

REJUVENATING CRACKING INDIA: BAPSI SIDHWA'S *ICE-CANDY-MAN*

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Abstract

The division of Indian subcontinent in 1947 into India and Pakistan has been among those tragic disasters, which not only stirred the souls of natives but has also led many thinkers and literary writers to decipher the larger meaning of life lived on this earth and the values of humanity. A number of writers have tried to fictionalize the magnitude, ambit, and influence of those barbaric acts that affected the lives of people during the partition. Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy-Man, also published as Cracking India, stands with so many other great novels that have been penned down on the theme of partition such as Kushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan, Attia Hussain's Sunlight on a Broken Column, Azadi by Chaman Nahal, A River with Three Bands by Shiv K. Kumar, A Bend in the Ganges by Manohar Malgonkar and many others. But Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice Candy Man, although paints the picture of violent havoc and brutal communal riots unleashed during Partition, yet it also highlights the importance of life saving forces which overpower the destructive ones. If there are killers, there are saviours as well. By trying to save the people of different religions, Imam Din, Godmother, Lenny's mother prove themselves as the saviors of humanity. This paper hence is an attempt to highlight in the novel the presentation of life sustaining principles that cannot be easily extinguished. The novel seems to present that though momentarily in trying situations hatred may prevail; it is only transitory for chaos cannot kill man's desire for order in life.

Keywords - Indian subcontinent, Bapsi Sidhwa, Broken Column.....

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Introduction

Violence has been in existence in diverse forms at manifold levels in most of the societies in the world. It too has grown in its power and magnitude along with the progress made by humanity at large. From being acts of mere hitting, it has manifested into wars causing monstrous destruction with the use of modern weapons and also led to genocide, where one race is intolerant of the other to an extent of extinguishing the other completely and millions have lost their lives as a result. Even as this paper is being deliberated upon, most inhuman and heinous cruelty is being hurled on innocent people throughout the globe. The recent terror attacks on the Bastille Day being celebrated at Nice or at the mass annihilation of terrorists by the head of Turkey on 15th and 17th July 2016 respectively and the Uri incident only a couple of days ago are only a few illustrations of morbid violence unleashed almost everywhere on a regular basis. Violence has a devastating and long-term impact on individuals and society, in terms of its physical, emotional and psychological consequences for victims and in terms of the fear it generates in communities. Among such destructions on a massive scale, the 1947 Partition between India and Pakistan has been one of the most excruciatingly painful violent events in the recorded history of mankind. Urvashi Butaliya describes 1947 partition in following words, “The political partition of India caused one of the great human convulsions of history..... twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West, of the newly created Pakistan.....Estimates of the dead vary from 200,000 to two million but that somewhere around a million people died is now widely accepted...75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion.)”

The Communal hatred and riots that tore the Indian sub-continent, dividing the people on religious lines were so intense that the cracks that developed in the hearts of people has bogged the minds of many creative artists. Many writers from India and Pakistan have unraveled the trauma of partition in their novels giving their own versions of comprehending such a colossal havoc, caused due to the politically motivated vested interests of a few people at the helm of affairs in the pre-independence times. In fact, Partition novels are such a significant number that they can be studied as a separate category of novels in themselves. However Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy-Man although a partition novel focusing on the communal riots that cracked India, painting a gruesome picture of the victimization of the innocent, its distinct approach in presenting partition enables a different reading of the novel possible. As Sidhwa is a Parsee, and having witnessed the happenings during the partition first hand, she is naturally endowed with an objective perception of understanding the chaotic situation, without taking sides. In an interview she has stated-

"As a Parsee, I can see things objectively. I see the common people suffering while politicians on either side are having all the fun".

Through the lens of Lenny, the child-narrator:

It is the same objectivity that Sidhwa tries to bring in the narrative of the novel as well. So she makes an eight year old Parsee girl named 'Lenny' who is lame after having had polio attack and so under the constant care of her parents and caretakers, as the narrator of the novel. As the events in the novel unfold, the readers get an unbiased picture of the harmonious life set in pre-independent Lahore, then a part of India through the eyes of innocent Lenny Sethi, whose untainted lens of humanity colours the narration. The child-narrator Lenny records the incidents of riots between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, whose Parsee identity, her status of an uncorrupted mind and disability making her mingle with the lives of common people through her dependence of Ayah makes her narration unadulterated and most objective. As Ralph Crane reviews the novel, he highlights the significance of the child-narrator. He writes-

"The atrocities of 1947 are best seen through the innocent naïve eyes of a child, who has no Hindu, Muslim or Sikh axe to grind.... Lenny is free from the prejudices of religion, and the

prejudices against women, and the constraints she will be subject to as she grows older. The authorial voice is a powerful voice of hindsight”.

Bapsi Sidhwa has painted the sharp, inquisitive Lenny, with crippled feet under the constant care of a beautiful young Ayah named Shanta, so realistically, that Lenny is established as a truthful witness to the mounting unease in Lahore. The riots, the fires and brutal massacres become most real through the child's experience. In fact Lenny is so truthful that in the novel she tries to wrench out her tongue because it is unable to lie and her truth and innocent faith on the Ice-Candy-Man results in betraying Ayah to the communal crowd which brings about the tragedy in the novel. The colossal upheavals of partition are presented graphically through this truth-ridden child growing up in Lahore and becoming more conscious about the changing environment around her. Again it is because of the child narrator's perspective that the novel does not degenerate into a narrative full of violent, hopeless and inhuman situations, but the glimpses of seeing hope in the hopeless, the feelings of love in the encompassing hatred, faith in the prevailing atmosphere of suspicion pervade all through the novel. For instance, when Lenny with her family visits the Fire Temple, she prays not just for herself and her family, but seeks blessings for all whom she is acquainted with irrespective of their caste or status,

“I ask God to bless our family and Godmother and all our servants and Masseur and Ice – Candy-Man.....” (p. 34-35)

What can be more benign than these feelings untouched by the political vicissitudes of those troubled times?

Elements of Hope in the Hopeless Despair of Partition

The novel which exposes the hardening of hearts and poisoning of minds leading to the most inhuman acts still does not become a documentary of gory events, as it is full of several instances where people value humanitarian approaches to life above all other interests. The visits of Lenny to the Victoria park with her Ayah, Shanta and the kind of friendly socialization they had with Ayah's admirers consisting of the Muslim protagonist of the novel, Ice Candy Man, Sher Singh, the Sikh zoo attendant, a Hindu masseur, Hari, the gardener, the Muslim butcher, the restaurant owner and Sharbat Khan, a Pathan and many others who are almost a family reveals

the human bonding among them. Also, the relationship of Lenny's family, the Sethis with people from varied cultures and castes and with the servants who are serving in their home clearly reflects the healthy relationship and the elemental goodwill that is pervasive among human beings irrespective of the barriers of colour, caste and social hierarchies. Hari, Imam Din, Mucchoo, Shanta, Yusuf all are of different religions but they work and live as one family. Even when Imam Din's family fleeing from a disturbed Pir Pindo arrive at Lahore seeking shelter, they together accommodate them, despite danger lurking over their own lives.

In fact, the trust and the confidence that the Sethis have on a Muslim cook Imam Din is reflected in their daughter Lenny being allowed to accompany him, when he goes visiting his village and also his grandson Dost Mohammad's village Pir Pindo, forty kilometers far from Lahore. The harmonious co-existence of people in pre-independent India with mutual affection and trust that was so natural is the overriding principle that is displayed in these pictures of the rural Lahore. These two visits of Lenny further helps in unfolding the dynamics of life lived by different communities in the village before the declaration of independence, their preparations for the impending clashes that may arise, their commitment to stay together come what may and later within a short duration of a few months the changes that shook the brotherhood thereafter, due to political interpolation.

The discussion between the Muslim leaders of Pir Pindo and the Sikh heads of Dara Tek Singh clearly highlight their mutual trust, affection and the prominence of feeling of oneness and brotherhood. The following piece of conversation is vital enough. When the issue of fast spreading Hindu-Muslim trouble and Sikh-Muslim trouble is opened up,

The Sikh granthi says, *"Our villages come from the same racial stock. Muslim or Sikh, we are basically Jats. We are brothers. How can we fight each other?"*(p. 56)

To this the Choudhry replies-

"Our relationships with the Hindus are bound by strong ties. The city folk can afford to fight... we can't. We are dependent of each other." (p. 56)

Imam Din tries to ensure the safety of his people from the Granthi. He says-

"As long as our Sikh brothers are with us, what have we to fear? I think you are right, brothers, the madness will not infect the villages." (p. 56)

Jagjeet Singh responds and adds-

"If needs be, we'll protect our Muslim brothers with our lives!" (p. 56)

To which the Chaudhry also declares –

"I am prepared to take an oath on the Holy Koran, that every man in this village will guard his Sikh brothers with no regard for his own life!" (p. 57)

The Mullah finally adds that-

"Brothers don't require oaths to fulfil their duty". (p. 57)

This conversation among the mullah, the village chaudhry, the Sikh granthi is reflective of the strong bonds of relationship that existed between the religious sects even under the threatening circumstances.

However, just a year later, Lenny's second visit to Ranna's village, Pir Pindo offers a changed atmosphere with an undercurrent of tension. On Baisakhi day, when she along with the male members of Imam Din's family goes to the Sikh village, Dera Tek Singh, though there are joyful celebrations, there is a sense of distrust and fear. Ranna's father, Dost Mohammad, notices the presence of the blue-turbaned strangers with staves and long kirpans whom he comes to learn from the Sikh granthi, Jagjeet Singh that they are Akalis. Jagjeet Singh expresses his helplessness and alerts Dost Mohammad,

"The Akalis swarm around it like angry hornets in their blue turbans..... Trouble makers. You'll have to look out till this evil blows over." (p. 107)

The feelings of brotherhood that seemed unalterable only a year ago, had now been shaken by the Akalis. Just a fortnight later, the Sikh villagers, despite their goodwill, fail to protect their Muslim brothers from the looting bands of the Akalis who violently raid Pir Pindo and other Muslim villages to massacre the males, and rape the girls and women. The most blood curdling episode of Ranna, who witnesses the massacre of his kinsmen and miraculously escapes from the burning Pir pindo. His journey through the ruined villages amidst death and destruction till he reaches all scarred to Lahore presents the mad rage that tore apart humanity on communal lines. But amidst the brutality, there are also traces of hope for him. The healing care of his relatives and the help and support of Lenny's mother and godmother restore him finally to the

world of faith and goodness when he is put in a Convent residential school to be able shape for himself a healthy and happy life. Lenny's words-

It surprises me how easily Ranna has accepted his loss; and adjusted to his new environment.....Ranna's ready ability to forgive a past none of us could control keeps him whole. (p.211)

The same transitory turmoil also happens in the life of Dilnawaz (the Ice Candy Man), the titular hero of the novel. Initially he is a jovial person who is known for his warmth and good-nature, who is an ardent admirer of Lenny's ayah. But the shocking sight of the Gurdaspur train that comes loaded with slit bodies of muslims transforms the peace-loving Ice Candy man into a bloodthirsty savage. When he is waiting for his sisters on Lahore railway station, he is struck by the ghastly sight.

"The train is loaded with mutilated bodies of Muslim passengers. Everyone in it [i.e. the train] is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslim. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women's breasts."(p. 149)

Ice-candy man loses his sanity and wreaks vengeance on all the Hindus. He joins a mob of Muslim marauding hooligans in their looting and killing spree and unleashes his cruelty on Hindus not sparing even his once good Hindu friends. Though he loves Ayah-Shanta from the core of his heart, this train scene makes him see her now as only a Hindu woman. He cheats Lenny and gets Ayah from her hiding, abducts her forcefully and captivates her in Hira Mandi of Lahore, a locality of prostitutes. She is raped there by many persons. But again after his temporary frenzy of revenge, he realizes his crime and after a couple of weeks, he marries Ayah, and changes her name to Mumtaz, which again reiterates the rejuvenation of humanity in him even after the crumpling effects of communal hatred and violence that had incited his vengeance and destructive capacities temporarily. But Ayah, a victim of his communal frenzy is not able to renew any good will towards him and longs to return to her own people. Fortunately, with the help of Lenny's relatives and godmother, Ayah is rescued from the prostitution house and moved to the rehabilitation centre for recovered women near Lenny's bungalow. The Sikh guard who is

in charge of the centre is so duty bound that he vigilantly watches over the women with lot of care and concern. In fact when the penitent Ice-candy man tries to intrude and meet Shanta, the guard beats him to a pulp and hollers-

“I’ll break the bastard’s neck next time! I’ve never had trouble before! Let anyone touch the women.....See what I’ll do to their cocks and balls! They are my sisters and mothers!”(p. 272)

These feelings of safeguarding women from all classes and religious backgrounds in grave situations of hatred bespeak of the goodness and compassion that still was alive in most trying circumstances. Shanta finds her peace when she is finally sent to the relief camp at Amritsar to rejoin her family. But again all victims do not get accepted as easily as Shanta. Hamida is another victim of communal atrocity. She represents those women who are kidnapped and raped, and then rejected by their families; are relegated to rehabilitation centers unwanted. Again Lenny’s mother employs Hamida as a nurse-maid at her home. Hence we find Lenny’s mother, God-mother, electric-aunt, Imam Din and many others who do all they can for the riot-victims irrespective of their religious background s proving that if there are killers, there are saviors as well. Even the Ice Candy Man realizes his mistake, turns into a purified steadfast lover and the novel closes with his crossing the Wagah border looking for his beloved.

Conclusion

Hence the novel is replete with strong images of love, life, hope, trust and compassion. It is finally ‘love’ that succeeds. Though Communal riots between Hindu and Muslim separate them, Ice –Candy-Man’s love for Ayah never ends reiterating that love is borderless. Therefore any man-made borders cannot but only temporarily stall the ever flowing reservoir of love and humanity.

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