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NARRATIVES OF MEMORY, TRAUMA AND WOMEN: A CRITICAL READING OF BAPSI SIDHWA'S *CRACKING INDIA*

*Kalyani Hazarika, Assistant Professor, Dept. of English,
Mahapurusha Srimanta Sankardeva Viswavidyalaya, Nagaon, Assam*

Abstract:

*Partition is an event which has redesigned and reshaped the destiny of South Asia in an entirely new dimension. The Subcontinent is the land of three major religions: Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism. All the three religions which have a long history of living together have also ruled the subcontinent for centuries. This inhabitation of hundreds of years resulted in creation of a common culture and a common identity for the people. This common culture and identity was based upon intercultural and inter-religious harmony. But the 'Partition of 1947' provoked communal hatred among followers of different religions which led to the rise of unprecedented violence resulting in loss of millions of lives. Historians have focused on the issues of freedom whereas literary writers have spent much ink on partition as a trauma. Their perspective on partition is conditioned by their communal, ethnic and nationalistic sentiments. Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the prominent writers of the subcontinent who have interwoven the historiographic thread into the fabrics of literature with particular reference to the partition narrative. The historiographic reading of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* aims to investigate the convergences and divergences in the event of partition with the most shocking and traumatic experience of division of hearts and communities. It will also make an attempt to see how the women characters in the novel struggle for their survival and how they are pained to visualize a future devoid of any hope.*

Key words: *Trauma, suffering, violence, memory, atrocity.*

Introduction

When India gained independence from Great Britain in 1947, the subcontinent was divided into separate nations: India, the Hindu homeland, and Pakistan, the Muslim homeland. To carry out this political solution to long-standing religious conflict, millions were forced to move, and this mass migration soon turned into slaughter. While exact numbers are not known, it is estimated that hundreds of thousands died. Those who survived also suffered-becoming refugees, losing fortunes and homes, succumbing to hunger and disease. Countless women were raped, then punished anew when their husbands and families rejected them as polluted. Much of the bloodshed and anguish took place on the Punjabi plains in northern India, a rich farmland intersected by five rivers. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* is acknowledged as the most representative partition novel. Instead of dealing with the creation of Pakistan, it focuses more on the tragedy of Partition and its fallout. Furthermore, the novel deals with the miseries and sufferings of women during partition violence.

In the novel, we see how Lenny experiences an identity shift as she must learn her new Pakistani nationality. The crack in India ultimately created Pakistan as a separate country, rationalized by primarily Muslim religion, but its people were not physically united with east and west widely separated-and in large measure did not feel united. The young Lenny experiences this as a shrinking of identity, as people change suddenly from being themselves to “dwindling into symbols.”

As the characters develop, Sidhwa clearly shows that the cracks are not neat cleavages such as

India versus Pakistan, Hindu versus Muslim. Rather, class and gender positions that have been affected by colonialism also shape the effects of partition. As a child, Lenny has no frame of reference for doubting that privilege will protect her. Instead, she is thrust into making adult decisions in order to help her nanny, Ayah, along with dealing with the generalized violence that surrounds them.

Sidhwa also effectively places female agency at the novel's center and thus destabilizes the predominant interpretations of the independence movement (or more precisely, movements) as operating at the level of diplomacy, in which the primary actors were all male. Moving the reader into the intimate spaces of female interaction, including a child's-eye view of women manipulating men to achieve their goals, expands our understanding of a watershed historical moment.

Discussion-

The form and structure of novel has facilitated the writers in articulating the traumatic event of partition. On one side the novel form engages in documenting the personal testimonies, on another side, it provides a framework that facilitates the representation of the suppressed stories thus intervening the confines of official histories. The writers have invoked and awakened repressed or suppressed memories which were kept dormant deliberately or un-intentionally at subconscious arenas. Multiple voices are refracted through the narrative voices to give way to the suppressed histories of the marginalized people. Sidhwa's text is distinct in adopting a marginalized girl child as narrator to represent the traumatic history of partition. Along with the well knitted plot structure, the device of child narrator facilitates Sidhwa to record the traumatic event of partition with great ease. By juxtaposing two worlds: Urban and rural, Sidhwa very effectively has succeeded in recording the harrowing tragedy of partition mainly through Lenny and partly through Ranna. Ranna's accounts stand as one the most gruesome accounts of the communal violence perpetrated upon Muslims by Sikh Community.

In the beginning of the novel, there is no place for the feeling of enmity among Hindus and Muslims but with the passage of the time this friendly situation completely reverses and they become killers of one another. To avenge murder of his sisters who are raped and murdered in riots of Hindu and Muslim, Ice Candy Man murders Masseur who loves Aaya and promises to marry her. He also gets indulged in other activities of violence. The novel clearly shows that this reversed situation is not a sudden result of any particular incidents but a result from policy of divide and rule used by the British rulers. They create uncertain and dangerous atmosphere where Hindu and Muslim can remain and live together for long time. Hindus and Muslims start hating one another for the cause. In this situation, thousands of innocent people including women, children, old people and so on are killed mercilessly by Hindus and Muslims without thinking who really is responsible for this situation. History shows that women have always been victims of violence whether it is religious riots or caste based riots

Cracking India as the title indicates signifies the cracks which had happened not merely in India as a geographical entity but also in the psyches of the people, diverse cultures and intercommunal harmony of the region. In the novel, Bapsi Sidhwa describes the communal tension and turbulence during the partition through the narration of Lenny an eight year old handicapped Parsi girl from Lahore. Lenny's visualisation of the terror which has gripped the city of Lahore is depicted through the tragic story of her Hindu Ayah Shanta. Ayah's feminine charm fascinates men of varying backgrounds, occupations and religions. Of her suitors, Masseur and Dilnawaz (Ice Candy Man) have developed strong rift against each other in order to win her favour. Lenny is gradually becoming conscious of the amorous advances of Ayah as well as the changing socio-political changes around her. The rumour of the partition of subcontinent is the talk of the town. The popular political slogans of political processions are independence from British imperialism and an independent country for the Muslims of India. One day, the riots erupted in Lahore in a far off locality from Lenny's residence which caused numerous deaths of the innocent people on both sides. The news of violence and killing spreads like wild fire. Soon, the fire of revenge and communal hatred

takes over the entire province of Punjab. Taking undue advantage of the turbulent situation, Ice Candy Man, out of sheer hatred and jealousy gets Masseur killed to pave way for Ayah. Subsequently, he receives the worst shock when he comes across the ghastly scene of the mutilated dead bodies of the Muslim passengers on Lahore railway station while he was waiting for his sisters who had to arrive from Gurdaspur.

We see that, 'Individualism' is one of the prominent themes in the novel. Individualism is a natural human sentiment which highlights the moral worth of an individual in terms of his contribution towards society. Earlier in the novel, several passages evoke Lenny's experiences as a polio patient, her enjoyment of the distinction of her disability, and the ways polio affects her role within her family and wider social sphere. The fact that polio vanishes as a plotline is both disappointing and interesting: Lenny's failure to focus on disability during adolescence overturns stereotypes about disabled girls' exclusion from the social/sexual culture of adolescence. Like so much else in this novel, Sidhwa's treatment of polio is emphatically and refreshingly local, focused on the way daily life goes on in its particular, individual ways in the context of large-scale political conflicts and received notions about bodies and identities.

In *Cracking India*, we come across a similar representation of individuals as this novel signifies the presence of Parsee being an integral part of the society during the turmoil. The Parsee characters like Godmother (Rodabai) and Lenny's mother who symbolize selfhood and devotion, feel the pain for humanity and try to save the women as much as possible. Sidhwa portrays these Parsee characters as heroic and humanitarian who try to save the lives and property of all human beings irrespective of their religious affiliations. When a Hindu girl, Ayah Shanta, requests Godmother to manage her freedom from the clutches of cruel Ice Candy Man, the Godmother secures her from the merciless Ice Candy Man and sends her to her family in India. Sidhwa also shows that Parsee women are devoted wives and mothers: they remain faithful, and serving. They follow the wishes and orders of their husbands. In the whole novel, we do not find a towering character like Godmother who is sharp witted having indefatigable stamina, social commitment and boundless love for humanity. In spite of her old age, she has marvellous sense of humour, power to mould and modify not only the individuals but also the system. She is authoritative and has the ability and understanding to handle the crisis. Her authoritative tone makes Ice Candy Man speechless when she makes him realize of the infidelity he has shown towards Ayah: "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! Nimakharam! Faithless!" (p. 78). All the narrators of the partition confirm that women were the worst victims of the cruelties perpetrated during partition. They were kidnapped and brutally raped; their children were killed before them on the both sides of border.

In this connection, we see that one day Lenny's cousin announces that he saw Ayah in a car and continues that she has become a call girl. From the discussions between Godmother and Ice-candy-man, Lenny learns that Ice-candy-man raped Ayah and allowed the men to rape her and he has become a pimp in the red light area. Ice-candy-man has changed Ayah's name from Shanta to Mumtaz and seized her physically and mentally and married her without her wish.

The most horrifying representation of the violence associated with Partition in the novel comes from Ranna's story of genocidal massacres. When Lenny sees Ranna the third time, he is orphaned and bears "the improbable wound on the back of his shaved head,"-"a grisly scar like a brutally gouged and premature bald spot" (206). The trope of "the improbable wound" is highly important. It is a wound that is at once somatic and psychological and, in a sense, it serves as a synecdoche of the traumas of Partition. The "improbability" of the wound not only refers to the incredible extent to which Ranna has been wounded, but also subtly alludes to the broken promises of solidarity voiced by village elders. What is even more "improbable" is the narrative description of "the attack on Pir Pindo" or the story of the annihilation of Ranna's family:

Ranna saw his uncles beheaded. His older brothers, his cousins. The Sikhs were among them like hairy vengeful demons, wielding bloodied swords, dragging them out as a sprinkling of Hindus, darting about at the fringes, their faces vaguely familiar, pointed out and identified the Muslims by name. He felt a blow cleave the back of his head and the warm flow of blood. Ranna fell just inside the door on a tangled pile of unrecognizable bodies. Someone fell on him, drenching him in blood. (213)

In other words, the “improbability” signals the inability of both the narrator and reader to register the shockingly vivid details of the massacre and the betrayal by the Sikh “brothers.” Later the “improbable” violence is uncannily repeated again shortly after the seriously wounded Ranna miraculously manages to escape to his uncle's village. And even after narrowly escaping the second massacre, Ranna continues to bear witness to the “improbable” atrocities as he roams around the burning city of Amritsar:

No one minded the semi-naked specter as he looked in doors with his knowing, wide-set peasant eyes as men copulated with wailing children-old and young women. He saw a naked woman, her light Kashmiri skin bruised with purple splotches and cuts, hanging head down from a ceiling fan. And looked on with a child's boundless acceptance and curiosity as jeering men set her long hair on fire. He saw babies, snatched from their mothers, smashed against walls and their bowing mothers brutally raped and killed. (218-19)

Like Lenny, Ranna also ceases to be an innocent child when he confronts a terrible violent attack on his village Pir-Pindo, killing of his own family, rape of his sisters and uprooting of people from their ancestral land. When Lenny meets him later and hears the story of his survival she tries to understand his trauma and his survival:

It surprises me how easily Ranna has accepted his loss; and adjusted to his new environment. So one gets used to anything... If one must... (CI 223)

Sidhwa very strategically moulds the private world and public world to Lenny. Although the story is set against the backdrop of India independence, it is equally the story of Lenny's maturation from a four-year-old limping girl to a young woman of growing sexual awareness. As a young girl she sits in the Queen's garden with her Ayah, her nanny, who is nubile and the object of desire for a large circle of young men of many races and creeds. Young Lenny perceives their eyes burning for Ayah, their furtive attempts to touch her with their hands, mouths, even their toes. Her education about sexuality thus begins early, though Sidhwa delights in showing us Lenny's later sexual discoveries as well, such as her growing aware of her Cousin's body. Complexity and vagueness of partition is very well juxtaposed with the complexity of the age of puberty. As children grow towards puberty, they are not able to comprehend all the changes. This is the stage of vagueness for them, but they have to cross this stage facing drastic changes as well as turmoil: physical, mental, emotional, psychological, and social and many more. In the same way the days preceding partition, during partition and the aftermath of partition was beyond the comprehensibility of ordinary men and women. They were passing through the critical phase of transition with tremendous changes in all fields.

As highlighted by the characters of Lenny and Ranna in *Cracking India*, children who were lucky enough to escape Partition alive were condemned with the memories that forever changed their lives both physically and psychologically. Although children suffered the same tortures and fates as others during Partition, they paid the ultimate sacrifice to their country with their innocence. As we see in the cases of Ranna, and Lenny, Partition changed the course of their lives. After such traumatic events, there was no way of returning to the life they had once known. Lenny's comment: “but in my memory it is (the fire in Lahore) is branded over an inordinate length of time: memory demands poetic license” (149) embodies the presence of an elderly voice which empowers and monitors the child narrator and brings past and present

together.

Conclusion-

Thus, we see Sidhwa succeeds in her devise to provide us with the self expressive views of history, politics and society. Moreover, the child's perspective also foregrounds the brutal fact how partition interrupted the natural course of their lives. After such a traumatic event, there was no way of returning to the life they had once known. Because Partition hindered the children's growing years, it forced them into maturity way before their time. Whether children suffered physically or psychologically, the result was the same: trauma, misplaced identity, and confusion. On the other hand, a whole generation of people was exhumed in the stormy fire of partition, their lives and futures were decided for them while they themselves had no choice. Although people survived partition, they succumbed to considerable psychological effects and remained haunted of a history they nowhere were responsible for. She persistently raises questions about the rationale of partition and continues to highlight the price of partition in more than one way. She shows that the millions of victims of Partition have paid a heavy price for freedom. The traumatic experiences of the refugees during partition will continue to haunt their memories and lives for years.

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