

Ice-Candy-Man: A Discourse of Feminism

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Abstract—Bapsi Sidhwa has been regarded as a feminist post-colonial writer who wishes to build up a world free of male dominance and patriarchy by placing her literary works within a dynamic of oppression and resistance. The paper analyses her third novel, *Ice-Candy-Man* in order to highlight the place of women in a patriarchal-colonial social order during the partition. Victimization and subjugation of women on the grounds of gender as well as religious affiliation is analysed in detail. The paper evaluates how Sidhwa refuses silence by making her women characters move beyond their role of submissive domesticity. Both Lenny's mother and godmother assume new roles and responsibilities and exhibit autonomous selfhood and individuality in order to expose the patriarchal biases within the social framework. Also the role of the young girl narrator, Lenny is evaluated who presents the central consciousness of the fictional and semiautobiographical world of *Ice-Candy-Man*. The 'compressed' world view of Lenny matures with the painful experiences of barbaric acts of abduction and rape of women around her including her Ayah. Women characters through Lenny's matured vision represent a collective consciousness where they assert their identity and independence, which becomes a discourse of feminism with a purpose to change the mind set and lives.

Keywords: Feminism, individuality, patriarchal biases, partition, consciousness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a belief that the women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. It also questions the long standing social structure that rests on male subjectivity, dominant phallogocentric ideologies and patriarchal attitudes. Lately, many writers have been engaged in the struggle for defence and liberation of women. Bapsi Sidhwa has been regarded as a feminist post-colonial writer who wishes to give the woman a sense of self and identity and contribute to the restructuring of social thought. She critiques the stereotypical images of women and fights for their rights and empowerment through her literary pieces. Her following personal interaction with Montenegro stands testimony to the fact that she not only voices against suppression of women and patriarchal set-up through her novels but also through her interviews:

Women should do this, women should not do this. This is how women should dress, this is how women should behave...and this is how women should not entice men. All

those ridiculous things....And women are getting more and more fed up with this, because they have just a few hard-won rights. (1990: 521)

2. ICE-CANDY-MAN: FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Bapsi Sidhwa's third novel, *Ice-Candy-Man* allows for its interpretation as a feminist treatise for the following reasons:

First of all, women characters in *Ice-Candy-Man* through Bapsi Sidhwa's vision represent a collective consciousness which is the manifestation of their autonomy and independence. Secondly, the novel has a larger purpose which is to change the mind set and lives. Thirdly, Lenny, the child narrator assumes a very active role and becomes Sidhwa's alter-ego. Fourthly, the novel analyses the patriarchal set up and the principles underlying women's oppression. And most importantly, the novel highlights the plight of abducted women during partition and therefore, can be interpreted as a gendered narrative of displacement. The segment that follows discusses all the points in detail in order to establish the literary piece as a feminist discourse.

3. LENNY: SIDHWA'S ALTER-EGO

The narrative voice in the novel is a polio stricken and a very observant young girl. A female narrative voice is suggestive of giving the central position to the women characters in the story. Sidhwa re-envisioned her own experience from her childhood days through Lenny and reveals in one of the interviews that she has no secrecy with regard to her resemblance with the narrator. She brings to the surface the attitude of her doctors towards her illness and disability through the character of Lenny:

'She's doing fine without the school, isn't she?' says the doctor. 'Don't pressure her... her nerves could be affected. She doesn't need to become a professor'... 'She'll marry-- have children-- lead a carefree, happy life. No need to strain her with studies and exams,' he advises: thereby sealing my fate. (Sidhwa, 2000:16)

The above incident reveals the patriarchal mind set of Col. Bharucha who believes that it is not education but the

responsibilities associated with domestic affairs that must be given prime significance in a woman's life.

4. WOMEN CHARACTERS

Sidhwa's attitude in the novel is highly feminist which is displayed through the women characters who exhibit autonomous selfhood and individuality. She explores the sexuality of Ayah as a means of female emancipation. She is presented as a sexually empowered woman whose physical presence entices and allures men around her. Lenny notices the attention and 'covetous glances' that the Ayah draws from the hawkers, cart-drivers, coolies and cyclists when she walks on the road. (3) She is decisive and self assertive who has the power to choose from Ice-Candy-Man, pahailwan, Chinaman, Sharbat Khan and masseur. Sidhwa defies traditional, stereotypical gender behaviour by depicting a character who interacts with men of different ethnicities with ease. She basks in the admiration of all male friends circle and does not deny herself the pleasure of their attention. In fact Ayah is depicted as a unifying element for a varied group of men from different communities and religions.

She is a manifestation of a strong and independent sexuality. She makes her sexual preferences; while she rejects Ice-Candy-Man's love and checks his sexual moves, she expresses her sexual desires very openly to masseur, the man she loves. Bapsi depicts a woman from lower class who is capable of asserting and expressing her sexual desires to the man she wishes to marry. The writer's view that sexuality is fundamental to liberation is evident from the way their relationship is brought about. However, Ayah has to pay a severe penalty by the frenzied mob led by ice-candy-man for saying no to someone she does not love.

Another significant woman character is Lenny's mother through whom Sidhwa presents a dual representation of woman power. Initially, she is presented as a servile housewife who is mostly busy with her social obligations. However, in the latter part of the novel, she comes out as a very strong woman who forges her independence and identity. She is protective of Ayah when the frenzied mob comes to her house searching for her. Her driving sprees with the Electric Aunt to help their stranded friends from both Hindu and Sikh communities and the rehabilitation of Hamida is suggestive of an emancipated and independent woman who follows the principles of compassion and love to extend the help to the people in need.

The strongest representation of female power in the novel is Lenny's godmother. She is tender, sensitive and soft but at the same time she has a very authoritative and strong appeal. She saves Ayah from Hira Mandi and restores her to her family in Amritsar. She dares to challenge and reprimand Ice-candy- man for the wrong he has done to Ayah:

'You permit her to be raped by butchers, drunks, and goondas...you have permitted your wife to be disgraced! Destroyed her modesty! Lived off her womanhood!' (260).

Besides being a psychoanalytic feminist writer, Sidhwa has also focused on the system of male domination and female subordination as a Marxist feminist. Pappu, young daughter of Lenny's servant is a very significant woman character as through her, she has depicted the oppression of woman because of caste, poverty and class. The poor young girl is often physically abused by her own mother and married off to an elderly and cynical dwarf only for money.

5. PARTITION: A PAINFUL EVENT OF RAPE AND ABDUCTION

The History of partition of India and Pakistan reveals that the mob from one community took revenge on the other and asserted its power on the other by making women target of sexual brutalities like rape, abduction, amputation of breasts and so on. In patriarchal societies women are seen as the bearers of their culture and honour. Patriarchy is entrenched not only in the social institutions but also in the psyche of both men and women. And therefore, for the fear of being abducted and raped, the women were either killed by the male members of the family or there were mutually assisted suicides. The novel, *Ice-Candy-Man* captures, in all its intensity, the painful memories of partition as seen through the eyes of Lenny.

Sidhwa fictionalizes her childhood observations of the partition and refugee camps in the novel. Like Lenny, Sidhwa at the time of partition was an eight-year-old girl living in Lahore. She reveals in one of her personal interactions that when she was a child, her name was Bhandara, which sounded like a Hindu name. After the riots were over, a gang of Muslim looters barged into their house thinking it to be a stranded house left by some Hindu family. At that time, their Muslim cook came to their rescue and the frenzied mob dispersed from there. It was then that Bapsi decided to write the story about Partition. However, she adds the incidence of Ayah's abduction by Muslim men to this scene and fictionalizes it in order to project the inhuman and barbaric acts against women during the riots. The abduction of Ayah reveals the mindset of ice-candy-man who is symbolic of male superiority and closed attitude.

6. CONCLUSION

Sidhwa asserts ice-candy-man's failure to survive on both personal and social constructs toward the end of the narrative. This deliberate act on the part of the writer is construed to bring to the fore the contrasting women characters who have risen above any community, caste, class, religion or ethnicity in order to help and protect those in need. Sidhwa not only identifies and presents the feminist issues but also transforms the ideas that govern, regulate and enforce gender equality.

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