

Sub-continental Subjectivity of Women's Victimization in Partition Violence : Gynocentrism in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novels

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Discriminatory activities of the nation states and the people of certain community/gender group to the others make them feel loss of social position and prestige. Male dominated power structured society make women feel victimized through exploitation, dominance and deprivation that is shown in Sidhwa's novels. National, continental and sub-continental boundaries are shown between India and Pakistan territory and regional religion biasness is narrated in her novels exposing the discriminatory social experiences to the women. The discriminatory activities of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim male raise the issues related with women's identity. Sexual exploitation, injustice and insecurity to the women are ways through which identity politics run out in the then India-Pakistani territory. Gynocentric study of the narratives in Sidhwa's novels is methodological application. Objective of this article is to expose the causes and consequences of the women's victimization. This article tries to find out the root cause of gender and religious victimization to the women. It also

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**JOURNAL OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Winter), 2021
Peer Reviewed, Indexed & Refereed International Research Journal**

deals with the problems of community and family insecurity to the women in the name and fame of social prestige.

[**Keywords** : Injustice, Discrimination, Isolation, Identity Politics, Responsibility]

1. Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa was born at Karachi in undivided India in 1938 to Tehmina and Peshoton Bhandara and she was graduated from the Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore in 1956. Sidhwa received Sitar-I-Imtiaz, the Lila Wallace-Reader' Digest 'Writers' award and the LiBeraturepreis award of Germany for her works. She was Secretary of Mother's and Children's House, a shelter for destitute women. She was also elected as a president of International Women's Club. She published four novels about partition violence and women's victimization. These are *The Crow-Eaters* (1978), *The Bride* (1983), *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988) and *An American Brat* (1994).

2. Textual Evidences, Theoretical Application and Contextual Meanings:

Thematically, her novels are rooted in the sub-continental periphery where she was born. Her novels have "...loose, episodic structure. Much of its comic energy and exuberance derive from a string of gags or comic episodes. However, the novels have memorable characters, individual; but not a typical" (Gaur, 11). Sidhwa applies dialectical and ironical approaches through characters in her narratives; her novels not only deal with her autobiographical periphery, they raise the voices for women's issues with deep historical consciousness. Regarding the issues of Sidhwa's novel, Rashmi Gaur writes :

Sidhwa's novels are based on true stories of women in the traditional male-dominated society of Pakistan. While Sidhwa was camping in the remote regions of the Karakoram Mountain, some army personnel told her the story of a girl who was taken from the plains by an old tribal to marry his nephew. She was unable to put up with her harsh life, she ran away and survived for fourteen days in the rugged mountains of Karakoram. Her husband and the tribesmen ultimately hunted her down and beheaded her. (12)

This extremely painful and highly serious subject matter reflect to the communal crime using sub-continental subjectivity as a

way to define individual problems, territorial craving, political opportunism and power exercise. Her novel, *Cracking India* brings to life the deeply religious, national, social, and economic crisis marking both historical and Indo-Pak political dynamics. The *Ice-Candy-Man* uses verse in Urdu to express his passion for Ayah, as *Jerbanoo* does in *The Crow Eaters*.

In *Cracking India* and *An American Brat* she wants to draw readers' attention to various problems of the society, "..... oppression of women, religious fundamentalism . . . unjust evaluation of historical events etc" (Gaur, 15). Bapsi Sidhwa has used a distinctive Pakistani, yet, Parsi ethos in her writing with unique individual voice. She uses monolithic national categories in *Cracking India*, as *Ice-Candy-Man* that was known in America was her success there; but despite initial good notices she quickly disappeared through the operations of the market place. *Cracking India*, in the name of *Ice-Candy-Man* represents the cold weather and the *Ice-Candy-Man* turns into a birdman who takes pride in deceiving his customers. At another point "he becomes 'Allah's telephone,' posing as a holy man with a direct line to the Almighty and apologizing to his clients that Allah has been busy of late . . . know; all this India independence business" (Ross, 75). For a time Ayah's beauty and innocence broke down the barriers, thus letting us imagine a future when a larger community will attain the oneness of the smaller community.

In the moral lesson of *Cracking India* she tells the complex story of Pakistan through the eyes of a child narrator, Lenny and relates it in the present context. The vulnerable Ayah becomes virtuous gaining the dignity and *Ice-Candy-Man* complimenting her sayings : "...she has the voice of an angel and the grace and rhythm of a goddess. You should see her dance, how she moves" (qtd. in Rani, "Gender" 122). And she goes into a poetic outburst: "princes pledge their lives to celebrate her celebrated face!" (122). There are a number of characters in the novel but Godmother and alias Rodabal, the social worker, are the most mundane. Godmother must have emerged from the depths of Sidhwa's personal experiences as a social worker. Then the novel shifts to the cosmopolitan background. The critics briefly discuss each measure of violence and its relevance to women. Thus writes Ilian Sen :

According to the different action groups and the feminists, the origins of the exploitation of women is in the patriarchal system

of society . . . the writing of the feminists in India, the political and left parties as well as trade unions are 'patriarchal', they subsume the women's questions . . . groups would like to keep away the women from the common movement, by taking up only social issues and dowry etc., under their leadership. They would not like women to be politicized so that they can march ahead in the mainstream of the revolutionary struggle. (320)

It was with these kinds of questions in mind that it was planned to examine in her book or not. Certain mass movements in the last two decades in which women have participated in significant numbers, and to which they have contributed a special women's view point. The role of women in some of the struggles has been command on, in others, it has been ignored. The facts of women's participation does not, of course, necessarily make them women's movements; any movement which is wide enough or involves a large enough number of people will inevitably involve large number of women. Indeed, if we examine these movements using the yardsticks of conventional 'feminism'-centering on what people see as a narrow or one dimensional woman's issues we are often disappointed. Women in this movement do not strive for autonomous or independent articulation of only their women's specific demands. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the ways in which movement have thus had to define struggles and issues to accommodate the women in their ranks that have charted out new dimension for women's suffering and struggles in India and Pakistan.

Violence means a greater sensitivity to human suffering, a keener sense of the demand for justice. Domestic violence, rape, prostitution, femicide and sexual abuse of the girl child are some of the most vicious and perverted manifestations of the violence on women. According to Suma Chitnis, "the violence, in general, is a coercive mechanism to assert one's will over another in order to prove or feel a sense of power" (12). The violence against women cuts some relationships between men and women across the geographical, cultural and ethnic boundaries, and persists despite significant social changes. The difference is usually only one of culture and temporarily specific manifestation and it re-plays that of the presence or absence of this violence in itself.

Violence, telling though unfortunate illustration, is that of Indian society during the last hundred years, which is supposed to

have witnessed its transformation from a 'traditional' to a 'modern' one. "A woman's life was lived within the extended family which was a small community in itself, finely graded along the triple axes of sex, age and gender degree of relationship with the head of the family" (qtd. in Kosambi, 20). Besides these things, patriarchal systems in the society, extended spanned family-several generations and comprised the patriarch, and younger and married sons accompanied with their families. All the unmarried sons and daughters, and sometimes widowed or deserted daughters returned to the parental home. The chief economic resource of the family and its immovable property including ancestral wealth was held in common by all the males born into the family as "coparceners; the daughters were not entitled to a share in this indivisible property and were therefore compensated at marriage with a smaller share of the movable property, especially jewels, clothes and household articles" (20). This bridal portion was intended to be treated strictly as her 'woman's wealth' solely under her control but was eventually transmuted into 'dowry' to which her husband and marital family laid claim.

The economic dependence caused by this loss of assets was considerably aggravated in those regions where women were largely, economically inactive. Despite these issues, the violence against women is perpetuated by those in power against the powerless, or the powerless in retaliation against coercion by others, to deny their powerlessness. Masculine power exercises and rape cases humiliate women and force to speak that men around women in question are not able to protect their women. They are thus wounded in their masculinity and marked as impotent, that is to say, a failure in keeping their property intact. Families and communities see rape as awful that in some cases the family's honor can be restored only by killing the woman who was raped. In rape cases, another hindrance for a victim and her relatives is that society and law both make the victim feel guilty. So in most of the rape cases, the girl's parents do even lodge the complaint to save her reputation and her future. Another reason for not filing the suit is that "the defendant's lawyer, to save his client, tries to perplex and humiliate the poor victim in the worst possible manner to the extent of making her feel guilty" (Contractor, 88). Thus a competent lawyer can make his cross-examination and terrorize the victim till she accepts to break her claim to punish the rapist. The law must protect her in such a

situation; however, it cannot play the positive role actively. For instance, in 1978, a 21-year-old nurse of Karnataka was raped by two men named Krishna and Raju. They were caught red-handed; but they did not get the hard punishment. So, regarding the issues Contractor asserts :

The court of Hasan City acquitted Krishna and fined Raju only Rs.500/-. The poor victim appealed to the Karnataka High Court where both the accused were ordered to undergo seven year rigorous imprisonment. Against that judgement, the accused appealed to the Supreme Court and the Supreme Court lessened their sentences from 7 to 3 years, on various grounds, including mental torture to the accused for 15 years. The judges did not take into consideration what mental torture and humiliation the girl must have suffered for a long period. Her suffering, her fight for justice for 15 years goes in vain. (89)

Such unjust judgment undoubtedly gives encouragement to the ruffians and depression and frustration to the common people. Likewise, once a doctor at his clinic in Surat raped a girl patient. Against it, a crowd gathered on hearing the girl's scream, however, the girl's parents denied to flash out the details because of the social stigma that the cases of rape entail. Rape is, thus, resorted to with the purpose of humiliating. In order to avoid the humiliation, sometimes patriarchy requires men to kill their own women. Such familial killings of women have been seen even while being forced to migrate from one territory to the other territory.

The violence faced by immigrant women, especially that faced by women from the Indian sub-continent is rather concerned with the rape cases and it is unforgettable to the victims and concerned families. Regarding the issues, Pramila Aggarwal asserts, "Third World countries,--women occupy the lowest positions in the paid workforce. These jobs are mostly classified as 'unskilled' and as a result they are not unionized" (167). Most women are not informed of their rights under the various work related rights such as minimum wage and overtime work.

The traumatic experiences of the forceful abduction, rape and unwanted marriage bedeviled the lives of uprooted women. Individual as well as communal voices of victims are included in the revisionist history by Menon and Bhasin. Women were unfortunately at the center of the sectarian, familial and even governmental

violence (carried out through the recovery operation)--that the recovery operation turned out to be particularly violent for women is one of the main points of Menon and Bhasin: "...it was a particular construction of the identity of the abducted woman that determined the entire recovery operation, one that raises serious questions regarding the Indian State's definition of itself as secular and democratic" (3). In feminist intervention, the discourse of the State is interrogated and challenged. Muslims did not accept the victimized women as easily as Hindus accepted. According to Aparna Basu, the State's interrogated and challenged phenomenon on these women's acceptance and rejection issues turned to the matter of economic factor. Thousands of the innocent women's lives are seen to have been in misery; however, the majority of the women recovered are rehabilitated in the greater or smaller measure or restored to their families. However, a few of the recovered women turned out to be permanent refugees :

Abducted as Hindus, converted and married as Muslims, recovered as Hindus but required to relinquish their children because they were born of Muslim fathers, and disowned as 'impure' and ineligible for membership within their erstwhile family and community, their identities were in a continual state of construction and reconstruction, making them, as one woman said to us, 'permanent refugees' (Basu, 16).

Most of those who turned out to be permanent refugees were pregnant. They were unacceptable to the family and the society, even though the government wanted to rehabilitate them. Women whose babies were born in Pakistan after partition would have to leave them behind, but those whose children were born in India, would be accepted as Indian citizens.

The State recovered them and housed them in temporary shelters so that they would be given back to their natal families, but as things turned out, most of them were not welcomed back for the fear of social stigma to the family and the community. Then the State again responded by attempting to redefine the values of female purity and family honor. Female victims of the partition violence certainly help us to see many things denied by the official history. They also tell the story of the contention over a woman's body, which has been treated as a site for deciding the honor and dishonor, victory and defeat for centuries and this finds expression in

its extreme form at such times of crisis, or the parade of naked women from Muslim or Hindu/Sikh community who speak most poignantly about the other face of partition mocking at the same time-they utter inadequacy of the official history that makes a point only to sing the glory of independence. The period of recovery works should not be considered conversion and such marriages as they have made should not be considered as marriage. Thus, writes Butalia :

....today it is necessary that those women who have been forcibly abducted, should be taken away from the 'paraya' (other) men who have made them slaves in 'paraya' houses and they should be brought to their 'real' homes. So although Kamlaben clearly felt sympathetic towards the women she was rescuing, she did not seem to question the notions of 'paraya' and 'real' homes which the State had created. (57)

Women have found it difficult to give voice to such experiences; they have remained outside the pages of history. Those who see their manhood in taking up arms can be the protectors of no one and nothing, for instance, the riot of Thoa Khalsa. Women have found it difficult to give voice to such experiences; they have remained outside the pale part of history. Abduction and rape must remain at the margins. Historical records acquire a kind of transparency as objective truth; these experiences are seldom able to enter them. They exist in the realms of pain and silence, and are to be found, in memory, in fiction, and in fictional memoirs.

The annual memorial day of the Thoa Khalsa incident, in which thousands of women had killed themselves to preserve the community's honor in the Delhi and Gurudwara has been an example of the institutionalization of the traumatic memory. In this regard, Veena Das remarks :

It is not only the nation state that tries to institutionalize the collective memories in a manner which makes individual willing to die or kill, these are also the communities, which in the process of their emergency as political actors, try to control and fix the memory in much of the same manner . . . collective memory comes to be institutionalized . . . allows a particular militant community to valorize the acts of violence against hapless who either belong to the other communities, or who dare to oppose the construction of the reality in militant discourse. (Critical Events 10)

Perpetuation of the traumatic memory fires the imagination of the militant and patriarchal Sikh community. For which “even intra-familial love does not matter as much does not question of honor-honor of the family in practicing its women from the patriarchal violence of the enemy community” (Beerendra Pandey, 110). The feminist reconstruction of partition violence highlights the double subordination of women through abduction, seduction, rape and conversion on the one hand and tattooing, disfiguring, chopping down the breasts and their murder on the other hand. About the feminist reconstructions of partition violence, Paola Bacchetta comments that they provide radically alternative understandings of partition, with vital implications for current conflicts and peace--at the center otherwise silenced subaltern subjectivity....[and] re-interrogate partition, the exchange of populations, and the violence that accompanied it (as Hindus were displaced from Pakistani territory to India, and Muslims from India to Pakistan) from the standpoint of subaltern survivors personal narratives, which the authors sporadically juxtapose with newspaper accounts and their own meticulous deconstructions of official documents, parliamentary debates, and state practices.

Menon and Bhasin write the partition history through the experience of pain and suffering of women recollected in the heart of victimized women, who were full of tears in their eyes. Therefore, Menon and Bhasin's studies in partition literature include the history of pain and grief as the theory of trauma literature. Their predominant memory recollected with confused freedom bewildered the loss of place and property of settled community not only within India but also in Pakistan and elsewhere in the world.

Feminist historiography interventions in the work of partition violence, for feminists provide a concrete image of traumatized memory of victimized women, exploring in the social experience and retrieving trauma as being both ‘compensatory’ and ‘re-written history’. Thus, at the stroke of the midnight hour when India awoke to life and freedom, thousands of women were being abducted, raped and killed. The exploration of genocide of the partition violence brings to the human dimension of partition. Cracking India from the child's viewpoint draws the readers glance; Lenny also suggests a keen dominant sensuality beneath the gullibility of a child. Her indulgence snubs the advice regarding the physical exercise for her

easier options towards fierce independence. Her keep in touch with Godmother and medical help from Col. Bharucha makes her rather happy with her deformity as it imparts a special status to her. However, she does not like the probability, a shift to the ordinary life of a normal child. Lenny is treating her physical abnormality as a norm to give to gain favors, abhorring the competitive word of normal children.

Regarding the cases of female subjectivity and position that most women in India found themselves in during the nationalist movement and later--during the partition of India and Pakistan that followed the independence struggle. This was basically due to the project of female education that the nationalists adopted as their cause in order to create liberal and progressive political images. While they move to include women in public life that began from the late nineteenth century onwards; these movements did not really resolve the issues that women were faced with the violence that took place in India. The cause of education remained a primarily middle-class concern, and did not include women from the rich or poor classes. Even the middle-class women had to deal with the dichotomies inherent in assuming different roles in private and public life: they had to be good wives and mothers at home, and competent women who could forward the cause of nationalism and hold jobs in public life.

Gyno-somatic politics was played on the body of woman and so they were targeted by men of both the communities. Abduction, rape, prostitution, forced marriage, or even their recovery later on constitute part of the same political game played out on the body of women: the humiliation of a woman of a country by South-Asian community symbolized the victory of the latter recovery for them. The protagonist, Ayah in Sidhwa's *Cracking India* turns out to be one such helpless woman on whose body the violent game of the partition of 1947 is played out. The sudden disappearance of humanity and the transformation from a human being into a thing is what Sidhwa textualizes in her novels. Henceforth, observing the Indian partition history through the women's narratives and testimonies Sidhwa selects the traumatized character. Thus, the Gyno-somatic politics and the trauma of violence can be transmitted without being impartial as well as the readers could relive the agony and terror even when Ayah's representation suffered from the prose

of otherness. In the bloody history of 1947, her representation has not only instigated the cycle of violence; but also gave the ground for continued rift between the parties involved in the conflict.

3. Conclusion

Sidhwa's novels use feminist lenses for the bloody history of 1947--the partition of British India into modern India and Pakistan. It offers both a self-narrated account of the growing consciousness of a little girl, a member (like the author) of a minority ethno-religious community, and a focus on the-until recently untold-experiences of the scores of women of various ethnicities, who were raped, abducted, or mutilated in the ensuing violence. Moreover, Sidhwa challenges the centrality and exclusivity of Pakistani and Indian masculine's master narratives by impudently locating its narrative perspective in the figure of a female child of a minority community. By refracting national history through a gendered consciousness, Sidhwa shifts historiography perspective to those not usually regarded as central to the forgotten or unwritten history.

A gynocentric revision of the history of partition of India foregrounds female victimhood and critiques the recovery and rehabilitation operation. Female victimhood and a feminist critique of man-perpetrated violence on women at the time of partition in 1947 are absent from textbook history. Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, and Urvashi Butalia break a fresh ground by revising the history of 1947 from the perspective of subalternist-cum-feminist subjectivity. Their interventions expose the masculinity nature of the violence done to women when Bapsi Sidhwa looked at from the view-point feminism.

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