



## RECONSTRUCTING THE NARRATIVE IN THE AFTERMATH OF PARTITION: A DECOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF BAPSI SIDHWA'S NOVEL *ICE CANDY MAN*

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### Abstract

The partition has left a lasting impact on the Indian subcontinent with its echoes heard to this day. In the aftermath of a new nation's rise and the freedom of another lay the displacement of many and the relegation of communities to stereotypical narratives and identities. This paper examines Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man* as a subversive counter-narrative to dominant representations of the partition of India in 1947. Through a close analysis of the novel, this study interrogates the ways in which Sidhwa challenges Eurocentric and colonial perspectives by foregrounding the voices of subaltern and marginalised communities. The research explores how Sidhwa offers a nuanced portrayal of the partition's impact on minority groups, particularly the Parsee community, while also shedding light on the violence against women and the challenges of integration during this tumultuous period. The study argues that *Ice Candy Man* serves as a literary intervention that disrupts binary constructions of history, complicates notions of heroism and villainy, and invites readers to critically engage with the human dimensions of partition.

**Keywords:** Partition, Subaltern Voices, Identity, Violence, Postcolonialism, Decolonisation.

The partition of India is remembered as a watershed moment in modern history, a schism that reshaped the Indian Subcontinent's social, cultural, economic, and political environment. This structural shift orchestrated at the end of British colonial rule in 1947, ostensibly addressed perceived religious tensions between two major communities, the Hindus and the Muslims.

"... the story of Partition is not about a well-oiled machinery of state-sponsored violence nor is it about institutionalised

mass-murder. It is about families, friends, neighbours and communities being torn apart in a frenzy of paranoia, hatred and fear." (Perron, 2002)

Addressing the partition entails acknowledging that the division of the Indian subcontinent was far from the simple act of freeing oneself from colonial powers. The episode was not merely a demarcation of new borders and the division of the land into two separate nations; it was a whirlwind of power politics, cultural tensions,

identity struggles, communal violence, religious strife, and post-colonial tumult that caused severe psychological damage, shattering long-standing social relationships, driving families apart, and ending centuries-old traditions, forever altering the lives of countless people. As a historical event, the partition pushes us to confront the ethical dimensions of drawing lines on a map, separating individuals based on religious identity, and the long-lasting scars inflicted on a nation's collective mind.

Born in 1938 in Lahore, British India (now Pakistan), Bapsi Sidhwa is a renowned Pakistani novelist of Gujarati Parsi Zoroastrian origin. Her early life was shaped by the socio-political upheavals of the Indian subcontinent, notably the devastating partition of 1947. Her literary works, including *Ice Candy Man* (1988), *The Pakistani Bride* (1983), and *An American Brat* (1993), often delve into the complexities of cultural identity, gender, and the human impact of historical events. Sidhwa writes in English, contributing to a better global understanding of South Asian literature. Beyond her literary accomplishments, she has received recognition for her advocacy on women's concerns and social justice, exhibiting a dedication to using her writing as a tool for social commentary, criticism, and change.

Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man* is a captivating testimony to the complex interplay of politics, society, and culture in the charged backdrop of British India's division in 1947. Sidhwa captures the displacement of people, sectarian tensions, and violent upheavals that precipitated the foundation of the two nations. The novel unfolds in Lahore, a city emblematic of the communal tensions that erupted during the partition. Against this historical canvas, Sidhwa deftly investigates the social dynamics, communal conflicts, and the human cost of this colossal event. Beyond the political and social dimensions, the plot digs into the region's rich cultural fabric and grounding. Equipped with her Pakistani heritage and first-hand personal experiences of the partition, Sidhwa, with her keen eye for detail and cultural nuances, paints a vivid picture of a society in flux, grappling with the challenges of identity, belonging, and the disintegration of established social institutions. The

diverse characters in *Ice Candy Man*, informed and influenced by her early life, serve as microcosms of the larger societal transformations, demonstrating how individual lives are profoundly affected by political decisions and societal upheavals.

Bapsi Sidhwa's purpose in authoring *Ice Candy Man* stretches beyond merely chronicling historical occurrences. The narrative aims to give voice to the silenced and marginalised, as well as to provide a comprehensive understanding of the human impact of political decisions. The novel serves as both a historical document and a literary exploration of the partition's profound and long-lasting consequences, demonstrating how human lives intertwine with bigger historical forces.

This research study undertakes an examination of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, highlighting the narrative's departure from conventional and Eurocentric accounts of India's partition, presenting a marginalised perspective, and emphasising the subaltern experience.

The historiographical landscape has long been dominated by a Eurocentric bias, with European and colonial perspectives shaping the narrative of world history disproportionately. This domination stems from the historical power dynamics created during the colonial and imperial eras. Edward Said's *Orientalism* highlights how European powers built a narrative that positioned the East as 'other,' establishing a hierarchical relationship in which the West assumed intellectual authority (Said, 1978).

Dipesh Chakrabarty also notes in his work *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*,

“That Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge becomes obvious in a very ordinary way. There are at least two everyday symptoms of the subalternity of non-Western, third world histories. Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate... “They” produce their work in

relative ignorance of non-western histories..." (Chakrabarty, 2000)

Non-European experiences and narratives have frequently been pushed to the margins, with little attention paid to the varied and diverse histories of regions outside of Europe. This distortion is further exacerbated by academia's institutionalisation of Western-centric knowledge creation, where scholarly paradigms and procedures frequently reflect and perpetuate Eurocentric ideas (Chakrabarty, 2000). The legacy of colonialism is visible not only in historical texts, but also in the broader dissemination of information, where the Western intellectual heritage continues to exert great influence. Non-European voices and experiences, vital for a comprehensive understanding of the past, are routinely ignored, silenced, or omitted, sustaining an incomplete and misleading historical narrative. Overcoming this Eurocentric hegemony requires a concerted effort to acknowledge and integrate diverse perspectives into the mainstream historical discourse, fostering a more inclusive and equitable representation of the human experience.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* serves as a powerful example of subverting colonial and Eurocentric narratives within the context of the partition of India. The novel challenges established historical perspectives by offering a nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of the partition's impact on the lives of ordinary individuals, particularly from marginalised communities. Sidhwa's narrative deviates from conventional Eurocentric accounts, bringing to the forefront the experiences of characters often sidelined in mainstream historical discourse. By centering the story on a marginalised character, Sidhwa subverts the Eurocentric tendency to prioritise dominant narratives and foregrounds the subaltern experience, contributing to the broader project of decolonisation in literature (Said, 1978; Ngũgĩ, 1986). Through this subversive storytelling, Sidhwa not only challenges the colonial legacy but also contributes to a more inclusive and diverse understanding of the partition, emphasising the importance of narratives that reflect the varied perspectives of those historically silenced by colonial and Eurocentric frameworks.

The first subversion is brought about by the retelling of the partition from the perspective of the Pakistani side. In the conventional historical narratives of the partition, predominantly based on the British and Indian records and accounts, communities are often reduced to stereotypes, with particular sects often being held solely responsible for all the violence, bloodshed and conflict. Such narratives also conveniently overlook and marginalise the voices and experiences of those across the border. Sidhwa offers a new perspective on the partition experience and subverts this reductionist approach. In an interview with Montenegro, Sidhwa acknowledges this subversion and states its relevance, calling it a means and method of offering a voice to her Pakistani readers and a sense of self-esteem. (Jataniya, Twinkle, 2023).

"At least, I think a lot of readers in Pakistan, especially with *Ice Candy Man*, feel that I've given them a voice, which they did not have before. They've always been portrayed in a very unfavourable light. It's been fashionable to kick Pakistan, and it's been done again and again by various writers living in the West." (Sidhwa, 1990).

This account of the divide allows for the subdued sect to have their own voice within the dominant and centralised voice of the West which consistently projects the demographic as "inferior".

"... but the western media has become so powerful that people in my part of the world are beginning to believe it. Their self-esteem is being eroded by their presentation as inferior persons... if there's one little thing I could do, it's to make people realise: We are not worthless because we inhabit a poor country or because we inhabit a country which is seen by Western eyes as a primitive, fundamentalist country only... I mean, we are a rich mixture of all sorts of forces as well, and our lives are very much worth living." (Sidhwa, 1990).

Sidhwa also brings under scrutiny the way certain historical personalities have been depicted

across the entire debate surrounding the partition. Leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru have often been idealised for their commitment to non-violence and their role in India's struggle for freedom. Their contributions to the nation's history are celebrated, overshadowing the complexities of their views on partition. Conversely, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, has been criticised and held responsible for the division of the subcontinent on several occasions. While the role of such leaders in the Indian freedom struggle is undeniable, the polarising narratives surrounding such figures often oversimplify the intricate factors that led to partition. Sidhwa subverts this stance by redefining the image of Jinnah in the novel and making him the "ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity" (Shah, 2020).

"... And I felt, in *Ice Candy Man*, I was just redressing in a small way, a very grievous wrong that has been done to Jinnah and Pakistanis by many Indian and British writers. They've dehumanised him, made him a symbol of the sort of person who brought about the partition of India, a person who was hard-headed and obstinate. Whereas, in reality, he was the only constitutional man who didn't sway crowds just by rhetoric, and tried to do everything by the British standards of constitutional law." (Sidhwa, 1990)

The very dominant perspective that holds Jinnah, a Muslim leader accountable for the partition, is brought under scrutiny, offering a fair contemplation and thought to both sides. Sidhwa also lends Lenny, the young protagonist a differing view on Gandhi whom she views "... as a small, dark, shrivelled, old man, who looked like Hari, the gardener." (Shah, 2020). The novelist reconstructs the glorified images of Gandhi and Nehru alike to that of an "eccentric dietician" and a "sly man" respectively (Shah, 2020).

"This comes down to a statement I'm trying to make in the book that there have been films like *Ghandi* which have sanitised him into a saint. He's not human in that film.

And I tried to humanise him." (Sidhwa, 1990)

Sidhwa further disrupts the dominant narrative by centering the plot around the experiences of Lenny, a young child narrator of Parsee descent. The novel emerges as a poignant counterpoint to the overlooking of minority experiences during the partition, particularly through its nuanced portrayal of the Parsee life and community. The Parsee community, being a religious minority, was often overlooked in dominant historical narratives of the Partition. Lenny's perspective is informed by her unique identity as a member of a minority community in addition to her disability, that also influences her outlook.

"... Parsis though involved in the Independence struggle, were not with any one side during the partition. Like the Christians. And as such, they weren't harmed by any party. In any case, they were such a tiny minority that they had no clout this way or that." (Sidhwa, 1990).

Through Lenny's perspective, the novel places a subaltern voice at the forefront. This choice ensures that the reader engages with the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of someone who occupies a sidelined position in society. In addition to her ethnic identity the intersection of Lenny's role as the child narrator, is essential for a decolonial reading because it offers an innocent, unfiltered perspective untainted by the biases and power structures of the colonial era. Through the eyes of a child, the novel unearths the unvarnished truths of the Partition, providing a subaltern viewpoint that challenges hegemonic narratives.

"In *Ice-Candy Man*, it was very useful to use the voice of a Parsi child narrator, because it does bring about an objectivity there. Your own emotions are not so... or at least your participation in events is not so involved. You are more free to record them, not being an actor immediately involved." (Sidhwa, 1990)

Sidhwa additionally portrays the turmoil of the integration of a minority community into the mainstream at the risk of losing one's individual identity. Sidhwa highlights the Parsee experience right from the beginning of their history where they "were kicked out of Persia by the Arabs" and "sailed to India" (37) and were met by the Gran Vazir who did not want "outsiders with a different religion and alien ways to disturb the harmony" (38). The response of the Parsee community to this encounter where they "stirred a teaspoon of sugar into the milk and sent it back" (39), symbolising they "would get absorbed into his country like sugar in the milk..." (39) highlights this very choice of losing their individuality and assimilating into an alien culture (Jataniya, Twinkle, 2023).

This symbolic act of integration raises questions pertaining to identity in events such as the partition, a turbulent period, especially for minority communities whose identities were intricately woven into the fabric of the subcontinent. Navigating identity during such upheavals became an arduous task as religious lines were drawn, leading to mass migrations and communal violence. Minority communities, like Christians, and Parsees, found themselves caught between the fervour of the Hindu-Muslim divide. The complexities of cultural, linguistic, and religious identities made it challenging for individuals to define themselves amidst the volatile political landscape. Fear, displacement, and the palpable sense of 'otherness' intensified the struggle for identity navigation. The partition forced individuals to confront and negotiate their affiliations, often in the face of hostility. The rupture of longstanding communal harmony disrupted the ways in which minority communities had historically defined their identities, leaving them grappling with the trauma of displacement and the challenge of re-establishing a sense of self within the newly demarcated borders. In times of such profound societal shifts, the nuanced identities of minority communities faced a crucible, shaping their narratives for generations to come.

Sidhwa redefines the narrative of new identities by focusing on the emergence of hybrid citizens, particularly through the lens of the Parsee community. A minority section, the community

found itself in an ambivalent state during the great divide. Sidhwa states that similar to Christians the Parsis were under no significant threat and despite being involved in the independence struggle they did not side with a particular group (Sidhwa, 1990). The onset of the Partition though may have compelled the group to actively blend into the Indian mainstream, transitioning from a liminal state to adopting a newly defined hybrid identity.

"Sidhwa aims to shed light on an unexplored ethnocentric community by showcasing its eccentricity to the world, with hopes to propel the world to preserve the community's journey from Partition through migration, adaptability, westernisation to hybridisation of identity." (Dhal, 2021)

The partition also unleashed a wave of unspeakable violence against women, eclipsing their identities and silencing their voices amid the cataclysmic events. Women across religious communities faced widespread atrocities, including abduction, rape, and forced displacement. The brutalisation of women during this tumultuous period not only robbed them of their physical safety but also inflicted deep scars on their identities. The pervasive violence shattered the traditional structures that had provided women with a sense of security and belonging. Many women, having endured unimaginable trauma, found themselves displaced and voiceless, struggling with the profound loss of home, family, and personal agency. The partition's chaos amplified the vulnerability of women, leaving them in the shadows of the larger narrative of political upheaval.

*Ice Candy Man* brings the experiences of women to the forefront through characters like Ayah and the Ayah's young charge, Lenny. Sidhwa weaves a narrative that sheds light on the profound impact of the partition on women. Through Lenny, Sidhwa attempts to bring a female voice to the forefront countering the generalised idea that Spivak (1988) points out; the notion of the subaltern, as individuals who are "spoken for" rather than being able to speak for themselves. The character of Ayah, also becomes a lens through which the novel

explores the multifaceted dimensions of female identity during this tumultuous period. The mere description and focus on her attractiveness and beauty becomes an act of violation where her "... body becomes the object of the male gaze and later during Partition, this body becomes the territory to be conquered." (Singh, 2018). The subsequent subjection to physical violence through rape tarnishes Ayah's identity of the self and annihilates her standing as a woman as well as a human being. Her eventual marriage to the Ice Candy Man and her conversion to the Muslim 'Mumtaz' add to the trauma and stripping off of agency that makes her a subject of marginalisation. The Ayah's journey reflects the loss of agency, security, and voice experienced by many women during the partition violence. "The history of the experience that she carries within herself is also the history of all the women abducted and raped during Partition." (Singh, 2018). Sidhwa's narrative magnifies the resilience and quiet strength of women, challenging their historical marginalisation in mainstream accounts of such events. By foregrounding women's experiences, *Ice Candy Man* contributes to a broader discourse that recognizes the pivotal role women played in shaping the social and cultural fabric amidst the cataclysm of the partition, providing a counterpoint to their often, overlooked narratives.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* stands as a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant representations of the partition of India in 1947, offering a comprehensive and empathetic perspective that centers on the voices of the subaltern, particularly women and marginalised communities. The novel, through the character of Lenny, Ayah, and the Parsee community, challenges the historical oversimplification and marginalisation of the experiences of minority communities, often overlooked in mainstream narratives.

The novel unveils the human cost of antagonisation across borders, emphasising the shared suffering and loss experienced by individuals on both sides of the newly drawn lines. The novel critiques the divisive forces that fueled animosity between Hindus and Muslims, shedding light on the collective tragedy of the partition. By humanising characters on both sides of the border, Sidhwa

questions the notion of clear-cut distinctions between 'us' and 'them,' challenging the antagonistic narratives that have perpetuated historical animosities.

The opposing leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, are presented in a complex light, subverting the tendency to overly glorify or villainise historical figures. The novel engages with the intricacies of political leadership during the partition, demonstrating that the decisions and actions of these leaders were far from unambiguous. This nuanced portrayal disrupts the binary constructions often applied to historical figures, encouraging readers to contemplate and debate upon the complexities of political agency during times of profound historical transformation.

Additionally, *Ice Candy Man* sheds light on the challenges of assimilation faced by individuals attempting to navigate the mainstream during the partition. The characters, torn between identities and displaced from familiar landscapes, struggle with the difficulty of integrating into a society undergoing radical transformation. This theme resonates not only with those directly affected by the partition but also with individuals navigating identity in the broader context of societal upheaval.

In essence, *Ice Candy Man* serves as a literary testament to the power of storytelling in redefining historical narratives. By amplifying the voices of the subaltern, portraying minority experiences, and challenging binary perspectives on identity, the novel invites readers to critically engage with the complexities of the partition. Sidhwa's work serves as a vital contribution to the ongoing project of decolonisation, offering a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of one of the most tumultuous periods in South Asian history.

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