

PARTITION AND THE MAKING OF POST-COLONIAL PAKISTAN: A STUDY OF CREATIVE RESPONSE IN ENGLISH AND URDU¹

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ABSTRACT

*Perhaps no piece of writing captures the sense of tragedy and trauma of the turbulent times of independence of Pakistan in 1947 as Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*. In this paper, mainly engaging with this work, and referring to Sidhwa's other works and some partition narratives from Urdu writers, I foreground the Partition of India and the politics surrounding it as resulting into the creation of a postcolonial Pakistan. Of particular focus are the political machinations of Mountbatten, Nehru and Patel to cripple Pakistan by depriving it of its rightful assets as reflected in a number of fiction and non-fiction works, including the one under study in the present paper. I have not only contextualized Sidhwa's work in history but also in other literary works published in English (e.g., Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, 1956) and Urdu (e.g., Abdullah Hussain's *Udas Naslein*, 2010).*

Key words: Partition, Postcolonial Pakistan, Historical Fiction

Introduction and Background

India and Pakistan came into being with surgical swiftness. The formal articulation of the demand for Pakistan was made on March 23, 1940 in Lahore in a public meeting of the resurgent Muslim League. The suddenness and unpreparedness of the Partition belied most anticipations of the immediate future. The boundaries between the two new states were not officially known until two days after they had formally become independent. But the most unforeseen aspect of the plan was the bloodbath that followed and created a historical hatred that is still simmering in India and Pakistan.

The character of the violence was not only unpredictable it was also unprecedented, both in scale and method. This burden of history has left behind deep resentment and animosity, and the most militant of nationalisms that is incomparable was also created through the official discourse of history in

¹ This paper has been extracted from the researcher's PhD thesis.

Pakistan and India, now backed up by nuclear weapons as well. On the other, a considerable sense of nostalgia also gripped the two nations (or various national groups), frequently articulated in the view that this was a partition of siblings who could not live together and decided to divide their home and property.

From the 1940s to the present, a great deal has been written about 'the partition of India' and the violence that accompanied it. Literary responses, as creative index of history as 'lived experience, of the past, possess significant interlinkages with the present. It is both compelling and challenging for a creative writer to assimilate critically the legacy of history, as a reference point for the present and formulate his/her own reflections. The legacy of history is variably reconstructed in imaginative writings, for instance, through crystallization of the 'particular' or an expansive probe into the general. Creative practice operates through 'selection' in order to be meaningful. However, the artist's prerogative of selectivity does not rule out commitment to an idea, ideal or ideology in aesthetic interpretation. A case in point, in this paper, is Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*. History thus selected and reenacted may be less 'scientific', less sequential, yet more interpretive in human terms, that is, in terms of the hopes and despair, aspirations and ideals of real human beings in concrete life situations.

Keeping in view the specificities of the Indian history, however, the ideological function of 'partition' historiography and creative responses has been very different from other such events in history. One case in point can be the history of Holocaust literature. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and other nations had been living in India for centuries together mostly in great harmony and peace. Unfortunately, what happened on and around 1947 has elided that actual history has justified the right-wing view that there had always been animosity between the main interest groups, and that Muslims had been only an imperial power in India for eight hundred years.

My purpose, partially, is to underscore how different the history of Partition appears from contending perspectives. More crucially, however, I hope that what sometimes looks like a plethora of quotations, and the simply overwhelming nature of many of the reports, will help to convey something of the enormity of the event.

A growing number of scholars have given attention to this contentious site of history that is avidly fought and has become the subject of heated debate. The good that has begun to filter out of this historical continuum is that many previously marginalized and ignored areas are constantly revisited by historians in India, Pakistan, Great Britain and elsewhere. This marks an important

advance in the process of rethinking the history of Partition, of nationhood and of national politics in the subcontinent. With the passage of time, emotions have been replaced by rational analysis, as is evident in a new book by Jaswant Singh (2009). But the passage of time does not unconsciously produce a set of new perspectives and questions. On the contrary, a set of far-reaching political and historiographical considerations lies behind such revisionist thinking in this area.

With reference to the creative response as propounded by Sidhwa in particular, one may say that art contests reality, but it does not avoid it. Indeed, it is this creative contest of art and reality that the aesthetic interpretation of the artist is articulated. Ultimately, and specifically in the context of historical socio-political discourses, the true significance of historical fiction lies in its aesthetic interpretation of salient historical and socio-political themes. In *Ice Candy Man*, Sidhwa has foregrounded a number of socio-political issues surrounding Partition as this is the major theme of her novel. For example:

1. Cabinet Mission and the reasons of its failure
2. Contrasting attitudes of Muslim League and Congress
3. Removal of Lord Wavell and appointment of Mountbatten as viceroy of India in the months leading to Partition.
4. The Sikh question
5. Riots in Punjab and its partition
6. Redcliff Award and the boundary commission
7. Gradual eroding of communal harmony
8. Congress ministries of 1937, and other historical problems of the time that ultimately resulted into Pakistan emerging as a 'moth-eaten' country.
9. Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement

My whole point in including the following survey is to highlight historical truth that has begun to emerge in the revisionist histories written more recently. The credit goes to Sidhwa, who, much before Stanley Wolpert's *Shameful Flight* (2006) (and other such 're-writings' of history), had the artistic courage and historical acumen to put that contested history of the Partition in its true perspective.

Partition and the Creative Response

One can say almost with certainty that no single event in the history of the twentieth century has inspired as much literature as the Partition of India. It was such a traumatic experience for the inhabitants of India, irrespective of their

creeds and colors, that almost everyone in the Sub-continent was jolted out of a centuries old mutual co-existence and communal harmony. The scale and depth of the tragedy was such that many writers, for many years to come, approached the subject of partition with great trepidation. Except for an artist of Manto's caliber, no other writer addressed this issue with a directness and ruthlessness that was required. This silence is even more striking in someone like Qurratulain Hyder. Twice, once in *Aag ka Darya* (translated as *River of Fire*, 1998) and again in *Akhri Shab ke Musafar* (translated as *Fireflies in the Mist*, 1994), she writes about the years before and after Partition, but chooses to remain silent about the Partition year. Both the discourses and the silences are significant. Given the violence that attended Partition, given the traumatic movement of millions of uprooted people, it is not surprising that the first impressions conveyed by the creative writers were that of a communal conflagration (Roy & Bhatia, 2008). The stark images of abducted women being paraded through the streets, of mutilated bodies of men and women, of train loads of corpses, of lines of moving humanity trudging through roads strewn with bodies and baggage left behind, the religious cries now turned into battle cries or calls for vengeance strew the literature that emerges immediately after independence. Saadat Hasan Manto, Abdullah Hussain and Kishan Chander use Urdu to describe this violence; Khushwant Singh and Bapsi Sidhwa use English.

Manto was perhaps the most original writer to take up the theme of partition in a number of stories. There is a passage in Sa'adat Hasan Manto's famous Urdu short story, "Toba Tek Singh", which could be read as an archetypal moment in the representation of the 1947 Indo-Pakistani partition. As a comment on the relative sanity of national-communal division, Manto sets his story in a Lahore lunatic asylum and here the horror of partition is conveyed in a bleak comic disorientation that takes hold of the prison inmates as they become unable to situate themselves in the changed landscape of a new independent South Asia. The passage that stands out in Manto's story articulates this dislocation as a repeated inquiry about the exact whereabouts of the new states:

As to where Pakistan was located, the inmates knew nothing. That was why both the mad and the partially mad were unable to decide whether they were now in India or Pakistan. If they were in India, where on earth was Pakistan? And if they were in Pakistan, then how come that until only the other day it was India? (Manto, 1990, p. 13)

Thus, for Manto, as for other South Asian authors of his generation, the writing of Partition entails certain level of cynicism or reflexive distance towards the very idea of located, unified identities (Tickell, 2001, p. 175).

As the bulk of such literature is bewilderingly high, I would like to discuss the creative response of Pakistani writers with particular focus on Bapsi Sidhwa's work since she, in the views of many critics, has been able to handle this contentious and charged issue with utmost clarity and disinterestedness. At the same time, she has very successfully incorporated the Pakistani view of Partition.

Except for her latest novel, *An American Brat* (2012), there is a common strain running in Sidhwa's early novels. Though they are different in their central themes and yet one can trace a commonality that can be described, in the words of Anita Desai, as 'a passion for history and for truth telling' (as cited in Rao et al., 2006, p. 88). In *The Crow Eaters*, *The Bride*, and *the Ice Candy Man*, her desire to understand the terrible events of the Partition of the Indian Sub-continent in 1947 and the subsequent birth of Pakistan as a nation is evident. To understand Pakistan's post-partition history and society, Bapsi Sidhwa appears to suggest that it is compelling to understand the events which led to its emergence as a new nation in 1947.

Even in her first novel *The Crow Eaters*, predominantly dealing with her own Parsi community in Lahore and Bombay, she revisits history, giving clear historical signposts throughout the narrative. References to Partition or Independence recur on a number of occasions. The presence of the British Raj is evident, for example, in the character of "that bumptious son-of-a bitch in Peshawar called Colonel Williams. I cooed to him—salaamed so low I got a crick in my balls—buttered and marmaladed him until he was eating out of my hand. Within a year I was handling all traffic of goods between Peshawar and Afghanistan!" By employing brief yet subtle historical references from the British Raj in India,

Sidhwa is writing back against the traditional pictures of the Raj—by implying that colonel Williams accepted bribes, and by showing Freddy arranging visits to dancing girls in the Hira Mandi for Charles P. Allen. The British Raj is thus transformed from the proud father of so many British versions of history to the somewhat seedy progenitor of Sidhwa's version of Pakistan's history. (Crane in Dhawan & Kapadia, 1996)

By giving a rebuttal of Indian and British versions of Partition histories, Sidhwa underscores her identity as a Parsi Pakistani writer. Historiography has been a major contention in the debates surrounding the troubled history of Partition. There is a politics of exclusion and inclusion in the official histories of both India and Pakistan. Therefore, as a Parsi writer, she even appears, on occasions, to write against Pakistani interpretations of history—as with Freddy’s foreboding words which bring the novel to a close: “We will stay where we are... let Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, or whoever rule. What does it matter? The sun will continue to set— in their arses” (Sidhwa, 1978/2006, p. 283). These words echo the views expressed by the villagers of Mano Majra in Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*: “Freedom is for the educated people who fought for it. We were slaves of the English, now we will be slaves of the educated Indians—or the Pakistanis” (p. 62). Even in *Ice Candy Man*, the inhabitants of Pir Pindo, initially, refuse to believe the Partition plan and consider it a great conspiracy to divide their centuries old villages and family ties. Sidhwa thus makes a strong political statement about the nature of politics of Partition.

Whereas *The Crow Eaters* draws to a close with the horrors of Partition imminent, those horrors are the starting point of *The Bride*. Thus the story of Zaitoon, ‘The Bride’, commences as the history of Pakistan as a new nation begins, and it begins in bloodshed and tragedy. Train massacres, rapes, and arsons had been the most common brutalities which were inflicted upon those crossing borders during 1947. That is why they are also the major motifs of almost all partition novels written in India or Pakistan, irrespective of their linguistic medium. Therefore, Sidhwa also chooses to start her second novel with the familiar scene of a train massacre in which the Sikhs attack a train full of Muslim refugees. The attack on the train which is told in the first-person to add the sense of horror, together with the later attack on the refugee camp causes readers of *The Bride* to recall once more the many Partition novels, like Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*. Nasim Hijazi’s *Khak aur Khoon*, and Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi*, in which similar attacks take place. In *The Bride*, however, the horror of “the chaotic summer of 1947” (Sidhwa, 1983/2008, p. 14) is only the starting point of the novel rather than its subject. Its actual subject is the plight of women who continue to suffer in the new independent country as well. The Independence does not bring any fruits of freedom for them as their marginalization and exploitation continue in the light of centuries old customs.

The Bride is mainly the story of Zaitoon who as a child is rescued by Qasim when the Lahore-bound train is attacked and her parents are killed. Qasim adopts her and raises her in Lahore as his own daughter until she is fifteen. At this point, he takes her to his ancestral home in the mountains to be married to one of his kinsmen. This allows Sidhwa to contrast the often brutal ways of Qasim's people with the gentler life Zaitoon has known in Lahore, and sets the scene for an exploration of the cultural divisions Sidhwa sees within independent Pakistan. At the centre of Sidhwa's examination of the conflicts she perceives between two essentially male-dominated worlds, lies a very strong interest in the position of women in Pakistani society. The plight of women as a leitmotif is skilfully highlighted by the introduction of the young American woman, Carol, who is married to a 'modern' western-educated Pakistani husband.

Her presence in the novel does not emphasize the cross-cultural differences between East and West so much as the cross-gender differences that exist within Pakistani society. Women, unlike men, are expected to be silenced voices, inhabiting the shadows cast by their fathers, husbands, the family home—silences and shadows which deny an individual her identity, make her anonymous. Sidhwa uses the burkha as the ultimate symbol of shadow and silence. (Crane in Dhawan & Kapadia, 1996, p. 51)

Zaitoon borrows a burkha so that she can walk past her father unrecognized (Sidhwa, 1983, p. 91). Similarly, Carol, offended by the stares of a group of tribal men sarcastically, comments, "May be I should wear a burkha!" (p. 113), suggesting that this would be a shadow which would hide her and metamorphoses her into an anonymous part of womankind.

Like its predecessor, *The Crow Eaters*, *The Bride* exhibits Sidhwa's passion for history. And as in *The Crow Eaters*, the date is introduced and a clear time-scale is adhered to. There are also references to real historical figures: to Sir Bindon Blood (p. 116) who failed to subjugate the mountain tribes at the turn of the century. Carol's experiences as the foreign wife of a Pakistani are juxtaposed with Zaitoon's ordeal as an 'outsider' married to a Kohistani tribesman, and together Carol's circumstances and Zaitoon's awful plight are used by Sidhwa to highlight the position of women in Pakistani society.

The British Raj was an important shaping-presence during the Partition drama as is evident in this novel. Sidhwa reminds the reader of the role of the British in the division of the sub-continent.

The earth is not easy to carve up. India required a deft and sensitive surgeon, but the British, steeped in domestic preoccupation, hastily and carelessly butchered it. They were not deliberately mischievous - only cruelly negligent! A million Indians died. The earth sealed its clumsy new boundaries in blood as town by town, farm by farm, the border was defined. (Sidhwa, 1978, p. 14-15)

The birth of Pakistan could not be celebrated as the mark of freedom as a great occasion in the history of this new nation. It was an abortion of history and geography.

Sidhwa casts the British not in the role of caring surgeon, but as bloody abortionist, and Pakistan as the child of their botched work survives, and is alive but damaged and literally dripping with the blood of its parent India. But in this novel the ills of Pakistan are by no means laid solely at the feet of the British Raj. Pakistan's continuing socio-political maladies are due to corrupt Pakistani politicians and businessmen, like the 'Leader' Nikka Pehalwan works for. (Crane in Dhawan & Kapadia, 1996, p. 53)

The only difference is, in Pakistan's context, the United States has replaced Great Britain as a colonizing power.

The colonial experience and English literary heritage seem to be essentially instrumental in the emergence of novelists like Bapsi Sidhwa. Both of the factors resonate down our memory lane when in Lahore, at an early stage of the novel, "Qasim perched a frightened Zaitoon on the tall, proud snout of the Zam-Zam cannon, known because of Kipling as 'Kim's gun'" (Sidhwa, 1983, p. 48). This historical/literary reference shows Sidhwa's consciousness about her modern readers who will read her novel in perspective of Anglo-Indian writers like Kipling.

In both *The Crow Eaters* and *The Bride*, partition is an important motif, but not the shaping-force of the novels. However, in her third novel, *Ice Candy Man*, Partition is the central motif, and there is a strong sense of the politics of the time, a strong historical consciousness in this novel, as there is in her two previous novels. The narrator of the novel is a ten years old Parsi girl, free both from the prejudices of religion, and from the prejudices against women and the constraints imposed on her sex which she will be subject to as she grows older:

Our shadow glides over a Brahmin pundit... Our shadow has violated his virtue. The Pundit cringes... He looks at his food as it is infected with maggots. Squeamishly picking up the leaf, he tips its contents behind a bush and throws

away the leaf... I am a diseased maggot. I look at Yousaf. His face is drained of joy, bleak, furious. I know he too feels himself composed of shit, crawling with maggots.

Now I know surely. One man's religion is another man's poison.

I experience this feeling of utter degradation, of being an untouchable excrescence, an outcast again, years later when I hold out my hand to a Parsee priest at a wedding and he, thinking I am menstruating beneath my facade of diamonds and sequined sari, cringes. (Sidhwa, 1988/2000, p. 116-17)

It may be worth remembering that Sidhwa herself was a young girl in Lahore in the years leading up to Partition, and thus, like Lenny, witnessed the historical events of the time. Due to the polarizing nature of the partition narratives, whether in fiction or non-fiction, truth becomes the biggest casualty in the writing process. Sidhwa is alive to this danger and therefore, chooses the age and sex of her narrator carefully. As a Parsi, Lenny has no Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh axe to grind. The narrative voice acquires much authenticity and validity in Lenny's self-condemning question, "How can anyone trust a truth-infected tongue?" (p. 243). This is a wonderful conceit, an elaborate metaphor which contains both paradoxical and ironical elements.

The word 'infected' loads its partner 'truth' with unusually negative connotations and causes us to reflect on the nature of the truth we want to hear. Though we require Lenny to be a reliable witness to the historical events she sees, and to tell an historical truth (within the bounds of Sidhwa's fictional truth) in her narration, we are made uneasy by the unwise, instinctive truth which causes, her to betray Ayah. Only a child could own such a truth-infected tongue. (Crane in Dhawan & Kapadia, 1996, p. 54)

It is this same childish innocence which causes Lenny to suspect that her mother and godmother are behind the arson attacks in Lahore as they carry cans of petrol in their car. She also expresses her childish concern for the 'fallen women' in the 'prison' across the road. In fact the women living there are those unfortunate daughters and wives who have been abducted by the Sikhs and the Hindus and have been raped. Now their families refuse to take them back as they are a 'stigma' to the family name. But it is testament to Sidhwa's skill as a novelist that the reader always sees the 'real' truth of the situation, while at the same time recognizing the validity of Lenny's perception about the truth. Again, we are reminded that there is no single truth—there are always many

ways of interpreting the events which are being played out in Sidhwa's Lahore of 1947. In *Ice Candy Man* the fact that Lenny's 'unreliable' narration proves, after all, to be reliable in its own way, causes us to at least question the British and Indian versions of the truth about Partition that have hitherto been accepted.

The dinner-party at Lenny's parent's house, during which Lenny and her brother hide under the large table and eavesdrop on the conversation overhead, allows Sidhwa to introduce a discussion of the major political issues of the day—Swaraj, the demand for Pakistan—and the major political players—Gandhi, Jinnah, Wavell, Congress, the Muslim League, the Akalis—which would otherwise be outside the world of her young narrator. Sidhwa brings her Pakistani identity into play as she tries to correct the misconceptions about Jinnah's personality and role in the Partition.

Lord Wavell, as viceroy of India, was viewed by many as a judicious and fair player in the years leading to Partition. On the other hand, Lord Mountbatten's scandalous relationship with the Nehrus and his prejudice against Jinnah and Muslims in general is now being well-documented in the revisionist histories of Partition. With uncharacteristic bitterness, Hassan the Masseur says: "So they sack Wavell sahib, a fair man! And send for a new Lot sahib who will favour the Hindus" (Sidhwa, 1988/2000, p. 90).

Similarly, Lenny overhears much about the current political situation. As a child she does not understand much of those developments at the time as she sits with Ayah and her followers. And it is because of what she overhears, because of the opinions she has been exposed to, that Lenny suddenly becomes aware of the different religions all around her. How history contributes to a precocious development of a child is apparent when she says: "It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves—and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing Ayah—she is also a token. A Hindu" (p. 93). This signals a growth from innocence to experience, which prompts us to place more trust in the rapidly maturing narrator.

Perhaps the most significant remark for my purpose in this text is that, on the one hand, Jinnah is treated by the Indian and British historians as a monster and, on the other, he died broken-hearted in his own creation, Pakistan. "And, today, forty years later, in films of Gandhi's and Mountbatten's lives, in books by British and Indian scholars, Jinnah, who for a decade was known as 'Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity,' is caricatured, and portrayed as a

monster.” (p. 160) In re-imagining Jinnah, Sidhwa draws on a quotation from the Indian poet and freedom fighter, Sarojini Naidu, to support the validity of her portrayal of Jinnah.

Alamgir Hashmi has expressed some reservations about the historical content of the novel. He writes that *Ice Candy Man* “concerns the Partition events of 1947, and is more interesting for its characterization, developing narrative techniques and the child’s point of view than what it actually has to tell about the events” (quoted in Crane, 1996, p. 58).

However, this is far from being a case of inaccurate historical detail; rather memory is playing a part here. *Ice Candy Man* is deeply political in its retelling of the events of Partition from a Pakistani rather than an Indian perspective. The historical signposts or references in this novel are necessarily limited because Lenny doesn’t understand much of what she hears. As Lenny herself says: “Obviously he (Ice Candy Man) is quoting Bose (Sometimes he quotes Gandhi, or Nehru or Jinnah, but I’m fed up of hearing about them. Mother, Father and their friends are always saying: Gandhi said this, Nehru said that. Gandhi did this, Jinnah did that. What’s the point of talking so much about people we don’t know?)” (Sidhwa, 1988/2000, p. 29).

Conclusion

India has produced a number of Partition novels which have contributed to the strong body of fiction which treats the history of India. But Partition is as much a part of Pakistani history as it is a part of Indian history, and it is important to have a Pakistani version of that shared horror. *Ice Candy Man* is both Pakistani version of Partition and a major contribution to the growing list of Partition novels which continue to emerge from the Indian sub-continent. Through her various marginalized narrators and through the experiences of the many marginalized characters in her first three novels, Sidhwa gives voice to hitherto silenced groups of Pakistan (and India) and in so doing tells other versions of her country’s history.

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