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Fractured Selves and the Politics of Treachery: A Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Ice Candy Man*

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Ice Candy Man* (1988), released as *Cracking India* in the United States, offers a critical reassessment of Partition historiography by narrating 1947 through Lenny Sethi, a Parsee child disabled by polio in Lahore. Departing from conventional accounts centered on political leaders and diplomatic treaties, Sidhwa foregrounds how Partition was lived as a personal and collective rupture across gendered, communal, and domestic spaces (Butalia, 2000, p. 3). This article contends that the novel's deployment of a child's perspective and a minority Parsee standpoint creates space to interrogate religious nationalism, secular idealism, and the ethics of non-alignment. By analyzing narrative form, the symbolic arc of *Ice Candy Man*, and depictions of sexualized violence, the discussion shows how Sidhwa erases distinctions between state history and intimate trauma. The study further argues that gossip, silence, and fragmented speech become key agents in the disintegration of intercommunal trust, with women's bodies rendered as territory for asserting communal power (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 47). In rejecting celebratory accounts of independence, *The Ice Candy Man* presents Partition as an unresolved injury, positioning the text as essential for grasping contemporary South Asian conflicts over identity, memory, and the responsibilities of literary witness.

Keywords: Partition fiction, Bapsi Sidhwa, gender and violence, postcolonial literature, Parsee subjectivity, *Cracking India*

1. Introduction

Writing Partition from the Periphery

The 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent constitutes one of the twentieth century's gravest human displacements, with

roughly 15 million uprooted and nearly two million killed across Punjab and Bengal (Butalia, 2000, p. 3). Whereas official records privilege constitutional deliberations, the Radcliffe Award, and negotiations among political elites,

literary texts have constructed an alternative archive of embodied experience. Within this archive, Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Ice Candy Man* is distinctive for its self-conscious marginality. In contrast to Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* or Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, which center male actors and nationalist frameworks, Sidhwa writes through the consciousness of a child and a Parsee—locations external to the Hindu-Muslim-Sikh antagonisms that shaped Partition's violence.

This peripheral location is analytically productive. Parsees, Zoroastrian descendants who migrated from Persia, made up under 0.1% of India's population in 1947. Prohibited by faith from proselytizing and historically aligned with colonial governance, they were neither claimants to nor direct targets of the communal conflagration consuming Punjab. Their liminal status permits what Gayatri Spivak describes as a mode of "subaltern witnessing"—not direct victimization by majoritarian brutality, but observation that lays bare the absurdity and cruelty underpinning it (Spivak, 1988, p. 284).

Lahore's significance as setting cannot be overstated. Prior to 1947, the city functioned as a pluralist cultural node where Urdu *mushairas*, Sufi *dargahs*, Hindu *mandirs*, and Sikh *gurdwaras* coexisted within a shared Punjabi idiom (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 22). Sidhwa's Lahore is domestic rather than diplomatic: kitchens, courtyards, and markets replace cabinet rooms.

Through this scale, she reveals Partition as a gradual erosion of social fabric rather than a sudden decree. Whispers precede weapons. Friendships dissolve before frontiers are fixed (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 96). The American title's "cracking" thus signals multiple fractures: of geography, of community, of language, and of psychic coherence.

Sidhwa also disputes masculinist constructions of 1947. Standard narratives present independence as political triumph—India liberated, Pakistan founded—secured by

strategy and sacrifice. Women figure primarily as emblems of communal honor or as numbers in abduction reports (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 43). Sidhwa inverts this hierarchy, placing the female body at the center of Partition's brutality and demonstrating that national freedom entailed intensified control over women's lives and movements. Through Lenny's perception, "freedom" carries divergent meanings for a Parsee girl, a Hindu ayah, and a Sikh refugee. The novel consequently contributes to what Urvashi Butalia calls "the other side of silence"—the retrieval of stories excluded from nationalist memory (Butalia, 2000, p. 22).

Finally, Sidhwa's form performs its argument. The narrative is episodic, non-chronological, and fragmented, reproducing the structure of traumatic recall. Exact dates recede; chronology collapses. In their place are sensory residues: the odor of charred skin, the cadence of mob slogans, the stickiness of melting candy (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 128). This technique refuses the coherence of grand narrative and substitutes a collage of splintered experience. Sidhwa thereby affiliates with postmodern critiques of totalizing history. The novel emerges as both literary artifact and historiographical intervention.

2. Narrative Form

The Moral Weight of Childhood Perception

Lenny Sethi's narration constitutes the novel's central formal innovation. Four years old as the story opens, she is pre-ideological, physically impaired by polio, and situated as both participant and outsider. Her reliance on Ayah, the Hindu caretaker who transports her, forges an attachment that crosses lines of faith and class (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 11). Because polio limits her mobility, Lenny remains stationary—watching from balconies, tongas, or the Queen's Garden. This immobility becomes narratively strategic: she observes without being observed, privy to adult exchanges meant to exclude children.

Childhood perception estranges violence in ways adult narration cannot. When Lenny watches a mob immolate a man, she registers textures and sounds: the "sizzle" of flesh, the scent of "burning pork," the way firelight plays across spectators' faces (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 127). An adult might supply political causality; Lenny offers bewildered detail. Her refrain—"Why are they doing this?"—lays bare the irrational core of communal reasoning (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 128). The absence of a satisfactory answer becomes more terrifying than any ideology. Sidhwa nevertheless resists idealizing childhood purity. Lenny is implicated, however unintentionally, in the violence she witnesses. The ethical crisis arrives when Lenny, conditioned to equate truth with virtue, reveals Ayah's hiding place to Ice Candy Man (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 177). That disclosure, ordinarily commendable, facilitates Ayah's abduction and violation. The episode demolishes myths of childhood innocence and initiates Lenny into a world where truth can wound. Sidhwa proposes that Partition generates a moral order in which established ethics invert. Under such conditions, reticence may be more humane than disclosure.

The language of Lenny's narration also evolves, tracking the novel's thematic trajectory. Opening chapters are lyrical, saturated with Lahore's sensory life: "the clink of the ice-candy man's spoon," "the jingle of Ayah's anklets," "the smell of jasmine in the evening air" (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 8). With escalating brutality, the prose contracts and hardens. Sentences shorten. Imagery turns to cinder, blood, and skeletal remains (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 149). This stylistic fissuring parallels political partition. Additionally, Lenny's lisp—her inability to articulate the "s" phoneme—operates symbolically. Unable to pronounce "Sethi," "Sikh," or "Muslim" clearly, she signals language's incapacity to stabilize identity amid communal collapse (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 13).

The child's voice thus critiques adult confidence in nation, faith, and historical

certainty. Lenny's disabled body further comments on the national body. Her polio-affected leg is repeatedly labeled "useless" (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 14), mirroring how communities render certain lives expendable during crisis. Yet this "useless" body becomes the locus of ethical clarity. Barred from marching with mobs or brandishing weapons, Lenny's sole capacity is to witness and, later, to remember. Sidhwa thus echoes disability scholarship's claim that vulnerability can produce distinct modes of knowledge (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 2). Lenny's exclusion from violence authorizes her as the text's most credible moral observer.

3. The Ice Candy Man

Desire, Masculinity, and Political Transformation

While Lenny anchors the novel's ethics, Ice Candy Man drives its ideological drama. He enters as a carnivalesque figure—street vendor, poet, rumor-monger, and charmer. He sells not only ice candy but narratives, Urdu couplets, and flirtation (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 16). His early secularism seems authentic: he courts Ayah the Hindu, banters with Masseur the Muslim, and amuses Parsee children with Punjabi tales. He personifies pre-Partition Lahore's composite culture, where aesthetic and culinary practices traversed religious boundaries.

His politicization is thus both startling and instructive. Sidhwa renders it with psychological nuance, not stereotype. Economic insecurity initiates the shift: as communal tensions rise, his ice candy trade collapses under boycotts (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 88). Next comes the contagion of rumor: he absorbs sensationalized accounts of Muslims slaughtered in Bihar and Gurdaspur (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 116). Finally, an affront to gendered pride: following attacks on Muslims in Lahore, he experiences his masculinity as violated (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 135). Sidhwa declines to portray him as pure villain. Instead, she shows how quotidian anxieties—financial ruin, humiliation, dread—are

appropriated by political discourse and transmuted into communal animus.

His entanglement with Ayah illustrates the fusion of eros and politics. Before 1947, his overtures are playful and consensual. He woos her with Ghalib; she responds with laughter and mockery (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 24). After Partition, the dynamic becomes predatory. When Ayah shelters in Godmother's home, Ice Candy Man joins the crowd hunting her. Upon discovering her, he enables her abduction and coerced marriage (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 178). He rationalizes this as rescue from Hindu vengeance, yet the act reads as appropriation. Sidhwa thereby demonstrates how communalism fuses sexual and territorial domination. The female body is transformed into land to be occupied and regulated (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 47).

The trajectory of Ice Candy Man's language is telling. Prior to 1947, he employs Urdu poetry to attract and unite. After 1947, he deploys sectarian slogans to menace and sever (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 137). Sidhwa implies that once a shared literary commons disintegrates, only violent speech remains. His ultimate abjection—performing with a trained monkey at the brothel housing Ayah—marks his total moral and corporeal collapse (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 244). The man who once crafted beauty with words is reduced to inarticulate begging. This descent embodies Sidhwa's judgment: communalism degrades its agents as well as its victims. Ice Candy Man is not simply evil; he is destroyed by the very forces he helps unleash. Through him, Sidhwa questions whether pre-Partition pluralism was substantive or merely a fragile veneer concealing older enmities awaiting political ignition.

4. Gendered Brutality

The Body as Contested Terrain

Feminist research documents that 75,000 to 100,000 women were abducted during Partition, with many more raped, mutilated, or forcibly converted (Butalia, 2000, p. 195). Sidhwa renders these statistics concrete through

Ayah and other unnamed women. Ayah's corporeality is repeatedly emphasized—her "chocolate skin," the sway of her hips, the chime of her anklets (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 12). Pre-Partition, this embodiment is celebrated as sensual and vital. Post-Partition, it becomes vulnerability and target. Sidhwa catalogs the specific mechanisms of gendered violence. Ayah is seized, compelled to convert to Islam, renamed Mumtaz, and incarcerated in a brothel (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 210). This sequence—abduction, conversion, confinement—recurred across Punjab. The text also examines subsequent state "recovery" campaigns in which India and Pakistan exchanged abducted women. Though motivated by humanitarian aims, these campaigns frequently retraumatized women who had formed new attachments (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 107). Ayah's rescue by Godmother remains deliberately inconclusive. She is placed in a shelter for "fallen women," her family's reception unresolved (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 266). Sidhwa rejects the comfort of reunion. Ayah closes the novel in silence, her suffering unvoiced and unremedied.

Contrast Ayah with Lenny's mother and Godmother. These Parsee women exploit their community's neutrality to operate a clandestine network aiding abducted women. They provide refuge, healthcare, and negotiation with male kin for releases (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 202). This model of agency is domestic, quiet, and communal rather than public or heroic. Sidhwa, however, does not romanticize their power. It is constrained by class and community limits. They cannot save everyone, only those who find their threshold.

The novel further tracks how Partition regulated female embodiment daily. Though a child, Lenny learns to fear men and to veil herself (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 71). Female mobility contracts; public space becomes perilous. *Izzat*, or honor, becomes affixed to female sexual purity, converting women into proxies for communal prestige. Violations of one group's honor are avenged by violating the other

group's women (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 139). Sidhwa exposes this reciprocity as savage and self-sustaining. By centering such experiences, Sidhwa asserts that no rendering of 1947 is adequate without acknowledging that independence was underwritten by the surveillance and violation of female sexuality. The female body in the text functions as metonym for the partitioned nation—breached, scarred, and claimed by rival masculinities. This reading aligns with feminist arguments that national liberation often consolidates patriarchal authority over women (Butalia, 2000, p. 192).

5. The Parsee Stance

Moral Possibilities and Limits of Non-Alignment

The Parsee community in *The Ice Candy Man* provides a distinct vantage on Partition's moral dilemmas. Historically, Parsees practiced political quietism, concentrating on trade and education. Colonel Bharucha voices this ethos: "Keep out of it. Let Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs kill each other" (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 37). For a microscopic minority encircled by larger groups, neutrality constitutes pragmatic survival.

Sidhwa both appreciates and interrogates this posture. On one side, Parsee non-alignment produces zones of provisional safety. Lenny's household employs Hindus and Muslims, observes multiple holidays, and sustains cross-faith friendships (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 21). Their residence functions as a transient haven where difference persists without immediate bloodshed. This haven gestures toward the pluralism Partition annihilates.

On the other side, Sidhwa shows that total neutrality becomes ethically indefensible during mass atrocity. The pivot occurs when Godmother abandons detachment to rescue Ayah. Leveraging her social capital and Parsee status, she bargains with Muslim authorities for Ayah's freedom (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 253). The act marks a move from passive toleration to active

responsibility. Sidhwa implies that during genocide, abstention constitutes complicity.

Parsee identity also permits Sidhwa to invoke Zoroastrian concepts without entering Hindu-Muslim theological dispute. Fire recurs—Lahore's burning structures, cremation grounds, and the sacred Zoroastrian flame (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 121). In Zoroastrianism, fire signifies purity and truth. Sidhwa uses the symbol ironically: Partition's fires purify nothing; they only consume and defile. This deployment of Parsee iconography reinforces the novel's thesis: archaic ethical systems buckle under modern nationalism's pressure.

The conclusion underscores neutrality's limits. Lenny's family ultimately relocates to India, driven not by ideology but by safety (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 270). They forfeit Lahore, their ancestral city, despite claiming no political side. The loss demonstrates the impossibility of existing outside history amid systemic violence. Sidhwa mourns not only Punjab's cosmopolitan ethos but also the impossibility of ethical distance when the social order itself disintegrates.

6. Language, Gossip, and the Collapse of Intercommunal Speech

The Ice Candy Man is, at its core, a meditation on language—its capacities to bind, to sunder, and to annihilate. Pre-Partition Lahore exists as a polyphonic arena where Urdu verse, Punjabi idiom, English administrative directive, and Gujarati prayer intermingle without hostility (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 8). *Ice Candy Man*'s code-switching puns and Ayah's folk songs exemplify this linguistic hybridity. Language serves as a conduit across communities, a shared cultural asset transcending sectarian difference.

Gossip emerges as the primary engine of Partition's violence. Reports of massacres travel not via journalism or official bulletin but through marketplace rumor, each iteration more lurid than the last (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 98). "They are killing our women. They are cutting off

breasts." Such unverified claims generate cycles of dread and reprisal. Sidhwa shows how language, previously connective, becomes weaponized. Sectarian slogans—"Pakistan Zindabad," "Bharat Mata ki Jai"—supplant complex dialogue and interpersonal nuance (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 117).

The novel's ethical climax turns on a failure of language with catastrophic effect. Lenny, trained to equate truth with goodness, truthfully discloses Ayah's location to Ice Candy Man (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 177). That truth-telling, typically a child's virtue, enables Ayah's abduction. Sidhwa thereby indicts an adult order that renders truth dangerous. Following her betrayal, Lenny retreats into selective silence, her muteness mirroring the enforced silence of Partition's survivors, especially women whose accounts were suppressed (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 181).

English holds an ambivalent place in this linguistic field. It is the idiom of colonial bureaucracy, of the British who inscribe arbitrary borders, and of Lenny's schooling (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 61). Yet it also furnishes Sidhwa a vehicle to address a global readership about South Asian realities. Writing in English about Urdu-Punjabi experience, she performs the cultural translation Partition demanded. The text's code-switching—preserving terms like *churail*, *gharara*, and *badmash*—resists total Anglicization and asserts that certain traumas exceed colonial language's grasp (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 26).

Sidhwa further tracks how naming becomes politicized. Characters begin demanding, "Are you Hindu or Muslim?" before play or conversation (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 94). A question once irrelevant suddenly adjudicates life and death. The erosion of shared linguistic space marks one of Partition's deepest losses. Sidhwa ultimately contends that Partition constituted not only territorial division but the collapse of the communicative structures that

had sustained South Asian pluralism for centuries.

7. Conclusion

Partition's Continuing Resonances

The Ice Candy Man withholds narrative closure because Partition itself remains an unhealed fissure in South Asian consciousness. Ayah's destiny is left indeterminate, Ice Candy Man is last glimpsed in bestial degradation, and Lenny's family quits Lahore bearing "a sense of irreparable loss" (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 271). This refusal of resolution is intentional historiography. Against state narratives that cast independence as triumphant national genesis, Sidhwa frames Partition as persistent trauma with ongoing effects.

The novel's lasting significance lies in its refusal to divorce private life from political event. Every major occurrence—the Radcliffe Line's announcement, Jinnah's oratory, Gandhi's assassination—is mediated through Lenny's bodily sensations, Ayah's affective states, or the incineration of districts (Sidhwa, 1988, p. 204). Sidhwa thus historicizes intimacy without sentimentalizing it. She shows how macro-political choices are instantiated in micro-level somatic and emotional registers.

Additionally, the text models minority writing that neither assimilates nor secedes but bears critical witness. The Parsee lens allows Sidhwa to critique all communities without claiming exclusive victimhood. This stance enables a structural analysis of communalism rather than attribution of blame to single actors.

For current readers, *The Ice Candy Man* functions as a warning. Ice Candy Man's descent from poet to zealot mirrors how digital disinformation and economic distress incite contemporary sectarian violence (Puniyani, 2003, p. 12). Ayah's ordeal resonates with present crises of trafficking and honor-related abuse (Menon & Bhasin, 1998, p. 215). By revisiting 1947, Sidhwa exposes durable

patterns of gendered and communal conflict across South Asia.

Ultimately, Sidhwa's novel argues that nations are forged not merely by constitutions and accords but by the narratives societies circulate about belonging, identity, and sacrifice. *The Ice Candy Man* demands remembrance of those immolated in the project of nation-making and recognition that 1947's "cracking" continues to configure South Asian life. Sidhwa's literary accomplishment resides in rendering that historical wound both particular and universally legible.

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