

## **The Predicament of the Fallen Woman: A Gendered Reading of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man***

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### **Abstract**

In Partition literature of the Subcontinent, writers depict the massive violence, communal riots and genocide which affect thousands of lives. Pitched against such mayhem is the female figure—the one who faces different forces of marginalization. Her body is turned into a site of warfare where men wrestle for their dominance on the pretext of race and religion. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* depicts the victimization of 'fallen' women in a patriarchal setup. This paper is an attempt to show how one of the victim asserts her individuality to liberate herself from the predicament defined by prefixed gender roles.

**Keywords:** Partition, marginalization, fallen, individuality, border, crossing, liberate

### **Introduction**

*Ice Candy Man* of Bapsi Sidhwa deals with the partition of the Sub Continent into India and Pakistan in 1947. The novel poignantly portrays the expression of bitter differences, the rift and division in social relations of the characters. Recent literary scholarship has contributed much to the immense eruption of hostility and destruction, the genocide as a result of the political upheaval and also questioned the violence to which women were subjected.

Sidhwa's interview with Bhalla emphasis about the suffering and victimization of women during partition:

It is the women who bear the brunt of violence that accompanies these disputes. They are the ones who are rooted in the soil; they are not interested in politics. But suddenly they find that their bodies are being brutalized. Victories are celebrated on

the bodies of women. So, it is not surprising that women became the targets of brutality during the partition also. They were seen as the receptacle of a man's honour. When women are attacked, it is not they per se who are the targets but the men to whom they belong. It is humiliating for a man to see his woman being abused before him (Bhalla 2007, 232-233).

Menon and Bhasin (Menon and Basin 1998, 43) also observe how women are victimized and subjected to many facets of brutalities during such mayhem. They find it to be “shocking not only for its savagery, but for what it tells us about women as objects in male construction of their honour”. Elaborating upon this they further adds that “Women's sexuality symbolizes “manhood”; its desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonour that it has to be avenged. Yet, with the cruel logic of all such

violence, it is women ultimately who are most violently dealt with as a consequence” (Menon and Bhasin *ibid*, 43).

Menon and Bhasin further say:

The abundance of political histories on partition is almost equaled by the paucity of social histories of it. This is curious and somewhat inexplicable circumstances: how it is that an event of such tremendous societal impact and importance has been passed over virtually in silence by the other social sciences? Why has there been such an absence of inquiry into its cultural, psychological and social ramifications? There can be no one answer to this question, but what seems to have stepped in, at least partly, to record the full horror of partition is literature, the greater part of which was written in the period immediately following the division of the country. In one sense, it can be considered a kind of social history not only because it so approximates reality (what Alok Rai calls “a hypnotic, fascinated but slavish imitation of reality”) but because it is the only significant non-official *contemporary* record we have of the time, apart from reportage (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 6-7).

Fiction is an art, a form of storytelling, which has enabled men throughout the ages not merely to imagine, but to transmit or share information of events, happened in the past. Fictional work has often succeeded in giving a voice to the past events by filling by the chasms or fissures where history had failed; it voices or tells the unheard stories. As these literary materials are fragmentary in nature, it is often incomplete and only marginal and therefore not whole or

complete. At times it can be particular or even individual but they persuade us to view how history gets inscribed, at the same time gives us a new perspective or an alternate reading of the master narrative. We, therefore, understand that these fragments (fictional works) are important in their own right because in their absence, “the myriad individual and collective histories which simultaneously run parallel to the official accounts of historic events” (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 8) will get lost. They will be “buried eventually in the rubble of history” (Menon and Bhasin *ibid* 8).

Jason Francisco in ‘*In the Heat of Fratricide*’ has justly commented that a fictional work built on a historical event “validates historical truth precisely in its power to represent” (Francisco 1996, 239-40)

A reading of *Ice- Candy- Man* as a political novel will show how religion became the determinant of identity. As such, racial harmony turned into racial murder, villages on both sides were plundered and burned, and women mutilated. Many partition novels in English have concentrated largely on the helplessness of women pitched against oppressive male forces and highlight the trauma a woman is subjected to at such times.

In *Ice- Candy- Man*, Sidhwa employs Lenny Sethi a young girl as the narrator. She is eight years old (she was five when the narrative begins). Though young in age, she is portrayed as being very alert “It is not without reason Mini Aunty has designated my talented ears 'cricket ears' ” (Sidhwa 1989, 261) having a keen sense of observation to the things happening around her. She is skillful and responds spontaneously to the situations that unfold before her. Bibhash Choudhury in *Beyond Cartography* describes Lenny as “the prime mover and articulator of a

narrative that chronicles a major crisis-ridden period in South Asian history". "Hers is a child's vocabulary, an advantage in this case, because it carries an innocence into the things seen that experienced eyes would have obfuscated or marginalized" (Choudhury 2016, 26-27).

### **The body of the fallen women as script**

With the Partition as the bedrock, Bapsi Sidhwa has built the *Ice-Candy-Man*. The story of the novel revolves around the Sethi household. Nestled within the Sethi household drama is the traumatized narrative of the "fallen women" as Sidhwa calls them in the novel. They are the destitute women who were brought to the camp. Gradually some were restored to their families and some given employment as household helpers. These women comprises of all those, who were abducted, raped or dragged into forced marriages and exploited in different ways. The fate of these women highlights their vulnerability at times of unrest. It also testifies of the overarching patriarchal consensus to subjugate them. The stories of these women would have been silenced and pushed into oblivion if not salvaged in fictional narratives. Through the active and keen observation of the young narrator-Lenny, the novel unfolds an array of episodes and incidents of tension, riot and violence. In the narrative, the stories of the "fallen women" cannot be overlooked because it is these stories that reveal and speak of the trauma women go through, the price she has to pay as men wage wars and vows vengeance.

This paper will try to study the predicament of Shanta who is a 'fallen' woman, her experiences of abduction, rape and humiliation in the hands of her former admirers. She is a Hindu Ayah in the Sethi household. Pre-Partition, she is portrayed as a symbol of integration, a unifying figure. The story shows

how her dozen admirers would gather around her irrespective of religious denomination. "Only the group around Ayah remain unchanged. Hindu, Sikh, Parsee are, as always, unified around her" (Sidhwa 1989, 97). But once the Partition violence is unleashed, her status is reversed, she is changed into a site of hatred and revenge, she becomes an object of attack, "her body takes on a wholly new meaning, for she is now the symbol and site of the enemy, ready to be devoured and annihilated. There is a crucial transfer here of the metaphoric implications of her body: from being the object of desire she is transformed into a subject of hate" (Choudhury 2016, 33).

Sidhwa allows sufficient space in the novel to depict Ayah as the embodiment of feminine sensuality and beauty. Men from different walks of life would gather around her.

### **Lenny remarks-**

The covetous glances Ayah draws educate me. 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 aside their pretences 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. Ayah is chocolate-brown and short. Everything about her is eighteen years old and round and plump. Even her face. Full-blown cheeks, pouting mouth and smooth forehead curve to form a circle with her head. Her hair is pulled back in a tight knot.

And, as if her looks were not stunning enough, she has a rolling bouncy walk that agitates the globules of her

buttocks under her cheap colourful saris and the half-spheres beneath her short sari-blouses. The Englishman no doubt had noticed (Sidhwa 1989, 3).

The above lines clearly indicate how the novelist objectifies Ayah as a figure to be looked at. It is also irrefutable that Ayah does not resist this build up of feminine identity; she basks in the glory of the admiring gaze of men around her. She is further portrayed as one who retains power, sexual autonomy and control within the circle of her male admirers. She fails to be tempted by the sensual advances of Ice-candy-man upon her. In this regard Lenny says,

“Things love to crawl beneath Ayah's sari. Ladybirds, glow-worms, Ice-candy-man's toes. She dusts them off with impartial nonchalance. I keep an eye on ice-candy-man's toes. Sometimes, in the course of an engrossing story, they travel so cautiously that both Ayah and I are taken unawares. Ice-candy-man is a raconteur. He is also an absorbing gossip. When the story is extra good, and the tentative toes polite, Ayah tolerates them” (Sidhwa 1989, 19).

This control and autonomy of her individuality is built upon very early in the novel and later on we see that it is this same conviction that will release her from the clutches of Ice-candy-man at the end of the novel. Running parallel to her individualized attitude is the recognition of Ice-candy-man that Ayah's autonomy can be taken away only by force. In the turmoil of the religious fanaticism following the Partition, the Parsi household including the Muslim inmate, Imamdin hides Ayah inside the house and guard it. This secret is religiously guarded. When Ice-candy-man came along with the mob he is unable to trace Ayah. He knew at once that the information to the hideout can be

extracted only through insidious means. He quickly takes the advantage of Lenny's innocence and elicits the information. Ayah is betrayed because of Lenny's innocence-her “truth infected” tongue (Sidhwa 1989, 184). It is due to Partition that Ice-candy-man succeeds in forcibly debasing Ayah on the pretext of love and revenge. Thus we see that the Partition no longer remained a topographical division or demarcation of a space but it became an entity, an agent endowed with great destructive powers. Ice-candy-man, who at one time fervently admired Ayah became beastly, hunts her down as a wild beast would hunt its prey. The fabric of social relationship being too fragile, it failed to withstand the intense confusion or chaos of partition and the once beautiful and endearing relationship and friendship is shattered, and physical, emotional and psychological wounds inflicted on each other. The forceful abduction of Ayah from home, the helplessness of the Sethi family as mute spectators to such a heinous crime being committed, testifies that the spaces of safety holds no meaning at times of war.

After her abduction, Ayah ends up in Hira Mandi, a space traditionally out of bounds for women of honour. Here, she is given a new identity which is beyond recognition. She is forced to transform from the simple and desirable Ayah to the heavily made up dancing girl to entertain men in Lahore's brothels. Feminists' theorists and writers have provided their insights to expand and develop the scholarship on issues relating to the female body, sex and gender. Numerous discussions have emerged in order to understand, highlight and explore the importance and position of bodies and sexuality, their identity within cultural, religious and philosophical discourse. In this connection Rosi Braidotti writes,

In the feminist framework, the primary site of location is the body. The subject is not an abstract entity, but rather a material embodied one. The body is not a natural thing; on the contrary, it is a culturally coded socialized entity. Far from being an essential notion, it is the site of intersection of the biological, the social and the linguistic, that is, of language as the fundamental symbolic system of culture. Feminist theories of sexual difference have assimilated the insight of mainstream theories of subjectivity to develop a new form of corporeal materialism that defines the body as an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting forces where multiple codes are inscribed (Braidotti 1994, 238).

The redefinition of Ayah's identity as a prostitute has reduced her to a maimed soul; she has become a site where men quenched their thirst for lust. She is sold over and over to "any man who has the money" (Sidhwa 1989, 241) and also forced to become the second wife of Ice-candy-man. The profundity of Ayah's victimization can be fully comprehended through an understanding of the history attached to Hira Mandi. This place dates back to the times of the Mogul Emperors. It was located on the margins "in the shadow of the old Mogul Fort" (Sidhwa 1989, 246) to "house their illegitimate offspring and favourite concubines" (Sidhwa 1989, 246). Hira Mandi still survives and as in the past, women's bodies are still used as sites to inscribe patriarchal supremacy. In the novel, Ice-candy-man is an agent in carrying forward the same age old patriarchal agendas set in motion centuries ago. In the words of Ice-candy-man, Ayah possesses "divine gifts" with the "voice of an angel and the grace and rhythm of a goddess" (Sidhwa 1989, 247). Ice-candy-man's

utterances imply that Ayah possess all qualifications to project herself as one with a desirable body, a show piece that man may ogle. These words transform Ayah into a sexual figure, and voice the continuing perpetration of how a woman is degraded to the status of an object. Ice-candy-man is convinced that since "I've covered her in gold and silks" (Sidhwa 1989, 250) Ayah would be more than happy to remain his wife conforming to the accepted set of gender roles. Again he says "the past is behind her", "But now she has everything to live for" (Sidhwa 1989, 264). These words very clearly reveal that Ice-candy-man is ready and willing to forget the past events. He is further willing to move forward, look forward to a future with Ayah. But does Ayah also nurture the same wishes? Does she look at the events of her life with the same eyes as him? She views things differently. She is not ready to forget and forgive, nor does she nurture any future prospect with him. This is because her experiences do not simply amount to some emotional, physical or psychological wound. It was something deeper—it was an act of forced intrusion, the invasion not only of her physical body but of her very essences, her very being. She was raped by her own friend, was prostituted to people whom she thought were her trusted friends. She was made to drink the bitter cup of betrayal. Trust, which is believed to be the foundation in an institution like marriage, was absent between them. For a "fallen woman" like her, marriage could have been a boon, a purveyor of her identity, security and stability in society but in her rejection of a connubial relationship with Ice candy man she is refusing to barter her self-esteem to satisfy and fulfill the norms laid down by a patriarchal set up for women. Fiona Toland writes "For de Beauvoir, marriage is an oppressive and exploitative economic arrangement, which

reinforces sexual inequality, and binds women to domesticity. It perpetuates the belief that if the female is protected and provided for by her male partner, she is happy: she is thought to be content that her needs are provided for. De Beauvoir, however refuted this belief” ( Tolan 2014,321). Ayah's refusal to remain chained to Ice-candy-man as his wife Mumtaz echoes this view of De Beauvoir.

Ayah's reaction again corresponds to De Beauvoir's “concepts of 'transcendence' and 'immanence', she argued that the fulfillment of human potential must be judged, not in terms of happiness, but in terms of liberty. Liberty is something more than maintaining one's existence peacefully and comfortably; to be free, a person must transcend the animal part of his or her life- the temporary and unthinking happiness that comes from being warm and well fed- and pursue the uniquely human desire to know more, do more, have more” (Tolan ibid, 321-322). By retaining her feminine individuality, Ayah refuses to succumb to any psychological power Ice-candy-man had over her. Her future with ice-candy-man was a twisted vision of love, a forced imposition upon her. It was sowed on the soil of betrayal.

The novel uses the historical event of Partition to highlight some of the most pertinent social issues at the time of Sidhwa's writing. She employs characters to give the readers an idea about the vulnerability of women. By incorporating the stories of the “fallen women” Sidhwa endeavors to bring to light the marginalized state of women, the treatment she receives and the value attached to her in the patriarchal society. Hamida is another “fallen woman”and she is introduced as the second caretaker of Lenny in the narrative to act as the connecting link through whom Sidhwa strives to achieve the continuity of the abducted women's

narrative. This continuity enables us to have a glimpse at the flickering hope of restoration for Ayah because the abducted woman carries with her the stigma of being 'fallen'. Hamida was 'fallen' and therefore considered unclean as she has been touched by other men. She is rendered unacceptable in her husband's home- a place designated as respectable according to patriarchal norms. The masculine power, the male dominated space forbids the entry of such women to debase their sanctum. But this façade of respectability is male construct, male oriented. Such a perception greatly highlights the very fragile and shaky state of female existence in a society dominated by forces of patriarchy. When such blind forces are in free play, the female voice is silenced and a clear picture of gender biasness is projected. This predicament of Hamida triggers questions on the reader's mind why women is subjected to harsh punishments for a deed which she never committed willingly. It is the man who is the perpetrator of heinous crimes as rape but the irony is that the female sex has to bear the brunt. Through the story of Hamida, Sidhwa is implying that Ayah has to traverse a rocky path in the course of her relocation and regeneration. In *The Other side of Silence*, Butalia states, “Not only had they very effectively been rendered invisible, but many of them wanted to stay that way, their stories held closely to them” (Butalia 1998, 355). In the novel, Hamida says, “Let her be. It'll take hours if she's being registered” (Sidhwa 1989, 273). “They'll be asking a hundred-and-one-questions, and filling out a hundred-and-one-forms (Sidhwa1989, 273). These camps though set up to protect the abducted women fail to give back their lost freedom. The suggestiveness therefore is very blatant- the rescued are further entrapped. Ayah's wounds are still fresh so she is utterly silent, as for Hamida, shehas somehow accepted

her fate and speaks. At times, intense pain and tears would cement human bondage. We see this taking place unconsciously between the two 'fallen' female characters as Sidhwa allows Hamida to empathize with Ayah's state. This unconscious empathy is an act of expression and articulation of their collective pain and anguish.

Ayah as a marginalized figure suffers as a result of the combination of two factors. One is Ice-candy-man's personal desire for her and the other is his religious antagonism towards Hindus. Here we see that Sidhwa balances the politics of communal hatred to the politics of emotions. Ice-candy-man had coveted Ayah before the eruption of partition turmoil. But Ayah preferred Masseur to Ice-candy-man. The corresponding reaction from him was his constant surveillance of Ayah and Masseur "where Masseur is, Ayah is. And where Ayah is, is Ice-candy-man". (Sidhwa1989, 121)

In the course of the turmoil of the Partition, Masseur is found murdered. With his most potential rival out of the way Ice-candy-man possesses the woman whom he unsuccessfully courted in the past. Later he marries Ayah, and this marriage was an appeasement of his desire for her. As a result, Ayah become the hunted, the helpless victim and she is unable to forget the dehumanized way in which she was possessed against her will. The result is the ensuing trauma, the intense personal suffering she undergoes. Lenny observes that her "radiance" "animation" and "soul" (Sidhwa1989, 260) have all disappeared. Reduced to a lifeless form she is all "vacant eyes are bigger than ever: wide-opened with what they've seen and felt" (Sidhwa1989, 260) Godmother who is depicted as an influential character in the novel is instrumental in releasing Ayah from her grim situation. The conversation between them bears a note of fatalism about how society would always

privilege the social and communal over the individual. Ayah should therefore forgive and try to make the best of her present situation. But what is most pertinent here is to understand the suppressed pain waging inside Ayah. Why cannot she remain wedded to him? Why cannot she accept him when he no longer mistreats her? He himself declares "I cannot exist without her", "I'm less than the dust beneath her feet" (Sidhwa1989, 251). But what Ayah has experienced is beyond repair, she has experienced the annihilation of her inner being. The question of forgiveness is now meaningless for she ceases to exist "I'm not alive" (Sidhwa1989, 262). In her rejection of a life of physical comfort with an identity as Ice-candy-man's wife, she enters into a space full of uncertainty and the idea of a sovereign self, an autonomous individual is silenced but the challenges involved in recovering her voice is not a case of lack of voice. Butalia speaking of abducted women with undecided futures asks, "where, and to whom, did these women belong?" is she "a migrant/ or a refugee? Or a dislocated person? Or all of those? How do we understand her experience?" (Butalia 1998, 145). The tragedy is that such people belong nowhere. Cultural norms always exerts its influence on the female community, and Ayah on her own is exposed to many unknown dangers. This realization forces us to recognize the supremacy of patriarchy. Basu Raychaudhury also observes that life for the displaced was disoriented:

The refugees had to renegotiate with various new choices, and women refugees were no exception to it. In fact, the communal violence that occurred during and after Partition always made women the victims of double jeopardy. The displaced women were victims both as displaced persons

and as women. For them, the economic uncertainty associated with a life beginning almost from scratch spelt disaster, and they faced different kinds of atrocities, in the form of sexual abuse and violence-atrocities that usually only women face (Basu 2006, 171).

### **Overcoming Silence**

Gayatri Spivak opined that South Asian women are so rigidly and completely strangled by patriarchal politics that they have no real voice. She famously asserted can they “talk back”? (Spivak 1985, 330-363). But Kathryn Hansen's argument shows that South Asian women instead of seeing the self as 'fragmented' with weak individuality, asserts that all selves construct themselves in rational terms. Interestingly Sidhwa gives Ayah a voice while remaining voiceless. Thus, despite the numbing pain, Ayah is shown as retaining her individuality as a person.

Ayah will have to renegotiate her life over again and for this she should have a foothold which lies somewhere far away from Ice-candy-man, therefore the necessity, “whether they want me or not, I will go” (Sidhwa 1989, 262). Ayah's future is bleak and uncertain. The possibility that she may not be accepted in Amritsar looms large. The story of Hamida is only another indicator Sidhwa employs to further the uncertainty of her acceptance by her relatives. In the midst of the surmounting uncertainty for a secure future she decides to undertake a journey into a world where Ice-candy-man's icy hands cannot reach her. Ayah's action corresponds to the views of Smith and Watson “a strategy of gaining agency” (Smith and Watson 2010, 235) and agency according to them is that which is disruptive to “existing social and political formation” (Smith and Watson *ibid* 235). After her abduction, rape and prostitution

Ayah knew there cannot be another experience more harrowing. But as a free agent she decides to step into a space across the border which is fraught with many questions of her survival as a “fallen woman”. Ayah's act of gaining agency and going to Amritsar is going beyond and in this regard Bhabha has remarked : “ 'beyond' signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary- the very act of going beyond- are unknowable, unrepresentable...” (Bhabha 1994, 5-6).

Heidegger also views that “A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its essential unfolding” (Heidegger 2012, 250). In the words of Menon and Bhasin :

Not all the stories we heard were intrinsically different: what is different is how events have been grasped, how remembered; how they have been understood or misunderstood; how each woman assimilated her experience. All are part of narration, and part of an unfolding history. Some women never recovered from Partition, others saw in this rapture a moment of unexpected liberation for themselves as women (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 19).

### **Conclusion**

*Ice-Candy-Man* is unique in its eloquence in successfully presenting a painful epoch that the subcontinent and its communities experienced. Sidhwa shows how the 'fallen' female characters suffer, the marginalization and violence they faced.

Ayah is a victim of patriarchal oppression but by rejecting the traditional gender role she recognizes her exploitation in

the hands of men and makes a conscious choice to gain power and retain her autonomy. Such an attitude is what feminists assert – that a woman can never liberate herself unless she realizes about her marginalization.

Ayah's self-knowledge of marginalization could be interpreted as the way to her psychological liberty. Self-knowledge

may never be a guarantee to happiness, but it is like the coming of the rainbow after a raging storm. It is like a bridge key in between great depths to provide a way ahead. Ayah decides not to submit to patriarchy without giving a fight. She decides to take control of her destiny through the assertion of her individuality. She is a symbol of a woman's will to rise.

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