

Autobiographical Elements in Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice Candy Man

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Abstract:

Partition literature is an outcome of the first hand experiences of writers, by virtue of the fact that most of the writers witnessed the most terrifying event of the partition of Indian Sub Continent followed by involuntary migrations of masses, massacre, bloodshed, destructions, despair, violence, barbarism, despotism, that gives writers success in narrating the events in the most effective ways and arousing the same sensitivity among the readers that they themselves felt. Chaman Nahal being a refugee himself is capable of giving penetrating and realistic descriptions of the most flagitiously atrocious event of Partition in his novel Azadi. Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan can be considered a condensation of its author's experiences and observations during those deplorable and lamentable days. Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice Candy Man is not an exception where in Bapsi Sidhwa's experiences, reactions, opinions found expressions in the form of words. Bapsi Sidhwa is a prima Diasporic Parsi writer from Pakistan, who was born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1938 and spent most of her childhood days in Lahore and witnessed the partition trauma as a 9 years old child. Objective of the present paper is to assess and analyze Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice Candy Man in the light of autobiographical elements. At the end of the paper it will be brought out how the writer perceived the trauma and traumatic atmosphere and how she reproduced the same and what is the effect of the novel on readers.

Key Words: Indian Sub continent, Partition, massacre, atrocities, trauma, autobiographical elements.

Introduction: Partition of Indian Sub Continent

The partition of Indian subcontinent followed by involuntary migrations and massacre of thousands of innocent people is a colossally tragic event in the history of the Sub continent that left scratches of its nails on the hearts of people of the subcontinent. The wounds left on the minds, hearts and souls of those who lived through those traumatic times bleed and ail even today. The partition of India does not mean only the geographical vivisection of the area but also catastrophe for thousands of people, the impressions of which have not become extinct so far. Myriad refugees, who were rendered orphans, filled both the sides of boundaries. The event becomes terribly tragic, heart rending and the most cataclysmic one in the history of twentieth century India by virtue of the fact that it was a deliberate and not a natural calamity like earthquake or a flood. Political and religious hatred resulted in communal clashes, massacre, and atrocities of various kinds and the barbarity of the most heinous kind during the chaotic days of involuntary migrations. Urvashi Butaliya Describes partition in following words,

“The political partition of India caused one of the great human convulsions of history..... twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West, of the newly created Pakistan.....Estimates of the dead vary from 200,000 to two million but that somewhere around a million people died is now widely accepted...75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religion different from their own (and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion.)”(Butalia 3)

1) Partition Literature as a product of the firsthand experience of authors:

Partition literature is an outcome of the first hand experience of writers, by virtue of the fact that most of the writers witnessed the most terrifying event of the partition of Indian Sub Continent followed by involuntary migrations of masses, massacre, bloodshed, destructions, despair, violence, barbarism, despotism, that gives writers success in narrating the events in the most effective ways and arousing the same sensitivity among the readers that they themselves felt. Chaman Nahal being a refugee himself is capable of giving penetrating and realistic descriptions of the most flagitiously atrocious event of Partition in his novel Azadi. Khushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan can be considered a condensation of its author's experiences and observations during those deplorable and lamentable days. Just prior to the partition of India and Pakistan in August

1947, Khushwant Singh encountered a group of Sikhs who proudly narrated to him how they had just made a mess of all the Muslim residence of a village. Khushwant Singh gave expressions to all those instances in his novel *Train to Pakistan*. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* is not an exception where in Bapsi Sidhwa's experiences, reactions, opinions found expressions in the form of words. She witnessed the chaos of partition of the sub continent as a 9 year old child.

2) Bapsi Sidhwa and her works:

Bapsi Sidhwa, a prima Diasporic Parsi writer from Pakistan, was born in Karachi, Pakistan in 1938 and spent most of her childhood days in Lahore. Her novels published in several European and Asian Languages include *An American Brat*, *Cracking India*, *The Pakistani Bride*, *The Crow Eater*, and *Water*. She edited *Beloved City*, *Writings on Lahore*. She had been crowned with glory by various honors including Bunting Fellowship at Radcliffe/Harvard, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writer's Award, the Sitara-i-Imtiaz, Pakistan's highest national honor in the arts, and most recently the Italian Premio Mondello 2007 and the 2008 South Asian Excellence Award for Literature. She had been in the advisory committee to Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Women's Development. She has taught at Columbia U, Mount Holyoke College, Brandeis, and Southampton University in England. Her novel *Ice Candy Man* has been filmed as *Earth 1947*, a major motion picture by a Canadian director Deepa Mehta. Her latest novel *Water* is a novelization of a film directed by Deepa Mehta. Since Sidhwa witnessed the partition as a child, it left an irremovable print on her mind and heart which always gets reflected in her fiction. In this connection she said the following in an interview with Shaila Abdullah,

“The Partition of India was a defining moment in our history and it affected millions of lives for years in its aftermath - mine included. The Partition is central to the narrative in my third novel *Cracking India*. It makes a brief appearance in *Pakistani Bride*, and is barely mentioned in *Crow Eaters*. The roar of the mobs appeared to be a constant in my life; even as a 7 year old I knew it was an evil that threatened our lives. I couldn't make out the words although I vaguely realized they were shouting religious slogans as they set fire to houses and harmed people.” (Abdullah 2014)

3) Autobiographical elements in *Ice Candy man*:

Bapsi Sidhwa's firsthand experience of the partition has found expression in the novel *Ice Candy Man* wherein the novelist narrates the fictionalized real story of partition. In an interview with Mayank Austen Soofi, Bapsi Sidhwa said the following about the fictionalization, "Even I often don't know where fact ends and fiction begins..... Because of childhood polio the doctor suggested I should not be burdened with school. I had light tuition – thankfully no math..... I've fictionalized biographical elements in the earlier part of *Cracking India* – Lenny is not me – perhaps my alter ego." (Soofi 2014)

In the same interview she said, "I am almost every character in my books." (Soofi 2014)

In the novel *Ice Candy Man* the story has been narrated by a Polio stricken child named Lenny, a daughter of a Parsee family of Lahore that reminds readers of the childhood of the writer herself. The first person narration technique used by the author in the novel makes readers feel as if they were reading an autobiography of the writer. There are quite a few evidences to consider Lenny as the portrayal of the writer herself. Lenny, being a child of a Parsee family, roams freely through the Sikh, Muslim, Hindu, and Parsee society of her environs in Lahore and observes everything and reports everything with a child's natural innocence. The writer uses immature child as a narrator to add more authenticity to the reporting of the events. As the narrator is stricken by polio in infancy she is receiving private schooling at home like the author and remaining always present at almost all places to witness every incident. Like Sidhwa, Lenny too has to undergo a series of operations during her childhood. In the novel Dr. Col. Bharucha is not in favor of her schooling which reminds readers of doctor's advice given to the writer's parents not to burden Bapsi Sidhwa with school. Further the writer seems to be claiming truth in her story by the reference of truth inflected tongue of the narrator. Once Lenny says, "I am tempted to tell her the truth My wretched truth inflected tongue just in time." (Sidhwa 239)

Further the description of the refugee camp/ Re habitation Courtyard of Recovered Women (a camp for fallen women) near Lenny's house is a fine blend of fact and fiction. Lenny's beloved Ayah is restored to this camp and many other people familiar to Lenny and her family also joined the camp after becoming victims of the chaos of the partition.

"There was a rehabilitation camp with many of these women adjacent to Sidhwa's house, and she states that she was inexplicably fascinated with these "fallen women," as they were described to her at the time." (Malmberg 2001)

Author has fictionalized her childhood observations of the refugee camps to manifest the cost that women had to pay for partition. Sidhwa gives descriptions of burning Lahore in the novel that she witnessed during her childhood.

“The flame covers two or three brick buildings in the bazaar and it’s hard to put out the fire. People are pouring into the lanes from their houses and shops. After a while, a fire brigade van arrives. Instead of water they pour fuel on the entire rows of the buildings on both the sides of the street which ignites in an incredible conflagration. People (Hindus) are running here and there and sometime they disappear in the smoke.” (Sidhwa 136)

Her home city of Lahore became a border city in Pakistan, and was crowded by thousands of refugees. Sidhwa writes about her childhood,

"...the ominous roar of distant mobs was a constant of my awareness, alerting me, even at age seven, to a palpable sense of the evil that was taking place in various parts of Lahore." (Malmberg 2001)

The incident of the gunny-sack is also a factual one which was witnessed in real by the author herself. In the novel while Lenny and Himmat Ali are walking on the Warris road, on the way they find a bulging gunny-sack in which was found the Masseur dead.

“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 smell of fresh roses. ” (Sidhwa 174)

People’s attitude towards the dead body has been described in the following heart touching words. “People gather around them, some concerned, some curious. But they look at Masseur as if he is not a person. He isn’t. He has been reduced to a body. A thing. One side of his handsome face already buried in the dusty sidewalk.”(Sidhwa 175)

In the novel Sidhwa presents her own opinions and beliefs about the personalities and characters of Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah through the narration by Lenny. Sidhwa seems to be giving her own opinion about Gandhijee though the brief portrayal of Gandhijee’s character in the novel narrated by Lenny. In the novel the author gives the description of the event when Gandhijee comes to Lahore wherein the author has focused more on Gandhijee's advices related to dieting and enema. Here it seems the author has portrayed the character of Gandhijee focusing on very few traits of his personality. Gandhijee has been depicted having feminine characteristics and the description sometimes appears to be laughing at the personality and character of Gandhijee. When Gandhijee

visits Lahore, Lenny and her mother meet Gandhijee. He is knitting surrounded by women. When Lenny and her mother go to Gandhijee, he politely puts aside his knitting and asks softly to practice enema, a medical way to clear the intestines.

"Flush your system with an enema, daughter, says Gandhijee...'Look at these girl'", says Gandhijee, indicating the lean women flanking him. I give them enemas myself there is no shame in it- I am like their mother you can see how smooth and moist their skin is look at their shining eyes!"(Sidhwa 87)

Further Gandhijee advises Lenny to practice enema, "Flush her stomach! Her skin will bloom like roses."(Sidhwa 87) Here the author has depicted the character of Gandhijee talking only about enema. She presented Gandhijee announcing, "An enema a day keeps the doctor away."(Sidhwa 87) The narrator has been shown by the author wondering in following words, "I am puzzled why he's so famous."(Sidhwa 87)

The writer clearly mentions that during division Muslims and Pakistan have suffered. The British government has done injustice to Jinnah and favored Nehru. Here the writer puts forth her own belief about the division.

“Within three months seven million Muslims and five million Hindus and Sikhs are uprooted in the largest and most terrible exchange of population known to history. The Punjab has been divided by the icy cards- sharks dealing out the land village by village, city by city, wheeling and dealing and doling out favors.....For now the tide is turned- and the Hindus are being favored over the Muslims by the remnants of the Raj. Now that its objective to divide India is achieved, the British favor Nehru over Jinnah. Nehru is Kashmiri; they grant him Kashmir.....they grant Nehru Gurdaspur and Pathankot, without which Muslim Kashmir cannot be secured.” (Sidhwa159)

The writer has compared Nehru with Jinnah. In the comparison she criticizes Nehru and favors Jinnah. The writer shows Nehru as Lady Mountbatten’s lover. Writer wants to convey that in the allotment of areas at the time of partition Britishers and Nehru took the benefit of Jinnah’s good character and personality and did injustice to him. Sidhwa ranks Jinnah as a constitutional man.

“His training at the Old Bailey and practice in English courtrooms has given him faith in constitutional means, and he puts his misplaced hopes into tall standards of upright justice.” (Sidhwa 160)

The writer says that Jinnah has been criticized in films of Gandhi’s and Mountbatten’s lives and in books by British and Indian scholars. “Jinnah who for a decade was known as Ambassador of

Hindu- Muslim Unity is now portrayed as a monster.” (Sidhwa 160) These are clear comments of the writer in defense of Jinnah through the words of Lenny the narrator of the novel. There are various other instances in the novel where writer defends Jinnah. Sidhwa quotes Jinnah's voice announcing Pakistan as a secular country.

She herself once considered the book as a defense of Jinnah.

“And I felt, in Ice Candy Man, I was just redressing, in a small way, a very grievous wrong that has been done to Jinnah and Pakistanis by many Indian and British writers. They’ve dehumanized him, made him a symbol of the sort of person who brought about the partition of India.....where as in reality he was the only constitutional man who didn’t sway crowds just by rhetoric.” (Dodiya 83)

4) Conclusion:

Bapsi Sidhwa’s firsthand experience, observations, beliefs and arguments are presented in the novel through words of an innocent child narrator. Though the writer herself says Lenny is not herself, one feels as if the narrator Lenny were the writer herself narrating the complete story of the partition. The writer experienced the trauma as a Parsi child born and brought up in Pakistan so she presents the trauma from Pakistan’s point of view. She reproduces the experiences and events in a manner that makes reader feel the same, though the 21 century readers may not have witnessed the events themselves. Through the realistic description of a fictionalized story of partition readers are made to feel as if they were present at the time of partition to witness the event and trauma. The novel can be considered truly autobiographical in nature, depicting the historical incident fictionalized and colored by the writers own reflections, opinions, beliefs, feelings, emotions, and imaginations.

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