



**Women and Pakistan: An Overview of Bapsy Sidhwa's
Ice Candy Man and *The Pakistani Bride***

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Abstract

Bapsy Sidhwa, the prominent Parsi-Pakistani writer, has earned accolades for portraying the conflicts, violence and pangs of the Partition of the Indian sub-continent in her fiction. A particularly crucial sub-theme in her novels is the portrayal of woman—their identity, subordination, sexual violence inflicted on them, and their ultimate fate in the shadow of Partition divide among warring groups and communities. Sidhwa herself— as a growing up child in Parsi enclosures in Pakistan—was a witness to the Partition holocaust, bloodshed and revenge in the years before and following the great watershed in sub continental history. The present research paper attempts to explore Sidhwa's sharp and incisive portrayal of Partition politics and violent aftermath presents itself as a literary discourse from the point of view of not only the author as a female, but also representing the women's psychological and spiritual situation.

Key Words: Pakistan, Partition, Sidhwa, Violence, Women.

Introduction

Before a brief overview of the two novels by Sidhwa— *Ice Candy Man* and *The Pakistani Bride*, it is useful to highlight from a multiple point of view the plight of women in the Partition period. The experience of violence remains the most dehumanizing aspect of Partition and the phenomenal extent of killing and arson distinguishes it as an event. Members of communities who a little while ago were living peacefully, ruthlessly indulged in looting, arson, shattering the interconnectedness in days and weeks. In case of women, violence proved a greater tragedy as they were subjected to the trauma of abduction; molestation and rape. They did not suffer only the sundering of relationships, lots of homes and families, but significantly, their bodies were made

territories where the trauma of Partition was enacted. Rape was used as a weapon, as a sport and punishment. While women feared the violation of their bodies the most, the male members of their families feared the shame and honour of the family and the larger community. Those women who survived rape and abduction were accused of bringing dishonour to the family. Some families even traded their young daughters in return for the safe transit of male members, Others, like the Ayah in *Ice candy Man*, who trusted in those close to them, were ironically made sexual targets by those very men, humiliating their self-respect in the worst possible sense . Women were subjected to colossal as ‘ colonies’, something that continues eve now, informing that the history of Partition "is a history of broken bodies and lives" (Khan 133)

Though nearly seventy plus years have passed, Partition remains a dark scar and left a deep and ragged fault lines which ran through individual lives and families. In case of women, the situation was made worse owing to the cultural taboos surroundings it. For those who had been severed from ancestral home and locations, rendered orphans (like Munni/Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride*) life became haunted with ugly nightmares for weeks and months, left at the mercy of the animalistic lust of males. The sensitive souls and spirits, emotions and feelings were subjected to untold misery and fear. The act of Partition was permanently etched, inscribed in the bodies of women by male members of the rival community. "They became the respective countries indelibly imprinted by the other" (Menon and Bhasin 43). Male savagery using women's body as an easy object to dishonour the other community forced members of the target community to kill their own women. The magnitude of this tragedy cannot be simply reduced to statistics as to how many rapes and killings took place. According to a view, the worst acts of sexual mutilation and dishonour during Partition "incorporate the more or less conscious wish to wipe out the hated enemy by eliminating the means of reproduction and the nurturing of infants" (Kakar 37).

The violence committed against women, indeed, adds another dimension to the madness and insanity which governed the acts committed by opposing groups on each other. While man is both a perpetrator as well as victims of violence, a woman does not commit violence on others. Both as victims and survivors of violence, women had to suffer not only the atrocities by men of rival community but also by their own community (Menon and Bhasin 37). Suffering varied kinds of violence, women were subjected not only to rape and molestation, dismemberment of their bodies, killing for honour, but also abduction and bartering for money. As *The Pakistani Bride* amply illustrates, men were imprisoned in their native/ tribal codes and so-called morality, hence women were looked upon as an extension of male identity and regarded as male property. Literature became a prison though which Partition events were looked at speculatively, and on

many occasions, with suspicion and irony. However in the case of women writers both from India and Pakistan—Partition was a reflection of their own experience, captured in a convincing manner. Regional barriers and linguistic differences are very often dissolved in women's writing on Partition, resulting in an organic, comprehensive view of the incidents. The literary response to Partition, particularly in terms of a focus on women's predicament, thus continues to contribute in a pressing sense, the overall assessment of the sub continental divide.

Bapsy Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man* (1988) unfolds and undertakes to scrape the painful wound with great precision. The author devices a tale of betrayal against the backdrop of the turbulent times that achieves a remarkable balance with the portrayal of ordinary life with day to day routines, and the large, emotionally charged communal/national issues. Sidhwa charts the transition for the old way of life, camaraderie and spontaneity of relations among people, to the rapid insularity and the latent communal hatred very sensitively. *Ice Candy Man* offers a dual perspective on Partition based on Pakistani, as also the Parsi point of view. The location of the narrative—Lahore—offers a multiple perspective as the city is inhabited by different communities Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Christians and Parsis. The narrator, significantly, is also a girl child, Lenny, an unusually precocious eight years old, who becomes a witness to the grim social change in those years of 1940s. She wonders, "can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where my house is? (Sidhwa 92). Among other things, Sidhwa has highlighted the composite culture which is still discernible in Lahore, despite the fact that the making of Pakistan is now a certainty. Lenny too has this experience when she visits with Imam Din, his village Pir Pindo, a Muslim majority village near Lahore. She finds Muslims and Sikhs sharing alike she concern over the trouble rocking the cities. As shall be focused upon a little later, the Hindu Ayah of the crippled Lenny presents herself as a symbol of composite culture of Lahore. A pivotal figure in the novel, she is surrounded by a group of multi religious admirers. The govt. home gardener Hari, the ice candy man, the masseur Sharbat Khan, Imam Din and the Zoo attendant Sher Singh. When the violent events roll ahead disrupting communal harmony. The group of Ayah's admirers slowly dwindles. Lenny, the observer—narrator provides the intimation of things to come through her nightmares. She compares herself with a Nazi child whose arm is sliced off, and she muses "I feel no pain. Only abysmal sense of loss and the chilling horror that no one is concerned by what's happening "(22). There nightmares of Lenny (and many more) as a girl-child presage the gruesome and gory pattern of things to emerge. In her second visit to Pir Pindo, the earlier atmosphere has transformed, symptomatic of the ensuing tension among communities. In this

sense surcharged with ill-will and discord, the country attains freedom. The altered reality is subtly denoted by Sidhwa through the innocent observation of Lenny:

The queen has gone! The space between the marble canopy and the marble platform is empty. A group of children playing knuckles, squat where the gunmetal queen sat enthroned. Bereft of her presence the structure looks unwomaned! (236)

Along with her brother Adil, Lenny suffers a deep impact through she is somewhat secure in his compressed Parsi household. She finds "the whole world is burning. The air on my face is so hot I think my flesh and clothes will catch fire..I start screaming; hysterically sobbing "(137). In many surrealistic experiences, Sidhwa shows Lenny's expression representing the surging violence within.

The novel further enlarges the Partition violence through the numbering details of violence committed against women. Women's sexuality symbolizes 'manhood'; as desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonor that it is to be avenged " yet with all its cruel logic, it is women ultimately who are most violently dealt with as consequences " (Menon and Bhasin (43-4). Sidhwa without doubt uses the women—as victim' s paradigm in the novel. Nobody suffers this more than the sensuous Ayah Shanta, a Hindu, working in a Parsi family. Her magic circle of admirers breaks up as communal tension rises with the dread of the 'other'. Her former lovers—admirers—rivals for her attention suddenly turn nasty and look upon each other with loathing. Lenny says, "People shrink dwindling into symbols" (11). The ice-candy Man is transformed from mischievous, lovable rogue into a seething monster whose exultation in watching the killings repels Lenny. He finally degenerates into an abominable villain when he betrays the Parsi trust and becomes instrumental in the abduction of Ayah by an unruly mob. He cannot retrieve his honour in the eyes of his beloved after betraying her. He demonstrates, through a genuine passion and love for the Ayah, yet has no chance of redeeming himself in her eyes. Ayah's abduction and subsequent rape highlights the unspoken and unspeakable horror of the degradation of the human mind. Sidhwa evokes the dread that one is meant to feel as the hooligans arrive for the Ayah. She is no longer the goddess they adore. Ice Candy Man, who was once even ready to kill if someone frowned at the Ayah, now connives to spirit her out of her hiding, betraying her trust. He watches jubilantly (a sign of male rapaciousness) as men drag her out with harsh hands, lift her into the cart. " Four men stand pressed against her propping her body upright, their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces" (183). Lenny knows that Ayah is irrevocably, deeply ashamed. They have shamed her. 'Not those men in carts—they were

strangers but Sharbat Khan and Ice-Candy Man and Imam Din and the cousin's cook and the butcher and other men she counted as her friends and admirers" (253-4). Their secret fantasy of possessing the Ayah is now suddenly let loose, and their passions can run amok with the blessings of society. It is a betrayal that Ayah can no longer live with; she refuses to stay married to Ice-Candy Man despite the counsel to make the best of a bad bargain. Women like Hamida, who is rescued by Lenny's mother, have been ordinary housewives and mothers before being abducted and raped. The Ayah is resolute to return to her roots, even if she is not accepted by the family in Punjab. Was it her fate? But for Lenny, it had less to do with fate than the will of men (214).

Women were forced to adopt a shelter forcibly with their so called 'protectors' or abductors; they were forced to consign their past as a forgotten memory. Such is the fate of the central figure Munni, later named Zaitoon, by her so-called foster father Qasim in *The Pakistani Bride*. Sidhwa unfolds the narrative, one of her passionately felt female experience of the Punjabi girl, against the backdrop of India's great historic divide. In the horrendous scenario of Partition, Munni is both a refugee and an orphan, little knowing that cultures of India and Pakistan were quite different so that she is trapped into moving to Lahore forcibly having no other option. Little does Munni know, having lost her parents, Sikandar and Zohra in the rebellions of 1947, the mental estrangement she was to suffer as a crisis of identity. Sidhwa very well understands the pain, anguish in one's being uprooted from home and bonds of culture. According to a view "A recurring theme in Partition literature, though evoked in distinct ways, is that of loss—the loss of homeland leading to a similarly irrevocable loss of identity (Khanna 106). Munni's story becomes that of forced exile, driven away to Pakistan, and compelled to accept her fate. Munni/Zaitoon becomes a mute victim in the hands of one who having pity on her, to accept an uncertain future. It is only later as she (Zaitoon) grows up that she realizes the difficulties of assimilating into a new culture; so much so that she is thrown into an alien environment one after the other—first into the Muslim milieu of Lahore, and later, the tribal racial codes of Pathan Culture of Kohistan, where she is forcibly married off by Qasim. Facing hostility from a number of angles, Zaitoon grows up under the scenes of violence and revenge in Lahore where Miriam Nikka Pehlwan's wife looks after her like a mother.

The Pakistani Bride brings together various strands of female experience, at times forcefully, at others, sensitively. Alongwith the ill-treatment meted out to Zaitoon in the rocky tribal Kohistan, Sidhwa shows a parallel female experience of Carol, an American woman married to Farukh, an engineer who faces his jealousy and inhuman behaviour. Sidhwa evokes with great

depth the existential dilemma of being a woman, be it the Punjabi Zaitoon, or the American Carol, both disillusioned with the harsh tribal code of the male dominated Kohistan where woman was treated no more than a commodity. In *The Pakistani Bride* multiple meanings underlie the sexual exploitation of Zaitoon by Sakhi on the one hand, and Carol's extramarital relation with Major Mushtaq, who is nothing short of a rapacious male exploiter. The novel ultimately presents a feminist crusade against a male dominated society, as well as rejecting an easy synthesis of opposing cultures whether Punjabi, Muslim, tribal or American—because culture and upbringing involves one's innate sense of emotional make-up. Zaitoon's tale of suffering indeed has its roots in Partition violence, for it is this violence and revenge that rob her of her parents and throw her into an alien world where values are questionable. Carol's tale, however, is different; she has married Farukh of her own accord, and love, but later realizes the futility of trusting and believing in both Farukh and Mushtaq. Zaitoon's case is distinct; she suffers humiliation in the first few days of marriage and wakes up to the brutish attitude of Sakhi who wishes to possess a wife like a chained animal. Her slow journey towards freedom, however arduous, is indeed heroic, notwithstanding the torture and agony she undergoes in her escapade in the hills, followed by hordes of tribesmen led by Sakhi, out to kill the betraying woman. Exhausted, hungry, injured and violated by two men on her way to a possible liberation, Zaitoon comes out, however, painfully from the threshold of death and elimination, presided over by the harsh tribal patriarchal codes. The novel closes with Mushtaq hoping that Zaitoon will be soon transported to Lahore by the Army towards a more secure future, whereas Carol, absolutely disillusioned and dismayed by the Kohistani treatment of women, decides to go back to America. Not having directly faced the gory violence of Partition, Zaitoon nevertheless represents as a woman the fighting spirit of a subaltern, as a weak and crushed human being. Sidhwa, in promising a new opening for Zaitoon, provides an alternative to the endless misery suffered by women at the hands of male perpetrators, both in the Partition period and beyond, so that the author's changed ending of *The Pakistani Bride* transforms women's negative experience to a new possibility of regaining a lost identity and selfhood.

Conclusion

An important aspect of the Partition upheaval is the effect it had on the lives of Women. Urvashi Butalia says in *The Other Side of Violence: Voices from the Partition of India*: "I knew by now that the history of Partition was a history of deep violation —physical and mental—for women". (Butalia131). Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) highlights strongly the pain that they underwent on their past, present and future were sucked into a vortex that changed their lives irrevocably. The way women, girls were orphaned in The Partition killings with nowhere to stay

or go, became a turning point in their future lives, often left to the mercy of others—of their own, or of other communities—to pull them wherever they wanted; in this case the males. Bapsy Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* catalogues the mutation in the women' s psyche with remarkable clarity.

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