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Female Experience and Agency in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*

Vivek Kumar Dwivedi

Pradeep Sharma

ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7434-1252

ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7337-9993

Corresponding Author: Vivek Kumar Dwivedi, Associate Professor, Department of English and Modern European languages, University of Allahabad, Allahabad, UP, India, vivekdwivedi1980@allduniv.ac.in

Co-author: Pradeep Sharma, Independent Researcher, Vancouver, Canada, pk_atrey@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Aim: Partition literature is largely focused on the stories, fictional as well as non-fictional, of violence that took place in India at an unprecedented scale in the aftermath of partition. Despite the apparent gender-neutrality of violence due to the underlying cause of communal hatred and the targeting of religious affinities, women were disproportionately affected by the chaos, simply because they were women.

Methodology and Approach: The paper uses primary and secondary works on the subject to conduct this study. The study has employed postcolonial approach to examine the novel.

Outcome: Through these portrayals, the novel mounts a critique of patriarchal constructions of honor and purity, which frequently resulted in the social ostracization of women who had experienced abduction or rape.

Conclusion and Suggestions: To sum up, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* (also published as *Cracking India*) offers a compelling interrogation of female experience and agency amidst the intersecting forces of communal violence and patriarchal domination during the Partition of India. Partition literature has often been dominated by masculine narratives, focusing on political upheavals and territorial divisions.

***Correspondence:** Vivek Kumar Dwivedi, Pradeep Sharma, vivekdwivedi1980@allduniv.ac.in

Literature on the partition of India is vast and growing, encompassing historical narratives, fictional works, poetry collections, plays, nonfictional accounts, research works, photojournalism, material culture studies, and more. This postcolonial literature, though largely focused on communal riots after the 1947 partition of India into two nations—India and Pakistan—is also comprised of works that depict the background social narrative of the time that led to the partition, the political volatility, the power game, and communal fears (Chatterji, 2014; Diamond, 2013; Khan, 2008; Larson, 1995; Menon & Bhasin, 1998; Pandey, 2001; Pāṇḍeya, 2003). It is also very diverse in orientation, depicting all types of emotions—anger, love, hatred, frustration, betrayal, treachery, cooperation, resignation, peace, and so on. The literature documents the roles of people from all walks of life during the violent communal riots in the aftermath of the Partition. And yet, one of the disturbing aspects of this genre of literature—historical narratives, fictional narratives, research works, and all—has been that there appears to be almost a complete omission of the significance of the role of marginalized people, such as women, children, people on the lowest rung in the society, the untouchables, and even the ordinary common people who worked tirelessly to bring social harmony during or after the violence (Kothari, 2003, 2009; Kamra, 2003). Or rather, it appears that partition narratives and other related historical/creative accounts have so flattened the discourse that we hardly hear of the marginalized voices or ever know that they even exist (Butalia, 2000; Dey, 2016). Documentation of the feelings of the marginalized Indian populations and the ways the Partition affected them has become a subject of research only recently (Butalia, 2000).

Menon and Bhasin (1998) argue for a change in that literary asymmetry. Their book is a first-hand account of women's tales as retold stories and memoirs on Partition, juxtaposed alongside official accounts, making women not only visible but also central in the Partition history. Similarly, Dey's (2016) research exemplifies the differential "rights" pertaining to gendered citizen subjects by documenting the large-scale violence against women, rape, torture, abduction, and forced confinement. Butalia (2000) is another researcher investigating the stories of Partition violence victims as their lived experiences to trace the mental and physical impacts of violent disruption in their lives. Butalia argues that it is only

by remembering and telling their stories that the survivors' scars can heal. Bhīṣma Sāhnī's *Tamas* endeavours to portray the violence of Partition events and herald the emergence of a particular work of literary fiction in Hindi.

The omission of women's writing on Partition or a feminist reading of the literary works or fictional representations of women in dominant socio-political roles in major Partition events or societal histories of women during Partition, etc., are all parts of this asymmetrical feature of writings on Partition. It is only recently that research on women's works on Partition has gained momentum. Thus, works like Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* (1988), which is a fictional representation of the dominant role a few Parsi women based in Lahore (undivided India) played in rescuing women victims of Partition violence; Jyotirmoyee Devi's *The River Churning* (1995), the story of a young girl victim of Partition violence and denunciation of Indian patriarchy's obsession with women's sexual purity; and Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), the story of a Muslim girl who asserts her identity as an individual in a strongly patriarchal family, have attracted researchers' attention of late (Menon and Bhasin, 1998; Mookerjea-Leonard, 2003). These writers (Sidhwa, Jyotirmoyee Devi, and Hosain) offer representations of silenced women and narrate their experiences, particularly of the ones who negotiate multiple identities in order to survive the harrowing events of partition (like Mrs. Sethi and the Godmother in *Ice Candy Man*, Laila in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, and Sutar in *The River Churning*). The writers bring to attention the differential "rights" pertaining to the gendered citizen-subject (Dey, 2016), and at the same time highlight the contradictions in state-sponsored narratives and community nationalist imaginings.

The Partition literature has been looked at from differing critical perspectives, and the incidents as well as factors have been analyzed from multiple angles. For instance, postcolonial critical literature based on studies on history from below, subaltern studies, and left-wing thought interprets the Partition violence as a reflection of the economic strife among the masses. Researchers say that since the subcontinent was sucked dry by the Britishers, Hindus and Muslims were looking for their survival on the leftover resources (see, for example, Diamond, 2013; Khan, 2008; Larson, 1995; Pandey, 2001;

Pāṇḍeya, 2003; Qasmi, 2019; Svensson, 2020; Zamindar, 2007). Whereas studies critiquing Indian [Hindu] nationalism see Muslims as 'the other' and therefore blame Muslims for the Partition as well as for the widespread violence in the wake of the Partition (see Ahmad, 2012; Akhtar, 2013; Diamond, 2013; Menon, 2013). On the other hand, women's critical studies identify the sources of exploitation of women under Indian patriarchy. They observe that irrespective of their religious affinities, both Hindus and Muslims followed strict patriarchal norms, while the Partition violence gave them the opportunity to further silence women into subjugation. The Partition was exploited by both communities to use women's bodies to further their ideas of the body politic (see Ahn, 2019; Bharucha, 1996; Butalia, 2000; Dey, 2018; Didur, 1998, 2006; Menon and Bhasin, 1998; Singh, 2023). If there are stories of brutalities of the killers, especially state machinery, during and after partition (Ferdous, 2021; Gupta, 2012), there are also stories of the success of the displaced, stories celebrating the resilience and sheer grit of people caught in the vortex (Ahluwalia, 2018).

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* has also been read from various perspectives. For instance, Arabati (2022) reads the novel as a representation of the politics of partition—how the 'divide and rule' policy of the British fueled Jinnah's two-nation theory and finally divided the Indian subcontinent. The novel also puts the then prominent INC leaders, such as M. K. Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar V. B. Patel, and the Muslim League leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in perspective, claiming that the tragic event of Partition was politically motivated, which upset the religious and cultural harmony among the Indians. To Bharucha (1996), *Ice Candy Man* exemplifies the patriarchal domination of women in India. The Parsees portrayed in the novel are determinedly influenced by Indian culture, and therefore, their women are also victims of patriarchy like other Indian women (Bharucha, 1996). Dey (2018) observes that *Ice Candy Man* is a representation of the female body as the site of male violence, particularly during the Partition of India. The acts of abduction and rape of the central female figure, the Ayah, indicate that women's sexuality was used as a tool to articulate religious/national enmity (Dey, 2018). Ayah's abduction can also be read as a punishment for her deviation from the established cultural norms both Hindus and Muslims expected their women to adhere to during the Partition. In general, women's bodies were

under patriarchal surveillance and regulation. There were provisions of punishment for the non-conformist or rebellious women. However, Bapsi Sidhwa gave her female characters a dominant agency, even if they used it clandestinely, and she displays a profound understanding of female characters and their roles in society (Sahu & Bhattacharya, 2025).

Rabani and Mishra (2024) interpret *Ice Candy Man* as a polyphonic narrative that mirrors the multitudinous forms of human suffering caused by unprecedented violence, as well as human resilience in the face of large-scale tragedy. Women's fictional works on the Partition raise issues sensitive to women, such as socially gendered distinctions, patriarchal repression of women, tragic memory, and traumatic experiences of women of the Partition era. Kabir (2005), for instance, analyzed the novels of Krishna Sobti and Bapsi Sidhwa and found that though the two writers are separated by nationality, culture, choice of language of their creative fiction, and their present location, they share a lot as regards their subject matter, that is, Partition as a traumatic event for women. Both Sobti and Sidhwa are sensitive to women's issues whose lives were affected by Partition. On similar lines, Mishra and Sthitaprajna (2023) analyze the works of Sidhwa (*Ice Candy Man*) and Shuvashree Chawdhury (*Across Borders*) to examine the socio-political consequences, sufferings, and trauma faced by people during the different partitions of India (1947 and 1971) and note that the partitions brought about dramatic changes in people's social, cultural, and political outlook. People suffer from fragmented identities and insecurity. Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* also sustains in its narrative the elements of subaltern historiography (Elangovan, 2009), since women are treated as subaltern beings with their voices silenced in Partition narratives—the female characters, such as Shanta the Ayah, Lenny, Mrs. Sethi, and Roda the grandmother, are voiceless characters. This is because even if they achieve something worthwhile and show some agency, they could do that only clandestinely; the social mechanism suppresses the subalterns, puts them under social control, and their bodies and sexuality are always under social surveillance.

The review of relevant literature (not exhaustive, though) shows that though there is extensive research work on the theme of Partition and on Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*, still there is a lack of literature exclusively focused on

female experience and agency of women in the Partition era as depicted in the novel. Thus, there is a research gap justifying the present research.

Female experience during the Partition is the predominant theme in *Ice Candy Man*. The novel also portrays female agency, however clandestine it may be, in bringing about the desired change in society. The protagonist, Lenny Sethi, is a four-year-old Parsee girl. Her mother, Mrs. Sethi, is a beautiful woman. She is well-educated and has a wide circle of friends, including many foreigners. The very first point we note about Lenny is that she is way too smart for her age. She suffers from polio, which gives her a slight limp, but that doesn't deter her from acutely observing the events around her. The other significant character in the novel is Lenny's 18-year-old Ayah, Shanta. The Ayah takes Lenny everywhere around Lahore, and that is how she meets the interesting characters coming from differing religious backgrounds depicted in the novel. The Ayah is a beautiful girl, and everyone stares at her in the street. She has several suitors, such as the masseur, Sharbat Khan, and the ice-candy man. The Ice-candy man is a Muslim popsicle seller who does all sorts of odd jobs and scams. After partition, the Ayah decides to stay in Lahore. But one day a mob, led by Ice-Candy Man, discovers her at home and kidnaps her. The Ice-candy-man forces her into prostitution and afterwards marries her. Eventually, the godmother, Rodabai, rescues her from the clutches of the Ice-candy-man and relocates her to India to find her family. Godmother is the matriarch of Lenny's family, and she is characterized by her strength and wisdom.

Ayah's abduction in *Ice-Candy Man* functions as a potent metaphor for the gendered violence endemic to the Partition of India. Her body becomes a symbolic terrain upon which the trauma of national division and communal hostility is inscribed. As a figure simultaneously marked by desire and dispossession, the Ayah embodies the vulnerabilities of women subjected to patriarchal and sectarian domination. While the threat facing men during the Partition was largely confined to the prospect of death, women experienced a dual marginalization—subjected first to sexual violence and subsequently to social ostracization or death. Sidhwa's narrative foregrounds this bleak reality, illuminating how the dynamics of physical and sexual control, often entrenched within domestic relationships, are amplified during periods of societal breakdown.

Sidhwa's attempts to foreground the female experience and social power of Partition-era women in *Ice Candy Man* are discussed further in the following subsections.

Among Lenny's circle of acquaintances were individuals from various religious backgrounds: the ice-candy man, the butcher, the hotel cook, and the Masseur were all Muslims; the gardener and her beloved Ayah were Hindus; and Sher Singh, the zoo attendant, was a Sikh gentleman. Lenny herself was a young Parsee girl, too innocent at the time to engage in political discussions. However, she would later reflect on these events with the insight of adulthood. As communal tensions deepened, even Lenny, despite her youth, began to perceive the growing divisions. People who once existed simply as themselves suddenly became defined by their religious identities: Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian. She witnessed how society shifted—how individuals contracted into their ascribed roles and became little more than emblems of their faiths. Her Ayah, once a comforting and all-embracing presence, had become a symbol of devout Hinduism, fervently participating in temple rituals and "spending liberally on offerings of flowers, sweets, and incense to the gods" (*Ice-Candy Man*, p. 80). Godmother, Slavesister, Electric-aunt, and my nuclear family are reduced to irrelevant nomenclatures—we are Parsee (*Ice-Candy Man*, p. 80). The novel critically explores the precarious position of minority communities—particularly the Parsees—in pre-partition India, highlighting the strategic neutrality they were compelled to maintain amidst intensifying Hindu-Muslim communal tensions. Given the volatile political climate and the uncertainty surrounding which faction would assume power following British withdrawal, overt alignment with any one group posed significant risks. This dilemma underscores the broader atmosphere of mistrust and fear that shaped minority experience during this period.

The narrative also presents a harrowing account of sectarian violence through the depiction of the Akalis, a militant Sikh group originally mobilized by Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the nineteenth century. Their categorical opposition to coexisting with Muslims in a hypothetical Pakistan culminates in a devastating assault on Imam Din's village. The massacre is described in graphic terms: elderly individuals and children are slaughtered, while young girls are abducted to Amritsar, subjected to sexual violence, and subsequently either abandoned or

trafficked. One child survivor, Ranna—the son of Dost Mohammad—escapes death only by chance, presumed dead after suffering a head injury inflicted by a sword. The physical scar he bears becomes a lifelong reminder of the deeper psychological trauma inflicted by the annihilation of his family and community. In *Ice-Candy Man*, Bapsi Sidhwa not only interrogates the cultural mechanisms underpinning the construction of the "other" but also exposes the systematic dehumanization that often accompanies such processes. Numerous episodes in the novel illustrate this phenomenon, though two particular instances stand out in highlighting how difference—whether religious, caste-based, or gendered—becomes grounds for social exclusion and degradation. The first concerns deeply entrenched prejudices related to caste, race, and religion. During an outing through Lawrence Gardens, Lenny and the family's domestic help, Yousaf, encounter a Brahmin priest engrossed in his midday meal. Their passing shadows inadvertently fall across him, provoking a reaction laden with symbolic and literal repulsion. The Brahmin, recognizing them as members of other faith communities, responds with visceral horror, "as if his virtue had been violated" (*Ice-Candy Man*, p. 98). His exaggerated physical recoil and the subsequent discarding of his food dramatize a social logic of ritual pollution and religious absolutism. Lenny's subsequent reflection—"Now I know surely. One man's religion is another man's poison" (*Ice-Candy Man*, p. 98)—captures the disillusionment such encounters foster. Yousaf's emotional response, characterized by a sense of humiliation and fury, further underlines the incident's dehumanizing impact.

The second episode centers on the gendered dynamics of "othering" within Lenny's own Parsee community. Attending a wedding as an adult, she experiences profound indignity at the hands of a Zoroastrian priest. As she extends her hand in a gesture of familiarity or reverence, the priest instinctively recoils, apparently suspecting that she might be menstruating. Lenny's reaction to this perceived contamination is one of intense psychological anguish, as she describes the moment as one of "utter degradation," feeling like "an untouchable excrescence, an outcast" (*Ice-Candy Man*, p. 98). This interaction, while not religious in nature, foregrounds how biological difference—particularly female physiology—becomes a basis for symbolic exclusion and moral judgment.

Though these incidents appear discrete, they are emblematic of broader societal mechanisms that mark individuals as "other" based on religious identity, caste status, or gender. Sidhwa's text situates these moments not as aberrations, but as illustrative of the systemic ways in which difference is stigmatized and hierarchy is maintained.

Following the Partition, this process of othering intensifies and acquires a violent dimension. The character of the Ice-Candy Man exemplifies this shift. Once a familiar and almost endearing figure, he transforms into a vengeful agent of communal violence. In response to the atrocities committed against Muslim women during the upheaval, he seeks retaliatory justice, proclaiming a desire to kill a Hindu or Sikh for every Muslim woman harmed. His relationship with Sher Singh—once cordial—is now fractured. The murder of Sher Singh's brother-in-law during a confrontation with Muslim tenants and Sher Singh's abrupt departure from Lahore provoke only a callous comment from the Ice-Candy Man, who now views such ruptures through the lens of communal hostility rather than shared humanity.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* is fundamentally a feminist text that critiques the structural violence of patriarchy, particularly as it manifests through the gendered atrocities committed during the Partition of India. While the novel is embedded in a historical moment marked by unprecedented communal upheaval, its narrative thrust transcends temporal confines to highlight the persistent patriarchal logic that positions women as objects of male possession. Sidhwa's fictional rendering underscores how patriarchal systems negate women's subjectivity, relegating them to exist solely in relational terms—to men, as dependents in need of protection or as symbolic extensions of male honor. The novel identifies two interrelated dimensions of this patriarchal worldview: first, that women are conceptualized not as autonomous beings but as commodified extensions of male wealth and status; and second, that women are perceived as inherently vulnerable and thus incapable of asserting agency or self-defense. These ideological strands converge most starkly during episodes of political violence and social rupture, such as war or communal conflict, where the violation of women is weaponized as a strategic assertion of dominance. Sidhwa demonstrates that such violations are not incidental but rather symptomatic of a

broader logic wherein the humiliation of women becomes a proxy for the humiliation of rival male communities. In this way, the novel critiques how, across cultures and historical contexts, women's bodies are appropriated as battlegrounds for male conflict. Sidhwa's narrative perspective aligns well with radical feminism, which views patriarchy as a pervasive, foundational system of oppression that manifests through both structural and interpersonal violence against women.

Multiple episodes in the narrative reinforce this argument, presenting women as pawns in the political and sectarian disputes of men. In pre- and post-independence India, reports of communal strife invariably trigger vows of retaliation, and women frequently bear the brunt of this violence—not merely through acts of physical aggression but through a deep violation of personhood. The patriarchal structures depicted in the novel further exacerbate this violence by compelling women to internalize shame and guilt, as though they themselves were responsible for the degradation imposed upon them. Two illustrative incidents underscore this critique. In the first, the Ice-Candy Man assists Sher Singh in evicting tenants. A group of men accompanies him, and in an act intended to shame and dominate, they expose themselves and direct vulgarities at the women in the apartment. In the second, following a massacre in Gurdaspur where a train carrying Muslim refugees is attacked, the Ice-Candy Man again participates in retaliatory violence—this time boasting about the harassment of Sher Singh's female relatives. He describes the incident nonchalantly, stating that a group of men "went a bit further… played with one of Sher Singh's sisters… Nothing serious—but her husband turned ugly… He was killed in the scuffle" (*Ice Candy Man*, p. 128). This disturbing casualness exemplifies the normalization of sexual violence within the framework of vengeance and patriarchal entitlement.

Further, the abduction and subsequent violation of Lenny's Hindu Ayah by Muslim men—an act carried out under the guise of communal retaliation—exposes the pervasiveness of gender-based targeting regardless of religious identity. These men, far from being mere anarchic actors, are portrayed as enforcers of an ideological system that legitimizes their actions through patriarchal entitlement and sectarian justification. The Ice-Candy Man, who professes love for the Ayah, ultimately orchestrates her exploitation in a red-light

district, thus transforming romanticized possession into coerced commodification. His actions betray not only his personal duplicity but also the broader cultural mindset that conflates affection with control. This point is searingly articulated by the Godmother, whose confrontation with the Ice-Candy Man transcends personal grievance to indict the patriarchal order as a whole. Her rebuke—"You would have your own mother carried off if it suited you! You are a shameless badmash! Namakharam! Faithless!" (*Ice Candy Man*, p. 198)—lays bare the opportunism and moral bankruptcy embedded in the gender dynamics of possession. The Ice-Candy Man's retort—"I'm "a man! Only dogs are faithful! If you want faith, let her marry a dog!" (*Ice-Candy Man*, p. 198)—further underscores his internalization of masculine entitlement and emotional detachment as normative masculine traits. Sidhwa's novel thus functions as a trenchant critique of patriarchal structures that facilitate and legitimize violence against women, particularly during moments of socio-political rupture. Through a fictional yet powerfully realistic narrative, she exposes how gendered violence is not merely collateral but foundational to the workings of patriarchal and communal ideologies alike.

Sidhwa's portrayal of women in *Ice Candy Man* challenges the conventional victim narrative by presenting female characters who, despite their suffering, exhibit strength and agency. While not always foregrounded as a direct socio-political consequence of the Partition, *Ice-Candy Man* by Bapsi Sidhwa powerfully highlights women's capacity for resilience and leadership in times of societal upheaval. The novel privileges female agency through its portrayal of assertive, resourceful women who assume responsibilities traditionally denied to them, often acting decisively in contrast to their male counterparts—many of whom are portrayed as passive, morally compromised, or ineffectual. Throughout the narrative, Sidhwa constructs a gendered dichotomy wherein men are frequently reduced to spectators or purveyors of violence and idle gossip, while women emerge as active agents of social engagement and transformation. With the exception of a few historical male figures mentioned in passing, male characters in the fictional landscape are often depicted as either reluctant participants or entirely absent from critical moments of resistance and decision-making. The titular character, Ice-Candy Man, for instance, represents not only a

morally ambiguous figure but one whose bravado collapses before the moral force of female characters, such as the Ayah and, more significantly, the Godmother. His posturing is shown to be performative, especially when confronted by the Godmother, before whom he appears diminished and deferential.

Similarly, Lenny's father and the Godmother's husband—referred to merely as the "Old Husband"—occupy peripheral roles, largely disengaged from political or social action. Male figures who form the so-called "Park gossip circle," including the Masseur, the butcher, the gardener, the zoo attendant, Sharbat Khan, and the hotel cook, are emblematic of this performative masculinity. Rather than participating in meaningful activism or responsibility, they remain confined to discussions devoid of transformative intent. Even characters such as Dr. Manek Mody, Colonel Bharucha, and Imam Din fade into narrative insignificance when juxtaposed with the dynamic presence of women like the Godmother, Mrs. Sethi, Electric-Aunt, the Ayah, and the child-narrator, Lenny. Among these, the Godmother stands out as an archetype of quiet but formidable power. Her influence is constructed through a blend of intimate community knowledge, traditional healing practices, and an informal network of surveillance—elements that underscore her strategic acuity and social foresight. Lenny's observation that "nothing was hidden from the knowing eyes of the Godmother" emphasizes her ability to discern deeper social undercurrents in everyday interactions. Her intuitive grasp of indigenous wisdom, coupled with practical intervention, positions her as an emblem of alternative authority: "And this is the source of her immense power, this reservoir of random knowledge, and her knowledge of ancient lore and wisdom and herbal remedy. You cannot be near her without feeling her uncanny strength" (*Ice Candy Man*, p. 169).

Mrs. Sethi, Lenny's mother, serves as another significant figure whose understated activism belies her domestic role. While her husband remains largely uninvolved, Mrs. Sethi appropriates her household resources—such as their vehicle—to aid those endangered by Partition violence. Her covert operations, including the smuggling of rationed petrol, not only reflect her moral courage but also her willingness to transgress societal boundaries for humanitarian causes. When confronted by Lenny, she offers an explanation that reveals both the ethical foundations and the logistical complexity of her undertakings: "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" (*Ice Candy Man*, p. 193).

Thus, Sidhwa's portrayal of women in *Ice-Candy Man* transcends conventional victimhood narratives. Instead, it reclaims female agency as a countervailing force against patriarchal complacency and violence, situating women at the heart of communal resilience and ethical resistance during one of South Asia's most volatile historical moments. The Godmother is portrayed as a matriarch with reputation and power, existing independently of male authority. Similarly, Lenny's mother transitions from a dutiful wife to an activist working to restore the dignity of abducted women. Her transformation underscores the duality of female identity in the novel—women are both victims and agents of change. This dual representation is also evident in Ayah's character. Initially, she is portrayed as a powerful figure whose beauty and charm unite men from different ethnic backgrounds. However, her agency is stripped away when she is kidnapped and forced into prostitution, illustrating the precarious nature of female power in a strongly patriarchal society.

Bapsi Sidhwa's work is comparable to other Partition novels, such as Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (2009), and Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), as regards portrayal of politics and violence. Nevertheless, unlike Malgonkar's evaluative approach in *A Bend in the Ganges,* which assesses the efficacy of Gandhi's political strategies—namely, truth and nonviolence—Sidhwa, in *Ice-Candy Man,* refrains from adjudicating the success or failure of these principles. Instead, her focus turns toward an interrogation of Gandhi's persona itself. Through the retrospective lens of the narrator, Lenny, Gandhi's ostensibly pacifist exterior is revealed to obscure a more unsettling undercurrent of cold, calculated force. As Lenny reflects, it was only with temporal and emotional distance that she could perceive "the ice lurking deep beneath the hypnotic and dynamic femininity of Gandhi's non-violent exterior" (*Ice-Candy Man*, p. 76). Lenny's personal interaction with Gandhi during his visit to Lahore further complicates his image. Far from awe-inspiring, the encounter leaves her bewildered, particularly by his preoccupation with bodily functions, such as enemas and stomach

cleansing. Her initial impression is one of deep ambivalence—she describes Gandhi as an "improbable toss-up between a clown and a demon" (*Ice-Candy Man*, p. 76). However, this caricature is momentarily destabilized when Gandhi turns his gaze toward Lenny, triggering an intense emotional response. In that moment, she feels overcome by a "pure shaft of humor, compassion, tolerance, and understanding" (*Ice-Candy Man*, p. 76), which binds her to an idealized conception of femininity imbued with gentleness and affection. Yet, this affective response is not without critical reflection. The text suggests that Gandhi's charismatic appeal—marked by a feminized non-violent ethos—exerted a hypnotic influence over the masses. These followers, however, were not inherently committed to non-violence; rather, they were temporarily enthralled by Gandhi's persona. When political conditions shifted and strategic considerations took precedence, the same populace, once pacified by Gandhi's aura, was capable of turning to violent measures in pursuit of communal dominance and territorial control.

However, as regards the narration of women's issues from the perspective of a woman, the novel is completely different from all three novels. Its special emphasis on underpinning the suffering of women during partition and women playing the central role in rescuing as well as helping relocate the suffering women and their families, irrespective of their religious affiliations, places the novel into the gynocentric genre where women help women to defeat male oppression. As an example, Hamida, a Muslim woman raped by Sikhs in Amritsar, helps Ayah, a Hindu woman raped by Muslims in Lahore, when the police brought her back from the red-light area, Hira Mandi, to the kidnapped women's shelter home close to Sethi's house. Mrs. Sethi and Electric-aunt, two Parsee women, clandestinely helped numerous Hindu and Sikh families from Lahore to cross the newly erected borders, supplying them with petrol they smuggled, putting their own lives at risk. And the most shining example is Rodabai, the Godmother, who was ever active exerting her influence to trace and relocate women kidnapped and tortured after partition.

To sum up, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* (also published as *Cracking India*) offers a compelling interrogation of female experience and agency amidst the intersecting forces of communal violence and patriarchal domination during

the Partition of India. Partition literature has often been dominated by masculine narratives, focusing on political upheavals and territorial divisions. Sidhwa, however, shifts the focus to gendered violence, exposing how women bore the brunt of communal hatred. Through figures such as the Godmother, Mrs. Sethi, and the Ayah, Sidhwa constructs a complex tapestry of womanhood that foregrounds resilience, moral courage, and the capacity for subversive resistance. While the narrative foregrounds the traumatic consequences of gendered violence, it simultaneously recuperates female solidarity as a site of empowerment. In doing so, the novel challenges the male-centric paradigms that have long shaped Partition historiography and literature, positing instead a gendered counter-narrative that centers women's lived experiences, ethical labor, and resistance. Despite the pervasive backdrop of violence, the female characters in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* are not portrayed as passive recipients of trauma. Instead, they assert agency, engage in acts of resistance, and cultivate solidarity in the face of patriarchal oppression. The Godmother's decisive intervention in Ayah's plight exemplifies the capacity for female alliance to disrupt structures of male dominance and control. Similarly, Lenny's mother, Mrs. Sethi, challenges conventional gender roles and social expectations by actively participating in the rehabilitation of abducted women—a role that directly contests the stigmatization imposed on survivors of sexual violence during Partition. Through these portrayals, the novel mounts a critique of patriarchal constructions of honor and purity, which frequently resulted in the social ostracization of women who had experienced abduction or rape. By centering such acts of resistance, Sidhwa foregrounds the transformative potential of female agency in dismantling oppressive social hierarchies and reconfiguring the moral frameworks of postcolonial society.

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Vivek Kumar Dwivedi

Vivek Kumar Dwivedi is currently working as Associate Professor at the University of Allahabad. Before coming to Allahabad University, he was on teaching assignments at several foreign universities. He is the author of *The Other Truth: The Indian Discourse on Literary Theory* (2010) and several articles in international journals on literary theory and criticism. He has presented his papers at international conferences in the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, Qatar, and India.

Pradeep Sharma

Pradeep Sharma has taught English Language and Literature at universities in India, Libya, Ethiopia and Saudi Arabia. He has contributed chapters in books and articles in research journals, interpreting texts through the lens of contemporary critical theories, such as poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postmodernism, feminism, and so on. His book, *Limits of Language: Poststructuralism and Ancient Indian Theories* is published by Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi.