

Conceptualizing Partition of Subcontinent through Fiction: An Analysis of Ice-Candy Man

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ABSTRACT

This study is grounded in the analysis of political and historical content presented in the novel Ice-Candy Man written by Pakistani author Bapsi Sidwa. The theory of New Historicism has been employed with the aim to draw a parallel between history and its fictitious representation. This exploration of the narrative matrix vis-à-vis history investigates as how Sidwa's literary work presents the socio-political developments through fictitious characters and situations. The study has been conducted through an analysis of a literary text along with the non-literary text, to evaluate as how far the author has utilized the historical facts in her work of art. Sidwa is considered one of the first eminent English language novelists of Pakistan who captured the history of the country in her fictional works, especially the trauma and tragedy of troubled times of the Partition of subcontinent is a significant theme of her novel Ice-Candy Man. Hers historical fiction is note worthy as it presents the national history from the perspective of a

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minority because the writer herself is a Parsee Pakistani. A critical reader of the novel can decipher the history of Pakistan from a peripheral perspective because the mainstream chronicles of both history and fiction present the narrative of Muslims as the country gained its independence in the name of Islam; however, this novel presents the perspective of a religious minority. The present paper is an effort to examine representation of historical and political occurrences in the fictional narrative of Bapsi Sidwa; highlighting her use of historical facts as a subversive form of writing and to analyse as how literature and history concerning Partition can be read interchangeably?

Introduction

The colonial rule in subcontinent came to an end in 1947 with the birth of two nations—Pakistan and India. As the basis of division was the Two-Nation Theory, therefore both nations not only celebrated the departure of colonial rule but also the triumph of the Freedom Movement. Although the historians glorified the political struggles, the literary writers were more concerned about the traumatic impacts of this unplanned division. Partition was a sudden event for most of the residents of the region as in the early period of independence struggle; Hindus and Muslims were attempting to accomplish freedom conjointly, however, with the passage of time the political leadership of the Indian Muslims recognized that the priorities of both the religious groups did not coincide since the Hindus were the majority group and the Muslims were a minority in most of the provinces. In their opinion, in a Hindu majority country the demands of Muslim minority would be considered dissident voices and even if they jointly attain a democratically free country, democracy will be a messy affair in the post-Partition India. According to the proponents of Two Nation Theory, the opinion of the minority would always be drawn down by the majority and would not be given its due space in the national discourse. So with the passage of time, the political headmen of the Muslims of subcontinent articulated their demand for a separate homeland for the Indian

Muslims. This demand was formally enunciated on March 23, 1940.¹

This date was momentous for the Indian Muslims being the day when the demand for a sovereign homeland was declared in a prominent public meeting of the Muslim League. This very idea of difference between Hindus and Muslims became the cornerstone of the birth of the first nation state for the Muslims. The idea was labelled as the 'Two Nation Theory', which became the axiom during the last few days of the British Raj in India.² According to Ayesha Jalal, "While the genealogy of the "two nation" theory is at best suspect, Jinnah's need to invoke the idea of Muslim distinctiveness was also based on political and not religious opposition to the Congress".³

The idea of Two Nation Theory provided legitimacy to the Indian Muslims for their demand for a separate homeland, however, the basis on which the country was to be divided were not well defined yet. Even the geographical boundaries between the two states were officially known two days after the announcement of independence. Amongst all these muddles and confusions the most horrifying aspect of partition was the blood bath that followed people on both sides of the border and initiated the hatred that still simmers between the residents of both countries. The incident was so ginormous in its impact that it did not only affect the lives of the people who migrated from both countries to reside amongst the people of their own faith, but also affected the lives and narratives of many subsequent generations from across the border. According to Alok Bhalla, "The partition of the Indian subcontinent was the single most traumatic

1 Aitzaz Ahsan, *The Indus Saga and the Making of Pakistan* (Lahore: Nehr Ghar Publications, 1996), 117.

2 Ayesha Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 21.

3 Jalal, *The Struggle for Pakistan*, 26.

experience in our recent history.”⁴ The partition not only resulted in the political division of the country, communal and social bonds were also disrupted, families and clans were displaced, and individuals were torn apart; losing their identities. This tragedy has had huge impact on the psyche of the residents of this region and continues to do so. Perhaps this is the reason that the literary productions of both the countries elucidated the theme of Partition even after decades of independence, as the first generation authors were the eyewitnesses of this trauma.

In this regard, New Historicist study of literature is valuable and interesting as it gives equal weighting to both literary and non-literary text. Drawing upon the New Historicist framework, this study analyses *Ice-Candy Man* to investigate as how the author has used fiction to document history.

Partition of the Subcontinent: Historiography *vis-à-vis* Literary Productions

Decades after independence, the literary authors on both sides of the border kept on articulating the trauma of partition through their works of art. Because of the inherent cataclysm of the issue, the fiction writers starting from 1940s and coming down to the present still inscribe the partition and the violence that accompanied the event. These fictional chronicles not only register the history of partition but also create hitch between past and the present. Marialuisa Bignami states:

Re-presenting the past in fiction or history denotes opening it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological: both the genres appear to be equally inter-textual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality and suggesting that truths exist only in the plural, that there can never be one truth.⁵

4 Alok Bhalla, Introduction, *Stories about the Partition of India* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1994), 3.

5 Marialuisa Bignami, Francesca Orestano and Alessandro Vescovi eds., *History and Narration: Looking Back from the Twentieth Century* (Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 154.

Fiction writers critically subsume the patrimony of history as a reference point for the present to device their own opinions. The legacy of history is mercurially restructured in the fictional writings, for which at times the authors choose a particular incidence in the history or comment on the general course of events. But how and what the fictional writers choose depends on the author's prerogative that is influenced by the writer's ideology and ideals. The fictional writings are obviously not formal documentation of history; rather these narratives are interpretation of the antiquity directly influenced by the author's personal inclination.

The focus of the present study is *Ice Candy Man* as an exegesis of the history of partition of the subcontinent. Since, it is a work of an art, it presents the writer's personal viewpoint and ideology; influenced by her philosophy of life. The work is considered highly autobiographical because the author has lived the traumatic experience of partition personally. She refers to the fact in these words:

I was a child then. Yet the ominous roar of distant mobs was a constant of my awareness, alerting me, even at age seven, to a palpable sense of the evil that was taking place in various parts of Lahore. The glow of fires beneath the press of smoke, which bloodied the horizon in a perpetual sunset, wrenched at my heart. For many of us, the departure of the British and the longed-for Independence of the subcontinent were overshadowed by the ferocity of Partition.⁶

She has chosen the event of partition and recreated it through her fictional work, and not only presented the metanarratives of Hindus and Muslims but being a Parsee herself, she was able to incorporate the perspective of the minority narrative as well. In this way, her fictional text presents a counter narrative that at times challenges the grand narratives by presenting the mini narrative.

Although both, a historian and a literary author document the actual happenings of the past, however, the process and

6 Rituparna Roy, *South Asian Partition Fiction in English: From Khushwant Singh to Amitav Ghosh* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 66.

face value of both works is different. While a historian tries to make his or her work look like a 'scientific' work which presents the happenings of the past in an organized and sequential way, on the other hand the work of a literary author is much different from that of a historian. It is a work, which may be less scientific, and orderly, yet it presents the past in a more humane way. Aforementioned polarities can be observed in the fictional works of Bapsi Sidwa and that of a historical book. She presents the historical facts in human terms by presenting the hopes, disappointments, aspirations and ideals of the human beings in real life situation, but a historian documents the same incidents in a phlegmatic way. In Marialuisa Bignami's view:

From the Fifties to date, writers like Khushwant Singh in *Train to Pakistan*, Manohar Malgonkar in *A Bend in the River*, Sadat Hasan Manto in *Toba Tek Singh* or *Open It*, on either side of the India-Pakistan border, have been trying to grapple with this traumatic period. They use fictional space imaginatively to formulate discourses on a human centred, variously defined "Other" identity, which writes itself into existence through the prism of their own contextual present. The truths revealed are as much the novelists' truth, as they are those of the time, and they succeed in laying the foundation for the history of the future.⁷

The historical fiction demonstrating the partition of the subcontinent is very different from any other historical fiction; i.e. the Holocaust literature, or the Latin American historical fiction. In the pre-partition subcontinent, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsees and numerous other religious groups were living together and striving for the independence, however, the specificities of their ideologies were quite diverse. Before the arrival of the British, these 'nations' were living together for centuries harmoniously, however, this peaceful coexistence of different religions under one government was omitted in the metanarratives of partition and Sidwa prefers the same Rituparna Roy states the same fact in these words:

7 Marialuisa Bignami, *History and Narration: Looking Back from the Twentieth Century* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 157.

Undivided India, which freed itself from the colonial yoke, and the event of the Partition of the subcontinent are inextricably bound together. Thus, no post-colonial denizen of the subcontinent possessing a sense of history and living in the post-independence era can ignore the pervasive influence and impact of the Partition on contemporary life. Undoubtedly the most important determining factor in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh's destiny, the Partition is much more than a historical fact, however, for it has served and continues to serve as a compelling literary theme that has engendered a substantial body of fiction on the subcontinent, fiction that is startling in terms of its diversity of focus, style and treatment.⁸

Most authors from both sides of the border were trying to address the trauma of the Partition in which the families were displaced, women were molested, children were slayed and whole clans were deracinated. The post-partition literature narrated the stories of the effected families who saw trainloads of dead bodies, women and children abducted and molested in communal violence. The incidents were so harrowing that writers from both sides of the border just narrated the stories of bloodshed and conflagration. The authors used numerous languages to communicate and convey the trauma and disillusionment. Similarly, Sidwa has incorporated historical truths in her fictional works. Commenting on the content of *Ice-Candy Man*, Tariq Rahman states:

The indelicate is, however, juxtaposed with the serious, even with the tragic, so that it is not vulgar nor is meant to be. It serves other artistic purposes. One of them seems to be to enhance the element of verisimilitude in the novel. For real life is an organic whole in which one mood may dominate but others are never fully excluded. Thus, while the Sikhs are murdering the Muslims in the Punjab and the Muslims are killing the Hindus and Sikhs in Lahore, other trivial things are also going on. This truth about life is conveyed through the narrator's mentioning trivial and ludicrous personal details.⁹

8 Roy, *South Asian Partition Fiction in English*, 13.

9 Tariq Rahman, *A History of Pakistani Literature in English 1947-1988* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 164.

Fictional Narratives of Partition Holocaust

Although in the formal histories written on both sides of the border the historians have recorded the linear accounts of the facts, however, these works of historians lack the human factor (the emotional side of the historic events), whereas, the literary writers, who document the historical facts with all sensitivity, fill this gap. This method of the literary authors helps bring the marginalized versions of history to the limelight. The critics generally agree that the literary authors as compared to the historians better narrate the partition saga. According to Rituparna Roy:

The colossal human tragedy of the partition and its continuing aftermath has been better conveyed by the more sensitive creative writers and artists – for example in Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories and Ritwik Ghatak's films – than by historians.¹⁰

The version of history put forward by the literary authors in their fictional works presents the writers' subjective viewpoints. This position of the authors is formed by the existing ideologies of the time and place in which these artists reside. The socio-political themes of Sidwa's historical fiction contest reality without avoiding it. The fictional text under consideration in this paper foregrounds the theme of partition as the key theme of the text; within this scenario the novel fictionalizes many significant historical events of the partition.

Partition and Response of Fiction Writers

The partition of the Indian subcontinent was an epoch-making event in the history of 20th Century. The division of the land on the basis of religion might be an ebullient event for some groups however, the actual experience was more traumatic and less euphoric for the people on both sides of the border. The trauma of the partition hit people belonging to all ethnicities and religions because these people were living in communal harmony before this political division jolted the roots of the culture and displaced them

10 Roy, *South Asian Partition Fiction in English*, 20.

geographically. In the wake of all this distress and anguish, literary authors were affected the most by this event. The magnitude of this occurrence was so monumental that the literary writers from both sides of the border made this event as the major theme of their writings for many decades. Though some fiction writers were apprehensive in giving voice to their feelings with the fear of being stigmatized or marginalized, but some were vocal and open about this situation.

One such author is Sa'adat Hasan Manto who assertively and openly presented his views whereas the likes of Quratulain Haider chose to remain silent about this incident even if the fictional works were set in the same period. Partition is the major theme of most of Manto's short stories, especially *Toba Tek Singh* got fame because it can be taken as a prototypical partition story of Manto.¹¹ The story is set in the time period of partition in Lahore, where the inmates of a lunatic asylum try to situate themselves in the newly divided country. Through this story of the lunatics, Manto tries to present the disorientation of the dislocated people of South Asia in the newly independent country. Though the tone of the story is relatively comic, but it tragically articulates the trauma of partition.¹² Unlike Manto, Quratulain Haider writes about the years preceding and following the partition, however, she never even once mentions the subject of partition in her fictional works e.g. *Aag Ka Darya* [Urdu: *River of Fire*, 1998] and again in *Akhri Shab ke Musafar* (1994).¹³ Many other authors from across the border tried to narrate fictional stories about the horrors of partition. These writers not only tried to narrate the historical 'truth' through work of art but also voiced their own views about the partition.

11 Sailaja Krishnamurti, "Uncles of the Nation: Avuncular Masculinity in Partition-era Politics", *South Asian History and Culture* 5, no. 4 (August 2014): 421-37.

12 S. H. Manto, *Kingdom's End and Other Stories*, trans., Khalid Hassan (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1987).

13 Quratulain Hyder, *Fireflies in the Mist* (New York: New Directions, 1994).

Similarly, Sidwa narrates the details of the horrors of partition from the perspective of the minority. She has so far written five novels, and almost all are set in the backdrop of South Asia; either in India or Pakistan. The only novel that ventures abroad is *An American Brat*.¹⁴ The central themes of her fictional works might be a little bit different from each other, however, all have a similar strain that incorporates the social history. According to Anita Desai, Sidwa demonstrates “a passion for history and for truth telling.”¹⁵ In three novels of Sidwa, one can feel the constant urge of the author to comprehend the event of the partition and the emergence of Pakistan and India as two distinct nations. In *The Crow Eaters*, *The Bride*, and the *Ice Candy Man*, she narrates the terrible incident of the partition and the early troublesome years of Pakistan as a nation.

In the *Ice Candy Man*, Sidwa revisits history of the subcontinent and gives clear signposts of significant historical events throughout the text. She refers to the partition and independence and the struggles that accompanied the incidents throughout the narrative. The detail reveals the horrors of partition, and also narrates as how this horrific incident left hundreds and thousands of people displaced, exiled, and homeless. Many families were either hurt or lost their loved ones and also saw kinsmen being slaughtered in front of their eyes. The story is told by a 10 year old Parsee girl named Lenny. She sees the society and demography of her native land changing, so the narrative is presented from the point of view of the protagonist. Bapsi Sidwa comments on the reaction of all the religious groups living in the pre-partition scenario of the subcontinent. She acquires this goal with utmost craftsmanship by introducing the readers to various characters in the novel. These characters are part of Lenny’s close circle. Sidwa introduces the reader to the Hindu Ayah

14 Shreerekha Subramanian, *Women Writing Violence: The Novel and Radical Feminist Imaginaries* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2013).

15 V. P. P. Rao, K. N. Rani & D. D. B. Rao, *India-Pakistan: Partition Perspectives in Indo-English Novels* (New Delhi: DPH, 2004), 88.

Shanta, the Muslim cook, the Sikh zoo attendant and Dilnawaz, the Ice Candy Man. Sidwa uses these characters to show her readers the multi-coloured pre-partitioned society. Ayah Shanta was abducted by a Muslim mob because she was Hindu. The most prominent actor in this incident is Ice Candy man himself, who was once her admirer. But this socio-religious discrimination is not limited to the Ayah only; by the end of the narrative the Ice Candy man also becomes a victim of same intolerance. At the end of the story he is beaten up, while Ayah manages to escape to the other side of the border.

Sidwa marks the difference while narrating the history of partition. Her work is distinct because it presents the alternative view of history, not only because it brings forward the viewpoint of the marginal but also because it is the perspective of a female. She informs her reader through the female visualization of the partition. The source of her fiction is her first hand experience of the event and historical accounts she read about the event. She admits this fact in these words:

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 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 could do to correct an injustice I would like to do. I have just let facts speak for themselves, and through my research I found out what the facts were.¹⁶

Since the main struggle was between the Hindus and Muslims so being a Parsee gave Sidwa an edge to look at the history more objectively. She admits this fact in these words, "The struggle was between the Hindus and the Muslims, and as a Parsee, I felt I could give a dispassionate account of this huge, momentous struggle (...) as a Parsee, I can see things objectively."¹⁷

16 Vandana Pathak, Urmila Dabir & Shubha Mishra, *Contemporary Fiction: An Anthology of Female Writers* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2008), 80.

17 Roy, *South Asian Partition Fiction in English*, 64.

Depiction of Partition Politics

Sidwa presents the partition politics through her fictional work but it is not direct reporting, rather the political and social upheavals are revealed indirectly through characters and situations. Lenny being the narrator of the story becomes aware of the important political actors of the country through others. According to Roy:

She invariably (though unwittingly) becomes a sharer in all the political talk that is a major ingredient of the novel; and it is chiefly through these conversations (which very often turn into bitter and acrimonious arguments) that she comes to know of the imminent Partition of the country and its chief players. 'Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, Iqbal, Tara Singh, Mountbatten are names I hear.'¹⁸

Communal Polarization

It is not just the politics of the partition that Lenny understands during this short period of time but also the division within society on the basis of religion and social class. The same fact is articulated by the author in these words:

It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves —and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer my all-encompassing Ayah —she is also a token. A Hindu carried away by a renewed devotional fervour she expends a small fortune in joss-sticks, flowers and sweets on the gods and goddesses in the temple.¹⁹

Geographical Divisions

Referring to the geographical division of the two countries Sidwa comments, "Playing British gods under the ceiling fans of the Falettis Hotel —behind Queen Victoria's garden skirt —the Radcliffe Commission deals out Indian cities like a pack of cards. Lahore is dealt to Pakistan, Amritsar to India, Sialkot to Pakistan, and Pathankot to

18 Roy, *South Asian Partition Fiction in English*, 68.

19 Bapsi Sidhwa, *Ice Candy Man* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2000), 93.

India".²⁰ She reiterates the fact that the division of the land is not a well thought out plan rather is done unwittingly.

Gurdaspur Train Incident

Bapsi Sidwa has not only documented the details of the communal violence indirectly but some incidents in the text directly comment on the similar actual happenings. The Gurdaspur train incident is one such incident in the text.

I lose my senses when I think of the mutilated bodies on that train (...) 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 want to kill someone for each of the breasts they cut off the Muslim women.²¹

The narrative incorporates the history of small towns as well as of large cities. Sidwa tells the reader about the condition of the small towns by narrating stories about small places like Dera Tek Singh as well as commenting about the large cities such as Lahore by portraying its post-independence life.

Historical Truths

Although Sidwa tries to portray a neutral image of the partition by using the narrator who is neither Muslim nor Hindu, however a critical reader of her fictional work can clearly understand the undertone of her literary work that is inclined more towards the Muslims and Pakistani narrative. The reason behind this predisposition can be her nationality as she has spent half her life in a country where Muslims are in majority. In addition, perhaps, this is not the only reason behind her propensity towards this version; probably it is the commitment of the author towards the historical truth that has pushed her in narrating the realities that many historians have recorded in their works.

Sidwa has graphically described the Gurdaspur train incident; the other significant incident was the attack of the Sikhs on the Muslim village in Punjab. Many other historians

20 Sidhwa, *Ice-Candy Man*, 140.

21 Sidhwa, *Ice Candy Man*, 90.

have also documented the same fact. Nicholas Mensergh, a British Historian visited India in the summer of 1947 and wrote an essay chronicling the fact in these words: "There was a widespread feeling, which in the light of after-events must honestly be recorded, that in the Punjab Sikhs were spoiling for a fight, and whatever happened elsewhere, there serious trouble was hardly to be avoided."²²

Lahore faced many tragic incidents during the time period when the Hindus and Sikhs were leaving the city. The main narrator of the novel comments on the communal riots in these words:

How long does Lahore burn? Weeks? Months? (...). Mozang Chawk burns for months... and months... And the hellish fires of Lahore spawn monstrous mobs. These no more resemble the little processions of chanting urchins that Warris Road spawned —and that Adi and I shouted ourselves hoarse in —than the fires that fuse steel girders to mortar resemble the fires that Imam din fans alive in our kitchen grates every morning.²³

Mass Migration

Other than narrating different aspects of the partition, Sidwa does not forget to tell her reader as how the historic migration of the region happened. The Hindus and Sikhs residing in Lahore for centuries had to leave the place, abandon the buildings and houses they called hem for generations because the city was now under the jurisdiction of a Muslim state. The author voices this fact through Mr. Singh in these words: "The Mehtas have gone! The Malothras have gone! The Guptas have gone! (...). I don't think there are any Hindu families left on Warris Road... just two Sikh families; the Pritam Singhs and us."²⁴ The novel further documents the fact that people were leaving their belongings behind and even if some tried to carry these across the border were looted on their way. The empty

22 Nicholas Mensergh, "The Last Days of British Rule in India: Some Personal Impressions," In *South Asian Partition Fiction in English*, Rituparna Roy, 74.

23 Sidwa, *Ice Candy Man*, 139.

24 Sidwa, *Ice-Candy Man*, 145

houses of the migrants were either burnt or plundered by the angry mobs.

Plight of Women

The women on both sides of the border were the worst victims of the violence. The whole narrative of partition is presented through Ayah's experience, and the integrated close circle of this particular character can be taken as representative of the multi-ethnic community of the subcontinent. The plight of those women who were either raped or abducted by the rival community has been highlighted in the novel. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin have also described the experiences of women during partition in these words as:

The violence of abduction and forcible recovery of women were subjected, to both, at the hands of men of the other community and within their own families, and to demonstrate how these diverse, yet linked, kinds of violence formed part of a continuum of violence that began pre-Partition.... Such violence, specific though it may be to a particular historical moment and to communal conflict, may enable us to gain some insight into the more mundane violence and abuse that form part of the everyday experience of women.²⁵

Conclusion

After analysing the fictional text in the light of the non-fiction, it can be concluded that Bapsi Sidwa's novel *Ice-Candy Man* plays on the historical truths. The author mourns the tragedy of the masses, and presents the lived history as she herself experienced this tragedy as a child. The reading of the relevant literature has also made her aware of such horrible times of the past.

25 Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 40.