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Autobiographical elements in Bapsi Sidhwa and Namita Gokhale

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Abstract

An autobiographical novel is a kind of novel that uses auto fiction techniques and proficiency, or the unification of autobiographical and fictive elements. It is the amalgam of both autobiography and fiction. Real life names and places are altered and events are reorganised to make them more dramatic but the story has close similarity to that of the author's life. Both Bapsi Sidhwa and Namita Gokhale have portrayed some memorable women characters and events that relate to their life and times. There are some similarities as well as some dissimilarities as far as the women characters of these women novelists are concerned.

Keywords: Bapsi Sidhwa, Namita Gokhale, autobiography

Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa's vision in limning women characters in *The Crow Eaters* is comic as she portrays the vitality of life in Freddy's mother-in-law Jerbanoo, his wife Putli and his daughter-in-law Tanya. Jerbanoo's character provides us with a lot of fun throughout the novel. More specifically her encounter with her son-in-law Freddy is quite humorous. Some minor women characters like Rosy Watson and Hutoxi are also significant. The novelist's insight in presenting the marginalized Parsi Women like Putli, makes the novel both entertaining and educative.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* throws light on the repression of women in the Patriarchal Pakistani society. In fact, it is a true story narrated to her when she and her family camped in the remotest regions of the Karakoram Mountains. Sidhwa fictionalized this story and made it more complex. Keeping in view the male members' treatment of Zaitoon and her mother-in-law Hamida, one can understand how cruel the tribal men can be to maintain their so-called tribal code of honour.

The protagonist Zaitoon is trained as an obedient Muslim girl. After her marriage with an uncultured tribal man, Sakhi, in the northwest regions of Pakistan, she realizes how unfortunate she is. She represents those women who are facing quite a few problems these days in Pakistan. By portraying Zaitoon's character, Bapsi Sidhwa emphasizes the fact that in matrimonial affairs, the cultural backgrounds of the bride and the bridegroom must be kept in mind. Unfortunately, in our Indian society, there are people who believe that horoscopes of the bride and the bridegroom should match or at least their temperament should match. Zaitoon's marriage fails because she and her husband represent two totally different cultural backgrounds. One is born and brought up in Lahore; the other is born and brought up among the tribal people in the Karakomm Mountains. Her husband Sakhi beats Zaitoon for no fault of hers. Even Zaitoon's mother-in-law Hamida is beaten by her own son. Sakhi's treatment of his wife Zaitoon and his mother Hamida gives us a glimpse of the plight of women in Pakistan, because this novel is not based on Sidhwa's mere imagination but it is based on her real observations regarding the status of women in Pakistan.

Content in Sidhwa

Throughout her childhood years, Bapsi Sidhwa suffered from a deadly ailment of polio and she was instructed at home by an Anglo-Indian lady teacher. She has put autobiographical elements of her life in the *Ice Candy Man* through the character of Lenny. She confessed that her inventiveness would come out from a lonely moments. In *Ice-Candy Man* we come across

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the oppression and exploitation of Rodabai's younger sister by Rodabai. Though Slavesister is obedient, Rodabai treats her shabbily and humiliates her frequently. It is unfortunate that she is not allowed to exercise her discretion or her will in any situation. By creating Slavesister's character, Bapsi Sidhwa wants to convey an important message, or warning that the exploitation and suppression of one individual by another are not confined to the male-female relationship, but in several cases woman turns out to be woman's enemy. The female protagonists play a major role in *Ice-Candy Man*.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, like most diasporic writing from the Indian subcontinent, is deeply rooted in social and political complexities that characterize Asian societies today. In *An American Brat* the theme of marriage is examined from Parsi point of view. Feroza, the protagonist, falls in love with David Press, a Jew in America. Her family in general and her mother Zareen in particular are mentally prepared to go to any extent to prevent her from marrying a non-Parsi boy. Feroza believes that underneath the religious and cultural differences, she and David Press are alike but unfortunately her mother does not think so though at time she finds David admirable and appealing. Through portrayal of Feroza's character, Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the fact that the Parsi Community has different norms for men and different for women.

If a Parsi man marries a non-Parsi woman, he is acceptable to the community. But a Parsi woman is not acceptable to her community if she marries a non-Parsi man. It makes us think why this community like many other communities in India and Pakistan practice double standards. The novelist also emphasizes the fact that marriage is purely a personal matter. It has nothing to do with one's religion. Feroza at last declares boldly that she will carry the fire in her heart. This means that in case of her marriage with any Christian, Hindu or Jewish boy, her faith will be intact. Inter faith marriage will never disturb Feroza's faith in Zoroastrianism.

Bapsi Sidhwa like Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga and other Parsi novelists portrays her community as a protagonist in her novels. All the novels of Sidhwa exhibit the consciousness of the Parsi community to which she belongs. That is why their fictional discourses turn out to be ethnocentric discourse; for these writers it is a matter of pride to belong to an ethnic identity in the works of these writers. The Parsis without being concerned with sectarian politics lead a peaceful life contributing to the progress of the given country. However, all minority groups tend to experience anxiety, when they live in a dominant situation. Ethnocentric discourse is produced because of a lot of anxiety about their community. Except Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* all other novels focus on the Parsi community in many ways.

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Content in Gokhale

Namita Gokhale is a renowned contemporary novelist of Indian English literature. In her novels she has tried to illustrate how a woman can use her power to create a space for her existence. Primarily seen as a feminist, her feminism is rooted in the larger framework of human rights, of personal freedom and the right to body. Her novels lay stress on the independent existence of women. Apart from feminism in Gokhale's works, we also find historical aspects. The names of the heroines like Paro and Parvati are historical names. Sidhwa and Gokhale have frankly revealed the realities of life. Of course Sidhwa is a little somber in her revelations, even Namita Gokhale has mellowed down in her later novels like *The Book of Shadows and Gods, Graves and Grandmother*; compared to her debut novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion*. Here the character of Paro goes to any length to satiate her desires; she does not hesitate to take any revolutionary steps in her journey towards freedom. She appears to be vindictive and hateful towards men; and devoid of affection. It seems men are indirectly responsible for women's behaviour; as B.R. - sewing machine magnate, to whom Paro had married was a man without principles and did not hold the institution of marriage with respect. Due to such behaviour from her husband, Paro became vindictive. The character of Priya can be compared with Paro. It suggests the life principle of binaries. This novel is set within the backdrop of metropolitan life of Delhi and Bombay. Here the writer has proved to be very realistic, as in the present the situation in the metropolitan cities is very grim. Women are exploited, consumerism has created its own problems and women are allured by the shine. They even go for live-in-relationships. They are in such a mental state because of cultural erasure. The new generation wants to move ahead speedily, comfortably and without any baggage. Hence without responsibility and without duty one cannot acquire stability or happiness. It indicates that the society is under flux. Paro is a woman who has affairs with many men. But in reality she yearns for a man's love and security; though outwardly she appears to be strong. This we come to know through her behaviour; when rejected by Shambhunath Mishra. The portrayal of Paro's character is quite significant. She represents the new woman living in cosmopolitan cities of India on her own terms.

Gokhale's heroine Parvati in *A Himalayan Love Story*, shares the same fate; like Sidhwa's *Zaitoon*. We can draw similarities between *Zaitoon* of *The Pakistani Bride* and Parvati of *A Himalayan Love Story*. The name of the novel leads the reader to falsehood. There is no grandeur except the Kumoan hills as the backdrop. Otherwise life of Parvati is pathetic and tragic. She survives through her daughter-Irra. Apart from Parvati, the characters of Irra, Marie, Pasang Rampa, and Neera are there. For all the ladies except Irra, physical aspects are of more importance rather than inner beauty. Here a contrast between Irra and Marie can be developed. Adeleine the Eurasian lady is also portrayed to be emotionless. In *Zaitoon*'s case it is a story of displacement, here the case is quite similar.

The novel *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* also has a realistic touch about it. Here she has very well brought out the shrewdness, smartness of Ammi, the way she adopts the survival strategy. Even the novel highlights the social behaviour and the religious fervour prevailing in the society. The protagonist maneuvers things to her advantage. Kalki allures Gudiya who belongs to the younger generation. The

writer has portrayed the difference between the older and the younger generation of the Indian society. The older group is more practical than the younger group who exhibit their weaknesses. This is the story of displacement, but instead of being displaced, they have created their own space. Here the minor characters like Phoolwati and Lila are portrayed as dutiful, powerful women who can handle any situation. Lila is duty conscious and faithful towards Ammi; even Phoolwati is fully aware of her duty and takes care of Gudiya in Ammi's absence as a real mother. Here we can draw a resemblance with Miriam in *The Bride*. The role of motherhood is somewhat significant with these two characters.

The Book of Shadows is Gokhale's autobiographical novel. Like the heroine Rachita, she also oscillates in the shadows in her life. But the novel ends in optimism; though initially it exhibits escapism. The characters are in search of love. This is one of the major drawbacks of the postmodern society. Rachita withdraws herself in a remote house in the Himalayas. She wishes to be in the past, in the pristine days as her present is disturbing. She takes time to come to terms with reality. The writer has also used ghosts to narrate her story. Rachita has been disfigured by an acid attack and this physical harm is less in comparison to the psychological trauma she undergoes. She retreats to her childhood home to get mental peace and solace.

Conclusion

Both the writers are contemporary writers; hence they have dealt with the present problem from that perspective. The locale of Sidhwa's works deals with the city of Lahore, mountains of Karakoram and the city of New York. While for Gokhale it is the Himalaya Mountains, cities of Bombay and Delhi. Both Sidhwa and Gokhale are very frank in the portrayal of their bold and powerful characters. Bapsi Sidhwa with her wit and humour is able to change the macabre into a likeable reading. While Gokhale's characters know how to handle grim situations. Life in the hills is difficult compared to the plains; hence their ways are also harsh and cruel not befitting civilized men. Gokhale has portrayed the concept of 'naturalism' and 'freewill'. She appears to be pessimistic at times, as otherwise it is the Indian psychology to make amends with circumstances. She firmly believes that she has portrayed Indian characters and Indianness is there in her works. Invariably Gokhale's heroines paint and repaint their nails off and on; which implies that they wish to wipe out memories and hope for a better tomorrow. From high-class lady like Paro, ambitious Gudiya, dominating Phoolwati, and simpleton Parvati all paint their nails. It seems Namita has obsession for removing and painting nails. It is also significant that the modern society people use various colours and bold colours to hide their vacuum. Gokhale further wants to throw light on the fact that discipline is on the diminishing in the modern cosmopolitan society and men and women do prefer sobriety and simplicity but they prefer a pompous and glamorous life. So in that way also colours are symbolic of hope.

Both the writers exhibit autobiographical elements. Sidhwa's wide exposure has helped her to pen her experiences into a fictional work. Lenny in *Ice-Candy Man* is modeled upon Sidhwa herself.

The novel *The Pakistani Bride* is based on a real incident. *The Crow Eaters* is a saga of her community. An American Brat deals with theme of marriage as the concept of inter-caste marriage is still a taboo among the Parsis. Moreover; it also

deals with the hardships of displacement, as Sidhwa herself has shifted from Lahore to the States. When Gokhale wrote her first novel *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, she had just married and was at her peak.

Namita Gokhale has had many experiences (good and bad), which has provided the canvas to pen her feelings-and she did it through her novels. In *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, she has exposed the evil trends in society, the role of religion, death and as a subplot wove the story of Gudiya and Kalki. In *A Himalayan Love Story*, she has narrated the story within the backdrop of the hills, which is her first love and Parvati suffers as the writer also suffered after a brush with death, and devoid of husband's support. Rachita, the heroine of *The Book of Shadows* is moving in and out of shadows as the writer herself.

Through their fictional works Bapsi Sidhwa and Namita Gokhale have touched the pulse of the society. They have diagnosed the problem of the contemporary society. In a true sense they are the representatives of the contemporary society. Though women soar high, with academic qualifications, and economic independence; they have vacuum within themselves. To maintain the equilibrium of life; along with the juxtaposition of reform, relationships should also be revived. Then only a healthy and harmonious man woman relationship will flourish.

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