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**Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel Ice-Candy-Man: A Feminist Perspective**

Abstract:

Bapsi Sidhwa (b. 1938) is a Pakistani novelist of Parsi descent who writes in English. Bapsi Sidhwa is beyond doubt one of the best contemporary novelists writing in English. Her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* (1991) earned her international acclaim and acceptance as one of the most promising English novelists from South Asia. *Ice-Candy-Man* is a tale of bloody Partition of India. "The novel offers a significant treatment of a gynocentric view of reality in which the feminine psyche and experiences are presented with a unique insight."<sup>1</sup> "The novel highlights feminist concerns about women's issues, particularly their experience of victimization and suppression within patriarchal society and how the suppression takes a brutal form in the face of national upheaval."<sup>2</sup> The paper aims to analyze *Ice-Candy-Man* as a feminist text highlighting the marginalization of women in the patriarchal society and their resistance against the absurd gender discrimination.

Keywords: Feminism, patriarchy, subjugation, misery, resistance, freedom.

"Feminism is a literary movement which evolved as an opposition to patriarchy or the dominant sexist ideology."<sup>3</sup> "It questions the long-standing, dominant, male, phallogocentric ideologies"<sup>4</sup> and patriarchal attitudes towards women. Feminism tries to define and establish social, legal, and cultural freedom and equality of women. Gender equality is at the core of feminist movement: it advocates women's rights on the ground of equality of sexes in all spheres of life.

Feminism also aims to revolt against the patriarchal society which associates superiority, strength, action, self-assertion and domination with 'masculine' and inferiority, weakness,

passivity, obedience and self-negation with 'feminine'. Feminism aims to emancipate women from the chains of domesticity and subjugation. By depicting domestic violence, sexual

harassment and male ego in their works the feminist writers highlight and condemn the plight of women in the patriarchal society and thereby try to inculcate a sense of rebellion and self-identity in them. Robert Webb aptly defines feminism in the following terms: "Feminism isn't about hating men. It's about challenging the absurd gender distinctions that boys and girls learn from childhood and carry into their adult lives."<sup>5</sup>

"As a woman, one is always marginalized. I have worked among women to create an awareness of their rights and protested against repressive measures aimed at Pakistani women and minority communities."

(Bapsi Sidhwa)

"The novel, *Ice-Candy-Man*, is a representative feminist novel. The novel is a significant testament of a gynocentric view of reality in which the feminine psyche and experiences are presented with a unique freshness and aplomb."<sup>6</sup> The women characters of the novel are aware and confident of their individuality and cannot be easily subjugated. The four major characters, Lenny, her Ayah Shanta, her mother and Godmother affirm their autonomous selfhood and exhibit capability of assuming new roles and responsibilities. Bapsi Sidhwa, in this novel, exposes the patriarchal prejudices present in the contemporary perceptions.

"The central consciousness of the fictional world of *Ice-Candy-Man* is represented by a young girl, Lenny, who is lame. The lameness of the narrator becomes suggestive of the handicap a woman creative writer faces, when she decides to wield the pen, because writing, being an intellectual exercise, is considered a male bastion, outside the routine of a woman's submissive domesticity. In contrast, her recuperation symbolizes the overcoming of the constraint on the intellectual activity of writing by Bapsi Sidhwa. By making Lenny the narrator of the novel, the novelist lends weight and validity to the feminine perspective on the nature of surrounding reality."<sup>7</sup>

By investing the female characters of the novel with the qualities of heroism, sacrifice, justice, and action, Bapsi Sidhwa makes *Ice-Candy-Man* a representative feminist text. Bapsi's feminist posture is manifested in Lenny's relationship with her cousin who makes unsuccessful sexual advances to her. Their relationship upholds the principle of equality or even superiority of women as she does not allow him to manipulate her sexuality and he remains a drooling figure, adoring her vivaciousness. Moreover, Lenny's lameness does not "become a source of self-pity or constricting force on her psyche."<sup>8</sup> Like other female characters of the novel she remains dominant and assertive.

Bapsi Sidhwa artistically portrays the miseries and brutalities that women face in the patriarchal society through the relationship between Lenny's parents. Lenny's father has been presented as a callous man by Sidhwa who ill treats his wife:

"As upsetting the caged voices of our parents fighting in their bed room. Mother crying, wheedling Father's terse, brash, indecipherable sentence. Terrifying thumps...Although Father has never raised his hands, to us, one day I surprise mother at her bath and see the bruise, on her body."

Bapsi exposes the lifelong cultural constructs which render women as an insignificant and a sexual object. The following statement of Lenny exposes the patriarchal bias whereby a woman has to be beautiful to be desirable while a man is exempted from such conditioning:

"Drinking tea, I am told, makes one darker. I'm dark enough... It's a pity Ad's fair and Lenny so dark. He's a boy. Anyone will marry him."

Moreover, her schooling is stopped as suggested by her doctor Col. Bharucha:

“She’s doing fine without school...She doesn’t need to become a professor...She’ll marry-have children-lead a carefree, happy life.”

This statement of Col. Bharucha is a represents the prejudices and bias of patriarchal society towards women- the ‘Other’.

Right from her childhood the sexual identity is thrust upon Lenny. Ayah, the heroine, of the novel infuses in Lenny the ideas of independence and choice. Lenny states:

“I can’t remember a time when I ever played with dolls...relatives and acquaintances have perished in giving them to me.”

Almost all male characters are presented as indifferent, apathetic or destructive in Ice-Candy-Man. The inhumane, insane, callous and destructive attitude of the patriarchal forces has

artistically been portrayed by Bapsi Sidhwa in the novel. The episode in which Ranna, a small child, wounded, runs for life when the riots break out, has been mentioned at length by Bapsi Sidhwa to highlight and condemn the destruction caused by the dominant patriarchal forces:

“There were too many ugly and abandoned children like him scavenging in the looted houses and the rubble of burnt-out buildings. His rages clinging to his wounds, straw sticking in his scalped skull, Ranna wondered through the lanes stealing chapattis and grain from houses strewn with dead bodies rifling the corpses for anything he could use...No one minded the semi-naked specter as he looked in doors with his knowing, wide-set peasant eyes.”

Another instance of this callousness on the part of the patriarchal society is manifested in the train episode:

“A train from Gurdaspur has just come...Everyone in it is dead...butchered...two gunny-bags full of women’s breasts.”

The women were not only killed but first tortured, raped and then butchered like animals. Through this event, Sidhwa questions the hypocrisy of people who glorify the image of the Indian women and worship them as goddesses.

The patriarchal biases of the male-dominated society gets a realistic and artistic manifestation when it is decided that the women and girls of Pir Pindo would gather at Chaudhary’s house and pour the kerosene oil around the house to burn themselves. By presenting this episode in the novel, Bapsi exposes the hypocrisy and hollowness of the patriarchal society where women are considered insignificant. Moreover, many women are molested, gang-raped and killed in the novel. Bapsi Sidhwa highlights and condemns this inhumane attitude on the part of the male members of the society.

Women characters on the other hand have been turned into the moral center in the novel. No woman in *Ice-Candy-Man* is shown to be indulging in violence. Pappo’s mother is destructive at a personal level. Papoo is a mal-treated girl, beaten by her mother, and is married forcibly to an older man. The author’s feminist posture is underlined in this episode. Ayah, the heroine of the novel, is a Hindu girl of eighteen. She epitomizes the strength of femininity and it is Ayah who infuses in Lenny the ideas of freedom and will. She is also ill-treated by other male characters in the novel. Through the caricature of Ayah, Bapsi Sidhwa satirizes the callousness and the hollowness of the patriarchal society which makes the life of a woman miserable. When the riots break out she becomes a victim of the lust of the uncivilized and frenzied mob.

Dilnawaz, the Ice-Candy-Man, leading the Muslim mob raids Godmother’s house in search of the Hindus. Mad with the rage, he throws Ayah into the hands of the frenzied mob:

“They drag Ayah out. They drag her by arms...her bare feet- that want to move backwards – are forced forward. Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat

opens her mouth like the dead child's scream...Four men stand pressed against her...their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces."

Rape is the greatest violence because it implies that a woman has no right on her own body and it can be used by anyone to meet their end. Such acts of violence are an intimate destruction of the feminine, and can also be read as an attempt to annihilate male honor. The feminist strain of the novelist gets a remarkable manifestation through the character of Godmother in the novel. Her feminist posture, "her self-confidence, and her authoritativeness and capacity to handle crisis-situations, is manifested in her dealing with Ice-Candy-Man and the rescue of

Ayah."<sup>9</sup> She scolds Ice-Candy-man for ill-treating Ayah and letting her be raped. Her confrontation with Ice-Candy-Man is an important episode where the feminist strain of the author gets manifested:

He (Ice-Candy-Man) says, "I am a man! Only dogs are faithful! If you want faith, let her marry a dog."

Godmother wildly reacts: "You have permitted your wife to be disgraced! Destroyed her modesty! Lived off her womanhood! And you talk of princes and poets! You're the son of pigs and pimps."

"Affected at last by Godmother's advice, Ice-Candy-Man lowers his eyes and says:

"I am her slave, Baijee. I worship her. She can come to no harm with me."

"No harm?" Godmother asks in a deceptively cool voice, "You permit her to be raped by butchers, drunks, and goondas and say she has come no harm?"

Ice-Candy-Man's head jolts back as if it's been struck.

"Is that why you had her lifted off - let hundreds of eyes probe her - so that you could marry her? You would have your own mother carried off if it suited you! You are a shameless badmash! Namakharam!"<sup>10</sup>

Thus Godmother concentrates in her character what the feminists feel very important for a woman to realize her individuality: the feeling of "self-worth". The character of Lenny's mother is another example whereby Bapsi Sidhwa presents her feminist posture. In the

beginning of the novel she is presented as a dutiful wife, catering to her husband's every need and managing the household. But during the events of partition, she begins to subvert the patriarchal social order by rescuing and housing women. She also smuggles gasoline to help her Hindu and Sikh friends cross the border safely to India. In rescuing these women, she has clearly moved beyond the traditional role of a housewife to become a social activist.

“In *Ice-Candy-Man* Bapsi Sidhwa critiques the stereotypical images of women and fights for their empowerment and emancipation.”<sup>11</sup> She ensures their emancipation by ending the novel on a positive note whereby Ayah is set back to her home free from all forms of subjectivity and domesticity. Bapsi Sidhwa in this novel exposes the hollowness and the callousness of the patriarchal society. By highlighting domestic violence and sexual harassment in the novel, Bapsi Sidhwa tries to inculcate a sense of self-identity and self-worth in women. Women characters play a deterministic role in the novel. They are presented as independent: they have a will of their own, a life of their own. In this novel, Bapsi Sidhwa challenges the traditional frame work that presents a woman as weak, submissive, passive, acquiescent, timid and emotional. She exposes the sterility of patriarchal society where a woman is denied genuine love and spiritual gratification. She violates the systematic, traditional norms and values in order to secure an unconventional position of women in society, where women will be given significance and respect. *Ice-Candy-Man*, thus, becomes a feminist text in the true sense of the term, successfully attempting to bring to the centre the female protagonists. These protagonists, while on one hand, come alive on account of their realistic presentation, on the other, they serve as the means of consciousness-raising among the female segments of society.

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