

Feministic Touch in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*

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Abstract. Bapsi Sidhwa occupies a central position in Pakistani English fiction Writing. Her novels are written with a genuine social purpose. The present paper traces the development of her vision with reference to women's situation in Pakistan. The position of women is debated in all her novels. The central consciousness of her work rests on the steady growth of women's essential feminine identity and the quest of selfhood. Feminism plays an imperative function in *Ice-Candy-Man*. It is through this aspect of the novel that it caricatures the importance of feminism and the unique position of women in the world. Bapsi Sidhwa has portrayed her female characters as more distinctive, strong and active as the one who are aware of their surroundings. Unlike other female characters that give up their hope in critical situation, the female characters of Bapsi stood about and fight against their fates and denied other's authority on them. This struggle made them matchless and exclusive from others. Bapsi talks about oppressive structures of customs, traditions and religion that victimise women. All the protagonists in Sidhwa's stories struggle with the system not only to create space for themselves but also develop in themselves the capacity to live life on their own terms.

Keywords : Power of feminism; strength of passion; oppression; lameness; sexuality.

Literature is the mirror of society and so it reflects the spirit of the age. The fiction as it is believed is born out of the society in which it lives and thrives. Hence it is supposed to be the reflection of the living style of the society. It adapts the customs, traditions and culture of the society and it does not ignore the changes in the society, be it synchronic or diachronic, rather portrays them in a befitting manner. It is often believed that a fiction writer portrays an ideal world which teaches, delights, and improves upon the existing set of circumstances. Each writer tries to construct the world which is beautiful and attractive and in many cases imaginative.

There are many writers who through their fiction try to give social message to the society. In other words some writers try to voice against the age-old customs and traditions of the society. In this portrayal, women writers play significant role. It is also believed that in the portrayal of society, the representation of women emerges as the most significant aspect of the writers of English fiction as a part of feminism.

Sidhwa is a new and important voice in the world of women writers. Novels are written with genuine social purpose. The position of women in various levels is sketched skilfully in all her novels. The central consciousness of a work

rests on the steady growth of women's essential feminine identity and the quest for selfhood. Bapsi Sidhwa in all her five novels, obviously depicts women situation and examines the oppressive structure of customs, culture and religion that suppress women. Sidhwa has carved niche for herself in the realm of Asian Women's Writing with her thematic preoccupations, well constructed plots and memorable characters in befitting narrative techniques and language. All the novels contain rich undercurrent of legend and folklore. It combines Sidhwa's affectionate admiration for her own community with a compassion for the disposed. Her own childhood memories give her novels further depth and resonance.

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice-Candy-Man* is a realistic narrative, set in Lahore. The story takes up the themes of communal tensions using religion as a way to define individual identity, territorial cravings, political oppressions, power and love, and binds them together in a very readable narrative. The novel revolves around people from diverse religious backgrounds—Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Parsis living in complete harmony till the rumours of the subcontinent division tear them asunder. Lenny's narration starts at her fifth year and ends after her eighth birthday. Lenny's passionate love for Ayah and the loss of innocence that accompanies the changing relationship through partition is an energetic centre to plot. The tale revolves around Ayah and her several suitors and what becomes of them interestingly enough. Sidhwa gives each one of Ayah's suitors different religion and cultural backgrounds. The lameness of Lenny is significantly portrayed because Sidhwa as a physically challenged person may have faced many difficulties to become a writer since it was once considered a mail genre or forte.

The female characters in *Ice-Candy-Man* are stronger than the male characters. Though the male characters act as imitators they remain marginal and feeble. The female characters such as Lenny, the Ayah, Shanta, Godmother remain crucial and insist on their own power of authority. They act as representative to expose the biases which prevail in the patriarchal society. The women characters are very sure and conscious of their individuality and they cannot be easily dominated. The experiences which are presented here by the women are very fresh and new.

Sidhwa has given a feminist touch to the character of Lenny who moves forward in life despite various hindrances and obstacles. As she observes life of various women around her, she understands the limitation associated with women's life in patriarchal society. She is shocked to see men betraying and sexually assaulting women and exploiting them. Though she enjoys her situation sometimes in the novel, "Having polio infancy is like being born under a lucky star. It has many advantages. It permits me to access my mother's bed in the middle of the night". (Sidhwa,10) She enjoys life as it is. Unlike other children she is more interested in knowing the things that happen in her surrounding. She is very keen observer and quick learner. This quality makes her unique from others. About her

learning and observing power she remarks, "I learn fast, I learn of human needs, fragilities, cruelties and joys". (20)

The character of Lenny is a mixture of irony, humour and wit. She observes many different personalities and traits of both men and women but she is neither influenced nor affected by that. Lenny easily socialises with everyone and this made her to visit the village of London. There she finds the true situation of women and responsibilities of Praveen and Khatija. For her they appear as the imitation of mother and aunt. After the abduction of Ayah, Shanta she finds herself very lonely and later her mother appoints a new Ayah, named Hamida to look after her. In no way the lameness of Lenny becomes the cause for sympathy and retrenchment of her intelligence. One can promise Lenny's consciousness towards her mushrooming sexuality. Her broad minded, free and independent upbringing makes her assessable for the pre mature sexual arousalment. And she takes pleasure in the covetous looks that Ayah receive from her the admirers such as Ice-candy-man's toes, gardener's talk, Sharbat Khan's side and deep intimacy with Masseur.

The foremost influence of Lenny is her Ayah, Shanta from whom she learnt many things, both worldly and domestic, like emotion, love and so on. For Lenny Ayah is the epitome of belief and faith. When cousin doubts on the Ayah's information about struggling of petrol Lenny says, "if Ayah says there is petrol in the car's dicky there is petrol in the car's dicky". (172) Shanta is portrayed as a great queen bee that controls the entire male bee that hang over around her. She has thirteen admirers including Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Parsi. She is the counter of attraction. Everyone likes her a lot for her work and for the love she has for others. The character of Ayah is the best example of Bapsi Sidhwa's portrayal of a true feminist. The major part of the novel revolves around Ayah. She is an eighteen year old girl who works as a caretaker of Lenny in a Parsi family. Though she works in a well natured place she is not guarded with safety because she is treated as a sex object by all other admirers and she is aware of that. She uses her charm as a stratagem of social endurance but this is possible to aggression of partition as the violence destroys all her recognisable world. She is aware and confident of her individuality. She educates Lenny with intelligence and choice. Though she is flirtatious with others she is extremely obedient to Lenny and her family. She takes care of Lenny as a mother. Ayah is the combined image of both beauty and intelligence. She was loved by everyone irrespective of a religion but during the wake of partition she becomes a Hindu for all. She is also a very keen observer of the surrounding. During the riots of the partition she got through a lot of suffering. Her beloved Masseur was murdered and this loss cannot be equalised by anyone. For this Lenny says :

It looks like a house pinning for its departed soul
haunted like Ayah's eyes are by the memories of
Masseur. She secretly cries. Often I catch her
wiping tears. (186)

With the help of some hooligans Ice-candy Man abducts her and she was sent to kotha, the place of prostitutes and dancing girls. Now the beloved Ayah becomes a Hindu for him. In spite of the conviction that she is seduced and kept in kotha for months after marriage also her self respect and dignity does not vanish. Her name is changed as Mumtaz. Even after her marriage she remains assertive and says to Godmother, "I want to go to my family, I will not live with him". (261) This shows her courage and daring nature.

Ayah's rape and disappearance from the scene and again her reappearance from the red light area show the complex situation women were placed into. After her rape Ayah does not return to Lenny but becomes part of that group which South Asian society believes is the fit place for degraded and disgraced women. During and after partition, many women who were not accepted by their families opted for red light areas. Clearly women's identity, religion and purity is not given any weight here. Hence Ayah marries Ice-candy-man not at her own will but as a rape victim with the choice.

Ice-candy-man pleads to godmother, "Please persuade her.... explain to her.... I'll keep her like a Queen, like a flower I'll make her happy". (261) Ayah never changes her decision and she stands stubborn in that and said, "but I cannot forget what happened". (262) Her rejection to accept the defeat regardless of physical and emotional trauma, marrying the defacement and her determination to look into future conveys moral courage to her. Thus the character of Ayah is unique and different from all other women characters as they accept their fate when they undergo physical mutilation. She is the symbol of self respect and dignity. Though she knows that the survival of Hindu is very difficult she never talks about conversion as other did for their survival. She values everyone on the basis of human nature and character but not on religious credibility. Thus Ayah can be compared to Hardy's *Tess of D'Urbervilles* she also denies marrying the one who physically tortures her. (Kapadia, 87)

Moving further in the novel we can see Godmother as the supreme example for feminist characters. She is the pulsating figure by whom Lenny is very much inspired and influenced. Her personality shows her character, her sharp approach, infinite love towards Lenny and her attachment and involvement in social activities show the power of a feminine. Her sense of humour is flawless. Despite the old age she is very active in her activities and the people respect her a lot. Her depth of understanding and carrying the situation is known when she convinces Ayah saying, "she was a fated daughter. It can't be undone. But it can be forgiven. Worse things are forgiven. Life goes on and the business of living buries the past... To make way for fresh joy and new sorrow that is the way of life". (262)

Sidhwa urges and demands the point that women may be harassed and exploited not only by the men but also by other women. She is the combined

image of both tough and smooth. She donates blood and with her influence she manages to get a seat in school for Rana and also she helps Ayah to get back to her place when she is confirmed that she is made to stay there without her will. Her husband and her sister appear to her just as peripheral and marginal. The most important incident which makes us to view the authoritative power and efficiency of godmother to carry out condition in smooth way is the conversation between Ice-candy-man and Godmother. It is not an easy task to talk and win with Ice-candy-man but godmother achieves that. Affected at last by Godmother's story, silent Ice-candy-man lowers his eyes. Having his voice divested of oratory, he says, "I am a slave, Baijee. I worship her. She can come to no harm with me", No harm? Godmother asks in a deceptively cool voice and rocking her back like a scorpion's tail, she closes in for the kill :

You permit her to be raped by butchers, drunk and say come to no harm?' Ice-candy-man head bolts back as it's been stuck. You would have your own mother carried off, if it's suited you! You are shameless *badmash*! Faithless. (248)

Without godmother the novel doesn't attain its height. She is the only character of the novel that works beyond the domestic things and sexuality and emerges as the vivacious figure. The most important factor for which the character of godmother is portrayed is to explore the 'self importance' and 'self worth' of female.

Lenny mother is another interesting female character in *Ice-Candy-Man*. As a submissive housewife she lives her life within the four walls of her home. Lenny's mother is a representative of those traditional women who have subordinates to never express their desire to establish themselves as better human beings. Through the character of Lenny's mother, mother has been portrayed very lightly. She also plays a significant role in the novel. She is pictured as the merger of both tradition and modernity. At situation she acts as a typical traditional housewife, looks after her husband with much care and concern, at times she untightens his shoes and according to the mood of her husband she submits herself and soothes him. Her mother's nature is revealed at times when she takes Lenny to the doctor. She feels herself responsible for Lenny's polio and feels guilty, "she should sit with me in the Sun? Massage like this or that? Use almond oil or mustard oil? Can she give me Phailbus's homeopathic powder? Cod liver oil? I am to blame, she says, I left her to Ayah. (8) The true feminist in her heart awards out when she witnesses the bloodshed. She takes step to safeguard the lives of victims, who suffered during the partition. She voluntary helps out not only Ayah but also the unseen and unfamiliar scapegoats, who faced the strange situation and underwent the physical harassment without being a part of the revolution.

Bapsi Sidhwa has played a vital role in protecting the suppressed status of women in patriarchal society. In the domain of patriarchal culture, woman is a social construct, a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted. As Sidhwa in her real life, her women characters in the fictional world are fairly beautiful, intelligent, modest but strong-willed and courageous. Rebellion is not in the nature. They try to cope with the parental, societal and cultural pressure in their life as much as they can. But when they find their very life or identity in danger, they throw off all shackles and fight with full force to thwart the foul attempts of their adversary.

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