

Cracking Bapsi

A Conversation with Bapsi Sidhwa

Interview by Samantha Cohen

I spoke with Bapsi Sidhwa just days after the untimely assassination of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Sidhwa, who now resides in the United States, served on Bhutto's advisory committee for Women's Development in the mid-1990s. Among the issues we discussed were the implications of Bhutto's death on the upcoming Pakistani elections—which were subsequently delayed by the government until mid-February. Since then, Bhutto's party has won a majority of seats in the government, and its candidate for prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani, has been sworn in to office. The Pakistani government, however, has had difficulty keeping the country united in the wake of militant uprisings.

SC You spent some time working on Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's advisory committee for Women's Development. Talk a little about your experience with her.

BS Bhutto was more of a figurehead in this body and the nitty-gritty and momentum were left to the Committee. I don't blame her—Pakistan is a complex and difficult country to rule. However, during both her tenures Bhutto was an ineffective ruler. She gathered yes-men around her and was averse to advice. One expected her to try harder to remove the Zina (adultery) ordinance, but

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Bapsi Sidhwa
is one of South Asia's most prominent writers. She has written six novels, including *Cracking India*, a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. She served on the late Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's Women's Development committee and has taught at several universities, including Columbia. She resides in Houston, Texas.

she never wrested enough strength or authority to do so. General Musharraf passed a resolution in the assembly two years back under the Protection of Women Act and freed hundreds of women rotting in jails because of false accusations of adultery by vengeful husbands, or brothers and fathers whom they had displeased. The Islamist members of the Assembly swore to repeal the Musharraf act.

What implications do you believe her assassination will have for Pakistan, not only in the upcoming elections, but in a broader political picture? And for women—particularly women in leadership—in Pakistan and elsewhere?

The U.S. asked General Musharraf to withdraw the criminal cases against her on the condition that she support Musharraf and give him democratic legitimacy. She agreed, but changed her stance and actively campaigned against him instead. It's a pity—they were both secular-minded and it would have given Pakistan a chance to become democratic. She took absurd risks in crowds, and the Taliban or Al Qaeda were almost certainly responsible for her death. Only the fundamentalists will benefit from the mayhem. They will do anything to get power and establish their own brand of Islamic Law. By and large the people in Pakistan are too sophisticated to allow for that.

For women in leadership positions, it will not really make a big difference, but

it will affect women in general adversely. It always benefits women to have a woman leader as a role model. When I am in Pakistan, I can be much more aggressive in voicing my opinions and the men accept this. Here, in the U.S., women have to be more circumspect and feminine. Some of my American men friends recently informed me: "American men will elect a black before they vote for a woman." What does this say about American men?

DURING BOTH HER TENURES, BHUTTO WAS AN INEFFECTIVE RULER

That is surprising. Most Americans would expect it to be the opposite.

Yes, they would. But in Pakistan, men are used to seeing women in positions of authority and are much more ready to accept the power that comes with their positions.

In his essay entitled "Why I Write," George Orwell says that his political motivations for writing derive from a "desire to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other peoples' ideas of the kind of society that they should strive after. Once again, no book is

genuinely free from political bias. The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude." Many working within and outside the humanities prefer to view literature as divorced from the political, as "art for art's sake." Your work argues that this is not possible, particularly your novel *Cracking India*. How is your work as a writer informed by politics? And your politics by your writing?

IF I COULDN'T PORTRAY THE TRUTH AS I SEE IT, I WOULDN'T WRITE

A change in political power immediately affects each aspect of our lives—as women, as business people, as workers, etc. This is much less so in the U.S. For writers to ignore politics in third world countries is to present an inaccurate and untruthful reality. I am not temperamentally suited as a writer to do that: if I couldn't portray the truth as I see it, I wouldn't write.

***Cracking India* explores hybridity—religious, national, political, etc.—in a way that really illuminates the complex nature of culture. How has your life experience enabled you to understand**

this? How has your position as a Parsi, a Pakistani, and an American immigrant made you aware of the nuances that many fail to see?

All the points you mention have informed my experiences, and made me aware of the nuances—this is, of course, an unconscious accumulation of stimuli that informs my writing. A writer's gift is defined by this inherent attribute.

The character of Lenny in *Cracking India* is, by virtue of being female, Parsi, and handicapped, marginalized on several levels. How does such a choice of protagonist reflect your own experience?

Marginalized people can be more observant and their assessment more accurate. Although Lenny is not like me as a child—I was a rather submissive child—I have given her many circumstances from my life. I grew up with polio, and I was schooled at home, so I was with adults often, as Lenny is. But I could not have written the novel unless I distanced myself from Lenny; I would be too self-conscious and inhibited. In that respect fiction often is more truthful than autobiography: in autobiography people tend to burnish their images.

She is such a complex character, simultaneously exhibiting a childlike naïveté and a wisdom that is deeper than that of the adults around her. In this way,

she takes on an ageless quality. And although the novel focuses on a particular political moment (Partition), it delves into a political crisis in a way that is certainly still relevant.

I love the way you phrased that. Yes Lenny is complex—she encompasses several age brackets—she is almost simultaneously a child, an adolescent, and one is aware of her consciousness as an adult as well. I suppose that makes her timeless, in a way, and the brutality and chaos that appear in times of political anarchy and war are also timeless.

Many in the West consider not only South Asian countries, but really any non-Western nation as “them,” or “other,” or, to borrow a particularly appropriate term from *Cracking India*, as “irrelevant nomenclatures.” How can a writer work to debunk these kinds of monolithic, dangerous, and demonizing generalizations?

Some in the West are unfathomably arrogant and, despite their advantages in education and living conditions, woefully ignorant. We are all brothers and sisters under the skin—a writer presents the human emotions we all share—the joys, sorrows, jealousy, courage and other attributes we hold in common.

Literature can humanize; it can give a voice to the silenced. It has the ability to bring the marginalized to the front

and center. As a woman, a Parsi, an immigrant, and a writer, I imagine this concept of marginalization is all too familiar to you. How do you, in your work, seek to de-marginalize?

Again, you aptly supply the answer to your question. What you say is true. I don't *seek* to de-marginalize: this comes about effortlessly and naturally as I write. I would say almost ninety percent of my writing comes from my unconscious.

Why write in English? Was this a difficult choice to make?

Because I had polio growing up, I did not attend a regular school. I was taught at home in English only. Of course, Gujarati is my mother tongue but in Lahore it was almost like a secret language; almost no one spoke or wrote it. I speak Urdu as well. But English is the only language I was taught to read and write, so the choice was made for me.

Writers, and those in the humanities more generally, are often marginalized because their work is not seen as relevant, important, or serious. In an earlier interview, you claim to have written your first two novels in secret to avoid embarrassment. What do you have to say, as an accomplished writer, to those who are skeptics of the humanities and their relevance in today's world?

Artists and writers are not taken seriously in most parts of the world: When I got the NEA Lila-Wallace award, a lot of people in my community were aghast—that a writer should get the reward instead of a scientist or engineer, etc. The powerful old myths in many cultures have lost, or are losing, their relevance—writers are the new myth makers. ■■