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Postcolonial perspectives on partition: A study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*
(cracking India)

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Abstract

The aim of my research paper is to study the postcolonial perspectives on Partition in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Ice-Candy-Man* through the subaltern eyes of a child-narrator belonging to the Parsi diaspora in colonial Lahore, Pakistan. Bapsi Sidhwa describes the traumatic tale of Partition days when the lofty ideal of nationalism was suddenly bartered for communal thinking resulting in unprecedented devastation, political absurdities and deranged social sensibilities. Through her novel Bapsi Sidhwa has not only been successful in questioning the British and

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Indian versions of the subcontinent's history, but has also provided an alternate version of history based on the prevalent, dominant Pakistani point of view. It will be explored as to how the novel examines the inexorable logic of Partition as an offshoot of fundamentalism sparked by communal hatred. This novel is the prism of Parsi sensitivity through which the cataclysmic event is depicted.

Key Words: Trauma of Partition, Diaspora, Victimization of Women, Communal Violence .

The aim of my research paper is to study the postcolonial perspectives on Partition in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Ice Candy Man* through the subaltern eyes of a child-narrator belonging to the Parsi diaspora in colonial Lahore, Pakistan. Bapsi Sidhwa describes the traumatic tale of Partition days when the lofty ideal of nationalism was suddenly bartered for communal thinking resulting in unprecedented devastation, political absurdities and deranged social sensibilities. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* was first published in London in 1988. In the 1991 American edition, this title was changed to *Cracking India*, because the publishers felt Americans would misunderstand 'ice candy' and confuse it with drugs.

Ironically, this mass scale exodus entailed crimes of unprecedented violence, murders, rapes and bestiality. The tragedy of the Partition encounter has given rise to fictional explorations with an attempt to define the inner turmoil and social complexes that plagued the subcontinent. The vast volume of Partition fiction in English, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and other languages of the subcontinent faithfully records the gruesome human disaster in the wake of Partition. The incredible suffering and bewilderment of the people of the subcontinent has been a favourite theme with the Indian and Pakistani writers. There is no dearth of writings about the

Partition of India, the socio-political conditions since Independence, and creative responses to the tragedy of Partition which are very well documented.

G. Pandey in *Remembering Partition* argues that while official histories view Partition merely as “constitutional political arrangement”, survivors’ memories suggest that it amounted to a sundering, a whole new beginning and thus, a radical reconstitution of community and history”. (G.Pandey: 2001, 7). Partition has been the theme for many of the Pakistani and Indian authors. It is an unforgettable event. Families were lacerated apart and small kids were left orphaned. The Partition holocaust wrought havoc on all sections of society, and communalism made people go berserk. The tragedy of Partition has stirred the creative imagination of many writers, who weaved the fabric of tragic tale highlighting inexplicable and intolerable mayhem of communal violence between the Hindus and the Muslims.

Bapsi Sidhwa is a prolific and an eminent Pakistani diasporic writer. Her works include *Their Language of Love* (2013), *Jungle Wala Sahib* (Translation from Urdu in 2012) *City of Sin and Splendour : Writings on Lahore* (2006, US), *Water: A Novel* (2006, US and Canada), *Bapsi Sidhwa Omnibus* (2001, Pakistan), *An American Brat* (1993, U.S.; 1995, India), *Cracking India* (1991, U.S.; 1992, India; originally published as *Ice Candy Man*, 1988, England), *The Bride* (1982, England; 1983;1984, India; published as *The Pakistani Bride*, 1990 US and 2008 US), *The Crow Eaters* (1978, Pakistan; 1979 &1981, India; 1980, England; 1982, US). Her novels in English reflect her personal experience of the Partition of Indian subcontinent, abuse against women, immigration to the US, and membership in the Parsi or Zoroastrian community.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s third and most famous novel is *Ice Candy Man* (*Cracking India*). The novel is set in pre-Partition India in Lahore. It examines the inexorable logic of Partition as an offshoot of fundamentalism sparked by communal hatred. It looks at Partition as a means

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of spreading disharmony which resulted in frenzy and chaos. Sidhwa shows us that the Partition leaves even sane people and friends helpless and ineffective. In her novel Sidhwa has foregrounded a number of socio-political issues surrounding Partition as this is the major theme of her novel. For example: conflicting attitudes of Muslim League and Congress, riots in Punjab and its Partition and communal disharmony etc. The racial, regional, national and cultural issues of historical as well as topical significance form the core of her novels.

It may be worth mentioning that Bapsi Sidhwa herself was a young girl in Lahore in the years leading up to Partition, and thus, like Lenny in *Cracking India*, witnessed the historical events of the time. Due to the conflicting or contrasting nature of the Partition narratives, the element of truth becomes very indispensable in the writing process of fiction or non-fiction. Sidhwa is alive to this danger and, therefore, chooses the age and sex of her narrator of the novel circumspectly. Through the first-person account of an eight-year old girl, Lenny, in Sidhwa's work, we feel the unease and insecurity experienced by this ethnic and religious minority group – the Parsis. Such quintessential diasporic discourses can be explained in Homi Bhabha's terms as, "the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective" (Homi Bhabha: 1994, 2).

The narrative voice acquires much authenticity and validity in Lenny's self-condemning question, "How can anyone trust a truth-infected tongue?" (CI: 243). This is a wonderful conceit, an elaborate metaphor which contains both paradoxical and ironical elements.

The word 'infected' loads its partner 'truth' with unusually negative connotations and causes us to reflect on the nature of the truth we want to hear. Though we require Lenny to be a reliable witness to the historical events she sees, and to tell an historical truth (within the bounds of Sidhwa's fictional truth) in her narration,

we are made uneasy by the unwise, instinctive truth which causes, her to betray Ayah. Only a child could own such a truth-infected tongue (Crane in Dhawan and Kapadia 1996: 54).

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy Man (Cracking India)* deals with the Partition of India and the circumstances that prevailed after the Partition. This is the first novel by a woman novelist from Pakistan in which she depicts the fate of people in Lahore vividly. The novel opens with the poem of Iqbal "Complaint to God" (CI: 11) with which the child-narrator Lenny is introduced. The story is narrated from the point of a young Parsi Zoroastrian girl. As admitted by Sidhwa herself, there are her own autobiographical elements in the novel. For example, the child protagonist Lenny is the personification of Sidhwa's own childhood. Like Lenny, Sidhwa too was, at the time of Partition, a polio-ridden eight year old girl, living in Lahore. Lenny is an introvert, and she is engrossed in her private world. After Dr. Bharucha's has done surgery to Lenny, she feels very painful, and becomes bed-ridden. The news of Lenny's surgery spreads like a wild fire in the small Parsi community of Lahore. While lying on the bed, Lenny observes ardently the reaction of visitors and her parents. She remains a mute a spectator throughout the novel. Like Lenny, the child narrator of the *Ice Candy Man*, Bapsi Sidhwa at the time of Partition was an eight-year-old girl living in Lahore. Recalling the nightmarish experience of those days, Sidhwa tells *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

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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 (Randhir Pratap Singh: 2005, 37).

One day, the Parsi community assembles in the community hall in the Parsi temple. Lenny observes everything with curiosity. Then the meeting of the Parsi community takes place to express their stand on Swaraj. Col. Bharucha holds the microphone and informs the gathering regarding the latest political developments. Having had thorough discussions, all the people express their consent to observe and see - a neutral stand. At the time of Partition, people were on the horns of dilemma not being able to decide to which side they had to support.

Imam Din, the cook of Lenny's house, takes Lenny to his village on his bicycle. Lenny observes everything keenly on her way to the village. This is the village Pir Pindo where Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims live peacefully. There she meets children Ranna and his sisters Khatija and Parveen. As the communal riots were perpetrated, the villagers assembled beneath a huge tree to discuss the grim situation in cities like Bihar and Bengal. They feel worried about the news of Hindu-Muslim riots. The villagers blame the British government for their inaction and passivity in the wake of communal riots.

It is the month of April and Lahore is getting hotter day by day. By now it has become clear that the Indian subcontinent is going to be separated. The Muslim league wants another nation by name 'Pakistan' to be created for Muslims. Imam Din, the cook at Lenny's house is worried about the news of communal riots and, therefore, plans a visit to his village Pir Pindo. Lenny would like to go along with him to the village. She still cherishes the memory of her earlier visit to the village. At this point of time, people get apprehended and anticipate the trouble

to be experienced. In this state of imbroglio, the military trucks arrive in Pir Pindo to evacuate Muslims forcibly to safer places. The Muslim peasants are obfuscated, and they do not want to leave their home, property and agriculture suddenly. At this juncture, the mutilated body of Mr. Roger, the Inspector General of Police, is found in the gutters. This news spreads like wildfire among the people of Lahore. The communal riots begin to take place, and this leads to chaotic situations. Both sides were in the vice-like grip of frenzy beyond control. Bodily mutilation is commonly seen in the violence of the Partition. After seeing this dreadful event, Lenny returns home and performs the same action on her doll—she pulls the legs of a doll apart. She is frightened by the result, crying, and her brother is confused and infuriated by Lenny's "pointless brutality" (CI: 48). Lenny's action is a response to the mutilation of the man. However, it is a psychological effect of being scared; it is a preconception endowed in her mind about the Partition of the nation.

The passages describing bloodshed and murder highlight the brute in human beings. After Master Tara Singh's rousing address against the division of the Punjab, the mob goes berserk. Even the police were targeted. And then there is towering inferno in Lahore. Lenny observes: The Sikhs milling in a huge blob in front wildly wave and clash their swords, kirpans and hockey-sticks and punctuate their shrieks with roars: "Pakistan murdabad death to Pakistan!" -And the Muslims shouting: "So? We'll play Holi-with-their-blood -" (CI: 134).

Communal violence spreads from towns to small villages like Pir Pindo. Muslims and Sikhs become enemies thirsting for each other's blood. In Lahore, people begin to move to safer places. Hindus and Sikhs leave their houses behind and reach Amritsar. People hear announcements on All India Radio about the division of districts in India and Pakistan. The Parsi

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community in Pakistan is safe, but still worried about its future. This act of violence against Muslim women spurs Ice Candy Man to inflict violence on Hindu and Sikh women.

Muslim mobs attack Hindu houses. A mob stops outside Lenny's house and enquire about its Hindu servants. They ask about the Hindu Ayah Shanta but the cook Imam Din tells them about her fake departure. Ice Candy Man comes forward and asks Lenny about Ayah. Out of innocence, Lenny discloses about her hiding. The angry Muslims drag her out of Lenny's house. The most loathsome scene in the novel *Ice candy Man* is the abduction of Ayah. "Muslim mobs show up at Lenny's house in search of the Hindu Ayah" (CI: 190). Ayah is kidnapped by Ice Candy Man and the mob. She is coerced to prostitute her body and also have sex with Ice Candy Man. Ice Candy Man successfully strips Ayah of her identity as a woman and as a Hindu. Whatever love he has for Ayah is smothered by his complete subjugation of her. He keeps her in the brothel even after marrying her. This sight proves to be traumatic for poor Lenny and she repents for telling the truth to Ice Candy Man. She is guilt-driven. For three days she stands in front of the bathroom mirror staring at her tongue. She feels much regretted for having spoken the truth which has turned out to be a curse for Ayah. Lenny thinks regretfully that a truth can also ruin one's life.

All the novels that are written in the backdrop of Partition give a vivid account of the communal violence that erupted in the subcontinent when the British announced its division into Pakistan and India. The most affected area was the Punjab province since it was one of the two provinces that were divided into two halves. This led to the huge migration from one city to another to seek a peaceful land for their survival while giving rise to unprecedented violence and crime scenes. Lenny in *Ice Candy Man* says that "she was born with the awareness of war" (CI:

31). Besides the rivalry between Masseur and Ice Candy Man for Ayah's favours, there is a far larger conflict between India and Pakistan as to who should live where.

Although Ayah escapes her abductor, but even with her family in Amritsar, she will be marked by her defilement during Partition. Thus, she will suffer the psychological and emotional outbursts forever. This is true of Hamida - the new ayah of Lenny. She depicts a woman who has been besmirched and subsequently discarded by her family. Godmother tells Lenny about Hamida that she was kidnapped by the Sikhs. "People can't stand their women being touched by other men" (CI: 227). Lenny is tormented by the wailing of a recovered woman at the refugee camp near her house.

In Pir Pindo village, Sikh crowds attack the Muslim community. Imam Din's family is in danger, but nothing can be done. Muslims in Pir Pindo village get killed and their women gang-raped. Children are slaughtered mercilessly. Ranna, the playmate of Lenny in Pir Pindo, is also wounded and buried under the heap of dead bodies. After some time, he safely moves to another place. Earlier, it had been decided that the women and girls of Pir Pindo would gather at Chaudhry's house and pour the kerosene oil around the house to burn themselves. Muslims are killed, women molested and children butchered. Only Ranna escapes and finds shelter in a camp in Lahore.

Ice Candy Man reports to his friends that a train from Gurdaspur has arrived in Lahore filled with murdered Muslims. He shouts, "Everyone is dead. Butchered they are all Muslims. There are no young women among the dead. Only two gunny bags full of women's breasts" (CI: 159). Ice Candy Man exclaims, "I want to kill someone for each of the breasts they cut off the Muslim women" (CI: 166). He is tormented by the butchering of Muslim women.

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In *Cracking India*, the body is indispensable in the representation of the Partition; it is the object which primarily bears the suffering. It is the location from which the narrative of the violence begins. For instance, when Lenny and Himat Ali find the gunny-sack of Masseur's body on the road, the depiction of the body starts:

The sack slowly topples over and Masseur spills out. [...] He was lying on one side, the upper part of his velvet body bare, a brown and white checked lungi knotted on his hips, and his feet in the sack. I never knew Masseur was so fair inside, creamy, and his arms smooth and distended with muscles and his forearms lined with pale brown hair. A wide wedge of flesh was neatly hacked to further trim his slender waist, and his spine, in a velvet trough, dipped into his lungi. (CI: 185).

Masseur's body is the starting point of the narrative. Even though he is dead, his body continues to tell the story and produce meaning; "they look at him as if he is not a person. He isn't. He has been reduced to a body. A thing" (CI: 186). Masseur's body is the embodiment of the violence.

The extreme form of community violence is killing, yet there are other forms of violence in the Partition. While they do not kill, they cause permanent changes or trauma to the victims. The one that is worth noting is the violence displayed on the body being circumcised. When the Muslim mobs come to Lenny's house to find out and catch if there is any Hindu or Sikh, they question the gardener Himat Ali, who, before the Partition and his conversion into Muslim, is known as "Hari." They ask him to recite the Koran and expose his circumcised penis to the crowd so as to prove that he is already "a proper Muslim" (CI: 192). Another important incident of the novel is that the barber who himself circumcises the gardener and the gardener's reciting

the Koran with a Hindu intonation, the mobs let the gardener pass. The circumcision “a unity between the spiritual and the corporeal” (CI:80).

Immediately after the Partition, there was an unbridled ventilation of the pent-up rancour. While the Muslims of Pir Pindo that fell on the Indian side of the border were subjected to the mass carnage and rape by the ravaging gangs of the Akalis, the Hindus and the Sikhs of Lahore underwent a similar tormenting experience. Bapsi Sidhwa expresses “...while the old city in Lahore crammed behind its dilapidated Moghul gates, burned, thirty miles away Amritsar also burned” (CI:207).

Bapsi Sidhwa subverts the Indian perspective on Partition in general and on Jinnah in particular. From the point of Bapsi Sidhwa, Partition was the result of British policies of divide and rule, Gandhi’s mixing of religion and politics and Nehru’s Prime-ministerial ambitions. According to Bapsi Sidhwa, Muslim League and Jinnah have been presented in the books of Indian and British scholars in a biased manner. Her presentation of Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and Master Tara Singh as the architects of Partition and excusing Jinnah paves way for an alternate view of reality. Her assessment of Jinnah’s role in the freedom movement is also noteworthy. She is of the view that the British have been less than fair to him as well as to Pakistan. Her portrayal of Gandhi is too radical to miss. She directly blames Gandhi for the Partition, while not caring to remember that the strongest opposition to the idea of Partition came from Gandhi himself. The analysis of the political leadership during the Partition days by Sidhwa is subjective and at times even prejudiced.

The contrast between Nehru and Jinnah is seen as the opposition between superficiality and worth, appearance and reality. The charm of Nehru is presented as deceptive while the austerity of Jinnah is seen as his virtue. Here the writer sheds all the pretensions of using Lenny

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as an objective narrator, and uses her authorial voice directly to stress the disparity between Nehru and Jinnah.

To conclude, *Ice Candy Man* gives us a glimpse into the events of turmoil on the Indian subcontinent during Partition. It distils the love-hate relationship of the Hindus and Muslims through the consciousness and point of view of Lenny, an unusually precocious eight-year-old Parsi girl. It presents the Parsi dilemma of retaining allegiance to political masters, as well as a Parsi-Pakistani perspective of Partition. Bapsi Sidhwa has not only been successful in questioning the British and Indian versions of the subcontinent's history, but has also provided an alternate version of history based on the prevalent, dominant Pakistani point of view. Through *Cracking India*, Bapsi Sidhwa has indeed brought to life the spiritual, emotional, and the real implications of the Partition of India.

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