

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF BAPSI SIDHWA ON VICTIMISATION OF WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the ideology of victimisation of women in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, with close attention to *The Pakistani Bride* (1983), *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988; US title *Cracking India*), *An American Brat* (1993), and *Water* (2006). Situating Sidhwa within Commonwealth feminist writing and South Asian Partition literature, the study argues that her fiction represents victimisation not as a naturalised feminine condition but as a historically constructed ideological formation sustained through patriarchy, nationalism, communal violence, religious orthodoxy, and diasporic modernity. Drawing upon feminist theory (Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), trauma studies (Cathy Caruth), and Partition historiography (Urvashi Butalia; Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin), this article demonstrates how Sidhwa exposes systemic gendered oppression while simultaneously foregrounding women's resilience, testimony, and ethical witnessing.

Through sustained close reading and textual quotation, the essay contends that Sidhwa dismantles simplistic binaries of victim and agent. Instead, she presents a continuum wherein women inhabit positions of vulnerability, resistance, negotiation, and survival. Her narrative strategies of child focalisation, embodied depiction, irony, and dialogic plurality transform the literary representation of suffering into a site of historical accountability and feminist critique.

Keywords: victimisation, Partition literature, Feminist Criticism, Postcolonial Theory, Gendered Violence, Commonwealth Literature, Trauma.

Introduction

Reframing Victimhood in Commonwealth Feminist Writing

The fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa occupies a distinctive position within postcolonial and Commonwealth literary traditions. As a Pakistani Parsi writer chronicling the upheavals of the twentieth century Partition, nationalism, migration, and religious orthodoxy Sidhwa repeatedly foregrounds women's lives at moments of socio-political rupture. Her narratives insist that the violence inflicted upon women is neither incidental nor episodic but structurally embedded in patriarchal and nationalist discourses.

Within South Asian literary studies, Partition narratives frequently centre communal brutality; yet women's bodies often become secondary metaphors for national trauma. Sidhwa, by contrast, re-centres female experience. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, the abduction

and rape of Ayah becomes the novel's moral axis. In *The Pakistani Bride*, Zaitoon's forced marriage dramatizes the commodification of women within tribal patriarchy. In *An American Brat*, migration complicates assumptions about liberation. In *Water*, widowhood exposes religiously sanctioned exploitation.

This article proposes that Sidhwa constructs an ideology of victimisation as the product of intersecting discourses: patriarchy, communal nationalism, religious orthodoxy, and diasporic anxiety. Her fiction does not deny female suffering; rather, it interrogates the systems that produce it. By integrating feminist theory, trauma studies, and postcolonial historiography, this essay argues that Sidhwa redefines victimhood as a historically contingent and ideologically sustained position one that can be challenged through narrative testimony and ethical witnessing.

Theoretical Framework: Ideology, Gender, and Testimony

Simone de Beauvoir's foundational claim that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir 283) underscores the social construction of gendered subordination. Judith Butler expands this formulation by arguing that gender is constituted through reiterated performance within regulatory frameworks. Victimisation, in this sense, emerges not from biological vulnerability but from the cultural scripting of women as subordinate subjects.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of subaltern silence further illuminates Sidhwa's project. When Spivak asks, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" she highlights how dominant discourses appropriate or silence marginal voices. Sidhwa's fiction resists such erasure by granting narrative centrality to women who are socially marginalised Ayah, Zaitoon, Feroza, Chuyia.

Trauma theory also proves indispensable. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is characterised by belatedness and repetition; it resists assimilation into linear narrative. In Partition literature, the unspeakable of sexual violence reflects this trauma. Sidhwa's narrative strategies fragmented memory, child narration, indirect description echoes the fractured temporality of traumatic experience. Finally, feminist historiography of Partition documents how women's bodies became sites of nationalist revenge. Abduction, forced conversion, and honour killings were legitimised through communal ideology. Sidhwa's novels fictionalise these histories, rendering them emotionally and ethically immediate.

Thus, victimisation in Sidhwa's work must be read as ideological production: the result of institutionalised norms, communal rhetoric, and gendered power structures.

Partition and the Sexualised Nation: Ice-Candy-Man

Ice-Candy-Man (US title *Cracking India*) offers one of the most powerful fictional accounts of Partition's gendered violence. Narrated by Lenny, a young Parsi girl afflicted with polio, the novel presents Lahore's transformation from cosmopolitan harmony to communal carnage. Early in the narrative, Ayah's body symbolises pluralistic desire: "Ayah's beauty disrupts the decorum of our households". Men of various religious communities gather around her, unified in admiration. Yet as political tensions escalate, communal identities override shared humanity. The turning point occurs when Ayah is abducted. Lenny recounts: "They drag her out... her sari slips off her shoulder... and I see her face twisted with terror" (183). The description is restrained yet devastating. Ayah's body becomes the locus of communal revenge. The Ice-Candy-Man, once a jovial admirer, betrays her, illustrating how nationalist fervour can mutate into misogynistic brutality. After her recovery, Ayah is described as "a broken doll, fragile and lifeless" (214). Yet Sidhwa refuses to render her entirely passive. Ayah ultimately chooses repatriation, asserting a limited but significant agency. The novel thus exposes how communal ideology equates female honour with national pride, transforming women into symbolic battlegrounds. The child narrator's perspective intensifies ethical witnessing. Lenny's innocence contrasts with adult rationalisation. Her fragmented understanding mirrors traumatic rupture. As she reflects, "The world is disintegrating, and I cannot put it back together" (197). Through Lenny, Sidhwa implicates readers in the responsibility of remembrance.

Patriarchal Violence and Commodification: The Pakistani Bride

The Pakistani Bride examines institutionalised patriarchy within tribal and urban Pakistan. Zaitoon, orphaned during Partition, is married off to a tribal man in the Kohistan mountains.

Her marriage is arranged for social convenience rather than consent.

Upon arrival in the mountains, Zaitoon senses entrapment: "The mountains closed in around her like prison walls". Landscape becomes metaphor for patriarchal rigidity. Her husband Sakhi's violence is legitimised by tribal honour codes. When Zaitoon resists, she is told, "A woman's honour lies between her legs" (117). This statement crystallises ideological victimisation: female worth reduced to sexual purity.

Zaitoon's attempted escape marks the novel's most dramatic assertion of agency. Fleeing through treacherous terrain, she endures hunger and exhaustion. Her survival challenges the inevitability of victimhood. Yet Sidhwa does not romanticise escape; the pursuit she faces underscores structural constraints.

Parallel to Zaitoon's story is that of Carol, an American woman who discovers that urban modernity does not guarantee equality. Carol's disillusionment reveals patriarchy's adaptability. Thus, victimisation is systemic rather than culturally isolated.

Diaspora and Negotiated Identity: An American Brat

An American Brat explores the complexities of migration through Feroza, a young Parsi woman sent to the United States to strengthen traditional values. Instead, exposure to Western individualism transforms her worldview. Feroza confronts racial prejudice, sexual autonomy, and cultural conflict. When her mother insists on arranged marriage, Feroza resists: "I will not be bartered like a sack of rice". The metaphor underscores commodification while affirming autonomy.

Victimisation here operates ideologically rather than physically. Feroza must negotiate between conservative expectations and Western stereotypes. Sidhwa complicates the myth of liberation, showing how diasporic women encounter new forms of

marginalisation. Yet Feroza's self-determination signifies growth. Migration becomes a site of negotiation rather than simple emancipation. Sidhwa thus expands victimisation discourse beyond overt violence to include cultural and psychological pressures.

Religious Orthodoxy and Gendered Exploitation: Water

Water, adapted from Water, portrays the lives of Hindu widows confined to an ashram. Child widow Chuyia asks, "Where is God? Does he live in the river?" (Sidhwa, Water 22). Her innocence contrasts with institutional cruelty.

Widows are subjected to austerity, deprivation, and sexual exploitation. Madhumati profits from prostitution disguised as religious duty. Sidhwa exposes how doctrine legitimises abuse. Yet Shakuntala's questioning of scripture suggests internal resistance.

Through vivid imagery and restrained prose, Sidhwa critiques religious ideology while preserving cultural nuance. Widowhood becomes a lens through which systemic victimisation is examined.

Narrative Techniques and Ethical Responsibility

Across these novels, Sidhwa employs:

- Child or marginal narrators to expose ideological absurdities.
- Embodied realism that foregrounds vulnerability without sensationalism.
- Irony and satire to critique nationalist rhetoric.
- Ambiguous closures that resist narrative consolation.

These strategies position readers as ethical witnesses. Literature becomes an archive of memory and resistance.

Victimhood as Continuum

Sidhwa's women inhabit a spectrum between suffering and agency. Ayah survives trauma;

Zaitoon escapes; Feroza asserts independence; Shakuntala questions orthodoxy. Their resilience complicates narratives of passive victimhood.

This dialectical representation aligns with contemporary feminist thought, which emphasises structural critique alongside recognition of agency. Sidhwa neither sanctifies suffering nor denies systemic injustice. Instead, she insists on historical accountability and narrative testimony.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1988.

Conclusion

The novels of Bapsi Sidhwa articulate a sustained critique of the ideology of victimisation. By situating women's suffering within intersecting structures of patriarchy, nationalism, religion, and diaspora, Sidhwa reveals the systemic roots of gendered violence. Simultaneously, she foregrounds voice, survival, and ethical witnessing.

For Commonwealth literary studies, Sidhwa's work demonstrates that feminist critique and postcolonial historiography are inseparable. Her fiction transforms victimhood into testimony, compelling readers to confront the socio-political conditions that perpetuate inequality.

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