

A Reappraisal of Women and Partition in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* : An e-lecture

The representations of women in the writings about Partition by both male and female authors mainly focus on exploring the sexual trauma, sufferings and painful experiences of women during the Partition. Narratives about Partition like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* and Shuana Singh's *What the Body Remembers*, to mention a few, portray women's experience of the violence and migration through their "anguish, trauma, pain and ambivalence" (Purohit 434). Women's experience in these writings is generally depicted as that of victimhood. There is no scope for denying this aspect but often there is a tendency to explore the depiction of women's experience in these writings in monolithic terms while overlooking other possible ways of engagement and representation. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy-Man* is one such work which draws attention towards the differential history of women's experience of the Partition. In this lecture, we will try to look at how the women engage with a multitude of experiences in the light of their representation in the aforementioned novel which resists any single bracketing. This representation is not necessarily one of victimhood.

The novel primarily puts emphasis on its narrator Lenny's Hindu Ayah referred to as Shanta in the novel, her abduction by a rowdy group of Muslims, led by one of her former Muslim suitors, Ice candy-man, and her eventual escape from his clutches. Shanta's story seems emblematic like other thousands of women who were abducted and raped by men of the warring communities during the horrible days of Partition which unleashed worst kind of violence and barbarism. Besides Shanta's story, the novel also contains many other significant female characters whose stories reflect a multilayered view of women's experience of the Partition which has been often overlooked or paid less attention to. While Shanta's story puts focus on the abduction of women as the most horrific symbol of violence, other incidents involving women give an idea of how the sexual violence was already prevalent in the society and thus what occurred during the Partition, as Sudhir Kakar mentions, was not an isolated occurrence but a "re-contextualization or a re-calibration of an already familiar phenomenon" (Kakar 154). Shanta

is initially presented as a sexually empowered woman, who uses her sensuality to win over a number of suitors regardless of the religious affiliation. The way male members interact with Shanta and other women and as later happenings prove, sexual predation does underlie the social attitudes of a largely patriarchal society. In some ways, this becomes a precursor to the eventual violence which was committed on women's bodies during the gory days of Partition. Be it the representations of Shanta, Hamida or the servant-girl, Papoo, the novel portrays the composite picture of women's experience of violence brought about by Partition. In this regard, Jill Didur argues, "the undercurrent impulse of society towards sexual predation gets exacerbated and manifested in violent ways in the Partition as in the case of Ayah(Shanta) and Hamida's abduction and rape in the novel" (Didur 50). It is in this context, one can argue that Shanta's body becomes the site for enactment of horrific violence. Even after suffering immensely at the hands of male oppressors, Shanta's portrayal does not allude to a stereotypical image of a woman numbed into total submission in the face of the magnitude of oppression she has faced. It is because as the rest of the story unfolds in the novel, she displays defiance and courage by insisting on getting away from the man she does not love. She is firm and decisive about taking her own path even in extreme adversity as she defiantly tells Godmother: "I want to go to my family...I will not live with him" (Sidhwa 245).

Shanta's defiant attitude towards Ice-candy-man eventually forces him to repent for his bad behaviour and actions. Ultimately, even in dangerous circumstances, he follows Shanta to Amritsar so that he can correct his previous deeds.

The narrator Lenny herself is a female child of privilege, born into an upper-middle class Parsi family. While her perspective is that of the upper-class, her close affiliation with Shanta allows her to come across a cross-section of the people in her society: cooks, gardeners, masseurs and ice-cream sellers. Lenny engages socially with a wide variety of people, and one thing she does notice is the element of sexual objectification. A woman's body is subjected to sexual oppression gaze but ironically, a woman is also expected to carry alone the burden of morality and propriety. Through the events demonstrating sexual objectification of women, Lenny becomes conscious of her own sexuality. As she recounts:

The covetous glances Ayah(Shanta) draws educate me. Up and down, they look at her. Stub-ended twisted beggars and dusty old beggars on crutches drop their poses and stare at her with hard, alert eyes. Holy men marked in piety, shove aside their

pretences to ogle her with lust. Hawkers, cart-drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists turn their heads as she passes.

(Sidhwa 3)

Lenny's cousin is an illustration of this sexual predation, as he repeatedly attempts and even cajoles Lenny to respond to his coercive sexual advances. He wants to exercise the violent power of his sexual fantasies on Lenny as he nonchalantly remarks to her that he will "show [her] someday" what rape means (Sidhwa 244). Yet Lenny's attitude towards her nameless cousin is of total assertiveness.

Corroborating further the fact of the inherent norm of sexual predation and violence in the name of social norms in the society is the story of Papoo in the novel. A little older than Lenny, Papoo is the sweeper's daughter who lives with her family in the servant quarters. As the readers come to know, her mother Muccho regularly "maltreats her daughter" even to the level of physical harm as once she is hospitalized for two weeks after a presumed beating by her mother results in a concussion (Sidhwa 21). Despite her mother's ill-treatment, Papoo displays resilience as Lenny comments that Papoo, "unlike other servants' children ... is not browbeaten into early submission" (Sidhwa 56). But as Lenny observes, her fighting temperament and eccentricities will be short-lived. Though "it is not easy to break her body," she is broken in "subtler" ways (Sidhwa 56). The rebellious Papoo is finally "broken" when her family drugs her with opium and marries her off to a dwarf, middle-aged man while Lenny is left "imagining the shock, and the grotesque possibilities awaiting Papoo" (Sidhwa 199). This draws attention to ways the society gave consent and acceptance to the subjugation and sexual enslavement of women. This becomes too evident when she sees Papoo's mother having internalised this norm in herself in the way she becomes responsible for her daughter's misery. Not only this, the whole society celebrates this bizarre marriage which is nothing but a period of sexual enslavement and violence for Papoo who has got no say in her life. This systematic social objectification of women acts as a major reinforcing point for the enactment of brutalities on women during the Partition violence.

The text also offers representations of other women which are somewhat antithetical to the images of victimhood of Ayah and Papoo. Against the backdrop of the victimhood of these women is set a different facet of womanhood in the form of Lenny's mother and her aunt, Godmother whose engagement with the experience of Partition defies any presupposed

categorisation. As described earlier, despite belonging to a religious minority, Lenny's family belongs to the privileged upperclass in pre-Partition India, mixing socially with other upper class Indians and with representatives of the British ruling class. Seemingly the powerful matriarch, Lenny's mother, Mrs. Sethi has a number of servants to take care of her children and her household; but behind the closed doors of the marital bedroom, she is under her husband's thumb. Behind the veneer of class snobbery, she lives in servility to her husband which at times results in physical assaults. As Lenny describes her parent's troubled relationship:

And closer, and as upsetting, the caged voices of our parents fighting in their bedroom. Mother crying, wheedling, Father's terse, brash indecipherable sentences. Terrifying thumps. Sometimes I hear Mother say, "No, Jana; I won't let you go! I won't let you go to her!" Where does he go in the middle of the night? To whom? Why ... when Mother loves him so? Although Father has never raised his hands to us, one day I surprise Mother at her bath and see the bruises on her body. (Sidhwa 224).

But as the bloody events of Partition finally unfold, we see Mrs. Sethi setting aside her conventional role-play of being a submissive wife. Appearing now as an empowered figure in public, she engages herself in humanitarian efforts and the community building to assist women who have been victimized by Partition violence. She oversees efforts to help Hindu and Sikh families cross the border safely to India, and to recover and provide shelter to the kidnapped women as communal frenzy engulfs Lahore and the rest of India. In fact, under the prevailing circumstances which are already pitted against women, it is a risk-filled job undertaken by Mrs. Sethi ; she could invite the wrath of revenge-hungry people, but significantly, this fear and her own previous domestic servility does not deter her from being proactive on a front traditionally occupied by males. Lenny's aunt Godmother emerges as a counterfoil in a space where the female victimization and male-violence are in proliferation. She is depicted as a vibrant figure possessing a personality with wit, authority and social commitment. She commands respect and rules imperiously over "her docile old husband and her slavesister" (Sidhwa 11). The second half of the novel, which focuses on Shanta's "recovery," is characterised by the dominance of Godmother who is all-powerful in her role as rescuer and in her dealing with the Ice-candy-man. Lenny recalls:

The long and diverse reach of Godmother's tentacular arm is clearly evident. She set an entire conglomerate in motion ... and singlehandedly engendered the social and

moral climate of retribution and justice required to rehabilitate our fallen Ayah(Shanta).

(Sidhwa 285)

As the communal violence exacerbates, Godmother acquires more assertive character. She not only facilitates Shanta's escape from the prostitution centre of Hira Mandi and rehabilitation of other suffering women, she also rebukes Ice-candy man, denigrating him as a "shameless badmash" for his ill-treatment of Shanta and thereby, drawing him towards repentance (Sidhwa 260). Through her such efforts, she appears to put up the female front to counter the intense machismo brought about by the violent acts of Partition. Setting aside her biological essentialism, Godmother bespeaks of an authoritative presence in the face of the hostile atmosphere where women have become vulnerable and easy victims of male violence.

But the question now arises about the two strands of representation of women in the novel: Does one attribute the depiction of victimhood or empowerment of women to the class they belong to? But then, attributing the oppression on women to class only would might tend to be simplistic; as male authority often cuts across the lines of class, at least, in the world that this novel portrays. As shown in the novel, within the upperclass family of Lenny, we have the marginalized figure of Slavesister, the sister of Godmother who is often humiliated and treated shabbily by Godmother and despite being the member of this upperclass, she has to constantly live in the servitude of others. And then, we have Mrs. Sethi whose own life alternates between public empowerment and domestic submission. In her study of the various accounts of survivors of Partition violence, Urvashi Butalia "acknowledges the absence of class markers in these accounts, and adds, that violence did not recognize class divisions" (Butalia 135).

In examining the representation of women in the novel, we can see that Sidhwa's representative canvas alerts us to the fact that women's experience in the context of Partition can not be often analysed in monolithic terms of being presented only as victims of violence. They are, at the same time, engaging with other realities of experience which go beyond the Partition. It is this aspect which often gets overlooked.

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