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Ice Candy Man: A Feminist Reading

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa can be considered as one of the dominant and powerful mouthpiece among the modern feminist novelists. She perhaps is only Parsi woman writer to write on the issue of India-Pakistan Partition of 1947. As the title suggests, this very paper is a read up on Bapsi Sidhwa's notable work Ice Candy Man (1989). This paper aims to provide certain stances on the nature of injustice and inequality and shades light on gender binaries, gender politics, power relations, sexuality and patriarchal hegemony presented in this novel by Sidhwa. This paper has also tried to justify how the woman is a signifier of honour of the society and how they have been subjugated through years by their men folk. Themes explored in feminism includes stereotyping, objectification, oppression, gender-discrimination, marginalization and patriarchal domination.

Keywords: *Feminist, Gender-binaries, Partition, Stereotyping, Objectification, Oppression, Marginalization.*

Feminism is a collection of ideologies and movements that aimed at defining equal political, economic, and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in societal status. A feminist is the person who upholds his/ her views in the support of the rights and equality of women. Feminist criticism questions long standing dominant phallogocentric ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretation in literature. It also challenges traditional and age old accepted male ideas about the nature of women and about how women feel. Women are marginalised in almost all parts of the globe. Though education, industrialization, modernization, and globalization all have made certain impact on the situation and status of women, however the distribution of such change remains uneven resulting in widening inequalities between men and women.

Simone de Beauvoir in her magnum opus work entitled *The Second Sex* (1949), pointed out magnificently how women are actually on the margin in the patriarchal society, "Man is defined as a human being and a woman as a female. Whenever she behaves as a human being, she is accused of trying to emulate the male".

Women are therefore constantly engaged in this Subject – Other relation, where Man is regarded as the Subject and Woman, the Other. Woman is considered to be inferior in comparison with Man. Here one can be reminded of Beauvoir's observation about women in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, rather becomes, woman" (283).

In her novel *The Pakistani Bride*, Bapsi Sidhwa shows intensely the exploitation of women in patriarchal society as, "Women the world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, to get importunately impregnated, beaten up, bullied and disinherited. It was an immutable law of nature" (226).

Literature is a powerful tool in the hands of a creative writer to modulate and change the socio-cultural framework and Bapsi Sidhwa through her extremely absorbing and most notable work *Ice Candy Man*, seeks to contribute to the progress already started all over the world, involving reconsideration of women's rights and status and a radical restructuring of social thought.

Bapsi Sidhwa belongs to that group of women creative writers who have started to sketch the determinate women for whom the traditional role in insufficient. A woman who wishes to affirm their

liberty and autonomy and is aptly capable of assuming new roles and responsibilities. Sidhwa has not concentrated on just one factor of women's lives, but she has taken women from every section of the society and have shown particular sufferings and problems. Nonetheless, rich or otherwise, most still suffer from many social taboos and political upheavals. These circumstances make those women better in understanding their responsibilities to society and particularly to themselves.

In *Ice Candy Man*, Sidhwa appeals a world free from dominance and hierarchy, a world which is based on the essentials of justice, honesty and equality and is truly humanitarian. In this novel Sidhwa presents a group of female characters who have outlived in the anarchic period of 1947, which can be registered as a period of worst religious riots in the history of India, rather in the history of mankind. The whole story has been narrated by Lenny who relates the horrors violence and her personal observations, feelings, and reactions. She not only observes but also analyses the sensual, lecherous and degraded attentions of men towards women; the voraciousness of male sexual desires to women who are reduced to status of mere sexual objects. She relates the peculiar social disadvantages and social evils to which women are subjected. *Ice candy Man* exposes how men establish their masculine power or masculinity and hence fulfil their male-desires. While as the other hand, it vividly depicts how women endure the pain and humiliation, (both social as well as familial) enacted upon them.

The women became victims of kidnapping, mutilation and rape. They were forcefully taken away from their parents, families or even from their own religion. But the experiences of women both as victims and survivors of violence is likely to absent from standard historical accounts. *Ice Candy Man* is a saga of female oppression and marginalization. It is an important work of gynocentric view of reality in which the feminine mindscapes and experiences are pictured with a unique freshness and transparency. It is comprehensible that Sidhwa turns the female protagonists in the limelight while most of the male either remain passive or indulge in the brutal atrocities.

The female characters in this novel throbbing with vitality, liveliness and an individual life of their own. Lenny is a 'girl child' and the most prominent female character in this novel. In the literature on Partition in English, Lenny is considered as the only girl-child narrator, besides Attia Hosain's Laila in *Sunlight on a*

Broken Column. Lenny, in spite of being a small child, is aware of the prevalent social ills and cruelties and addresses the issues of young girls' forced marriages to old and degenerate men even by their own families.

The subcontinent was turned into a hellish place in August of 1947, when the "British Raj" announced the separation of India into India and Pakistan. This has been resulted in fatiguing and forceful migration of the people from across the borders of both the countries. Women were abducted by members of other religious groups to be murdered or to be brutally raped. They are forcefully sold into prostitution, they are violently tortured and mutilated and sometimes they are stripped naked, with their bodies engraved with vivid religious violence and were paraded down the streets.

The tragic occurrence oscillated the creative imagination of many writers who weaved the fabric of tragic tale highlighting the mute and unbearable atrocities of communal hatred between the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and other religions as well.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi*, and Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* are some examples to give us insights of public frenzy, communal riots, social upheavals, exploitation of women by men, and large scale of sectarian violence. Sidhwa's masterpiece *Ice Candy Man* depicts the atrocities of events with such a fine artistry that the tragedy comes alive.

Bapsi Sidhwa, only author of Parsee origin, remains a powerful voice among the modern feminist writers to write on Partition of 1947. What individualises Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* is the Parsee sensibility through which the cataclysmic incident is pictured. Being a Parsee, Sidhwa through her novels shade light on the fast-changing scenario in her Parsee culture. *Ice Candy Man* is Sidhwa's important manifesto of Partition of India. In this novel she deals with the Parsee milieu and Partition emergency. *Ice Candy Man* was published in America under the title *Cracking India* in 1991. The novelist shades ample light on various women's issues, particularly their experiences of suppression, oppression and their brutal victimization and sad predicament within the patriarchal domination.

The novel deals with strong female protagonists each of whom represents a way of life that either plots with the premises of patriarchy or else challenges the

societal repressiveness in a flexible manner. What is most striking is that how Sidhwa has wonderfully re-created Universe where all the women characters appear as biological entities, throbbing with energy and vitality of life. Lenny, her mother, her Godmother, the Ayah named Shanta are the major female voices in the novel. The transformation of Lenny's mother as a social welfare activist, Ayah's sexuality and the liveliness of her soul and

Godmother's positive vibes represent their redemptive potentials. The women in *Ice Candy Man* are not only aware of their aims and desires, but also eagerly obstinate and determined about their independent handling of circumstances. The feminine qualities of compassion and motherhood are dominant in all the major female characters in the novel.

The cynosure of the fictional world of *Ice Candy Man* is a young Parsee girl, Lenny who is lame. The lameness of the narrator – protagonist is suggestive of handicap, a woman creative writer faces, but she decides to wield the pen, because writing is an intellectual exercise which is considered to be a masculine work, outside the domain of women. Her recuperation symbolises the over-coming of the constraint on the intellectual activity of writing by the Bapsi Sidhwa. The novelist gives weight and validity to the feminine dimensions on the nature of surrounding reality by making Lenny the narrator of *Ice Candy Man*. Lenny suffers from polio and records about her observations about her surroundings in a detached manner. Being the narrator Lenny introduces herself through the lenses of society in comparison with her brother, "I am skinny, wizened, sallow, wiggly – haired, ugly. He is beautiful. He is the most beautiful thing, animal, person" (Sidhwa 22).

Lenny's attitude towards herself is the result of people's remarks which she hears around her. The novel is implicitly suggestive of an unbridgeable rift between sexes. The brutal molesting of children and women in the lame excuses of communal hatred basically shades light on the gender division, which is much more absolute, extreme and malicious than racial fundamentalism. Women when they fall victim in the hands of men's beastly violence like Lenny's two Ayahs, cannot hope for their restoration to their own families. The following conversation between Lenny and her Godmother is most pathetic one in the entire novel:

‘What’s fallen woman?’ I asked Godmother. ‘A woman who falls off an aeroplane’.

Godmother can be like that sometimes ... ‘Hamida was kidnapped by the Sikhs’, says Godmother seriously...Once that happens, sometimes, the husband – or his family – won’t take back.’ Why? It isn’t her fault she was kidnapped!’ ‘Some folk feel that way – can’t stand their women being touched by other men’. (Sidhwa 215)

This Conversation between the two mirrors how inscrutable the unwritten laws of patriarchal constitution are. The women themselves more often internalize these laws into their perception of self-identity. Lenny recognizes the biological exploitation of women in a male dominated society as she grows up. Once when Lenny was taking tea with her Godmother, she recollected, “Drinking tea, I am told, makes one darker. I’m dark enough. Everyone says, it’s a pity Adi’s fair...Anyone will marry him” (Sidhwa 81).

These comments show her hopelessness of gender marginalization through her body and colour. She comes to know that a girl must have a fair complexion in order to get married. So however, she is enjoying a social attention due to her disability, but the society doesn’t spare her by the gender marginalization. The character of the of Lenny is the true essence of feminine characterisation of how a woman should be. Lenny’s relationship with the nameless cousin upholds the principle of equality and highlights the importance of feminism, for she doesn’t grant him to manipulate her sexuality.

In the early part of the novel, we come to know that her doctor advised her mother that they should not take any tension about the schooling of Lenny, because they will affect the nervous system of her and he said, “She’s doing fine without school...her nervous could be affected” (Sidhwa 15).

Lenny says that her doctor confines her fate into the four walls of the house. He had marginalised her life in the men made society. In other words, her educational development is easily dismissed by her biological deformities. Sidhwa however tries to show the age-old notion of man against women’s education. She further gives another example of oppression through the character of Papoo, the sweeper’s

daughter, spending her nights and days doing hard domestic chores. According to Lenny, Papoo is always abused and ill treatment her mother, “Muccho manages to pound her daughter with her fists and with swift, vicious kicks...Hai I’m dead” (Sidhwa 46).

Papoo always bears the frustration and anger of her mother. Sidhwa portrays Muccho as an unconscious female figure and an unjust mother who shows neither love nor tolerance for her daughter. If we deeply observe the character of Muccho, we come to know that she is submissive to her husband. She knows very well that women in our society is always marginalised by men, and that’s why she wants to mould her daughter in the same way she feels. Lenny knows that one day that Muccho certainly kill her daughter one day and she says, “I hate Muccho ...will kill her” (Sidhwa 46).

Another instance of women subjugation is through the portrayal of Ayah who represents the exploitation of female sexuality by men. Ayah can be seen as the paradox for sick sexual desires of men of all races, religion, and status. The extreme scenario is that of Ice candy Man who forces her into prostitution without regarding the fact that how terrible it might be for his own wife. Despite her conviction that she is now a contaminated person, she retains her will to go back to her own family and start a new life. When events in the novel took a violent turn, Ayah became one of the poor sufferers. Ayah became like a soul-less body. When Lenny and Godmother visited her, a clear difference of life and death was visible in her eyes as Lenny says, “Where have the radiance and the animation gone? Can the soul be extracted from its living body?” (Sidhwa 260).

The formative influence of Lenny is no other than Ayah. It is Ayah who embodies the strength of femininity for she injects in Lenny the ideas of self-choice and freedom of will. Lennys mother is another significant feminine figure who conforms to the age-old traditional image of a faithful and serving wife who seems to be capable only of humouring things out of her husband. Sidhwa projects through Lenny’s mother that women should have aims in life besides domesticity which should be developed by them to the best of their skills and efficiency. Women need to free themselves from the confinement of ‘womanliness’ which will erase the existing discrimination regarding their continual marginalization and domestic subjugation. In this novel Sidhwa shows how Lenny’s mother and how her aunt play sincere, humanitarian

and heroic role of fighting for the lives and properties of the Hindus.

Women are usually presented as meek, mild, weak, marginalised and victimised by the patriarchy. But the character of Godmother in *Ice Candy Man* is portrayed as influential, dominant and powerful woman. A woman conscious of her identity and different from other traditional women. Lenny says that Godmother is respected by the member of all the religions in the community for her helping hand towards the needy and poor people, especially women, "Godmother is influential...or in extreme need of her" (Sidhwa 209). Lenny is strongly influenced by her character. She finds protection in her character and looks up to her in every matter. She obeys her decisions and consider her as a wise woman. Her relationship with Godmother is expressed through Lenny, "The bond that ties her strength to my weakness...bond of motherhood" (Sidhwa 3-4).

The women-figures in this novel also draw our attention to the facts of victimization of women and their liberty to define their lives according to their pre-ordained gender norms. They also exposed the patriarchal hegemony prevalent in the social perceptions. In *Ice Candy Man* we are clearly exposed to the patriarchal practices of society which marginalised the spontaneous growth and development of women also represents women's psychological domain that has been carved by centuries of conditioning.

The key difference between a feminist text and a male discourse is that in the later mentioned it's always the male who is given the lime light, who is credited with the features of heroism, sacrifice, justice and action, while generally the female protagonists remain the recipients of the male bounty and chivalry. While on the other hand, a feminist text is revolves around the woman who performs and controls and promotes the course of action by her voluntery involvement and concern and in the process, it is she who acquires the attributes of heroism and glory.

Hence, we can safely conclude that Bapsi Sidhwa has a universal appeal to the feminine folk that they should not resort to patriarchal demands because by so doing they are multiplying Patriarchy. The whole ambience of Sidhwa's novel is immersed in blood and cloaked in the murky smell of burning India. However, we can say that she has raised her voice against the social inequalities, gender differences and biased laws that consistently practised upon women.

She offers a vision perpetuate of life in which feminine worth is made to reign. She portrays women not only as victims but also as saviours. Sidhwa as a novelist speaks of the emancipation of women. Hence the novel ends on a positive note. Women strive to come out of their hapless, hopeless and helpless condition and finally able to move forward from their tormented, neglected and degraded predicament to start their life once again. This novel thus demonstrates the dazzling brilliance of the authoress who is very much aware of the diverse shades of Feminist studies.

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