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Negotiating Multiculturalism in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*

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ABSTRACT

William James said in his *Pluralistic Universe* (1909) that he "believed that the idea of a plural society would be crucial in the formation of philosophical and social humanism", that the embracing of a multicultural society could help build a better, more egalitarian society. *Multiculturalism* has its supporters and critics alike. Bapsi Sidhwa enriches the theme of the immigrant experience, especially, the theme of assimilation. *Ice-Candy-Man* brings out the aspects of multiculturalism at various levels.

Key words: multiculturalism, partition, religion, hindu, muslim

Multiculturalism is a debated term but can be called as a notion of co-existence of different cultures living benevolently. It includes distinct 'cultural groups' with equal social status. Whether or not cultural groups should have distinct 'political' status is a contested issue among 'political scientists'. Some nations have adopted official policies of *Multiculturalism*, but the norm is varying depending on the conditions of cultural diversity accompanied by greater or lesser degrees of tolerance and acceptance.

As Kapadia depicts "*Multiculturalism* began as an official policy in India in 1950 with the adoption of its new Constitution. In the English-speaking countries it started in Canada in 1971." (Kapadia)

Multiculturalism has both supporters and critics, where, supporters see it as a self-evident entitlement of cultural groups, as a firm of civil rights grounded in equality of cultures. They

assume that it will lead to interculturalism-beneficial cultural exchanges, where cultures learn about each other's literature, art and philosophy and influence each other's music, fashion and cuisine. On the other hand, the opponents feel that it would be something which has been imposed on them without their consent. It will hamper their future generations, who will adapt this 'mixed culture', which may lead to the extinction of their own culture.

Bapsi Sidhwa is a Parsee writer from Pakistan, now settled in the United States. What distinguishes Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*, is the prism of Parsee sensitivity through which the cataclysmic event of Partition is depicted. *Ice-Candy-Man* is so far, the only novel written by a Parsee on the theme of Partition. Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* is studied with the perspective of *Multiculturalism* in this paper. She believes in both acculturation and deculturation, where acculturation is a process of learning and

incorporating the values, beliefs, languages, customs of the immigrants. Advocating deculturation she feels that obnoxious and torturous cultures should be rejected. She enriches the theme of the immigrant experience, especially, the theme of assimilation. *Ice-Candy-Man* brings out the aspects of multiculturalism at various levels.

In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Colonel Bharucha, a doctor and respected member of the Parsee community in Lahore, while presiding at a meeting convened to discuss the fate of the community in the pre-partition and post-partition India, recalls the exodus of the Parsees from Persia several centuries ago. The Vazir of the Indian Prince appears with a glass of milk, filled to the brim, a symbol that states that the "land is full and prosperous and we don't want outsiders with a different religion and alien ways to disturb the harmony". The Parsees respond by stirring a spoon of sugar in the milk, indicating their desire to live in harmony. The Indian prince, totally fascinated with the gesture, welcomes the exiles. The story, mythical or real, remains a constant reminder of acceptance and accommodation of different cultures by India.

Sidhwa has very expertly delineated the milieu of India before partition. The narrator of the novel is Lenny Sethi, who belongs to small but prosperous Parsee family. The *Multiculturalism* is evident from the fact that Lenny, in most of the chapters of novel, is surrounded by characters belonging to different religions. The chapters before the partition array a series of incidents which demonstrate the tight knots of relationships of the people belonging to different religions and cultures.

Sethis are served by five servants-Ayah, Imam Din, Yousaf, Hari and Moti. All of them belong to different religions, but they live as if they all belong to only one religion and that is humanity. Ayah is a Hindu, Imam Din, the cook and Yousaf, the odd-job man are Muslims. Hari, the gardener and Moti, the sweeper, his wife Muccho and daughter Papoo are untouchables.

They all live like one family, sharing odds and evens of life with each other. They serve the Sethi family with full devotion and honesty. Ayah is next to mother for Lenny, sometimes more than a mother. Though her employer is a Parsee, Ayah looks after Lenny with full affection. Lenny learns and looks the world through the eyes of Ayah.

Ayah has a friend circle, rather, admirers. *Masseur, Ice candy man, the Fallettis Hotel cook, the Government House gardener, the butcher, Pathan and Chinaman*. They all belong to different religions and background. But all of them form a compact group. They all meet in the park with Queen Victoria's statue and share their daily encounter with life and depict their struggle for life. 'Imam Din is tall, big-bellied, barrel-chested, robust' (pg.49). He is sixty-five years old. He used to take Lenny baby to his village, where she is fed and looked after with full affection. The Muslims and Sikhs of this village called Pir Pindo, have very strong ties.

Lenny accompanies Imam Din to his village Pir Pindo for two days to celebrate *Baisakhi*. This day celebrates the birth of Sikh religion and of the wheat harvest. The Muslims of Pir Pindo go to Dera Tek Singh, a village with majority Sikh population.

Sidhwa pens: 'It is the thirteenth of April. The wheat has been harvested; the spring rains have spent themselves, and the earth is powdery. From on top of Imam Din's head I see the other groups of villagers converging on *Dera Tek Singh*-Hindu, Muslim, Sikh – as they raise their own majestic trail of dust.' (105)

After half of the novel, it is revealed to the readers that the Ayah belongs to Hindu caste. The servants lived like a family, teasing and laughing at each other. An incident depicted in the novel displays the cordial atmosphere in which they reside. All of the servants are after Hari, the gardener's dhoti. Yousaf, Moti and Imam Din run after Hari. Even Papoo, the sweeper's daughter is brandishing a long broom. The washerman who has brought the laundry joins the adventure, she writes: "We are like a pack of puppies, worrying and attacking each other in a high-spirited gambol" (45). Though it appears as if everyone wants to pull-

off Hari's dhoti, but even he knows that he will not be hurt or denuded. He is playing a role of jester and everyone is enjoying the game. It is only a good-natured romp.

Mucco, the sweeper's wife is always after her daughter Papoo. She maltreats her daughter. When all of the servants were after Hari's dhoti, Papoo, with an infant wobbling on her hip, was enjoying the scuffle. This good-natured romp ended when suddenly Muccho came cursing Papoo, "Bitch! Haramzadi! May you die!" 'Haram-khor! Slut! Work-Shirker! Move my eyes from you and off you go!' shrieks Muccho in ungovernable rage, raining sharp, hard slaps on Papoo's head and back." (45)

Leaving Hari, all the men including Hari and also Ayah ran to save Papoo. They all together set up a protective barrier of arms and hands persuading Muccho to forgive her. Ayah affectionately, 'dip her pallo into a mug of water and sponges the dust from Papoo's lifeless face.' (pg.46) Everybody is concerned about Papoo and rebuke Muccho for her cruelty. They blame her for her behaviour like a stepmother. Such incidents highlight the densely knitted life of these characters belonging to different cultures.

The servants are so close to Lenny and Adi that they take their complaints to them. Lenny likes Imam Din, she takes her complaints to him. Even Ayah takes her complaints to him. When Adi peeps through crack in the bathroom, only Imam Dim can handle him.

These all people belonging to different cultures or religions are not known or called by their respective name. They are recognized by their professions- the masseur, the ice candy man, the butcher and so on. The multicultural feature of the novel is evident from these depictions.

When the rumours of partition prevail throughout the country, they all get united and try to plan out the tactics to save each other from the religious fanatics. Hari becomes Muslim and is called Himat Ali. Moti and his family convert to Christians and change their names. So, Lenny's close relationship with Ayah takes her out of the

confines of the bourgeois Parsee community and exposes her to the heterogeneity of socio-cultural perspectives.

Finally, in the twenty-first century, thanks to Sidhwa, it is not just the Parsee writer who has a literary tradition in English but also Pakistani fiction. Paradoxically, even as Sidhwa speaks of the *Multiculturalism* and joins the rank of immigrant American writers, her Pakistani lineage will continue to define her in America as her Parsee heritage does in Pakistan.

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