

BAPSI SIDHWA'S ICE-CANDY-MAN: AN AUTHENTIC PRESENTATION OF A TRUE HUMAN BEING

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ABSTRACT

Many writers of South-Asian descent have written about the traumatic experience of partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and from their writings we come to know the violent event of partition that constitute history. Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan*, Attia Housain's *Sunlight On a Broken Column*, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, Manto's *Toba Tek Singh*, and Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* are some such examples that give us insight into the religious or racial atrocities, public frenzy, communal hatred and exploitation of women. Bapsi Sidhwa, a new and important voice in the world of Commonwealth fiction, is best known in India for her book *Ice-Candy-Man*, which was later made into a film, 1947:Earth by Deepa Mehta. Though she belongs to India, Pakistan and the United States simultaneously Sidhwa, a recipient of 'Sitara-i-imtiaz', Pakistan's highest national honour in Arts in 1991, likes herself to be called as a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsi woman. All her four novels – *The Crow Eaters*, *The Pakistani Bride*, *Ice –Candy-Man* and *An American Brat*—are about her perceptions of life as a Parsi, Punjabi, Pakistani and American woman respectively. All of her works have some degree of autobiographical elements as she picks up some significant incidents from her own life or from the lives of other people and flashes them out to create a larger reality of fiction. There is a sense of truthfulness in the characters of her novel and to make it possible she draws the characters of the stories from her own perception of the common folk of her surroundings. The great Urdu poet of the subcontinent, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, has praised Sidhwa for her comedy and Shrewd observations of human behaviour, Faiz Ahmed Faiz says that "Ruthlessly, deeply perceptive, she tells her story with rare courage, frankness, and good humour"(Paranjape 89). He compares her to V.S. Naipaul and R.K. Narayan.

KEYWORDS: Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*: An Authentic Presentation of A True Human Being, Attia Housain's *Sunlight*

INTRODUCTION

Sidhwa's third novel *Ice-Candy-Man* also known as *Cracking India*(1988) by her American publisher possesses several layers of connotative and enigmatic interpretations. Written on the theme of partition it is her most serious political novel till date. Effectively using the persona of a child narrator, the novel critically presents the kaleidoscopically changing socio-political realities of the Indian subcontinent just before the partition. When most of the critics focus on the theme of partition in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy-Man* the other aspects of the novel remain ignored and therefore less discussed. Among all these aspects her craftsmanship in the characterization of the novel is a significant territory. Like other novels on partition this novel also emerges as a compelling study of character and event, irrespective of caste bias and religious affinity. Readers are introduced to a plethora of characters from different communities and different walks of life. Though much ink is spent for the characterization of the protagonist of the novel i.e. Ayah my attention is drawn

towards another central character of the novel on whose name the book is entitled i.e. Ice-candy-man. The character is an amalgamation of reality and fiction. The author has mixed various characteristics of a real person to make him an authentic representative of the contemporary society. He is interesting because there is a twist in the mid of the character's development. This twist may be a shock for the readers but it indicates the novelist's great skill in drawing various shades and colors into the character and thus makes it a complex and different. The character is complex in the sense of psychological point of view and different because he is a person who embodies both the good and evil qualities of mankind. According to M.H. Abrams, we may consider such a character as a round character of the novel. As Abrams states that "a round character is complex in temperament and motivation and is represented with subtle particularity; such a character therefore is as difficult to describe with any adequacy as a person in real life, and like real persons, is capable of surprising us." (Abrams; p-33) The feminist author has allowed a minimum space to elicit different virtues of his character but within this little space the novelist has shown her skill to project him as a tragic- hero. Like a villain and a traitor he breaks the faith of an innocent little girl and defiles the friendship of a terrified woman.

When the readers probe into the deep of the story they will understand that each of the characters has gone through three phases of time—a) Pre-Partition phase, b) Partition phase and c) Post-Partition phase. The story of the novel starts its journey in pre-partition period i.e. in the colonized India ruled by the British. And at the very beginning of the novel little Lenny, the narrator of the story, presents an idyllic picture of India bloomed like a fresh-morning-rose with its colorful bright petals which may help the readers to draw a picture of perfectly built Elysium- like-India in their mind's eye. When everything is alright in the homogenous India Ice-candy-man makes his first appearance in Queen's garden as a salesman "selling his popsicles to the other groups lounging on the grass". Like other admirers of Ayah such as "the Fallettis Hotel cook, the Government House gardener, and an elegant, compactly muscled head and body masseur" (18), Ice candy man is also deeply fascinated by her. His power of story-telling, charming presentation of 'an absorbing gossip', and the incantation of his poetic impulse help him in creating a 'chocolate chemistry' with Ayah. Though among her many admirers Ayah is more flexible for the masseur, sometimes she tolerates some piquant behavior of Ice-candy-man for his 'extra good' stories: "When the story is extra good and the tentative toes polite, Ayah tolerates them". He is a well-read person and always furnished with sufficient correct knowledge and news of the contemporary world politics: "He reads Urdu news papers and the Urdu Digest. He can, when he applies himself, read the headlines in the civil and Military Gazette, the English daily." (28). He is a talkative fellow and stories flows off his 'glib tongue like a torrent.'

Everything was in right direction in a homogenous state of living in the pre-partition era before Lenny senses a change with the upcoming news of partition of the country. And this ominous tiding makes everything topsy-turvy including the innocent world of Lenny as well as the friendly ambience of Lahore. The gloomy atmosphere of Lahore during the partition demolishes the psychological aspects of a rational human mind and this is truly discerned through the changing behavior and attitude of Ice-candy-man. Ice-candy-man's account of the incident at the railway station is horrifying and it makes traumatized not only Lenny but also the readers. Ice-candy-man informs that the train for which he was waiting to receive his relatives has shocked him. He says, "Everyone in it is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslim. There are no young women among dead! Only two gunny bags full of women's breasts!" (149). The author has shown us through this novel how the violence of partition had brought a drastic change in the mindset of a common man like Ice-Candy-Man. Before the arrival of the ghostly train he was an innocent fellow who loved to make gossip and recite poetry. This incident brings a complete change into the character of Ice-candy-man. A friend has become a foe for another friend. Everybody loses his /her identity. What rules the state at this time is the religion. During this communal animosity religion

gets the supreme priority and each one's respective religion becomes his/her identity. Therefore Ice-candy-man does not ashamed to vent his spleen for his Sikh friend Sher Singh. The massacre of the train makes his blood boil and takes away his poetic complacency and turns him into a violent beast. Lenny hears the rough edge of his tongue: "I lose my senses when I think of the mutilated bodies on that train from Gurudaspur...that night I went mad, I tell you! I lobbed grenades through the windows of Hindus and Sikhs I'd known all my life"(156). His fiery tongue proves how much heated he is as he says, "I want to kill someone for each of the breasts they cut off the Muslim women"(156). This horrible sight causes him to lose his sanity. He runs in the streets of Lahore to avenge the genocide of his Muslim brothers and sisters by taking active part in killing Hindus and Sikhs. Then he does the heinous deed of his life when he helps a mob of Muslim goondas in lifting Ayah from Lenny's house breaking his promise to an innocent girl and confines her in the red light area of Hira Mandi. This event becomes the tragic flaw of his character which causes his down fall later on. As a consequence, in spite of the suffering of his conscience and the repeated cry of forgiveness for his misdeed he fails to win the heart of Ayah. In this way Sidhwa has posited that during communal strife, sanity and human feelings are forgotten. Infact riots anywhere in the world follow the common pattern where distrust and rumour reign everywhere which leads bloodshed and terror.

In the post-partition era the transformation of Ice-Candy man from the pattern of communal discord to that of reconciliation is emphasized by the veteran novelist. Repudiating his all angry destructive look of the partition era Ice-Candy man arises as a love-bird with renewed vigour, zeal and poetic impulsion like the rebirth of Finix from its ashes. From a treacherous rogue person, always ready to nudge Ayah Ice-Candy man becomes a man of refined sensibility. He is an ardent lover of Lenny's Hindu Ayah. Therefore he confesses to Lenny's Godmother: "I am her slave, Baijee. I worship her"(248) and "I can't exist without her"(251).

Though Ice-candy-man is considered as gifted poet he is a socially degraded fellow in the eyes of the so called upper middle class people. He represents a particular community of the society who are called in negligible term as 'pimp'. He is born and brought up in Hira-mandi, the place of dancing girls. Poetry flows down like a stream from his mouth when he interacts with others. He loves to describe each and every moment of life with the words of poetry written by great Urdu poets like Mirza Galib, Faiz or Mir. His poetic croon always whispers at the ears of Lenny's Ayah like a bee following the sweet fragrance of flowers:

"...the bumble-bee came –

Strutting among the flowers, strumming love" (120).

Ice-Candy-man has no social strata. His verses have no recognition to the so called educated upper middle class people. Rather he is merely treated only as a pimp. He loves Ayah but his diminished social state is the main obstacle on his way of getting her. Therefore, he has drawn Ayah down to his state of being by out-raging her modesty. Surprisingly, it is caught in the words of Lenny's Godmother: "Is That Why You had her lifted off—let hundreds of eyes probe her – so that you could marry her?"(248). The concept of English proverb "Everything is fair in love and war"-is seen to be concretized here. Therefore, as the events unravel gradually one morning the dead body of Masseur is found on the Warris Road. Many things remain untold by the author and the death of Masseur is one of them which give the story an air of mystery. Though the cause of his death is inherent in the text but, the implication made by the author is crystal clear to the readers that it is more the jealousy and the possessiveness of Ice-Candy-man for Ayah than the hard times of the partition which is guilty of it.

Sidhwa does not present him as a hardcore villain rather she presents him as a true representative of the human being whose personality is featured with good and evil characteristics of mankind. What Sidhwa has seen through her eyes during the partition and exodus of the sub-continent has impartially expressed here. The pain of partition has changed the pattern of human relationship and it puts different persons on different pedestals, separate platforms. And Ice-Candy-man truly represents this type or class of people who had to face the acid test of the partition era. We know that no human being is perfect in this world. Good and evil characteristics of mankind coexist side by side. Ice-candy-man is an “intermediate kind of person”, a person neither pre-eminently virtuous and just nor utterly a villain. Unlike Khushwant Sing’s Juggut Sing, the hero of *A Train to Pakistan*, Ice-Candy-man can’t rise himself above all kind of illusions and prejudices of religion during the communal riot of partition rather he succumbs the pressure of circumstances. The abduction of Ayah and outraging of her modesty may well be treated as the tragic flaw of his character which brings his downfall at the end of the novel. As he uproots Ayah’s soul from her body later it returns to him as a boomerang and he fails to set up a bridge of love between his soul and that of Ayah. Thus Ice -candy- man digs his own grave with his own hands. Therefore in the post-partition era when the turmoil subsides Ice-candy man’s repentance for his misdeeds remains unheeded by Godmother but in this time his heart-rending cry is felt by the readers: “...I’d do anything to undo the wrong done her. If it were to help to cut my head off, I’d cut my head and lay it at her feet!”(250). Later, when Ayah is kept in the rehabilitation centre he remains sitting there outside the camp for the whole day and night. He creates a floral beauty around the camp for his beloved. The fragrance of the flowers awakens Lenny from her bed in the early morning: “Each morning I awaken now to the fragrance of flowers flung over our garden wall at dawn by Ice-Candy-man. The courtyard of the Recovered Women’s Camp too is strewn with petals;...”(277). He becomes a harmless fellow, “a moonstruck fakir who has renounced the world for his beloved”(276). Lenny, the narrator, also goes parallel with this thought: “He has become a harmless fellow. My heart not only melts- it evaporates when I breath out, leaving me faint with pity.”(277). Here I can’t resist myself from quoting Zauq’s poem which he murmurs may be apt to describe his madness:

“Don’t berate me, beloved, I’m God-intoxicated!

I’ll wrap myself about you; I’m mystically mad” (277).

This is not only some poetic lines but also his soul’s utmost yearning for his beloved. Hence, at the end of the novel when Ayah is sent to Amritsar to her family Ice-Candy-man crosses the Wagah border behind her.

Deviating from the conventional mode of story- telling Bapsi Sidhwa does not force her characters to end the story happily rather without being rigorous she simply projects the story as it demands to be happened. Ice-Candy-man, a very simple representative of common folk, becomes an extraordinary character in the hand of Sidhwa. *Weekly Mail* has rightly pointed out:

“The brilliantly created Indian characters in this novel are made with a real face, that turns at times into a mask of horror and at others into a peal of laughter... Of all the marvelous people brought to life in this novel there is one who signifies resistance to change and uses the chaos around him for his own malicious ends. And so in the end there is one person who comes out unscathed and no wiser from the brutal pain of Indian independence: Ice-Candy-Man”(Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy-Man*; p-iv).

Besides the world of Lenny and her Hindu Ayah Sidhwa also reflects and concentrates into the world of Ice-Candy-man. In a dialogic pattern of story-telling the author appropriately allows some space to explore the

consciousnesses of her other characters like Ice-candy-man, a true representative of common folk, to heighten her work to the level of a polyphonic novel. The dialogic pattern of the novel being accorded with the tool of realism renders the fiction a sense of truth and authenticity. Like Arundhati Roy's Booker-Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), Sidhwa has successfully portrayed the men and women of this novel in their true colors. The unpredictability and the natural change of the characters give the novel a new dimension and suggest author's keen knowledge and first-hand experience with the real humanity of this world. Therefore, the character of Ice-Candy man surprises us when he betrays the faith and belief of an innocent girl and her truthfulness by disclosing the secret place of Ayah's hide. Thus a character like Ice-candy-man of this novel being an inhabitant of the Indian sub-continent achieves a cosmopolitan appeal.

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