



Mapping the Female Body as Battleground: Feminist Perspectives on Gender-based Violence in *Ice-Candy Man*

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Abstract

This study analyzes Bapsi Sidhwa's partition novel *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), also named as *Cracking India*, written against the backdrop of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. The novel portrays that communal violence, unleashed during the partition, resulted in massive gender-based violence, indiscriminately targeting women from the different religious backgrounds, including Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. The study employs feministic theoretical framework based on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), patriarchal violence (MacKinnon, 1989; Butler, 1990; Nussbaum, 1995) and subalternity (Spivak, 1988) to better understand the politics of the body in a society with cultural and religious differences. The study establishes that women's bodies, as a symbolic battleground, embody violence triggered in the wake of communal strife among distinctive religious, national, or patriarchal groups living in the British colonized Indian Subcontinent. The study posits that women are doubly oppressed, regardless of their religious, national, and cultural affiliations: first by the engrossed intersectionality and patriarchy, and the second by the simmering outbursts and rhetoric of nationalism that broke out in the wake of the partition of the Indian subcontinent. It is established that Sidhwa's narrative reveals the intersection of working-class women, patriarchal sexual violence, and female subalternity, objectifying the bodies of women for body politics. In addition, it is found that the communal anger and honour, masculinity, religious and political vengeance transformed women's bodies into territories to be trespassed, seized, conquered, molested, and destroyed. Thus, the intersection of class, religion, and gender degenerates into the odd experiences of abduction, rape, forced prostitution, and commodification. Finally, the study establishes how Sidhwa's narrative portrays the trauma and violence borne by the women during the gender and communal-based differences during the partition of the subcontinent from a feminist perspective.

Introduction

The apocalyptic partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 triggered the largest forced migrations of the twentieth century, displacing 12-20 million people between the newly established countries, i.e. Pakistan and India. Migrants faced slaughter, burglary, arson attacks, sexual assault, and forced abductions amid massive refugee exoduses – the Hindus and Sikhs to India and the Muslims to Pakistan. Trains arrived loaded with corpses; migrants were killed, burned, kidnapped and looted en route. Much of the violence targeted women as symbols of communal honour, involving systematic gender-based atrocities such as rape, mutilation of the body, abduction, and forced marriages

(Menon and Bhasin, 1998). The clashes erupted primarily among Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims along the line of religious divide. *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), written by the female writer Bapsi Sidhwa and narrated by a girl-child, presents a female perspective on this violence and brutality. The novel uses the female body as an epicentre or battleground of gender-based violence, where the chaos and cruelty of the partition are entrenched.

Research Objective

1. To analyse the gender-based violence represented in *Ice-Candy Man* from intersectionality, patriarchal and subaltern perspectives.

Research Questions

1. How does *Ice-Candy Man* delineate the gender-based violence from intersectionality, patriarchal and subaltern perspectives?

Literature Review

Partition literature characteristically delineates the violence and, more specifically, gender-based violence unleashed in the wake of political polemics, rifts and disagreement. Most of the violence was committed in the name of religion, and the violence has been tagged as ‘communal violence’. Varshney (2002) believes that an event is identified as a communal riot if there is violence and two or more communally identified groups confront each other or the members of the other group at some point during the violence. The brutal communal violence ignited when the partition was approaching its climax. The various religious communities, including the Muslims, the Sikhs and the Hindus, were at daggers drawn with one another on the eve of the partition. Mostly the violence was gender-based and directed against the women of the various communities as a matter of communal honour and anger. Many partition authors have broadly presented the intersection of violence and gender. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (1998) argue “women were raped, mutilated, abducted and killed not because they were women alone, but because they were symbols of the community” (p. 43), which critically opines that the bodies of women became symbolic carriers of community honour and were targeted during communal violence. Likewise, Yuval-Devis (1997) maintains that women often symbolise national boundaries, marking their violation a political act. Hence, women were targeted, and their bodies were taken as the national battleground and “national pastime.” (p. 259).

Various studies on *Ice-Candy Man* accentuate the centrality of gender-based trauma and violence because during the partition of the Indian subcontinent, the women suffered more than the men, as depicted in the novel. The novel depicts and presents women as central sufferers of the partition. Ali (2014) takes Ayah’s abduction as a metaphor for border brutality wreaked on women. Chandra (2012) explores how *Ice-Candy Man* uses reminiscence and trauma to present gendered sufferings.

Butalia (1998) argues that the bodies of women become symbolic battlegrounds in the violence on the eve of the partition. Similarly, Das (2007) states that the sexual assaults during the 1947 partition violence proved to be a political message to dishonour the opposing and conflicting community through the bodies of women. These studies explore Lenny’s narrative, where rape of women, abduction and mutilation mirror partition trauma through gender-based violence. The novel presents the commotion of time from the perspective of individuals’ experience of mounting pains and collective anguish of the religious groups, seen and narrated through eight-year-old girl, Lenny. The child’s narration also receives attention. In this context, Hussain (2016) asserts that Lenny’s innocent standpoint intensifies the terrors of violence, representing the state where ordinary bystanders can become complicit.

The above view of the partition trauma and violence experienced by the women encourages the researcher (s) to plumb the depths of the novel through the feminist lens. Thus, feminist theorists Spivak (1988) and Butler (1990) discuss in detail how women’s identity is formed colonial and masculine structure. Their opinions assist in the interpretation of the Ayah’s symbolic position in the novel.

The existing studies of the undertaken novel affirm that Sidhwa’s narrative centres women’s suffering but calls for a deeper feminist reading. Thus, this paper contributes to that gap by focusing specifically on the female body as a battleground for gender-based violence.

Research Methodology

Feminist literary criticism predominantly employs qualitative methods, such as close textual analysis, narrative examination, and reflexive interpretation, to foreground women’s lived experiences and challenge patriarchal narratives. By challenging the established positivist views, this approach negates the common belief that only neutral

and objective knowledge can be treated as authentic, true and valid. This approach advocates that the power of imbalance in terms of religion, culture, and gender differences can affect and alter the situated knowledge.

Drawing upon a diversified array of the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality referring to gender violence erupting from religion, nation, caste, colour, and gender differences (Crenshaw, 1991), patriarchal social structure which normalize gender violence as a tool of male dominance (MacKinnon, 1989; Butler, 1990, Nussbaum, 1995), and subalternity which establishing subaltern bodies as double silenced commodities because of patriarchy and colonialism (Spivak, 1988), this study asserts how the body of a woman turns to be battleground due to intersectionality, patriarchal norms, colonial marginalization.

Feminist Theoretical Framework

The present study is carried out through the lens of a feminist framework with multiple layers. It draws on the main feminist theories, which focus on gender, violence, patriarchy, and embodiment.

Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1991) establishes intersectionality as a reason for violence: “women experience discrimination as women, but they also experience discrimination because of race, class and other identities” (p. 1244). She claims that gender oppression increases when combined with class, race, caste, and religion.

Patriarchal Sexual Violence

Mackinnon (1989) argues, “Sexuality is the primary social sphere of male power” (p. 03). She further asserts, “Rape is not an exception in male domination, but a paradigmatic expression of it” (p. 172). Hence, she finds that sexual violence is a political device which is often used to reinforce patriarchal supremacy. Butler (1990) opines that gender tyranny is embedded in everyday structure. Nussbaum (1995) describes objectification as treating a person as a commodity for use. More accurately, the term defines it as the commodification of a female body.

Female Subalternity

Spivak (1988) argues, “If the subaltern speaks, she is no longer subaltern” (p. 308). Further, she believes that subaltern women are silenced twice, first by patriarchal power, then by colonial or national discourse. Spivak (1988) opines that under colonial and nationalist projects, the women during the partition faced oppression from two sides, i.e. domineering colonial/ national politics, and patriarchal domination. In addition, Spivak (1988) further argues that the subaltern cannot speak.

This framework provides the feminist analytical lens for studying the gender-based violence portrayed in the novel from the perspectives of intersectionality, patriarchy and subalternity.

Discussion

Intersectionality: The Female Body as a Communal Property

Deb (2011) takes *Ice-Candy Man* as a subject of the Holocaust and distressing moments during the partition of the Indian subcontinent. He maintains that religion played a major role in the moments of historical social and political upheaval. It caused the communal riots and killings. During the partition, the women were mostly targeted and were taken as a community honour. Butalia (1998) presents that violating women of the opposite religious group was a kind of religious revenge. The Hindu Ayah’s kidnap by a Muslim mob reveals this logic. She suffers the partition pains because of her Hindu identity; consequently, her body is considered communal property, and subsequently, she sustains the communal rage. The mob of the opposite religious group played with the female body. However, before the partition, the same Ayah is presented as the epicentre of the communal harmony. People of different religions congregate around her irrespective of their religious differences. “Ayah’s admirers coexist” peacefully (p. 19). They sit, joke and discuss political issues together. Despite diversified religious affiliations, they live peacefully and without religious bigotry, bias, prejudice and discrimination. The partition causes a complete shift in the relationships of the various religious communities. Before the partition, the Hindu Ayah is depicted as a symbol of communal harmony, after the partition, her status degenerates into the epicentre of communal disharmony. The Muslim mob inquires, “Where is the Hindu woman? The Ayah!” (p. 181). After finding Ayah, “They drag her out by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet, her lips are drawn away from her teeth, sleeve tear under her arm” (p. 183). The mob violently takes possession of Ayah and feels great pride in it: “The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands ... in their triumphant grimaces” (p. 183). The mob almost swallows her. Later on, the Hindu Ayah is permitted “to be raped by butchers, drunks and *goondas*” (p. 248). Her body is presented as the playground for the ‘national pastime’.

Lugones (2010) highlights the gender identities of Indian Muslims, Sikhs and Hindu women within hierarchical civilizational narratives. *Ice-Candy Man* delineates that colonial modernity and communal dissections work together to create political masculinities which allowed violence and forceful possession over women. Ayah is kidnapped in the midst of slogans “*Allah-o Akber and Pakistan Zindabad*” (p. 178). “Suddenly men roar slogans again: *Allah-o Akber* Where is Ayah... Ayah is Hindu?” (p. 179). The kidnapping of Ayah reveals that communalism, nationalism, patriarchy and colonial history intersect to commodify the colonized female body during the partition of the Indian subcontinent.

Besides the Hindu Ayah, the plight of the Muslim women is portrayed through the character of Hamida, the new Ayah for Lenny. “What a fallen woman. Hamida was kidnapped and raped by the Sikhs. She was taken to Amritsar,” as a result, “the husband- or his family- won’t take her back... It isn’t her fault she was kidnapped” (p. 215). She is a Muslim and becomes the prey to the partition consequences on the part of the Sikhs. The juxtaposition of Ayah’s/ Shanta’s (Hindu) story with Hamida’s (Muslim) story depicts that the bodies of the women of various religious identities were taken as communal property during the partition. The communal harmony prevailing before the partition was replaced with communal disharmony triggered in the wake of the division of the land. In addition, this reveals that communal violence uses the female bodies as an extension of the national honour. Thus, the prevailing intersectionality remains one of the major reasons for gender-based violence.

Sexual Violence as a Tool of Patriarchy

According to Butalia (1998), seventy-five thousand women of various religious communities were abducted and raped across the borders during the partition of the Indian subcontinent. *Ice-Candy Man* delineates the identical situation where women endure abusive and sexual violence as a political device through masculine supremacy.

A strong co-existential bond between the Muslims and the Sikhs is portrayed. To them their mutual peaceful bond is more important than their religious identities. The Sikh *granthi*, blesses the Muslim girls, “May the seven gurus bless you with long lives” (p. 54) He suggests their marriages soon. “Don’t you think it’s time their hands were painted yellow?” (p. 55). The Sikh *granthi* alludes to the henna-decorated hands of brides on the eve of their marriages. Later on, on the eve of the partition, the Sikhs turn upon the Muslim women as vengeful lions, sexually abuse and violated the females. Thus, the women suffer sexual and emotional trauma, which is the direct consequence of the partition. *Ice-Candy Man* presents the details of sexual violence against the females as “gruesome details” (p. 108); “the Sikhs attack at least five villages, they are “moving in marauding bands of thirty or forty thousand” and “killing all Muslims. Setting fires, looting, parading the Muslim women naked through the streets, raping and mutilating, in the centre of villages and in mosques.” (p. 197). The Muslim villagers decide to burn their women alive instead of letting them be raped and exploited by the Sikh mob. The canisters of kerosene are also arranged for burning their women. Women suffered sexual violence coupled with physical abuse, “do anything you want with me, but don’t torment me. For God’s sake, don’t torture me. Oh God! A man whispered, she is the mullah’s daughter” (p. 200). The mullah is killed, and his women are raped. Three or four male Sikhs rape a woman in the mosque, raising “*Wah Guru! Wah Guru! Stop* whimpering, you bitch, or I’ll bugger you again! Other men laughed. There was much movement ... moans. A woman screamed ... there was a loud cracking noise and the rattle of breath from lungs. Then a moment of horrible stillness” (p. 203). Eleven-year-old sister, Khadija “... run stark naked ... long hair dishevelled ... her body bruised, her lips cut and swollen and a bloody scab where her front teeth were missing” (p. 201). The Sikhs turned against the women as “vengeful demons” (p. 201). Hence, sexual violence is embedded as a tool of patriarchal male dominance supported by the social structures. Equally, the sexual violence was committed on the bodies of women to pacify their partition anger.

In context with the sexual violence as a patriarchal tool, Ayah’s body is presented as the playground for “the national pastime” (p. 259). She is taken to the Hira Mandi a red-light district (brothel), where she is transformed to a dancing girl, a prostitute, and Ice-candy-man becomes her pimp. Her body is presented as the playground first and then the battleground as a communal anguish and revenge. Ayah is taken in February and Ice-candy-man marries her in May, hence, he continues becoming her pimp for almost three months. He permits Ayah “to be raped by butchers, drunks and goondas” (p. 248). It symbolises the collective sexual violence against the females.

Mohanty (2003) argues that partition narratives cannot be studied in the gender context only; it requires religious, cultural and historical contexts. In this context, the novel presents the women’s bodies become symbolic territories on

which the people of the new states, on religious and political grounds, exert stress on masculine and communal power. The Hindu Ayah's rape and forced prostitution by the Muslims, Hamida's kidnapping and rape by the Sikhs and Sher Sing's sister's sexual assault and abusive sexual violence committed by the Sikhs in the Muslim village present sexual violence as a patriarchal tool to satisfy their anger against the opposite group. As a matter of reason, the people of diversified religious communities turned against one another because of the partition anguish and political polemics. Hence, this study has used the feminist lens to see sexual violence as a tool of a political device through patriarchal supremacy.

The Subaltern Women as 'Silenced Women'

Spivak (1988) claims that subaltern women are doubly silenced, first by masculine supremacy, then by colonial or national discourse. In *Ice-Candy Man*, the women who are sexually violated and traumatised physically and emotionally rarely speak for themselves, however, their trauma is narrated indirectly most often through their silence. When kidnapped, sexually assaulted, violated and abused the women appear again they remain silent and they are presented as neither alive nor dead. In this context, the Ayah remains the central figure in the novel, but after she is kidnapped, she disappears from the narrative. She considers herself dead when she says. "I am past, I'm not alive" (p. 262). She "refuses her tea" and is deadly calm with "her lower head" (p. 263). She is "emptied of life" (p. 264) and is "haunted by her past" (p. 265). Her haunting description and silence symbolises her social death. Symbolically, confirming Spivak's argument that subaltern women are denied narrative agency with dominant discourses. Thus, as a literary reflection, Ayah is considered a subaltern woman. Her sufferings remain unspoken; she is silenced.

Similarly, Hamida is also kidnapped and raped; consequently, she is refused acceptance by her own family. Both women represent countless silenced subaltern women who suffered the same trauma during the partition. Masculine supremacy, coupled with subaltern status, has silenced Ayah being "disgraced", "destroyed (of) her modesty" and "lived off her womanhood" (149). She is taken to the Hira Mandi, her body is commoditized and she is allowed to be raped by the people in masculine market. Thus, Ayah and Hamida symbolize many suffering subaltern women, who bear the consequences of the partition as an abominable repercussion of the colonization of the Indian subcontinent.

Conclusion

The analysis Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy Man* based on a triangulated feminist theoretical framework, including intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), patriarchal violence (MacKinnon, 1989; Butler, 1990; Nussbaum, 1995), and subalternity (Spivak, 1988) establishes that gender violence ensued after the partition of the Indian Subcontinent in the wake of the partition is not an isolated attempt of personal choice but it is deeply embedded and rooted in various intersecting the political, social, religious, ideological power structures which converge at the moment of this apocalyptic partition and fuel the communal violence against women. Women's bodies are the central battleground where the wars of nationalism and communalism are waged with male supremacy. The women are victimised and targeted as bodies of the enemy, as a matter of honour and revenge and silenced as damaged goods kept aside. Ayah, including other female characters, symbolises thousands of anonymous women whose sufferings are silenced during the partition of the Indian subcontinent.

From an intersectional perspective, the women suffer shaped by the intersecting forces of gender, religion, and class. Women, irrespective of religion, are targeted not only because they are women, but because their bodies symbolically represent communal honour and identity. The abduction of Ayah shows how communal violence becomes gendered, as her communal identity, social vulnerability, and female body together render her an easy object for violence, sitting at the crossroads of diversified intersectionality.

Through the lens of patriarchy, the study reveals that the novel normalises masculine supremacy and legitimises violence against women across both private and public spheres. Men use their power through control, surveillance, and sexual exploitation; on the other hand, women are reduced to objects of exchange and symbols of revenge based on their communal identities. *Ice Candy Man*'s transformation into a forceful perpetrator mirrors how patriarchy works together with nationalist and religious ideologies to validate gender-based violence against women.

Finally, the analysis from the subaltern perspective discloses the organised silencing of women's voices. Women like Ayah and Hamida experience vicious forms of violence, displacement, and dishonour and rejection; their suffering is hardly articulated in their own terms. Their silence is not a choice but a result of oppression, anxiety, and social erasure. The novel presents how the subaltern women "cannot speak," as their trauma is either ignored, mediated by

male voices, or absorbed into leading historical narratives of the Partition that give more importance to political and communal concerns than the gender-based violence experienced by the women.

Thus, the triangulated feminist theoretical framework, including intersectionality, patriarchal violence, and subalternity, exposes the planned oppression and gendered violence in the novel. The novel equally challenges male-dominated histories and reestablishes the experience of women at the centre of partition memory, which significantly contributes to feminist discourse. The study further establishes that women bear grave consequences in the wars or communal violence, and their bodies become the first battlegrounds and territories seized and traumatised with gender-based violence. Re-reading of *Ice Candy Man* and the history invokes a renewed interrogation of the power structures such as intersectionality, patriarchy and subalternity which perpetuate gender violence in the historical and contemporary context.

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