



# Voices from the Gaps

# Bapsi Sidhwa

*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.*

— Interview with Bapsi Sidhwa in Massachusetts Review, 1990



## Biography

Bapsi Sidhwa is an award winning Pakistani novelist striving above all to bring women's issues of the Indian subcontinent into public discussion. She was born in 1938 in Karachi, Pakistan (then part of India), but her family migrated shortly thereafter to Lahore. As a young girl, Sidhwa witnessed first-hand the bloody Partition of 1947, in which seven million Muslims and five million Hindus were uprooted in the largest, most terrible exchange of population that history has known. The Partition was caused by a complicated set of social and political factors, including religious differences and the end of colonialism in India. Sidhwa writes about her childhood, "the ominous roar of distant mobs was a constant of my awareness, alerting me, even at age seven, to a palpable sense of the evil that was taking place in various parts of Lahore" ("New Neighbors"). Sidhwa was also witness to these evils, including an incident in which she found the body of a dead man in a gunnysack at the side of the road.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1938
- \* Pakistani novelist and women's rights advocate
- \* Author of *Cracking India*

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# Bapsi Sidhwa

## Biography continued

Characteristically succinct, she says of the event, “I felt more of a sadness than horror” (*Mass. Review* 523). Her home city of Lahore became a border city in Pakistan, and was promptly flooded by hundreds of thousand of war refugees. Many thousands of these were women - victims of rape and torture. Due to lasting shame and their husbands’ damaged pride, many victims were not permitted entry into their homes after being “recovered.” There was a rehabilitation camp with many of these women adjacent to Sidhwa’s house, and she states that she was inexplicably fascinated with these “fallen women,” as they were described to her at the time. She realized from a young age that “victory is celebrated on a woman’s body, vengeance is taken on a woman’s body. That’s very much the way things are, particularly in my part of the world” (Graeber 6). It appears as if realizations such as this inspired Sidhwa’s later activism for the cause of women’s rights.

Sidhwa claims to have had a rather boring childhood, with the exception of the years of strife surrounding the Partition, due partly to a bout with polio, which kept her home schooled. She cites *Little Women* as being the most influential book of her childhood, as it introduced her to “a world of fantasy and reading--I mean extraordinary amounts of reading because that was the only life I had” (Rajan, p.1). She went on to receive a BA from Kinnaird College for Women, in Lahore. At nineteen, Sidhwa got married, and soon after gave birth to the first of three children. While traveling in Northern Pakistan in 1964, Sidhwa heard the story of a young girl who was murdered by her husband after an attempted escape. She looked into the story and discovered that the girl was a purchased wife, a slave. This discovery moved Sidhwa into action. She began to tell the girl’s story in the form of a novel.

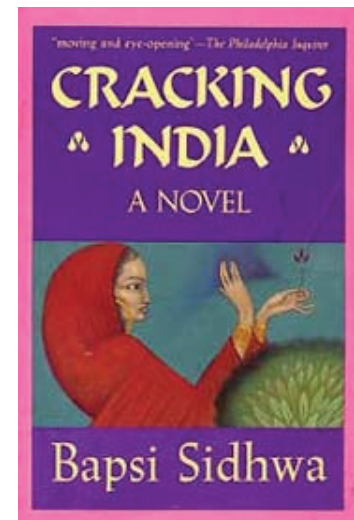
Along with prevailing expectations of women’s place during that time in Pakistan, the responsibilities of raising a family prompted Sidhwa to write in secret. Although Sidhwa speaks four languages, she made a conscious decision to write in English, partly due to the increased probability of worldwide exposure to issues that concerned her within the subcontinent. At that time there were no English language books published in Pakistan, so after Sidhwa finished writing the novel, she published it herself as *The Bride*. The novel was critically acclaimed for its forceful style and its undeniable ability to speak eloquently of human warmth amid horrible circumstances. She received the Pakistan National Honors of the Patras Bokhri award for *The Bride* in 1985.



# Bapsi Sidhwa

## Biography continued

Soon after publication of *The Bride*, Sidhwa began work on her second novel, *The Crow Eaters*. The novel is named after derogatory slang referring to the Parsi people, in reference to their supposed propensity for loud and continuous chatter. *The Crow Eaters* is a comedy, which signals an abrupt change from her earlier work. The Parsis, or Zoroastrians, are the socio-religious group to which Sidhwa belongs, a prosperous yet dwindling community of approximately one hundred thousand based predominantly in Bombay. *The Crow Eaters* tells the story of a family within the small Parsi community residing within the huge city of Lahore. Complete with historical information and rich with bawdy, off-color humor, the novel is never boring; as Sidhwa's acute sense of humor constantly changes from the subtle to the downright disgusting. Nothing is above this humor, which often times leaves the reader feeling guilty for laughing out loud. The main character, Faredoon, relentlessly torments his mother-in-law Jerbanoo, especially about her self-indulgent complaints of impending death. Some of the most hilarious moments involve Faredoon's detailed and gory description of her funeral. The Parsis practice charity in life as well as death, and their funeral custom of feeding the body to the vultures reflects this belief.



Bapsi Sidhwa's third novel marked her move into international fame. *Cracking India*, was published in several other countries in 1988 under the title *Ice-Candy-Man*. Book sellers stateside feared that an American audience would mistake the unfamiliar occupational name (meaning popsicle vendor) for a drug pusher. The novel is considered by many critics to be the most moving and essential book on the Indian partition. Told from the awakening consciousness of an observant eight-year-old Parsi girl, the violence of the Partition threatens to collapse her previously idyllic world. The issues dealt with in the book are as numerous as they are horrifying. The thousands of instances of rape, and public's subsequent memory loss that characterize the Partition are foremost. In the hatred that has fueled the political relations between Pakistan and India since that time, these women's stories were practically forgotten.



# Bapsi Sidhwa

## Biography continued

In one of her infrequent bursts of poetry, Sidhwa writes, “Despite the residue of passion and regret, and loss of those who have in panic fled-- the fire could not have burned for . . . Despite all the ruptured dreams, broken lives, buried gold, bricked-in rupees, secreted jewelry, lingering hopes. . . the fire could not have burned for months . . .” (*Cracking India*, 149) Sidhwa replaces flowing, poetic sentences with forceful criticism when she theorizes about what caused the fires to keep burning. Sidhwa repeatedly condemns the dehumanizing impact that religious zealotry played in promoting mob mentality, separation, and revenge during the Partition. Sidhwa’s widely varied narration alternates between opulent description, subtle humor, and bone-chilling strife. The narrator, Lenny, is astute beyond her years, yet the questioning nature of the child is portrayed so skillfully that it allows the author to effectively deal with serious subjects both firmly and with subtlety, whichever suits her purpose. When she discovers that her mother is illegally stockpiling gasoline, Lenny wrongly assumes that her mother is responsible for the bombings that are plaguing Lahore. This image is both funny and disturbing, highlighting the strange mixture of innocence and fear that Lenny is dealing with. When the citizens of Lahore become more apprehensive of the impending Partition, they stratify strictly upon religious lines. Lenny’s perceptions of the differences in people changes at the same time. In reference to a Hindu man’s caste mark, Lenny proclaims, “Just because his grandfathers shaved their heads and grew stupid tails is no reason why Hari should.” “Not as stupid as you think,” says Cousin. “It keeps his head cool and his brain fresh” (*Cracking India*, 102). Seemingly simple passages such as this one succinctly and with humor on the realities of prejudice, and hint at a child’s precise realization of the discriminatory nature of the caste system. The novel is made up of hundreds of such cleverly phrased passages, which make the book quite enjoyable to read despite the clarity with which the troubling passages are depicted.

Women’s issues, the implications of colonization, and the bitterly divided quagmire of partisan politics that the British left in their wake are reevaluated in the novel, picked apart by the sharp questions of a child. Sidhwa’s credibility in the eyes of the press and literary critics of the subcontinent is remarkably accentuated by virtue of her being a Parsi, a woman, and a first-hand witness to the violence. The Parsis remained neutral during the Partition, a fact well remembered by two countries that are enemies to this day over the highly disputed events of the Partition. Sidhwa uses this impartial position to its fullest, contributing greatly to the national discourse on the matter. Critical analysis of *Cracking India* deals with a wide variety of topics in the novel, including several analyses of Sidhwa’s subtext on male/female authority issues. *Cracking India* was made into the visually and emotionally stunning, highly acclaimed film *Earth*, by Pakistani-Canadian director Deeptha Mehta in 1999.



# Bapsi Sidhwa

## Biography continued

Sidhwa travels frequently to Pakistan in her capacities as a women's rights activist. Sidhwa works with women to help foster an awareness of their rights, including the organization of large-scale awareness-raising public protests. She also utilizes her position as an acclaimed writer to make numerous public statements in the Pakistani media aimed against repressive measures that harm women and minority communities. She has worked as the voluntary secretary in the Destitute Women and Children's home in Lahore for years, and was appointed to the advisory committee to Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Women's Development.

Since moving to the United States in 1983, Sidhwa has received numerous literary awards both in the U.S. and abroad. In 1987 she was awarded both a Bunting Fellowship at Radcliffe/Harvard and a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts that allowed her to finish *Cracking India*. In 1991 Sidhwa received the Sitara-i-Imitaz, Pakistan's highest national honor in the arts, along with the Literaturepreis in Germany. In 1993 she published her most recent novel, *An American Brat*, a comical reflection on the confusing friction that different cultures impose upon a Pakistani girl in the United States. The same year she received the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award, which, pleasantly enough, also included one hundred five thousand dollars. The author has received numerous other awards for her writing.

Bapsi Sidhwa is currently working on a collection of short stories. She has recently taught at a number of American universities, including Princeton, Rice University, Brandeis, and Mt. Holyoke. In her most recently published essay, for *Time Magazine*, she reflects on the Partition's victims of rape. "What legacy have these women left us? I believe that their spirit animate all those women that have bloomed into judges, journalists, ngo official, filmmakers, doctors and writers-- women who today are shaping opinions and challenging stereotypes" ("New Neighbors").



# Bapsi Sidhwa

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