

FEMININE ASPECTS IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S THE ICE-CANDY- MAN

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Abstract

*Bapsi Sidhwa remains a potent voice among the modern feminist writers. She is the only Parsi woman writer to write on the theme of Partition. Bapsi Sidhwa through her extremely absorbing and most important work, *The Ice-Candy-Man*, seeks to contribute to the progress of change that has already started all over the world, involving reconsideration of women's rights and status and a radical restructuring of social thought. In *The Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa wants to have a world free from dominance (patriarchy) and hierarchy, a world which is based on the principles of justice and equality and is truly human. In this novel Sidhwa represents a series of female characters who have survived in a chaotic time of 1947 in India, which can be registered as a period of worst religious riots in the history of humankind.*

Key Words: *Feminism, partition, justice and equality, women's rights, suppression.*



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The Feminist Movement of the 1960s heavily influenced and ignited literary minds of South Asia, chiefly the women writers. Bapsi Sidhwa is one such literary figure, whose concerns for women find portrayal in her novels. Her protagonists are mainly women who essentially win against their male counterparts in their struggle for survival and honour. *The Ice-Candy- Man*, written in similar mode is a sort of feminist discourse set in the background of partition. It has been effectively rendered through an eight year old crippled girl, living in the midst of, yet apart

from the rising tensions among the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs during the Partition of the Indian sub-continent. The protagonist of the novel is an eight year old girl called, Lenny, with a crippled leg.

The novel encompasses various female characters of varied temperaments. The reactions and responses of the female characters of *The Ice-Candy- Man* are resonant with audacity and determination. The characters of Lenny, Godmother, Ayah, and Lenny's mother are ornate and have been well worked out. If there is a character of Ayah, an embodiment of motherhood, love, compassion, tolerance and strong will power; then, there is also a character of Hamida, who is also a 'fate-smitten' lady like Ayah but compromises and accepts the destiny and does not strive to go back to her family as she feels, "What can a sorrowing woman do but wail?"

Broadly speaking feminist is not only a woman who raised voice against men but it is also an agitation for men and a true concern for women within one's heart and mind. If there is a cry for "fallen-women", Lenny gives her ear to it, irrespective of her young age. After the pathetic incident Lenny couldn't forgive herself as her mind. She is completely preoccupied. Taking in view the feminist perspective, she punishes her "truth-infected tongue", for three days. She behaves deliriously for Ayah, Lenny says, "I punish it with the rigorous scouring from my prickling tooth brush until it is sore and bleeding" (184).

The character of Ayah is a grotesque depiction of female psyche that can be interpreted as reaction against the masculinity. She is circumscribed by the "patriarchal restraint". Ayah is surrounded by her male admirers of different religions. Her gestures of sexual warmth are expressed in the novel with a vitality that vivifies her relationship with her male admirers. She has a dynamic character that exuberantly controls their emotions. She deals with them maturely and does not allow anybody to take advantages of her.

Ayah is no more a petit bourgeois, because she is independent and earns her living. She not only moves out of the city for a job but also carries altogether a different outfit of the place where she works. She is sensible and a prudent lady who knows the advantages of compromising at times when required. She gives a rational explanation to her thought, "do you know what salaries ayahs who were Punjabi clothes get? Half the salary of the Goan ayahs who wear saris!" (29).

The Ice-Candy-Man is a saga of partition that deals with the theme of socio political environment and how this environment affects the lives of people and moreover it leads to the

downfall of partition victim Ayah and the way she confronts the trauma and sufferings. The women were brutally raped and left morally and physically wounded and the men beheaded or cold-bloodedly murdered. Sidhwa also makes a comment on the victimization of women in society and provides equal space to communal violence on both sides of the Indo-Pakistan border. The sad fate of Lenny's ayah amid Lahore's communal frenzy, the stories of rape victims, the descriptions of Lahore's red light area, the Hira Mandi where women walk at three O' clock in the evening as if they've just awoken from sleep, amidst the half-naked men at flower stalls and hawkers carelessly joking at them; and the tragic child marriage of her servant's abused teenage daughter Papoo, who is wilfully married off to an elderly and cynical dwarf, who comes to his own marriage in a drugged condition, and is left in a stupor throughout the pompous affair; are all woven into the narrative to make a chilling statement on women's lives. Sidhwa has highlighted the females rapes after the riots and she also depicted the violence on women from men .They are always victimized by the males. Sidhwa has given feminist touch to her character that moves forward despite many hurdles.

By observing the life of many women she understands the limitations associated with women lives in patriarchal society which brings us to the point that women novelists in the sub-continent have often shied away from express political themes and have been more comfortable by highlighting the problems faced by women in a patriarchal society, within or outside a feminist framework. Sidhwa states that women are always marginalized and she always protest against it. Lenny's mother is another significant female character who conforms to the traditional image of a Fidel, faithful and serving wife who seems to be capable only of humoring things out of her husband. Displacement is a natural condition of women, given the social fabric, the centrality of marriage and the relocation in space and culture that accompanies it. Females don't have to kill baby boys. Just not nurture them. Females are forced to 'birth' baby boys, but beyond that, a female's physical actions are her own. Males will die without the constant infusion of female energy that they get from our wombs and from our lives. They are perfectly welcome to take the male infants from the hands of the midwife, and what they do with it is from that point is their decision. Females need not be emotionally and intellectually invested in a male future.

The novel plays a key role in Bapsi's oeuvre intertwining her Pakistani identity, with her Parsi roots, giving voice to the guiding preoccupations of her work: the fate of the dispossessed

and the damned of the earth; the onslaught of revenge and violence to which the women of 'enemy' communities are subjected to in the name of faith and nation. It also brings forth the Parsis' moral position when faced with the religious and ethnic dilemmas of their Muslim, Sikh and Hindu neighbours. Lenny's mother and electric-aunt get themselves involved in the mighty task of helping the refugees from India and those leaving Lahore, by providing them with smuggled ration petrol and other amenities, and rescuing kidnapped women and sending them back to their families or to the Recovered Women's Camps. The abduction of Ayah leaves them dumbfounded; nevertheless they resume the task of finding her, in whatever condition, and rehabilitating her.

The analysis of *Ice Candy Man* shows women characters to be strong enough and live life of their own. They are not suppressed. In the patriarchal set up males are superior and females are considered inferior. All the good qualities are associated with males and all the weaknesses with female. But in *Ice Candy Man* all the strong qualities are presented by female characters. The main character of novel is a young, who is lame. Through this handicap child it is presented that women can be creative even with disabilities. She takes pen and narrates the story of partition. In general notion writing is the characteristic of males and women has to perform domestic tasks. By making Lenny narrator, Sidhwa lends weight to the feminine perspective.

Simon de Beauvior holds the opinion that mothers are responsible to inculcate the sense of submission in women. Lenny learns that marriage of a girl is of utmost importance to their parents. Independence and self identity is for men. As a child she enjoys the love of her mother and the protection of her father but the story of *Ice Candy Man*'s love for Ayah destroys her concept of love. The meeting of Godmother and *Ice Candy Man* open her eyes to the wisdom of truth and compassion. She watches women being rapped and men turning to beasts. Women including Ayah become prey of men. Lenny was shocked to see the human mind corrupted so easily. Men were declaring superiority over each other by sexually assaulting women. Shashi Deshpande states that rape is a violation of trust between two people and a greatest violence.

Though Sidhwa uses the medium of English in writing, which indubitably puts her in the elite circle of writers and readers, she has been able to give voice to the marginalized sections of human society, by rigorously questioning the histories and assumptions of contemporary Pakistani society and posing a counter-voice to the dominant patriarchal narrative which has subdued women to a large extent. Nevertheless her austere attack on a number of prevalent

beliefs is softened by her, candid and wry humour. She uses it as a tool to criticize without causing much offence in her novels. Sidhwa provides an alternative perspective to the predominant narrative by subverting the roles assigned to female characters, thus recreating women's sense of history and belonging. Her women protagonists refuse to accept the narrow and constricting roles assigned to them by society and conventional notions. Sidhwa more often than not, voices the pain and injustice endured by the victims in terms of modesty and honour, who are made to suffer in silence and whose protestations go unheeded as Gayathri Spivak has rightly observed, "Between patriarchy and imperialism...the figure of the woman disappears...into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the third-world woman caught between tradition and modernization."

In the colonial context, the image of woman as nation or culture brings out both her power and helplessness simultaneously marshalling and emasculating her range of control. Arguments for women education and emancipation were based on the logic that educated women make better wives and mothers; yet are reminded not to overstep their bounds and usurp authority from men, making them companions and help-mates to their men and yet as completely subservient to the male of the household. The idea is to improve the lot of the woman, yet protect her from becoming 'decultured', as a result of too much of education.

The patriarchal concept of male responsibility in controlling and providing for the family was mimicked by the colonial state which cast itself onto supposedly serving the colonized subject. However now the familial vocabulary extended beyond the relationship between state and subject, it shouldered the onus of expressing racial and cultural relations as well. The Colonizer became a patriarchal archetype assuming the task of looking after the crude, underdeveloped, undisciplined civilization. With the colonizer at the Centre, the colonized man felt the need to reassert and strengthen his superiority within the familial vocabulary. It resulted in the requirement of women to refresh their subservience, even though she was provided with a certain freedom and education. It is here that her silence becomes manifest.

A prominent topic of debate in post-colonial theory is the practice of 'sati', the traditional practice of the immolation of the widow in her husband's pyre, in the conventional patriarchal society. Though the woman is the subject of debate, nowhere is her subjectivity discernible- the widow herself is not discussed anytime, her ordeal and pain. Despite their differences and mutual rivalry, the colonial and indigenous patriarchies bonded together to assign a 'place' to native

women whose prospect of real freedom presented a frightening picture to them. Those who dared to break the codes of silence and subservience became the objects of extreme hostility, which succeeded in silencing the bold. This inability of the native woman to articulate is emblematic of her difficulty to recover her voice steeped in oppression, the absence of a 'space' from which she can render her voice. Way down the hierarchy she finds it difficult to challenge those who rule the system.

The subordination of women to men in all cultural domains in a pervasively patriarchal civilization is a characteristic trait which results from a female internalization of the male superiority. In the process, the feminine in society has come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, timid, emotional and conventional. Such notions are further reinforced in the marginal and subordinate characterizations of females, in highly-regarded writings in literature, complementing masculine desires and enterprises. Such works implicitly addressed to male readers, solicit women to identify against themselves, making her 'the other', an alien outsider much alike the colonial suppression of the man of the sub-continent.

Sidhwa's women characters in *The Crow Eaters*, *The Bride*, *The Ice-Candy-Man* and *An American Brat* are all conventional figures of submissive nature. Yet she is careful to draw an expansion and realization of their rights as inhabitants of a common earth. Thus, Sidhwa has highlighted the process of change that has already started all over the world in order to claim women's rights and status through *The Ice-Candy-Man*. Though the Ice-Candy-Man is masculine, yet the novel is about women's lives viewed through a woman's eye.

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