



**Violence and Partition of India: A Critical Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*
and Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara***

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Keywords :

*Partition, Women,
Violence, Film, Fiction*

ABSTRACT

India and Pakistan are the two distinct country nations that were created as a result of the 1947 Partition of India. Approximately one million people perished as a result of the disastrous choice to divide the nation upon independence; 33,000 Hindu and Sikh women in Pakistan and 50,000 Muslim women in India were kidnapped. Early commentaries on the Partition of India documented rather than represented the unimaginable violence and trauma. The representations of the everyday local experiences of the victims having been pushed to the margin, such commentaries failed to give a fuller, more rounded discussion of the event. Similarly, much historical scholarship on the event concentrated on the high politics behind the Partition and the causes of Partition. However, this historical scholarship did not deal with the personal and social histories of the people, especially women, during the Partition. Thus, creative art forms—literature, films, etc.—continue to be a sharp tool for waking the sleeping and bringing readers back to the terrible past of the India-Pakistan split, a malignant wound that will never go away. This research paper intends to study this physiological and psychological site of gendered violence and its haunting memories of inhuman xenophobic holocaust through, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1988), and Ritwik Ghatak's movie *Meghe Dhaka Tara*(1960).

Introduction:

In the year 1947, the glorious sunrise of Indian Independence was eclipsed by the gory Partition. The mutilated twin of British India was untimely ripped out of her womb. The modusoperandi of this operation caesarean of the Indian subcontinent resulted in far reaching consequences. The official records and documented history of this event are confined to facts and figures. But the agonies and anguish of common man was lost in the whirlpool of time, until the litterateurs reclaimed it on their canvas. Writers like Khuswant Singh, Saadat Hasan Manto etc. opened the flood gates of pent up literary representations of Partition of India in English language. Gradually, it proliferated into a genre with appellation of Partition Literature in Indian English Literature. Of today, it has become an integral part of South Asian Partition Literature as well.

With its disagreeable, strong stench, India's partition is still important in the current political landscape of the postcolonial Indian subcontinent's countries. The unchecked communal meiosis it is causing is a persistent threat to the national cohesion of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Nonetheless, its literature functions as a magical concoction of integration into the Indian subcontinent's cultural awareness by serving as a seismograph to measure the tremors and aftershocks of the grave effects of the recurrent rising of divisive forces. It awakens people to the violent pulse that resulted from a collective frenzied state and its aftermath, the scarred recollections of the generations that followed. Similar to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the literature of Partition is a collection of eerie folktales of psychological and physical violence that are passed down from generation to generation. Thus, creative works continue to be a timeless means of raising the sleeping and giving readers a brief glimpse into the terrible past of the India-Pakistan split—a tear that still falls like a fountain in the eyes of the age who witnessed it. The Partition's horrors are still vivid in the minds of those who experienced every second of it, but those who arrived later and were spared witness it through the eyes of the fictional characters they read about.

The Partition remains a wound permanently indented on the memories of people of three countries of the subcontinent, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. As Urvashi Butalia mentions in her book *Other Side of Silence* (1998), “Estimates of the dead vary from 20, 00,000 (the contemporary British figures) to two million (a later Indian estimate) but that somewhere around a million people died is now widely accepted” (Butalia 01). The savagery perpetrated on women during the Partition is unimaginable: “...about 75,000 women are thought to have been abducted and raped by men of religions different from their own and indeed sometimes by men of their own religion”. (Ibid)

Violence against women:

Many historians or writers try to delineate the story of women while recounting the horrors of the Partition. With subaltern and feminist readings of erstwhile sidelined histories, many researchers have now come up with the otherwise untold story of women. Among such writers are Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin who work on the question of identity and the polarizing choice of allegiance to family or to the state/country that women faced during the Partition. Menon and Bhasin demonstrate how women were seen as unequal citizens, thus subjected to abduction, rape, abuse and murder during and post Partition. The writers’ narratives construct of how abducted women were forcibly recovered later, making the writer and reader question the citizen rights of women. As the writers’ show such rights were sacrificed in the patriarchal pursuit of protecting the purity of the “legitimate” family and religious community. Apart from the mental and psychological agony suffered by women during and Post Partition as shown by Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin in *Borders and Boundaries* (2000) Urvashi Butalia in *Other Side of Silence* (1998) gives vivid narratives of the violence unleashed upon women during the 1947 Partition. She speaks of physical torment of women in terms of widespread sexual savagery, and unearths the memories of horror which are hidden inside the generality of Partition stories.

Other writers like Veena Das's *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors* (1990) also speak of the brutality and violence meted out against women in terms of subjectivity, as in rape, abuse and murder that haunts the memories of those who survived the Partition. The barely forgotten cruelty and horror of Partition was again re-lived in 1971 over the clash of interests languages and cultures between East and West Pakistan and subsequently led to the emergence of East Pakistan as Bangladesh. History repeated itself in 1971 leaving many women much alike 1947 Partition, abused, raped, left psychologically tormented and geographically alienated from their relatives, friends and families. Yasmin Saikia *Women, War and Making of Bangladesh* (2012) speaks about these atrocities where military men engaged themselves in raping and torturing women on a mass scale. Loss of identity and citizenship were again repeated in 1971, leading to repeated forced migration from Bangladesh to India which continues till today. During the 1947 Partition, the Sikhs and Parsis who lived in Pakistani Punjab areas suffered the most owing to their difference of languages and culture due to geographical location. The horror of which has been recounted in the movie *Khamosh Pani* (Sabiha Sumar, 2003). For the Sikh community, it was the horror of Partition revisited when Mrs. Indira Gandhi (the then Prime Minister of India) was assassinated in 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards (Butalia 04). In retaliation innocent Sikhs across the country except perhaps in communist ruled West Bengal were systematically targeted with the mostly covered and sometimes even overt cooperation of state machineries.

Violence and Women: Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy-Man:

Ice-Candy-Man (1988) is a semi-autobiographical novel by Bapsi Sidhwa. The novel portrays a distressing account of Partition when the high principles of patriotism were abruptly bartered for communal hatred, resulting in unparalleled devastation, political unrest and unstable social awareness. Bapsi Sidhwa portrays the political anxiety and social insecurity which was shared by all the broken up people of those times. Her imagination is possibly best represented in *Ice-Candy-Man*, as it addresses

the Partition of the subcontinent in ways that include the ordeal of nationalisms, broken identities, and the unsafe condition of disrupted intellectual awareness. The novel has been adapted into a film, *Earth 1947* (1998), which brilliantly touches on moments— but all— of the poignancy in Sidhwa’s representations of postcolonial history.

Ice-Candy-Man presents the chaotic upheaval of Partition through the eyes of an eight year old girl who witnesses the changing world during Partition. The violence, blood-shed and gang rapes are all shown through the eyes of a handicapped Parsee girl called Lenny Sethi who lives in Lahore. All the characters of Sidhwa double as symbols of the India of 1947. Ayah Shanta, the poor Hindu victim in the novel is a symbol of all women who were subjected to immoral beastly physical and social mutilation. Lenny is unaware of the political realities of the then undivided India. She lives in a world closely-knit, protected and away from the miasma of massacre. The novel *Ice-Candy-Man* becomes a story of Lenny who sees her world (and others too) crash down to ashes. She knows not much but as she steps into the mature years of her life, she realizes the violence that occurred in the memories of thousands of people in the name of ‘Peace’.

In the novel arrival of the train from Gurdaspur serves as the turning point in the lives of many people. Ice Candy man reports to his friends that a train from Gurdaspur has arrived in Lahore filled with murdered Muslims. He shouts:

"Everyone is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslims. There are no young women among the dead. Only two gunny bags full of women's breast..." I want to kill someone for each of the breasts they cut off the Muslim Women..." (Sidhwa 156).

Ice Candy Man is motivated to exact revenge on Hindu and Sikh ladies for this act of cruelty against Muslim women. This scene is perhaps the most violent and heart-moving scene in the history of any

nation, in the sense that the train carries the dead and mutilated bodies of the beloved ones of the people waiting at the platform. The sub-plot of Ayah Shanta, the major character in the novel *Ice- Candy- Man*, needs a lot of interpretation in terms of a certain type of violence that is way beyond physical harm and mutilation. The kind of treatment given to Ayah is a situation where any woman will plead death and even beg for it. She would find a greater solace in sleeping than waking up to live such a sub-human life.

When I think of Ayah I think she must get away from The monster who has killed her spirit and mutilated her "angel's" voice. And when I look at Ice Candy Man's naked humility and grief I see him as undeserving of his beloved's heartless disdain ... while Ayah is haunted by her past, IceCandy-Man is haunted by his future; and his macabre future already appears to be stamped on his face, (Sidhwa 264).

In this sub-plot, the Ice-Candy-Man becomes the coloniser dominant male and Shanta becomes the colonized submissive female. Men, using their political 'bodies' exploit, violate and subjugate the 'weaker' 'other' and mistakenly prove their superiority. There are other aspects and angles of violence to this novel which require a discussion when we talk about violence per se. Not to talk about violence on man or a woman, but while showing general violence, like other works of Partition, writers like Bapsi Sidhwa explore the terrifying and devastating side of Partition. *Ice- Candy- Man* lays a good graph of a tragic novel by showing once-upon-a-time-happy world and the slow penetrating terror that mounts making the reading awesomely grim.

In Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Ice-Candy-Man*, Ranna, a small boy, both witnesses and endure extreme levels of violence during the 1947 India/Pakistan Partition. Lenny sees him for the second time; Ranna is already the survivor of the partition violence that occurred in his village PirPindo by the



Sikhs. It didn't seem as though Lenny had become acclimated to recognizing Ranna before the Partition, therefore he was unable to do so. After his survival, Lenny describes her first impression of Ranna, saying, "So painfully thin [...]" His ribs are so skeleton that I can see the air passing through his neck and lungs, and his limbs are black and brittle. (194). Ranna's atypically angular body reveals his battle for survival amidst the devastation in his village. Ranna sees the horrifying carnage during the Sikh onslaught. "Ranna witnessed the beheading of his uncles, older brothers, and cousins." He felt a blow split the back of his head and warm blood seep forth (Sidhwa 201).

Ranna just collapsed inside the door upon a tangled mass of corpses. The bodies obstruct the entrance, turning the room where they hide into a bloody puddle. Ranna vaguely recalls that he may have saw his sister "run stark naked[...] her long hair disheveled, her boyish body bruised, her lips cut" after an act of violence (Sidhwa 202). Ranna gets hit in the head by one of the Sikhs' blows, but he survives. Ranna's injury turns into a somber reminder of his horrific background.

Ranna's body bears scars from the violence, which represent the suffering that the partition has caused to him. "He has welts all over him; it looks like his body was cut up and then welded," Lenny says.

(Sidhwa 194) Ranna's physique is allegorical of the blood-soaked and aching nation which survives afterwards Partition. Children did not only see their relatives torn and tattered brutally by other humans, but they themselves became victims of harshest of harsh violence with unimaginable objects. In chapter 15 of *Ice- Candy- Man*, there is a scene where a Sikh "*waives like a flag*", a body of a child hung on a spear. This violence confuses and frustrates Lenny and she pulls apart the legs of her doll remembering the merciless and inhumanly reckless killing of humans. When Lenny sees Ranna for the second time, she is shaken to the limits-

So painfully thin... His limbs are black and brittle, the circular protrusion of his wind pipe and ribs so skeletal that I can see the passage of air in his throat and lungs... witnesses the horrible bloodshed, decapitation of the male members of his family and humiliation of his sisters and other women folk. He sees his sister "run stark naked ... her long hair dishevelled her boyish body bruised her lips cut."(Dhumal, Nita Satish 26).

Violence is the tool that shows the barbaric killing under the pseudo communal pride. There are images of a naked and mutilated woman hung with her head down from a ceiling fan; new born lives snatched mercilessly and hit to death against the walls and their mothers raped repeatedly, many times to death. The chief plotter of the abduction of Ayah is the Ice-Candy-Man, thereby; he vents out his long thwarted lust for her and avenges the savage atrocities inflicted in the name of the community. This broken-spirited and abject woman returns to her people in the end and is rescued from the brothel but carries an indelible mental traumatic stigma life-long. The streets of Lahore observe blood raining from the clouds of brutality. Bodies of the dead and alive are all drenched in human blood and the memories of the children tainted, forever. This bewilderment of people and a happy world lost becomes the favourite theme for the writers of the Indian subcontinent.

The literature on the partition asserts that the human being—rather than the Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh human being—was the primary focus of the division. Within the realm of narratives, the encounters of every group clearly reflect one another, in fact, they both reach out and grasp at one another. Nothing in exile—crime, hopelessness, or grief—belongs exclusively to one person. (Anisa 43). Lenny's heart pains to see the world coming down to ashes and a burning hell everywhere. She feels the difference and this palpable chasm suffocates her to misery. The argument in Queen's Garden about the impossibility of a communal violence amongst these Parsis is proved wrong with everything changing in Lahore.

When Ayah questions Ice-candy-man about their acquaintance Sher Singh, Lenny notices that he is resentful of the Sikhs. Telling Yousaf that he was one of the people who exposed the Sikhs to the Muslim mobs who were violent does not make him feel ashamed. When he states, "I lose my senses when I think of the mutilated bodies on that train from Gurudaspur... that night I went mad, I tell you!," Lenny realizes a change has occurred in him. I threw explosives through the windows of Sikhs and Hindus that I had known my entire life (Anisa 44).

Lenny here comes to terms with reality- that the world she thought was perfect, was now tumbling down into pieces. Relations were not what they used to be, once upon a time. Lenny is shocked by Ice-candy-man and Godmother's meeting. Lenny has no understanding of HiraMandi, pimps, or prostitutes. But it is via Godmother's mistreatment of Ice-Candy-man that she learns of Ayah's suffering. Her guilt-ridden mind is stunned to see Ice- Candy - Man repenting and clenching his hair in his fists and saying that he cannot exist without Ayah. The tracing of Ayah at the end is altogether another type of psychological violence. In most of the cases, the people were confused where to go and whom to ask. Police were the culprits and abductors in many cases. Reaching out to the missing ones became a mental violence and the aftermath of the war was even more devastating for the survivors. People had lost hope in the government and judiciary and their faith had shaken irrevocably.

Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960)

Ritwik Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) (*The Cloud-Capped Star*) is a Bengali movie that reflects on the lives of people in post-partition Calcutta. Ritwik Ghatak presents an apparently splendid, particularly overripe, however provocative and record of poverty, bewilderment, and pariah in *The Cloud-Capped Star*.

Meghe Dhaka Tara revolves around a society that is angry and destructive over what happened during the Partition days, the Partition of Bengal during the India/Pakistan division and the plight of the innocent refugees. The film centers on a lower-middle class Bengali refugee family that was severely impacted by India's Partition and is still fighting for existence in the slums outside of Calcutta. Nita, the oldest daughter, abandoned her college degree to pursue a career in the workforce. She provides for the family's financial needs. Shankar, her older brother, is a quirky and careless person who can be the boss of the household. He writes songs all day, works on his scales and classical Indian khayals, and aspires to be a well-known vocalist.

Nita's mother is in charge of the family, while her father used to teach at a local school. Gita and Montu, Nita's siblings, attend school. Nita's one bright spot in her miserable life is her love for Sanat, a young scientist she intends to marry in the future. The plot takes numerous turns, and eventually Nita's family starts to rely more and more on her income. Montu and Nita's father suffer crippling injuries, and Shankar moves to Bombay to pursue a career as a singer. Sanat does come back, but he marries Gita, Nita's sister, after falling in love with her.

Nita experiences a toll from her life's tensions and strains. She contracts tuberculosis and, despite her dire illness, she goes on working to support her family. After becoming a skilled classical singer, Shankar returns from Bombay to find Nita dying of a fatal disease. She is brought by Shankar to a sanatorium in the highlands, where she remains neglected by her family and unsure of her prognosis.

The movie symbolises a star (a country/ a woman) that is overcast by clouds, (*Megh*). Ritwik's plot revolves around the woman protagonist, Nita, a refugee from East Pakistan portrayed as a typical self-effacing third world Bengali woman, whom everyone in the family takes for granted. Fighting against tuberculosis her urge for life reflects the greatest irony in the battered life of a refugee maiden. "Brother,

"I want to survive" is the last sentence she speaks, she is a cornered woman, her family refuses to take note of her happiness, tragedy consumes her fiancé and she herself is struck by consumption.

The Cloud-Capped Star, an allegory for the terrible effects of Bengal's partition, depicts the breakdown of a middle-class Bengali family due to hardship, destitution, selfishness, and tiny, internal strife. The recurring picture of a train cutting across the skyline suggests that the family's ancestral territory is physically divided. As Nina struggles to recover from the devastation caused by exploitation, self-denial, and want, her cries of misery eventually blend into the unmistakable, resounding voice of a people who have been uprooted and lost. The music is the icing on the cake.

The dwindling and waning happiness of Nita and the mood set of agony and pain calls out loud for help, but in vain. On the far left of the image, a man's face is seen in profile as he sings into the shadows. His name is Shankar. About halfway through the shot, the camera abruptly pans to the extreme right of the frame, where we see Nita, Shankar's melancholic sister, singing into the darkness. We are suddenly aware that Nita and Shankar sit close to each other, but completely turned away from each other. A more perfect example of the distinction between what critic-filmmaker Alain Bergala refers to as the organization of a shot (situating the figures in a set) and the attack upon it chosen by the camerawork would be difficult to find than in the case of an iconoclast like Godard. On the far left, a man's face is shown in profile: Shankar. Who else than Ghatak, a proto-modernist operating here within the confines of the classic melodrama genre, would have captured this *mise en scène* on film in such an odd and unsettling manner? Breaks, ellipses, "unmotivated" camera movements, unrealistic pools and speckles of light in an agonizingly obscure darkness, and most importantly, a wild sound mix that transitions from ambient noise through song to the echoing lash of a whip that expressionistically conveys Nita's increasingly manic despair characterize the entire depressing scene, in which the selfless and self-sacrificing Nita begs her brother, who is soon to depart, to teach her a Tagore song. Every sound cue and

every cut in Ghatak's work is an event; he doesn't just "establish" a scene; instead, he agitatedly withdraws and redraws it in response to the intense pressure of the emotions present in it. (Fujiwara 315).

Ghatak crafts a singular, visceral experience that documents the methodical demoralization of the human psyche by contrasting light and shadows, adding dramatic, forceful noises that emphasize the emotional impact and humorous tone, and more: the dismal, surreal shot of Nita walking down a staircase after having to abandon her studies to support the family; the overdone sounds of cooking while the mother watches Nita and Sanat, which subtly expresses her fear and rage at losing their main source of income; the juxtaposed picture of Nita - The sound of lashing as Nita and Shankar sing a melancholic Rabindranath Tagore song (evoking Raskolnikov's dream on burden and responsibility in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, 1866 is heard, first illuminated in front of a latticed window as she reads Sanat's letter, and then hidden behind the window upon Shankar's return.

There are episodes galore in the works and also the movies dedicated to the Partition, especially the ones under discussion where the culprit in fructifying the cracking of Mother India is held to be the internal pseudo-communal hatred that germinated in the minds of Hindus/Muslims/Sikhs. The partition of India was largely the result of a failure of the leaders on the part of India and Pakistan who gave in and gave up to the intentions, due or undue, just or unjust, of the British Government.

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