

Reading the Partition of India Through a Child's Gaze in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*

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Abstract

India was colonised for nearly two hundred years. The nation attained independence after years of struggle for freedom in 1947. The glory of independence soon vanished, and the dream of unity became an illusion with the fatal awakening of India's partition. Euphoria turned into agony. People were left homeless. The mass migration shook the nation. Communal riots erupted. People were displaced, plundered, and brutally massacred irrespective of their age and gender. Women were abducted, abused, and raped. Official history and documents offer a masculine narrative of the partition of India. Writers like Sidhwa critique this masculine narrative of history and partition. Lenny is the narrator of Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy-Man*. Violence erupted in the society around her after the partition of India. The novel reflects on the disturbing consequences of partition through a child's perceptive perspective. This paper explores how partition has fractured innocence and problematised the embodiments of childhood and maturity.

Keywords: Partition, violence, trauma, girl-child narrator, maturation.

The partition of India was a cataclysmic event in history. People were displaced, resulting in mass migration. Urvashi Butalia, in her book *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*, notes, "The political partition of India caused one of the great human convulsions of history. Never before or since have so many people exchanged their homes and countries so quickly" (3). Communal violence broke out. Friends became foes. People were massacred. The streets were in flames, and the cities became the slaughterhouses. Women suffered the most. A woman's body became the site to express hatred, aggression, and violence to avenge the other community. They became victims of rape, molestation, abduction, forcible conversion, marriage, and death. The official history of the partition of India is centered on masculine tropes. Consequently, women are often marginalised in partition narratives. Butalia observes, "The violence that women faced in the aftermath of Partition is shrouded in many layers of silence" (193). The emancipation from the gender biased discourse of partition becomes possible after the publication of feminist or women-centric texts and oral histories.

Bapsi Sidhwa was a renowned feminist writer. Her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* is set against the backdrop of the partition of India. The horror of partition is addressed in this novel through the naive yet perceptive gaze of a girl child named Lenny. Sidhwa's novel of partition is certainly gender-conscious. Nilufer E. Bharucha observes in "From Behind a Fine Veil: A Feminist Reading of Three Parsi Novels" that "Lenny, the girl-child narrator of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1988), inhabits a more sophisticated cityscape...However, she too is subject to the limitations of her gender. In fact she is a doubly marginalised figure-female

and physically handicapped. Lenny, from behind this veil of marginality, offers a uniquely subaltern view of the bloody birthing of Pakistan” (132).

In an interview with Preeti Singh, Sidhwa expressed her intention to write about partition because “very little had been written about it. There are certain images from my past which have always haunted me. Partition was a very violent experience for everybody in the Punjab. Although I was very young then, I saw chance killings, fires, dead bodies. These are images which have stayed with me. There were also the stories I grew up with...Also, there was, in those days, such a strong sense of hostility between the two communities...This hostility has to be dealt with” (292). Lenny’s experience during the partition in *Ice-Candy-Man* was very similar to Sidhwa’s own experiences, as told to Preeti Singh by Sidhwa: “...in *Ice-Candy-Man* or *Cracking India*, the first part is autobiographical, except that the central character of the child is not me per se. I had to create some distance between the child Lenny and myself as a child...I made her a much more defiant and feisty child. Also, this child is informed by my adult consciousness. So a lot of me is there, but other bits are purely imaginative” (291).

The novel is set in Lahore. Before partition, people with different religious beliefs resided there together. After partition, Lahore became a part of Pakistan, and things began to fall apart with the upsurge of communal violence and riots. The entire narrative revolves around Lenny, a Parsee girl, and her Ayah, a young Punjabi woman who looked after her, and is told through the eyes of a girl child. The idyllic world of Lenny was shattered after the partition of India. In “Border Work, Border Trouble: Postcolonial Feminism and the Ayah in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*”, Ambreen Hai notes that the novel “creates a double feminist lens for the bloody history of 1947—the partition of British India into modern India and Pakistan. It offers both a self-narrated account of the growing consciousness of a little girl, a member (like the author) of a minority ethno-religious community, and a focus on the—until recently untold—experiences of the scores of women (of various ethnicities) who were raped, abducted, or mutilated in the ensuing violence” (383).

Lenny’s maturation during India’s partition symbolises the community’s lost innocence. Ambreen Hai argues, through Lenny’s eyes, that the narrative “locates itself at the nexus of a number of intersecting contemporary concerns: gender, violence, nationalism, cross-class representation, and ethnicity. Written at a time when questions of nationalism and gender were only beginning to be theorized, *Cracking India* is among the first (of a new wave of second-generation writing) to address an event that still remains shrouded in silence” (388). Lenny witnessed that the society around her was changing rapidly after the partition. Communal violence erupted, unleashing ruthless destruction: “A train from Gurdaspur has just come in...Everyone in it is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslim. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women’s breasts!” (Sidhwa 149). In awe, Lenny found the dislocation of settled life. The Hindus and the Sikhs had migrated. “Beadon Road, bereft of the colourful turbans, hairy bodies, yellow shorts, tight pyjamas, and glittering religious arsenal of the Sikhs, looks like any other populous street. Lahore is suddenly emptied of yet another hoary dimension: there are no Brahmins with caste-marks – or Hindus in dhoties with *bodhis*. Only hordes of Muslim refugees” (Sidhwa 175).

Lenny became aware of “religious differences” (Sidhwa 93) after the partition. She observed, “It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves - and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing Ayah - she is also a token. A Hindu. Carried away by a renewed devotional

fervour she expends a small fortune in joss-sticks, flowers and sweets on the gods and goddesses in the temples” (Sidhwa 93). Lenny discovered that Imam Din and Yousaf became “religious zealots” as they suddenly began to prepare themselves “ostentatiously” for the “Jumha prayers” (Sidhwa 93). However, these gestures appeared to be very superficial to Lenny. People like Hari, Moti-the-sweeper, his wife Muccho, and their daughter Papoo were “entrenched deeper in their low Hindu caste” (Sidhwa 93). The English Christians condescended to the Anglo-Indians. The Anglo-Indians looked down upon the Indian-Christians. The Indian-Christians scorned all non-Christians. Lenny observed that her family was “reduced to irrelevant nomenclatures – we are Parsee” (Sidhwa 94). She asked the fundamental question, “What is God?” (Sidhwa 94). Conversion was another shameful consequence of the partition. In this novel, Hari’s conversion highlighted this issue: “Hari has had his bodhi shaved. He has become a Muslim. He has also had his penis circumcised. ‘By a barber,’ says Cousin, unbuttoning his fly in Electric-aunt’s sitting room. Treating me to a view of his uncircumcised penis, he stretches his foreskin back to show me how Hari’s circumcised penis must look’ (Sidhwa 161).

Repeated references to the nationalist leaders made by the Ice-candy-man prompted Lenny to ask, “Mother, Father and their friends are always saying: Gandhi said this, Nehru said that. Gandhi did this, Jinnah did that. What’s the point of talking so much about people we don’t know?” (Sidhwa 29), even though she knew their influence on her parents and others around her. These political leaders were manipulating ordinary people to serve their interests. Sidhwa, in an interview with Preeti Singh, reflected on this: “Part of my title Ice-Candy-Man did reflect on ice candy men, i.e., manipulative politicians who hold out false candies to people” (293).

Lenny knew that “India is going to be broken” (Sidhwa 92). With childlike innocence, she asked Cousin, “Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is? Or crack it further up on Warris Road? How will I ever get to Godmother’s then?” (Sidhwa 92). Cousin dismissed the idea of partition, stating, “Rubbish...no one’s going to break India. It’s not made of glass!” (Sidhwa 93). Ayah offered another dimension to their idea of partition: “They’ll dig a canal...This side for Hindustan and this side for Pakistan. If they want two countries, that’s what they’ll have to do – crack India with a long, long canal” (Sidhwa 93). The absurdity of partition is expressed in the following words: “Playing British gods under the ceiling fans of the Falettis Hotel – behind Queen Victoria’s garden skirt – the Radcliff Commission deals out Indian cities like a pack of cards. Lahore is dealt to Pakistan, Amritsar to India. Sialkot to Pakistan. Pathankot to India” (Sidhwa 140). However, after the partition, Lenny became aware of her new national identity: “I am a Pakistani. In a snap. Just like that. A new nation is born. India has been divided after all” (Sidhwa 140).

Lenny gradually developed an understanding of the violence caused by the partition from Ranna’s stories in Pir Pindo, where communal violence upsurged: “They are killing all Muslims. Setting fires, looting, parading the Muslim women naked through the streets – raping and mutilating them in the centre of villages and mosques” (Sidhwa 197). Debali Mookerjee-Leonard, in her book *Literature, Gender, and the Trauma of Partition: The Paradox of Independence*, comments that “Writings about children’s experience of the Partition are scarce” (166). Sidhwa’s depiction of a girl child narrator in this novel illustrates how the horror of partition violence deeply affected the child’s mind. Lenny’s detailed dissection of a “big, bloated celluloid doll” (Sidhwa 138) was an act of imitation of violence.

This serves as a fitting allegory of the senseless and reckless violence of partition. As a result, her peaceful and innocent childhood was disrupted. Rituparna Roy, in her book *South Asian Partition Fiction in English: From Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh* notes, “At eight, Lenny is already on the threshold of experience, but it should be remembered that in her case, her stepping into the world of experience is accelerated by the fact that her most impressionable years coincide with the communal upsurge that happened around the time and event of the Partition” (67).

Lenny was very close to her Ayah, a beautiful Punjabi woman who had many suitors and admirers from different religious and ethnic backgrounds: “Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee are, as always, unified around her” (Sidhwa 97). Through her, Lenny understood the notions of female sexuality and the objectification of a woman’s body through the male gaze: “The covetous glances Ayah draws educate me. Up and down, they look at her. Stub-handed twisted beggars and dusty old beggars on crutches drop their poses and stare at her with hard, alert eyes. Holy men, masked in piety, shove aside their pretences to ogle her with lust. Hawkers, cart drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists turn their heads as she passes...” (Sidhwa 3). Ayah became a victim of sexual politics after the partition. Roy aptly points out that “Ayah is (especially keeping in mind the composition of her circle) actually symbolic of the Indian earth that was ravaged by the Partition of 1947” (71).

The Ice-candy-man shrewdly exploited Lenny’s innocence. After the partition, Ayah became a Hindu for him. Lenny informed the Ice-candy-man about Ayah. As a result, Ayah was abducted: “They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet – that want to move backwards – are forced forward instead. Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat opens her mouth like the dead child’s screamless mouth...The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart...their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces” (Sidhwa 183). Lenny was shocked and emotionally shattered after Ayah’s abduction. She felt betrayed. She repented: “For three days I stand in front of the bathroom mirror staring at my tongue. I hold the vile, truth-infected thing between my fingers and try to wrench it out: but slippery and slick as a fish it slips from my fingers and mocks me with its sharp rapier tip darting as poisonous as a snake. I punish it with rigorous scourings from my prickling toothbrush until it is sore and bleeding” (Sidhwa 184).

Ayah was sold in “the Hira Mandi... The red-light district” (Sidhwa 240). She was installed as a “dancing girl” (Sidhwa 240) and a prostitute. Later, Ice-candy-man married her: “He has christened our ayah Mumtaz!” (Sidhwa 260). This is an act of forcible marriage and conversion. Her identity is determined through her marital status. When Lenny visited Ayah with her Godmother, Ayah expressed her dissatisfaction with that marriage: “I will not live with him” (Sidhwa 261). She pleaded, “I want to go to my family” (Sidhwa 261). Following this visit, Ayah was rehabilitated. Lenny was informed that “Ayah, at last, has gone to her family in Amritsar” (Sidhwa 277). Through Ayah’s suffering, Lenny learned that during the socio-political turmoil, revenge was sought by violating a woman’s body in the other community. Veena Das, in her essay “Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain” argues, “In the literary imagination of India, the violence of the Partition was about inscribing desire on the bodies of women in a manner that we have not yet understood. In the mythic imagination in India, victory or defeat in war was ultimately inscribed on the bodies of women” (82).

Lenny acquired a shocking insight into the gendered violence of partition. Once raped, violated, and mutilated, women are not accepted by their families. The Sikhs had kidnapped Hamida, Lenny's new ayah, and taken her away to Amritsar. Her husband and his family refused to incorporate her into the household as she had been a "fallen woman" (Sidhwa 214). Though Hamida tried to establish it as "fate-smitten" (Sidhwa 213), Lenny protested, "...and it had less to do with fate than with the will of men" (Sidhwa 214). This incident adheres to the typical patriarchal notion that honour is located in a woman's body. The "shame-fear-dishonour syndrome" (Menon and Bhasin 59) forced many women to commit suicide during and after the partition. Others were killed by their relatives under the pretext of honour killings. Urvashi Butalia remarks, "...while abducted women then entered the realm of silence, women who were killed by families, or who took their own lives, entered the realm of martyrdom" (208). This further illustrates that the relationship between womanhood and nationhood is complex and conflicting. Butalia observes: "Throughout the nationalist movement one of the most powerful symbols for mobilizing both women and men had been the image of India as the mother, Bharatmata. Now, Partition represented an actual violation of this mother, a violation of her (female) body...If the severing of the body of the country recalled the violation of the body of the nation-as-mother, the abduction and rape of its women, their forcible removal from the fold of their families, communities and country, represented a violation of their bodies as real - not metaphorical - mothers" (189).

Ice-Candy-Man offers a gynocentric perspective on the partition of India and its various nuances through the eyes of a girl-child narrator. Her understanding of the fatal consequences of partition was naive yet perceptive. In Ambreen Hai's words, this novel is an example of "border writing" (383) because "by refracting national history through a gendered consciousness, Sidhwa shifts historiographic perspective to those not usually regarded as central to that history" (389). Sidhwa's novel of partition deliberately strikes a note of difference by portraying women not merely as the victims of the partition. Women became the saviours of other women during that turbulent time. Courageous endeavours undertaken by Lenny's Godmother, mother, and aunt to rehabilitate those women who were abused or abandoned showed solidarity among women amid the devastation and disturbance caused by the partition. Bharucha observes, "Through the character of Lenny, Sidhwa explores a female universe ..." (136). Although the very fabric of her childhood was torn apart by the historical rupture, she was empowered by a strong female bond.

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