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Parsi Culture in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-man*

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Abstract

The article looks at Bapsi Sidhwa's endeavours to depict the parsiness in her novels *Ice-Candy-Man*. It also looks at reflections of the people in the Indian subcontinent. Her novels *Ice-Candy-Man*, *The Crow Eaters* and *An American Brat* feature characters who have attained self-awakening or self-realization. The decision of a character in *Ice-Candy-Man* to hide her Parsi roots and identify herself as a Pakistani is analyzed. The intention of Sidhwa to show the Westernization of the Parsis is also discussed. Sidhwa's characters show invincible courage in breaking loose from the customary and traditional practices of her community. She lets herself loose from such practices occasionally. The paper discusses the ways and manners of the minority class of Parsis. Many distinctive qualities of the class are lime lighted.

Keywords- *Parsi, Subaltern, Minority, Survival*

It is quite natural for a writer to give room to one's own culture and social background in one's writings. Bapsi too is not an exception. Being a Parsi by birth, she is profoundly rooted in her own culture and beliefs. Bapsi has given voice to all that happened to her in and outside her home. Her own life becomes the representation of the Parsi minority girls and women later on. She says:

I was brought up in a very strict home. We Parsis adopt the flavour of which every country we are in, we have to, and the atmosphere in my house was segregated. When my brother's friends came, I was told, 'you better disappear'... that sort of thing... (Bapsi)

The depiction of community in its fluid state lies at the heart of Bapsi's novel. The Parsis at the time of partition had the advantage of detachment from any of the issues which provoked the other communities. For the Parsis, the question was of survival, of establishment and acceptance of identity as a community. The status of being neutral is shown by Bapsi in *Ice-Candy-Man*, when Col. Barucha, the president of the community in

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Lahore advocates 'status quo'. He wants fellow Parsis to shun the anti-colonial movement and nationalist agitation headed by Mahatma Gandhi. He says, "...if we've stuck the Hindus they'll swipe our business from our noses, and sell our grandfather's in the bargain. If we're stuck with the Muslims they'll convert us by the sword! And God help us if we are stuck with the Sikhs...."

Another feature of Parsi community talked about in the novel is the Parsi religious tolerance and reverence for all faiths, the novel plays a key role in Bapsi's oeuvre of intertwining her Pakistanis identity, with her Parsi roots, giving voice to the guiding preoccupations of her work, the fate of the dispossessed and the demand of the East, the onslaught of revenge and violence to which the women of the other communities are subjected to, in the name of faith and nation. The novel brings forth Parsis moral position amid identity crisis. Bapsi shows that Parsis act beyond their religion as they are found involved in many tasks of helping the refugees from India and those leaving Lahore. They provide them petrol, drinks, comfort and other basic amenities. The rescued kidnapped women are sent back to their families by Parsis. Explaining their secretive and seemingly suspicious outings, Lenny's mother says: "I wish I'd told you. We were only smuggling the rationed petrol to help our Hindu and Sikh friends to run away. And also for the convoys to send kidnapped women, like your Ayah, to their families across the border." (242) The motivation behind such selfless and noble actions by Lenny's mother is neither individual heroism nor political fanaticism. Zoroastrian ethics of "good deeds" are the basis for such charitable acts. A remarkable energy of rescuing Ayah from the "Kotha" is shown by Rodabai, Lenny's Godmother. She takes Ayah to a rescued women camp and then arranges to send her to her relatives in Amritsar.

In the novel, the rescued kidnapped women are sent back to their families by Parsis. Lenny's mother and Electrical- Aunt are dumb founded over Ayah's abduction, finding and rehabilitating her in whatever condition she may be in. Lenny's mother, Mrs. Sethi and her aunt Minnie travel all over Lahore providing cans of petrol to the beleaguered families.

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By showcasing the different aspects of Parsi life in her novels, Bapsi has done a great service to her minority community in Asia. She writes about Ice-Candy-Man "...there is no doubt that in this book I was conscious of trying to preserve Parsi charmed humour and ethos".

As an author, Sidhwa herself engages in a post-colonial task of reconstruction reality as alternate to what is standard in established history, the idea of partition being seen as a historically accepted solution fails to acknowledge the narratives of struggle that took place

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within it. In this void, Sidwa wishes to voice, representing both a thematic condition of post-colonialism and also the role of post colonial author. The dominant post-colonial theme of expressing cultural ethos is evident in the realm where honour, betrayal, hope and despair all converge into one amorphous and complex mass.

Sidwa vividly portrays the complexities of life in the subcontinent after independence. In the novel in question, Lenny the young narrator rewrites the history of the subcontinent in her journey of self-narration. This history becomes more complex as she writes it not only from the Pakistani but from the Parsi point of view of impending future is expressed by Col. Bhavucha in the meeting at the five-temple. He tells his community to shun the anti-colonial movement and stick to their stance of royalty to the British empire. He warns them that one we get Swaraj, 'Hindus, Muslims and even the Sikhs are going to Jockey for power; and if you jokers jump into the middle you will be mingled into chutney'. However, Dr. Moody contradicts by saying that it is not that simple. He claims; "our neighbours will think that we are betraying them and siding with the English". M.F. Salat observes that Sidhwa contradicts the received discourses by showing the "silent but positive role played by Lenny's parents". In helping both the Hindus and the Muslims", suggesting that "the Parsis too were involved in their own ways in the events of time and that they were not just indifferent and passive onlookers to the awful human tragedies".

Salat observes that it is a revelation meant not only for Lenny but also for all those who are ignorant of the Parsi involvement in the Partition when Lenny's mother explains the secrets of her outings.

A major preoccupation of a writer is language. Should the writer write in the language inherited from the imperial power or should one revert to the native language. Regarding it, Chinua Achebe argues; "I feel English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be new English, still in the full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit to African surroundings". Bapsi uses English in the *Ice-Candy-Man* similar to Chinua Achebe's belief. In an interview to Feroza Jussuawalla she states;

My first language of speech is Gujrati. My second is Urdu, my third is English. But as far as my reading and writing goes I can read and write best in English. I am tail end product of the Raj. This is the case with lot of people in India and Pakistan. They are condemned to write in English but I don't think this is such a bad thing because English is a rich language...

(Feroza Jussuawalla)

So, Sidhwa writes in new English- English punctuated with words from the native language. While she translated a no. of words from the native languages, several words are left untranslated; "Pahelwan, a wrestler, 'choorail, witches', 'Shabash-well said', Ghar ki Murgi dal barabar, puppets', 'Mamajee uncle'. Bill Ashcroft in "the empire writes back",

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observes that such individual words are the most obvious and the most common authorial intrusions in cross-cultural texts.

Bapsi also quotes Iqbal- the urdu poets occasionally for his anti-colonial subjectivity. As the poet demystifies the notion of the whites as a superior race by exposing their secret of “conjuring tricks”, Sidhwa undercuts the British notion of civilizing the other and calling it “the white man’s burden”.

The technique of letting a child reader render voice to atrocities of a historic event and its disheartening consequences is unique and most objective. It can only be compared to the poetic narrative of Atia Hossain’s *Sunlight on A Broken Column* which too is rendered by a child narrator.

Sidhwa achieve many things through as she herself tells us that the character of Lenny is autobiographical and similarly quite striking. She too was affected by Polio as a child, and the crippled childhood memories are often brought in, washed by the mammoth Vandalism of the consequences of the Partition. Thought out the narration there flows a wistful remembrance of those by gone days, the lovable characters that were so much part of her life, the pain that came with their being thrown away for the world, a longing to return to those days of wonder and excitement and childish fancies. But still, Lenny’s narration is used to give cultural manifestation an objective tinge. Using lenny as narrator only helps us in believing the story as true and delicacy of the minority community.

Bapsi negotiates the cultural ethos in this novel with the aim of immortalizing the said culture. Sidhwa throughout her novels presents Parsi inclination to move beyond the customary boundaries and their longing back for the Parsi tradition. The pain over the lost tradition proves too heavy for her characters and nothing compensates it in the end.

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