



# The Aesthetics of Violence and Diverse Sexualities in the Fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa: new wave of Feminism in Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

*In the post-colonial fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa female body has been used as a salable commodity in the traditional patriarchal society of Pakistan. Women are sexually oppressed and exploited as religion and morality are silent spectators there. The plight of women in Pakistan society is quite apparent and the newspapers are packed with the episodes of rapes and sexual oppression of women. The political reforms are insignificant as women are treated as the second class citizens in Pakistan. They are not allowed to enjoy freedom and are forced to observe purdah since men are considered superiors to women. The novels of Bapsi Sidhwa depict the plight of women who are subjected to the terror of male domination. In her novels; *The Pakistani Bride*, *Cracking India* and *An American Brat* Bapsi Sidhwa describes the sufferings of women who are treated as the "Other." Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* describes the endless sufferings of women who are trapped in the power structure of men and are always treated as objects of sexual pleasures and not individuals. The Pakistani society is patriarchal, repressive, oppressive giving privileges to men and its harsh treatment of women, justified in the name of cultural traditions and religion. In this society men are born with respect, dignity and worth whereas women are considered as salable commodities. Men are considered as individuals and women are thought of as bodies.*

**Keywords:** Female body, salable, commodity, other, marginalization, patriarchal, repressive, plight, domination

Bapsi Sidhwa was born on August 11, 1938, in Karachi, Pakistan, then part of India. Her family belongs to the Parsee ethnic community which practices the Zoroastrian religion. Bapsi

Sidhwa spent most of her time in Lahore; she was polio ridden and had to stay at home. But she was a keen observer of life and its activities. She published her *Ice Candy Man* in 1988 which



created a sensation in the Pakistani society. Sidhwa packed her novel with the scenes of domestic violence sexuality and loss of identity of women. She had firsthand experience of the partition culture and she used her material in as *Cracking India*. The main issue taken up Sidhwa in this novel is the cultural displacement of the people affected by the partition holocaust. In 1991, Sidhwa republished it with a new name as *Cracking India*. Lenny is the narrator who vividly depicts details of the holocaust of partition. Lahore turns into a hostile world and the scenes of violence are horrifying. Lenny also talks about the forces of hatred and violence that grip the society. She talks about the loss of friendship and the disintegration of Lahore society. Bapsi Sidhwa wrote four major novels in her life; *The Crow Eaters* (1980), *The Pakistani Bride* (1983), *Cracking India* (1991) and *An American Brat* (1993). Sidhwa has also been highly regarded as a feminist postcolonial author who effectively addresses issues of female sexuality and the place of women in Indian and Pakistani society.

Sidhwa's work has garnered positive critical attention for providing a unique Parsee perspective on the culture and politics of the Partition of India. *Cracking India* has received a decidedly mixed critical reception. Several scholars have also criticized *Cracking India* for oversimplifying the history and politics of the Partition. However, Tariq Rahman has argued that *Cracking India* "shows the human personality under stress as a result of that cataclysmic event and depicts a society responding to it in the way societies do react: through sheer indifference, gossip, trivial and malicious activities, making love, and also

killing, raping, and going insane" (Tariq Rahman 123). Kamala Edwards has observed, "Sidhwa is a feminist and realist. One sees in her women characters the strength of passion, the tenderness of love, and the courage of one's convictions. They struggle to overcome the hurts of time and escape the grip of a fate in whose hands they are often mere puppets" (Edwards 23).

Bapsi Sidhwa seriously touches upon the partition violence in this novel. She narrates all the socio-political forces that result into the episodes of Holocaust before and after the partition. In the Second World War, the most destructive episode was the Holocaust of the Nazis. The Jews were sent to the concentration camps out of hatred. Sidhwa describes all the vents of partition and the aftermath of partition following the testimonies of Holocaust given by Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel and Delbo. The novel deals with the events of partition of India, a subject as harrowing as the Holocaust. Sidhwa has depicted the horror of the riots and massacres of innocent people. Lenny brings into light the bitter facts of history; she tells us about the rapes and sexual oppression of women. Sidhwa has depicted the scenes of rapes, burning of houses and killing of innocent children and young girls. She has described the monstrous human nature and the pervasive vogue of evil.

Bapsi Sidhwa is a Pakistani feminist who took up the cause of women in her novels. She had seen the atrocities perpetrated on women during partition. She relied on her first hand information when she wrote *Cracking India*. She set the novel in Lahore and used the perception of innocent Lenny to depict the traumatic sufferings of women. During partition the main target was women though they were never



involved in political activities. Men took sadistic pleasures in oppressing women. They took the revenge from the rivals attacking and sexually oppressing their women.

### **CAUSES, SYMPTOMS AND EFFECTS OF RAPES: REVIEW OF RAPE FICTION**

There are two famous novels in the post-colonial fiction; *Disgrace* written by J. M. Coetzee and *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* of Gil Courtemanche. Both the novels depict the themes of sexual oppression and violence. Sidhwa's *Cracking India* is another historical document on the social change and brutality encountered by women. The novel takes us to the period of intense violence. Courtemanche has depicted the horrors of the Rwandan genocide and Coetzee's *Disgrace* depicted the traumatic experiences of the people living in the post-apartheid South Africa. Since a child is an image of truth and honesty; Sidhwa takes up a child's perspective in this narration. She lashes at the cruelty of the system that promotes gender discrimination and sexual oppression. Lynin A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver explore the effects of rape on the mind of women. Their *Rape and Representation* exposes the cruelty of men and the realities of rape. Gayatri Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* talks about the marginalized status of woman. Higgins and Silver observe that men use all tools to objectify women. They have given a new concept of survival. They believe that a survivor is a woman who silently endures the sexual oppression. Hasina in the novel *Brick Lane* is an example of a survivor. Susan Brownmiller has also theorized about sex and sexuality in *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975). This critical paper investigates the cause of rapes and exploitation of women in the

post-colonial society. Susan touches upon the psychological aspects and contends that fear of rape brings so many psychic problems to women. Susan claims that rape is enacted not out of desire but out of "hatred" (Susan 185). Rape is a "deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession" (Susan 391). Men are possessive; sadistic and womanish. She has propounded the theory of *possession*. She has given many instances how "women are used almost as inanimate objects, to prove a point between men" (Susan 125). Susan emphasizes that "even in the context of an individual case, the meaning of rape is never individualistic." Rape is regarded as a traumatic form of brutality.

Bapsi Sidhwa depicts the image of female body in her novels to highlight the events of rapes and sexual aggression. Violence, sexual abuse, physical assaults are common in her novels. Sidhwa exposes the deeply rooted connection that the figure of women has with each country's national identity. She investigated the orthodox mind set of the people who believed that a land cannot be fully conquered if women of at territory are not captured. Capturing of women was sanctioned by the kings after the war in Islamic history of India. Bapsi Sidhwa uses the metaphor of cracking in her novel *Cracking India*. The novel recounts the rising tensions that lead to the partition of India from the eyes of a young Parsee girl, Lenny. She presents a gendered perspective of Partition. The plot of the novel provides the diverse sexualities of women and their marginalization. Female characters are subjected to rapes and physical assaults. The worst scene is of amputating of the breasts of women. *Cracking India* is harrowing tale of rapes of women; their sexual aggression and



molestation. Her Ayah represents beauty; her body is erotic as she becomes a victim in the novel.

### **Body as tool of sexuality: Women Trapped in Communal Frenzy**

For Bapsi Sidhwa female body is the nucleus as all tragic events of partition are articulated through the mutilation of female body. Body as becomes symbolic of the plight of women in *Cracking India*. Bapsi Sidhwa published her famous novels *The Pakistani Bride* and *Cracking India* expressing her concern for the defilement of female bodies. In Pakistan society bodies are given in marriage transactions to promote the interest of the bridegroom. They are imprisoned in a cage and are denied all liberties. Both the novels of Sidhwa depict the colonization of female bodies by patriarchy and religion. The female body is tortured and tormented; physically beaten and tortured. Women are treated as salable commodities in Pakistani society; no woman dares to oppose her husband. Men are possessive as they believe that after marriage women absolutely belong to them. The female bodies are physically tortured; battered and sexually oppressed. They are often subjected to rape and prostitution. Men in Pakistani society have supreme power to maintain their control over women. The novel begins with the mutilation of the bodies. Lenny and Himat Ali find the gunny-sack of Masseur's body on the road; Sidhwa alarms the readers of the disruption of society:

The sack slowly topples over and Masseur spills out. [...] He was lying on one side, the upper part of his velvet body bare, a brown and white checked *lungi* knotted

on his hips, and his feet in the sack...A wide wedge of flesh was neatly hacked to further trim his slender waist, and his spine, in a velvet trough, dipped into his *lungi* (*Cracking India* 185).

The partition fiction has given the historical facts since the publication of *The Train to Pakistan* written by Khushwant Singh. Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* is another landmark on the partition saga. Both the novels depict the scenes of violence and communal riots. In Chapter 16, Sidhwa narrates an inhuman scene of violence and brutality. A Sikh fanatic kills a Muslim child and pokes it on a spear just to terrorize the other community. He "waved it like a flag" (144). The image of a dead body hung on the spear symbolizes the inhuman brutality of a community. The Sikhs are demonstrating the power of the community to intimidate the other community. Lenny narrates another bloody deed of the senseless community:

My eyes focus on an emaciated Banya wearing a white Gandhi cap. The man is knocked down. His lips are drawn away from rotting, *paan*-stained teeth in a scream. The men [the Muslim mobs] move back and in the small clearing I see his legs sticking out of his dhoti right up to the groin—each thin, brown leg tied to a jeep. [...] There is the roar of a hundred throats: "Allah-o-Akbar!" and beneath it the growl of revving motors (145).

The plot of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* is packed with the harrowing scenes of



mutilation of body and senseless violence. Sidhwa has taken up the psychological perception as she depicts the psychological impact of mutilation of body on the mind and psyche of Lenny. The young and innocent child is stressed when she witnesses the scene of the mutilation of bodies. She performs the same violent action on her doll in a surprising manner: “She pulls the legs of a doll apart. She is frightened by the result, crying, and her brother is confused and infuriated by Lenny’s ‘pointless brutality’” (148). Lenny’s action is natural reaction of the mutilation of body. Lenny doesn’t know the meaning and causes of violence but this has psychological impact on her sensitive mind. It may be averred that the mutilation of the body symbolizes the disintegration of the society and culture and civilization. A wave of hatred and revenge begins which engulfs all communities forever. The Ice-Candy-Man adds fuel to the fire by breaking the news the Muslims have been butchered who were travelling by train. The Ice-Candy-Man terrorized the people of Lahore screaming that “A train from Gurdaspur has just come in. Everyone in it is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslim” (159). It was an act of retaliation; large number of men and women and children were killed. The female bodies were abused; their dead bodies were rotting in the heat. In Michel Foucault explores the significance of the body thus in, *Discipline and Punishment*; “Rather than seeing soul as the reactivated remnants of an ideology, one would see it as the present correlative of a certain technology of power over body” (Foucault 29). The metaphor of battlefield is coined by Sidhwa to describe the conflict between men and women. The female body becomes the battle field in

which all communities fight to conquer the female bodies. Ice-Candy-Man continues his report: “there are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-sacks full of women’s breasts!” (159). Menon and Bhasin (2007) investigated how the cultural and patriarchal forces dehumanize women. The writers analyzed the process of “the castration of males and the amputation of a woman’s breasts” They have exposed the cruelty of patriarchy which blocks the free movement of women.

The scene of amputation of a woman’s breasts is indeed horrible and inhuman. It cannot be justified as it symbolizes barbarity and savage attitude of the society. Amputation of breasts desexualizes a woman and negates her as wife and mother. Breasts of woman symbolize her reproductive power and the breasts in the gunny-sacks suggest the prevention of the future generations of the victims (44).

Menon and Bhasin deal with the question of belonging in their critical study. In their book *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition*, the learned critics tell us the causes of violence and displacement of the women. Menon and Bhasin observed that sexual violence begins during riots or at a time of political instability. People often ask the question during communal violence “Was your mother raped?” Lenny is also concerned about this question when she depicts the scenes of riots and sexual oppression of women. She herself feels tortured in describing these episodes. The women’s breasts in the gunny-sacks symbolize the unnatural



communal hatred that is dangerous for the growth of any civilization.

Sidhwa has dramatized a terrifying scene of communal violence; the Muslim mobs raid at Lenny's house to search out the Hindu or Sikh. They are red with anger and look monstrous. They question the gardener Himat Ali forcing him to recite the Koran and expose his circumcised penis to the crowd. They want to prove his Muslim identity; to ascertain whether he is "a proper Muslim" (192). After the guarantee by the barber who himself circumcises the gardener and the gardener's reciting the Koran with a Hindu intonation, the mobs let the gardener pass. The circumcision, "an engraving of being Muslim upon the body"... is done to achieve "a unity between the spiritual and the corporeal" (98-80).

### **Scenes of Kidnapping and Rapes: Traumatic Experiences of Ayah**

Ayah is the nucleus of the novel *Cracking India* as she represents all women of the subcontinent who were raped and sexually oppressed by the communal people. She is a wonderful person; young beautiful and hospitable. All love her and wish to enjoy her company; she is depicted as a sex bomb in the novel with her erotic body and gestures. She belongs to the category of fallen women of Bapsi Sidhwa as Lenny gives a detailed analysis of such women..." Ayah and many other women were unfortunate who fall prey to the sexual drives of men. In *Disgrace* there are explosive scenes of gang rape. Bapsi Sidhwa expresses her concern for the events of rapes and prostitution. Sidhwa has documented the horrifying scenes of communal violence; mutilation of female bodies; their inhuman abduction and rapes. Manju Jaidka observes that

Bapsi Sidhwa is frank and realistic in giving the historical facts of the partition violence. Rapes are symbols revealing the evil intentions of the society. Ironically, female bodies "became sites of contested power" (48). Jaidka has given the metaphor of oppression in her critical analysis. All Women protagonists of Bapsi Sidhwa function as "objects of oppression" in her novels. Their battered bodies become "the focal point of the narrative, highlighting the impact of history on the meek and powerless" (46). Rosemary George contends that women of Sidhwa may be described as "communal sufferers, familial victims, and second-class citizens" (Rosemary 138). All her male characters are powerful, passionate and callous denying liberty to women to enjoy sexual pleasures but don't give any liberty to women. They treat women as toys of sexual pleasures. Men are rapists; sexual and rigid. They go to Hira Mandi for their sexual entertainment. Sidhwa has given a dialectical relationship between rapists and those who are raped. Paul Brians in his book *Modern South Asian Literature in English* investigates women of Sidhwa. He finds a traditional "pattern of oppression that victimizes all women in the novel. This oppression is found from bottom to the highest level" (107).

Lenny is greatly impacted by the liberal ideas of Ayah. She is a popular woman as all people from street hawker to upper class men were caught by the bewitching beauty and sensuousness. "hawkers, cart-drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists" alike "turn their heads as she passes" (12). Lenny too noticed her "rolling bouncy walk that agitates the globules of her buttocks" (13). Sidhwa constructs Ayah's sexual attractiveness right from the beginning of the



novel. Ayah is not glanced *at*, but “*draws glances*” (12); she controls the gaze of which she is the object. Ayah is eagerly sought after by all sections of people. Men derive sexual pleasures from her sensuous body and erotic poses. Ayah goes on pushing the pram in the street “with unconcern” (12). She dusts off the things that “love to crawl beneath [her] sari. Ladybirds, glow-worms, Ice-candy-man's toes” (28).

Cahill goes further and contends that “in acquiring the bodily habits” of femininity, women become radically alienated from their bodies” (Cahill 161). Sidhwa contends that her beauty and sexual body becomes a threat in the novel. Mac Kinnon points out that Sidhwa's portrait of Ayah and her female sexuality can be discussed in metaphorical language. Ayah has “a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others [which] women never own or possess” (Mac Kinnon 172). Mac Kinnon further contends that men are sex traders while sexualities of women are salable goods. Sidhwa observes that there is “subtle exchange of signals and... complex rites by which Ayah's admirers coexist,” but Ayah's influence over these rites is considerable. Ayah is not a passive agent but an active power as her lovers respect her “favor” (29). Lenny gives us a graphic description of Ayah telling how “stub-handed twisted beggars...drop their poses and stare at Ayah with hard, alert eyes. Holy men, masked in piety, shove aside their pretenses to ogle her with lust. Hawkers, cart-drivers, cooks, coolies, and cyclists turn their heads as she passes” (12).

The Hindu and Muslim communities are killing each other but in this hour of unrest Ayah plays a unifying role to cement the relations between two communities. She threatens, “If all

you talk of is nothing but this Hindu-Muslim business, I'll stop coming to the park” (101). Ayah's appeal has a positive impact on the rioters who assure her that “For your sake, we won't bring it up again” (101). Sidhwa has given powerful images to describe the magnetic personality thus: “She, like Mother, is an oil pourer” (99). Certainly, Ayah uses her power to lessen conflicts. However, at last the insane passions prevail and Ayah is kidnapped and forced into sexual prostitution. Lenny uses the metaphor of bee to portray the magnetic personality of Ayah. She is a remote control in the novel as all men are under her thumb. She rules over the men of all communities and nobody dares to oppose her even during the riots. Her passionate appeal brings transformation for a short time but at last the religious insanity overpowers all sensible thoughts. She is seen as a threat to their mission so eventually she is kidnapped because of being a Hindu. But she too becomes the victim of sexual oppression as Sidhwa depicts the traumatic experience of the Ayah thus:

Her suitors misbehaved with her, they used violent methods to possess her and they dragged her out. The men dragged her and forcibly put her on a cart with their harsh hands, lifted her into it (195).

Thus the Partition of India proved worst for the women; they were the real target for the rioters wanted to take revenge from the rival communities. Sudhir Kakar noted that there was a connection between social mores and sexual violence. He expressed his ideas in his book *The Colours of Violence*:

There were so many causes of sexual violence against women in the north and the main was the perverted mind of the people of Punjab who expressed their religious frenzy during the partition. Unfortunately, women became the victims of the rioters (Sudhir Kakar 38).

Rita Menon and Kamla Bhasin opine that Ayah becomes a trophy of sexual oppression and abuse. The title of the novel gives the metaphor of cracking; the abduction and rape of Ayah symbolizes the cracking of civilization. The metaphor describes the cracking part of India and Pakistan and the loss of sanity and communal harmony. Ayah is abducted and all women were subjected to torture and sexual oppression. Lenny gives reference to the amputation of breasts of women narrating the cruelty of men and disintegration of society. Ayah is cracked and with her kidnapping the dignity and stability of the communities is cracked.

Indeed, the last section of the novel is very touching to find that Ayah loses her original identity. She becomes a Muslim woman with a Muslim name Mumtaz. Her female body is colonized by the male dominating culture. Ice-Candy-Man's sexual control over her symbolizes the subjugation of women. Mumtaz expresses her tortured soul and confesses to Lenny and Godmother that she is "not alive" (274). Lenny uses the word "mutilation" to describe the traumatic experiences of Ayah. She complains that Ice-Candy-Man was like a monster that killed her spirit and mutilated her "angel's" voice. *Cracking India* traces the forces of class conflicts.

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