

# The Creative Launcher

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## Enigma of Partition Depicted in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*

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### Abstract

The tragedy of Partition provided writers with the occasion to write about the plight of the people of the subcontinent and to bring home the point of the impact of British rule, which had previously boasted of a “civilizing mission”. The vast volume of Partition fiction in English, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, and other languages of the subcontinent faithfully record the gruesome human disaster in the wake of Partition. The incredible suffering and bewilderment of the people of the subcontinent have been a favourite theme with Indian and Pakistani writers. Public frenzy, communal hatred, extreme disintegration, and large-scale sectarian violence are some of the critical issues amply found in the works of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Rahi Masoom Raza's *Adha Gaon* (1966), Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1973), Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1991), short stories by Saadat Hassan Manto, and the poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz. In her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* (1991), Bapsi Sidhwa narrates the story of an upheaval of the 1947 partition of India through the eyes of a young Parsee girl Lenny growing up in Lahore. The character of Ayah is introduced to refer to the several millions of displaced, looted, and raped Hindus and Muslims during one of the harshest political phases in the subcontinent's history. This paper endeavours to portray the trauma of communal violence as depicted by Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel, *Ice-Candy-Man*.

**Keywords-** Partition, Violence, Torture, Political Upheaval

The decade of the 1940s was the era of two major historical catastrophes, the Second World War with the holocaust in Europe and the Partition in India. Rituparna Roy writes:

[P]artition is a cataclysmic event that impinged upon the lives of millions on the subcontinent, in a way that even the two World Wars had not, in terms of the sheer brutality and damage that it inflicted upon a considerable portion of the population, the mass exile and displacement that it caused and the new schisms that it created among people. (Roy 132)

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August 1947 witnessed the end of the British rule in the subcontinent by giving birth to new nations, India and Pakistan. Historians belonging to the main current of Indian nationalism blamed imperialism for tearing off the bonds that had held the two communities for centuries. Based on this perspective, Partition of the subcontinent was a logical conclusion of the “divide and rule” policy by which they sowed the seeds of communal hatred and pitted the Hindus against the Muslims. This division was based on the “two-nation theory”, with the argument that the Hindus and the Muslims cannot live together as one nation due to their distinct cultural and religious identities. The Muslim majority regions of Punjab and Bengal were divided, with West Punjab and East Bengal forming West and East Pakistan, and India in the middle of the two (Hasan 1993). This resulted in massive and violent migration of the people across the borders. The people in the subcontinent experienced unprecedented trauma of Partition, and its pervasive influence and impact on contemporary life cannot be ignored even today.

Partition was an enigma which was depicted in all art forms, literature being the most emphatic one, and *Ice-Candy-Man* belongs to the genre of Partition literature as a seminal work like Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Chaman Nehal’s *Azadi* (1975), B. Rajan’s *The Dark Dances* (1959), Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and, to a certain extent, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1980). Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* was first published in London in 1988. This title was changed to *Cracking India* in its American edition in 1991 because the publishers thought that Americans would misunderstand “ice-candy” and confuse it with drugs. The books as mentioned above present the Indian perception of the Partition holocaust. The first novel on Partition was *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) by Attia Hosain, which depicts the vulnerability of human lives in the subcontinent. Mehr Nigar Masroor’s *The Heart Divided* (1987) presents the Pakistani version of these violent and tragic events. Both these versions offer us an insight into the trajectory of the holocaust of Partition. Being the third novel on Partition by a female author, *Ice-Candy-Man* demonstrates how Partition ruthlessly divided friends, families, lovers, and neighbours on either side of the border.

There are striking parallels between Sidhwa’s novel and Hosain’s partition novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961). Both these novelists use a female narrator with considerable merit. Hosain’s narrator, Laila, reveals the trauma of Partition through her memories and insights of the disintegration of the Taluqdar family. In the same way, the enigma and horror of Partition are revealed by Sidhwa’s child narrator, Lenny. *Ice-Candy-Man* is a novel of political upheaval in the subcontinent and its aftermath, involving characters from all communities—Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, and Parsis. Thus, a multiple perspective of Partition emerges as witnessed by all the affected people. But what distinguishes Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* from other partition novels is her use of Parsi sensitivity

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to delineate the story. Another distinct quality of the novel is the character of Lenny, who is like the persona that Chaucer adopts in his “Prologue” to *The Canterbury Tales*, rendering credibility by being almost a part of the reader’s consciousness.

With the wonder of a child, she observes social change and human behaviour, seeking and listening to opinions and occasionally making judgements. Her childish innocence seems to be a naive display of Chaucer’s persona, and a source of sharp irony. This device helps Sidhwa treat a historical moment as gruesome as Partition without morbidity. The subtle irony and deft usage of language create humour that does not shroud but raucously highlights the trauma of Partition.

Partition is shown as a series of images and events depicting human loss, agony, and dislocation. The dislocation of settled life is brought before us by Lenny’s understanding of the demographic change in Lahore. In awe she observes that Lahore is not cosmopolitan anymore. The Sikhs and Hindus have fled: “Lahore is suddenly emptied of yet another hoary dimension: there are no Brahmins with caste marks—or Hindus in dhotis with bodhis. Only hordes of Muslim refugees” (Sidhwa, 175). The child narrator senses the difference and pain caused by the huge exchange of population. The dislocation and uprootedness of Partition is thoroughly experienced by Lenny and her brother, Adi, as they drift through the Queen’s Gardens searching in vain for familiar faces and acquaintances: “Adi and I wander from group to group peering into faces beneath white skullcaps and above ascetic beards ... I feel uneasy. Like Hamida, I do not fit. I know we will not find familiar faces here” (Sidhwa 237). The dislocation of life during Partition caused emotional upheavals. This is best exemplified by the attitude of Lenny when she comes to know that Masseur is one of Ayah’s several suitors who proposed marriage. Even in the child, there is a feeling of insecurity as she clings to Ayah’s hands and persuades her not to marry Masseur as it would amount to separation.

The scenes of violence and arson, and, above all, the venomous hatred of friends who had months earlier insisted on the impossibility of violence have a frightening impact on the young Lenny. Violence breeds violence as Lenny is also a victim. Her rage is directed at her collection of dolls. In a frenzy she acts out: “I pick out a big, bloated celluloid doll. I turn it upside down and pull its legs apart. The elastic that it holds them together stretches easily. I let one leg go and it spans back, attaching itself to the brittle torso” (Sidhwa138).The destructive urge overcomes Lenny, and she is not satisfied till she is assisted by her brother Adi; she wrenches out the doll’s legs and examines the spilled insides. This violent act by Lenny is an apt allegory of the mindless violence of Partition.

Bare facts present the horror of the most significant communal divide in history. Sidhwa aptly shows the inexorable logic of Partition, which moves on relentlessly, leaving even sane people and friends helpless and ineffective. Communal riots spread from towns to small villages like Pir Pindo. To avoid further loss, people like Sher Singh, Prakash, Kirpa Singh, and Shanker decided to move to

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safer places with their near and dear ones. The degree of insanity reached its pinnacle when small kids were not left out of this communal frenzy. Ranna, the young playmate of Lenny, is made to suffer tremendously and forced to take shelter at a refugee camp and fortunately gets reunited with Noni Chachi and Iqbal Chacha. The impact of this communal frenzy is that even characters like Hari and Moti are forced to change their names. Thus, they suffer a change of religious identity as well.

The communal frenzy distorts people's moral compasses and leads to feelings of suspicion, distrust, and rumours. Even the children, Lenny, Adi, and Cousin are suspicious of the movements of Mrs Sethi and Aunt Minne, who travel all over Lahore without taking the children with them. Ayah heightens the sense of mystery when she says that the dicky of the car is full of cans of petrol. Hence, Sidhwa establishes that such things are common in a charged atmosphere like this when people are under the grip of a communal frenzy. The three children are stunned by this disclosure and let their fantasies go wild. Finally, they conclude, "We know who the arsonists are. Our mothers are setting fire to Lahore! ... My heart pounds at the damnation that awaits their souls. My knees quake at the horror of their imminent arrest" (Sidhwa 173).

The children begin to fantasize about their mother's movements but Sidhwa shows how rumours prey upon the frenzied minds of men debased by communal hatred. Ice-Candy-Man and his friends overhear a piece of news on the radio, and they at once interpret it as "uncontrollable butchering going on in Gurudaspur" (Sidhwa, 149). There are further rumours of a train full of dead bodies coming to Lahore from Gurudaspur. Ice-Candy-Man declares after a frantic cycle ride that all the dead are Muslims. This news adds fuel to the communal frenzy of Ice-Candy-Man, and the people gathered at Queen's Garden harbour a feeling of revenge against the Sikhs. Even they now look at their friend Sher Singh with a vengeance, making him flee from Lahore. Under such a highly charged atmosphere, insanity prevails over rationality. Such ignominy is best exhibited when Ice-Candy-Man out of sheer rage says,

I'll tell you to your face—I lose my sense when I think of the mutilated bodies on that train from Gurudaspur...that night I went mad, I will tell you, I lobbed grenades through the window of Hindus and Sikhs I'd known all my life! I hated their guts. (Sidhwa, 156)

Revenge becomes the leitmotif for Ice-Candy-Man and his friends. The role of rumour and the consequent violence that follows are delineated with subtle irony by Sidhwa, and is very contemporary as is also depicted by Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* (1988).

During the tragic history of Partition, vicious acts were not confined only to adults. Even children were also exposed to the same violent and angry world. They, too, could not escape the harsh realities. Those children who were lucky enough to survive Partition were haunted by the horrible memories so much so that they were physically and psychologically handicapped forever.

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Sidhwa has focused on this aspect of tragedy through the characters of Lenny and Ranna. In one of the incidents, Lenny witnesses a Sikh mob attacking the streets, burning buildings, and fighting with Muslims. Lenny's eyes focus on a man tied to several vehicles and then viciously torn apart:

[Her] eyes focus on an emaciated Banya wearing a white Gandhi cap. The man is knocked down. His lips are drawn away from rotting, paan-stained teeth in a scream. The men move back and in the small clearing, his legs sticking out of his dhoti right up to the groin—each thin, brown leg tied to the jeep. (Sidhwa 145)

At first, Lenny is upset and terrified; however, when she returns home, she is curious and is eager to know the meaning of what she has seen. She also gives us a detailed account of the psychological and physical tortures that the innocent folk underwent at the hands of the cruel world around them. Minor characters are made to suffer psychological trauma or forced to undergo psychological trauma.

The abduction of Ayah reflects Lenny's childhood innocence falling prey to the wicked world around her. She blames herself as responsible for the kidnapping of Ayah. Thus, she suffers most intensely throughout the course of the novel. The absence of Ayah is a void not only in the house but within her little self too. The loss is much more than the vast absence of Ayah from the family, which nothing can fill up: "Ayahless and sore-tongued I drift through the forlorn rooms of my house" (Sidhwa 185).

Ranna's encounters in the village of PirPindo entail substantial physical and psychological damage. Being such a small boy, Ranna is innocent to the capabilities of men and is thrown into a world where he is a stranger to violence and brutality. Ranna suffers a great deal of pain at the hands of others; he has a massive gash on his head, spear punctures in his legs, and extensive body damage from his flight to safety (Sidhwa, 213). It would be difficult for any child to fathom why this is being done to them; however, Ranna accepts his wounds and easily adapts to a will to survive. While Ranna's physical wounds will heal, the scars left behind will forever remind him of the treacherous day when his family was stolen from him. Every atrocity that he witnesses is imprinted on his mind forever.

Ranna recalls his father's death:

There was a sunlit sweep of curved steel. His head was shorn clear off his neck. Turning once in the air, eyes wide open, it tumbled in the dust. His hands jerked up slashing the bleeding stump of his neck. (Sidhwa 213)

Ranna's ability to re-enact such a gory scene proves just how etched the events are in his mind. Ranna remembers every detail of his father's head, bodily actions, and blood—a sight he will retain forever. Sidhwa presents a detailed account of the psychological and physical tortures that innocent souls suffer at the hands of the cruel world around them.

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Sidhwa shows how Partition and its continuing trauma affected women, focusing on Lenny and her Hindu Ayah. Partition narratives testify that Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim women were among the greatest victims of religious and cultural persecution (Pennebaker: 2000). On both sides of the newly created border, women were kidnapped, abducted, raped, and brutally killed. The defilement of a woman's body was considered to be the greatest dishonour that a family had to endure. And the violence inflicted upon women was equivalent to a sacrilege against one's religion, country, and family. Recalling the chilling shrieks and moans of recovered women at the time, Sidhwa asks herself: Why do they cry like that? Because they are delivering unwanted babies, I'm told or reliving hideous memories. Thousands of women were kidnapped (Sidhwa, "New Neighbors"). It has become the practice of the victors that they tend to celebrate their triumphs on the bodies of women while crossing all the limits of humanitarianism.

The most abhorring scene in the novel *Ice-Candy-Man* is the abduction of Ayah. Ice-Candy-Man abducts Ayah, the very woman he loves, because she is Hindu. Ayah is subsequently gang-raped, and as if this physical abuse by the Muslim mob was not enough, she is then condemned to a life of prostitution in Hira Mandi. Although Ayah escapes her abductor, even with her family in Amritsar, she was marked for defilement during Partition. Thus, she suffers psychological and emotional outbursts forever. Inevitably then, women became the worst victims of atrocities during civil strife as victories against the enemy were inscribed, marked, and celebrated on their bodies. According to Urvashi Butalia, "The figures [of women raped, abducted, tortured] range between 33,000-50,000 Hindu and Sikh women and 21,000 or so Muslim women (Butalia81). Lenny's Ayah was just one among those thousands of victims. After Ayah's abduction, Hamida is recruited from the adjacent rehabilitation camp by Mrs Sethi as a replacement for Ayah. It is significant though that she herself describes the camp as a "camp for fallen women" (Sidhwa 226) but Hamida's definition of "fallen" is equivalent to how the society perceives her in general. Nothing much is told about Hamida in the novel, and we never come to know the exact circumstances of her violation because the prime focus of the story is on Ayah and not on Hamida.

Partition has been an enigma that caused irretrievable loss on all sides in many different ways. All art and literature have tried to re-evoke that unforgettable trauma suffered by people across borders. Sidhwa has shown her belongingness to the awakened humanity and suggests that remembering the past is painful but also a learning opportunity. It is apparent from the above discussion that Sidhwa has successfully created a new discourse by bringing before us the holocaust of Partition. With sparkling humour, parody, and allegory, she conveys an ominous warning of the dangers of compromising with religious fundamentalism. Though it encompasses the horror of

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Partition, Sidhwa reveals that communal riots are contemporaneous, and her message is clear that those who forget are condemned to repeat it.

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