

Fate of Common People During Partition in the Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the fate of common people during the Partition of India. Indian sub-continent is a conglomeration of many religions. Each religion has its own culture. The paper not only focuses on the role of Communal riots in the Partition but also how women in all communities were used as a play material in the Partition playground. Socio-religious and political disparities and the importance of greed during the partition.

Keywords: Marginalization, Communal riots, Partition, atrocities on Women and Common men and Conglomeration.

The topic of Indian Independence is an ever-interesting theme for many writers. On this arena one can find works not only on conflagrations on either side of Radcliffe Line in *Train to Pakistan* by Kushwant Singh (1956), *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Hosian (1961), *A Bend in the Ganges* by Manohar Malgonkar (1964), *Azadi* by Chaman Nahal (1975), *Shadows of Time* by Mehr Nigar Masroor (1987), *A Fine Family* by Gurucharandass (1990), *The Fated Sky* by Kewal Kaloti (2008), etc. but a number of films were also deal with the same theme such as *Gandhi* (1982) by Richard Attenborough, *Partition* (2007) by Vic Sarin, *Train to Pakistan* (1998) by Pamela Rooks, *Tamas* (2005) by Govind Nihlani, *Garam Hawa* (2001) by Sathyu M.S. etc., and *Ice-Candy-Man* or *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidhwa (1988), which was made into a film *1947* subtitled *Earth* (1999) directed by the Indo-Canadian Director Deepa Mehta, is one among them that focus on Freedom was not free to the sub-continent.

Leaders on both sides played vital role in politics and common people faced cruelties. One character in *Cracking India* called Ice-candy-man a muslim comes on a cycle breathlessly, with sweat and dust and his frantic eyes instantly rest on Sher Singh a sikh, for a while and turn towards the group friends and breathlessly announces, "A train from Gurudaspur has just come in," "Everyone in it is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslim. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women's breasts!"(140). Once again he sees Sher Sigh and says: "I was expecting relatives... For three days... For twelve hours each day... I waited for that train! What I've heard is unbearable. I don't want to believe it. For a grisly instant I see Mother's detached breasts: soft, pendulous, their beige nipples spreading."(149)

The details of train massacre is described by Sidhwa in such a way that the reader experiences the horror of partition in her novel *The Pakistani Bride* through a character Qasim. He describes the horrors of train as follows:

Compartments and lavatories are jammed with stifled brown bodies; some carry the dead weight of children asleep on swaying shoulders. Women hold on to flush chains, they lean on the children cramped into washbasins. The train speeds on.

Only now does the engine-driver realize there is something further down the track. A roar rises from the mass of jolted refugees. The train's single headlight flashes on. It spotlights the barricade of logs and some unaligned rails. White singlets flicker in and out of the glare. The train brakes heavily and the engine crashes into the logs. People are flung from their scant hold on the footboards, roof and buffer. Women and children pour from the crammed compartments.

Now the mob runs towards the train with lighted flares. Qasim sees the men clearly. They are Sikhs. Tall, crazed men wave swords. A cry: 'Bole so Nihal' and the answering roar, 'Sat Sri Akal!' Torches unevenly light the scene and Qasim watches the massacre as in a cinema. An eerie clamour rises. Sounds of firing explode above agonized shrieks. (Sidhwa 27-28)

At one point Ice-candy-man harshly says:

you remember how he got rid of his Muslim tenants? Well, the tenants had their own back! Exposed themselves to his womenfolk! They went a bit further...played with one of Sher Singh's sisters... Nothing serious – but her husband turned ugly... He was killed in the scuffle,' says Ice-Candy-man casually. 'Well, they had to leave Lahore sooner or later...After what one hears of Sikh atrocities it's better they left sooner! The refugees are clamouring for revenge! (156)

The Government House gardener suspects Ice-candy-man and asks whether he was there in that mob.

Ice-candy-man angrily states:

If you must know, I was! I'll tell you to your face – 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! I hated their guts... I want to kill someone for each of the breasts they cut off the Muslim women...The penises! (156).

Everyone become silent, Gardner agrees and says that "There are some things a man cannot look upon without going mad. It's the mischief of Satan... Evil will spawn evil...God preserve us" (157). Another person a Gardener with tears painfully says, "when our friends confess they want to kill us, we have to go..." (157). Masseur asks Moti about his stay. After a pause Moti announces that he talked to the Padre at cantonment's Mission regarding their conversion to Christianity. Ice-candy-man restlessly suggests that it would be better for them to change their names too. He also informs that "the Falettis hotel cook also runaway with his tail between his legs!" (159). Shanta a character is unable to control herself. She is disappointed, because "The winds of destruction are blowing across the land". According to Kushwant Singh, his faith goes on that "The only ones who enjoy freedom are thieves, robbers and cut-throats" (Singh 64). Massuer consoles Ayah and promises that he will take care of her and he also requests her to marry him.

Later many Hindus lose their religion. Moti and his family convert to Christianity. He adopts a new name David Masih. Hari converts to Islam. He changes his name to Himat Ali. He changes his dress code from dhoti to *shalwar kameez*. He is even circumcised.

Gita Viswanath observes in her article *Revisiting 1947 Through Popular Cinema: A Comparative Study of India and Pakistan* that No other country in the twentieth century has seen two such contrary movements taking place at the same time. If one was a popular nationalist movement, unique in the

annals of world history for ousting the colonizers through non-violent means, the other, in its underbelly, was the counter movement of Partition, marked by violence, cruelty, bloodshed, displacement and massacres. (Viswanat 4)

Dhawan states in *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa* that the “Partition is shown as a series of images and events depicting human loss and agony” (Dhawan: Kapadia 42). One day Lenny is going to tuition at Mrs. Pen’s house situated in Warris road along with Himat Ali. On their way they see a bulged gunny bag. Curiosity is aroused in Himat Ali and when he pushes it with his toe the bag falls down and half of the Masseur’s body comes out of the bag. Himat Ali and Lenny find a lot of bruises on Masseur’s body. In *Azadi*, Chaman Nahal says that there is one thing common among the mobs that “In no case the victim is allowed to survive from the attack and tell what happened; he was stabbed to death” (Nahal 105) and in the majority of the cases, Nahal says “Faces were not disfigured, but the killers had a macabre fascination for ripping open stomachs. In each case, the intestines of the man would have spilled from the body and would be lying next to him in a pool of his blood.” (Nahal 105) Processions, murders, looting, rapes, abducting of women are common.

Imam Din, Yousf, Lenny, Himat Ali, David Masih – everyone comes out except Ayah. She smells some danger and she runs inside the house to hide somewhere. Someone in the mob enquires about Shankar. Imam Din says that they have left for Delhi. They ask about Sethis. Imam Din responds that Sethis are not Hindus, they are Parsis. They ask by pointing to Moti. Yousf answers that he and his family have converted to Christianity and he has taken a new name, David Masih. Now they point at Hari. Imam Din replies that he has taken Islam as his new faith and now his name is Himat Ali. The mob do not believe him, they ask him to do *Kalma*. Himat Ali does it but they are not satisfied and they ask him to remove his *lungi* and check whether he is circumcised or not. Now they believe Himat Ali is a proper Mussalman. So far in the world history no one bothered about their foreskins for their survival. It is a great tragedy to say that in partition the lives of men depended upon their circumcision. Meanwhile, unexpectedly, Ice-candy-man emerges out from the mob and asks

Lenny a parsi child of 8 years about Shanta like :

Ice-candy-man is crouched before me. ‘Don’t be scared, Lenny baby,’ he says. ‘I’m here.’ And putting his arms around me he whispers, so that only I can hear: ‘I’ll protect Ayah with my life! You know I will ... I know she’s here. Where is she?’

And dredging from some foul truthful depth in me a fragment of overheard conversation that I had not registered at the time, I say: ‘On the roof – or in one of the godowns...’(182)

They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet – that want to move backwards – are forced forward instead. Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat opens her mouth like the dead child’s screamless mouth. Her violet sari slips off her shoulder, and her breasts strain at her sari-blouse stretching the cloth so that the white stitching at the seams shows. A sleeve tears under her arm.

The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands, supporting her with careless intimacy, lift her into it. Four men stand pressed against her, propping her body upright, their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces. (183)

In fact, Ice-candy-man is ready to do anything for the sake of Ayah out of love for her. But here Dhawan feels that “the passion of love is powerless against religious bigotry” (Dhawan 46) and love is

shown as not being able to do anything when communal passions are aroused. Lenny is shocked of the things that happen to Ayah because of her truth infected tongue.

Sidhwa narrates Ranna's experience as a victim and witness of tragic things that affected himself, his family, and his clan just two months ago.

Pir Pindo is a village which is very close to Amritsar dominated by Sikhs. Jagjit Singh requests and warns the Muslims to leave the village since the neighbouring villages are occupied by Akhalis under the leadership of Dera Tek Singh, a cruel leader. Owing to their love for the land, Muslims refuse to leave Pir Pindo at once. That night, Dera Tek Singh and his mob cover Pir Pindo village on all four sides. Sidhwa not only depicts the cruelty of Sikhs but also the ache of Muslims and their marginal position during the partition:

Sikhs have attacked at least five villages around Dehra Misri, to their east. Their numbers have swollen enormously. They are like swarms of locusts, moving in marauding bands of thirty and forty thousand. They are killing all Muslims. Setting fires, looting, parading the Muslim women naked through the streets – raping and mutilating them in the centre of villages and in mosques. The Bias, flooded by melting snow, and the monsoon, is carrying hundreds of corpses. There is an intolerable stench where the bodies, caught in the bends, have piled up. (197)

Madness of partition violence spreads from cities to towns and towns to villages. Ranna says that during the dark the entire village was occupied by the Sikhs. They killed each and every Muslim man, woman, child, and baby not only in his house but in the entire village. He says that “he saw his eleven-year-old sister, Khatija, run stark naked into their courtyard. Her long hair disheveled, her boyish body bruise, her lips cut and swollen and a bloody scab where her front teeth were missing” (202). He saw other women folk had been tortured by the Sikhs. The mob made the women naked and hung them upside down and their long hair kept on fire. And for some women they separated their parts. The mob raped each and every woman and girl irrespective of their age. Some women were raped and ripped through their stomachs. They killed babies by smashing them against the walls and throwing them in boiling oil. They did not leave a single place in the village without searching. They covered fields, houses, mosques, etc. Ranna says:

The Sikhs were among them like hairy vengeful demons, wielding bloodied swords, dragging them out as a sprinkling of Hindus, darting about at the fringes, their faces vaguely familiar, pointed out and identified the Mussulmans by name. He felt a blow cleave the back of his head and the warm flow of blood. Ranna fell just inside the door on a tangled pile of unrecognizable bodies. Someone fell on him, drenching him in blood. (201)

One day Lenny's cousin announces that he saw Ayah in a car and continues that she has become a call girl. From the discussions between Godmother and Ice-candy-man, Lenny learns that Ice-candy-man raped Ayah and allowed the men to rape her and he has become a pimp in the red light area. He has changed Ayah's name from *Shanta* to *Mumtaz* and seized her physically and mentally and married her without her wish.

Though the common men were not interested to take part in riots, the fanatics provoked common men to turn as devils on the marginalized minorities with no human sentiments. The borders not only divided the nations but mainly divided the religions. The common men mortgaged their fate in the hands of a very few national leaders. Both sides created gangs from amongst the professional anti-social elements such as dacoits, rowdies, killers, etc. to create lawlessness in the two societies. Partition made the people lose their identities. Many families were separated. Thousands of children became

orphans, handicapped. Around seven million Hindus and five million Muslims migrated to India and Pakistan. Around 500,000 to one million people died and 1,00,000 to 2,00,000 women were raped. Keloti also says that “The men folk had either runaway or taken refuge in hideouts. Some of them were being caught hold of, made to see the heinous scenes of their girl children with their naked eyes” (Keloti 65). Gang-rapes occurred publicly on both sides. Sikhs used swords, Muslims daggers, and Hindus trishuls without mercy. If a Muslim mob captured Sikh or Hindu women, they made them to dance nakedly in front of the mosques and vice-versa. Anwasha Sen Gupta depicts in her article *Looking Back at Partition and Women: A Fact Sheet* that “The Hindu married women were stripped off their conch shell bangles and vermilion mark on their forehead (sindur) and forced to recite the Kalma” (Gupta 4). Many of the kidnapped women disappears into their private houses. Balla points out the horror situation of minority women that “Women were literally sold like vegetables in streets of Punjab for ten or twenty rupees like vegetables: Men used to go down the streets with captive women, shouting, ‘women for sale, women for sale!’” (Balla 237)

Seeing all these horrors, many men in the three communities themselves killed their women and children. Urvashi Butalia observes that “Many families chose to burn buildings with all their young girls in that to save the honor of the girls” (Butalia 162). Butalia also says that “A brother tells of his sister, a young girl named Maan Kaur who sat in front of her father, with her back to him, and pulled aside her long braid of hair to allow him to successfully use his sword to cut her head off in order to save her from possible dishonor” (Butalia 163) and another horror shown by *Tamas* film Director Govind Nihalani is that Sikh women along with their children had jumped into the community wells to save their honour proudly and willingly rather than be besmirched by Muslim mobs. Some of the women who had been carried away by the mobs turned as their personal keeps and rest of the women were paraded naked on streets. Nahal describes in his novel *Azadi* regarding the women parade in Sialkot through Arun the protagonist that he figures there were forty women from sixteen to sixty years of age in the parade:

They were all stark naked. Their heads were completely shaven; so were their armpits. So were their public regions. Shorn of their body hair and clothes, they looked like baby girls, or like the bald embryos one sees preserved in methylated spirit... They were all crying, though their eyes shed no tears ... none of them made any attempt to cover themselves with their hands... The bruises on their bodies showed they had been beaten and manhandled.

The procession moved through the bazaar, and along with the procession moved a river of obscenities – foul abuses, crude personal gestures, spurts of sputum, odd articles like small coins, faded flowers, cigarette butts and bidis that were thrown at the women. As soon as the women came near, that section of the crowd became hysterical. ‘Rape them.’ ‘Put it inside of them.’ ‘The filthy bitches.’ ‘The Kafir women’. Some said worse things. Then came the shower of spittle. Almost everyone spat, and hundreds of tongues were pushed forward inside of their teeth and hundreds of uplifted faces canon-like fired the saliva... Many men in the front rows of the crowd lifted their lungis to display their genitals to them. Others aimed small articles at them and tried to hit them... And almost to the last man, whether they spat or shouted or threw things of just stood with their mouths open, they stared at the public regions of the women. Through indelicate exposure those areas had lost their glory, lost all magic, and there was only a small, slippery aperture you saw there. But men’s eyes were settled on these apertures. And the moment the women had passed ahead, the eyes were settled on the bruised buttocks. (Nahal 261-262)

And the same thing happened to Muslim women in India. Balla remarks that “When Muslims ‘enjoyed’ the women they had kidnapped, the Sikh men dismembered them or treated them very brutally” (Balla 234). They took revenge on the women folk of the opposite community.

According to Keloti, the madness of Partition has reached its peak when people of both countries started to send gifts to the new Prime Ministers. The Muslim mob found an abandoned suspected milk utensil on the street:

“Slowly and consciously the servant boy of the ‘chat – shop’ went close by. Carefully, he opened up the lid and turned the utensil upside down. Everybody was stunned to see the contents. It were a mound of circumscribed human penises, might be of fifty-sixty in number. A pungent smell followed...The servant boy spit repeatedly, picked up a piece of paper, a letter, from within the mound, came back and handed the paper to the educated man. He read aloud, ‘The First Gift for Jinnah on First Freedom Day of his Pakistan.’” (Keloti 130)

Similarly the Hindu mob found a gift on a Ghost Train from Pakistan where everyone was killed in and writes “The First Gift for Nehru and Patel on First Freedom Day of India” (Keloti 131). The trains not only carried dead bodies but also horrific tales and rumours as well. Exchange of gifts between the two nations has become very common. Both Richard Attenborough in his film *Ghandhi* and Keloti in his novel *The Fated Sky* tell that, at one point Nehru himself came on to Delhi streets with a stick in his hand to control the mob. After the declaration of Independence Lord Mountbatten and his Lady went to Shimla for vacation. Some of the national leaders called him back immediately to set right the position of burning India. Keloti points out the inefficiency of Indian political leaders: “Within a span of three weeks Independence, Free India became the slave of British Empire again under the Governor General ship of Lord Mountbatten as Nehru was referred to have said, “We are well experienced Agitators but not Rulers” (Keloti 199). Approximately ten million people had to leave their homes and ancestral holdings and a tenth of them were slaughtered in the most singular civil war in recent history. There were no leaders, no armed forces, and no plans – only a spontaneous and visceral ferocity. Sidhwa herself narrates the trauma of madness by giving equal importance both to Hindus and Muslims. Though the madness prevailed on either side it is ironical to hear from her that only Muslims were marginalized in Partition. Bapsi Sidhwa once responded to a query about the overall purpose of *Ice-Candy-Man* by stating that the novel is “to function as a recording of a particular history, hoping that one might learn lessons from that history. Indeed, in this age of global violence and atrocity, we need to pause and take stock of the lessons we have learned from history and literature.” (Montenegro 10)

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