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SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATION OF THE CHARACTERS AS NATION AND COMMUNITY IN *ICE-CANDY-MAN*

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ABSTRACT:

Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy-Man (1988) which was also published as Cracking India is a partition novel based on 1947 the cataclysmic year when India won freedom and a new nation state Pakistan came into existence. The novel deals with the horrific experience that people experienced i.e. bloodshed among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. In the novel these experiences have been depicted vividly through the eyes of an eight-year old Lenny who belongs to the Parsi community which was neutral and uninvolved in the active politics of partition at the time. However, on the surface the novel deals with the trauma of partition but the theme has serious symbolic undertones. "The term symbol" says M.H.Abrams "is applied to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in turn signifies something, or suggest a

range of reference, beyond itself." Ayah, in the novel, is symbolic representation of undivided India who becomes the victim and is violated because each community wants to possess her. Significantly, Ice-candy-man is a Muslim and represents the community while Masseur represents the Hindu. The paper seeks to analyse the novel from its symbolic points of view and further elaborate how during the partition the oppressors (male) violated the sanctity of the oppressed (female) for their own interests.

KEYWORDS: *symbol, women, violation, partition and oppression .*

INTRODUCTION

With the drawing of the Radcliff line in 1947, India was partitioned into two: India and thenewly constructed Pakistan, the former meant to be Hindu dominant, while the latter stood for a Muslim homeland. On the surface it appeared to be a very simple solution that the two communities should be divided and live apart, but this is not so easy. There was violence, dislocation, upheaval, large scale riots in which thousands of men were killed, women raped and children murdered. Millions of people were

displaced: Muslims left India for Pakistan while Hindus and Sikhs left Pakistan for India. This traumatic event is vividly depicted in the novel *Ice-Candy-Man*. The narrator of the story, eight-year-old Lenny, is affected by Polio and represents the author herself – she too was affected and witnessed the partition. At the centre of the novel is the mutilation and sundering apart of a nation, the bloodshed it engendered, all seen in the perspective of pre-independence amity and fraternity.

During the partition, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh were actively involved in the combat to rule Hindustan or at least wrest a piece of land for the majority of their community. But the micro communities like the Parsi

did not demand for their share but were neutrally and actively observing the politics of the time. Already an immigrant community, the Parsis were very cautious as they remembered how they had entered India in the eight century A.D. and did not want another migration. If they supported any of the communities fighting at the time the outcome may have been disastrous. So being aware of all this, the Parsi community decided to be law-abiding regardless of whoever ruled the land. Col.

Bharucha's speech at the fire temple prayer-cum meet, which was held to celebrate the British victory in Second World War, elaborated the community's stand which Lenny notices:

'...It is a struggle for power. Who's going to rule once we get *swaraj*? Not you,' says Colonel, pointing a long and accusing finger at us as if we are harbouring sinful thought. 'Hindus, Muslims and even Sikhs are going to jockey for power: and you jokers jump into the middle you'll be mangled into chutney!' (36)

Both the communities Hindu and Muslim, and even Sikh at some level were trying hard to take the possession of the mother country. Hindus and some of the Muslims were in favour of undivided India, while the majority of Muslims was trying hard for a new nation state, Pakistan. The Ice-candy-man, who as a symbolic representation of Muslim community, by any means wants possession of Ayah, the symbol of mother country. She, however, enjoys the company of the Masseur. Ice-candy-man woos Ayah desperately as we have seen in the novel: "Talk to me for a while... Just a little while," pleads Ice-candy-man so piteously that Ayah, whose heart is as inclined to melt as Ice-candy-man's popsicle, bunches her fingers and says, 'Only ten minutes'" (28). The mother country is disturbed when the rumour of its cracking spreads. Its sons whether Hindu, Muslim or Sikh etc., who were earlier living in a harmonious atmosphere, came out to challenge one another and become the symbol of their community. Religious gatherings fanned the fire and even those who never prioritised religion earlier started sloganeering for a separate land for their community. Lenny observes that:

It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves – and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing Ayah – she is also a token. A Hindu. Carried away by a renewed devotional fervour she expends a small fortune in joss-sticks, flowers and sweets on the gods and goddesses in the temples.

Imam Din and Yusaf, turning into religious zealots, warn Mother they will take Friday afternoon off for the Jumha prayers. On Friday they set about preparing themselves ostentatiously. Squatting atop the cement wall of the garden tank they hold their feet out beneath the tap and diligently scrub between their toes. They wash their heads, arms, necks and ears and noisily clear their throats and noses. All in white, check prayer scarves thrown over their shoulders, stepping uncomfortably in a stiff black Bata shoes worn without socks, they walk out the gates to the small mosque at back of Queens Road. Sometimes, at odd hours of the day, they spread their mats on the front lawn and pray when the muezzin calls. Crammed into narrow religious slot they too are diminished: as are Jinnah and Iqbal, Ice-candy-man and Masseur.

Hari and Moti-the-sweeper and his wife Muccho, and their untouchable daughter Papoo, became ever more untouchable as they are entrenched deeper in their low Hindu caste. While the Sharmas and the Daulatrams, Brahmins like Nehru, are dehumanised by their lofty caste and caste-marks.

The Rogers of Birdwood Barracks, Queen Victoria and King George are English Christian: they look down their noses upon the Pens who are Anglo-Indian, who look down theirs on the Phailbuses who are Indian-Christian, who look down upon all non-Christians. (93-94)

Bapsi Sidhwa has represented Ayah one of the chief women characters in *Ice-Candy-Man* in a symbolic manner which is often lost sight of because of the realist representation which pervades the rest of the novel. Ayah, who is Lenny's caregiver is a young woman who is not from Lahore. Even though Lenny is eight-year-old, she needs nurturing as she is lame due to an attack of infantile Polio. This is crucial to understanding the novel which is seen through Lenny's eyes. Lenny's vision is precocious and often matured. In her evening outings to the Park, she is very much aware of the men who surround Ayah. These include the Masseur, the Ice-candy-man, the gardener and the cook, Lenny quite understands that these are all potential suitors and admirers of Ayah. Though Lenny belongs to the upper middle class, she is exposed to certain amount of a raw physicality, from which middle-class children are generally protected. It is also important to note that in true upper middle-class fashion, Lenny identifies characters lower on the social scale by their professions. We learn later that Ayah's

name is Shanta, almost throughout the novel she is referred to as "Ayah". This applies to the Masseur and the Ice-candy-man as well. This identifying the character by his or her profession simultaneously underscores Lenny's social class and also serves to universalise these characters.

The description of Ayah in the novel is also noteworthy. She is dark and sari-clad whereas Punjab has always been the land of fair-skinned and Salwar-kameez clad women. It is from here that we can trace Ayah's symbolic function. As the novel progresses, we can read the narrative in terms of Ayah's symbolic role. Ayah appears to be symbolised as undivided India. The idea (Bharat Mata) entered the discourse of nationalism almost in opposition to Mahatma Gandhi's '*satyagrah*'. Young revolutionaries were often deeply influenced by the rhetoric of the mother imprisoned and violated by the White (male) oppressors, perhaps Ayah is also partakes of some symbolic significance in such myth making. Read in this light, Ayah, the India figure has many suitors, all of whom want to possess her. Significantly when she makes her preference clear, it is for Masseur, the Hindu male. Compared to the Ice-candy-man, the Masseur is laid back and does very little to woo Ayah. On the contrary the Ice-candy-man is a poet, story-teller, and very focused in his efforts to win Ayah. However, he is only Ayah's second choice as he comes to realise when he follows the lovers Ayah and Masseur from a distance. The Ice-candy-man a raconteur in himself embodies the ability to tell tales of far off lands, perhaps a referring to the Islamic tradition of historian and cultural expressions like *Dastangoi*. When the Ice-candy-man finds himself rejected in favour of the Masseur his jealousy knows no bounds. Even then the narrative may not have taken the tragically violent turn that it takes had it not been for the murder and mutilation of the Ice-candy-man's sister. The historical fact of trains loaded with dead bodies appears as a representation of the horrors of partition in many Anglo-Indian novels. The horrendous act of "two gunny-bags full of women's breast" is enough to drive the Ice-candy-man mad with hatred. The chopping of breasts is an attack on woman as mother. Without being suckled by the mother no mammalian infant can survive into a healthy adulthood. The chopping of the breasts represents a direct violent attack on motherhood. As a reaction to the of the mutilation of women's bodies the Ice-candy-man goes absent and is ready to take revenge for each of the breasts that was cut and put into two gunny-sack. As the mutilation was a direct attack on the women-hood, Ice-candy-man is determined to deprive the Sikhs and Hindus of fatherhood. He says:

I lose my senses when I think of the mutilated bodies on that train from Gurdaspur ... that night I went mad, I tell you! I lobbed grenades through the windows of Hindus and Sikhs I'd known all my life! I hated their guts ... I want to kill someone for each of the breasts they cut off the Muslim women ... the Penises! (156)

Shanta's role in the novel is of "the other mother" for physically impaired Lenny. The violence against women expressed in the novel shows the vulnerability of women in all the roles in which the impinge are the life of man. It appears that because the women are the primary bearer of the culture of their community and give birth to the next generation of the "other" community, they are the victims of the worst kind of violence.

Lenny is brought up in an atmosphere where Gandhian principles of truth and non-violence are the only beacons of sanity in her world plunged in bloodshed, hatred and killing and yet ironically it is the truth or rather the fact which is the cause of Ayah's undoing. Schooled to tell the truth under all circumstances the terrified Lenny whose house has been surrounded by the rioters reveals to the Ice-candy-man that Ayah is actually hiding upstairs and is not living in the far-off safety of Amritsar as is claimed by her mother. Ayah is captured, raped and finally sold to a brothel. Interestingly, her name is changed from Shanta to Mumtaz. At the symbolic level this would seem to indicate the creation of the new nation state of Pakistan. A part of old mother country is marked out and given different name and the fractured identity is born out of bloodshed and violence.

But the novel does not just end on a negative note. After the killing, brutality and violence of the partition, sanity does slowly emerge and Ayah is discovered and rehabilitated by the Lenny's Godmother.

Ice-Candy-Man thus communicates at two levels: the conscious one that tells the story of Ayah and the second level which at a symbolic level tells us a story of one of the darkest periods of Indian history.

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