

## Women's Subjectivity and Resilience in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*

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### Abstract

The Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 was no less than a horror-filled episode in the history of the Indian subcontinent. People on both sides of the border, regardless of gender, experience unprecedented trauma. Added to the hardships of displacement, loss of loved ones, properties and livelihoods was the terror that ran through the masses; one that involved shedding of blood and loss of lives. However the experience of Partition for women, especially those without power or agency, was doubly hellish. Many became victims of rape, molestation and de-humanization at the hands of strangers and familiar men alike. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* chronicle such lived experience of women during Partition which are otherwise silenced and kept buried to themselves. This paper aims to discuss the experience of women as portrayed in the novel and further examine the subtle acts of resilience and resistance that these women exhibited in the face of hardships.

**Keywords:** Partition, Women, Subjectivity, Agency, Resilience.

### Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa (1938-2024) is a prominent contemporary writer and novelist. Some of her notable works include: *The Crow Eaters* (1978), *The Bride* (1982), *Cracking India* (1991), *The American Brat* (1993) and *Water* (2006). She belongs to the Parsi community; residing in Pakistan for many years before moving to the United States. She is the recipient of many awards, notably the Sitara-i-Imtiaz (Star of Excellence) Pakistan's highest honor in Arts awarded in 1991, Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award and the Premio Mondello for Foreign Authors in 2007.

The novel *Cracking India* was previously published as *Ice Candy Man* in 1988 in England and garnered the attention of readers around the world. Partly autobiographical, this novel revolves around the events leading up to the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and its aftermath. Narrated through the eyes of a young girl, it explores the dynamics of human-relationships, gender, class, religions, power, etc. during a turbulent period of history. Considering the lack of women's narrative or perspective in this area, this novel opens up great avenues to expand one's understanding of women's subjectivity in connection to the partition. As Urvashi Butalia has written 'the history of Partition was also the history of widespread sexual violence, particularly rape, abduction, forced marriage, selling into prostitution'. (xxvi) Therefore, study of women's subjectivity is indispensable to partition studies. It becomes crucial to revisit narratives of female experience especially written by female narrators who are more capable of articulating a more truthful picture than their male counterparts.

Previous writings on women experience of the partition have been notoriously presented within gendered and patriarchal frameworks. In many literary works dealing with partition, women characters are created with the sole function to portray the victims. They become symbols employed in delivering or sensationalizing the gruesome nature of warfare

and its consequences. Talking of Saadat Hasan Manto's short story 'Open it', Rosemary Marangoly George observes such gendered dynamics that is deeply ingrained in the writings of Partition. He writes: 'this story easily allows for a reduction of men and women to perfect binaries—rapists and raped, protectors and protected, villains and victims, buyers and bought, sellers and sold' (142). Such binaries and narrativising of women characters as the ultimate casualty of extremities forms a substantial portion of partition literature. It is in this sense that Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* breaks free from such existing narratives, giving voice and opportunity to the women characters to tell the story themselves. Women characters no longer remain as passive victims to whom the atrocities are committed but transforms into active characters helping in shaping the direction of the story. Sidhwa is among the new band of contemporary female writers such as Quratulain Hyder, Amrita Pritam, and Jamila Hashmi, who, as Jacquelyn M. Kleist writes 'breaks free from the hegemony of patriarchal Partition narratives to provide a distinct female counter-narrative'. (70)

### Women Characters: Voices, Experience and Resilience

The women characters in *Cracking India* are unique in the sense that they have authority and agency to portray themselves as a human being with feelings, emotions, flaws, likes and dislikes. Many women characters in the novel become subjected to violence and dehumanizing ordeals, but their roles in the story moves beyond victimhood. They do not remain as objects of sympathy; rather they assert their selfhood and individual will. The character of Ayah is a glaring example. In the story Ayah is betrayed by the very people who claim to be her lovers and admirers. As a Hindu woman who finds herself in the newly created 'Muslim-country', she becomes an enemy to the society. With no one to protect her owing to her poor social status, she is sold into prostitution, then forced to marry a Muslim man and assume a new name, Mumtaz. She is thus stripped of her dignity, religion and even her identity. She easily falls into the category of a victim character, however Sidhwa does not end Ayah's story here. When given the opportunity Ayah begged Lenny's Godmother to help her escape the forced marriage and return her home to Amritsar. She exhibits her strong-willed character whilst upholding integrity and placing her own desires and judgments over those of others. She stands her ground, refusing to forgive and forget Ice-Candy Man's humiliating treatment towards her. She decide not succumb to fate or to the wills of her perpetrators. Ayah's life maybe reduced to a lifeless existence but somehow escaping the grasp of Ice-candy Man and being able to return home, display a momentary victory on her part even as her future in Amritsar remains unpredictable.

Another character Hamida portrays the possible fate that Ayah may encounter once she returns to Amritsar. Hamida is a Muslim woman who was kidnapped and taken to Amritsar but later rescued and brought back to Lahore. However on her return, her family refused to take her in, ostracizing her on the ground that she has been touched and contaminated by other men. Hamida's victimhood becomes part of her character and she seems to accept her fate as a fallen women. Through her Sidhwa portrays the depth of mental suffering that each fallen woman carried within them. Their psychological turmoil and anguish is evident in the screams and cries that Lenny hears at night, coming from the bungalow that house these women. Both the characters of Ayah and Hamila displayed resilience amidst adversity in their own ways, transforming their stories of victimhood to stories of struggle for survival and moving forward in life.

In terms of resistance and resilience by women characters in the novel, Lenny's mother and Godmother are two characters that resisted the atrocities, choosing to stand on humanitarian grounds. It is apparent, however that their ability to exert power and influence people stems from their social status, economic condition as well as their religion and community background. Lenny's mother and grandmother are both women of good disposition; kind, intelligent, empathetic and eager to extend their helpfulness. Lenny's mother is a courageous woman who risked her life to help people affected by the Partition. She smuggled rationed petrol to be used for transporting rescued women or Hindus and Sikhs friends escaping from Lahore. Lenny's mother played a huge role in rescuing kidnapped woman and reuniting them with their families or giving them protection at the 'Recovered Women's Camps'. Overall Lenny's mother symbolizes the quite sacrifices that womenfolk forgo for a society to function smoothly, mostly unrecognized and unacknowledged. Even during wars, human empathy run deep and Sidhwa's successfully present women not as quite observers, helpless against violence and injustice but as reactive individuals who refuse to turn a blind eye to evil doings.

Coming to Lenny's Godmother, she is by far the most powerful women character in the novel. She has access to information, high influential people and officials. She appears to be extremely clever, full of experience, knowledgeable and comprehensive of life. She commands respect and her judgments are considered trustworthy and reliable. She has the power to break or make a person's career or status in society. An example of her powerful influence is the securing of seat for Ranna, a poor refugee boy, at a Convent school. This golden opportunity for Ranna will secure a prosperous future not only for him but for seven of his succeeding generations. Godmother's full power and authority is revealed while dealing with Ice-candy Man's hypocrisy and cruelty against Ayah. Outraged by Ice-candy Man's disgracing of Ayah and living off her 'womanhood', she threatens him: "I can have you lashed, you know? I can have you hung upside down in the Old Fort until you rot!" (198). If there was anyone who could save Ayah from the grasp of Ice-candy Man and his gang of accomplish, it was Godmother. Ayah would have lived a prisoned-life, buried in tears and grievance had not Godmother intervene. Recognizing the power of Godmother, Lenny the narrator writes:

"She set an entire conglomerate in motion immediately after our visit with Ayah and singlehandedly engendered the social and moral climate of retribution and justice required to rehabilitate our fallen Ayah. Everything came to a head within a fortnight. Which in the normal course of events, unstructured by Godmother's stratagems, could have been consigned to the ingenious bureaucratic eternity of a toddler nation..." (217)

Lastly the character of Lenny, the central point of reference to which every other character's story in the novel is related to. Lenny's knowledge of the world is limited and she relies on the grown-ups around her to navigate the ways of the world. She is born into an affluent Parsi family and lives quite comfortably even as she battles polio as a toddler. Although Lenny is a child in the story, the author manages to offer insights and thoughtful comments since the story is told through the means of recollections of memories. Lenny's experience of the Partition is that of a witness. She witness her neighbours leave their homes, the city burning, the rescued women being brought to the camps, the dead bodies by the roads, the mob that took Ayah away, etc. She fulfill all the criteria of being a 'witness', i.e. a third party observer who is not directly involved but can give testimonial account as proof

that the event took place. It is undeniable that Lenny's life is very much involved with the event of partition, but it is manifested indirectly, she was never a first-person victim of any atrocities. However, Lenny is heavily affected emotionally as can be seen in the guilt that she carried after betraying Ayah albeit unintentionally. Her guilt-ridden action of scrapping her tongue with a harsh toothbrush is evident of the depth of torment she felt. Despite the fact that Lenny was manipulated and tricked by Ice Candy Man's deceptive lies, she is tormented and plagued with guilt. Her plight is looked sympathetically by everyone, none choosing to blame or reproach her. However she continues to judge her actions as deserving punishment.

'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.' (151)

Even as a child Lenny has agencies owing to her social class and the community to which she belongs. Her power over people is derived from her influential parents and grandmother. When Ayah was confirmed to be living in Hira Mandi, the infamous place where respectable folks dare not tread; Lenny, a mere child was able to infiltrate such place as a result of her grandmother's influence. Lenny as the narrator has the liberty and authority to write her side of the story as well as of those around her.

## Conclusion

Partition literature has been plagued with stories of women's victimization and women characters without agencies. Patriarchal and gendered narratives of partition have created binaries, limiting and invalidating experiences outside these binaries of male perpetrators and female victims. It becomes imperative that it free itself from such limitation to bring in more subversive voices. It must accommodate voices of third gender, disabled individuals, marginalized individuals, etc. Following the footsteps of woman authors like Sidhwa, more women narrative should be studied and encouraged. Only when women assert their authority over their own lives, bodies and narrative can they create a truthful representation. Study of lived experience and testimonial accounts would benefit women as well as other marginalized communities in establishing more political and economic freedom. As discussed earlier, Sidhwa's *Cracking India* does not end when the women is raped, kidnapped, abandoned or forced into prostitution, it paints a fuller picture of women's experience and life. The stories continue, capturing the suffering, pain, mental turmoil that comes along with victimhood. Furthermore the stories prevail to account women's struggle to survive, move on and become stronger.

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