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The Plight Of The Mother And Motherland: The Ayah As The Nation In Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*

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Abstract: Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *Ice-Candy Man* gives a microcosmic view of the grimness and the brutalities of the Partition of India. Through the child Lenny, suffering from a deformed leg she gives a view of how life changes in a wink. Sidhwa projects the terrible lot of the Ayah, the Hindu woman of eighteen, working in a Parsee household, acting as the nanny to the narrator, whose attractive personality and existence is mauled by a group of Muslim avengers in particular and by the turn of the events in general. Shanta the Ayah is scarred and charred by the men and especially the Ice-Candy Man, the popsicle man who had been a prominent admirer in the huge train of admirers who flocked to her for her company. She is bought and sold, molested and raped, disgraced and tortured. In her dishevelled form and her shamed self she resembles the Nation torn and shattered by its own people. In her sari, the traditional wear of an Indian woman, her caring gestures and feminine gait she is a mother, becoming one with the Motherland in their ruin.

Index Terms: Partition, jingoism, patriotism, identity, Nation

Bapsi Sidhwa (1938-2024), the Parsee writer of South Asian origin, is popularly known as the Pakistani woman writer with keen insight of looking into the life of the different communities intricately woven in the fabric of South Asia. She deeply studies the world around her from her partially distanced stance of a Parsee writer amidst the scuffles and turmoil of the Hindu Muslim communities in the North Western part of the Indian subcontinent. The characters of the novels have a wide range of people who are similar in their aspirations, but widely varied, as each character appears strikingly alien to the others and the novel evinces the chiaroscuro of different characters. The male characters though prominent in their flesh and blood stature are unlike the women characters who sprawl through the entire novel spreading out their beauty and languor and come out as the spokes in the wheels that drag the novel to its fruition. The women stand spread-eagled throughout the novel and create their mark.

In *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), the “eighteen-year-old ayah” (11) Shanta, works in a Parsee household and basically functions as the nanny to Lenny, the little girl who is suffering from *polio* and has to move around with a deformed leg. The ayah’s chocolate brown complexion with her charm, gait and her attractive personality gather suitors around her, who work in the household, the gardener or cook, the tradesmen or the other men who gather in and around the house in an attempt to come close to her amidst their work. The household brims with people, men and women, workers and traders in the wake of the Partition of India. The individuals who had begun with their individual stories of success and loss, stories of achievement or failures, stories of their home and hearth transform to become different communities clubbed together, fighting for survival. Almost every character in one way or the other participates in representing her/his community, and stand up for the community in the course of the novel. Some of them become jingoists claiming themselves to be a warrior fighting for the nation.

Nationhood becomes a layered understanding and every figure comes to terms with the same in her/his way. At times the community and taking resort to the community's core makes the characters come to a home and nation when every factor like home or nation become nebulous. In difficult time, when "Hindus... [were] being murdered in Bengal... Muslims, in Bihar" (55), community's name meant more than one's own name. The women belonging to any religion, Hindu, Muslim or Sikh became the locus of attacks of the men. As the veteran feminist critic Urvashi Butalia comments in her seminal text *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* on the magnanimity of the violence meted out to the women, the refugees' "experience of dislocation and trauma ...find[s] little reflection in written history" (1998: 9) (Butalia). The understanding of nation begins with a sense of oneness in spite of the different consciousnesses that every character brings. The nation brings a spirit of nationhood that is understood and internalized by different characters in the drastically same spirit of oneness, initially— "Muslim or Sikh, we are basically Jats. We are brothers. How can we fight each other?" (56). The conversation between different communities prove heart-warming—

‘If needs be, we’ll protect our Muslim brothers with our lives! Says Jagjeet Singh.

‘I am prepared to take an oath on the Holy Koran,’ declares the *chaudhry*, ‘that every man in this village will guard his Sikh brothers with no regard for his own life!’ (56-7).

However with the agitation on the brink of the Partition of India, the spirit of oneness recedes and what prevails is the urge to kill. The nation is not seen as the happy convergence of different communities, rather each community poses as the nation.

The Partition of India with the birth of Pakistan was yet unthought-of and as the people wondered as to the nature of the ‘cracking’ that would ensue because of the Partition, people could never think of how or in what order a new nation could be born tearing apart the sinews of the parent nation. Children feel worried if the nation should be cracking at their part of the house and a crisis of identity emerges as the child Lenny understands, “I am Pakistani. In a snap. Just like that” (140). The child narrator observes, the Indian cities were given out, “like a pack of cards,” (114) Lahore, Amritsar, Sialkot, Pathankot and all.

The Ayah though scared was not much perturbed by the talks of nationhood and murders. Encircled by a host of admirers as the Masseur, the Ice-Candy-man, Imam Din, “two new admirers: a Chinaman and the Pathan” (73), her dreamy eyes preserved the dream of time-hallowed love like that of Sohni Mahiwal. The attention that was all hers was not quite unnoticed of Lenny, who in her childish perceiving felt every vibe that touched her companion:

I lie on the grass, my head on Ayah’s lap, basking in— and intercepting—The warm flood of stares directed at Ayah by her circle of admirers. The Falletis Hotel cook, the Government House gardener, a sleek and arrogant butcher and the zoo attendant, Sher Singh...Masseur and Ice-candy-man drift over to us and join the circle (88-89).

The loots, the plundering and the sudden attacks by people of several communities do not dampen her spirits. She remains her charismatic self with people around her to make her feel safe and secure. As the child narrator observes, in spite of differences brewing in the society, “Only the group around Ayah remains unchanged. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee are, as always, unified around her” (97). Though a Punjabi, as the Ice-Candy Man would ask, ‘*Shanta bibi*, you’re Punjabi, aren’t you?’ (29), and she would demurely reply, ‘For the most part,’ (29) to the Ice-Candy Man, her preference for the sari gives her the common Indian stature. She becomes a representation of India in her penury— “‘I’ve saved my whole salary this month.... forty rupees!’” (76) and complacency at once.

Shanta, the ayah of the household, and her attractiveness become the powerful locus around whom the entire world of men turn in Lenny, the child narrator’s household. The Ice-Candy Man makes advances towards the ayah, which are subtly rejected. Instead the ayah finds a better companionship in the Masseur to whom she extends sexual favours. In the wake of violence the Masseur is killed and his body lay as, “A thing. One side of his handsome face already buried in the dusty sidewalk” (175). The grimness of the masseur’s transformation from ayah’s lover to a mere body becomes conspicuous in Lenny’s narration:

The swollen gunny sack lies directly in our path. Hari pushes it with his foot. The sack slowly topples over and Masseur spills out— half on the dusty sidewalk, half on the gritty tarmac— dispelling the stiletto reek of violence with the smell of fresh roses (174).

The death of the Masseur had heralded the metaphorical death of the ayah who had been ruined by his death. The ayah as his counterpart is given a death-in-life existence; her life makes death easy. People are forced to change their religion as sweeper Moti, Muccho, Papoo all turn Christian and “Hari-the-gardener has become Himat Ali!” (180). As he is forced to recite the Kalma, he “injects into the Arabic verse the cadence and intonation of Hindu chants (181).

The ayah's notion of being safe and protected shatters as she is dragged out of her hiding and brutally tortured for days and months. As in the hands of the colonizers India had been ruined and made to grovel in dust, similar sight comes to the fore as the Ayah is raised up by brutal hands and put on the cart. Bereft of her grace, her motherliness and concern for the child Lenny, she appeared as an emblem of the Nation that had been severed and its people maimed and murdered; mangled bodies lying everywhere. Punjabi as she was, she had never worn a salwar kameez; instead her sari, the traditional wear of an Indian woman. The men of different communities had been attracted to her and the train of admirers had congealed to form one nation around her. Later she becomes the emblem of the nation that is torn apart. As the prominent critic Deniz Kandiyoti observes, women—

bear the burden of being 'mother of the nation' ... as well as being those who reproduce the boundaries of ethnic/ national groups who transmit the culture and who are the privileged signifiers of national difference (Kandiyoti 1490).

The group of Muslim hooligans and pretend warriors uphold the right of their nation avenging the cut off Muslim breasts found in bags, take out the ayah from the house as their prize, the trophy by violating her sanctity,

The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands, supporting her with careless intimacy, lift her into it. Four men stand pressed against her, propping her body upright, their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces (183).

...as a revenge for the incident, narrated:

A train from Gurdaspur has just come in... Everyone in it is dead. They are all Muslim. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny bags full of women's breasts!" (149).

With the beginning of the riots the Ice-candy Man visits the house of the Sethis, where the ayah works, with a gang of rough men with cries of 'Allah-o-Akbar!' and 'Pakistan Zindabad' (178). They ransack the house in search of the ayah who is a "Hindu" (179). The men with "eyes, lined with black antimony" (179) intent upon finding the ayah, go about questioning the members of the household. The Ice-Candy Man in his turn plays his trick on the child Lenny, whom he assures, "Don't be scared, Lenny baby,... I'm here.... I'll protect Ayah with my life! You know I will... I know she's here. Where is she?" (182). And like the "monkey-man's performing monkey, the trained circus elephant, the snake-man's charmed cobra, an animal with conditioned reflexes that cannot lie..." (184), Lenny succumbs to the Ice-Candy Man's guile. As the narrator in a child's keenness of vision observes:

Ice-candy-man's face undergoes a subtle change before my eyes, and as he slowly uncoils his lank frame into an upright position, I know I have betrayed Ayah (182).

The men had their due of the Hindu flesh and the Ice-Candy-man had meted out his part of vengeance upon the ayah for having preferred the Masseur, his rival in vying for the Ayah's favours. The masseur had been already found dead but the ayah was not to be killed as the Ice-Candy man had deep desire to possess the ayah and acquire the woman, as the warriors of the land would have the nation all to themselves after the Partition. They burnt down their nearest kin in a dire urge to possess the nation. As critics Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon observe in their article, violence becomes "an indicator of the place that women's sexuality occupie[d] in an all-male, patriarchal arrangement of gender relations, between and within religious or ethnic communities (Menon and Bhasin 41).

The ayah being dragged "by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet", her bare teeth, as a "dead child's screamless mouth," her sari slipped off her shoulder, her breasts stretching at the cloth of her sari blouse (183), resemble the Nation that was "Cracking", that was "tear[ing] under her arm" (183). Her beauty, her attractiveness, her gait of wearing her sari, her neatly tied hair, lies grovelling in the dust. India breaks into its parts and so too the ayah. The ayah loses her candour as the Ice-Candy-man trades her flesh in the same way as the inmates of the nation and the Britishers had hewed the flesh of the motherland.

The ayah was brutally tortured in the hands of several men over days, months and years. As the Godmother claims,

'You permit her to be raped by butchers, drunks, and *goondas* and say she has come to no harm?'... 'You have permitted your wife to be disgraced! Destroyed her modesty! Lived off her womanhood!' (248-49).

The Ice-Candy man's tortures were done in a way to avenge her desires which were for an *other* man than he. Confirmed to beat out all her desires in his sadistic way the man had done away with all his humiliation in the name of jingoism or cleansing the society of every Hindu, making room for an ethnically pure land, all their own. After all his brutalities, his exposing her before "hundreds of eyes...prob[ing] her" (248), he

decided to marry the ayah as a Muslim woman. He would not leave her, instead make her repent the injury done to his merit; make her “dance like a performing monkey before other men” (248). He would blame her for his insult and yet take away her graces in the name of being a Hindu. The Ice-Candy Man, “[t]reachorous, dangerous, contemptible. A destructive force that must be annihilated” (249), as he is, he claimed himself to be the Saviour— ““They would’ve...killed her... I married her!”(249). He brags of being a man, feigning sophistication in his newly made poetic gesture and verses.

The nation in “Cracking India”, which later came to be titled as “Ice-Candy-Man” gives a curious introspection into the violence of love denied, the “wisdom of righteous indignation over compassion...To the demands of gratification— the unscrupulous nature of desire...To the pitiless face of love” (252). The Ice-Candy-Man’s tears though might seem pretentious to the readers for his previous hypocritical moves, yet his emotional exuberance in his proclaiming, “I can’t exist without her” (251), certainly justify little Lenny’s emotions:

There is a suffocating explosion within my eyes and head. A blinding blast of pity and disillusion and a savage rage. My sight is disoriented (251).

The Ice-Candy Man feigns the deepest wound as the Godmother urges him to send Shanta back to her people in Amritsar. His life too surrounds around the Ayah in spite of the crevices and fissures that have arisen due to the Partition. Shanta had the charm in her chocolate brown complexion, the true colour of India, which makes her the face of the nation. Womanhood and Nationhood blend in the incessant torture meted out to both. The Nation and the ayah, the Caregiver, the benevolent entity get ruined and stand scarred and charred in the hands of men avenging their losses and brewing their hatred in the most dangerous ways.

The ayah wants to return to her people. In spite of the Ice- Candy Man’s confirmation to the members of Lenny’s household that she would be looked after properly, she denies staying with the Ice-Candy Man and instead wishes to get back to her people in Amritsar, in spite of the lurking doubt that she would not be taken back by her people. Lenny had been told that even bird-mothers don’t touch their babies once they had been touched by others and the Godmother had narrated the pathetic truth, ‘Some folk feel that way— they can’t stand their women being touched by other men’ (215). Still the Ayah had emphasized “I want to go to my folk” (263)...“whether they want me or not, I will go” (262).

The Hindus and Muslims though had become warring factions, yet the Ice-Candy Man wants to keep back the ayah as a Muslim, converted, as the prize won after the Hindu community was ousted from Lahore. He had made his money by making her perform in the sex trade as well as crush her ego and her self respect, which was the revenge that he had preferred to take on the ayah. As the author Sidhwa herself aptly says in an interview in “Why do I write?”—

One had thought we were done with it, the spiral of hatred that defined the new borders, the savagery that accompanied the partition of India. The British had gone ... but... what is happening in both countries in the name of ethnicity, race and religion only signifies that the partition did not solve our problems (Sidhwa 3).

The gradual tearing apart of the veils of honour and bringing the ayah out of the closet brings her as a parallel to the nation that meets an unthought-of lot. The nation appears to be seething in the wounds given by the Britishers and natives alike. The people who had been loving neighbours previous to the Partition turn out to be armed in tooth and nail against their nearest kin. People gang up together on the basis of their religion and whether Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs all brew the same sort of jingoism. The brutalities know no end when it comes to the women. As the *Wikipedia* gives in an article, “Violence against women during the Partition of India”, “It is estimated that during the partition between 75,000 and 1,00,000 women were kidnapped and raped” (*Wikipedia*).

The people feel deep regard for their nation and the sense of patriotism seem to be growing in the light of the disturbance. The love for the nation gets incarnated as hatred for the *other* communities. The otherness is borne out of a terrible urge to prove the self and get out of the clout of community. In the wake of the Partition, the Ice-Candy Man with his surreptitious moves and his popsicle like entertaining words change his ways and become an avenger looking out for whatever harm he could meet out to the men and women who stand in the way. Lenny in her childish words daubed in adult understanding catches the mood of the Nation:

I feel so sorry for myself— and for Cousin— and for all the senile, lame and hurt people and fallen women— and the condition of the world— in which countries can be broken, people slaughtered and cities burned— that I burst into tears. I feel I will never stop crying (217).

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