

# Periodic Research

## Acceptance/Existence: A Postcolonial Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice CandyMan* (*Cracking India*)

### Abstract

Fiction portrays the society as it sees. It continuously influences and is influenced by the life style of that society in which it is born. A writer portrays an ideal world and does not ignore the changes in the society, synchronic or diachronic, instead focuses on the improvement of the existing circumstances. Through this process the fiction writer is able to penetrate into the soul of society. The representation of women has been the most challenged aspect as women had been a subdued and subaltern group. The present paper will study the problem faced by women in patriarchal setup and their forced acceptance to exist.

**Keyword:** Postcolonial, Feminism, Partition, Hegemony, Patriarchy, Political Conflict.

### Introduction

Postcolonial literature attempts to uncover the colonial ideologies by feminizing, marginalizing and dehumanizing the natives as 'the other'. Their representation relies upon a series of binary opposition as White/ Black, Mature/Immature, Progressive / Primitive, Civilized / Barbaric and European/ Native. The Postcolonial studies analyze the link between this representation and political practices in general. Such studies of 1980s and 1990s specially question the nationalist resistance to colonialism and seek to understand how oppression, resistance and adaptation have occurred during colonial times. With a passage of time, issues of modernization, development, democracy, displacement, gender, and even race have been stressed upon.

The voice of feminism is more perceptible and prominent in Pakistani fiction. The writers belonging to this branch have tried to portray women and their issues. Third world women are depicted as victims of male control. According to Mohanty, Third world women, like western women, are produced as subjects in historically and culturally specific ways by the societies in which they live and act as agents. Postcolonial fiction portrays the injustice, oppression, and exploitation by the colonizers and how the lives of women were doubly affected by the process of colonizing. Young says, 'Postcolonial Feminism is certainly concerned to analyze the nervous conditions of being a woman in a post colonial environment, whether in the social oppression of the post colony or the metropolis. Its concern is not in the first place with individual problems but with those that affect the whole communities' (115). Pakistani fiction is the continuation and extension of the fiction produced under the colonial rulers in India. As such it has inherited all the pros and cons of the fiction in India before the end of the colonial rule in Indo-Pak. The writers have portrayed the lives of Pakistani women under the imposing role of religious, social, and economic parameters. These roles are partly traditional and partly modern day realities that women face. They are portrayed mostly as round characters, which are initially bound and restrained by the chain of customs and tradition, constantly developing and changing. They are also possessed by the demons of the social taboos which are man-made and used to control the lives of the women. Writers show that women find themselves on the many horned dilemma while going through such circumstances. They are colonized and declared to be the 'others' and silent majority (subalterns). The Muslim and Hindu religion further contributed in making these taboos even stronger. The postcolonial men re-colonized the bodies and minds of their women as a reaction and in an effort to preserve their cultural values. Women, as in the past, were supposed to carry the burden of cultural values as an offshoot of post colonialism. But the same has brought also modern day realities to the forefront along with a new consciousness for



**Geeta Phogat**

Asst Prof, Dept of English  
BPSMV, Khanpur Kalan,  
Sonipat



**Shalini Attri**

Asst Prof, Dept of English  
BPSMV, Khanpur Kalan,  
Sonipat

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women. But all this ignited the process of mental freedom though the bodies were still colonized by men.

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man* (*Cracking India* as named abroad) depicts a broad cross-section of Lahore society both before and after the city became a part of Pakistan. This approach to the novel, one that treats it as a quasi-historical record, necessitates an acknowledgment of arguments about Partition historiography. *Cracking India* as a piece of fiction that seeks to represent the psychological and social realities of a specific place at a specific time (Lahore in 1942–1948), and an attention to the representational strategies that allow the text to accrue meaning. Further one can find here a story about love lost, trust deceived and the subjugation of the mind by deliberately subjugating the body. The novel is also about redemption, intolerance, shrugging of passivity duplicity of colonialism.

This paper will analyze the impact of colonization on *Ayah* also named as Shanta, in a South Asian native created by Bapsi Sidhwa in her *Ice Candy Man* (1988). Sidhwa portrays the traumatic events of partition through the eyes of an eight years old Parsi girl, Lenny, from Lahore, who is the uninvolved observer of the systemic violence of nation making. She belongs to the minority Zoroastrian community, neither Hindu nor Muslim nor Sikh but a wealthy Parsi family suffering the trauma in the most sensational way, through the loss of friends, neighbors, and servants. Lenny is specially privileged by her household due to a crippled leg from the after effects of Polio. She cherishes herself for this profuse separation from all other children and is looked after from morning to night by her Ayah (Shanta), named only once in passing but referred through the narrative by her function i.e. of servant. Ayah is a young woman beautiful in body and spirit generating a group of men of all persuasions and occupations, flocking around her hoping to be meted a favor or glance from her. During the riots Lenny's ayah is abducted and sold by her so called lover Ice candy man also called Dilnawaj, her Muslim suitor. Later she is married to the same person and gets her name changed as Mumtaz. Such a portrayal by Sidhwa has pushed her female character leading to a treatment like a pawn under the rampant patriarchal hegemony. Sidhwa effectively portrays women as a commodity used as per convenience of the man.

The portrayal of women by Sidhwa can be seen as a reaction against the negative portrayals of the local culture by the colonizers. Exploring the themes of struggles for independence, cultural conflict, displacement and feminism in their local settings was not accidental but a deliberate phenomenon. Before British colonialism, for example, life of Indian Muslim women was segregated and limited to the small world in which they lived and died, usually without making any significant mark in the society. The story of Ayah is exemplary: like her, thousands of women were abducted and/or raped by men of the "enemy" community during the chaotic

months before and after Partition. The colonial British state was turning into postcolonial nation-states having its own borders, structures of order and power hierarchies. Ayah was raped during the ontological condition of the newly divided territories: bodies committing crimes upon other bodies, and body of Ayah does not speak. The violence practiced upon her body eludes the story. Ayah, as the subaltern female figure of Sidhwa's narrative, leads us directly to Spivak's path-breaking question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Focusing on the figure of Ayah, the writer analyzes the ways she inhabits the subaltern subject position and how her abduction and recovery participate in the contested ideologies of Partition history. The canvas of the novel is expansive whereas Ayah's story is symbolic of the power that cannot be questioned. It gives us a multi-contextual dimension of Ayah's abduction with a layered view of Lahore society.

She is -- not unlike India itself -- a symbol of larger-than-life reality, truly 'perplexing'. Lenny also notices that, 'beggars, holy men, hawkers, cart-drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists' lust after her. Says she:

"The covetous glances Ayah draws educate me. Up and down, they look at her. Stub-handed twisted beggars and dusty old beggars on crutches drop their poses and stare at her with hard, alert eyes. Holy men, masked in piety, shove aside their pretenses to ogle her with lust. Hawkers, cart-drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists turn their heads as she passes, pushing my pram with the unconcern of the Hindu goddess she worships." (195)

Ayah, who at the outset is just a maid at the Sethi residence looking after infant Lenny, all of a sudden is swept off her cozy corner into a whirlpool of political upheaval. She is forced to change from being an ordinary domestic help to a public entertainer in a matter of few months. What shocks and saddens the reader is the coarse treatment she meets for no fault of hers. Here's someone who was till now secure, in the next minute rendered helpless. She becomes just a puppet in the hands of a fate worse than death. She is just an example of the several millions of displaced, looted and raped Hindu and Muslim women during one of the harshest political phases in the history of the subcontinent. In the course of the novel it seems apparent that Ayah, as she is sobbing to masseur's proposal to marry her, says, "I'm already yours," (201) thus echoing its more radical poignant undercurrent that she was already lost.

Lenny herself is a privileged child and is thus a doubly "neutral" narrator, by virtue of her age and ethno-religious affiliation. While her perspective is that of the upper-class child, her attachment, both physical and mental, to her Ayah allows her (and the reader) access to the working-class world of cooks, gardeners, masseurs and ice-cream sellers. Thus, the novel belies its own opening statement that Lenny's "world is compressed" (11) for Lenny roams well beyond the boundaries of her own Parsi family and community. She is engaged socially with a wide variety of people, and one striking theme is the

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pervasiveness of sexual predation and violence. The patterns of Lenny's life reveal the physical and psychological aggression motivated by male sexual dominance. The society during pre-Partition – untainted by communal conflict—was still immersed with violence, particularly directed against women. Thus what occurred during the partition was not an anomaly but merely a re-creation of an already familiar phenomenon. Even Lenny is not safe from the condition of being 'the second sex' (Beauvoir). She finds herself fending off the unwanted attentions of her older cousin who fumbles with her despite all prohibitions and succeeds on occasion to touch her private parts. Lenny, clearly a mimic of Ayah, learns lessons and sees the world through her maidservant's eyes, experiencing a similar fate. As the child's body turns into a woman, she finds about her position of being the 'other'.

Sudhir Kakar, perhaps the most well known psychoanalyst in *India Today*, has noted the connection between social mores and sexual violence in his book *The Colours of Violence*. He discusses the empirical evidences to suggest that the greater the legitimization of violence in some approved areas of life, the more is the likelihood that force will also be used in other spheres where it may not be approved. Kakar's analysis details neatly with the patriarchal world that Sidhwa depicts, a world in which male aggression, especially against women, is ever-present. The ruptures or cracks are evident in the examples of violence given in the text. The novel highlights that external events can unleash the animalistic characteristics in humans, so much so that they are blinded by prejudice and selfishness and even use religion to justify their beastly activities. Almost all the males are apathetic and indulged in destructive violence.

Ayah's story focuses attention on the abductions of women as the symbolic epicenter of communal violence and various episodes clearly describe how sexual objectification and exploitation of women was an accepted and routine affair in the society. In the beginning Ayah is a sexually empowered woman, deploying her sensuality to rule over a circle of religiously-diverse suitors. But later on she is overpowered. It is precisely the pervasiveness and habitual acceptance of sexual violence that eventually leads to the proliferation of violent acts enacted on the bodies of women. Ayah is, presumably, coerced into accepting Ice candy man as husband once the kidnapping and rapes have left her no option. After Ayah's abduction in February 1948, the Sethi family tracks her down and when they have "arranged to have her sent to Amritsar" where she has family (262), Ice-candy man marries her in order to install her as a "dancing girl" in Lahore's red-light district. Ice candy man by his sexual control over Ayah exposes a man's desire to subjugate a woman thus suggesting another way of proving the superiority of one religion over the other. The woman's body is reduced to the token status of a tool in man's articulation of identity and assertion. When Godmother and Lenny finally meet Ayah/Shanta/Mumtaz, she declares that she is "not alive" (274), and begs them to "get [her] away from" her husband (275). Instead of becoming the nexus for a diverse community the body is decorated and marched in public, or in a place like Hira Mandi where the distance between public and private sphere collapses. Shanta wants to flee

from here to there, but where. There also she is not sure of her future. Shanta's eyes too are symbolic as they have a dual function: marking both the dead and the exiled from this massacre of history called the partition of British India. Dead while living and exiled from the familiar in terms of home, labor and love, Shanta's eyes provide the 'unsayable' alternate history, the 'dead' writing history with their absence.

The account of Sidhwa's fiction regarding feminism is never complete unless we refer to the feminism portrayed in the novel *The Ice-Candy Man* (1988). Women's bodies were twice colonized, first by the British and then by the men in the Indo-Pak subcontinent, as suggested by Sara Suleri (1989). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also claims that women in the subcontinent were simply a silent majority whom she termed as subalterns. According to her, this aspect of women in India had become even stronger because of the impact of colonialism (Morton 2000). Pre-partition-Shanta is the object of attraction for many Muslim and non-Muslim men, especially masseur. But post-partition-Shanta is only a ravaged and molested woman who has nothing to fall back upon other than selling her body as a dancing woman. None of her lovers could save her from becoming so. Shanta is not one woman but a representative of thousands of Hindu, Muslim and other minority women who were raped, killed, and cut to pieces because of the aftermaths of partition. But with her courage and determination she survives and ultimately reaches her family in Amritsar. Women are the ones who have to bear the impact of the wrong doings done by the males. These men are seen violating the rights of women throughout the novel.

Sidhwa pays particular attention to the severe price paid by women in absolute patriarchy, as is her stated goal by writing a novel in which a woman, in the figure of the Ayah, pays the highest price for men's wars and nationalistic endeavors. On the whole, the women are a disenfranchised class. Although women do inhabit a sisterhood, but it remains unnoticed by the social system. Only in the brutal dehumanization after death are they allowed to exist freely. Is it existence or acceptance of the fate of subservient class i.e. women?

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