

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*: A Feminist Artefact

S. T. Waghmode

[P.V.P. Mahavidyalaya, Kavathe Mahankal, Dist- Sangli]

Bapsi Sidhwa, a twentieth century Pakistani Parsee woman, like Khushwant Singh and Chaman Nahal, has recaptured the pulse of historic past of the partition days in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man*. (1988) The novel covers some of the years of the pre-partition period during which the human consciousness was tossed across some barriers like religion and hatred in human life. Religion had become, once again, a source of strife, struggle and separation for existence. Unfortunately, for centuries, the word religion with its true spirit has not been properly understood by the humankind. One wonders to find out the evaporation of its essence and its ugly residue disturbing human relations. This paper attempts to focus the human experiences with the special emphasis on the dynamics of man-woman relationship in this novel.

An eight-year-old, physically deformed girl-Lenny is the narrator in this novel. Although the novelist has tried to create a kind of innocence in the novel, it, later on, falls short and there is the authorial narration in it. It is natural that a girl of eight could not have grasped the vastness of the happenings around the city of Lahore- the place of action.

We see the full picture of, a Parsee Family- the minority culture of Lahore. The Sethis of Lahore are rich people. Mr. Sethi is a sub ordinate character, though he is the only source of income. His wife- Bunty dominates all the house-hold-affairs; and later on, Mr. Sethi proves himself false in the filial and marital-ties. One remembers what Ernest J. Simmons says:

The sanctity of the family can be preserved only by the mutuality of the pure love of husband and wife, which is achieved, ... by sacrifice, pardon and desire to make each other happy. (1968 : 86)

The Sethis' relatives- Godmother (Rodabai) and her family members enrich the background with their actions. We gradually realize

that there is something comprehensive and compassionate in her personality: She is a powerful woman with social influence. However, her husband is meek and submissive. This happy and active woman helps the sufferers in the novel. First, she helps Ranna, Imam-Din's grandson who was utterly bereft in the communal violence. He was torn apart from his home and from his family members. So she protects him, nourishes him and then sends him to the Christian convent school for his further development. Her second important action is related to the helpless heroine of this novel-Shanta- the Ayah. Ice-candy-man had kidnapped and enslaved Shanta. Godmother finds out this culprit-and threatens him to death and finally releases Shanta from his trap. This action is noteworthy. Like William Shakespeare's heroine Portia, Godmother 'drops manna in the way of starved people'. (1967: 161)

It seems that the centre of action is shifted from men to women.

When it was very difficult for the Hindus and the Sikhs to live in the newly born Pakistan; almost all of them, after abandoning their houses and leaving their property behind, were migrating to India. Bunty, Lenny's mother and Electric-aunt were smuggling the rationed petrol and helping the Hindus and the Sikhs to run away from Lahore and sending the kidnapped women to their families across the border. In the nick of time, however small it may be, these ladies played a praiseworthy role.

The novelist throws light on the peace-loving, non-violent Bunty Sethi. Once, Imam Din, her cook, had caught a big cat, behind the hinges of the door because it used to disturb in the kitchen. As he was trying to crush its body it was mewling plaintively. Bunty could not tolerate it. She suddenly punished Imam Din for his violent action and released the cat. She is quick in her good actions, conscientious, and energetic and knows that there is joy in living life. But the non-violent, peace-loving atmosphere changes itself giving place to the violent march of the treacherous and dangerous people- both the Muslims and the Sikhs.

The historic political decision of partition plays a major role in the lives of the uncounted lakhs-innocent people- who were living peacefully under the sky in the name of nation and religion. But a kind of mutation takes place. The whole scene changes afterwards. The people, who had assimilated each other's culture, and had been living with mutual understanding, got separated and taken away by the mighty whirlwind of religious hatred and mean-mindedness. These people themselves cut down the sheltering tree into pieces and greedily grabbed what was their own share. Those were the darkest days in the history of Hindustan that plunged mankind into hell. Both the Muslims and the Hindus set on fire each other and killed each other. There were strewn parts of the mutilated bodies of Muslims and Sikhs. The history had witnessed the bleeding wounds of mankind with open eyes. In short, the humanity was put on trial. The leaders who boasted of Indian heritage and unity were choked by the suffocating violence and they could do nothing. To root out the religious orthodoxy Bapsi Sidhwa has wisely asked one question. It is put in the mouth of Lenny:

The Rogers of Birdwood Barracks, Queen Victoria and King . George are English Christians: Pens ... are Anglo- Indian, ... the Phailbuses are Indian- Christian, . . . Weare Parsee. What is God? (1989 : 94)

The interaction between Lenny and her Cousin is interesting as far as her feelings are concerned. Her Cousin, in isolation, once tries to molest her. He focuses his eyes on her chest and places his hands on her breasts. The novelist has aptly described the changes in Lenny's pre adolescent personality. Lenny tells us frankly:

As the mounds beneath my nipples grow, my confidence grows'. (Ibid :220)

One reminds what the Frenchwoman Helene Cixous writes about women in her essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa":

I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man

Men have committed greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate woman, to be their own enemies: ... She must write herself. ... Write yourself Your

body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of . the unconscious spring forth. (1990 : 318-320)

Lenny, as a reaction, reflexively draws back and slaps his hands "till her palms sting'. In addition to this she, warns him:

'If you ever do that again, I'll break your fingers, knuckle by knuckle'.

'But I love you', he says.

'Well I don't!' she retorts. (1989 : 231)

This is her feminist- stance and there is not even a faint tinge of inferiority and submission to the emerging passions.

There are many male characters in the novel-for example, Col.

but they are soon removed from the platform of action. The strange and new part of the novel is that Shanta- the-Ayah is placed at the centre and most of the men characters are kept

rotating at the periphery. The Ayah, in her teens, works in the Sethi- family. Her only important task is to look after Lenny and her younger brother Adi. This attractive chocolate coloured girl is so gorgeous that she has been turned into the 'sexual object' in the Freudian sense. All the men are attracted towards her. As usual, to sit in a semi- circle, after the day's hard work, in the evening, and to pass time in conversation and merry- making had been the daily routine of the people who did inferior task. Imam Din- the cook, Hari- the gardener, Moti- the sweeper, Sharbat Khan- the pathan, the knife sharpener, Masseur- Shanta's lover and Ice-candy-man the opportunist- all are waiting for the chance to speak to her. The major historic event of partition is observed by these people from their own points of view. The novelist has shifted the centre of consciousness from the notable rich to the unnoticed poor- people, and what we ultimately get is the life seen and understood by the common people- a subaltern view of life.

novel. The relationship between Shanta and Ice-candy-man has been much

stressed in the later part of the novel. Ice-candy-man, like other people, was much attracted towards her, but she was quite clear about her relations with Masseur, therefore she could say that, 'Where Masseur is, Ayah is'. (Ibid: 121) and she frankly told Masseur: 'I'm already yours', and 'I will always be yours'. (Ibid: 158) Speaking in terms of Shakespearean imagery, her love was not 'time's fool', and it didn't change with the changing circumstances. But Masseur is killed in the communal riots, and so, Ice candy-man tags behind her.

In those troubled days, the Muslim gundas capture her and snatch her away from the Sethi family. The selfish giant Ice-candy-man enjoys this chance; saves her life and transforms her into the dancing girl- a source of income. Thus, the human relationship is shamelessly exploited. But, in the end, Shanta refuses to live with Ice-candy-man. Godmother threatens him. Her comment on him is important.

"That scoundrel! He can't deceive me again! If he dares show his face I'll call the Police and have him hung upside down." (Ibid: 272)

In the modern African-American literature there is one character- Shug in Alice Walker's novel- *The color Purple*. (1982) She helps and saves Celie- the heroine of the novel. Likewise, Godmother helps Shanta and releases her from Ice-candy-man. Shanta, in the end, goes to her family members at Amritsar.

Bapsi Sidhwa has given justice, poetic justice of course, to her characters. In general, the corrupt and short- sighted person is defeated and the virtuous woman is portrayed triumphant and successful. She has properly painted the powerful world of female characters. Being a feminist, which is the best thing to do in this world, otherwise the human development will be crippled and one-sided, she places the men and women side by side, and allows her readers to judge them. The novel itself is the best illustration of the superiority of women. Bapsi Sidhwa has set an example that, by no means, women are inferior to men. And if we give them chance, they, with their potential, can prove themselves as able as men, and sometimes better than men.

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