

Women as Victims and Saviours in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*

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Abstract:

Feminism basically seems to be a movement that demands equal rights for women. It tries to identify women as creative and equal contributors of values. Sidhwa's fiction regarding feminism can never be complete unless there is a reference to the feminism portrayed in the novel *The Ice-Candy Man*. This novel portrays in particular the double impact of British colonialism and the impact of partition on the lives and bodies of women through the character Ayah (Shanta). Her novel *Cracking India/ Ice-Candy Man* depicts the historical events of partition but presents it from these perspectives – Pakistani, Parsi and feminine versions of partition. Through this novel Sidhwa makes an honest attempt to articulate the emotional, mental sufferings of the victims of partition, especially the women victims. She also portrays how women have been saviours of other women.

Keywords: Anglophile, lingua franca, global lexicon, Indianised English, Communication.

Introduction

Partition seems to be the main thread that ties various themes in the novel. The novel explores Sidhwa's concern for the place of women in Pakistani society, human struggle for survival due to the communal riots and the sense of loss and dislocation due to partition. Jagdev Singh has rightly observed:

Ice-Candy Man is, so far, the only novel written by a Parsi on the theme of Partition. While the novel shows in the beginning the non-committal attitude of the Parsi community towards the flux in which the various communities of India found themselves in the beginning of the twentieth century, it distills the love-hate relationship of the Hindus and the Muslims through the consciousness and point of view of Lenny, an unusually precocious five-year-old Parsi girl. (166)

Ice-Candy Man represents the historical violence of partition from the perspective of the eight year old polio-stricken girl child Lenny. She belongs to a Parsi family settled in

Lahore. She is the child of an upper middle class Jamil. She finds her close companion in her Ayah. The novel weaves together the multiple narratives of betrayal, love, infidelity, violence, political chaos and turmoil, horrifying experiences based on Lenny as a witness to the events and conditions generated by the partition of the sub-continent. The story of the novel seems to be the actual fact which is based on the novelist Bapsi Sidhwa's childhood experiences as a witness to the events that extended forth during partition.

The novel actually opens with the picture of the pre-partition days, its communal harmony and progresses towards a violently changing domestic and social space. The novel commands attention and admiration on several counts. It is the second novel by a woman writer who deals with the theme of partition of India. The first novel by a woman writer that deals with the theme of partition of India is *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Hosain

Feminist critics have been unearthing the women writers whose expression has remained largely marginalized in the literary canons all over the world. The prominent characters in *Ice-Candy Man* are mostly women and at the centre of them is Lenny.

The caretaker of Lenny, the Ayah is always surrounded by Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and the Parsee admirers. The man from these communities always surround her. This hints at a Hindu-Sikh-Muslim communal harmony that was prevalent in the pre-independent days. During this time the news of partition disturbs the calm, quiet life of the inhabitants of the Punjab. People turn hostile towards each other. There is hatred and hostility even amidst the admirers of Ayah. The Hindus and Sikhs are betrayed by the Muslims. Everyone betray each other. Even Ayah is betrayed by the ice-candy man. The Muslim goondas of Lahore single out the Hindus and Sikhs from the city. They spare nobody, not even their close friends. The Parsees try to hide the Ayah in their house when the angry Muslim mob attack Lenny's house. But then comes the ice-candy man. He talks to Lenny and deceives her saying that he would save the life of Ayah. Lenny trusts in him and points out the house where Ayah is. Thus in a way Lenny too betrays Ayah through her ignorance. The betrayed Ayah is then taken charge of by the goondas who mistreat her. After this incident Ayah is not seen by anybody. She is found to be in Kotha at the end of the novel as the wife of the ice-candy man. Her name is changed as Mumtaz. Though she lives with the ice-candy man, she is not at all happy with him. Finally she leaves the ice-candy man and goes to live with her relatives in Amritsar. Thus at the end, we find that Ayah is separated from the treacherous ice-candy man.

Torn between the struggle of duty and self-fulfilment, women find their bodies to be the battle yard upon which traditional values and modernity come to friction. Lenny's

relationship with Ayah increases her understanding of gendered social norms. Female sexuality is exploited by men and this is evident through Ayah. Men compete with one another to win her favour. But Ayah gives importance to the one who satisfies her psychosexual needs. Ayah very well knows that she is an object of sex for male but she manipulates her sexuality for cheap things, like brushy clothes, food, nut, etc. Through her Lenny observes the difference between romantic love, lust, physical desire, etc.:

Sharbat Khan wears drawstring pantaloons so baggy they put to shame Masseur's Shalwar – and over them a flared tunic that flaunts ten yards of coarse white homespun. He cycles past our bedroom and Gita Shankar's rooms to the back of the house. Adi and I scoot after him.

Sharbat Khan parks his cycle against a tree and squatting by it waits for Ayah. Ayah comes.

Ayah is nervous in his presence, given to sudden movement; her goddess-like calm replaced by breath-stopping shyness. They don't touch. He leans across his bicycle, talking, and she shifts from foot to foot, smiling, ducking and twisting spherically. She has taken to sticking a flower in her hair, plucked from our garden. They don't need to touch. His presence radiates a warmth that is different from the dark heat generated by Masseur's fingers – the lightning strikes of Ice-candy-man's toes. (ICM 75)

The novel in general show how women suffer due to communal frenzy. Her Parsi women seems to be also the object of the male violence like the women of other communities. Sexuality and victimization of female sexuality is depicted through Ayah. The incidents of rape and violence on women in the novel *Ice-Candy Man* shows how women suffer due to communal fury. During partition violence is inflicted upon women. But in the Vedas and Puranas women's power is respected as mother figures are worshipped as Devi. Women are also seen as symbols of honour. In this novel *Ice-Candy Man* Sidhwa says that women's abuse, as sexual objects is a recurrent phenomenon. Her portrayal of Hira Mandi and ice-candy man substantiate the fact that women have always been mistreated sexually. Sidhwa also depicts a subversion of women's gendered roles in many incidents mainly through the character of Godmother. She is the person who rises above all the male and female characters in the novel. At the end of the novel she is the one who rescues Ayah and sends her family using her influence and contacts. She appears to be a feminist in her own right. She sharply rebukes the ice-candy man through her criticism of patriarchal exploitation.

You have permitted your wife to be disgraced! Destroyed her modesty! Lived off her womanhood! . . . And you talk of princes and poets? You're the son of pigs and pimps! You're not worth the two-cowries one throws at lepers! . . . I can have you lashed, you know? I can have you hung upside down in the Old Fort until you rot! . . . Get out of my sight, you whining haramzada! (*ICM* 249)

Sidhwa brings forth two strongest examples of feminine power in *Ice-Candy Man*. The female figures set out in their own capacity to fix the ruined lives of countless women by setting up camps to save bereft women and children. Lenny's mother, her Godmother and Electric Aunt play their part by one means or the other. Earlier to partition, Lenny's mother played the role of a dutiful wife, providing food and services to her husband every day need, rubbing his feet while he returned from work and looking through the household. Lenny's mother however starts to overthrow the patriarchal social order by saving and protecting the women and even by housing them during the events of partition. Lenny's mother ignores even the warnings of a male neighbour to her. She steps outside the role of a traditional woman and brings a change in the lives of women who have been abused and hurt.

Godmother's feminine power over ice-candy man is expressed not only by her verbal dominance, but also through her physical dominance and his corresponding physical subordination. Through her verbal and physical ascendancy over the ice-candy man, Godmother inverts traditional patriarchal power dynamics. Through her annexation of traditionally masculine power, Godmother succeeds in successfully disentangling Ayah from her marriage. Anyhow, with the closing success of Godmother over ice-candy man, the patriarchal power is overthrown. By fixing Godmother's victory at the end of the novel, Sidhwa makes a clear affirmation about the particular aspects of feminine power. When Ayah at the end expresses her desire for escape, the Godmother helps her to free from the clutches of ice-candy man. We also find that even her wish to attain freedom is realized only through Godmother

The women characters in Sidhwa's novels emancipate themselves by celebrating their female body and seek the help of women rather than men to empower their feminine strength. They learn the art of living and hence they succeed in liberating themselves from the unwanted limitations and restrictions thrust upon them by traditional, cultural and social systems. Generally one finds in Sidhwa's stories women who dare to go beyond the limitations set for them. Thus a writer like Bapsi Sidhwa wishes to build a world which is free of dominance and hierarchy a world that rests on the principles of justice and equality. Thus through Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* and through the women characters in the novel we

find women who have been as victims suffering a lot in the male-dominated society. But we also find women who try to come out of all these traumas and play an important role as saviours of other women.

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