

GENDERED VIOLENCE, PATRIARCHY, AND THE FEMALE BODY AS BATTLEGROUND IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S ICE-CANDY-MAN

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ABSTRACT

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), published as *Cracking India* in the United States, is among the most sustained literary examinations of the specifically gendered dimensions of Partition violence in South Asian English fiction. This paper argues that Sidhwa's most politically significant contribution in the novel is her construction of women's bodies, and particularly Ayah's body, as the primary site upon which the competing claims of communal identity, religious nationalism, and patriarchal authority are inscribed during the crisis of 1947. The paper examines three interconnected dimensions of this argument. The first is the way in which Ayah's transformation from a free-spirited, admired woman who moves easily across communal lines to a captive, renamed, and violated body enacts the novel's central claim that Partition violence was not gender-neutral but specifically targeted women as symbolic repositories of community honor. The second is the structural role of patriarchy in perpetuating this violence, demonstrated through *Ice-Candy-Man*'s conversion of love into possession and the novel's portrayal of the governmental rehabilitation system as a further exercise of institutional control over violated women's bodies and choices. The third is the relationship between the silencing of women's suffering in official Partition narratives and Sidhwa's literary project of restoring their voices to historical memory. Drawing on the feminist historiography of Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin, and on Veena Das's analysis of violence and everyday life, the paper situates *Ice-Candy-Man* within the tradition of feminist Partition scholarship that insists on the centrality of gendered experience to any adequate account of what the division of the subcontinent actually meant for the people who lived through it.

Keywords: *gendered violence, Partition, patriarchy, Bapsi Sidhwa, Ice-Candy-Man, feminist fiction, Ayah, women's bodies, South Asian literature, communal violence*

INTRODUCTION

The Partition of India in 1947 has generated one of the most significant bodies of literary and historical scholarship in South Asian studies, yet for decades the specifically gendered dimensions of that violence remained largely absent from its official narratives. Historians and literary scholars working from feminist perspectives have progressively restored to visibility the experiences of the estimated seventy-five thousand women who were abducted, raped, forcibly converted, and in many cases killed by their own families during the Partition crisis. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*, published in 1988, belongs to and substantially contributes to this project of feminist recovery. Through the character of Ayah, Lenny's beloved Hindu nanny whose fate provides the novel's most devastating narrative thread, Sidhwa constructs a detailed and unflinching account of how communal violence operated through and upon women's bodies in ways that were not incidental but structural, not spontaneous but organized by the same patriarchal logic that governed women's lives in times of peace. This paper reads *Ice-Candy-Man* as a feminist literary argument about the relationship between gender, community, and political violence, examining how Sidhwa uses Ayah's suffering to make visible what official history has consistently rendered invisible.

The feminist historiography of Partition that provides the critical framework for this paper has been built primarily through the landmark works of Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin. Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (2000) is the foundational text in this tradition, arguing that the violence of Partition played out not only in the public sphere but also in the private spaces of homes, where women's bodies became battlefields for asserting religious and national dominance. Her further observation that women's bodies became the site on which the new nation-states inscribed their boundaries, making them victims of political violence, provides the theoretical framework within which Sidhwa's portrayal of Ayah is most productively read. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (1998) extends this analysis, arguing that women's bodies became the site of violent contestation where honor, purity, and nationalism were inscribed through acts of abduction, rape, and forced conversion, and that Partition violence for women was not just about mass killings and migrations but about losing control over their bodies, dignity, and identities. Veena Das's *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (2007) contributes a complementary framework, arguing that the memory of coexistence was deliberately buried

under the rhetoric of religious purity and national identity, and that the trauma of Partition was lived in the private spaces of homes, in whispers, in silences, and in the everyday struggles of survivors. Gyanendra Pandey's *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* (2001) situates these gendered experiences within the broader context of communal politics, noting that women's suffering during Partition was erased from official narratives, reinforcing a masculine version of history where honor and nationhood mattered more than justice for female victims. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Saadat Hasan Manto's *Toba Tek Singh* provide comparative literary contexts for understanding how Partition fiction has engaged with the question of communal violence, though neither foregrounds the gendered dimensions of that violence with the sustained attention that Sidhwa brings to them.

AYAH AS THE SYMBOLIC BODY OF PARTITION: Sidhwa's construction of Ayah from the outset designed to prepare her for her narrative function as the symbolic body upon which Partition violence will be enacted. Ayah is portrayed as a woman who exists effortlessly across communal lines: she is Hindu, she is beautiful, and she is desired by men of every religious community. Her admirers in the park

where she takes Lenny to play include a Muslim ice-candy man, a Hindu masseur, a Sikh, and various others, and their collective admiration of her is presented as an emblem of the pre-Partition coexistence that Lahore once represented. The deliberate construction of Ayah as a figure who belongs to everyone and is loved across communal divisions is essential to the novel's feminist argument, because it makes unmistakably clear what Partition destroys: not simply political unity or geographical integrity but the human capacity for relationships that cross the lines of religious identity. When Partition violence transforms these men from admirers into competitors for control of Ayah's body, Sidhwa is showing with precision how the political becomes the personal and how women pay the most intimate price for decisions made by political leaders. The abduction of Ayah, described through Lenny's horrified perspective as the men drag her out with her sari slipping from her shoulder and her bare feet kicking, is the novel's pivotal moment precisely because it converts the symbolic into the literal: the body that represented communal harmony becomes the body upon which communal hatred is acted out.

PATRIARCHY AND THE CONVERSION OF LOVE INTO POSSESSION: One of the novel's most significant feminist arguments

concerns the relationship between patriarchal ideology and communal violence. Ice-Candy-Man's treatment of Ayah before and after her abduction demonstrates with disturbing clarity how patriarchal structures enable men to convert the language of love into the practice of possession without recognizing the contradiction. Before Partition violence escalates, Ice-Candy-Man's admiration for Ayah is genuine in its emotional content, if already problematic in its assumption that her beauty is available for his consumption. After the train full of mutilated Muslim women's bodies arrives in Lahore, his grief and rage are real, and the novel does not deny this. But what his subsequent actions reveal is that patriarchal ideology has given him no framework for expressing either his love for Ayah or his rage at Muslim women's violation other than the exercise of control over a woman's body. He hands Ayah over to the mob, then retrieves her, then forces her into a brothel renamed Mumtaz, then claims to have married her and converted her. As Lenny observes with a child's devastating directness, he says he loves her but has turned her into something she never wanted to be. The novel's critique here is not simply of Ice-Candy-Man as an individual but of the patriarchal system that makes his behavior both possible and, within the logic of communal honor and revenge, socially intelligible. Menon

and Bhasin's analysis of women as property and tools for revenge is precisely the framework that Sidhwa dramatizes through the relationship between Ice-Candy-Man and Ayah.

THE REHABILITATION SYSTEM AS SECONDARY PATRIARCHAL

VIOLENCE: Sidhwa extends her critique of patriarchal violence beyond the communal riots themselves to encompass the governmental systems established in their aftermath to recover and rehabilitate abducted women. When Ayah is finally found and brought to a rehabilitation camp, her physical rescue is accompanied by a psychological dissolution that the novel presents as a second form of violence. Lenny sees her sitting still and withdrawn, her laughter, playfulness, and warmth entirely gone, and understands that she will never be the same again. The rehabilitation system, which prioritized the national symbolic importance of restoring abducted women to their original communities over the individual desires and wellbeing of those women, is implicitly critiqued by Sidhwa through the image of Ayah's broken silence. As Butalia's research has documented, governments in both India and Pakistan forced recovered women to return to their original families regardless of whether those women wished to return, prioritizing national pride and the symbolic restoration of

communal honor over the actual needs and choices of women who had survived profound trauma. Sidhwa's portrayal of the silenced and broken Ayah in the rehabilitation camp is her fictional testimony to this secondary violence, the institutional continuation of the same patriarchal logic that enabled her abduction in the first place.

WOMEN AS VICTIMS OF BOTH COMMUNITIES:

A crucial dimension of Sidhwa's feminist argument is her insistence that women were victimized not only by men of opposing religious communities but also by men of their own communities and, in many cases, by their own families. The novel documents how women were killed by their own families to preserve honor and how many committed suicide rather than face sexual violation, which Sidhwa presents as evidence not of female courage but of the total enclosure of women within patriarchal systems that valued communal honor over individual life. The implication is that the violence done to women during Partition was not a deviation from the normal patriarchal order but its extreme expression: in peacetime, women's bodies are controlled through marriage, purdah, and social restriction; in the crisis of Partition, the same logic of control was enacted through abduction, rape, and forced conversion, with the difference

being only the identity of the men exercising control. Pandey's observation that Partition violence was fueled by decades of political maneuvering and deep-seated social prejudices, combined with Butalia's documentation that women's suffering was systematically erased from official narratives, provides the historical grounding for understanding why Sidhwa's literary recovery of Ayah's experience constitutes a political as well as aesthetic act.

SIDHWA'S FEMINIST LITERARY PROJECT:

Ice-Candy-Man contributes to Partition literature not merely by representing gendered violence but by insisting on the political meaning of that representation. Sidhwa's choice to center the novel's emotional and moral weight on Ayah's fate rather than on the broader political events of Partition is a deliberate feminist authorial decision: it asserts that the experience of a Hindu woman abducted by a Muslim man who claims to love her is not peripheral to the history of Partition but central to it, not a personal story detachable from the political narrative but the political narrative as it was actually experienced by those who bore its most intimate consequences. As Sidhwa herself has stated, she felt compelled to tell the story of Partition not just as history but as something that affected real people in deeply personal ways, and the gendered specificity of Ayah's

suffering is the most personal and the most political dimension of that compulsion. Sunil Khilnani's observation that national histories often erase the everyday suffering of ordinary people but literature restores their voices is directly applicable to Sidhwa's project, and it helps explain why *Ice-Candy-Man* remains essential reading not only as literature but as a form of historical witness.

CONCLUSION

Ice-Candy-Man makes a feminist argument about Partition that no history book of the period makes with equivalent emotional force: that the bodies of women were the primary terrain on which the violence of communal conflict was enacted, that this was not incidental but structural, and that the patriarchal ideology which organized women's lives in peace was the same ideology that organized their victimization in crisis. Through Ayah's abduction, violation, forced conversion, and broken rehabilitation, Sidhwa documents with fictional precision what Butalia, Menon, Bhasin, and Das have documented with historical and ethnographic precision: that Partition was, among other

things, a catastrophe specifically for women, and that understanding it fully requires placing gendered experience at the center of the account rather than at its margins. The novel's enduring significance lies in this insistence, and in Sidhwa's refusal to allow Ayah's suffering to be aestheticized or romanticized, ensuring instead that it remains as uncomfortable, as specific, and as politically charged as the history it represents.

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