



WRITING THE MARGINS: A STUDY OF THE PARSI PERSPECTIVE IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S *ICE-CANDY-MAN*

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ABSTRACT

The novel *Ice-Candy-Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa is remarkable for giving voice to the Parsi community who are left less than a million in the world and who are absent from the general stream of history as well as the discourse of the Partition of India. Sidhwa through the mouthpiece of an eight years Parsi girl child narrator Lenny narrates the harrowing and excruciating experiences of violence during the Partition of India. The novel throws light on the concerns and predicament of Parsi people in the contemporary sub-continent and their feelings of alienation and loss of belonging in a foreign land amidst different warring communities. The novel also acquaints us with the Parsi ethos, way of life, their culture, hopes, aspirations, disillusionments, and an indomitable will to survive and do good.

Keywords: Partition of India, Parsi Identity, discourse, Bapsi Sidhwa, postcolonial.

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Bapsi Sidhwa is a Parsi, Pakistani Punjabi woman writing in English, the best of her fiction is set in the turbulent times of the Partition of India and the postcolonial South Asia (O'Neil 1376). Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy-Man* tries to reassess or reconstruct the history of Partition giving voice to the marginalised groups on the levels of gender, class, ethnicity and nationality. Sidhwa reviews the history of Partition from a more or less Parsi, feminist and Pakistani perspective to displace or counter the discursive tendencies of historical thought in Europe or India. The novel deals with the predicament of female characters in a patriarchal society, Parsi identity in the backdrop of a tumultuous relationship between India and Pakistan.

August 1947 was the time when Indian sub-continent was divided into two nation states; India

and Pakistan. The casualties during Partition of India amount to more than a million, with a thirteen million people as homeless and refugees on both sides of the border. According to a report, around seventy-five thousand women were abducted or raped (Ayres 106). The novel *Ice-Candy-Man* familiarises us with these horrible and dreadful times in the contemporary South Asia. The novel rewrites history giving voice to the Parsi community. The major thematic concerns of the novel are issues of socio-cultural identity, feeling of alienation and anxiety due to a minority status of Parsis among other dominant communities.

Bapsi Sidhwa was born in Karachi on August 11, 1938, her major novels reflect her Parsi, female and Pakistani Identity. Sidhwa in her childhood, like the girl child narrator of the novel *Ice-Candy-Man*,

had to go through many painful experiences due to her physical inadequacies. Her reading of the Victorian satirist endowed her with a great sense of humour and irony. Sidhwa points out the autobiographical content of her novels, she says:

In *Ice-Candy-Man* or *Cracking India*, the first part is autobiographical, except that the central character of the child is not me personally...This child is informed by my adult consciousness. So a lot of me is there, but other bits are purely imaginative. For instance, the relationship between Lenny and her male cousin- I had no such male cousin! I had no such Ayah either. But we did have servants like Imam Din and Yusuf. So partially I took things directly from my own experience, but the rest is created." (Sidhwa, "My Place in the World" 291)

Most of her novels like *The Crow Eaters* (1980), *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), *An American Brat* (1983) and *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) panoramically describe the Parsi way of life and voice their concerns. Her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* narrates the experiences of an eight year physically disabled girl child Lenny during the communal conflicts of ninety four-seventy. In 1947, India was partitioned into two different countries on the basis of religion that resulted in the eruption of sectarian riots leading to the unimaginable human and economic loss and suffering. The novel *Ice-Candy-Man* is set in those turbulent times when the existence became nightmarish for the subjects of the subcontinent, especially the women. Binod Mishra and Sanjay Kumar opine:

..."woman-as-victim" and "women-as-saviour" of women and the weak, condemning male chauvinism and violence-mongering callous selfishness of the politicians and barbaric nature of communal frenzy in targeting hapless minorities and women, Sidhwa artistically juxtaposes the incidents on both sides of the border to go beyond narrow national commitments. Consequently, the appeal of her novel is not constrained by her Parsi or Pakistani background. (Mishra 225)

Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* is a profound novel depicting the turmoil of the Indian sub-continent

during the Partition. Sidhwa in the novel tries to present her view of history from the perspective of the marginalised groups to counter the British and Indian narratives of the history of the Partition. The novel was first published in 1988 in India and England as *The-Ice-Candy Man*; in 1991, the US edition appeared named as *Cracking India* to avoid the connotations of drug culture (Brians 104). This multiplicity of themes, narratorial voices and diverse identities makes the novel a kind of heteroglossia:

...the events, incidents, issues, characters and the language have become instruments in the conscious hands of the narrator shaping the discourse on history and politics...The novel is a powerful discourse on the multiple histories, of nations, of communities and of individuals. (Nimsarkar 78)

In the novel Sidhwa has mostly made use of the first person narrative technique to express the conditions of Lenny's life, her Parsi family background, and the general atmosphere of the turbulent times of Partition. Thus the personal accounts of the girl child narrator Lenny become very much suffused with the major currents of the contemporary history, which according to Rahul Sapro result in the rewriting of the "history of the subcontinent, thereby undercutting the British views of history imposed on the subcontinent" (Sapra 9).

The novel depicts the psycho-sexual development of the girl child narrator Lenny. The novel describes the childhood activities of Lenny and her cousin that involve bodily closeness although at the level of innocence on the part of Lenny. It is important to note here that this relationship more aptly described as a childhood play cannot be considered incestuous since in Parsis the marriages between cousins are common. While *Ice-Candy-Man* deals with the Partition of India told from the perspective of a Parsi girl child, her other novels like *The Crow Eaters* and *An American Brat* are also notable for the description of Parsi ethos. The issue of interethnic romance is a major theme in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa. Parsi community has apprehensions about the interethnic marriage due to their negative growth of population. That is why Faredoon Junglewalla in the novel *The Crow Eaters* does not

allow the marriage of his son Yazdi with an Anglo-Indian girl Rosy. This arbitrary decision of Faredoon had a very devastating effect on the life of his son. The very same situation we find in the novel *The American Brat*. In the novel, we see that Feroza is a typical Parsi Pakistani girl, her mother Zareen worries about her orthodox views and nature. Cyrus Ginwalla, her father, has his own fears that his daughter will end up marrying a non-Parsi boy, and out of this paranoia, he decides to send Feroza to her Uncle Manek in the United States of America. As a South Asian, she undergoes a very harassing attitude of the checking staff at the Kennedy International Airport.

Similarly, *The American Brat* by Sidhwa, encodes the cultural shock of Parsi immigrants in America, in the novel we see that Feroza, a religious minded and conservative girl is shocked to see the moral decay and the filth of the America along with its material and technological progress. We have a similar description in the novel *The Crow Eaters* when Faredoon takes his wife Putli and his mother in law Jerbanoo to England to save the newly wedded Tanya and Billy from their troublesome nature. Putli and Jebrano who think highly of the culture and morals of the English are frustrated with their experience in England. In America Feroza is utterly transformed by the new socio-cultural environment. First she moves in with Jo and joins the University of Denver, and then she falls in love with David and writes to her parents about her decision to marry David. Cyrus and Zareen are extremely shaken by the idea of their daughter marrying a Jew, and ultimately with the efforts of Zareen and David's realisation of the differences between the two communities, the relationship ends in a break-up. But not before it has taken its toll on the emotional and mental health of Feroza.

The novel *Ice-Candy-Man* is full of symbolic incidents, characters and details. It provides richness, depth and complexity to the novel enabling it to express a range of meanings to the novel. The symbolism in the novel is very much influenced by the specific cultural conditions of the Parsi community and life in Lahore. Lenny's nightmares and internal fears as a child can be interpreted as the external chaos of the city of Lahore and the subcontinent in general. Here is an account of Lenny's nightmare:

Children lie in a warehouse. Mother and Ayah move solicitously. The atmosphere is business-like and relaxed. Godmother sits by my bed smiling indulgently as men in uniforms quietly slice off a child's arm here, a leg there. She strokes my head as they dismember me. I feel no pain. Only an abysmal sense of loss- and a chilling horror that no one is concerned by what's happening. (31)

The Partition had a manifold impact on the life of the subcontinent; it signalled the breakdown of the bonds of love and peaceful existence as well as the failure of the inter-community networks to resist the bloodshed. It had an intense impact on the relationship of various classes, to see Partition mainly as a matter of religious or communal conflict is to ignore the working of power dynamics in the subcontinent and the material forces shaping all the history in general. The violence also represents a crisis at the level of man and woman relationship. Throughout the history, the violence done to women is the natural corollary of any religious, political or cultural conflict. As a Pakistani nationalist writer, Sidhwa has tried to expose the politics of the dominant western or Indian tradition of thought that arraign the trio- the Muslim community, the Muslim League and Jinnah- for the troubled waters of the history of the subcontinent. Sidhwa tries to correct this prejudice or bias of the historians towards her country, by pointing out the constructed nature of the history of the sub-continent devised by the dominant power structures.

Sidhwa's depiction of Partition may be Pakistan oriented but she is above the narrow parochial nationalism, as she writes from the perspective of a marginal community in a conflict of dominant communities. Moreover, she writes from a gynocentric perspective voicing the concerns of women in the subcontinent (B. Singh 364). Sidhwa's central concern is the condition of a Hindu Ayah and her sufferings at the hands of the Muslim community or lover, i.e., Ice-Candy-Man. Paranjape quotes Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz that the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa are "Ruthlessly truthful, deeply perceptive, she tells her story with rare courage, frankness, and good humour" (82).

The novel rewrites history giving voice to the Parsi community who are left less than a million in the world. The Parsi novelists writing in English are generally divided into two broad categories: the writers like B.K. Karanjia and Dina Mehta, who live in their own countries and write about their socio-cultural concerns as well as the expatriate writers who have left their home country and write from the second country. Writers like Rohinton Mistry, Firdaus Kanga, Farrukh Dhondy and Bapsi Sidhwa fall into the latter category (Dodiya vii). All these writers assert and feel proud of their Parsi identity and ethnicity. The major thematic concerns of the Parsi writers are issues of their particular cultural and religious identity, sentiments of estrangement, and apprehensions of their extinction from the face of the earth. Although these authors deal with the predicament of the Parsi community, they also deal with the general issues of life and humanity, for example, Firdaus Kanga writes about the issues that are central to the community as well as to any individual. Rohinton Mistry talks about his community, country and the relationship between various communities in India, Farrukh Dhondy writes about the issues that transcend the national boundaries and engages with the question of inter-racial harmony. Almost all Parsi writers, despite their assertion of the Parsi identity, affirm that communal harmony and tolerance are the prerequisites for the peaceful co-existence of various communities.

The novel *Ice-Candy-Manis* set in Lahore where the dominant religious community is Muslim with not more than two hundred Parsi families left. Parsis in India came 1300 years ago when Arabs captured Persia. They came to the western port of India near Gujarat around 785 A.D. whose king Madhav Rana allowed them to enter his territory on the assurance by the Parsi Priest that the Parsi People will not cause disturbance or threat to the Indian society by their differences. The Parsi priest demanded a bowl of milk and presented it to the king after mingling some sugar in it suggesting that Parsi people will mix in the Indian society as sugar sweetens a bowl of milk. So Parsis have always been going through an in-between and hybrid position. In the novel *Ice-Candy-Man* we have a reference to the above anecdote, Colonel Barucha says:

When we are kicked out of Persia by the Arabs thirteen hundred years ago, what did we do? Did we shout and argue? No!' roars the colonel, and hastily provides his own answer before anybody could interrupt. 'We got into boats and sailed to India!' (37)

It is notable, and that Parsis as a community has adopted the neutral position not deciding to take part in the communal conflict during the Partition. At the meeting of Parsi community at Waris Road, Colonel Barucha says, "We must hunt with the hounds and run with the hare" (16). Later he warns the Parsi community as follows: "Hindus, Muslims and even the Sikhs are going to jockey for power: and if you jump into the middle you'll be mingled into chutney" (36). However, this neutral position was not as simple as that and resulted in a kind of alienation and loss of belongingness for the community. Dr. Mody argues against Colonel Barucha's ideal of neutral position saying, "Our neighbours will think that we are betraying them and siding by the English" (37). The Parsi dilemma of siding either with Hindus or Muslims is well presented in the words of another Parsi member present at the meeting: "Which of your neighbours are you going to betray? Hindi? Muslim, Sikh" (37).

Colonel Barucha advises all Parsis not to interfere in the Partition matter: "I hope on Lahore Parsi will be stupid to court trouble...I strongly advise all of you to stay at home- and out of trouble" (36). The issue of Partition of India again emerges towards the end of the novel *The Crow Eaters*, Faredoon Junglewalla now an old man instructs his family to take neither of side India or Pakistan, but to take side of the English since it was the only way out for their survival in the subcontinent. Faredoon believes that if the Parsis take sides with any of the Indian community the other community will not spare them so he thought it advisable to side with the rulers. It is pertinent to say here that despite the policy of neutrality adopted by the Parsi community, Sidhwa has presented Parsi community as a highly compassionate, helpful towards the suffering of the masses caused by the animosity between the two dominant communities. Lenny's mother has been secretly providing rationed petrol to Hindu, Sikh women to escape from Pakistan. She has also been

helping the female victims of communal violence by arranging for their way to India to their families, but Lenny thinks that she is indulging in some 'secret' activities of violence. Lenny's mother later clarifies it to her, "we were only smuggling the rationed petrol to help our Hindu and Sikh friends to run away...And also for the convoys to send kidnapped women, like your ayah, to their families across the border" (242).

The identity of Parsi characters in the novel is essentially a 'hybridized phenomenon' involving the relationship between the European culture, Parsi Culture and the Indian experience (Ashcroft *et al.* 220). Sidhwa speaks at length about the Parsi origin, their historical roots and their cultural mores in the novel. There is a reference in the novel to the Parsi way of disposing of the dead. Godmother tells Lenny about the Parsi way of last rites:

Instead of polluting the earth by burying it, or wasting fuel by burning it, we feed God's creatures. The soul is in heaven, chatting with God in any case...or broiling in hell like Mini's will (114).

Bapsi Sidhwa as a Parsi writer brings out the drawbacks and foibles of her community as well as the dominant community. Her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* can be seen as giving voice to the Parsi Community that is marginalised and silenced community in the Partition discourse as well as the history of the two postcolonial nation states. Bapsi Sidhwa's first published novels *The Crow Eaters*, *An American Brat*, also deal with the theme of the Parsi Identity. In these novels, we get detailed accounts of Parsi way of life, their hopes and aspirations, rituals, rites, customs, beliefs, superstitions, myths and legends. Sidhwa has used the title of her first novel *The Crow Eaters* to suggest "the crow-like high-pitched garrulousness of the Parsis" (Singh 8).

While in *The Crow Eaters* Sidhwa's treatment of Parsi community is highly satiric and humorous, the *Ice-Candy-Man* presents the dilemma and strategically difficult position of the Parsis in the geo-cultural space of the postcolonial Indian subcontinent. *The American Brat* reflects the tensions created by inter-community romance or marriages within the Parsi community as their very existence is in the danger of extinction. Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the few Parsi novelists writing in English

today, her fiction is marked by a penchant for humour and realistic descriptions of the contemporary socio-cultural phenomenon. Her portrayal of the Parsi concerns in her fiction, the characterization of the Parsi characters, and their way of life acquaint us with Parsi world and help in voicing the issues that are central to Parsis as a community.

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