

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

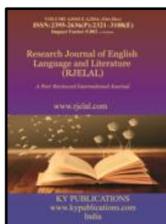
THE IMPACT OF PARTITION ON PARSEE COMMUNITY IN PAKISTAN BAPSIDHWA'S
"ICE CANDY MAN"

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ABSTRACT

The Partition of India in 1947 was one of the most horrific events of decolonization in the 20th century, bringing death, rape and plunder in its wake. The agony of partition has reverberated in literature in various India Languages in as many ways as the writers themselves. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* offers intimate glimpse into the events leading to the division of the country from the point of view of a young Parsee girl living in the city of Lahore after the birth of Pakistan. *Ice Candy Man* is a major novel dealing with the impact of partition on yet another ethnic community namely the Parsees. Besides it resulted in a deep-rooted animosity between two communities leading to blood bath and unprecedented violence and lack of trust. Many families sharing common ties and rituals were uprooted forever.

Key words: Partition, agony, holocaust, communal riots, decolonization

Among writers dealing with the trauma of partition, Bapsi Sidhwa is an impressive and original voice in the world of common wealth fiction¹. She has published a number of novels since her debut novel *The Crow Eaters*, which came out in 1975, but it was printed subsequently in two versions in 1980 and 1982 and received good reviews. In fact, Parsees are a minority culture group anywhere in the world and they are found mostly in India and Pakistan, though in recent times they have found a haven in Canada. As is well known, the Parsees came to India in order to escape persecution and forced conversion to Islam at the hands of invading Muslims (Arabs). Hence they were forced to leave their native land Persia (now Iran) and took shelter in Gujarat some 1300 years ago and adopted India the country as their new homeland. It is here that they came to be known as Parsees that is the people of Persia, though they were Zoroastrians, the followers of the prophet Zarathustra. The major concern of the Parsees have always been aware of self-

preservation and, to this end; they have always been quite accommodative and submissive². For example- in the well-known novel *Ice Candy Man* one of the characters blurts out in self-defence "let whoever wishes rule, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, We will abide by rules of the land"³ In fact, this is how the Parsees have survived and prospered through the rise and fall of different dynasties and kingdoms through such a long time. This certainly goes for their survival instinct as well as a close concern for maintaining their religious beliefs, rituals and cultural traditions. This has, of course, resulted in the gradual decline in the Parsee population and, in recent times, there has been some serious thinking on their future prospects in the changed conditions of dogmatism and intolerance particularly after Post-Nehruvian periods. Bapsi Sidhwa's first novel '*The Crow Eaters*' deals with their origins and their survival in a serio-comic fashion and there have been deliberate exaggerations in the treatment of Parsee characters and their ways of living. However, in the

light of self-constrained topic of the impact of partition, it is essential to shift the emphasis from the first novel *The Crow Eaters* to the next novels such as *The Pakistani Bride* and, of course, the relevant *Ice Candy Man*. In fact, in the second novel, the novelist takes up the question of inter-communal marriage in a Non-Parsee context. But her attitude makes very clear that she is aware of the problems one has to face in an inter community marriage which pain and unhappiness, bringing unending woes to both the partners. However, in *Ice Candy Man* he takes up the issue of partition and its impact on the Parsee In depth and detail. In this novel, she takes up the historical process leading to partition of the country and its tragic consequences even for the neutral Parsees in the vexed situation. In the novel, we find that Parsees usually tries to remain neutral in the clear interest of survival but this does not help. As a representative novel of ethnic issues, *The Crow Eaters* is a much-better novel which presents the history of the various aspects and future of Parsee community. But as a partition novel, one has to turn to the novels like *The Pakistani Bride* and of course *Ice Candy Man*. In fact, in the novel *The Pakistani Bride* the novel deals with the plight of women, disparity between Pakistani and tribal society, and effect of the partition on the lives of a woman who is nurtured in a different tradition. But this novel shows that there is no civilization, no law in the tribal society and it is very difficult for a liberal woman to adjust in the tribal society. The novelist has avoided gory details of rape and violence but through the protagonist Zaitoon, she shows that after her marriage, a woman has to undergo a process of hellish torture and assault. Even in this novel, two cases of harrowing experiences, one by an American women Carol and the other dealing with Zaitoon tell us a lot about the irreconcilable gap between two cultures and the untold sufferings undergone by women. In fact, in the third novel *Ice Candy Man* 1908, which was changed into another title *Cracking India* in 1991, we have a graphic detail of the harrowing pictures of the partition of Indian subcontinent into two nations. But this time, the story is told not through the eyes of a Hindu victim or a Muslim victimizer. But the story is now told by a 'minority

Parsee victim'. This novel offers a clear evidence of the role of politicians in nurturing fundamentalism and generating communal hatred. For the first time, Sidhwa in this novel brings in socio-political issues such as the conflicting attitudes of the two major political parties namely Muslim league and Congress, riots in Punjab, trauma of partition and attacks on women⁴. The novelist shows through the character of Lenny that the discourse of secular nationalism meets a tragic end. One day a particular character learns through the news on radio from the so-called *Ice Candy Man* that a train from Gurdaspur has just come in and everyone in it is dead and they are all Muslims and there is no woman among the dead. Only there are two gunny bags full of chopped women breasts. The depiction almost reminds one of the stark descriptions of the holocaust in Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*.

The main feature of the novel lies in the depiction of the events in the wake of the partition presented through the eyes of physically handicapped girl child named Lenny, who is a minority Parsee. This girl child is accompanied by a Hindu ayah named Shanta and she has access to all kinds of people who admire the manners and appearance even during communal riots. This is the novel where we have characters from various communities and even minor characters such as the Gardner, the Cook, the Sepoy, the butcher, the wrestler, the person working in the zoo, the masseuse and the vendor '*Ice Candy Man*' represents various sections, communities and religious faiths of Indian subcontinent. But everything is disturbed, when a Muslim mob stops outside the Shetty house and enquiries are made about the Hindu servants, specially the Hindu ayah Shanta while the Muslim cook gives a fake report, Lenny out of her innocence discloses the truth to the *Ice Candy Man* and, finally, the furious Muslims drag her out and the '*Ice Candy Man*' takes her to the notorious HiraMandi where she is forced to prostitution with a new name Mumtaj. However, Lenny's God mother rescues the ayah from the clutch of *Ice Candy Man*. This is how she is ultimately restored to her family in Amritsar. In fact, *Ice Candy Man* offers graphic details of the impact of the partition on a society which consists of mixed

population and it causes not only disharmony but unleashes the force of frenzy and chaos. The novelist is at pains to emphasize that the concept of secular nationalism and camaraderie gets a rude jolt in the atmosphere of surcharged violence. Even ordinary characters seem to be quite ruffled and the news from radio causes a grave damage and the long bonhomie between Hindus and Muslim undergoes a sea change. Initially, *Ice Candy Man* had helped Sher Singh and his friend but now the friend turns into a foe and the *Ice Candy Man* makes a statement which shows a total metamorphosis and he cries out in defence of his behaviour----- "I lobbed grenades through the windows of Hindus and Sikhs. I'd known all my life! I hated their guts.....I want to kill someone of each breast they cut off the Muslim women⁵. The effect of this sudden change of behaviour is endorsed by the handicapped girl Lenny in a comment which is authorial in spirit "It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves.....and the next day they are Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians people shrink dwindling into symbols"⁶.....In this background, the ayah Shanta is no longer a lovely woman beloved of all. She also becomes a token, just a Hindu nothing more. The transformation of the kind and loving *Ice Candy Man* into a violent and hardened gangster is also completely shocking. His love for ayah does not stop him from pursuing evil and exploiting both ayah and Lenny. Even though he later marries the ayah, it seems to be a callous marriage, just a mechanical exercise because the victimized lady can never forget her mental and physical humiliation. Obviously, *Ice Candy Man* becomes a dejected lover after his failure in winning the heart of the lady whom he has forced to marry and rightly he moves across the Wagha border into India. On the personal level, the protagonist fails as a human being in the eyes of the lady whom he loved and desired. Even on the social level, he fails to survive because the community does not give any value or status for his misdirected zeal. The different versions of the *Ice Candy Man* simply show that the protagonist is a fickle-minded person who sometimes appears as a lover and sometimes as a deceiver and manipulation. At times, he becomes an unbelievable human oppressor but, at other times he emerges as

a victim of destiny. Thus the title *Ice Candy Man* appears to be a very suggestive title for a person who undergoes many transformations. The novel also has a second title *Cracking India* which is equally revealing because the writer here makes her 'own comments' on various contemporary political figures. In fact, all major contemporary Indian political figures are found wanting in values of decency and humanity⁷.

In fact, Bapsi Sidhwa's art of characterization calls for special attention because she has a vested interest in portraying the agony and the ecstasy of female characters. In fact, she has often been seen as a 'feminist' in the portrayal of female characters but the point to note is she discovers positive virtues in her women characters such as strength of passion, tenderness of love and, of course, the courage of one's convictions. As an Indian commentator has rightly remarked in this context, "subtly but effectively her female characters subvert the ingrained elements of Patriarchy, privileging female will, choice, strength along the feminine qualities of compassion and motherhood"⁸. In fact, in the novel *Ice Candy Man* male characters are not so much alive, strong and sensitive and consistent as the female counterparts. Therefore, most of the male characters remain predictable and stereotyped. Lenny is, of course, the most convincing character and has shades of autobiographical traits. This fact is illustrated from writer's own 'interview', where she has admitted the similarity between Lenny's childhood and her own childhood, Like Lenny, she was also a handicapped child belonging to a very negligible minority community but this does not prevent the writer from presenting the events of partition through the slow awakening of a child heroine who is aware of her sexuality and consciousness of things in and around her and this is what makes the novel so memorable and authentic. Though she remains, confined to a compressed world, yet she grows in knowledge and is bent upon finding her own identity by remaining neutral, and maintains a fine balance in the tough times. Colonel Bharucha rightly presents a bright future for her in spite of her handicap----"she will marry and have children----lead a carefree, happy life, no need to strain her

with studies and exams"⁹. In fact, Lenny accepts the gender based relationship in the society as an accomplished fact, without allowing it to colour her personality. As an introspective child, she has the advantage of looking at the contradictions in the society through multiple angles of irony, humour, wit and affection. She is neither influenced nor conditioned by the existing bias against women and this explains her interest in her ayah, Hamida and her cousin. She does not condemn if anyone has been wrong or exploited simply because one has been kidnapped or abused. Her sympathy to fallen characters is a refreshing aspect of her personality. In fact, throughout the novel, she is maintaining an attitude of openness and critical distance. This is why she does not submit to the communal frenzy, or for that matter, avoids contact with male characters. She is aware of her feminine charms but does not use the same for undue advantages. Lenny's mother is yet another character who is convincing within her limits. She is like a typical housewife, belonging to the upper middle classes and is burdened with domestic obligations---viz---entertaining guests and attending parties but she neglects her children and Lenny is a direct victim of her bad rearing. She even admits "it is my fate---I neglected her, left her to the care of ayah"¹⁰. Lenny admires her mother's delicate beauty "all-encompassing motherliness" because her mother is possessive but does not perform her duties and hence there is a kind of subtle jealousy and also regret--- "she is my mother ---flesh of my flesh and adi's. She must love only us"¹¹. As already stated, there is no redeeming feature in the portrayal of Lenny's mother because in spite of her luxury and comforts of modern life style, she remains a traditional wife, humouring wishes of her husband. There is a touch of satire in the treatment of Lenny's mother who seems to surrender her possibilities and dormant qualities and become a marginalized woman. By contrast Santa, Lenny's, Ayah, is a much more convincing character and occupies much space as a formative influence on the central character in the novel. Lenny is fascinated by the eighteen year old Hindu Ayah who is employed by her parents to look after her and her brother. There is a detailed description of her physical appearance and colour in a very

sensuous and picturesque language. Her 'chocolate brown colour' and 'round and plump face' and 'stunning looks' suggest her female vitality and sex appeal¹². She is herself quite aware of her sexuality and this lands her into a lot of trouble later on. In fact, she is cynosure of all and sundry. A lot of characters (ordinary people) are admirers of her beauty. She perhaps behaves like the queen, who controls the actions and emotions of her admirers. Lenny learns many aspects of human existence which include "human needs frailties, cruelties and joys"¹³. In a very beautiful and analytical expression, she reacts to the charms of Shanta---"I learn also to detect the subtle exchange of signals and some of the complexities by which Ayah's admirers co-exist -- - I escape into day dreams in which my father turns loquacious and my mother playful"¹⁴. Through her character this becomes clear that she uses her charm as a strategies of survival and manipulation. The end of the novel also suggests that she stands to all because, even after her abduction and forced conversion and is kept in a brothel. She still manages to keep her own identity and has a desire to seek her freedom and, in fact, moves away from the man who does not love her but only wants to covet her. Hence in the end, she deserves appreciation for her moral courage and stand. God mother is yet another important woman character, though she remains an invisible presence. In fact, she is a surrogate mother for Lenny in a mutually fulfilling relationship. She is some kind of an allegorical character having sharp wit and profound understanding of human nature and psyche. Her wisdom is revealed in all of her remarks and she is quite straight in her reaction to the fate of the Ayah and takes it as a kind of sad fact of life, an act of destiny but when it comes to a matter of judgment, she is unsparing and that is why she snubs *Ice Candy man* for his shameful conduct. In short, in this novel, we have lots of female characters who draw our attention. Only the character of the mini Aunty alone is typical of the fate of slaves. By contrast, her male characters do not convince because they are predictable types. Only the ice candy man emerges as a kind of interesting character something of anti-hero. As already suggested, Bapsi Sidhwa's treatment of partition is marked by creativity of a very high order.

In fact, a fellow novelist, Githa Hariharan has rightly remarked that Bapsi Sidhwa has captured the 'turmoil of the times' with a brilliant combination of 'an individual growing up in pain and the collective anguish of a newly independent but divided country'. The novel is at once an 'autobiographical novel' and a documented novel which depicts the horrifying details of cruelty and human loss of dignity in a seriocomic vein. The novelist's success lies in adopting proper 'narrative strategies'. The narrative persona of a Parsee child enables the writer to express her impressions freely and spontaneously, asking questions with a sense of puzzle and also to exercise a close watch over the details. The narrator does not record the happenings in a direct manner but arouses our curiosity by asking questions and expressing wonder at the unpredictable behaviour of adult people¹⁵. In her innocence, she can ask questions without any sense of shame or guilt and can easily empathize with the suffering of ordinary people who are part and parallel of her compressed life. She can easily shake her head about the issue of a fallen woman and pick up debate with her God mother regarding God and the issue of sin and guilt. In fact, Lenny's perplexities and her shocking discoveries make her realize that all men are predators and there is no difference between a beggar and a holy man with regard to human lust. This wide-eyed growing child also realizes sadly that both the political leaders and the British government are fighting their own battles and they are not fighting for the masses. As the ayah once remarks to Lenny 'what is it to us if Jinnah, Nehru and Patel fight? They are not fighting our fight¹⁶. Moreover, Lenny voices her concern over the events even through her Parsee background makes her safe and she adopts a tone of neutrality. Even then the later events make her realize that the future is dark and dangerous. As Lenny comments 'the whole world is burning. The air on my face is so hot.....how long does Lahore burn? Weeks? Months?'¹⁷ One important aspect of the novel is marked by the writer's responses to gender-related issues and the victimization of the girls or women is not a one dimensional affair but it is related to patriarchy and the traditional mind-set where marriage seems to be the be all and end all of a

women's life. The treatment of various marriages suggests that the women are themselves to blame to a certain extent for exploitation of their own sex because they do not have the courage to discuss gender issues frankly even to their own relatives. In short, in *Ice Candy Man* we get a new dimension of the theme of partition, affecting the minorities in Pakistan where the Parsee dilemma is reflected in a very convincing manner. The writer discusses the logic of partition as something a part of destiny in which all characters are caught up and here is a fickleness of human behaviour. One factor which is common to the partition novels of Khuswant Singh, Chaman Nahal, and of course, Bapsi Sidhwa is the emphasis on the inhabitants of Punjab, dislocation of life and complete loss of human feelings but, yet in another sense, this novel is different because it deals with the trauma of partition from a 'feminine'¹⁸ perspective and in this respect invites comparison with Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers*. Though the novel is written from the Pakistani perspective, it does not spare the politicians and the British officials who make the best use of the model situation. Not a single Indian leader is sentimentalized or praised and every one of them is treated as an opportunistic politician who defies logic human decency and turns into a bunch of lunatics or gross fanatic¹⁹. Even the non-violence of M. K. Gandhi is given a political colour and he is treated as a strange mixture of demon and a clown. Nehru is similarly treated as an aristocratic politician who is interested in Kashmir but not in other parts of India. His private life also is treated without any sense of respect and he is regarded as a proud Brahmin in spite of his closeness with British people. Among Sikh leaders master Tara Singh sets the worst example. Jinnah, however, is presented as a very firm and determined politician and he is praised for his commitment and qualities of leadership and persuasive power. There are, of course, some 'anachronisms and misrepresentations' of facts but they can be ignored and the writer's main vision is depicted in her well-known interview²⁵ with a female critic where she is on record to have stated that religion, hatred and violence can bring out the worst in mankind and the

dormant evil easily surfaces making man a beast under group behaviour.

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