ literary as well as South Asian Postcolonial circles’.

Cilano confirms the opinion that ‘Pakistan’s proximity to India – the countries’ cultural imaginaries and interlocked histories’, and facts that the ‘worldwide Anglophone audiences are more familiar with writers claiming Indian citizenship or roots, or that ‘several ‘celebrity’ authors self-identify as Indian or as diasporic Indian’, all problematize how these critics and readers perceive Pakistan ‘to occupy less cultural space than its larger sub-continental neighbour, India. Hence the world view of Pakistani English-language fiction remains very limited. However, Cilano refuses to accept arguments against the independent and distinct identity of Pakistani writing. For instance, Cilano regards as invalid the propostition that Indian readers’ perception is doubly hampered while reading Pakistani fiction. To clarify this point, Cilano discusses Anita Desai’s remark from her review of Muneeza Shamsie’s first anthology of Pakistani English language and literature Dragonfly in the Sun that the thematic and stylistic similarities in the works of Pakistani and Indian
English writers ‘can make an Indian reader feel as if one has entered a cave of resounding echoes’. To this Cilano’s response is that ‘if the Indian reader is hearing echoes, then the implication is that it is the Indian voice that speaks first and the Pakistani voice that resembles as the echo’. So, Cilano tries to rectify the impression created by Desai’s claim by providing that essentialist categorization unjustly diminish ‘the critical insights recent Pakistani English-language fiction reveals, especially through its use of English as a language of creative composition’, that now assert an independent authenticity and identity.

These critical insights into Pakistani writing, Cilano maintains, question being reduced to theoretical essentialism of even the established paradigmatic traditions, such as ‘a diasporic model of global literatures in English’, and instead urge to be viewed through ‘a transnational approach defined in terms of coextensive critical paradigms derived from global and national literary cultures, as well as in terms of linked – rather than simply comparative – historical perspectives’. Opinion pieces reflecting Cilano’s assertions keep appearing in Pakistani leading national dailies. Nevertheless, Pakistani English literary works have not attracted as much critical attention as they deserve. Rich artistic offerings in the form of quality English fiction, memoirs, English translations, and occasional poetic contributions in the previous decade have caused a fresh surge of interest in Pakistani English productions. Yet, the international acclaim accorded to most of these works, especially of fiction, seems to coincide with the troubled historical times which are replete with momentous happenings, both national and international, in which Pakistan is presumed to occupy the centre-stage as a major actor.

Admittedly, the individual artistic and discursive worth have contributed to winning of accolades, recently, by such works as Mohammad
Hanif’s *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (both the novel and its film adaptation by Mira Nair), and Intizar Hussain’s 1979 novel *Basti* (nominated for Man Booker prize 2013). However, preconceived reductive notions about Pakistan still prevail. Literary circles in Pakistan have been genuinely concerned lately that once the war on terror changes focus or locus, Pakistan will no longer be the ‘terrorist flavour of the month’, and the ‘commercial fiction’ being produced these days might become less relevant in the eyes of the foreign publishers and readers.456

The case of grander international stature of Indian English writing, or of less recognised Pakistani English writing deserves more thought, and much elaborate discussion, but in the local regional context, taking a collective purview of literary works from the countries seems crucial to generate a cultural dialogue that is mutually beneficial for both. Combined and comparative analysis of the works of Indian and Pakistani artists is the need of the hour to promote world peace and harmony also because both these nuclear-armed countries are considered traditional rivals, and on the political front keep tarnishing each other’s international image. The imperatives of politics are understandable, but particularly in the regional ‘historical, material and cultural context’ it is very crucial to engage with ‘cultural documents’ like the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy to understand feelings and emotions of the ordinary people, and their stance on the rhetoric of politics which reflects in similar patterns on oppression of the subalterns in both countries. Further, the works of the four artists, being ‘fundamentally and inescapably embedded in social practices, institutional processes, politics and economy,’ also endeavour to understand the culture of violence obtaining

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in both countries, which is the root cause of all the human tragedies that follow a pattern every few years. These works have an abiding corrective value and enquiry into such cultural documents is the hallmark of the contemporary scholarship in cultural studies as well.\(^\text{457}\) In the transnational context, the emphases on the issues of multiculturalism, the problems of immigration, diaspora, etc. in the works of these artists might also further enhance the scope of cultural studies under the post-colonial orbit, a relationship that got established from early 1980s onwards.\(^\text{458}\)

This thesis, however, carried out a detailed analysis of the works of the representative artists from the two contending polities with the intention to investigate as to how far the different nationalist perspectives of their countries’ histories impact upon the creative potential of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy who either severely criticise or openly claim to fight the rampant injustices and wrongs in their societies. The enquiry has been very fruitful. Thorough scrutiny of the works of the four artists reveals that, despite their different nationalities, interests, and media, each one of them successfully deals with the discursive clash of the antagonist traditions of nationalist histories of the region, while detailing and generating empathy for the plight of the subaltern subjects, and what helps them particularly in this regard is the focus on female gender. While following predominantly the feminist project, it is the sheer force of their human perspective that lets these artists further negotiate competing discourses of ethnic, caste, class, or racial differences to identify and provide viable ‘spaces’ to their subalterns for escape from or reform to the dominant discourses. In fact after having these findings, one feels inclined to strongly assert that there is a dire need to carry on such projects that seek combined and comparative critiques of more and more


works of Indian and Pakistani artists because the biases contained in histories of these rival states are not reflected at all in the creative works. In fact, creative works like those of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy can serve as the possible sites of negotiation not only between the people and the communities but also between the polities across the borders.

The works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy are not just artistic representations of the plight of the subaltern subjects in their societies, rather these artists engage with themes emerging from history in history’s own terms. They identify problems and devise elaborate paradigms to bring official versions of history into discussion such that they divulge not just their personal views but also highlight the fault lines that might urge people to think of their own complicity in the wider drama of oppression and violence going around. These artists relate very emotional and simple tales but force people to question the false ideals they blindly or hypocritically follow. Oppression of the humans has to end somewhere, so why not make concerted effort for redress though reclaiming and recovering the true face of history by reviving the human connection. This is one of the major underlying messages of these artists’ creative pursuit. It is very unfortunate that the stories related through artistic muse are lost under the weight of lofty discourses and conceited discussions. These stories need be told without any pretentions because these contain the pain of humanity, and as such, cherish lofty universal goals.

Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy subvert the rhetoric of nationalist histories with personal histories of the oppressed individuals and with the language of emotions. Such a task for redress is a mission impossible for the historians, however much effort they may exert in earnestness. That is why these artists have been able to pinpoint the loopholes that even the revisionist theorists of literatures and historians often leave unattended. Post-colonial
scholars accede to the fact that even the subaltern historians’ approach to view everything in Gramscian terms led them to discover only a few beleaguered aspects of the history.\textsuperscript{459} The way Roy spins the harsh realities of Indian culture in the sufferings of Ammu, Velutha, Estha and Rahel is a task beyond the imagination of a historian who can never muster up courage to tell everyone in the face, like Roy does, as to how many wrongs they are committing. Only Sidhwa and Roy would risk putting the image of their own communities at stake, for showing characters which represent the privileged and beleaguered sensibility like that of the members of their majoritarian societies, to urge people that they may reflect on the societal ills and take their share of blame. But these artists could do all that only because they wanted to jolt the public conscience and believed that the intended message was worth the risk they were taking. Mehta and Chinoy would invite or directly face violence but remain determined to tell their stories which carry the trust of those who put their full faith in these artists by telling them their tales.\textsuperscript{460}

The works of artists like Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy can be utilised to achieve various socio-political goals not just in the wider local but in the global context. Awareness about these works should be promoted through research on comparative aspects of their socio-political and cultural significance because these works carry within themselves elaborate paradigms to advance mutual harmony, and tolerance for difference. As these works serve a call to the collective conscious of the communities and nations across borders, therefore, the understanding of the lived experiences of the protagonists in them makes the case of nationalist image and identity stronger than those that are projected through history. In this, there is a potential danger for the offenders (the politicians and culturalist ideologues) because


the reformative works of these artists, by engaging with sensitive debates about society and culture, put a lot of coercive influence on the oppressors who find themselves in awkward situations finally to give in to the demands for societal and institutional change. The importance of literary texts for effecting such change cannot be overemphasized. However, nowadays the impact of the films and documentaries, that depict real life, is being considered ‘more lasting’ than ‘the works of several generations of historians’. Moreover, owing to global information, and media distribution associations, notable films and documentaries have acquired a much wider audience impact. The international acclaim accorded to Mehta’s and Chinoy’s films is a proof-positive that the potential of these films was much less anticipated in terms of the impact these films later generated not only in the respective societies of India and Pakistan but also worldwide.

Generally, creative works do not follow the dictates of any theory, but the gendered consciousness of the women artists under scrutiny seems to have led them to work within certain confines. Yet, the situation does not impede their creative ability, rather hones it to a level that through their imagination these artists actually appear to restructure ‘the parameters of every day social life’, such that they not only construct ‘the social and moral maps for their readers’ and viewers but also ‘envision alternative identities, alternative societies, [and] alternative histories for their protagonists. Although India and Pakistan claim to be democratic societies, and are allowing their people to protest against and challenge the institutional as well as political coercion, yet the struggles of ordinary human beings for justice never seem to meet their cherished ends. Such a hopeless situation prevails not just because of the political or institutional failure but because the peoples’

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personal attitudes are averse to change also. Those who wield power in any
capacity are susceptible to resort to all kinds of ‘verbal, physical, and symbolic
violence’ that are an essential given of the cultural set-up in which domination
and subordination are the defining principles of correspondence between
individuals. This equation of domination and subordination remains
unchanged ‘from the relations of production to the relationships in the
family’.463 The stories of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy address all the
different forms of violence with utmost subtlety, pinpointing where the
individuals go wrong, as without such reminder the people seldom realise
how inapt and unjust their day-to-day conduct is. As such, the works of these
artists have a permanent educative worth to reform societies at large.

Since the works of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy particularly
address the categories of caste, class, community, ethnicity, race, and gender,
these works provide the people a better view of the peculiar consciousness of
their fellows with whom they spend their whole lives. It is not that the people
are not cognizant of the particular socio-cultural differences which exist across
the divisive configurations of various human affiliations, but that they cannot
relate emotionally with the situations of the people who are different from
them. Creative works strive to remove the smokescreens that exist between
humans, making them recognise the fault lines of the false socio-cultural
ideals they follow and urging them to shun the prejudicial notions that
impede them to revive their human connection, and thus inspire them to work
for building genuinely plural societies.

It must also be taken into account just how big the challenges are that
creative artists sometimes have to deal with in order to get their message
across to their intended audience. Their message is for the common man, but
at times it has to be put across to the people not directly but through agents of

463 Bhabha, Homi K., ‘Foreword’, in Chakrabarty, D., Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern
change. Chinoy made use of this scheme in the case of her much-advanced-in-
time documentaries.

Chinoy addressed the foreign as well as informed sections of
Pakistani society because the nature of her messages was a bit harsh to digest,
and at the time she produced her documentaries, especially *Pakistan: Children
of the Taliban*, public opinion had not yet turned completely against terrorist
activities of the Talibans. However, with time the truth of her claims is
becoming evident for the people. When the Taliban have started directly
attacking and ruthlessly killing the innocent people in all parts of the country,
even an ordinary man can relate to what Chinoy or her educated followers
have been warning against for quite a while. Even in the case of acid attacks
on women the people are realising that, despite the Women Protection Bill
that was in place as it was promulgated by the parliament in 2011 before
Chinoy released *Saving Face*, the situation does not seem to have changed
because horrible cases of violence have been on the rise all throughout 2014.464

Quite contrary to Chinoy, Mehta put her provoking call for change
directly before the Indian public, throwing simultaneously a challenge to the
conservative forces in society which resist liberal ideals in the name of
tradition and religion. The challenge here is even huge, since the role of the
creative artist is only limited to triggering a heated debate, as it is less
significant compared to the enormous potential of the message. The artist has
to subside, like Mehta did, especially in the case of film *Fire* by keeping herself
aloof from the gay and lesbian activism that ensued after ban on screening of
the film. It is because the real responsibility for change has to be taken up by
the people themselves, and the society must reform itself through a consensus
or constant clash that emerges between the liberal and conservative forces.

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file:///C:/Users/Asim%20Aqeel/Desktop/Sharmeen/Acid%20attacks%20on%20the%20rise%20-%20Pakistan%20-%20DAWN.COM.htm
In the case of Sidhwa and Roy, their minority status itself becomes a hurdle in the way of their genuinely humanistic call to the collective conscious of their majoritarian societies. Spinning the stories around their own communities and their histories which in essence have been altered by the ethos of the dominant cultures around, the two artists endeavour to highlight the oppressive nature of majoritarian ethics. They risk the privileged position of their community outlook, and devise negative Parsi (like Faredoon, and Lenny’s and Feroza’s hypocritical parents) and Syrian Christian (like Pappachi, Chacko, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma) characters which represent, and thus help the two artists to assume a position of objective non-identity, and invade the oppressive psyche of their majoritarian societies. Even then their task remains difficult to be accomplished, as we highlight especially in the critiques of *The God of Small Things* (in Chapter 1), and *Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India* and *An American Brat* (in chapter 3) how regrettably the earnest calls both by Roy and Sidhwa to their societies for revaluing and revamping the violent bases of their cultures, were missed, that too, in the light of the true messages inscribed in divine teachings that the people principally subscribe to.

Such challenges matter a lot, in turn, to define the contours of the aesthetic of the four artists’ activist film or fiction both in the short and long run. In Chinoy’s case we observed (in Chapter 4) that her diasporic position and her art’s foreign projection also had significant bearing on to whom or how she was addressing her message. It constrained her activism for societal change for quite a while, as we observed that her message in her 2010 documentary *Pakistan: The Children of the Taliban* was not taken very seriously, but later her Oscar feat in 2012 with *Saving Face* helped her take this activism to an all too new level. However, Chinoy’s artistic interests have led her to believe that it is only a close collaboration with the real ordinary people whose stories she also tells in her works that brings real change. Once their
lives are projected on a bigger scale, Chinoy’s subalterns assume the status of icons whose actions are available to be emulated by others, and thus generate a self-sustaining campaign for change.

In Mehta’s case (in Chapter 2), we scanned both the immediate and long-term scenario to examine how her activism was rejected by the Hindu right and the champions of national ethical culture outrightly and, later on, by the certain liberal elements also, especially gays and lesbians, when they found themselves not represented in Mehta’s ongoing campaign against the forces of status quo. Mehta had made her case clear on the matter of lesbianism in the very outset in quite categorical terms. However, there is much danger if such a situation of misgivings prevails between an artist and the real subalterns in society because it can be very detrimental to forging any viable collaboration between the two.

Sidhwa’s activism has always been relatively intellectual in disposition, though, she kept herself actively engaged in social causes all along her artistic journey (see the section Sidhwa and Her Art in Chapter 3). It might not be very inappropriate to say that her constrained position as a Parsi, and the non-existence of general literary culture in the country, never let Sidhwa’s public image grow in the local context of Pakistani society to the extent it had already assumed in the international literary and activist circles. However, reverence and regard accorded to both her literary and activist endeavour could not translate as tangible evidence in the form of critical acclaim her work deserved. For this both the foreign and Pakistani literary critics appear to be culprits because it is because of critical indifference to Sidhwa’s work that her genuinely reformative message and activism remained out of public view. This negligence, in effect, results in quite an injustice to the efforts of a genuine artist and reformer whose collaboration with the subalterns or agents of change can never even take any formal shape.
The case of Roy’s *The God of Small Things* reveals itself to be simultaneously the worst and the best one both in terms of the aesthetic and exchange value of the activism it precipitated. Roy’s success was stupendous in terms of the local and international recognition, and extended reach to Indian public that her fiction could readily garner. In this backdrop, objections to the diasporic nature of her fiction also became subsidiary. But to Roy’s own regret, perhaps (as we made a case in the critique of her novel in Chapter 1), the reality of her message was entirely lost on the ordinary people. Quite paradoxically, Roy’s simple message in the novel got buried under the lofty critiques and discussions. As a result she turned to prose, journalism, and incessant activism. When she transcribed the same message of her novel in plain language of day-to-day speech, and its intended poignance was felt, the public admiration turned into disdain because Roy through her words and actions urges the people for serious self-questioning and for embracing reality open-heartedly. Roy’s controversial campaign against the Narmada dam, and her aberrant and harsh views about India’s nuclear drive and support for the cause of the Kashmiris and Naxalites earned her rebukes as a traitor. Even then she has persisted both on literary and humanist fronts, and carries on her activism standing by the weak on the roads and streets because it is her true calling as a genuine artist.

The choice of projecting their art in English Language is very important, as it has served many different purposes specific to the concerns of each of the four artists. Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy have made a very creative and subversive use of the language because of which they have been able to problematize rather the unchallengeable configurations of ‘religion’, ‘religious bodies’, and communal and historiographic ethics of their extremist and majoritarian societies. The area to which many post-colonial literary critics are also turning of late is the domain of the sacred and the sacral, and within that overwhelmingly challenging is the debate around the term
‘religion’. The term religion is ‘a genealogically Western, or specifically English spoken category… constructed and dominated by the “English” narratives of Christianity’. If we consider the particular notions of the discourse of *Deen* (God made religion) that Islam envisages and *Dharma* (the universal law of societal conduct) as Hinduism details, then religion as a Western construct is taken as ‘the action(s) of the other’, specifically in Indian sub-continental context.

Roy, Sidhwa Mehta and Chinoy have approached the particular notions of the concept of ‘religion’, ‘Deen’ or ‘Dharma’ through the symbolically conceived religious bodies of their characters, first to reclaim the original connotation of each term and then to subvert it through their fictionalised, light-hearted, meditative or traumatized view of the history. These artists, in fact, show the most appropriate way of writing against hegemonic and neo-colonial systems, ‘using the master’s tool’ not only to liberate their own artistic sensibility but to allude towards a possible ideological shift regarding the use of English to contemplate the moral precepts of their post-colonial societies, and thus impress upon others that ‘global languages oppress but are liberating, too’. The works of these creative artists serve as a translation of cultures, as they have knitted their stories around the myths, rituals, and ceremonies, and different cultural and societal codes of conduct and have made their readers and viewers ‘experience otherness’ in terms so as to present it not as exotic but as an authentic and genuine human facet of life.

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The most interesting aspect that, in particular, Roy, and Chinoy share in their persona is that they have not confined themselves to the imaginative world of their art, rather have played their active part in bringing about institutional change in their societies. This is a whole new dimension that has enhanced the role of the artists to emerge as leaders and put their weight behind the resistive struggles of those ordinary people whose stories these artists narrate or dramatize. This collaboration of the subaltern and the artist also offers the possibility to evolve workable strategies to apprehend and rightly orientate the resistance struggles from the very depictions of real life in art. Another redeeming aspect of the artistic endeavours of the artists like Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy is that their call for change and resistance is being heard, understood, and appreciated by both the national and international communities. Therefore, they not only act as the agents of modernity and liberal ideals but also as monitors to keep a check on the socio-cultural, politico-economic, and ideational failures in their societies.

Further in this regard, it seems imperative to summate, in particular, the feminist achievements of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy by recapitulating how each artist specifically negotiates and puts before their national and international audiences the problems of their female protagonists and characters, given the different orientation of their artistic medium and social position relative to their subjects. For reference and clarity, it might also be helpful to base reckoning on the sensitive nature of subject here on some of the crucial criteria set out in the methodology section and regarded in general while making analysis of the stylistic and ideational approach of each artist in relevant sections of the thesis.

For instance, we have elaborately discussed the critical insights by Mohanty, Spivak, Bulbeck, etc., in the methodology section to approach the feminist aspects of the literary works, especially by women artists. Mohanty
warns about handling the question of identity formation of female subjectivity. She opines that while studying male violence through Western feminist perspective, readers/critics are often beguiled to establish universality or cross-cultural validity of women’s texts without critically understanding the specific context of the societies in which these works are produced and received. Spivak also blames that Western feminism tends to treat the Third World woman as an object of study. For Mohanty, part of the solution lies in focusing on the categories of sex, ethnicity, race, education, class, religion, community, law and citizenship. The danger in being so specific in her view is that sometimes artists endeavour to ‘cross national, racial, and ethnic boundaries’ by producing and reproducing ‘difference in particular ways’. Bulbeck is also apprehensive of this tendency in the works of Third World artists, as it renders their concerns divisive, and so is detrimental to the cause of a united front that women can present against their oppression worldwide. Therefore, the need of the hour according to both Mohanty and Spivak is proper activism through political organization and mobilization across borders, i.e., the ‘strategic use of essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest’.

In the light of these theoretical underpinnings, the works and activism of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy specifically evince very unique aspects of

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femininity and its diverse contexts in the subcontinental region through the clearly differentiable categories of the protagonists they present. Ammu and Rahel, as members of the Syrian-Christian community appear to be an extension of Roy’s own feminine self that got nurtured experiencing aloofness while she grew up in the community-bound life-style of Kerala. At the same time, both Ammu and Rahel, beyond their ethnic and communitarian outlook, are oppressed by their class status which they share with multitudes of other women in the majoritarian society of India. These aspects of their oppressed sensibility reflect also through the various faces of male violence each of these women experience at the hands of Pappachi and Chako (both Syrian-Christian patriarchs of the family), and her husband – who in Ammu’s case was an irredeemable drunkard Hindu from a rich feudal family, and in Rahel’s case was an American whose romantic expectations degenerated into utter indifference after her exotingly strange behaviour in love-making.

Each of Sidhwa’s protagonists, be it the less artistically conceived Afshan, Zaitoon, Shenaz, or Hamida in The Bride, Rosy Watson in The Crow Eaters, or be it the perfect exponent of genuinely assertive sensibility, like the Ayah in Ice-Candy-Man/Cracking India, Feroza in An American Brat, and Chuiya and Shakuntala in Water: A Novel, is easily distinguishable as a woman defined by her particular ethnic, class, racial, or communitarian background, and by the specific kind of patriarchal oppression she is subject to. It is interesting to note how fiction as a medium provides relative freedom to both Roy and Sidhwa to detail their female characters, such that they are able to present their feminist agendas into their particular cultural modes with striking differences in their ways to approach patriarchy and its oppressive schemes.

Mehta’s approach to feminism and patriarchy is very pointed and in many ways could be rather allusive of stereotyping if not for the very boldly
unique subject-matter of her films and the violent politics of identity and lifestyle she seeks to engage through such aberrant characters as Radha and Sita in *Fire*, the Ayah in *Earth* and Kalyani in *Water*. Although the peculiar caste, class, ethnic or community identities of Mehta’s protagonists appear subordinated in view of the grander scheme she envisages to criticise religio-cultural politics of the Hindu nationalists, yet their subalternity and Mehta’s rich offerings in terms of her characters’ agency-defining actions to foil patriarchal motives never subsume a generalised aura.

Chinoy’s female characters are too-suppressed in a society which is itself struggling to find its identity through a violent clash of the liberal and conservative ideals. The dilemmas and oppressions Zakia and Rukhsana face in *Saving Face* at the hands of patriarchal males in mainstream society of Pakistan or the violent fates which await Qainat or countless other girls and women of the tribal region at the hands of the Taliban who want to subdue the people in the name of their version of the religion are beyond tackling by individuals, as these menaces demand collective action on the part of society. Even then, Zakia, Rukhsana, and Qainat show resolve to fight oppression with the desperate power of a dying man. Intriguingly again, it is the choice of the visual medium, and sharpened diasporic outlook that lets both these artists explore and expose the extreme limits of female oppression in their nation-states.

It is also very heartening to realise that reference to subalternity by Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy, although essentially relative, is yet not at all divisive because it has brought about collaborations, at least (so far) in the case of Mehta and Sidhwa regarding the former’s *Elements* trilogy, and that too without any conscious effort or intention to converge their feminist politics. Chinoy’s activist interest against female oppression has also invited enough interest in India, where she was hailed as the champion of women’s
human rights in the region despite her nationality as a Pakistani, especially during the Jaipur Literature Festival 2013. Similarly, Roy’s extended focus on the subaltern concerns of the downtrodden, the tribals or people from the occupied territories offers many facets where a possible activist collaboration can possibly take shape between her and her Pakistani counterparts (fiction and prose writers or even journalists) in order to materialise some viable strategy that may by-pass the political dimensions of border-divide to strengthen a human-link among the ordinary people of the neighbouring countries. It is also particularly worth mentioning in the case of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta, and Chinoy that no matter that all these artists configure women’s subalternity through established ‘religious, legal, economic, and legal systems’ in their societies and communities, their highly critical use of the feminist vision for devising truly representative protagonists whose oppression is caused by complicity of the whole societies (including both males and females) in their countries elaborates a genuine politics of the postcolonial feminism which has been duly recognized in global feminist circles, but regrettably not as deservedly acclaimed in critical response, though.

The real advantage of collectively analysing the texts of Indian and Pakistani artists is that a comparative perspective helps a reader to situate the particular representational traditions from each country within an extensive regional and indigenous artistic culture. This advantage proves a further boon because a critic can benefit (especially in view of the hampered global recognition of the Pakistani art forms) from the critical discourses that largely address the discursive potential of this extensive regional artistic context. For instance, the critiques, discussions, and debates regarding Indian English literature and fiction, and Bollywood cinema have specifically helped in borrowing assumptions for analysing the texts of the Pakistani artists, Sidhwa and Chinoy in this thesis. Yet, at the same time the view on the histories of the polities and of the subaltern subjects from the region is also enriched by the
perspectives that Pakistani artists offer to complement the vision of their Indian counterparts.

This analogous insight also gives a better understanding of the regional critical traditions to critics, and helps them consequently orientate the critical traditions in both countries to the needs and imperatives of the modernist global discourses. The application of the concepts and aesthetic of thus developed critical discourses, especially while appraising the indigenous works produced in English, can provide inspiration and substance for developing postulates that may serve possibly as a modern indigenous (read regional) theory.⁴⁶⁸ Such a regional theory can then provide both the indigenous and generic assumptions for ‘analysis of language, rhetoric, signs or other systems of signification’ and for ‘critique of social, cultural, and historical conditions and the way these conditions are reflected in and altered by cultural forms’, as this study of the novels and films of Roy, Sidhwa, Mehta and Chinoy has shown. So in a way, this regional theory can ‘help us understand both the particular contexts and the ideological points of view that help shape’ the literary and representational texts.⁴⁶⁹ From the post-colonial perspective, this amounts to discovery of the new ‘sites of enunciation’ for ‘turning inwards to the post-colonial nation-state’, and religion that will help, according to Gayatri Spivak, to re-evaluate ‘the task of the post-colonial’.⁴⁷⁰

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