

## A Genetic Feminist Study of Selected Works from Bapsi Sidhwa

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### Abstract

*This Research paper examines the challenges faced by women in Pakistani society through an analysis of English fiction written by Pakistani woman author Bapsi Sidhwa. The research focuses on the themes of resistance and struggle observed in selected works, with specific attention given to the writings of author Bapsi Sidhwa. By delving into the miserable conditions depicted in these works, including sexual prejudice, rape, and forced marriages, this study aims to shed light on the gendered inequality prevalent in Pakistan. To analyze the existence of women in a male-chauvinistic culture, this research employs a Genetic Feminist theoretical framework (1980, 1983, 1986, and 2008).*

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Male chauvinism, Suppression of Women, Feministic inquiry, Pakistani Literature

### I. Introduction

Many writers of fiction in English from Pakistan emerged in the early stages of the twenty-first century, with many winning or being nominated for international prizes. Kamila Shamsie earned Pakistan's first literature prize for her debut novel, and her third work, *Kartography* (2002), received the prestigious John Llewelyn Rhys Prize. Uzma Aslam Khan was also among Pakistani novelists selected for the Commonwealth Literary Writers' Prize (Eurasia area) for her second novel, *Trespassing* (2003). Kamila Shamsie is one of the emerging authors who have received considerable attention.

Pakistani fiction written by women is characterized by various themes that continually change and progress towards perfection. The main themes portrayed by these Pakistani English writers include hunger, poverty, diseases, social evils, relations between different races, and Indian national movements during the creation of two different states, collateral damage for the struggle for freedom, and the contrasting situation between tradition and modernity. However, women fiction writers have a different agenda, focusing on presenting patriarchy and gender issues.

Pakistani literature in English has evolved significantly, with women writers addressing various topics that cater to the interests of different strata of life, including women. These novels have imprinted on the world literary stage, captivating readers through innovative depictions of recurrent motifs, such as the conflict between East and West, multiculturalism, gender issues, and different aspects of human nature, including diaspora themes and magical realism.

The researcher aims to describe why some recurrent themes resurface in two texts and how these themes are relevant to women, exploring theoretical interpretations included in primary and secondary data. This research provides a literary critique of two novels Bapsi Sidhwa authored.

#### 1.1 Research Objectives

Some male writers from Pakistan are well-recognized worldwide, presenting diverse perspectives through their themes and outlook. However, many have viewed the world from a

male-chauvinistic standpoint. Since men may need to grasp the female experience fully, they may need to accurately portray women's perspectives in their true colors. With their prejudices and concerns to navigate, male writers can effectively present male points of view.

### 1.2 Research Questions

The research questions for the present study are:

(i) Are the recurrent motifs elaborated by Bapsi Sidhwa in her representative pieces of fiction ordinarily different from those that male fiction writers elaborate on?

(ii) Is it correct that Bapsi Sidhwa always tries to stick to a feminist perspective or wild zone?

These questions form the basis for the research investigation and aim to explore the distinctions in recurrent motifs between male and female fiction writers, challenge the assumption that women have exclusive themes, and examine whether women writers consistently adhere to feminist perspectives or explore the "wild zone" in their works.

### II Review of Literature

Specializing in Victorian literature at the turn of the nineteenth century, Showalter's groundbreaking work revolves around the representation of lunacy and hysteria in literature, particularly in the writing of women and the depiction of female characters. Several Pakistani female authors have contributed to the literary canon, and their works can be analyzed within the theoretical framework of gynocriticism proposed and established by Showalter. Within Pakistani English literature, numerous female writers have produced women-centered writing, forming a crucial foundation for gynocriticism. Elaine Showalter (born January 21, 1941) is a literary critic, feminist, and cultural and social commentator from the United States. She has influenced feminist literary criticism across academic circles in the United States, introducing the concept and application of gynocritics, a study focusing on women as authors.

The themes of female usurpation and male chauvinism are explored in works by Uzra Aslam Khan, Feriyal Gauhar, and Moazzam Sheikh. These fictional works depict chauvinism among men in different eras. Two notable works, Mumtaz Shah Nawaz's *The Heart Divided* and Sorayya Khan's *Noor*, offer accurate depictions of Pakistani culture where males are portrayed as usurpers and females are colonized. *The Heart Divided* explores male dominance through the stories of two sisters, Zohra and Sughra Jamaluddin, fervent supporters of Congress and the Muslim League in Punjab, respectively. *Noor* by Sorayya Khan breaks the silence on female ideas and addresses issues of exploitation and hidden memories, particularly in the context of Down syndrome.

Pakistani women writers and the suppressed histories stored in their works navigate a delicate balance between the potential healing force of an autonomous, decolonized future and their marginalized status within an ostensibly 'inclusive' reality.

The female lead characters in Sidhwa's writings try to show how men try to dominate women emotionally. They are physically and sexually violated. Sidhwa shows that women are fighting against such norms and traditions. These norms and traditions try to restrict women in different ways, restricting their behavior and appearance. This common ground in the literature of Sidhwa is an interpretation of women in the background of Pakistani culture. Sidhwa began writing on women's places in her community after challenging the customary roles assigned to women. When Sidhwa decided to follow her dream of becoming an author in the early seventies, she was among the few female English fiction authors who portrayed realistic pictures.

Sidhwa is one of the most famous novelists in Pakistani English literature, and she has demonstrated herself to be a promising writer regarding gender issues. Sidhwa moved to America alongside her husband in 1983 and lives in Houston, Texas. Sidhwa's stay in America

proved wholesome for her. Her love for her homeland, notably her birthplace in the Pakistani city of Lahore, and her Punjabi heritage remain strong.

Sidhwa says in an interview with Bachi Karkaria, "Simply by virtue of my gender, I am a woman." She does not feel like an American and says, "Her strengthened three (Ps) identification has enhanced her fiction." (Singh 6)

Sidhwa has lived in two countries, and it has strengthened her outlook on socioeconomic problems. She portrays the problems that impact Pakistani women in both countries. Her depiction of sexual subjugation in Pakistani society is a primary focus of her fiction. Her overall awareness stems from her experience in America, a place with far more sexual freedom.

Sidhwa's novels tackle these societal themes in Pakistani society, including marriage, sexual commercialization, and female victimization. It makes her later work, *An American Brat*, better suited to this research because it focuses on Pakistani women's cultural conflict and experiences in the diaspora.

Singh claims in her writings that Sidhwa's fictional female characters are remarkably similar to the author herself in real life. Singh argues that despite their general lack of rebellion, these characters carefully manage the expectations placed on them by their parents, society, and culture. However, in the face of an immediate threat to their identity and very survival, these ladies lose all self-control and fight back, fiercely opposing the evil plans of their enemies. (Singh 22)

In addition, Sidhwa is a Parsee by her belief system. She actively addresses her cultural and religious traditions, adoring and condemning her Parsee characters' lifestyles humorously. As a woman, she is interested in women's lives in general and specifically in Pakistani culture. "Ice Candy Man" and, mainly, "The Pakistani Bride" consist of Pakistani Muslim characters.

As a result, this research investigates and emphasizes the struggle of women. These women seem to be searching for identity against artificial cultural taboos that have captured women under the cover of culture and religion, much like demons. The female characters in the selected works deal with various cultural and social subjects. They provide different viewpoints on female sexuality and physicality. These characters become vital in the study concerning their feminine identity. The women of Sidhwa learn about gender oppression via sexual awakening, abuse of sexuality (rape, coerced marriage), and sexist prejudice.

### III. Materials and Methods

#### 3.3 Object of the Study

The research is centered on examining the works of selected representative Pakistani woman writer Bapsi Sidhwa, with a primary emphasis on analyzing her significant literary contributions. The study aims to delve deeply into the recurrent themes present in her works. Additionally, it seeks to challenge and scrutinize the biased perceptions that label women writers as having limited thinking and accuse their fiction of being characterized by repetitive themes.

#### 3.2 Research Approach

The qualitative research method will be employed in this study to analyze the most recurrent themes discussed in different pieces of fiction by Bapsi Sidhwa utilizing gynocritic theory, particularly within the theoretical framework of Showalter's gynocritic perspectives.

#### 3.3 Research Methods

*Content analysis* is the chosen research method, aiming to detect the existence of specific words, topics, or concepts in qualitative data, such as literature. This approach allows researchers to examine the language used in literary works, identifying biases, prejudices, and relationships

within the content. Various sources of data, including interviews, open-ended inquiries, field study notes, and historical records, may be used for content analysis.

The study employs relational analysis, which investigates the connections between concepts in a text, expanding on conceptual analysis. It focuses on the point of view of women writer Bapsi Sidhwa, with the addition of a gynocritical historical perspective to understand gynocriticism as a theoretical perspective.

### 3.4 Data Sources

The works selected for this research, "Ice Candy Man" (1988) and "The Pakistani Bride" (1983) by Bapsi Sidhwa, however, focus on women and their social and personal lives in Pakistani society. Sidhwa's oeuvre stands out from the other possibilities available due to its emphasis on women's domestic lives, making it the most suitable for this investigation. As women's bodies occupy priority in her search for self-assertion, her stories are firmly grounded in the experiences that women have daily.

### 3.5 Theoretical Framework

As literary theory books suggest, Showalter coined "gynocritics" to describe women-centered criticism. It suggests that this kind of criticism places women at its center. According to her, gynocriticism encompasses a variety of topics, such as the history, themes, and structures of women's writing. It presents the psychodynamics of women's creativity and has been derived from the individual or collective women's literary tradition. This typical study also focuses on the topic of gyneco-critical interpretation. Gynocritics tries to bring out a cultural position and identity of women by highlighting the cultural norms and traditions within the domain of the cultural field of women writers.

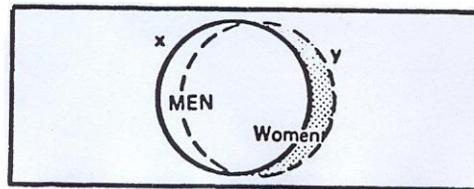
Showalter quotes Woolf and emphasizes women's writing differently: "It is courageous and sincere. This writing is close to what a woman feels. Neither it is bitter nor does it insist heavily on femininity. Yes, it is certain that women write in a different way." This kind of writing suggests that men are outsiders somehow. They may think that male writing is egocentric, self-deluding, and sterile. Women writers could feel that the entire literary tradition, monopolized by male writers over women writers, had one common effect: male writers misinterpreted women; they misrepresented women (ALTO 240-43).

A gynocritic constructs a female literary identity. It describes phenomena dealing with women writers' domain from a cultural perspective where they describe the social context in which they survive and write. From a gynocritic point of view, the present study digs into prominent Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa, who takes women's lives as a text source of strength. Sidhwa tries to create symbols, establishing a separate wild zone where she can thrive. She articulates women's issues elaborately, presenting recurrent themes often overlooked by male writers. Males have a different symbolic weight, but women carry forward their norms. Sidhwa intersects women writers' cultural field. She directly relates to the social context in which she survives and thrives.

Following feminism, steadfast female writers start to develop a new writing style. This style is insistently female. It celebrates a new female consciousness after being partially frightened by the public display of art that hovers just outside the normal boundaries of male writings. Through this purely female style of expression, women try to discard masculine and instead wholly adhere to their own unique experiences. Through artistic vision, they seek to connect various elements of the female experience. Form is more than "a matter of writer's creative choices." Every kind of

expression, regardless of content, gains meanings and values through a cultural and historical process (Strine 28).

One of the primary emphases of Showalter's cultural framework is how it depicts female custom. It is a positive means of vitality and solidarity. It is also capable of creating its own symbols. It opens up an untamed zone of experience, unlike male tradition. As a result, Showalter constructs the concept of a feminine "wild zone." Showalter depicts the juxtaposition of two groups. One of these is the male majority group. The other one is muted through the following illustration conceived by Ardener (qt. in Showalter, "Feminist Criticism" 200); she assumes that women form a muted category or group. The boundaries of this group's culture and reality overlap. The dominant (male) group does not entirely obstruct women.



Picture No.1 Showalter's Wild Zone

Showalter refers to the Y zone as the "wild zone" because it relates to a location where men are not allowed to step inside, a "no-man's-land," and because it refers to aspects of women's lives that are intangible to men and have not been experienced by them. The untamed area or "Female zone" is where symbolic feminine consciousness can come to life, the invisible can become apparent, and the silent can speak. It is a space for "the radical women's language, a language of everything which is suppressed; it is an area for the radical women who write in 'white ink.'" It is the hiding place of "Cixous's laughing Medusa"; it is a place where female writers can work outside the "cramped confines of the masculine area" (Feminist Criticism 200-204).

### 3.6 Delimitations of the Research

This study investigates how Bapsi Sidhwa articulates her unique perspectives in fiction and how her voice resonates effectively with a broad audience. The primary focus is on assessing the maturity and proficiency of Bapsi Sidhwa in storytelling. Specifically, the research examines how a Pakistani female author, Bapsi Sidhwa, portrays male dominance in her novels.

### IV Discussion

This study illuminates how various socioeconomic and cultural factors shape and influence the identity of a Pakistani woman. Through her work, Sidhwa prompts her audience to acknowledge and embrace the similarities and differences that define Pakistani women in their private and public spheres. This research endeavors to paint a nuanced portrait of the female figure in Pakistani culture, shaped by diverse yet consistently patriarchal and often conflicting ideas that govern her existence, as depicted through the female characters in their narratives.

Examination of the myriad female characters in the novels substantiates and unveils a consistent pattern of oppression that revolves around the control of the female body. The literary work of Sidhwa reveals the complex interplay of vengeance, shame, and honor laws that govern female sexuality throughout Pakistan. It is challenging to overlook the shared experiences of victimization, degrading treatment, and humiliation that women endure. This victimization manifests in various forms: emotional, as Sidhwa illustrates, where religion and cultural

traditions are intertwined to exploit and victimize women; physical, as Sidhwa's work portrays, with female bodies sold, traded, beaten, and subjected to rape.

Consequently, there is a pronounced self-negation among the female figures, placing them in a paradoxical situation that compels them to consistently question their identity, irrespective of the nature or source of victimization.

In the words of Uzma Aslam Khan (2009):

Through the exploration of themes such as marriage, childlessness, rape, adultery, the pursuit of education, and divorce, Sidhwa delves into the ways her female characters strive to shape and establish their social standing and identity. The novels under scrutiny in this study depict women showcasing a spectrum of abilities and resilience when confronted with profound adversity. A notable example is Zaitoon, portrayed by Sidhwa in *The Pakistani Bride*, who makes a bold and perilous decision by fleeing her husband's tribe in the mountains.

As said before, Bapsi Sidhwa continues to focus primarily on female sexuality, which seems to be the most researched topic concerning women. In actuality, the variety of responses provided by women (considering their circumstances) and the numerous ways that female sexuality is managed, negotiated, and exploited underscore not just the shared suffering of these women but also their varying degrees of agency and autonomy. Given that many female characters in the works still link marriage with their sexuality, the intertwining themes of female sexuality and marriage are consistently explored throughout the narratives. As Sidhwa puts it, "Marriages were the high points in the ladies' lives," emphasizing the significant role marriage plays in shaping the experiences and identities of the female characters. (*The Pakistani Bride* 88)

Marriage occupies women's thoughts more than any other issue, and the authors examined in this study offer unique yet significant perspectives on this matter. In "Ice Candy Man," Lenny grapples with apprehensions about marriage due to her dark skin tone and a trembling leg. Ayah, on the other hand, endures a harrowing forced marriage to her kidnapper while her mother makes courageous attempts to salvage her marriage. Similarly, Papoo finds herself compelled by her mother to marry a middle-aged dwarf. Sidhwa, through characters like Godmother, a controlling housewife, and her unmarried sister Slavester, illustrates how power dynamics operate in marriages and broader social networks. This portrayal challenges the notion that marriage is solely a power struggle where women are passive victims.

Sidhwa argues that being single and hence dependent on others can lead to oppression and suffering in the same way that an unwelcome or forced marriage does. When stated differently, marriage need not always represent the competing forces a female character must overcome to attain agency or authority. It might provide a sense of independence and power to South Asian women.

*The Pakistani Bride*, the title of Sidhwa's novel, suggests that the novel may deal with marital issues in greater detail. Afshan is the first Bride in the novel, and the reader follows her journey along with that of numerous other brides, such as Zaitoon and Carol, who continue to be the primary characters of the story, and other women who make fleeting appearances, such as the Mullah's step-daughter, Nusrat.

Zaitoon sat beside Nusrat, articulating her distress about departing from her family. In the lead-up to the wedding day, the Bride spends a week adorned in old clothing, undergoing oil massages that leave her body and hair sticky. This meticulous preparation is designed to enhance her radiance, setting the stage for her transformation when she emerges on the wedding day, adorned in crimson silks, her hair, throat, and arms aglow with the brilliance of diamonds. (*The Pakistani Bride*, 90)

Nusrat is conspicuously absent from the narrative and does not contribute significantly to the plot. Conversely, Zaitoon's impending marriage holds crucial importance, catalyzing the storyline. Zaitoon's journey as a bride to her husband's hometown parallels Carol's experience with marriage. Towards the story's conclusion, both Zaitoon and Carol, as brides, reject their traditional roles as obedient wives. However, the haunting image of a bride's floating head in a river is a potent symbol, depicting the dire consequences awaiting women who attempt to defy their prescribed roles as obedient wives.

Sidhwa examines how Pakistani tribes regulate female sexuality, mainly through the institution of marriage. She highlights women's routine repercussions, encompassing physical, psychological, and emotional tolls. These punishments were frequently meted out under the guise of alleged transgressions, perceived insults, and even fabricated instances of infidelity. As a result, women's bodies become a contested territory, with men across Pakistan asserting their rights to them in various ways. The Major in *The Pakistani Bride* conveys to Carol that physical abuse of women is pervasive, stating, "It occurs all the time." There are several reasons why women are killed, including perceived slights, betrayal of family honor, and adultery. Whereas women in Punjab had their noses chopped off, the girl just murdered here." (The Pakistani Bride 223)

The Army Major made the point that different regions within a country may have different consequences for women depending on how vital female sexuality is regarding honor. In Punjab, chopping off a woman's nose can be sufficient to undo the damage she does, but in Kohistan, a tribal region, the family's shame is lifted when the lady is killed.

Ice Candy Man ruthlessly awakens Ayah to his evil as he develops into a violent, menacing creature. Moreover, a similar pattern of feminine sexual constraint is evident in Sidhwa's second piece, *The Pakistani Bride*. Like Ayah, Zaitoon dreams of her passionate partner in the enigmatic mountains that Qasim portrays. The fact that Qasim portrays Zaitoon's tribal world through the eyes of a man, allowing him to explore the wonders of the mountains surrounding him without being constrained by household duties or strict male guardianship, is something Zaitoon's naive mind cannot fathom.

However, when Zaitoon goes to Qasim's world, she quickly comes to terms with the skewed image in her mind. Zaitoon sees her father's violent side as well, as she refuses to marry Sakhi after just one day in Qasim's birthplace and insists on going back to the plains, much as Ayah does when she learns how brutal Ice Candyman, the person who showered her with love and favors, can be.

"Qasim was enraged" when Zaitoon declined to participate in his scheme. He flung her away and pulled at her clinging fingers. "Now acknowledge this... Qasim's voice was piercing and harsh. I have made my pledge, and my honor is at stake. I value it more than life itself. I will kill you with my own hands if you defile it." (The Pakistani Bride 159)

Zaitoon witnesses her devoted father become a tribal leader consumed by honor, viewing his daughter as only a commodity to be exchanged and his words as valuable to his tribe. Zaitoon encounters not just her father's dark side but also her own. Sakhi also falls short of becoming Zaitoon's perfect hero because he observes and appreciates her motions.

The second main character in Sidhwa's novel, Carol, also experiences sexual exploitation, degrading treatment, and repression while traveling to her husband's homeland. She is not the only one. She learns that the Major's overprotective behavior and seeming mannerisms are superficial. In one instance, he tells Carol, "Do you know, he added, "this morning I had to post a

picket to guard you while you painted the river?" Unexpectedly, she lit up with joy...It was here! A feeling of being looked for and safeguarded overpowers her. (The Pakistani Bride 113)

"It happens all the time...women get killed for one reason or another...imagined insults, family hooliganism, etc." is the Major's casual statement that awakens Carol, like it did Zaitoon, to the reality of how little benefit males around her provide women. In addition to her naïve idealization of the Major, Carol continues to romanticize herself as a goddess deserving of adulation and views all Pakistani men, even the tribal males, as kind and protecting masculine figures. (The Pakistani Bride 223)

After sexually assaulting Carol, the Army Major also says no to marrying her. Carol decides to go to America after learning about Zaitoon's escape and the Sakhi tribe's search for her. It proves to be the last straw.

Some significant themes throughout Sidhwa's literature include sin, suffering, and forgiveness. After manipulating Ayah, Ice Candy Man begs for her forgiveness. Ice Candy Man promises Godmother that he will look after Ayah, fearing that he may lose her when she decides to travel to Amritsar. "I'll treat her like a queen, like a delicate flower. I'll make her happy," he declares, succumbing to the weight of his long-suppressed misery as tears stream down his face. (Ice Candy Man 264)

Sidhwa, on the other hand, gives her Muslim characters more of a sympathetic portrayal. Major Mushtaq mistreats Carol sexually, but he also acts like a father figure by saving Zaitoon. Qasim arranges Zaitoon's marriage based on his desires, but he is also viewed as being in charge of her upbringing, medical treatment, and education.

Her name is a memorial to his deceased daughter. Sidhwa does not fail to highlight the positive aspects of Nikka's character, like Nikka, who visits prostitutes and sexually abuses Hindu women while posing as a Hindu priest. Throughout her time in Lahore, Zaitoon carries the warmth of her father's love. Later, when left alone in her husband's tribe, she yearns for Nikka's nurturing and protective presence. While at times Sidhwa's portrayals of Muslim male and female characters may come across as clichéd and stern, she makes a concerted effort to present a nuanced and intricate image of a patriarchal society. Within this framework, men are depicted with a spectrum of traits, from avarice to kindness, underscoring a deliberate balance in their portrayals.

She underscores the disparities in the two women's comprehension of sexual matters during their adolescence and as they matured, shaped by the influence of both non-Muslim and Muslim environments. This contrast is vividly portrayed through the characters of Lenny in "Ice Candy Man" and Zaitoon in "The Pakistani Bride."

She also emphasizes the detrimental consequences of a culture characterized by "sexual repression" within Pakistani society, attributing it to the increasing sexual segregation of young men and women and the withholding of sexual information from them. Instead of fostering a bond of mutual intimacy centered on satisfaction and gratification for both partners, the marital sexual relationship often transforms into a battleground. In this scenario, the husband may assert his legal right to engage in sexual activity, disregarding the concerns, worries, and fears of the wife. Sidhwa fearlessly delves into the dynamics of sex within marriage through Zaitoon's experiences with her husband, Sakhi.

The power dynamics present in the ensuing sexual encounter are unknown to the sexually immature Zaitoon when he marries Sakhi. Zaitoon pleads for help as she is terrified into hysteria by Sakhi's aggressive sexual attempts. Zaitoon rejects his second effort to touch her because she is perplexed by his activity, which is focused on the most intimate area of her body. Sakhi becomes enraged and tells her that she is technically his property because he has touched her too

closely. That stung. Zaitoon quickly reflexively pushed his hand away. 'No!' "Why not? "He exhaled, giving her crutch a warm squeeze, "It is my cunt!" (The Pakistani Bride 162)

The majority of women go through the sexual process for several reasons, such as shyness, fear, moral and religious obligations, and—above all—the need to stop their husbands from being unfaithful or getting remarried. As opposed to Zaitoon, who finds that fulfilling pleasure replaces her sexual innocence during her sexual encounter, anxiety and curiosity drive her.

## V. Conclusion

This study delved into the exploration of the (female) self as portrayed in literature, with a specific focus on Pakistani women author Bapsi Sidhwa endeavoring to unravel women's identities within the dynamic context of modern Pakistani culture, sometimes aligning with and at other times challenging, the prevailing cultural ideology. The objectives also encompass an inquiry into how the pervasive ideology of patriarchal dominance influences women in their unique experiences and its reflection in Pakistani poetry. To gain a nuanced understanding of these issues, the researcher conducted close readings and comparative analyses of two outstanding novels authored by one prominent Pakistani woman writer, Bapsi Sidhwa. This research shows that Bapsi Sidhwa contributed much to Pakistani English literature from a gynocritic perspective. We can quickly assess from recurrent themes from Bapsi Sidhwa that this author has her own space, and she explores themes relevant to everyday living in Pakistan. She has created her wild zone. She presented women's position in such a way that no man could have handled these themes better. Men could not have delved so much deeper in the real sense. They could not recreate those passions and feelings that only women can feel and understand. These written gems by Bapsi Sidhwa have taken us to the center of Pakistani society, where we need much information.

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