Ars Artium: **An International Peer Reviewed-cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences**
ISSN (Online) : 2395-2423 • ISSN (Print) : 2319-7889
Vol. 5, January 2017
Pp. 45-52

Partition and Women: A Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Ice Candy Man* (1989) is a standing example of the relationship between partition and women. It portrays a broad cross-section of Lahore society both before and after the city became a part of Pakistan. The narrative is in the first person, the narrator being an eight year old handicapped Parsi girl. The beginning and the end of the novel are highlighted with two epigraphs, through which the novelist expresses her earnest desire to work urgently to heal the wounds of partition and to give words to the tragedy.

Keywords: Partition, Trauma, Exploitation, Post-colonial, Epigraph.

> Mass scale migration, death, destruction, loss – no matter how inevitable Partition seemed no one could have foreseen the scale and ferocity of bloodshed and enmity it unleashed . . . still less could anyone have foreseen that *women* would become so significant, so central and indeed so problematic. (Butalia 188)

This declaration by Urvashi Butalia clearly states the widespread effects of partition of India on women's life. Indeed, women played a very crucial role since it was intrinsically related to the symbolic meaning their bodies acquired in defining the nation, its identity as well as their own identity. The conflicting and complex relation between womanhood and nationhood perfectly mirrors the Indian case. Cynthia Cockburn rightly opines, "Woman is [. . .] highly valued in nationalist discourse and often symbolizes the spirit of the nation [. . .] national movements transfix women as living boundary makers of the collectively". (Cockburn 43) The struggle of colonialism and anti-colonialism is said to be scripted on the body of women, mostly middle-class women. The Indian nationalists at the time of partition cast a new and collective female identity in which community and gender intersected with each other and these two elements collectively intersected with government. Though, the nation was celebrating the concept of

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"new woman" and she was defined as mother land and *Bharat mata*, but it is also true that they were sufferers of abduction and mass rape, rather "political rape". (Leonard 142) The communal crimes against women during partition, were carried out collectively and by extreme brutality evolved from the cultural and social settings founded on all-male and patriarchal conception of gender relations within and between communities. Rape of 'Other's' women became the most immediate way to strike, to lower the moral and to challenge their men and manhood. To attack 'Other's' women purity is to attack the honour of her whole community and ultimately her nation. The body of a woman was considered as a project or territory over which the affirmation of one's identity was fought in a battle in which weapons were sexual violence and abduction. Menon and Bhasin clearly synthesize the picture:

> The material, symbolic, political significance of the abduction of women was not lost either on the women themselves and their families, on their communities, or on leaders and governments. As a retaliatory measure, it was simultaneously an assertion of identity and humiliations of the rival community through the appropriation of its women. When accompanied by forcible conversion and marriage it could be counted upon to outrage both family and community honour and religious sentiments. (Menon and Bhasin 5)

This "shame-fear-dishonour syndrome" (Menon and Bhasin 59) forced hundreds of women to take their lives in order to avoid the humiliations of sexual abuse; as many were killed by their own husbands, fathers and brothers for the same reason. The abducted women entered "the realm of silence" and those who were killed by their family or took their own life, entered "the realm of martyrdom". (Butalia 208) This inevitability of rape leaves woman with the choice of committing suicide so that she could be accommodated within the narrative of the nation as a legitimate and pure dead citizen and those who survive rape are refused entry into the domestic sphere of the new nation because a raped and impure woman cannot be perceived as the vehicle of the family and nation. It forces Jasbir Jain to remark that "partition was inscribed on the bodies of women". (Jain 117)

The memories of partition are too hurtful to be told but, it can be stated that art, better than any other language can express the unresolved and untold burdens of the partition. A historian writes about the wars and the historical events, but a creative writer writes all the perspectives of the events and makes it approachable and comprehensible to the common man. Bapsi Sidhwa is one such writer who wrote about this important and difficult period of the partition in her much celebrated novel *Ice-Candy-Man*. Sidhwa says in "Why do I write?" "I have loved to commemorate in my fiction, about my concerns. That is the nature of writing, if you have things to say, you need no other reason to write". (Sidhwa 31) She as a creative writer has painted the details left by the historians, wrapped them with the factual details of the historical events with a coating of fiction and made the events interesting and appealable to the readers worldwide. While writing the novel, she felt that the Indians and Pakistanis still share the concern for partition. In an interview she states:

> One had thought we were done with it; the spiral of hatred that defined the new borders, the savagery that accompanied the partition of India. The British had gone . . . but . . . what is happening in both countries in the name of ethnicity, race and religion only signifies that the partition did not solve our problems. (Sidhwa 3)

Sidhwa also says that she thought that with the passage of time the two communities would forget this case and heal themselves but she was wrong, "neither in Pakistan, nor in India, nor even in Bangladesh . . . This hostility has to be dealt with". (Sidhwa Int. by Preeti 292) She felt motivated to write *Ice-Candy-Man* because she wanted her novel "to function as a recording of a particular history, hoping that one might learn a lesson from that history". (Sidhwa Int. by Rajan 13) Her narrative of partition speaks about the silence, horror and loss of men and particularly, of women. She shows how the decision of partition played havoc on the life of ordinary people whether they were Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. The partition tormented their lives, identities, citizenship and nationalities into pieces and left them crippled with no alternate, but to see each other with suspicion and hatred. The novel opens with the lines of famous Urdu poet Mohammed Iqbal which is a metaphor of writer's consciousness:

> Shall I hear the lament of the nightingale, submissively lending my ear?
> Am I rose to suffer its cry in silence year after year?
> The fire of verse gives me courage and bids me no more to be faint.
> (Sidhwa 1)

Sidhwa ends her novel also with the lines of Iqbal. She quotes him at the beginning of the last chapter of the novel:

> Give me the wine that burns all veils, the wine by which life's secret is revealed,
> The wine whose essence is eternity,
> The wine which opens mysteries concealed.
> Lift up the curtain, give me power to talk.
> And make the sparrow struggle with the hawk. (275)

Through these two epigraphs, at the beginning and the end of the novel, Sidhwa expresses her desire to work urgently to heal the wounds of partition and to give words to the tragedy. But, the task is not easy as her feeble voice (the sparrow's) has to struggle against the numberless voices of official discourses (the hawk) which make people's suffering speechless to utter the secret and mysteries. On the last page of the novel she writes, "The guard . . . squats by Ice-Candy-Man, gleaning wisdom from his comment on life and its ways and the wayward ways of God and men and women". (277) She deliberately writes about 'women' to show that the structure of the society is not neutral; it needs man and woman to work smoothly. Allotting a visible space to woman is enough to declare that her novel of partition is gender-conscious.

Ice-Candy-Man can rightly be defined as a *bildungsroman* or a post-colonial *bildungsroman* as it deals with the growth and education of its female protagonist and

first-person narrator, Lenny, a handicapped Parsi girl - from her childhood to adulthood. In this novel, Sidhwa presents various nuances and complexities related with a decision of political pragmatism through Lenny, a child narrator and chronicler. Lenny looks at characters belonging to different communities through the prism of her own Parsi sensitivity. The child's narration lends a kind of authenticity to the novel. *Ice-Candy-Man* also presents the horrifying details of cruelty, human loss and dislocation, with a subtle irony, witty banter and parody and forces the readers to desist from maudlin sensitive reactions, and to concentrate more on the inscrutability of human behaviour. The novel *Ice-Candy-Man* deserves to be ranked as the most authentic and best on the partition of India. In the novel, Sidhwa has captured the turmoil of the times, with a brilliant combination of individual growing up pains and the collective anguish of a newly independent but divided country. Seen through the prism of a marginalised minority girl-child, it focuses on the deteriorating communal climate in pre-partition days. "Lenny's naiveté, her privileged position, and her religious background lend her version of partition a quality that other novels about this tempestuous period in Indo-Pakistani history lack". (Ross 183) Protected by her religious background and her parents' status, Lenny is not directly affected by the contumelious situation of partition days, but she keenly observes and comments on the events happening around her. The tone of a reporter which she adopts for recording the events or commenting on them enhances the poignancy of the emotions which are linguistically underplayed. Recalling the nightmarish experiences of her own time days, Sidhwa tells to Feroza Jussawalla:

> When I was a child living in Lahore at the time of Partition, my maiden name was Bhandara, which sounded like a Hindu name. After most of the riots were over, a gang of looters came in carts into our house thinking it's an abandoned house. They were quite shocked to see us and my mother and everybody there. At that time our Muslim cook came out and said, 'What do you damn people think you're doing? This is a Parsi household,' and they said, 'we thought it was a Hindu household,' and they went away. I decided to write a story about Partition because this scene was vivid in my mind. (Cited in Singh 37)

Sidhwa describes Lenny's learning about sexuality, community and nation and her view point over partition not as a political moment but as an accident which disturbs the personal life of people around her. On the narrative level, Lenny works as the 'fire of verse' in Iqubal's poem. She is not particularly an attractive child. She tells, "I am skinny, wizened, sallow, wiggly-haired, ugly". (Sidhwa 22) We are also told that she is dark-complexioned in comparison to her fair-skinned brother. "It's a pity, Adi's fair and Lenny so dark. He is a boy. Anyone will marry him". (81) But, the deformity of her foot helps her gain attention of the adult world and contributes to the singularity of her vision. Isabella Bruschi marks a very interesting similarity when she asserts:

> The deformity of her (Lenny's) foot, which will be cured in time, works as an allegory of the nation that will gain independence, thus being healed of the impairment of British Rule; Lenny herself remarks that polio makes her feel

> involved in politics, when her doctor, Col. Barucha, blames the English for having brought it over to India . She is shocked . . . painful treatments, makes her more receptive and sympathetic to the torments of others. (Bruschi 179)

In an interview, Sidhwa declares, "Truth, nothing but truth can lead to a lot of harm, too". (qut. in Bahri 228) As a child always tells truth, Lenny's innocence leads to the tortures of her Ayah's life. She works as 'Ayah' for the polio-infected girl Lenny in the Parsi family of Lahore around the time of partition. From the pre-partition India to the post partition Pakistan; her subjection to the sexual abuse remains the same. The ice candy man is the reporter and the linking element of the plot. Queen Victoria's Garden is a type of confluence where all the suitors of Ayah meet (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian). Being a Parsi and loyal to her motherland, she praises Jinnah and criticizes the hero of Indian independence, Mahatma Gandhi. Men of all religious communities attempt to harass her sexually, which becomes evident when the eight years old narrator Lenny says:

> 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 look her with lust. Hawkers, cart drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists turn their heads as she passes… (Sidhwa 3)

In the long line of Ayah's tormentors, Ice-candy remains at the forefront. Under the pretext of love and affection, he attempts to win her sexually even in the public parks. His fingers try to "massage Ayah under her sari". (19) Sidhwa tells that "things love to crawl beneath Ayah's sari. Ladybirds, glow-worms, Ice-candy man's toes". (19) Ayah's body itself becomes a synecdoche of the broken land, desired by all and ravished by those who courted and loved her. She stands for all those women who suffered the agonies of pre and post-partition, on whose bodies disputes were held and nations were built. Butalia throws light on the reason that why women and their sexuality were central to the preceding of partition:

> 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 ... if the severing of the body of the country recalled the violation 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 removal from the fold of their families, communities and country, represented a violation of their bodies as real – not metaphorical – mother. (Butalia 189)

There is no doubt on the fact the ice candy man loves Ayah, but that love or affection changes into the communal hatred after the partition of India. Trainload of corpses comes from across the border and people divide in terms of religious beliefs. This division gets performed in the bodies of the women. Ice-candy man who loves Ayah from the inner core of the heart and who even kills her lover to get her, suddenly forgets his feelings for her, when he knows, "A train from Gurdaspur has just come

in…Everyone in it is dead. They are all Muslim. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny bags full of women's breasts!" (Sidhwa 149) He loses his temper and decides to take revenge from Ayah by violating her body. She hides to save herself from being abducted. Imam Din tries to save her, saying, "she left Lahore". (179) But, Ice candy man emotionally blackmails Lenny saying,

"Don't be scared, Lenny baby …I am here…I'll protect Ayah with all my life! You know I will …I know she is here. Where is she?" (182) Believing his words Lenny says, "On the roof or in one of the godowns…." (182) Pleading to her emotion, the mob discovers Ayah and "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". (183) Continuing the narration, she further says, "the men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands, supporting her with careless intimacy, lift her into it". (183) After the abduction, Ice-candy man takes her to "Hira Mandi…the red light district" where she works as the dancer and her kidnapper plays pimp for her. (240) She is taken to the place where "the men pay them [girls] to dance and sing …to do things with their bodies". (240) He first uses her body to acquire the financial benefits and later on converts her into Muslim and marries her. Against her will, she goes through the forced conversion, marriage and different forms of sexual abuse. Godmother, having found Ayah married to Ice–candy man, invites him home and asks, "why do you live in Hira Mandi? It's the red light district, isn't it? It's not a suitable place for a family man". (246) Sensing that ice candy man plays pimp for her even after the marriage, she outshouts, "You permit her to be raped by butchers, drunks and goondas and say she has come to no harm?"(248). She further says, "Is that why you had her lifted off-let hundreds of eyes probe her so that you could marry her?" (248). She knows that ice candy man forcefully marries her and lets her "be disgraced!" (249) She finds him "treacherous, dangerous and contemptible" (249). With this realization, she commits to recover Ayah from Hira Mandi and restore to her family. She even tells him, "Restore her to family in Amritsar". (250) The Godmother commits to imbue her "with a sense of worth" and restoring her "to the social acceptability". (Menon & Bhasin 192) So, she chooses what Ayah chooses for herself. Ayah often repeats, "I want to go to my folk". (263) She admits, "whether they want me or not, I will go". (262) Responding to the demand of Ayah, Godmother takes the help of police administration and recovers her from the brothel. She succeeds in bringing her to the camp, the first step for restoration to the family. They transform themselves into the social workers who in the "time of great social dislocation… found it possible to slip through the cracks and exercise their agency on behalf of the women whenever they could". (Menon & Bhasin 201) Due to the exercise of their agency, Ayah "has gone to her family in Amritsar". (Sidhwa 277)

Another woman, Hamida in *Ice-Candy Man*, also represents all those victims of partition, labelled as the fallen women. She, after the Ayah of the family gets abducted, comes to work as Ayah for Lenny. After being sexually abused, she searches work in Lahore rather than going back to her family. Lenny knows from her Godmother that "Hamida was kidnapped by the Sikhs…she was taken away to Amritsar. Once that

happens, sometimes, the husband – or his family won't take her back". (215) It's not her fault to be kidnapped and raped. But the family regards it as the honour killing and sends her back instead of restoring her to the family. The family refuses her at the moment she needs the family most. Godmother tells Lenny that "some folks feel that way – they can't stand their women being touched by other men". (215) By listening this, Lenny recalls when Himat Ali once forbids her to touch the sparrow that had tumbled from its nest on her veranda: "Let it be, he'd stopped me. 'The mother will take care of it. If our hands touch it, the other sparrows will peck it to death.' 'Even the mother? She asked. Even the mother' he'd said". (215-16)

When Hamida gets raped, she even does not try to go to her family, thinking that "They are better off as they are. My sister-in-law will look after them. If their father gets to know I have met them he will only get angry, and the children will suffer. Moreover, she never blames her husband for not coming to recover her. To our surprise, she says, "He is a good man,' …it's my *kismet* that's no good…We are *Khut-putli*, puppets, in the hands of the fate". (222) Hamida blames her fate for her suffering but makes no claim for space in the family. She takes her status of the fallen woman as given and commits the violence against herself. When Lenny grows old, she starts developing thoughts. For her growing up is also a sorrowful consciousness of reality. She asserts:

> I feel so sorry for myself – and for Cousin – and for all the senile, lame and hurt people and fallen women – and the condition of the world – in which countries can be broken, people slaughtered and cities burnt – that I burst into tears. I feel I will never stop crying. (217)

Bapsi Sidhwa restores voice to all women – no matter what religion or community they belong to, no matter whether they have lost their honour or struggling for their honour. She has given the example of Ayah whose real name is Shanta, that means 'peace' (mentioned only once in the novel). She is the representative of Hindu women while Hamida which means 'nice nature' symbolizes Muslim women. What Sidhwa wants to show is that women of both the communities suffered a lot at the hands of both Hindu and Muslim men at the time of partition. Ayah moves towards her people and home. Sidhwa doesn't write what happens to her in Amritsar, but she becomes the symbol of re-establishment of honour. Being a woman, Sidhwa is more capable and effective in highlighting the pain and plight of partition not only on woman's body but also on her psyche. While giving words to her thoughts, she says, "A woman's experience can only be translated by a woman" (Sidhwa Int. by Mmaka 03) and "some books can only be written by women" (Sidhwa Int. by Rajan 13). She, like Elaine Showalter, believes that women have played a prominent role in shaping the cultural and political identities, but instead of getting respect they have become an instrument for men to play with. Women were the worst sufferers of partition and Sidhwa has tried her best to give a bold voice to their sufferings and no doubt, she is quite successful in her efforts.

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