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Analyzing the Silenced Shrieks of Women Amidst Euphoria of Freedom with Special Reference to Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*

Jaishree Jha

Research Scholar, University Department of English, Ranchi University, Ranchi.

Email: shreejit1019@gmail.com

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Jaishree Jha

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Abstract

An event that reconfigured the destiny of South Asia in a whole new dimension is Partition. Partition literature foregrounds the plight of the people during the ethnic genocide that followed the splitting of the Indian Subcontinent. Most of the events that are narrated in male-authored novels have prioritized public masculine space over private feminine space within the hierarchy of historical collections. As opposed to this, there are certain narratives that focus on the concept of the domestic sphere as crucial place of history.

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* depicts through the experiences of Lenny, the narrator, how partition gave rise to unprecedented violence which resulted in the traumatic experience of people, particularly women. It is through the character of Ayah that Sidhwa reveals the unsavory side of male characters in the novel. The man who professed love for her is the one who dragged her out of Lenny's house and subjected her to the brutality of rape and violence in the wake of communal riots.

This research paper attempts to explore the post-colonial narratives as an embodiment of collective memories of the trauma of partition, the loss of innocence, agony and pain that transformed the course of life of many women. It also aims to explore the ways in which such narratives lend us new perspectives by making the women emerge as strong characters at the end of this traumatic experience.

Keywords: partition, women, violence, trauma

Introduction

History is considered as the most crucial aspect of our civilization as it certainly provides framework for the understanding of the past events. However, what remains as a challenge in

this regard is that whether trusting our understanding or analysis of historical incidents or events is accurate, or is there any lack of information or learning resources that are creating vacuums in our knowledge we are

ignorant of. Men have mainly written narratives of historical incidents where stories of women have been either ignored or cast aside, and when they portrayed women, it was often depiction of women as passive participants with limited roles within society. One cannot deny the fact that the pages of history have been primarily dominated by the narratives of men. According to Lerner, historical books lack comprehensive presentation of society's history due to their major focus on male experiences, which consequently resulted in men being depicted as the central figures. Resultantly, the active involvement and roles of women in socio-political events are often unacknowledged.

The absence of women as subjects of history is majorly due to the fact that "they are presumed to be outside history because they are outside the public and the political, where history is made. Consequently, they have no part in it" (Menon 3). Over the past few decades, many female-centric partition narratives into the historical recount of partition has challenged this aspect. By way of example, Butalia in her article "Community, State and Gender: Some Reflections on the Partition of India" adduces a pamphlet by an activist group called Women Against Fundamentalism:

I am a woman / I want to raise my voice
/ because communalism affects me / In
every communal riot / my sister are
raped, my children are killed . . . / my
world is destroyed/ and then / I am left
to pick up the pieces . . . / It matters little
if I am a Muslim, Hindu or Sikh / and yet
I cannot help my sisters. Violence is
almost always instigated by men, but its
greatest impact is felt by women. In
violent conflict, it is women who are
raped, women who are widowed . . . in
the name of national integrity and unity .
. . . We women will have no part of this
madness, and we will suffer it no more . .
. Those who see their manhood in taking
up arms, can be the protectors of no one
and nothing. (128-129)

The above pamphlet not merely succinctly locates women within the framework of ferocious partition but also raises loud voice against forcibly assigning roles to women as bearers of "national integrity and unity".

Research Methodology

This research paper attempts to reconsider the events of partition of the Indian subcontinent by adopting women's perspective by analyzing the famous work of Bapsi Sidhwa- *Cracking India*. A qualitative research methodology has been employed with emphasis on comprehensive examination, interpretation and analysis of the selected text. It cannot be claimed that women are completely absent from the history of partition. However, they have been mostly seen in history books as numbers and as "objects of study, rather than as subjects" (Menon and Bhasin 1998: 11). Therefore, it is important to engage in a gendered study of partition.

Discussion

Cracking India

This work of fiction by Bapsi Sidhwa aptly captures the hardships of women during partition of India. Urvashi Butalia in her *The Other Side of Silence* observes, "The silence that women faced in the aftermath of partition is shrouded in many layers of silence" (193). Almost every day we hear about the chilling instances of violence against women and that is the reason why no one can deny this fact that women have been the most silenced being in many dismaying ways. This work of Sidhwa portrays a fictional account of partition through three viewpoints- Parsi, Pakistani and Feminist. While explaining her intent behind writing this novel she writes, "my intention was to write about Partition because very little had been written about it. There are certain images from my past which have haunted me... Although I was very young then, I saw chance killings, fires, dead bodies. There are images which have stayed with me... This hostility needs to be dealt

with" (Sidhwa and Singh, *My Place in the World*, 292).

The novel unfolds through the character named Lenny, who is presented as an innocent parsi girl who could look at the communal violence through an impartial eye. Lenny, who is an eight-year-old girl, witness how womens' bodies gets subjected to brutal sexual violence and strips their autonomy during Partition of India in the year 1947. The horrifying incidents of abduction of Lenny's Hindu nanny named Ayah by a Muslim mob highlights the brutal violence and displacement experienced by women during such period. There are various incidents in this novel which shows its readers the horrendous realities of sexual assault and various other forms of exploitation. The family served by Ayah fails to protect her from such gruesome events. What is most disturbing in the novel is the presentation of passive spectators during time of violence against women. Spectators remain mute when the rioters drag out Ayah mercilessly. As Lenny observes in the novel-

They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet-that want to move backwards- are forced forward instead. Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat open her mouth like the dead child's scream less mouth (194-95).

Ayah could not protect herself. Sexual violence renders her feeble and voiceless forever when during violence, she gets surrounded by violent and ruthless men. Ice -Candy-Man forcibly converts Ayah into Islam religion and gets married to her. She gets new name- Mumtaz. Even under this new identity she couldn't speak or express herself freely. Her husky voice and damaged vocal chords are suggestive of the suppressed voice of the subaltern. Ayah is ravished by the strangers as well as the familiar ones like Sharbat Khan, Ice Candy Man, Imam Din, cook, butcher and many other men too.

Hamida also experiences similar humiliation. Lenny was informed that Hamida was kidnapped by Sikhs and was taken to some other place. She was also warned that if she comes back, her husband or his family wouldn't accept her back. Thus, a violated woman had to suffer doubly - the brutality of her abductors and the exclusion from her own family. She has children and knows that her spouse and his family would never embrace her back as she is humiliated by "others". While expressing her vulnerability to Lenny she calls herself "khut - putlis, puppets in the hands of fate." She develops low self-esteem after the gruesome events that happened during that period and blames everything to her fate. As she hopelessly says, "It is my kismet".

Under patriarchal set-up, a woman is conditioned in such a way that she is compelled to look at her value through the eyes of men. The rules and regulations chalked down by such a society for an ideal woman take the front seat by making women believe that they are of inferior gender. Conditioned by such a society, she interprets almost everything as desired by the parochial outlook of men. Hamida herself considers the rehabilitation camp as 'a camp for fallen women'. Like Hamida, assaulted and wailing women in the 'Recovered Women's Camp' blame all their sufferings and conditions on their fate.

There were many families during partition of 1947 who clearly refused to take their daughters and wives back by claiming that the rescued women had been defiled by the religious Other. A woman without her chastity and modesty had no place and regard in the patriarchal scheme of things. As a result, "the State, so quick to come forward with its recovery was at a loss about the reintegration of these women into the new nation" (Butalia 145). Many women were reluctantly accepted back because their families simply needed someone to do the housework (Menon and Bhasin, p. 77). Various political leaders and social activists exerted their influence and urged the families to willingly

accept the recovered women back. For instance, it is interesting to note that Gandhi (after pre-partition Noakhali riots in 1946 and even during the early stages of violence post partition) as a response to various events of mass suicides and honour killings had articulated opinions such as: "I have heard that many women who did not want to lose their honour chose to die. Many men killed their own wives. I think that is really great, because I know that such things make India brave" (qtd. in Mookerjea-Leonard 2015: 32). However, as several thousand rescued women were now being rejected and despised by their families (therefore making them the responsibility of the state), Gandhi radically changed his viewpoints and claimed:

It is being said that the families of the abducted women no longer want to receive them back. It would be a barbarian husband or a barbarian parent who would say that he would not take back his wife or daughter... They had been subjected to violence. To put a blot on them and to say that they are no longer fit to be accepted in society is unjust. (qtd.in Guha 2011: 275)

Though all women in the novel belong to the common Gender called female, not all of them are exactly the same. Much depends on the position of woman in society. So, there is certainly 'discrimination within the discriminated'. Ayah and Hamida's victimisation have its roots in their lower - class status also which makes them more vulnerable than Lenny's other women relatives. Lenny witnesses gender discrimination in Lahore after independence: many women were restricted entry into public spaces as if they were the second citizens. Lenny's visit to the 'Recovered Women's Camp' and their separation from community forced her to misunderstand the camp as women's prison and women to be some criminals. This sense of guilt is put into the heads of victim systematically by the patriarchal society which leads to their further victimization, and as a result the rape-victims like Hamida considers herself a fallen woman

and instead of fighting against injustice, accepts everything as her fate. Lenny expresses her rage, "I have seen Ayah carried away - and it has less to do with fate than the will of men" (*Cracking India*, 217). At least Lenny, a small child, can easily see and analyse the gender discrimination happening indiscriminately in every sphere.

The brutal acts on women's bodies were not targeted at them as individuals. In fact, mutilated and raped bodies of women were one of the ways to send out a warning to the men of the religious group to which the women belonged. A female body became a canvas where one group or community tried to prove its religious supremacy over the other. Jisha Menon in *The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition* describes the relevance of the body of a woman in a communal conflict. She observes: "The female body served as the terrain through which to exchange dramatic acts of violence. The gendered violence of the Partition thus positioned women between symbolic abstraction and embodiment" (121). Moreover, when one explicates the symbolic meanings behind various such violent acts, one can certainly claim that branding a woman's body with symbols of the other country or religious group signifies that the woman and her body have been tainted by the sinful religious Other. Branding becomes a constant reminder for the woman, whose shame at losing her honour and modesty remains forever ingrained on her body and psyche. Also, the stripping and then parading of women at places of worship is a double-edged attack; it is the simultaneous humiliation of one's religion and of women. The acts of extreme violence on women such as amputating their breasts, burning vaginas and ripping out of their wombs serves an even more frightening purpose. According to Menon and Bhasin (44), these acts "desexualise a woman and negate her as wife and mother; no longer a nurturer." In a civilization that continues to view women as only fit and suitable to be mothers and caretakers in their husbands'

households, severing women's sexual organs essentially makes their very existence unimportant.

Conclusion

In a chauvinist society, sexual violence against woman becomes the dominant weapon in the hands of the aggressors and rape of a woman is considered as the rape of her community. Ayesha Jalal puts it appropriately in her "Nation, Reason and Religion" - "All said and done, the commonality of masculinity was stronger than the bond of religion. Men of all three communities delighted in their momentary sense of power over vulnerable women". Sidhwa's *Cracking India* brings this dark and seamy sides of Partition and male chauvinism very effectively to the fore. It is the silenced shrieks of women that speaks through the pages of the above-mentioned novel.

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