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Three Protagonists, Same Voice- A Comprehensive Study Of The Voiceless Minorities In Three Novels

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Abstract

This paper on Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*, Vidiyadhar Surajprasad Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* would undertake a comprehensive study on the three marginalized voices and problematizes the concept of homeland. Although the characters and situations are entirely different from each other, they share the same common problem-. They belong to the minorities and are not adequately represented. Lenny, Salim and Antoinette underscore how the voices of minorities are often heard but not paid a heed to in a crowd of Eurocentric and local voices.

Lenny, a young Parsi girl with a limp, lost her closest companion *Ayah* and felt a revolt bubbling inside her but the Parsi society didn't let her express it, in fear that it would cause a rift between them and the other community. Their family observed the horrific violent acts during the ethnic warfare between two major communities in undivided India. *The Bend in the River* is the story of Salim, who being a Indian Muslim in Africa always felt a nag behind him as he could never fit into either category, a struggle to survival marked his existence. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette lost her mental sanity, never really accepted by the people she considered as her own, lost her mother and her autonomy and finally got betrayed by her white husband who even fetisized her beauty and never trusted her black companions. Her voice was curbed due to imprisonment and because of the English narrative style in the preceding novel which branded her as the *madwoman in the attic*.

However there always lies a sense of solidarity binding these communities together in the form of strategic essentialism. The problems faced exclusively by the minority community and a struggle to thrive is often neglected in narratives. Problems of identity crisis have always affected minorities no matter the place they settled or the time period they concerned themselves with.

Keywords- Bapsi Sidhwa, Ice candy Man, Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea , violence, minority, lost voices, struggle, identity.

Introduction

World literature of Goethe was a Eurocentric phenomenon but to break these stereotypes these three novels of the post-colonial era give voice to the voiceless.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), subsequently published in the US as '*Cracking India*' was published in the year 1991, is the first Pakistani Anglophone novel involving the Parsi family of the Sethis. The novel talks about the horror of violence seen through the eyes of a disabled girl who aged from four to eight in the novel. A majority of the novel takes place in Lahore which was then situated in India. It talks about the status of a Parsi family which became observers of the horrific violent acts during the ethnic warfare between two major communities in undivided India, i.e. - the Hindus and the Muslims. However, there were over a few thousand Parsis all huddled together in Waris Road. The story of *Ice-Candy Man* is based on the real tragic history of the partition of India into two independent nations called India and Pakistan but from the point of view of a Parsi girl.

Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, a Trinidadian writer, published his novel "A Bend In The River" in the year 1979 steadily through the dark reality of post-colonial Africa and talks about the view of an outsider to the decolonization of the African subcontinent. Widely hailed as Naipaul's greatest work, it delves into the life of a young Indian man who moves to an isolated town at the bend of a great river in a newly independent African nation. Salim a Muslim of Indian descent who lived at first in the east coast of Africa is considered doubly as an outsider. Belonging to the minority community, he is a neutral eye but still struggles to build his business against a backdrop of growing chaos, conflict, ignorance, and poverty. Through his narration we witness communal riots and several illegal activities like smuggling, that forcefully dragged Salim into trouble. Salim describes the plight of outsiders and minorities after post colonization as the minorities huddled close together bounded by communal solidarity.

Jean Rhys' "*Wide Sargasso Sea*" was published in 1966. It acts as a prequel to Charlotte Bronte's "*Jane Eyre*". This novel, though set in the 1800's, depicts the struggles and identity crisis of the Creole community. The creoles were a mixed race and were made to feel like outsiders by the major inhabitants. The protagonist of this novel is the infamous 'madwoman in the attic', Bertha Mason who was originally named as Antoinette Cosway was a Martinique living in Jamaica. She and her family struggled to thrive and were at risk all the time. The creole family in this novel was the Cosways (later Masons), former slave owners. The safe walls of Colibri estate feels safe no more as the family is attacked and tried to be oppressed by the majority communities. Married to an Englishman, Antoinette is caught between his demands and her own precarious sense of belonging and is thus driven into madness. The novel describes the background to Mr. Rochester's marriage from the point-of-view of his wife Antoinette.

This paper will provide a voice to the minorities by portraying their fears, alienation and lack agency against the backdrops of rebellion.

Voiceless witnesses to Communal violence

Quoting young Lenny from 'Ice candy Man', communal violence and riots have been described as

(...) Setting fires, looting, parading the Muslim women naked through the streets - raping and mutilating them in the center of village and in mosques. The Bias, flooded by melting snow, and the monsoon, is carrying hundreds of corpses. There is an intolerable stench where the bodies, caught in the bends, have piled up [Sidhwa 172].

Being a neutral eye, Lenny saw the unbearable sites. She found the body of the Masseur in a gunny bag, the Death of inspector Rogers which was soon forgotten. Her nanny Ayah was kidnapped by the Muslim mob which she realistically describes. She graphically describes the Buildings of the Hindus burning and the Train incident and the tearing of a man. At a young age she saw how women's bodies had become a site of violence with rapes and abduction and the plight of fallen women. Women in India have always been the subalterns and a limp Parsi girl was practically voiceless. She could do nothing to help the people. Her community had to lay low so that they don't get noticed and attacked.

Quoting Salim from 'A Bend in the River', *"Rebel activity ignited in the bush. The President sent white mercenaries, and they swiftly quashed the rebellion"*. [Naipaul 106]. After winning independence from the European colonists, the native Africans put up statues, monuments, and even street signs. Salim, though an outsider, had to move away from the east coast, scared that the riots and persecutions would lead him to lose his life. Increasing violence was perpetrated by the Liberation Army led Salim to move out of the country and to go to London. Also, Mahesh's wife Shoba had to hurriedly return to her place because of the communal violence in the east coast. Salim was neutral to these displays of violence but at the same time it affected him negatively. Although he was hidden among the minorities, he had to give up his business. Salim also describes the death of Father Huismans who although belonged to one of the majorities, his death affected none.

The racial hierarchy in 1830's Jamaica is shown to be complex and strained, with tension between whites born in England, creoles or people of European descent born in the Caribbean, black ex-slaves, and people of mixed race. The resentment between these groups leads to hatred and violence. . Antoinette's beloved house was burnt down to the ground by the angry blacks, her mother's horse was poisoned and her deformed brother Pierre was left to die in the fire by Myra only because of the hatred towards the Creoles. Someone even threw a stone at young Antoinette, thus injuring her on the head (being a young girl, she was voiceless then). The violence was not only manifested physically but also emotionally. Antoinette describes the jeers and smirks that welcomed her family. As well as the emotional unavailability of her own husband towards her. Locking her up in the Attic at Thornfield Hall was another manifestation of communal violence of which Bertha was dragged into only because of her minority status.

A question for identity.

A question for identity is continually seen in all the three novels. During a congregation of the Parsis, there was a debate as to where the Parsis belong to. Both the Hindu and the Muslim community believe that the Parsis have sided with the Britishers. The Parsi community has always remained a minority and felt a threat of its extinction under the rule of dominant communities. They argue pointlessly if they should go with Hindus, Muslims or the Sikhs, weighing the pros and cons of going with each side. They have to be careful with each step they take and to side with the party that's winning. Earlier Lenny only cared if Warris Road would be in India or Pakistan. Later, she witnessed her nanny Ayah losing her identity after being abducted as her name was changed from Shanta to Mumtaz. Quoting Lenny, *'one day everybody is themselves and the next day, they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christians'*. [Sidhwa.101]. Parsis found no place in her monologue.

Salim narrates the opening line of the novel: *"The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it."* [Naipaul 1]. Nearly all of the characters in the novel 'A Bend in the River' suffer from feelings of dislocation. Some of these characters have been geographically displaced from their homes, and some feel alienated from the cultures they grew up in. They have a mixed ethnic or racial heritage that makes them feel out of place. We find Salim, considering himself as an outsider in post-colonial Africa. Post-colonial Africa consisted of the European population and one state for the indigenous population but Salim belonged to none, plagued by the sense of aloofness and helplessness, he could neither directly participate in the activities nor do something to improve his situation. He could neither call himself a true African, nor connect to his Indian roots. When he went to the European Domain, he still felt like an outsider. He often questioned where he belonged and fit it. He didn't even find any connection to London. He often complained how any history he came to know was from history books and that he knew nothing of his ancestors.

Antoinette in the very first part of the book made it clear that she doesn't identify as either white or black, referring to both groups as 'the whites' and 'the blacks'. She began to question her identity as blacks called them 'white cockroaches' and the Europeans referred them as 'white niggers'. She belonged to a family of slave owners and after the Slavery Emancipation Act of 1833, her family was left with no identity or power. Even Tia talked about 'real white people with gold money' that made Antoinette question what her real identity was. She talks about eating English food and never really being able to connect with her roots. She missed Christophine's cooking instead. While talking to Rochester she once said *"I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all"* [Rhys II.4.1.61]. Antoinette, under the pressure of her race and gender, is forced to develop a hatred of her own identity.

A sense of contempt and distrust

Quoting from "Ice-candy Man" a Parsi during a meeting about partition expressed his contempt towards Gandhi saying *"Who does Gandhi think he is?"* [Sidhwa p.35]. Another person in the crowd comments upon the Indian National Congress being a "Gangsters". The Parsis seem feeling left out and unsafe. these were some of the few lines showing the contempt of people towards power. A haunting sense of distrust is seen throughout the novels. The minorities do not really trust the Britishers or the Hindus or the Muslims power which was evident when Lenny's father was hosting a dinner party with inspector Rogers. The little

community of two hundred had a hatred for political leaders as well as the violence. Lenny couldn't even trust the Ice-candy in the last part of the novel as he betrayed her by taking Shanta.

In the case of Salim his mistrust towards Yvette and her husband Raymond seemed like an inbuilt fear of colonizers in his heart. Yvette seemed to drain away all his love and affection just like colonizers drained a country of its resources. A sense of disgust is seen in Salim when his own servant Metty betrays him and informs the police about the hidden casket of ivory and gold just after the Big Man has nationalized everything and has given Salim's store away to Theotime who knew nothing about handling a business. When Salim is being taken away to prison, he views the president's "Discipline above all" Signs with a deep sense of contempt. Salim hated the concept of New Africa and the officers taking absurdly large bribes. Salim couldn't even place his trust on Metty, who got him caught. Over the course of the novel, Salim grows increasingly suspicious of both civilizations. Talks at the Domain about "the New Africa" strikes him as dangerously detached from the real Africa.

In Antoinette's case, so much was her contempt towards the people of majority that she says 'Black ants or red ones, tall nests.... Once I saw a snake. All better than people. Better. Better, better than people' [Rhys I.1.3.38]. While Antoinette is growing up she is subject to the hate that society has on her. She even contempt Mr. Mason and called him 'white pappy'. She didn't want to meet him during her time at the convent. Anette, Antoinette's mother trusted no one, not even the servants only because they were black. She held the people around her with contempt as they all had 'hating faces'. Tia was perhaps the first black girl who made Antoinette feel such a deep sense of contempt, followed by the drunken Negroes and Amilie. She viewed mister Mason with contempt as well as her brother Richard and Mister Rochester and Grace Poole.

Uncanny fear

In the very beginning of the novel, we discover that Lenny suffered from a fear of lions. This however was replaced with the fear of bombs as she said 'fear of bombs that tinged with bitterness my mother's milk' [p.49]. She was scared when she asked both Ayah and Cousin if India would be cracked and if she wouldn't be able to visit her Godmother anymore. And even her witness to trauma such as the news of a gunny bag full of women's breasts makes her think frightfully as what would happen if her own mother's breasts would be detached. Sexuality became uncanny for her because she never understood it entirely but only knew it as a way men could commit gendered crimes upon women. At the starting of the novel, the carefree and happy four-year-old Lenny we see would have become a rather frightened, self-hating and pessimistic ten years old version of herself. She had trouble sleeping and was plagued with nightmares.

Salim had to dwell in the fear of losing his assets to the new government. The Liberation army was no better wreaking havoc wherever they went as they were young, self-important and often got drunk. He couldn't even stay at one place because after the town's boom, all business came to a standstill. Shoba, belonging to the same minority, talked about her frightened while she visited the east coast for her father's funeral. There was no financial security and fear lurked after him. But Salim was different from the other two characters as he acted against his fear and hid ivory and gold at the foot of his stairs. Helpless had overridden his fear.

Antoinette lived in fear because of the trauma she had to face in her childhood. She had seen her mother's horse getting poisoned and her house being set on fire. Every time she slept, she had often wanted to have a large Cuban dog lying by her side. She also kept a log where she slept thinking that it would protect her. She even says that she is scared of being happy which shows how repressed and frightened she must have felt. The twisted faces and the gaping mouths of the blacks frightened her and she was even frightened

of losing the love of Rochester as deep inside she didn't trust him for he was white. When Rochester asked her why she didn't want to marry him to which Antoinette replied that she's scared of him.

Financial losses

The financial losses faced by the minorities are different in a sense they couldn't act upon it instantly in fear of getting discovered and dragged into violence, so they had to wait longer to be stable.

Lenny's family met with a financial crisis near the end of the novel when her mother asked her husband for money and this incident caused their relationship to fall apart. Mister Sethi was plagued with tension and eventually ended up having an affair. Lenny's mother is often seen pestering her husband for money as she had to pay Lenny's physiotherapist and to get clothes for her children. Even Colonel Barucha lost his patients near the end of the novel.

Salim is the narrator of the novel and after he moves deeper into the continent he opens a shop, selling small items. He mentors Ferdinand and hires Metty, but goes back to England for a while. He finds, upon his return, that the Big Man has nationalized everything and has given Salim's store away. His store would be managed by an African named Theotime who caused losses. He faces a huge financial loss and is eventually forced to smuggle gold and ivory after having learnt about this illegal trade from his friend Mahesh. Inder, who was a part of the minority as well, complained about not getting a job like the white boys did, although he was similarly educated. Even after the boom of the town, he continued being hit by financial losses and had to move from place to place in order to stay afloat.

Antoinette's family suffered from a huge financial crisis after the Slavery Emancipation Act of 1833. This led them to lose all slaves working in their plantation and they eventually grew so poor that Antoinette had no ribbon to tie her hair and no clothes. They had no food to eat and ate salt fish instead of fresh fish. Tia had even called them beggars in the first part of the story. There was no financial security and they gained money only after Anette married mister Mason. They lived in their dilapidated house earlier with no money to even repair the leaky roof. When talking to Daniel, Rochester found that Anette's previous husband, Mister Cosway died drinking as he was plagued with a financial crisis after emancipation. Also, both Anette and Antoinette could get no work because no one trusted their family.

Conclusion

Concluding the paper, we came to know that minorities are the one that suffered the most in silence. It can be undoubtedly said that Bapsi Sidhwa, Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul and Jean Rhys are masters of representing their lost voices in their respective works. The pathos and suffering of the minorities have been aptly depicted in these novels

We further conclude that the suffering of the minorities was universal in nature and affected them irrespective of their gender, location and time period. The issues faced by the minorities that includes loss, detachment, identity crisis, financial problems, fear and contempt is vividly depicted in these novels which give these novels a special place in English literature.

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