

# BAPSI SIDHWA AND DEEPA MEHTA: AN ARTISTIC COLLABORATION

Claudia Meoli

In this paper I shall focus on the collaboration between two artists who have created two acclaimed artistic results: the novel *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidhwa, and *Earth*, its cinematic transposition directed by Deepa Mehta. The collaboration between the writer and the director is interesting not only because they share the same topics, interests and poetic expressions, but also because they are both exiled artists.

## Introduction

The division of the Indian subcontinent belongs to the memory of every Indian and every Pakistani, as does the violence of the tragic events that started after the Partition was announced at midnight on the 14th of August 1947. That night the world's biggest mass migration began and in nine months, at least two million people had been killed as a result of ethnic violence. Many women were raped and murdered - it is what Sidhwa and Mehta bring back to human memory.

The two artists are exiled, even if they have not been 'forced' to leave their countries, but, once away from their mother land, they have been able to adopt a new and original perspective on the question of the attachment to one's own origin. My contribution would like to determine how their geo-cultural displacement has made it possible, for them, to deal with the issue of the Partition between India and Pakistan.

## Cracking India

In an interview with Derek Attridge (1992:55), Jacques Derrida remarks that:

"A writer cannot not be concerned, interested, anxious about the past, that of literature, history, or philosophy, of culture in general. S/he cannot not take account of it in some way and not consider her - or himself a responsible heir [...] Account cannot not be taken, whether one wishes it or not, of the past".

One cannot not write one's own story, and the story of a community of people: Bapsi Sidhwa was born in Punjab, the Indian region where religion, traditions and history have always played an essential part in the memories and experiences of its inhabitants. Needless to say that Punjab was strongly affected by the Partition; the newly established boundary divided the region with such an impact that since then, people have called the division the 'line of hatred'. Sidhwa was born in Karachi and grew up in Lahore - being a Parsi, she remained a spectator of the Partition. When Lahore was given to Pakistan, she was only a child (perhaps her young perception was particularly shocked by what she was witnessing; it must also be the reason why she adopted a child's point of view in narrating the story of *Cracking India*). What is more, at the age of two, she contracted polio, so she was spending her life in solitude: she did not go to school, and could not play with the other children - it was mainly books that provided her with

a space of freedom. She was an 'outsider' and a lonely person, mainly possessing literature as her company, literature creating for her the alternative world to the cruelty she was facing.

Today, Sidhwa does not live in Pakistan; she moved to Houston, in the United States. Since then, she has often come back to Lahore, where she enjoys playing the role of an observer of Pakistan. Her identity is characterized by a kind of 'hybridity', which is reflected in her books, written by a 'Punjabi-Parsi-Pakistani' writer. In this vein, we can also say that Sidhwa's writing is acutely ironic, and, even more importantly, it is always written in very articulate, though accessible, English –she herself having studied through that medium. Of course, her familiarity with English made it easier for the writer to live in the U.S.A. In *An American Brat* (1993,) she narrates her experience: she has faced her exile in a 'double bind' – that is, enjoying American freedom with a point of nostalgia, in a bittersweet way.

*Cracking India* is Sidhwa's third book. Published in 1991 under the title of *Ice-Candy-Man*, the novel narrates the Partition of India and its consequences from the point of view of a child. In an interview with Julie Rajan, who asks her why she wrote of events that took place in a distant past, she replies:

"I wanted to write about Partition precisely because so little has been written about. [...] When you see something like that, it becomes a very powerful and important memory" ([http://www.monsoonmag.com/interviews/i3inter\\_sidhwa.html](http://www.monsoonmag.com/interviews/i3inter_sidhwa.html)).

*Cracking India* is not, however, an autobiographical novel (even if there are many precise connections): it is the story of the writer's research into one of the most forgotten and hidden events in international postcolonial history. In order to write a novel devoted to the trauma and suffering provoked by such an incredible historical-social fact, she had to find out information – in her research, what she found out was that people did not want to talk about it; everybody refused to remember the kidnappings and ravages that happened to men and, particularly, to women: "Maybe the hurt was too fresh" the writer says. The question of the women's involvement and their suffering was to become the centerpoint of the novel - in another interview (<http://changingupakistan.wordpress.com/2008/08/29/a-novelists-perspective-on-pakistan-a-conversation-with-bapsi-sidhwa/>), Sidhwa observes that,

"at times of such anarchy, women seem to bear the brunt of the attack – they attack a woman because they are attacking a man's honor. A woman is often used and misused for these purposes".

Being a woman herself, the writer focused on the condition of women in that critical period, by exploring the 'collective repressed' and by giving a voice to its female victims.

Of course, there have been other writers who have written about the Partition, such as Saadat Hasan Manto and Khushwant Singh; but they are male writers, who approach their subject matter mainly from their own perspectives. Sidhwa's feminine point of view proves different: the Partition of India created one of the highest numbers of exiled people, mainly women, in the history of the world. These events are narrated in the novel, even if we never find neat descriptions of what is happening. Precision in historical reconstruction, in fact, does not matter to Sidhwa; what is important is to construct a story where women are at the centre.

The novel tells the story of Lenny, a 7-year-old girl, who suffers from polio. Lenny has a nanny, (*Ayah* in Hindi, and the name given to her character throughout the book), who is a beautiful woman surrounded by people who love her. She has two suitors in particular: Ice-Candy-Man and Masseur, both of Muslim

religion. Ayah is at the centre of a group of friends who spend time together, regardless of the differences in their religious beliefs. Lenny, probably because of her walking difficulties, spends more time with Ayah and her friends, than with the children of her age. Ayah is framed in an interreligious and interethnic circle; when the harmony breaks, it is she who becomes the victim of the Indian-Muslim sectarian war.

Sidhwa uses her character to make her point about the Partition of India, its consequences, and, in particular, its repercussions on women - the events gradually become vivid to the reader, who naturally empathizes with the characters being caught up in the story. It is a story of an 'exile' that begins when people are still in their own homes, when they gradually become exiled in their lands, forced to migrate because of their religious beliefs. We can recall what Julia Kristeva, in *Strangers to ourselves* (1991:8), says,

"In crossing a border (...or two), the foreigner has changed his discomforts into a base of resistance, a citadel of life".

During Partition, borders were first created, and, after the imposition, people had to cross them, leaving their lives behind. The Parsi community played witness to this change - it saw the horror that originated from the transformation, as if it were crossing the border itself - when everything changes, it feels like crossing a border - nothing more, nothing less....

## Earth

In his *Reflections on Exile* (1983:185), Edward Said reports some lines of Hugo of St. Victor:

"[...] The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect one has extinguished his."

The Palestinian scholar further explains,

"that the strong or perfect man achieves independence and detachment by working through attachments, not by rejecting them. Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one's native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both."

If this quotation does not sound appropriate for Sidhwa, it seems fitting for Deepa Mehta. A 'hybrid' artist by her own definition, she claims to be a "citizen-filmmaker of the world": not an Indian and not a Canadian either. Actually she was born in Amritsar, in Punjab; as a child, she moved with her family to New Delhi where she graduated in Philosophy. Soon after, she started producing documentaries and she currently lives in Canada. She does, however, travel consistently, from one country to another, continuously trespassing geographical and cultural borders.

In an interview with Richard Phillips (6th August 1999, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/meh-a06.shtml>), Mehta says that she has always thought about Partition. She has been fascinated by this event, and also disillusioned by the silence inscribed by Western cinema. When she decided to devote a film to the Partition, her desire was to trespass the fixed images India often recalls to the Western

mind; her aim was to 'de-exoticise' or 'de-orientalize' India - as Said would say. When she came across the novel *Cracking India* by Sidhwa, she thought it was exactly what she was looking for- it was then that the two women artists started collaborating. The chance was there for them because they both felt free due to the distance of time and space. In fact, it was somehow comforting to find someone to share the work with. To make sense of this shared need, and the richness that it created, Julia Kristeva (1991:12) offers her analysis of the advantages of being 'exiled':

"Free of ties with his own people, the foreigner feels 'completely free'. Nevertheless, the consummate name of such a freedom is solitude. [...] No one better than the foreigner knows the passion for solitude. He believes he has chosen it for its enjoyment, or been subjected to it to suffer on account of it, and there he is languishing in a passion for indifference that, although occasionally intoxicating, is irreparably without accomplice. The paradox is that the foreigner wishes to be alone but with partners, and yet none is willing to join him in the torrid space of his uniqueness. [...] Accordance is the foreigner's mirage. More grueling when lacking, it is his only connection – utopic or abortive as it may be."

The collaboration between Sidhwa and Mehta has proved 'utopic': from their intimate and productive accordance, *Earth* was born. According to Sidhwa ([http://www.monsoonmag.com/interviews/i3inter\\_sidhwa.html](http://www.monsoonmag.com/interviews/i3inter_sidhwa.html)), Mehta was carried away by the book in such a way that she wrote the script even before signing the contract. That was how Sidhwa wanted it to be: the director had to love her book deeply. At the same time, it was not always easy to collaborate. Sidhwa was always present when the film was being shot; she saw when her title was changed, but, even if at the moment, she did not think it matched the book, she knew Mehta was making her trilogy on the natural elements (*Fire, Earth, Water*). What was really difficult to accept was to see entire sections of the book being deleted: once again, though, Sidhwa understood that cinema is a different media: for instance, it could not contain all the novel's incidents and characters. The most evident and different of the changes relates to the 'end': the novel *Cracking India* follows the aftermaths of the Partition; *Earth* finishes soon after the event, when Ayah is kidnapped. Because of these minute differences, what was becoming clear in their collaboration was that literature and cinema are different; they cannot but rule the experience of reading the novel and of watching the film. For instance, the first part on the screen creates a positive and peaceful atmosphere among the characters in a way that is different from how Sidhwa narrates it in her book; in the second section, everything changes; the tragedy begins; the film changes its register; it becomes darker; it changes its colours... What follows is a short analysis of some of the rich differences between *Cracking India* and *Earth*.

## The colours

Colour is an important element in Mehta's films, giving her the possibility to communicate feelings and atmospheres that can be 'felt' by the spectator. It is a powerful possibility and Mehta benefits from it as much as she can, paying attention to the use of colours. Generally, her films have a dominant colour and for this film it was the colour terracotta that came to her mind when she was writing the script. Conversely, she did not want the colour blue. It is exactly like that: the film covers a range of colours from green to yellow, from red to brown; and only in one scene, there appears the bright blue of Ayah's sari.

Michael Taussig, professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, in his "What color is the sacred?" (2006:51), refers to the relationship between Proust and Vermeer, saying that the use of colour in painting is similar to the use of words in writing: "style is to the writer what color is to the painter". Daring a risky comparison, we could say that this dialectics works also for Sidhwa and Mehta: being a director,

Mehta has her own singular ways of expressing sensibility. In her films, photography plays a key role - light is at the core of photography, and one has to know how to use it. Colours change with light, creating various atmospheres and conveying different emotions. These visual elements combine with music - which is always original in Mehta's films. Even though, *Earth* stays faithful to *Cracking India*.

### The language

Another difference between *Cracking India* and *Earth* is 'language'. Despite the fact that Sidhwa is Pakistani, the novel is written in English, with a few words in Hindi or Urdu. The official language of India is Hindi; English is common among the upper class and educated Indians. Sidhwa does not draw differences in class, religion, or occupation - every character speaks in English. Of course, this is because of narrative reasons: it would be extremely difficult to read a book with characters often switching language. This limit does not exist in cinema, where a dialogue can be easily understood by adding subtitles. The original language adds realism to the social and cultural picture of the film. English is the *lingua franca* allowing Indians to communicate among the different dialects spoken in India; though it is not the language spoken by everybody. The size of the country and the variety of languages and dialects spoken make it difficult to define India's national language. In this context, English plays an important role - it has lost its negative connotation of being the language of the British oppressor, and it has also developed a unifying function in a fractionated country. If Sidhwa was more or less bound to make a choice, Deepa Mehta decided not to do so. The characters in her film speak different languages: sentences in Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati and, rarely, in English are pronounced in the film, that switches from one language to another, sometimes mixing Hindi to English: this is a narrative strategy that gives the idea of the 'multilinguism' and 'multiculturalism' of the country.

### The British rule

The use of English as *lingua franca* suggests the presence of the century-long British rule, the influence on the politics of the subcontinent and the inheritance it has left. British rule on India is a discussion that is not addressed by the film, while it is clear in the novel, even though neither artist delves deeply into the subject. A scene in the house of Lenny's parents is the occasion to show how this controversial debate can degenerate into a fight. Lenny's parents invite their friends for dinner: Mr. and Mrs. Singh, both Sikh, and Mr. Rogers, an English policeman, with his wife. They are spending an enjoyable night chatting away, when Mr. Singh and Mr. Rogers start arguing; the reason relates to the time when India will be independent, allowing the most crucial points of the debate on British rule to be thrown onto the table. The British imperialistic and racist belief is that the Indians will never be able to self-rule - it is what Mr. Rogers says, strongly opposed by Mr. Singh. They then start discussing what will happen when the British quit India. Mr. Rogers' conjecture is wrong, when he says that the situation is politically confused (the political situation will become clear soon after Partition, with the Congress Party and the Muslim League respectively placed in India and Pakistan); still, he is also right in foreseeing the explosion of violence that will follow. The discussion turns into a fight: as soon as the calm returns to the table, the hosts make a list of the good effects of the British domination in the subcontinent - in the book, conversely, the narration goes on to describe the continuation of a pleasant and relaxed dinner. The point of discussion is presented, the mainstream idea that the British colonialism had, in the end, its advantages: the British built roads, they gave India the regular Post service; they taught the Indians English! Could we expect a better 'comfort' for the death and suffering of so many people involved in the Partition? The novel and the film have played their part in re-opening this question...

## **References and Notes:**

### **Bibliography**

- Sidhwa, B., *Cracking India*, 1991, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Milkweed
- Sidhwa, B., *An American Brat*, 1993, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Milkweed
- Sidhwa, B., *Water*, 2006, Minneapolis, Minnesota, Milkweed
- *Cracking Sidhwa*, Sidhwa, B. interviewed by Julie Rajan, 2000, Monsoon Magazine [http://www.monsoonmag.com/interviews/i3inter\\_sidhwa.html](http://www.monsoonmag.com/interviews/i3inter_sidhwa.html);
- *A Novelist's Perspective on Pakistan*, by Kalsoom, 2008, <http://changinguppakistan.wordpress.com/2008/08/29/a-novelists-perspective-on-pakistan-a-conversation-with-bapsi-sidhwa/>
- Mehta, D., *Fire*, 1996, Canada
- Mehta, D., *Earth*, 1999, India
- Mehta, D., *Water*, 2005, Canada-India
- "If people want to separate they should understand what it would really mean", Deepa Mehta interviewed by Richard Phillips, August 1999, World Socialist Web Site, (ICFI) <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/aug1999/meh-a06.shtml>

### **General References**

- Derrida, J. and Attridge, D., "An interview with Jacques Derrida", in *Acts of Literature*, 1992, New York, Routledge
- Kristeva, J., *Strangers to Ourselves*, 1991, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Said, E., *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, (London: Granta Books, 1984)
- Spivak, G., "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1994, in P.Williams and L.Crishman,*Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, New York, Columbia University Press