



# **THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF BAPSI SIDHWA: A CRITICAL STUDY**

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## ***Abstract***

*This study uses a feminist and post-colonial perspective to critically analyze how women are portrayed in Bapsi Sidhwa's writings. It explores the themes of Identity crisis, gender inequity, cultural limitations, and the fight for independence in patriarchal settings. By examining their experiences of marginalization, resiliency, and self-assertion, the study explores the difficulties faced by female protagonists navigating post-colonial environments. The study contrasts tradition and modernity while highlighting concerns of exploitation, feminine bonding, and cultural identity through Sidhwa's works such as *Ice-Candy Man*, *The Pakistani Bride*, and *An American Brat*. The study provides insights into the changing roles and status of women in South Asian literature and society by examining these narratives and shedding light on the specific and universal difficulties that women encounter. By offering a framework for comprehending women's struggles and empowerment in modern literature, this study advances feminist discourse.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Post-colonial literature, Patriarchy, Marginalization, Cultural constraints*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The research critically examines the female characters in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa from the perspective of colonial periods to post-colonial structure, mentality, and output of women in society from tradition to modern age. The issues faced by traditional women in the face of patriarchal taboos and their response in the post-colonial scenario. The study of post-colonial and feminist concerns as well as elements related to the feminine traits in Bapsi Sidhwa's writings. Since the novels in this study were written before the turn of the twenty-first century, it is important to examine whether or not they are universally appealing and accurately depict the status of women in India now. Women's senses and sensibilities have been marginalized by a patriarchal, gender-based society dominated by men; therefore, in order to attain the aim, women must develop and demand space in accordance with the philosophy and movement of feminism. The female characters in Bapsi Sidhwa's novels ostensibly presume that women's status has not altered and that they must instead carve out a place for themselves in society by overcoming adversity and striving to develop a self-governing life force.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

- The study would investigate gender sensitivities in a patriarchal culture that is created and run by men.
- The study would highlight and present different feminism theories through the perspectives of female characters.
- It would accurately depict women's circumstances in post-colonial Indian society.
- The issues and difficulties faced by Indian women will be analyzed from a microcosm to a macrocosm, along with possible remedies.
- The study will provide a fresh perspective on the issue facing women in the modern world.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Hakyoun Ahn (2019) discussed on the regular gendered violence that its female characters experience. A notable school of Sidhwa criticism has focused on the disparities in the women's class privileges in the book. In his study, he examined how Sidhwa creates a sense of solidarity among women from all social classes by depicting them as fellow victims, conceptualizing their gendered trauma as a result of the ongoing threat of male sexual violence, and analyzing Lenny's sexual development by looking at the sexualized maternal bodies of them. According to the research, Lenny's narrative gaze can be characterized as "queer" because of her luminous and crippled status, and her gaze turns into a means of political resistance and discernment. Lenny's queer eyes reveal that her godmother, nanny Ayah, and upper-class mother had all been sexually assaulted.



Aamna Safdar and at el (2022) explored how Bapsi Sidhwa handles the feminist theme in her book *The Pakistani Bride*. A largely male-dominated culture oppresses, dominates, and exploits women. Investigating gender stereotypes in Pakistan's tribal patriarchal society is the goal of this study. Fairclough's 3-Dimensional Model, or FTDM, is employed as a lens through which the text of the novel is analyzed in order to emphasize the isolated lives of women in a society that is predominately male-oriented. According to the study's conclusions, women experience social, physical, and emotional oppression and subordination. Cultural practices are fundamental to the marginalization, oppression, and patriarchal hegemony of women. Because power in speech identifies the precise methods in which it might be wielded physically and practically to achieve desired objectives, this discussion centers on women. The appalling state and abhorrent treatment of women in Pakistan's remote regions are exposed by the textual analysis. Additionally, the study shows that FTDM illustrates the use of ideological language and the function of persuasive techniques in the formation of social bonds.

#### **Critical study of “The Pakistani Bride” (1983):**

It is the journey of Zaitoon, a little girl left an orphan by the turmoil and mayhem brought on by Partition. She reminds a Kohistani tribesman Qasim of his late daughter who passed away from smallpox, so he adopts her. Qasim marries Zaitoon to Sakhi, a young man from his Kohistani clan, out of a sense of communal honor. Focusing on the issue of female sexuality and their hardships and obstacles in orthodox society, the novelist illustrates the contrast between the male world outside and the female world inside. Through their interconnected tales, Sidhwa illustrates the harshness of the patriarchal system and the high cost women face for daring to challenge it. Economic and religious factors are taken into account when deciding on a marriage, and the leaders of the households don't mind if the body is treated like a commodity. Male family leaders freely exchange women's bodies in order to meet their financial necessities. Women's marriage and female sexuality in a post-colonial society are the novel's central themes.

It is terrible for women to live in such tribal areas of Pakistan. Death is the only way out once a lady marries a tribal man. If a wife in a tribal family is unhappy, she cannot consider divorcing since it would cast doubt on the honor of the tribe husband. It is culture that pertains to a specific, unique group of people and includes behaviors that are different from those of other people. It has a strong impact on everyone, wherever, at any time. A culture is defined and a community is formed by its traditions, practices, rituals, values, myths and folklore, religion, philosophy, and language. The identity, behavior, and life philosophy are shaped by these cultural structures. The characters of Zaitoon, Carol, and Shehnaz demonstrate how women in Pakistan's repressive patriarchal system are unable to develop their own unique identities like males and are inevitably subjected to physical abuse, persecution, and estrangement. Women are not given the freedom to make their own life decisions since they are not regarded as unique persons. Thus, Zaitoon's refusal is completely disregarded.

The difficulties experienced by women navigating a society rooted in rigid patriarchal conventions and traditional codes of honor, such as Zaitoon, Afshan, and Carol, are depicted clearly by Sidhwa. As seen by Zaitoon's forced marriage to Sakhi in order to satisfy her father's sense of honor, women are portrayed as commodities whose lives are determined by males. Characters like Carol and Zaitoon represent opposition to patriarchal authority. Zaitoon's fight for independence is reflected in her attempt to leave her controlling marriage. American wife Carol struggles to fit in with Pakistani society and ultimately decides to leave in order to express her uniqueness. The objectification and oppression of women in urban and tribal settings is criticized in the novel. The physical, emotional, and sexual violence that Zaitoon and other women experience emphasizes their predicament in a culture that is ruled by men. The conflict between restrictive cultural traditions and the potential for liberation is symbolized by the bridge that Zaitoon crosses. Her continued existence is a testament to the human spirit's tenacity. Sidhwa examines the universal problems of gender inequality by contrasting the lives of two women from distinct cultural backgrounds: Zaitoon from rural Pakistan and Carol from the West. Women's relationships, like that between Zaitoon and Miriam, highlight the value of solidarity by offering moments of compassion and understanding.

In the novel, the mountains, bridge, and river all function as potent metaphors for the limitations and obstacles that women encounter. Zaitoon crossing the bridge is a symbol of the potential to overcome social and cultural limitations as well as resistance to oppressive customs. When viewed from a theoretical lens, *The Pakistani Bride* offers a complex critique of the social mechanisms that oppress women. Sidhwa challenges cultural customs, postcolonial realities, and patriarchal conventions in order to promote women's autonomy and the abolition of repressive traditions. By placing Zaitoon's journey within these theoretical frameworks, the book transcends its status as a survival story and instead serves as a larger critique of structural injustice.

#### **Critical Study of “Ice-Candy-Man” (1988):**

Sidhwa depicts the rapidly shifting sociopolitical landscape of the Indian subcontinent in the years leading up to the Partition. Lenny, an eight-year-old Parsi girl who has contracted polio, serves as the book's narrator. In order to solve the enigma of the adult world, Lenny watches the other characters and compiles her observations. Through



her eyes, the reader is made aware of numerous feminist issues that need to be addressed in the immediate area of Lenny's household, including the marriage of her parents and other marriages in their community, the relationship between Muccho, a servant woman, and her daughter Papoo, the sisterhood between Godmother and Slavesister, the kidnapping of Ayah, and, last but not least, Lenny's own status as a girl in the home. The economic, geographical, sexual, and physical domination that many men attempt to exert over women—both those they love and those they do not even know—is a more prominent feminist issue in the novel. The story of Ayah and the fallen woman, Hamida, is where this is most evident. the novel's depiction of female sexuality. At least in South Asian literature, there doesn't appear to be a comparison to the candor and openness that permeate the descriptions of Lenny's developing sensual impulses.

Through the character of Ayah (Shanta), the novel illuminates the ruthless persecution of women during Partition. She experiences sexual assault and is objectified by society, underscoring the precarious position of women in times of social unrest. Ayah refuses to remain with Ice Candy Man after he coerces her into marriage and prostitution, demonstrating her agency in spite of her mistreatment. Her insistence on seeing her family again is a perfect example of defiance against patriarchal oppression. The patriarchal conventions that dehumanize women and turn them into possessions are criticized in the novel. Despite claiming to adore Ayah, Ice Candy Man deceives her by using her for his own gain. The double standards that society has for women's morality and chastity are criticized, with a focus on how women are disproportionately affected by both personal and collective violence.

Characters that defy social conventions, such as Lenny's godmother (Rodabai), are strong and wise. Ayah's godmother is crucial in saving her and providing advice, highlighting the value of female unity in opposing patriarchal systems. The combination of gender-based discrimination and communal violence is set against the backdrop of the Partition. To demoralize rival communities, women—symbols of collective honor—are the targets of horrifying crimes like rape and kidnapping.

Lenny's perspective offers a distinctive perspective on the story, contrasting the effects of Partition on women with her developing understanding of gender-based social norms. As seen by the remarks on her skin tone and conventional marriage norms, Lenny's observations highlight the pervasive gender prejudice. Even if a lot of female characters go through hardships, their deeds frequently show resiliency and an implicit challenge to patriarchal authority. Examples of women exerting agency include Godmother's commanding manner and Ayah's unwillingness to accept Ice Candy Man's "love."

Lenny shows herself to be a brave and fearless child throughout the novel. She is curious, demanding, and ambitious, and she pursues her goals in spite of obstacles. She is aware of the restrictions placed on women's lives in patriarchal cultures. The sorrow of hundreds of women who were abducted, beaten, raped, and killed like animals is symbolized by Ayah's suffering, which is not the suffering of a single lady. The ability to take on new roles and duties is demonstrated by Lenny, her Ayah, her mother, and her godmother; even Lenny's mother transitioned from being a homemaker to a social worker. The ayah maintains her resolve to return to her family and start again, even though she believes she is now an impure person.

#### **Critical Study of “An American Brat” (1994):**

The novel tells the story of Feroza Ginwalla, a Pakistani Parsi girl who is moved from Gulberg, Lahore, to Denver, Colorado, in America to experience a more liberal way of life. Feroza is the wayward daughter of Cyrus and Zareen Ginwalla. The bashful Feroza, who in Lahore hesitated to approach young men, now flirts with Shashi, an Indian student at the University of Denver studying hotel management, after moving to the United States. She later develops feelings for a Jew named David Press, an American. She gains self-assurance and assertiveness. Because of her mother Zareen's meddling, her relationship with David Press ends. Feroza, as her mother describes her, becomes a 'American Brat' at the end of the novel. She doesn't only go back to Lahore to marry one of the three good Parsi boys who have been selected for her. Thus, the novel has an equivocal ending. Despite her broken relationship with David Press and overall depressed state, Feroza would rather live a life of hardship and hard labor in the United States than a settled family life in Lahore since the United States allows her the independence and personal choice that the Parsi community in Lahore only restricts. Thus, Bapsi Sidhwa emphasizes how the protagonist's attitudes are significantly altered by expatriate experiences.

In a sense, Feroza's lifestyle reflects culture and its aspects both deliberately and unconsciously. Zareen has no doubt that Feroza's exposure to a new country will extend her perspective. She will grow into a balanced individual. Her experiences living abroad would cause a significant shift in her personality. Zareen goes out of her way to oversee Feroza's travels. Before the trip, she provides Feroza with comprehensive instructions regarding the outfits, luggage, and other matters. Since she has no experience living in a new country, she called Manek to take care of Feroza. Feroza experiences a special sense of inner emancipation as her jet lands at Kennedy Airport. Feroza was really eager to travel to America, the place of wealth and opportunity.

The connection between Zareen and Feroza demonstrates the age divide and divergent perspectives on modernity, tradition, and religion. Zareen's attempts to manage Feroza's life are motivated by both mother worry and her



commitment to Parsi traditions. The Parsi community's double standards on gender roles are criticized in the book. Women who choose to marry outside of their faith are shunned, although males are comparatively free to do so. These constrictive conventions are challenged by Feroza's experiences in America, which include her exposure to freedom, gender equality, and new relationships.

The difficulties women encounter in negotiating gendered, generational, and cultural expectations are profoundly explored in *An American Brat*. Sidhwa challenges the restrictions imposed on women while honoring their tenacity and ability to change through Feroza's journey. In order to empower women in a globalized world, the novel provides a feminist reflection on the need to redefine cultural and societal standards.

## CONCLUSION

In order to illustrate how male-centered traditional society is being forced to adapt to the evolving patterns of selfhood assertion by the female characters in various social contexts in the novels under study, the researcher presents a comparative image of the resistance displayed by the female protagonists of various generations. In Bapsi Sidhwa's works, she imagines women making greater efforts to discover who they are, the problems surrounding women's subordination, and their varying degrees of struggle. In addition to portraying her female protagonists in feministic shades, Bapsi Sidhwa elevated them to a new level by exploring the various social settings, political milieu, cultural rootlessness, existential identity, and the disrupted human relationships with regard to race, milieu, and moment. She also depicted the immigrant experience and the various shades of the educational, existential, social, economic, and cultural setting.

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