

Third World Tapestries in the US: Allende and Sidwa - A Comparative Study

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- **p-ISSN:** 2663-3299
- **e-ISSN:** 2663-3841
- **L-ISSN:** 2663-3299
- **Vol:** I (2016)
- **Page:** 1 – 10
- **DOI:** 10.31703/glr.2016(I-I).01

Abstract *The United States of America serves as a unique site for the literary world of contesting cultures due to the immigrant writers whose spirit of quest pulled them to this terra firma, away from their homelands. These exiled writers reside in the US but their native lands remain the thematic concern of their work. This study critically explores and investigates fictional accounts of two contemporary diaspora authors, i.e. Isabel Allende and Bapsi Sidwa. These female authors from third world countries present subversive female characters both in the diasporic setting of the United States and in their native locations. Sidwa and Allende create characters who resist the native patriarchal structures of the third world homelands and establish their individual identities in the first world metropolitan.*

Key Words:

Diaspora, Third World, First World, Postcolonial, Identity, Exile.

Introduction

The present study intends to compare the fictional works of two contemporary diaspora writers Isabel Allende and Bapsi Sidwa. Both Allende and Sidwa are presently residing in the United States of America, and it would not be untrue to say that for both of them US has been a place of self-actualization. These contemporary female writers belong to third world countries that apparently seem poles apart geographically and culturally, however, the aim of this study is to draw parallels between the works of these two writers to show how personal can serve as political. Because literature of a country or region does not only serve the purpose of entertaining people hence serving as a leisure activity, but also serves as a social and historical document. Literary artists portray their immediate reality

in fictional works according to their social status and worldview. Dislocation, exile, diaspora, migration etc. are common themes in the literary creations of both Allende and Sidwa. Furthermore, both extensively refer to the history of their region.

Fiction is never devoid of history because it is spawned out of the society in which it dwells and flourishes. Fictional works always incorporate the diachronic and synchronic dimensions of society as subject matter. Fiction is a portrayal of society in which history emerges as a significant aspect. Conventionally, history records past events and the mainstream definition describes it as “A chronological record of events, as of the life or development of a people or institution, often including an explanation of or commentary on those events.” In other words the traditional explanation of the history assumes that it systematically records the events that affect a nation and its various institutions. Furthermore, it takes history as presenting the past as it was without contaminating the facts. Other than this the events are usually recorded in chronological order. Moreover, it is assumed that the version of history recorded is unbiased and objective. However, during recent times this view about recorded history has been challenged not only by the critics but also by some historians. For example, Howard Zinn gave a totally different view of history of the US in his widely acclaimed book *A People’s History of the United States*.

But the perspective of the history especially in written form is the official version so it basically deals with whatever the powerful elite of that time period wants to be recorded. Official history is always presented from the point of view of the powerful elite and what serves their purpose, hence mostly ignoring the ground realities that served as the basic premise behind these apparent events.

There are many other ways of preserving history other than the conventional history books, and people have been utilizing different forms of written verse to record history. One common method of preserving history is literature and it has been evasively used in both written and oral form. History and literature have long been interlinked, literary artists since ages have been using history in their works both in form of poetry and prose. One such example is Homer’s *Iliad*, where he reconstructed the history of Trojan War, that had actually taken place hundreds of years before him. Homer based his work on the oral tradition and gave it a shape in written, however, he does not claim historical accuracy. Literary texts can be used as useful historical sources yet it would be a naive approach to ask for the historical accuracy. In the book *History: What and Why?*, Beverley Southgate contends that the conventional model of seeing history as a ‘re-discovery’ of the past ‘as it was’ has now been outmoded. Developments in the disciplines of linguistics, psychology, philosophy, as well as works of Marxist, feminist and post-colonial authors have been successful in challenging the orthodox assumptions in this discipline.

However, conventional history books are not the only way of recording past

events. History can also be recorded in form of literary works so literary writers can be taken as unconventional historians. Presumably historians are bound to find out what happened in the past and then accurately record it, so the task seems simple as it tries to layout the matters as it is or was, however, the task of a literary artist is much more intricate as it involves probing back into the history and trying to figure out the darkness and confusions that the history conceals and bring it to light and clarity. However, Aristotle who is enormously influential in the field of literature makes a clear distinction between poetry (literature) and history. He defines history as *what has been* and literature as *what might be*.

While trying to re-invent the past the literary writers try not to be biased yet the way they look at history and how they represent it in their fictional works depends upon their world view, their social standing within a society and how they are seen by their surroundings. While trying to reach the truth the writers can end up screening their own prejudices. At times it can be denying the 'realities' that were important for others. Hence it is important not only to analyze the history projected through the works of art but also to see the assumptions of the literary artists. In Marxism, feminism and post-colonialism the conventional historical accounts are challenged, because they open up new interpretations of the narratives. In other words it can be presumed that history is not fixed, and can be changed. And if it is not changed at least it can be read from a new perspective. This view of history opens up possibilities for reassessment of the historical truth from the standpoint of the underprivileged, those who were overlooked or viewed through a distorted lens in the past. In other words it gives an opportunity to give voice to the people who are usually considered without history in the orthodox accounts of history such as the slaves, workers, women and minorities etc. In this regard the post-colonialists pose various challenges to these assumed orthodox views of history. It clearly objects the conventional view of recording the events 'objectively' as it were.

There is always some room in the historical claims and this space of historical truths is filled in by the literary writers when they review the verdicts of the historians. Yet this review cannot be taken as final. As literary writers record history they are not completely unbiased and are always affected by their personal prejudice towards the subject matter. Hence it becomes evident that both history and the literary writings are intertwined. There are many examples in the contemporary literary history where the literary artists have used not only their fictional works but also their memoirs as a means of recording the history of the contemporary age.

Since this study focuses on Isabel Allende and Bapsi Sidwa's works so it would be significant to refer to Allende's memoirs *Paula* and *My Invented Country*. Allende has very skillfully used these memoirs to encapsulate the cotemporary history of her country. Not only in her memoirs but also in her fictional works she captures the political, social and economic history of her

motherland. Besides she uses her notes in her novels especially the first two novels are filled with historical references of her country. She depicts the Chile of the mid twentieth century and especially the reign of the socialist regime. The time period that the writer focuses on is the time period of Salvador Allende's regime, later on the overthrow of socialist government and the regime of Augusto Pinochet.

The first novel of Isabel Allende, i.e. *The House of the Spirits* can be analyzed from historical perspective. In this fictional work Allende retells the history of her motherland. However, the interesting facts are the characters that she uses for this purpose. Allende fictionalizes history using the character of agricultural elite, Estaban Truba, a patriarch who is active in the conservative politics of Chile. Critics have found many resemblances in this fictional creation of Allende and her personal life. However, the important factor is how these characters see and represent the history. Yet, Allende tries to give voice to both sides, namely the elites and the working class yet her narrative becomes narrative of the upper class. It is interesting to note how Allende fictionalizes the contemporary history of her society, however, this process of fictionalizing is twofold, because in this manner she does not only fictionalize the history but also historicizes the fiction.

The very first novel of Isabel Allende was written in a state of uncertainty, because the moment the writer started writing this novel her intention was not to write a novel, rather she wanted to write a letter to her dying grandfather whom she had promised that she would be at his bedside at the time of his death. However, this letter got too long and although, initially the writer intended to just put in a nutshell her own family history, but during the process she could not help commenting on the contemporary social, cultural and economic history of her country. Since Allende is not a historian but a literary artist so at times she incorporates characters and incidents which might never have actually happened and perhaps were purely a creation of the writer's mind. She uses different narrative techniques to comment on the history of her country. The most notable technique employed by the writer is that of magic realism.

Like most novels written in magic realist tradition, *The House of the Spirits* is a family saga which covers four generations of the Trueba and Del Valle family. The story is mainly told in the first person. Since, it is a magic realist writing so the events in the novel are not presented in chronological order. Although, the story starts with the childhood memories of Clara, who is one of the leading female characters of the novel, however, it is not told by her; rather it's her granddaughter Alba who narrates the story. Being an eminently feminist writer Isabel Allende's main focus throughout the span of the novel remains on the female characters. Most of her literary works including the work in question revolve around female characters that face all kinds of hurdles and mature during the course of the narrative. In the novel *The House of the Spirits* the main characters are the three females of the same blood lineage; however the character of Estaban Trueba is also very important. Through the story of a family, the author goes on to narrate the

story of a nation.

Though this is apparently a family saga, Isabel Allende completely incorporates the recent turbulent history of her country. Other than looking at this narrative just from historical perspective, this fictional work can be interpreted from various viewpoints. It is a literary work that predominantly uses the technique of Magic Realism. Other than this, the text can be analyzed through the feministic lens because it highlights the role of women characters not only within household but overall at the social level. However, I intend to look at this work of art from the perspective of encapsulating social, economic, political history of Chile. Other than this I intend to highlight the writer's personal prejudices that pop up time and again during the course of the narrative. She herself belongs to a politically well-connected family, which has been amongst the leading families of Chile, hence in her works of art she retells the history from the same vantage point.

Latin American societies have a class system which can be compared to the cast system in India. Isabel Allende describes this fact in her memoir *Paula* in these words

In Chile, the upper class tends to have European appearances; as you descend the social and economic scale, indigenous feature become more pronounced.

Basically the upper class of the society is direct descendants of the Europeans. They are the people who are both politically and economically dominant and strong. Isabel Allende presents this class difference through different characters. The two main families that are the focus of the narrative belong to the upper class of Chile, they play important role in the politics of the country. The upper class presented in the novel through the families of Truebas and Del Valles are basically Blancos, these are the politically and economically powerful people. Allende refers to the class struggle in her country through different characters and incidents.

Isabel Allende herself belongs to this privileged class of society that had the power and means to influence the mainstream historical narratives. So perhaps it was easier for her to look at the history from the point of view of these people. She presents the history from the point of view of a "Blanca." Although, she also refers to the lower strata of society but they are mostly minor characters in her narrative. In this way she creates an "other" for the well-established elite as opposed to the poor and underprivileged. One reason of her works becoming famous and her narratives taken so seriously can be that being the niece of the assassinated president she is considered more apt to comment on historical truth. However there are many examples where writers from a minority talk about the national history and are given worth.

Especially in our part of the world there are many examples of minority writers commenting on the main historical narratives. The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 created two independent nations and resulted in the end of British colonial rule in the subcontinent. But it was not an easy process and unleashed many atrocities that gave ample material to the literary artists to fictionalize. Twelve

million people from both sides of the border were forced to migrate and millions were killed in this process. Ever since both countries got independence writers from both sides of the border have been trying to delve into the deeper history and interpret it according to their own viewpoint. Partition became major focus of scholarly endeavors and perhaps has been the chief focus ever since. Although both nation states have official versions of history nonetheless literary artists keep on adding their far cries through their fictional works. One such writer is Bapsi Sidwa, who commented on the history of partition through her literary work.

Sidwa belongs to the minority group of Pakistan and presents the viewpoint of the marginalized religious minority. She has written five novels in all but her most famous novel is *Cracking India* or *Ice-Candy Man*. Partition is the main theme in the *Ice Candy Man*. This is actually her third novel in which she narrates the story of the violence surrounding the partition of subcontinent. This novel has several autobiographical elements, since Sidwa narrates the actual history of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 which she herself had experienced. For this purpose she uses the character of a young Parsi girl as her mouthpiece.

Writers cannot avoid their immediate context while creating their works of art. And this is quite evident in Sidwa's works because most of her fictional works are set in Lahore, the city where she was brought up and the characters that she creates are mostly Parsi. It reemphasizes the fact that the characters that the literary artists produce are primarily from their own culture and surroundings. Sidwa engages her work of art with the history of the partition of the subcontinent and presents it from the viewpoint of her own community (Parsi). She presents the consciousness of her own community to the forefront through her fictional work. It makes her work seem ethnocentric discourse, because it primarily focuses on the Parsi community and how they experienced and saw the partition. There is a sense of ethnic assertion in her works.

Although the prime focus of Sidwa's work remains her own community and she emphasizes the fact that the Parsis do not pose any threat to the community they inhabit, rather they become a part of it and work towards the betterment of the community at large. However, while highlighting her own community and religion she does not forget to mention the others faiths and religions of subcontinent. She talks about various themes in her fictional works ranging from the plight of women in the subcontinent to the partition riots, communal disharmony and cultural conflicts.

Sidwa personally witnessed the atrocities of the partition with the apprehension of an eight years' old child. The narrative perspective of her fictional works is commensurate with the facts and she reinforces it with her Parsi sensibilities. She looks at the history through the eyes of a small child that is almost equal to that of her own age at the time of partition. Important aspect of Sidwa's writings is that she writes using the language (English) of the colonizers. Sidwa is not a Muslim yet when she writes her tone is nationalistic. She calls Jinnah as

“Jinnah Sahib” and Gandhi as “your precious Gandhijee” in this way she presents India as “other.” The narrative is contextualized in the political matrix.

The literary works of Allende and Sidwa can be compared and contrasted at various points. Both are women writers from the third world who write about the actual history that they have witnessed. They personally experienced these historical moments and capture them in their works of art. But the interesting thing about their work is the perspective of history that they evoke. Both women went through almost similar circumstances of failed marriage and are residing in the United States after leaving their native countries. Yet the settings of their fictional works are their motherlands and the characters that they create resemble the people they have personally known. Both the writers use autobiographical elements to create their works of fiction. *Ice Candy Man* is written by a Pakistani but not a Muslim writer and this is perhaps the most striking feature of this work of art. It gives voice to an ethnic group that is otherwise not so powerful or heard in the mainstream narratives of history. In a theocratic state this Parsi voice has significant reverberations. On the other hand *The House of the Spirits* is a fictional work created by the niece of the assassinated president and gives the perspective of the socialist government and comments on the unjust end it met.

The fictional works of Allende and Sidwa present female characters who struggle against the mainstream society and challenge the patriarchal conventions with varying degrees of success. These subversive female characters resist the normative structures that subjugate them by controlling the societal standards and traditions. The rebellious female characters ameliorate their circumstance or manage to construct a more fulfilling sense of identity by rebelling against cultural norms, these women defy social standards to improve their life circumstances, whereas, few transmute for worst. Isabel Allende and Bapsi Sidwa, create characters that follow a trajectory that allows them to transgress gender, racial, and class limitations, deconstructing the traditional binary system that classifies women as angel or harlot.

The subversive female protagonists of Bapsi Sidwa and Isabel Allende initiate resistance against the prevailing hegemonic ideologies and challenge the moral and cultural values of their societies. Rather than following the traditions these female protagonists throw the cultural practices into disarray. They are “different” because they do not conveniently fit into the contemporary ideals of womanhood. Unwilling to submit to the traditional role of women assigned by the patriarchal system these female characters subvert the existing social and cultural structures. Isabel Allende creates the character of Rose in her novel *Daughter of Fortune* who is a spinster; she displays subversive traits by expressing her unwillingness to submit to the institution of marriage. According to her “A husband would be an impediment as he would not give me anything I do not already have.” Although, Ms. Rose challenges the dominant patriarchal structure by resisting marriage but she is a typical aunt for Eliza. She herself resists the patriarchal society’s norms

and traditions but wants Eliza to comply with the existing cultural conventions; “Ms. Rose did not tell Eliza the one time she had tried to fly on her own she had crashed head on into reality, she did not want to plant any subversive ideas in girl’s mind.” Eliza the protagonist of the text is another subversive female character who struggles to get her freedom since she was confined by patriarchal dominations in the Chilean society. Eliza is an unconventional female who follows her heart and crosses the American continent in search of her lover. Although, her search is not fruitful but in the process of this rummage she faces the harsh realities of life that help her discover personal freedom for life time. The character of Paulina Delvelle also shows subversive traits; she is a female who rejects the domination of her father and marries according to her own will, this act helps her achieve personal autonomy. Other than this her inclination towards personal property is another seditious oddity. Paulina’s vigorous claim on the personal property is something that situates her in a different position than other conventional women of that time. This characteristic could also be seen as her aspiration of power, knowing that power is contingent upon economic strength. Similarly in Sidwa’s fictional creations female characters are robust. Feroza manages to escape not only the shackles of the patriarchal Pakistani society that is highly influenced by the Islamic ideology but also the Parsi patriarchal social structure. She struggles hard to create her own identity that is not related to any male. In *An American Brat*, Sidwa highlights the victimization of the protagonist through the sensitive issue of inter-marriage in the Parsi community. Women in the novel exercise agency using various strategies.

Patriarchy demands the submission of women, whereas all these female characters refuse to play the docile roles. The portrayal of such anomalous female characters not only disrupts and challenges the heroic ideals within the stories; it also threatens the dominant ideology of the time. Therefore, there is a tendency (in the text) to appropriate and contain the subversive female characters by patriarchal society. Texts of both the authors comment on the institutional power structures such as government, nation, institution, organization, or a society. Although Sidwa and Allende belong to the third world countries that are not connected through the geographical location but the sociohistorical conjunctures of these postcolonial nations make them similar in many ways. I want to analyze and analytically explore the texts of these two authors and create parallel amongst the histories and struggles of these third world female characters who emerge against racism, sexism, and colonialism. The basic argument would revolve not only around the political basis of comparison between the two texts but also the cultural bases. Very strong comparison can be drawn between the two authors in the way they present the issues of gender and class in their texts. Sidwa and Allende create fictional characters that are bold and subversive, they are not docile and submissive characters as are the third world women imagined by the first world. According to Mohanty, this analysis ‘freezes third world women in time, space and history.’ The

fictional characters of these texts are dynamic and complex characters. The texts represent the struggle of the third world women to engage in the historical process. The texts challenge the prevalent discourses about the third world women circumscribed by the first world's understanding of the third world. Cultural appropriation as the "adoption of elements of one culture by members of a different cultural group is an important theme of the texts. The texts provide common contexts for struggle. The narratives present the personal stories of the authors that are fictionalized, hence serving the 'personal as political'. The experiences of the female characters are rooted in their political situation and gender inequality. The texts present the personal experiences of the women that comment on the power relationships in the native patriarchal societies of the authors. The personal behavior of the female characters is of political significance. The common link between the two texts is the struggle of the subversive female characters against the patriarchal societies. The texts show the women's societal roles are impacted by traditional gender roles and the patriarchal culture. These writers establish individual identities that defy homogeneity assigned to regional identities and establish heterogeneous characters that are influenced through transnational travel.

The significance of memory and writing is fundamental to these female authors and their characters as it provides them an opportunity to create oppositional agency; the capacity to act independently and to make their own free choices avoiding the power structures and forces such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, ability, customs, etc. that would have otherwise influenced their decision and limited their choices. The personal narratives of the characters attempt to present counterhegemonic narratives that critique and dismantle the hegemonic discourse, while narrating the experiences of these female characters the authors give voice to those who were 'written out of history'. This study places the works of Allende and Sidwa in a global, cross - cultural context. Both the authors belong to the postcolonial third world countries but overgeneralizations cannot be made about the colonial past of the countries of both these authors, however, the methodological concerns or the theoretical framework of this research cater to the context of the authors.

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