

Vignettes of Violation: A Gendered Reading of Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy Man

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Abstract – The most shocking incident in the history of Indian peninsula was that the country was divided into two separate nations (i.e. India and Pakistan) at the end of the colonial era. The partition that was based on religious identity had created unprecedented tensions among the Indians resulted in devastating communal riots. Human rights were badly violated by the fanatics and their heinous acts of bigotry. Although women were hardly given any opportunity to be the part of freedom fighting, they became the worst victim of partition violence. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* which is one of the most remarkable works based on Indian partition provides us with a sincere representation of the terrible impact of it on people of the subcontinent especially on the women. It gives a pictorial account of exploitation, rape, murder, abduction, assault on the private parts of the women, and amputation of their breasts that happened to be very common during the time of partition. In the present novel, Sidhwa has drawn an imaginary connection between a female body and territorial landmass of the undivided India. Here, the character Ayah is a metaphorical figure representing nation as a woman or a mother. The molestation of Ayah's body can be equated with the molestation (partition) of India. The present paper will foreground the dimensions in which gender relation is essential in understanding and analyzing the phenomena of nation. It will take up feminist approach to show oppression and exploitation against women as portrayed in the novel to drive home the conclusion, and will suggest possible ways for the emancipation of the women.

Keywords: Nation, Colonialism, Racism. Partition-Violence, Nation-Building, Gender Relation, Human Right

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INTRODUCTION

It is shameful that violation against women has become a part of our everyday life. Women are experiencing the discrimination daily, and they are being deprived of their due rights. Besides, they become the victim of the animalistic cruelty of the male dominated society. This inhuman practice is basically occurring due to negligence towards women. According to an international survey (IMAGES) sixty five percent of Indian men believe women should tolerate violence in order to keep the family together, women sometimes deserve to be beaten. Although these heinous activities have become normal in our society, their condition becomes more deteriorated during the time of communal riots. They have to face rape, murder, abduction, molestation, and certain other types of atrocities. In case of Indian history of partition, there was no exception regarding the lot of the women who became the victims of the bigots and the fanatics. Several communal riots had broken out both during and after the partition of India.

The atrocities against women, during the time of independence, have been presented by many authors in their writings. Some of the prominent writers have portrayed the gory and bleak sides of the partition are Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Chaman Nahal, Khushwant Singh, Bhisham Sahni, Bapsi Sidhwa etc. The present article will focus on the violation against women as it is depicted in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy Man*.

Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the prominent South Asian women writers of the 20th century. She was born in 1938 to a Parsee family in Karachi which is now in Pakistan. Her writings are replete with the themes of human relationship and disloyalty, disillusionment, marginalization of women, cultural hybridity, and socio-political tensions among communities. In her writings, she has manifested her craftsmanship in blending the multidimensional issues including gender, community, caste, class, religion, and tradition to expose the hypocrisies of the so called 'civilized society'. Though she started writing at the age of twenty-six she gained international recognition as one of the promising South Asian novelists with the publication of her

third novel *Ice-Candy Man*. This novel is on the theme of Indian independence and its partition at the end of the colonial era. The narrator in the novel, Lenny Sethi is presented as a girl who enjoys a privileged life in Lahore in the 1940s. She is very happy with her Ayah whose beauty draws attention of many a youth of that locality. Unfortunately, the sudden breaking out of communal riots after the declaration of partition and the abduction of Ayah has destroyed her mental peace and tranquility. In the course of the novel, she gradually comes to know about the hatred, animalistic desire and brutality of the animal called human.

There are two main happenings (i.e. independence and partition) in the history of Indian politics that not only affected the fate of individual but also the whole course of the national life. Indian freedom fighting movement had come to an end with a painful history of partition that ultimately led to a great upheaval, ruthless mass-killing and migration of people across the borders. A large number of people became dislocated from their home land as a result of forced migration, innumerable women were violated, and numberless children were orphaned. Suspicion grew among the communities who were living side by side for generations.

Struggle against the colonial power gives rise to a strong sense of patriotism among the colonized people. This sense of patriotism has been responsible for providing the native with strength to strive against the foreign regime so that the colonized people can have their control over their homeland. This ardent desire of being independent helped in creating a sentiment of nationalism among the dwellers of a land. Nationalism is an ideology that focuses both on loyalty to and pride in one's nation. It slowly but surely establishes a belief in the mind of a citizen that his country is more important than and superior to other countries and his or her individual identity is strongly tied to his/her homeland. The concept of nation its modern sense is new to the Indian minds. According to Online Collins Dictionary: "A nation is an individual country considered with its social and political structures" (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/nation>). According Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary a nation is "a country considered as a group of people with the same language, culture and history, who live in a particular area under one government" (1015). The end of the era of colonization has led to rise of nationalism throughout the world. No sooner did the colonial power retreating from the colonies than the colonized people gained the legal right to redefine themselves as they perceived it. The concept of nationalism had been used by the colonized people as a tool to overthrow the colonial power so that they could recover their freedom from the bondage of the foreign regime.

Although women were kept away from participating in the nation-building process, their bodies were made to be a passive witness to the disorder of partition. Qadri Ismail in his article "Constituting Nation, Contesting Nationalism: The Southern Tamil (Women) and Separatist Tamil Nationalism in Sri Lanka" figures out nine characteristic of nationalism. One of these characteristics is that women have no place or space in a nation, though the nation is always thought of in relation to women. The cause behind such deprivation is that women cannot have a home therefore cannot have a country. The violence that broke out during the partition is extremely heinous and gory in nature. Thus, a woman's body becomes a subject of phallogocentric atrocities and her prestige is damaged by the politically and ideologically motivated agenda of the time. In this way a woman becomes dispossessed by losing control over her own body. We see in the novel *Ice-Candy Man* Ayah is being uprooted and taken to Hira Mandi, 'the diamond market.' However, the diamond refers to those women who were uprooted and eradicated from their 'home'.

The main reason behind the atrocities against the women is the stereotypical mindset of the people who justify the discrimination between the sexes. In this regard Beauvoir's commentary is noteworthy:

The terms 'masculine' and 'feminine' are used symmetrically only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relations of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electric poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as it is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general, whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (*The Second Sex* 83)

However, the land serves as a background of promoting political agenda of different communities. Since the body of a woman is equated with the homeland it also becomes a victim of partition like the undivided India that was split into two separate nations – India and Pakistan. Since a woman is treated as a territory, it becomes a site of honour, prestige, and at the same time a commodity to be abducted and violated. In the history of Indian freedom fighting, we witness a dichotomy between male and female. The ravaged bodies of women became medium through the message of one community was carried out to the other community. In this way a woman's body was treated by the people with meanest mentality. Bapsi Sidhwa has dexterously presented these pathetic scenes in her novel, and has vehemently condemned those who view that a woman "is created to be a toy of man" (Wollstonecraft 66).

In *Ice-Candy Man*, Lenny, the child protagonist forces her cousin to help her rip a doll's female body apart and she does so to express her bitter feeling on hearing the news of the partition of India.

It implies the connection with the real body which in turn is associated with the geographical division of any geographical land. The present paper will highlight the dimensions in which gender relation is essential in understanding and analyzing the phenomena of nation. It will also examine the role of women as reproducer of 'nation' in the context of the partition of India.

The novel is written from feminist point of view. Feminism is a movement which plays a very important role in highlighting the suppressing the women in a male dominated society. In this society women are considered inferior to men by denying them their proper rights. Sidhwa in the present novel exposes the marginalization and suffering of women which they experienced as a direct consequence of partition. Sidhwa in her novel takes painstaking effort to represent this history of suffering that remains unnoticed and neglected by the dominant political discourse. She goes against the conventional male discourse of partition to put forth a feminist version of the historical events. Her characters are strong enough to give voice to the innumerable voiceless women. Lenny, the narrator in the novel is presented with intuitive power of describing a situation though she is merely a girl. Ayah is described as "everything about her is eighteen years old and round and plump" (*Ice-Candy Man* 03). There is still another character Rodhbai who rescues oppressed women who are the victim of the violence and she also comes to rescue Ayah from Hira Mandi.

As has already been noted, the concept of nationalism is the byproduct of colonialism. This concept of nationalism becomes a form of racism in the hands of fanatics when it is used at its extreme level. This nation building process is basically a male centered activity; therefore, female identity is wiped out from the sphere of nation building process. In spite of this real fact, the women became the receiving end of masculine atrocities. An imaginary connection has been drawn between the body of a woman and the territory of undivided India in most of the writings on the partition of India. *Ice-Candy Man* like other partition works unveils the experience of individual women and how it affects their lives. Sidhwa also highlights the gender inequality in the male dominated society. A woman who becomes a victim of molestation is never accepted even by her 'own' family and always looked down upon by her society. This becomes explicitly visible from the following conversation between Lenny and her Godmother:

'What a fallen women?' I ask Godmother... 'Hamida (the second Ayah of Lenny) was kidnapped by the Sikhs', says Godmother seriously... 'She was taken away to Amritsar. Once that happens, sometimes, the husband – or his family – won't take her back.'

'Why? It isn't her fault she was kidnapped!'

'Some folk feel that way – they can't stand their women being touched by other men.' (*Ice-Candy Man* 215)

We come to know another story of genocide in the novel from the mouth of Ranna. He hears from Dost Mohammad how women were treated by the riot-mongers. They were committing mass murder, setting fire on the houses, forcing women to parade naked through the streets, raping and mutilating them in the centres of villages. So, the riot-mongers are indulging in every type of inhuman activities where the women became their soft target.

In *Ice-Candy Man* Shanta who is sharp, beautiful, and young is a Hindu Ayah of Lenny in the house of a Parsee family in Lahore. She is happy in her workplace and is favourable among her neighbours with whom she involves in gossiping at a regular interval. But the communal riot in Lahore changes her life drastically. She becomes a victim of the fanatics and bigots who deprive her of her virginity by taking the advantage of chaos and lawlessness during the time of partition. She was kept in Hira Mandi, a notorious place where the young women are kept for dancing. Lenny comes to know from the conversation with her cousin that her dignity is being snatched away from her Ayah:

I ask, 'Where is this Diamond Mandi with the red light?'... 'And the diamonds? Who sells the diamonds?' I prod gingerly.

There are no real diamonds there, silly. The girls are the diamonds! The men pay them to dance and sing...and to do things with their bodies. It's the world's oldest profession,' says Cousin as if he's uttering profundities instead of drivel. (*Ice –Candy Man* 240)

Ice-Candy Man has killed Ayah's soul by snatching away her jolly and spirited will power, therefore, the charm and enthusiasm of her complexion has completely faded away. She is forced to lose her religion to become Mumtaz and suffers the agony of embarrassment and disrespect. Sidhwa asks:

Where have the radiance and the animation gone? Can the soul be extracted from its living body? Her vacant eyes are bigger than ever: wide-opened with what they've seen and felt: wider even than the frightening saucers and dinner plates that describe the watchful orbs of the three dogs who guard the wicked Tinder Box witches' treasures in underground chambers. Colder than the ice that lurks behind the hazel in Ice-candy man's beguiling eyes. (*Ice-Candy Man* 260)

Here, Ayah is a symbolic figure of the nation which is represented as a woman or a mother. The raping of Ayah's honour is equivalent to the raping of the mother land. The charm in the face of Ayah can be corresponded with the glory of mother India and

the absence of attraction and charm of her face indicates the defamation of the glory of the undivided India (i.e. partition of India).

The most pathetic aspect of violence during the time of partition was that it has been glorified in many cases. The persons who indulge in violence are satisfied as they become successful to dishonor the women of other communities. Here, we can speak of *Ice-Candy Man* who, is basically a generous person in nature, does not cherish even a single grain of fanatic attitude at his heart. But his attitude takes a complete turn when he witnesses the horrific scenes in the train compartment at Lahore station, and the train has come from Amritsar. The train is filled with the dead bodies of Muslims and amputated breasts of women in sacks. In order to prove the strength of his community and to proclaim its superiority, he wants to take revenge upon the women of the enemy community:

I lose my senses when I think of mutilated bodies on that train from Gurdaspur...that night I went mad, I tell you! I lobbed grenades through the windows of Hindus and Sikhs I'd know all my life! I hated their guts...I want to kill someone for each of the breasts they cut off the Muslim women... [*Ice-Candy Man* 156]

Ice-Candy Man is thoroughly a story about suppression and deprivation of women. It gives an account of sufferings and exploitations of women in our male dominated society. It graphically presented how the masculinity is deep rooted in the society and therefore men do not hesitate to assault women so that their dominance remains intact. At the same time, it gives pictorial details of how women are bound to endure the atrocities and humiliation that they face. The whole story has been narrated by a lame child Lenny who relates the story from an unbiased perspective which bestows a sense of creditability and authenticity to the narrative. Lenny not only observes but also analyses man's lascivious and degrading attention towards women, voraciousness of male sexual desire. The story in *Ice-Candy Man* describes the horrific incidents happened during the time of partition and the lofty ideal of nationalism was suddenly bartered for communal thinking resulting in unprecedented devastation, political upheavals, and deranged social sensibilities. Sidhwa has been successful in portraying sensitively the anxiety, insecurity, turmoil, lawlessness, chaotic situation and hardship experience by the common people during the time of partition.

The title *Ice-Candy Man* in broader sense can be equated to every single citizen of the Indian sub-continent. The general characteristic of the Indians are very much pleasing and adorable like candy. Unfortunately, this gentle nature seemed to disappear from the minds of the people during the time of partition and forgot their century-long history

of communal harmony. In her first visit to Pir Pindo, Lenny saw that the Muslims took oath to protect their Sikh brothers and sisters from the impending danger of communal tension but the harmonious relation among communities vanishes with breaking of violence of partition. *Ice Candy Man* seems to celebrate the vista of Lahore burning in the flame of communal riots and gets agitated at the death of masseur. He betrays Lenny to ensure Ayah's abduction by the mob. The title is somewhat ironical as the novel is about the suffering of Ayah and *ice-candy man* is responsible for her suffering yet it is named after *ice-candy man* "to divert the attention of fanatic and so called rulers of the time" (Patwa 4). This novel has an alternative title, --'Cracking India' which implies not only the cracks on India as a geographical entity but also refers to fragmented condition and bitter experience of the people.

CONCLUSION

In the present novel, Sidhwa gives a universal message to the women to strive in order to come out of their plight instead of simply surrendering themselves to the will of patriarchy. Throughout the novel, Lenny is seen to be a bold, courageous and strong enough to face the challenges given by the patriarchal society instead of being a child. In this novel, Sidhwa uses Lenny as her mouth-piece. By observing life of many women characters, she understands the limitations of women in the male-dominated society. She realizes that the root of such biased attitude against women is unfathomable, and it is not possible for any single individual to do away with all these problems overnight. People irrespective of their caste, creed, class and gender must be united against the gender discrimination which has been handed down generation after generation. Dobash once rightly claimed, "...men who assault their wives are actually living up to the cultural prescriptions that are cherished..." (24)

In *Ice-Candy Man* Sidhwa represents before the readers the ground reality of women in Indian context and suggests alternative way of thinking for the betterment of the women and the society at large. Through her writing she raises her voice against the discrimination of woman, and urges us to remould our attitude towards the fair sex. She seems to be a supporter of Mary Wollstonecraft who once wrote, "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves" (133). In fact, Sidhwa has always been of the opinion that women must be given an opportunity to utilize their potential power beyond their so-called traditional role. If they become the active members of the society, they would definitely contribute towards the society. To make this happen in reality, we must come out of the stagnant notion of phallogocentric attitude. A drastic change in human thinking is the need of the hour to have a revolution for the upliftment of the socio-economic condition of

women. Only then we can have a much desired society which will recognize woman as an independent human being having soul, dream, desire, and feeling. In this context we can remember of Del Martin who has rightly commented: "The historical roots of our family models are ancient and deep...New norms for marriage and family must be created..."(26).

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