



THE MARGINALIZED IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S *ICE-CANDY MAN* AND
HARPER LEE'S *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* – A STUDY



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ABSTRACT

The word 'Marginalized' - means to live in the margins of society by being excluded from participation in any group effort. From the beginnings of the human race to the present, mainstream society has always marginalized some groups of people as the unfamiliar, extraneous, opposite, negative and inferior- "the other". 'Othering' marginal groups have been primarily based on certain ideological categories. Categories, by and large are constructed along the lines of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, caste and class. Sometimes these areas coalesce to form further minority sects within these excluded groups.

To understand the representation of marginals, I have chosen to analyse Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These two women writers write from very different locations. Sidhwa being a Parsi woman writer in a mainstream patriarchal, Muslim Pakistan; while Lee is a white woman writer writing in a white, Patriarchal and Christian mainstream society.

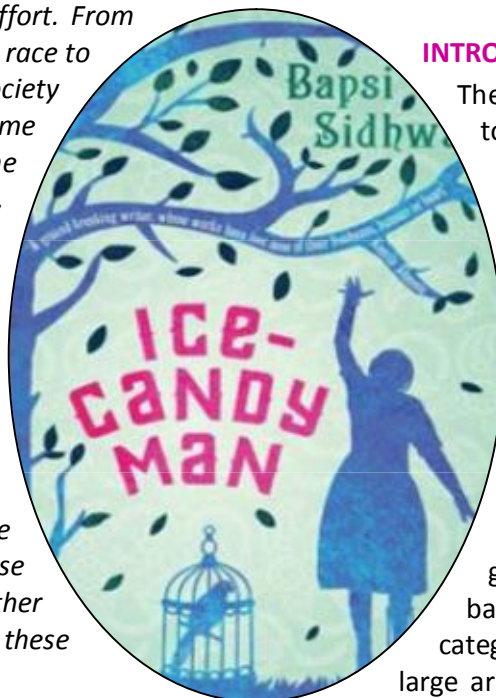
KEY WORDS: margins of society , mainstream patriarchal, Muslim Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION :

The word 'Marginalized' - means to live in the margins of society by being excluded from participation in any group effort. From the beginnings of the human race to the present, mainstream society has always marginalized some groups of people as the unfamiliar, extraneous, opposite, negative and inferior- "the other". 'Othering' marginal groups have been primarily based on certain ideological categories. Categories, by and large are constructed along the lines of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, caste and class. Sometimes these areas coalesce to form further minority sects within these excluded groups.

Literature has always reflected society, recorded individual experiences and perceptions and has also fostered ways of thinking. An 'erstwhile' Canonical literature, which is largely the literature written by the Centre, for the Centre, of the Centre and from the Centre, has displaced, de-centred and

silenced peripheral groups. The late twentieth century's literary sensibility has focused its research and study on Feminist, Post-Colonial, Dalit and other such 'marginal' writings. This critical faculty



has thus been recovering the histories and perspectives of marginalized people. These histories from below assert their difference from the assumption of the Centre and hence also their identity. It proclaims itself as central and self-determining, not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but also questions the assumptions upon which that order was based. Since language is a medium of power, writings from the margin define itself by rejecting the language of the Centre and by supplanting it with their own. These writings from within, re-present the case of the marginalized rather than being represented by the mainstream. In these literatures we hear silenced voices speak for themselves, we perceive spaces that were deliberately darkened or discoloured, experience the joys, the pains, the anger, the pathos, the passions of people who were dehumanized, objectified by mainstream writings.

To understand the representation of marginals, I have chosen to analyse Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These two women writers write from very different locations. Sidhwa being a Parsi woman writer in a mainstream patriarchal, Muslim Pakistan; while Lee is a white woman writer writing in a white, Patriarchal and Christian mainstream society. Despite their difference in the relationship to the centre, they share the common periphery of being women writers wielding a male prerogative-writing. It is interesting to note, therefore how they use words to crucify. Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* is a simultaneous self-representation of the peripheral position of the Parsis and women, and a representation of others in a similar position. Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, on the other hand is a representation of all marginal spaces, be it race, class or gender. Further, Lee's position as a middle class educated white in a racial white Alabama places her with the persecutors than with the persecuted. She therefore represents the margins to the mainstream and presents a plea for their inclusion. Sidhwa on the other hand questions the need to even write back to a Centre, and thus excludes and marginalises the majority. In comparing these two disparate writers, one can situate them in the common space of writings from, about and for the margins. At the same time there also emerge differences in their representations, owing to their perspectives. Lee's novel largely belongs to mainstream literatures that have attempted to sympathetically portray margins, like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Mulkh Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, to name a few. Sidhwa's can be located with other marginal writings like Dalit Writings, South East Asian Women Writings and so on.

How benevolent and selfless are the novels? What stereotypes do they question, subvert, invert or re-establish, inadvertently or otherwise? Are these writers then writing back to the centre or from the centre? Do they offer alternative discourse? Or do they alter indigenous discourses itself in the bargain? To arrive at an answer to these questions, it is required to contextualize the two novels. Both the novels are retrospective narratives; they look back at historical and politically turbulent times. The action of *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes place in the 1930s, the period of the Great Depression but Lee wrote the novel and it was published in the 1950s -the period of the American Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968). Lee who hails from Alabama, home of the American Civil Rights Movement, wrote against the background of Rose Louise Me Cauley Parks, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Martin Luther King and the birth of a future president - Mr Barack Obama. The novel was her 'dream' for the South in particular, and America in general.

The 1930's history itself is very sketchy and vague in the novel. Within the novel, effects of the Depression are seen in the lives of the Ewells and the Cunninghams. On the other hand the 1950s and some controversial events of the period, like the Emmett Till case, the Scottsboro Boys case are subtly or inadvertently suggested in the Tom Robinson trial. Patrick Chura locates the anachronisms in the novel's historical present, 1930s, that proleptically anticipates the novel's future-1950s and hence suggests that, "its historical present is diluted by the influence of events and ideology concurrent with its period of production."¹ But a writer does not write in a cultural

vacuum. If the 'pastness' of the past is central so also is the 'presentness' of it. Reflecting on the racial past of the novel from our twenty first century present, when America has chosen her first Afro-American president, Lee we can say had 'imagined' the ethos of the America of the new millennium the "Atticus"² America, America without margins.

Sidhwa's novel attempts to grapple with a cataclysmic event in Indian history, the partition, which has gone on to colour the collective unconscious of world terrorism. Adi's question to Lenny in the novel is also the authorial voice questioning the atrocities of partition from the hindsight of the 1980s "why were you so cruel if you couldn't stand it? He asks at last, infuriated by the pointless brutality"³. Sidhwa questions the dystopian reality of the New Millennium, in which the best and the worst seem to be full of passionate intensity, and everywhere margins and borders drown in the ceremony of innocence.

Scout Jean Louise Finch is the narrator of *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. She is the daughter of Atticus Finch, a white lawyer who practiced in Maycomb, the county seat of Maycomb County. Her ancestors were the Finches who hailed from the first ancestor Simon Finch. Maycomb represents the racist, castiest and excluding South. Though not complexly marginal as Lenny, Scout shares with Lenny the doubly jeopardized position of being child and girl. While Lenny belongs to an affluent minority social group from the beginning which never really gets absorbed into the mainstream, Scout and her family are marginalised by Maycomb, for being inclusive, through the course of the novel. Through the all-encompassing ingenuous perspective of the children, Lee offers us the alternative reality to the town's parochial superstitions from Boo Radley to Tom Robinson. Atticus liberates the children towards this more comprehensive world-view. The literal space from which the Robinson trial is viewed and narrated also indicates the margins which, Scout speaks from and for and the margins, Harper Lee represents The space is the second-storey of the courtroom, the 'coloured balcony'. Thus the children violate the segregation rules of Maycomb and literally enact the then famous trial- Brown Vs Board case.

Ice-Candy Man is the titular hero of the novel, yet its real heroic protagonists are its women. In a patriarchal society, heroism, valour, positive action and domination are attributed to men and, femininity implies weakness, passivity, docility and self-negation. Through a deliberate subversion of these deep-seated elements, Sidhwa not only attributes women with heroic qualities but also makes them the champions of compassion and humanitarian zeal. Subhash Chandra sums up this view, "Bapsi Sidhwa turns the female protagonists into the moral centre while most of the male characters either remain apathetic or indulge in destructive violence and disintegrative actions"⁴.

Lenny speaks about women from two different spaces- women who belong to her own Parsi, affluent space and those from other spaces. Interestingly all the Parsi affluent Women- be it GodMother, who saves Ayah, mother and 'Electric aunt' who save destitute women are embodiments of strength. On the other hand all the "other" women are victims of patriarchy- be it Shantha, the Hindu Ayah, Papoo the dalit child, Hamida ,the destitute woman or slave sister whose oppression is signified in her very name. By making women both the saviour and the one who need succour, Sidhwa no doubt destabilizes the position of men, yet this feminism of Sidhwa is not only Parsi-centric but also elitist. Though this can be seen as Sidhwa's attempt to silence the mainstream that views Parsis as self-serving, nevertheless, the dichotomy between Parsi women and other women remains.

True to its objective, Parsi stance *Ice-Candy Man*⁵ portrays Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities as uniformly violent or apathetic. Despite this claimed objectivity, there is also Sidhwa's reason to write the novel, as stated earlier. To achieve these two rather paradoxical objectives the novel uses the strategy of creating characters from every community. Most important among this group is the titular character Ice-Candy Man. Through his degeneration the

novel portrays the Machiavelli that is characteristic of men and debunks a patriarchal canon that portrayed men who created 'his'-story'. Ice-Candy Man is a Muslim and by raping Ayah, he then becomes the stereotypical, 'black male Muslim rapist of Partition Writing, ever threatening pre-partitioned India represented by the Hindu Ayah. How would this challenge mainstream Indian versions of Partition? In all these versions the Muslim is the dominant other.

But Sidhwa has stated that by the title she also meant the remote and cold, icy politicians who decide the fate of millions their constantly shifting opinions, their motives sometimes noble and sometimes selfish. The novel particularly debunks mainstream Indian Politicians 'like Gandhi, Nehru and elevates the stature of Jinnah by illuminating his qualities which have been sidelined by mainstream history. Further, all the Muslim men are not portrayed as villains. Masseur is a sensitive, compassionate human being and Imam Din retains his essential humanity. In this we see Sidhwa's objectivity and her comment that religion is only a 'token.' The Akalis and the muslim mobs strike the same terror in the heart of the reader. The text offers us two sardarjees who represent Tara Singh's cult - the volatile Mr. Singh and the thin zoo attendant Sher Singh whose charge is the Zoo Lion. The portrayal of the Hindu men however is not only different but also focuses on other kinds of violence they perpetrate in the name of religion. The Hindu is portrayed as effeminate and ineffective, weak and incapable. Hence they resort to subtle but equally traumatic violence in the name of caste. Sidhwa thus, destabilizes structures that define Centre and Periphery, self and other, mainstream and margins. Though Lee questions these very structures, she does not destabilize them. Lee attempts in her novel a representation of the racial and social others in Maycomb, Alabama South. She achieves what Atticus asks Scout to do in the novel- stand in another man's shoes and walk around in them, and then we would find that "most people are nice, when we really see them".

This position of Lee is clear from the very title of the novel, which gets explicated when Atticus gets his son an air gun but warns him that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird. The mocking bird as a symbol or a metaphor of those excluded, pervades the text. The first mocking bird the novel introduces us to is Boo Radley. Boo anticipates Maycomb's persecution of the innocent Tom Robinson. Though he shares the symbol with Tom, it is not the colour of Boo's skin that dictates his cultural exclusion. The novel culminates with the know ability of the real Boo, when he saves the children, from the evil Bob, like the Arthurian Knights. Thus reality transforms him from the bogey man the 'other' to the truth that his name, Arthur, alludes to, the 'self'. Boo, thus is emblematic of the multifaceted exclusions that are made in Maycomb of race, class and caste in particular, but the South in general.

Both Lee and Sidhwa debate the position of the Centre, in their own ways but through their writings they have also problematised tropes like margins and centres, self and other, authenticity and objectivity in representations. Are all men cruel, stone-hearted, cold Ice-Candy-Men? Does saving the image of Jinnah require the defaming of Gandhi? Even as saving a Boo Radley requires a Tom Robinson? Who then are the Mockingbirds? Who is doing the killing or the mocking? Rhetorical questions, no doubt, but it is evident that, to be authentic, objective and self - representing is almost impossible.

Locating a space and calling it marginal, peripheral and other, would destabilize existing ones, no doubt, but would restructure and recreate new ones. This new ideology would exclude that which had seen itself to be familiar, superior, positive and pertinent, and thus posit itself as the opposite of the unfamiliar, inferior, negative and extraneous, creating new margins. Speaking by some would entail silencing of some. Assertion of one's identity would involve negating another. In this constant state of flux, it therefore becomes problematic to locate centres and margins. In this world where nothing is permanent we cannot fix prototypes. No, not a whit can we defy the augury

of transience. Only that is permanent which is universal, all-encompassing and true. This then is literature's message to the new millennium - in the literature of this transient and circular world, there are no boundaries only shadow lines, only horizons and arches, "where through / gleams that unraveled world whose margin fades for ever and for ever ..." (*Tennyson, Ulysses*).

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