



# **Crossing Borders, Crossing Selves: A Comparative Reading of Migrant and Refugee Experiences in the Works of Khaled Hosseini and Bapsi Sidhwa**

**Dr Sreevidhya S**

Facilitator & Assistant Professor

Department of English (Shift II)

Agurchand Manmull Jain College

Meenambakkam, Chennai-61

A comparative analysis of the works of Khaled Hosseini and selected works of Bapsi Sidhwa is done to identify the important aspects of both the writers as well as the countries that are taken for this study. Analysis is done based on a few comparative methods suggested by Ulrich Weisstein. According to Ulrich Weisstein,

“The student who considers literature from a comparative point of view will find that, like the notions of period, current, and movement, the concept of genre offers an extremely fruitful field of investigation. In cultivating this branch of literary theory, the scholar must proceed historically as well as critically if he is to discover principles that make possible a systematic arrangement of his material”. (Ulrich Weisstein, 1973, 99).

The discrimination based on religion is found in both the countries they belong to. Both the writers, Khaled Hosseini and Bapsi Sidhwa, belong to two different nations that follow the same religion. However, they follow different religious faiths. Khaled Hosseini was brought up in the calmer Afghanistan which was predominantly Islam and followed religious norms as taught to them. Pakistan is more open towards development and Afghanistan seems more restricted towards seeking help for development. The geographical boundaries have created distinction in the minds of their people. Ever since its independence

after colonization, Pakistan has witnessed improvement in various ways like education, infrastructure and medical aid. But Afghanistan continues to remain backward in all these. The writers have attempted to talk about the nations that they belong to. Khaled Hosseini was brought up in the calmer Afghanistan which was predominantly Islam and followed religious norms as taught to them. The situation changed such that it is deprived of improvement. The Soviet war and the Taliban war, has left the country in rags. Religious extremists have had their time of play to deep root, their beliefs in the name of religion, strong into the minds of the innocents. Khaled Hosseini's writings demonstrate the need for the world to realise that the country which is dominant of Islam is devastated by both religious extremists and the reluctant attitude of people to move forward in life.

Bapsi Sidhwa followed Parsi culture and enjoys the credit of two nations, India and Pakistan. She prefers to be called as a Punjabi- Pakistani-Parsi novelist. She was not brought up as the Muslims of her nation but followed Parsi faith alongside accepting civilizational changes. Her writings are influenced by the Muslim culture and her stories are shaped by not only the "Muslim" community but also by the Non-Muslim people who have also contributed to the evolving of her stories. There is a strong mention of her Parsi culture in her novel *An American Brat*. Parsi people are always mentioned as peace loving and they mix with the culture of the new place easily. They firmly believe in their Zoroastrian ideas and never go against them. They worship 'fire' and hence go to the Fire Temple to offer prayers. They believe that fire is not just an element needed much to sustain life, but also has the power to cleanse.

In comparison to the two countries, Pakistan is highlighted as a better place to live, because they are more willing to improve. Hosseini's attempt to show the world that his nation is wounded and needs relief is well established. There are feelings of loss- lost love and relationships in the writings of Khaled Hosseini. There are feelings of yearning for love in the writings of Bapsi Sidhwa. Hosseini and his family left Kabul when he was only eleven years old. If his family had not chosen to leave their motherland, they would have ended up just as the other poor millions who were displaced. The wish to return to one's homeland is always deep rooted in the hearts of those who live as refugees. Though life has given them an opportunity to live better, Hosseini has used this opportunity to throw light on Afghanistan through his writings. Bapsi Sidhwa belongs to the Parsi community that fled Iran, fearing religious extremism. In general, Parsi people are peace loving and very adjusting across the globe. The Parsis are highly religious and follow their rules according to the Zoroastrian faith, strictly.

The Parsis have remained as people who left their home in search of peace and betterment. When they came to India, partition affected them and many were sent to Pakistan. Their affinity towards their motherland as well as the country in which they lived remained original. Though they remained people who fled from their homeland, they did not support inter-caste marriages. They may be called simple minded people, very friendly and peace loving, but they are strong in their culture and follow their religious duties strictly.

In this research, it is understood that diasporic identities of the two writers have paved way for the world to realise that there are various groups of people and their fatigued life which are not exposed to the remaining world. It is through writers like Khaled Hosseini and Bapsi Sidhwa that the most traumatic conditions and most downtrodden people of their nations have been brought to light. It is autobiographical in nature.

Alongside diasporic identity, being a common factor in both the writers, the plight of women, gender bias, birth and death, class consciousness, marriage, cultural differences and religious extremism are also researched. There is a representation of Islam in the life of all women, in the writings of Hosseini. The best lesson that they learn in life is to endure. Bapsi Sidhwa in her writings, highlights the subjugation of women and the upper hands of religious men. Though she creates Parsi characters in her novels, the influence of the people around is inevitable and the lives of women are decided by the law makers. Prejudice is met on the poor souls as verdicts. Patriarchy is a common factor in both the countries. Women do not have rights over decision making, as they think that the religion Islam, considers women to be indecisive.

Women are respected only if they deliver a boy baby. It becomes logical to support a woman who has a son rather than a daughter so that the family is carried forward. Women are not provided the right towards education. The novels of Hosseini show how, in Afghanistan, there are patriarchal laws created by the men to prevent women from getting educated.

However, the author wishes to change the situation in his homeland and has, hence, created Pari in *And The Mountains Echoed*, to reveal how women can explore their knowledge and become free like men. Decision making is possible by women too and Bapsi Sidhwa shows this clearly in the novel, *An American Brat*. The economic crisis of Afghanistan and the terror affected Pakistan are inevitable in the writings of both Khaled Hosseini and Bapsi Sidhwa. The urge to return home is natural and inevitable. Though there is less discourse available to distinguish or equally weigh the highly complex and volatile nations, they have

yet provided optimism to authors compelling them to write the present state of life. There are political, social and religious issues that have contributed to the material for writers. With class consciousness reigning high there has always been division of Shia Muslims and Sunni Muslims. The influence of one on the other has become a catastrophe in the already weak society.

Men are always portrayed to be extraordinary, either in the form of harshness or in the form of the love they exhibit. Baba in *The Kite Runner*, the loving brother Abdullah in *And The Mountains Echoed*, Manek in *An American Brat* are characters who show abundant love and concern for women. Men are also capable of being compassionate and loving. Though women have always remained as an embodiment of shame and suffering, heroic traits of women are also pictured in the novels of both writers. Male dominancy and the privilege to feel higher in authority is based on the gender differentiation brought by the patriarchal law makers. Assef in *The Kite Runner*, Qasim, Sakhi and Rasheed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, are characters with dominating harsh personalities.

Women are not only capable of bearing tortures, but also are capable of rising to mutiny. Mariam who fights against her harsh husband Rasheed in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and Zaitoon who escapes the tyranny of her sadist husband Sakhi in *And The Mountains Echoed* are vital examples to prove that women will rise to stand for themselves. The women of these two countries are not much different in terms of the tortures and the tyrannical treatment from their husbands. But, the men of Pakistan, according to the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa have shown better thinking levels to provide freedom to women.

Though there are men who consider women inferior to them, there are also men who advocate methods of improvement in women's lives. Laila's father in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* always dreams of giving the best of education to his daughter and, hence, allow her to study. Non-profit organisations and self-help groups have helped the war-torn Afghanistan. Yet, there are many instances of illiteracy among Afghan women.

Women have been used as a reservoir of emotions, tears, endurance and patience.

Women writers are at their best in portraying womanhood, their relationships with the world they are exposed to, their anguishes and their never visualised dreams. Feroza in *An American Brat* is a character who challenges for change. She is focused on the outside world of objects and sensory perceptions and actions. Her sociability and assertiveness are traits to be proud in comparison to her old nature but, conservative theory suppresses it. At one point, she is shocked to find a different self of her. Conservative

principles and values are grounded in her but an attempt to return to “where things were” is impossible because of ego. Zaitoon and Carol in *The Pakistani Bride* are not exposed to freedom as Feroza. They are unable to bring in change in their lives or demand equality with men in the society. Their inability to break the shackles and rise is only capable of a silent mutiny in their hearts. Gender is a constraint found in both the novelist’s characters. Though there has been a considerable development in the society with regard to women, there is also a negative perception that pulls down women. Denial in the name of faith is found in the novels.

The people of Islam worship the formless God Allah. The men in the family go to the mosque to offer prayers and they learn to recite the Holy Quran. Eating meat is not considered a sin according to the Islam culture. The women offer their prayers from home just as the men do, compulsorily five times in a day. The Parsis worship Zoroaster and is named as *Ahura Mazda*. They go to *Agiyari* to pray. They do not eat beef as they believe that Zoroaster was saved from the murderers by a cow when he was a small child.

The religious rites followed in both cultures are different. When a person belonging to Islam dies, he is buried with proper prayers and recital of the Holy verses of the Quran. They consider the body of the dead to be a pure one. But in the Parsi culture, when a person dies, they neither cremate nor bury the body of the dead person. Instead they place it on the Tower of Silence or *Dakhma*, to allow scavenging birds and other creatures to feed on. Cremating and burying are considered to pollute the environment according to the Parsis. Hence, they leave the body on the top of the mountain or Tower of Silence.

Khaled Hosseini has narrated through his story-telling techniques, the sad state of his war-torn Afghanistan. His stories are an attempt to revive the country through various possible means so that those who have left the country will be able to return to their homeland without any further fear. Bapsi Sidhwa has used personal experiences to project the position of women and has also highlighted the need for women empowerment. The characters in her novels are examples that are capable of inspiring people, helping them identify such an element of yearning to improve, within themselves. The dream to see their respective countries as a well improved, healthy, safe and empowered nation is met in the stories they have created. The hope to see their nations develop and be able to stand without influences from anti-social elements is not very far in the views of both the writers.

---

REFERENCES

---

- Hosseini, Khaled. *And the Mountains Echoed*. Riverhead Books, 2013.
- , *The Kite Runner*. Riverhead Books, 2003.
- , *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Riverhead Books, 2007.
- Robinson, C. S. *The Theme of Erasure and Survival: A Comparative Study of Alice Walker and Bama*. 2015. Alagappa University, PhD dissertation. Shodhganga, Dec. 2015. PDF file.
- Sidhwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat*. Milkweed Editions, 1993.
- , *The Pakistani Bride*. Milkweed Editions, 1983.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Columbia University Press, Mar. 2010.
- , *Death of a Discipline*. Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Totosy de Zepetnek, Steven. *Studies in Comparative Literature*. Rodopi, 1998. Word file.
- Weisstein, Ulrich. *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory*. Indiana University Press, 1973.
- Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. Vol. 1, London, 1796.