

Bapsi Sidhwa (1938-2024): Parsi Pakistani Writer between Lahore, Partition, and the US

Arif Azad



Bapsi Sidhwa, who died aged 86 in Houston, Texas on 25 December 2024, was Pakistan's pioneering woman fiction writer in English who rose to regional and global fame, blazing a trail which was followed by women writers who came after her. As a member of a microscopic and invisible community, she put Parsis on the world literary map. In introducing her people through her fictional characters to the world, she also introduced the world to the subcontinent; and its bloody and scarred partition into contemporary India and Pakistan.

Sidhwa was born in 1938 in Karachi, but raised and educated in Lahore. She graduated from the famous girls-only Kinnaird College in 1957. Her path to college education was not smooth. A polio-stricken child, she

was home-tutored from the age of 2 to 15 years. This home-schooled period proved a boon which she used to read widely, exploring and mining the imaginative possibilities of fiction.

She credits Charles Dickens, Leo Tolstoy, and V. S. Naipaul as her key formative literary influences. The traces of *The Pickwick Papers*, which she read avidly in her childhood, are evident in *The Crow Eaters* (1978). As a lonely child, she was also introduced to Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* by her Anglo-Indian tutor. The novel opened out to her a cast of women characters who kept her company in her solitude and loneliness.

Her family, the Bhandaras, are influential in business and politics in Pakistan. Her brother Minocher ('Mino') Bhandara was a politician, and formerly in the

National Assembly. As a child growing up in Lahore, in a politically and socially engaged family, Sidhwa saw many visiting leaders of the independence struggle, and some of the sense derived from these experiences fed into her novels as well.

She also enjoyed proximity to Pakistan's political elite, particularly the Bhutto family. She closely followed the twists and turns of Pakistan's first directly elected prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's murder show trial, which has been commonly dubbed a judicial hanging. These events she saw through the eyes of one of her own Parsi friends, Justice Dorab Patel, who was one of the dissenting supreme court judges in the Bhutto trial. In recent years, the supreme court in Pakistan has judged Bhutto's hanging as a miscarriage of justice.

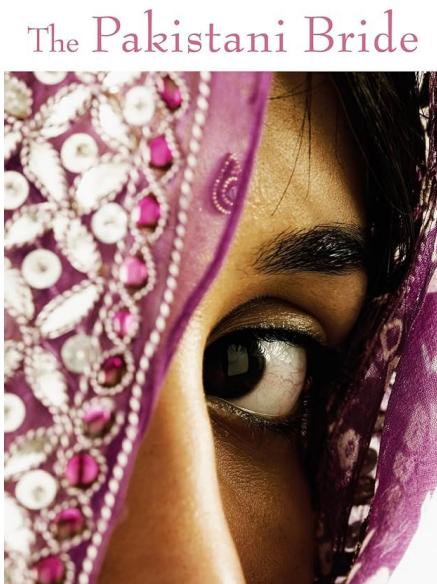
Her first marriage to a Bombayite Parsi ended in divorce, with her two children from the marriage remaining in India. It was difficult to maintain contact and see them due to partition-enforced bureaucratic hurdles. Her second marriage proved very fruitful intellectually and domestically.

The germ of her novel *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) sprouted from her honeymoon in the northern mountainous area of Pakistan, when she heard the story of a Punjabi girl taken to the region to be married into a conservative family. The Punjabi bride, who chafed against the restrictions imposed by her husband's conservative family, was killed while attempting to flee from a suffocating marriage.

Sidhwa's first instinct was to write the real-life event into a short story, but the momentum of the story led her to a full-scale novel. This was her first signature novel which spotlighted women's issues – a concern she renewed in her subsequent novels to varying degrees. With one novel after another, her commitment to women's rights seems to have solidified.

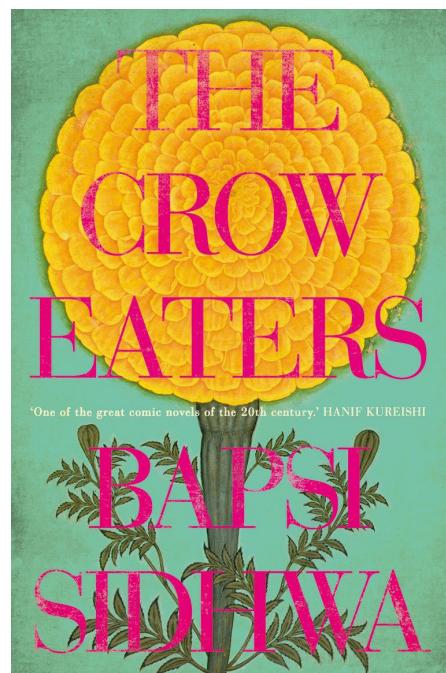
As a rights activist, she was at the forefront of struggles for women's equality in Pakistan. When the rights of women came under ferocious attack during General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship, she joined in regular protest marches organised by women's organisations in Lahore. Her novel, *An American Brat* (1993), also refers to that dark period in Pakistan's history when women's rights were in dire peril. Sidhwa also served as an advisor to the Benazir Bhutto government in the late 1980s on women's issues. In her own words, "I am a novelist, striving to bring women's issues of the Indian subcontinent into public discussion."

Her first novel was self-published. As a woman writer, and that too from a minority community, she faced challenges in making her way in the male-dominated literary world of Lahore. However, she persevered and forged literary friendships with leading Urdu writers such as Bano Qudsia and Ashfaq Ahmed, and famous poets Faiz Ahmad Faiz and feminist Kishwar Naheed. Despite these contacts, literary recognition was slow to come. It was only when her novel *The Crow Eaters*, was published by Jonathan Cape in the UK, that she began to be recognised widely, both in Pakistan and abroad.



BAPSI SIDHW

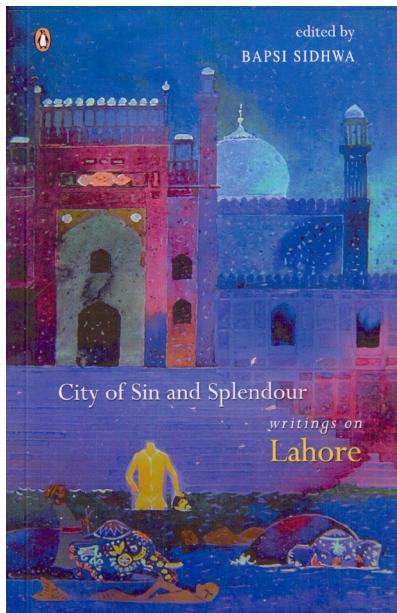
a novel by the author of *Cracking India*



As the Parsis have been financially successful but socially invisible, the literary spotlight her novel cast on them did not go down well with the community. Its launch in a local hotel in Lahore was called off due to a bomb threat. She went to great lengths to reassure her community that the novel portrayed them in an affectionate vein. *The Crow Eaters* is a heartwarming portrait of the Parsis in Pakistan, reflected through the characters of Faredoon 'Freddy' Junglewalla and his mother-in-law. The novel evokes a bygone era when Pakistan was powered by the business dynamism of minority communities, and the fast-vanishing community of the Parsis and their ways.

The trend of Parsi representation in Asian literature was later picked up by Indian-Canadian novelist Rohinton Mistry, who focused on the Parsis of Bombay. By and by, the Parsi community came to see her as their ambassador worldwide, and she was eventually enlisted in the hall of fame of the Zoroastrian faith, and a literary prize was established in her name. *The Crow Eaters* has also been translated into Urdu under the title *Jungle Wala Sahib* in 2012 by Umer Memon.

Lahore was central to Sidhwa's life, politics, and fiction. It is the recurring setting in her novels and other writings. Her novel *Ice Candy Man* (1988, published under the title *Cracking India* in the USA) is set in Lahore, as is *The Crow Eaters*.



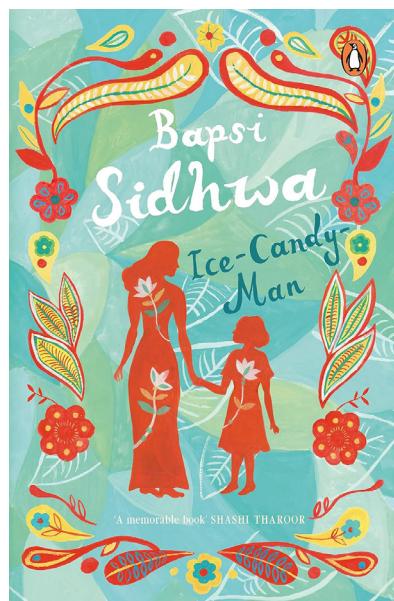
In 2006, she collected writings on Lahore titled *City of Sin and Splendour: Writings on Lahore*, which included essays, besides hers, by other famous writers of Lahore origin such as Ved Mehta and Pran Nevile. In

the collection are also included extracts and essays from the writings of Sara Suleri, Mohsin Hamid, Kishwar Naheed, and famous Urdu writers Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Saadat Hasan Manto.

Her last collection of short stories, *Their Language of Love* (2013), also features Lahore as its setting. In her introduction to *City of Sin and Splendour*, she recalls Lahore in all its glory and presents one of the most heartfelt tributes to the city. "I've tried to cover as many aspects of Lahore as possible, from the historical perspective to aspects of the modern city".

Many later novelists also used Lahore as a source of inspiration in their fiction. Mohsin Hamid's debut novel *Moth Smoke* (2000) is centred around Lahore under the jackboot of General Zia-ul-Haq. Sara Suleri's Lahore-drenched memoir *Meatless Days* (1989), is a paean to the culture and creative spirit of the city Sidhwa so dearly loved.

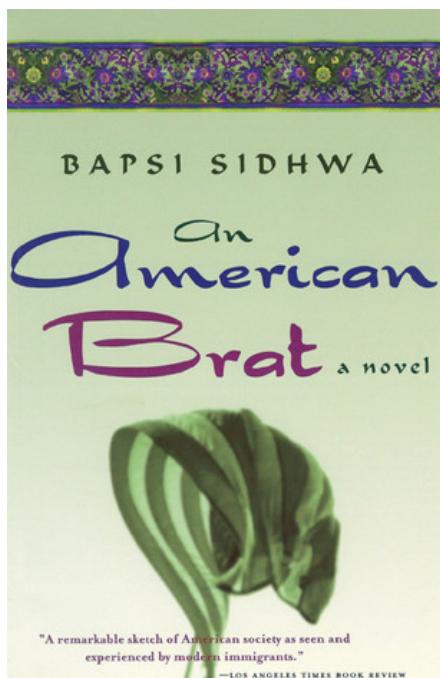
Though she moved to the US in 1983, Sidhwa still made it a point to spend a great deal of time in Lahore. In that sense Sidhwa remained a Lahori through and through, maintaining her home there until the last decade of her life. She was a regular fixture at literary gatherings in Lahore in the 1980s, and lived as part and parcel of the city's cultural life. I attended many literary salons during my student days where she read from her work-in-progress.



However, it was in the US where Sidhwa completed her most famous work *Ice Candy Man*, which remains one of the best-known works on the partition of India, along with "Toba Tek Singh" (1955) by

Saadat Hasan Manto and *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh. It is a staple in university teaching on the literature of the breakup of countries and the separation and displacement of peoples.

Sidhwa was deeply marked by partition and the communal violence in its wake. Though the Parsis were largely spared attack by other communities, she was witness to its horrors. Her best-known book, *Ice Candy Man*, centres around the events of the partition of India. The story is told through the eyes of a Parsi child, a polio-struck girl who saw the mindless communal violence perpetrated by Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. The narrator, like Sidhwa, tells the story of partition-related violence from a unique minority vantage. The novel was made into a film titled *Earth* (1998) by Indian-Canadian film-maker Deepa Mehta. Both the film and the novel have gained traction not only in the region but also worldwide. One of the reasons the novel gained recognition was the fact that it was written from a non-Muslim and non-Hindu viewpoint.



An American Brat was also completed in the US. The novel showed Sidhwa's growing engagement with concerns of diaspora and cultural tensions that arise out of migration to another culture. The novel speaks to this tension in an eloquent way in relation to a Parsi woman who marries outside of her community, earning the ire of her community. *An American Brat* is set both in Lahore and the US, reflecting an in-betweenness which Sidhwa herself was negotiating.

Sidhwa later wrote the script for a play based on *An American Brat*, directed by Brad Dalton (2007). Kali Theatre also staged her play *Sock 'em With Honey* (2003) in the UK. Less famously, she also turned the screen script of Deepa Mehta's film, *Water*, into a novel of the same name (2006).

With increasing literary success came a slew of speaking and teaching engagements in the US and the UK. She taught creative writing courses at the University of Columbia, Brandeis University, University of Houston, Mount Holyoke College, Rice University, and Southampton University.

Sidhwa was the recipient of Sitara-i-Imtiaz ('Star of Excellence'), Pakistan's highest honour in the arts. She was also the recipient of the Bunting Fellowship at Radcliffe/Harvard, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award, the Literaturpreis in Germany, and the Primo Mondello Award in Italy. Sadia Uqaili has produced a 2022 documentary on her story titled *Bapsi: Silences of My Life*. Sidhwa is survived by her children Mohur, Khudadad and Parizad; and a younger brother Feroze, her older brother Minocher having predeceased her in 2008.

Arif Azad is a public policy and public health professional, who studied medicine in Lahore; he is the author most recently of *Thinkers, Dreamers and Doers: People, Places and Ideas of our Time* (2022, Islamabad: Iqbal International Institute for Research & Dialogue).

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