



Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*: A Bildungsroman Presenting the Gynocentric View of Partition of India

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Abstract – Bapsi Sidhwa is a Pakistani feminist writer of Gujrati Parsi Zoroastrian origin with many acclaimed novels at her credit. The New York Times called her “Pakistan’s finest English language novelist.” She authored several novels including ‘Cracking India’, ‘The Crow Eaters’, ‘An American Brat’, ‘The Pakistani Bride’ and ‘Water’.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s ‘Ice-Candy Man’ presents Pakistani-Parsi perspective on the Partition of India. *Ice-Candy-Man*, is a bildungsroman that depicts the story of Lenny’s awakening into sexual awareness and her awakening to history. Lenny’s story goes parallel with political history of India. The first person narration employed in the novel allows the author to naively comment on human relationships against the backdrop of Partition.

Keywords – feminist perspective, narrative technique, bildungsroman, partition, Parsi-Pakistani-feminist point of view of Partition.

In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa employs first person narration. *Ice-Candy-Man*, is a bildungsroman that depicts the story of Lenny’s awakening into sexual awareness and her awakening to history. Lenny’s story goes parallel with political history of India.

Personal history merges with political history through the story of Ayah. Thus, Sidhwa connects the personal with the national concerns and expands the boundary of her fictional world. The first-person narration by a Parsi-eight year old girl child serves

manifold purposes in the novel. By employing a girl child narrator, Sidhwa presents Parsi-Pakistani-feminist point of view of Partition. Sidhwa's narrative intends to incorporate the marginalized culture outside the mainstream as a part of history. For this, Lenny suits her purpose. Lenny is marginalized in more than one way. She is a disabled girl child who belongs to micro-minority community of Parsi.

The history of Lenny coincides with the chronology of Partition of subcontinent, India. In the words of V.L.V.N. Narendra Kumar –

“In Lenny's consciousness, there is a gradual and purposeful shift from scepticism to faith. It is a tale of 'arrival', a true bildungsroman in which Lenny learns to view the world from a heuristic perspective. Her enlarged consciousness results from her experiment with truth of which Ayah is the victim. Lenny's passage from a state of bliss to the adult world of pains and pleasures constitutes the cone of the narrative. The progression of her mind is thus a positive movement in which she reaches the plenitude of her being.”¹

Being an eight year old girl, Lenny naively comments on human relationships against the backdrop of Partition. “The naivete of the child permits her to look at things from unconventional angles. She lacks prejudices - the hatred and biases one learns as one grows up. Her innocence gives her the strength to raise doubts and ask questions which cannot be comfortably answered by any grown-up, and also to reach at conclusions intuitively.”²

Through Lenny, Sidhwa is able to portray diverse cultures and different epochs. Lenny's parents belong to affluent class and through them we come to know the Parsi and the British point of view. Lenny has access to people of all ethnicities and religions. She has access to a wide variety of viewpoints through her Ayah. Ayah's friends belong to different ethnic groups - Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus. Their debate over Partition helps Lenny to formulate her own views. Lenny's visit to Pir Pindo with Imam Din introduces her to Ranna and his family and Lenny depicts how communal virus affected and destroyed rural folks too. Thus, first person narration enabled Sidhwa to present multi-dimensional perspective on Partition. Vanashree Tripathy aptly remarks that Sidhwa's narrative – “captures a vast human contact socio - political configurations, ideologies, spiritual longings, righteousness within and without in un-theorized, un-formulated idiom, like a camera it impartially registers the subversive dynamics of time.”³

Ice-Candy-Man is, so far, the only novel written by a Parsi on the theme of Partition. Lenny, being a Parsi, captures the Parsi ethos, and the cataclysmic event of Partition is viewed through the prism of Parsi sensitivity. Lenny, a precocious Parsi girl, analyzes the changing communal pattern through the non-partisan Parsi point of view, which is likely to be unbiased. Lenny lives in the extended Parsi family - with her Mother, Father, Electric Aunt, Godmother, Slavesister, Col. Barucha, Dr. Mody. Through these characters the Parsi ethos is built. The Parsi dilemma whether to leave Lahore or support the new nation, Pakistan, is discussed in detail. Colonel Barucha at the Jashan meeting speaks to his co-religionists –

“If we’re stuck with the Hindus, they shall usurp our business under our noses and sell our grandfathers in the bargain : if we’re stuck with the Muslims they’ll convert us by the sword ! And God help us if we’re stuck with the Sikhs !”⁴

Colonel Barucha warns – “There may be not one but two – or even three – new nations ! And the Parsis might find themselves championing the wrong side if they don’t look before they leap.” He suggests them to remain where they are – “Let whoever wishes, rule ! Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian ! We will abide by the rule of their land.”⁵

Sidhwa essentially presents the Pakistani perspective of the division of the country. Indian writers in English fictionalized the theme of Partition in their novels and has a long heritage of fictionalising the Partition since the first novel *Train to Pakistan* written by Khushwant Singh in 1956. *Ice-Candy-Man* is the first novel on the theme of Partition by a Pakistani writer and Sidhwa had to make new beginnings. She – “was writing in what was essentially vacuum. Hence it was necessary for her to establish her political credentials, proclaim her cultural allegiance.”⁶

In order to establish her Pakistani identity, Sidhwa diplomatically handles the narrative. Knowing and viewing things through the girl-child helps Sidhwa to pass judgements as naive observer. In order to establish her Pakistani identity, Sidhwa caricatures Gandhi and eulogises Jinnah. The voice of a child narrator helps in presenting Gandhi ironically.

Ice-Candy-Man presents gynocentric view on Partition. Being a feminist text, *Ice-Candy-Man* shows women performing and controlling the action. The gynocentric view of reality makes the novel different from scores of other novels on the theme. In the male

discourses on Partition, the men are in command and they occupy the centre of the stage. Sidhwa's view as a woman makes the whole rendering altogether different. Female characters in *Ice-Candy-Man* pulsate with life. Male characters are dull and devoid of vitality. Male characters are perpetrators of violence and responsible for the victimization of women. Thus, Ayah is betrayed, raped and abducted by her male friends. Lenny's father indulges in debauchery and is not loyal to his wife. Cousin also asks Lenny for physical favours to which she strongly resists. Women fight against the victimization and they are actively involved in good deeds. Lenny's mother and Electric Aunt help the Hindu refugees who want to cross the border by supplying them petrol. Ayah refuses to accept her fate as the wife of Ice-Candy-Man and manages to go to Amritsar. Godmother, towering high among women protagonists, rescues Ayah and secures her to refugee camp. Women characters are sparkling with wit, will-power and social commitment – "Thus it is the women who undertake the risky job of saving lives in danger and the fact acquires significance in the fictional scheme of things."⁷

Sidhwa also deals with the theme of suppression of women by women through two sub-plots. Machoo maltreats her daughter Papoo and marries her off to an old man. Godmother, a woman with strong will-power, and social commitments, shabbily treats her younger sister, Slavesister. Despite Slavesister's slave-like obedience, Godmother frequently humiliates her. Sidhwa conveys that exploitation and manipulation are not restricted to the male-female relationship. "The feminists, it seems, are being made alive to the dangers of replicating the patriarchal principle and thus perpetuating the class of the exploiters and the exploited amongst themselves. This makes Sidhwa's credo broader, fairer and more responsive to the human condition."⁸

The novel has so many sub-themes that it lends the novel an episodic structure. With the main plot of tragic tale of Ayah and her friends, there is sub-plot of Ranna and his village, sub-themes of Papoo and Machoo, Rosie and her family, Godmother and slavesister episode, Father and Mother relationship. The skillfully interwoven plots give each other substantial meaning.

Some critics criticised Sidhwa's narrative technique and doubted that behind the child's voice, the author conveys her own adult thoughts. Vanashree Tripathy remarks – "The shrewd but sensitive rendering of the part by girl child - its geography of scars, its history of pain - raises doubts about the credibility of the projection of the child's 'point of

view'. One may find within the child's point of view a mature woman's perceptions or authorial omniscient point of view permeating and overlapping and as a result, a volitional blend of innocence and experience"⁹

K. Nirupa Rani also pointed out that – “It is an adult that speaks through the child's memory and keeps the reader on guard and creates a sense of impressions that the child is capable of reminiscing.”¹⁰

In fact, Sidhwa employs two narrative voices – the first is that of Lenny, a child and the other is that of authorial omniscient narrative voice. The implied adult narration tries to objectify the past experiences of Lenny's childhood. The adult narration also informs about happenings, like political events and author's opinion about it, which is beyond the capacity of a child's rendering. Sidhwa herself seems to agree to the presence of adult-author in the narrative. In the following passage, she hints how Lenny begins to be a story-teller, an author herself –

“And as the years advance, my sense of inadequacy and unworth advances. I have to think faster - on my toes as it were ... offering lengthier and lengthier chatter to fill up the infernal time of Father's mute meals.

Is that when I learn to tell tales ?” ¹¹

Ice-Candy-Man is a novel with strong autobiographical elements. In an autobiographical fiction, the first person narrator is the character of the author with varying degrees of accuracy. The narrator is still distinct from the author and must behave like any other character and any other first-person.

Sidhwa, while employing the first person narration, is aware of the fact that she may gain in realism but lose in character-analysis. The girl-narrator, Lenny can only observe the other characters from outside : she cannot give an insight into their thoughts and feelings, except in so far as these are apparent in their words and actions. Lenny is a character, a participant in the fiction, who must follow all of the rules of being a character, even during her duties as narrator. For her to know anything, she must experience with her senses, or to be told about it. She can interject her own thoughts and opinions, but not those of any other character, unless clearly told about those thoughts.

The limitation of the first-person narration is that the wide territory of experience of other characters in the novel remains unexplored, and the depth of their feelings remains undelved. Thus, the reader regrets for not knowing the points of view of Ayah, IceCandy-Man and many other characters in the novel.

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