

Female Identity, Gender and Politics in Partition Novels: A Comparative Study of Ice Candy Man and Clear Light of Day

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Abstract:

The division of India and the formation of a new nation Pakistan has had a transformative impact on the whole subcontinent. The partition resulted in widespread violence that not only posed a challenge to the nation's identity but also had a profound impact on the identity of women, regardless of their cultural or religious backgrounds. Women, who are seen as the pride of the family, particularly in Asian nations such as India, are subjected to oppression and derogation in the name of religious, social, and cultural traditions. They are treated as commodities and objects of entertainment by men. The partition has had a profound impact on both the collective mindset of the people and their social interactions. Throughout history, women have consistently experienced subjugation under patriarchal dominance, and this was most evident during the split. The treatment of women during partition exemplifies the treatment of women as a distinct social group on the Indian subcontinent. The partition of the Indian subcontinent had a profound impact on the lives of women, causing significant trauma. Amidst the tumultuous period of partition, certain famous authors such as Bapsi Sidwa and Anita Desai have drawn parallels between the bloodshed that transpired and the brutality inflicted upon women. The violence was of such magnitude that certain dads resorted to the act of killing their own daughters. Women were killed in the pursuit of preserving their family's reputation. Writers such as Bapsi Sidwa and Anita Desai aimed to contribute to the process of restructuring and rewriting the status of women in their works "Ice Candy Man" and "Clear Light of the Day," respectively. The objective of my research paper is to assess the extent to which they have achieved success in this endeavor. In this paper, I have conducted a thorough analysis of the female characters in both novels who have endured the atrocities of division. I will examine how these characters navigated the realms of politics and patriarchy.

Keywords: Partition, Gender, Negotiating, Patriarchy, Identity, Politics, Trauma.

Introduction:

“Freedom is for the educated people who fought for it. We were slaves of the English, now we will be slaves of the educated Indians or the Pakistanis”

Khushwant Singh

Following three centuries of enslavement, India emerged from the shackles of colonial rule in August 1947, only to be confronted with the partition of the subcontinent into two separate nations: India, with a Hindu majority, and Pakistan, with a Muslim majority. The adverse consequences of the division continue to manifest in the twenty-first century. The partition led to one of the greatest migrations in human history

till date as Sikhs and Hindus moved to India and Muslims trekked either to Bangladesh or west. It is estimated that 16.7 million people were forced to leave during the four years after the partition. This also suggests that 2.2million people went missing or unaccounted during the partition(BKM.2008). Since migrants were likely to be male, Muslims in India had a higher male ratio than Hindus and Sikhs and when Muslims migrated to Pakistan it affected the gender ratio and literacy rate as well.

The populations that previously coexisted peacefully and united against British rule have suddenly become violent, resulting in bloodshed and brutality. Hindus and Sikhs are aligned on one side, while Muslims are on the opposing side. The insurrectionism in Punjab and Bengal was particularly strong, characterized by bloodshed, mass abductions, and sexual brutality. Approximately 75,000 women were subjected to rape, mutilation, and defilement following physical assaults, as described by Nisid Hajari in his book *Midnight's Furies*. Gangs of murderers set entire villages on fire, brutally killing men, children, and the elderly, while abducting young women for the purpose of rape. According to British soldiers and journalists who had observed the Nazi death camps, they asserted that the atrocities of partition were much more severe. They reported instances where pregnant women had their breasts removed and newborns forcibly extracted from their tummies. Additionally, they discovered cases where children were actually cooked on spits.

The phrase "Partition" refers to the process of dividing a single country into two separate entities. It is often the result of complex socio-cultural or political factors, as witnessed in the partition of countries such as Ireland (1919), India (1947), and Palestine (1948). Significant historical events such as the French Revolution and the Irish Civil War have consistently served as a source of inspiration for writing. Literature plays a crucial role in safeguarding the recollections of these significant historical events. Literary works are categorized into several genres such as poetry, novels, short stories, non-fiction, and more.

Francisco has accurately portrayed that literature alone effectively portrays the agony of the innocent, whose grief is universally felt and serves as a more genuine means of achieving reconciliation compared to political discussions. The literary piece on the partition confirms that the central figure of the partition was the initial human being-[P] (250).

Women were the most severely affected by division, enduring cruel forms of oppression like as abduction, sexual abuse, forced marriage, and honor killings. Women were targeted as scapegoats during the traumatic period of partition, with men from opposing communities seeking revenge by beating them. They experienced trauma not only from external sources (such as other cultures and religions) but also from within their own family. Several instances in the history of partition involved instances where dads killed their own daughters.\

Some of the works which played a key role in the foundation of partition literature in India are Toba Tek Singh (1955), *Train to Pakistan* (1956), *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Tamas* (1974), *Ice Candy Man* and so on. The writers of these works have successfully portrayed the massacre and bloodshed of the people during Partition. Khushwant Singh in *Train to Pakistan* (1956) has depicted how the once secular village called Mano Majra, where Muslims and Sikhs were living in harmony has turned bloodthirsty because of the chaotic event like Partition. Not only novelists but poets as well lamented on the partition like Faiz Ahmad Faiz in *Subh- eAzadi* (*Freedoms Dawn*, 1947) bewailing the violence and oppression of partition states "this is not that longed for break of day, not that clear dawn in quest of which our comrades set out." Partition cannot be reduced to mere historical event but it inspires our writers to outpour their thoughts on it. They have not only portrayed the tragic tale of partition, the atrocities and oppression but the impact of partition on women belonging to different community. Bapsi Sidwa's *Ice Candy Man* and Anita Desai's

Clear Light of the Day are pertinent examples which delineated the brutality that was unleashed on women during the partition. Bapsi Sidhwa, a Pakistani novelist has gained a worldwide acclamation through her works especially *Cracking India* (also published as *Ice Candy Man*) which brought her international acclaim and she emerged as one of the promising writer of Indian Literature in English. *Ice Candy Man* is a politically stimulated novel as Bapsi Sidhwa herself conceded it in one of her conversation:

“The main motivation grew out of my reading of a good deal of literature on the Partition of India and Pakistan... what has been written has been written by the British and Indians. Naturally, they reflect their bias. And they have, I felt after I’d researched the book, been unfair to the Pakistanis. As a writer, as a human being, one just does not tolerate injustice. I felt whatever little I would do to correct an injustice I would like to do. I don’t think I have just let facts speak for themselves, and through my research I found out what the facts were. (36)

Anita Desai, an Indian novelist and Emerita John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She has been a prolific writer who not only won Sahitya Academy Award but was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize for her accomplished novel, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). In *Clear Light of the Day*, she has remarkably illustrated the lives of women and how far they are from their own identity in the patriarchal society. She states even in her interview with Sunil Sethi:

“My novel is about time as a destroyer, as a Preserver and about what the bondage of time does to the people” (India Today Dec 1-5,1980:142).

In her story, Bapsi Sidhwa skillfully portrays the oppression, abuses, and exploitation of women, bringing the tragedy to life with great creativity. She has depicted the plight and subjugation of women in a male-dominated society. The concept of women as victims has been employed as a mechanism in the portrayal of violence. The author portrays her female characters as individuals who have successfully endured the tumultuous circumstances of the 1947 partition. Women were subjected to both physical and psychological brutality. Sidhwa has endeavored to depict the psychological state of women who endure the anguish of partition. The novel prominently features female characters as the main focus, while the male protagonists are portrayed as either passive or engrossed in acts of violence. The girl child narrator, Lenny in the novel has been given a prominent position. Lenny witnessed varied forms of victimization on women during partition in India.

The unity of religion which could be seen before the partition turns out to be different during partition as Lenny herself comments:

“One day everybody is themselves- and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing Ayah – she is also a token- The Hindu”. (98)

In this work, Sidhwa provides us with an understanding of how women's identity is restricted in a world controlled by men, and Lenny's mother exemplifies this situation. Lenny's mother serves as a notable exemplar of how she modifies the conventional notion of being a loyal and obedient spouse. Women are compelled to give birth to male infants without being given the option to choose whether they would prefer to have a baby girl or boy. Male individuals proudly assume responsibility for raising male offspring, while the determination of their destiny is consistently influenced by their dominating parents, leaving the mothers in a subordinate position.

Sidhwa has depicted the negative aspects of this novel by highlighting the extreme cruelty inflicted upon women. However, she also portrays the triumph of these women over their circumstances through the portrayal of strong female characters like Ayah. Despite the patriarchal society they live in, Ayah is able

to assert control over the actions and emotions of her male admirers. She exuded great confidence and maintained her composure even in the presence of her admirers. She endured hardship during the riots when she was forcefully taken by the associates of Ice Candy Man due to Lenny's "truth-infected tongue". She fell for the Ice candy man's persuasive words and revealed the location where her Ayah was hiding, a decision she subsequently regretted. The phrases convey a strong sense of shame as she explicitly states, "I have betrayed Ayah." Despite Imam Din's desperate falsehood being unsuccessful in saving her, I am the individual responsible for managing finances. I am akin to a trained circus elephant or a charmed cobra under the control of a snake-man, an animal with conditioned reflexes that is incapable of deceit.

Ayah has suffered a disastrous fate due to Lenny's honesty. She is compelled to accept the belief that the elderly Ayah has passed away. Ayah's situation has deteriorated to the point where she is seen as a vulnerable young girl who is objectified and desired solely for sexual pleasure, as described in the text:

“Up and down, they look at her. Stub –handed twisted beggars and dusty old beggars on crutches drop their poses and stare at her with hard, alert eyes. Holy men, masked in piety, shove their presence to ogle her with lust. Hawkers, cart –drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists turn their heads as she passes, pushing my pram with the unconcern of the Hindu goddess she worships.” (3)

Narratives have played a key role in documenting the horrific events of division. The women from many communities experienced immense physical, psychological, and mental suffering during the violent partition, which cannot be fully documented but can be recounted. Even women from rich backgrounds were not exempt from the influence of patriarchy.

Mrs. Sethi, Lenny's mother, dedicated herself to aiding women who suffered from the division by helping to find kidnapped women and offering them refuge. However, within the confines of her bedroom, she herself became a victim of abuse at the hands of her husband.

Sidhwa has eloquently portrayed Lenny's comprehension of the parents' flawed relationship through her words:

“And closer, and as upsetting, the caged voices of our parents fighting in their bedroom...I know they quarrel mostly about money. But there are other things they fight about that are not clear to me. Sometimes I hear Mother say, “No, jana; I won’t let you go! I won’t let you go to her!” (224)

In the novel, Sidhwa effectively portrays Ayah's triumph over her suffering as she manages to liberate herself from the oppressive patriarchal mindset that was deeply ingrained in society, particularly among traditional women. Her virginity and her identity were forcefully taken away from her, two crucial aspects that are fundamental to a woman's existence. Her name, Shanta, was replaced with Mumtaz. She was subjected to rape and then coerced into marrying the same person, known as the Ice Candy Man, in order to avoid any questioning. Instead of being condemned and punished, he acted as if he was doing Ayah a favor by marrying her. However, she declined to marry the individual who was accountable for the upheaval that transpired in her life. Her escapades have played a crucial role in shaping Lenny's understanding. She asserts, "

“They have shamed her, not those men in the carts- they were strangers... but I am certain of her humiliation” (102)

Another significant female character in the narrative is Lenny's Godmother, Rodabai, renowned for her quick thinking and insightful comprehension. When she consoles Ayah after the violence that happened on her, her insight can be comprehended better in these lines:

“That was fated, daughter. It can’t be undone but it can be forgiven. Life goes on and the business of living buries the debris of our pasts. Hurt happiness... all fade impartially to make way for fresh joy and new sorrow that’s the way of life.”(105)

Godmother was always ready for the help when Ayah did not want to marry Ice Candy Man, she supports her in her decision and while scolding Ice- Candy Man for what he did to Ayah and ruined her life she confronts him saying “Is that why you had her lifted off – let hundreds of eyes probe her – so that you could marry her? You should have your own mother carried off if it suited you! You are a shameless badmash! Nimakharam! Faithless!... “oh? what kind of man? A royal pimp? What kind of man would allow his wife to dance like a performing monkey before other men? You „re not a man, you’re a low-born, two-bit evil little mouse!” (248). Though Godmother has seen as a very strong lady but sensitive at a same time.

Undoubtedly, Bapsi Sidhwa's novel "Ice-Candy Man" bears a male title. However, it is crucial to appreciate how skillfully and effectively she portrays the victimization of women during the Partition as a significant issue in the story. Ice-Candy Man symbolizes male hegemony, exploiting a woman and then corrupting her, as stated in the text: “The much loved Ayah now becomes what Lenny’s boy cousins calls the opposite of virgin Mary a Whore.” (88)

Although the work was composed during the partition, Anita Desai expresses her sorrow for the devastating consequences and violence that resulted from it. The upheaval that occurred during the division can be likened to the internal turmoil experienced by the female characters in the story. The novel consists of four parts, with the second part depicting the chaos, riots, horror, and bloodshed that occurred during the partition. However, the author does not directly involve her characters in the partition, nor do the female characters directly parallel the events of the partition. The Das family diverged not due to the violence of partition, but as a result of their own volition. Their partition was self-imposed.

In this novel, Desai portrays the cyclical nature of life and explores the internal struggle experienced by the protagonist, Bim. Bim selflessly prioritizes her family's happiness over her own, exemplifying the sacrifices made by women in everyday life who have learned to be submissive and compromise in various aspects of their lives. Bim has made the decision to assume responsibility for the care of her brother, Baba, who has a cognitive impairment. She made the decision to remain unmarried, stating, "I will support myself financially, take care of my aunt Mira and father, and achieve independence." In this story, Desai portrays the metamorphosis of women from a state of innocence to one of experience. Although this work is a novel, the author skillfully employs poetic tactics such as imagery to depict the emotions of her female characters. She utilizes elements such as buds, insects, animals, and flowers to convey the feelings experienced by these characters.

Desai has explored the dual nature of close friendships, illustrating how they can simultaneously serve as sources of strength and vulnerability, and how they have the potential to deeply hurt us. This is the tale of a lady who fluctuates between the present and the past, torn between fascination and reality. Not only does the novel depict the sacrifices and emotional state of women, but it also portrays their capacity to forgive and forget. It demonstrates their ability to move forward, leaving behind the bitterness of past memories. This is evident from the title of the novel itself, "The Clear Light of Day," where the protagonist, Bimla, has learned to forgive, let go of the past, and begin anew

"If there were hurts, these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally" (p. 165).

Anita Desai has depicted the experiences of women in India by portraying her female characters, namely Bim, Tara, Mira-Masi, and Bim's mother. The women in the male-dominated society were experiencing marginalization, suppression, and oppression. The novelist effectively portrays this theme throughout the novel. The struggles faced by women in Indian culture, whether as mothers, sisters, wives, etc., are vividly depicted in the book. Bim, the eldest daughter of the Das family in the initial part of the story, is shown as benevolent, compassionate, and willing to make sacrifices for her family. She demonstrates her kindness towards her older brother, Raja, by caring for him throughout his illness, as well as taking care of her younger brother, Baba. In the initial stage of the story, Bim replicates the conventional behavior of women in India, who exhibit such intense emotions that they are willing to sacrifice their own lives for the well-being of others. However, this trend underwent a transformation in the latter portion of the novel, as Bim matured and developed an optimistic perspective on life. She now aspired to achieve financial autonomy;

“... I shall earn my own living. and look after Mira massi and Baba and be independent”

Bimla did not want to be dependent and was ready to shun the shackles of patriarchy of any form; “for all father cared I could have grown up illiterate- and cooked for my living or swept. So I had to teach myself history and teach myself to teach”.

Conclusion:

In this paper, I argue that it is imperative for Indian women to declare their autonomy and actively strive to establish their own individuality. Women have a strong motivation to achieve objectives in their lives and necessitate emancipation from household duties in order to actualize their imaginative aspirations. Authors like Bapsi Sidhwa have strived to depict the significant impact of partition on individuals, including women. They investigate the extent to which the violence and chaos resulting from the division have greatly impacted their lives. The pervasive oppression of women by men in Indian culture persists, to the point that even long after Partition, women have accepted and justified male supremacy. Both Bapsi Sidhwa and Anita Desai have sought to highlight the changes that have taken place in patriarchal India before and after independence, a phenomenon that has been witnessed globally through the feminist movement promoting gender equality. Their success stems from their portrayal of this topic through the primary characters in their works. Both authors have centered their aforementioned literary works around female protagonists, showcasing their dedication to advancing feminism in India through their literature. Their objective is to convert a culture that is predominantly controlled by males into one where both males and females have essential responsibilities in the advancement and growth of the nation.

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