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THE PLIGHT OF INDIAN WOMEN AS REFLECTED IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S ICE CANDY MAN

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ABSTRACT

Women must be given an equal opportunity in terms of education, employment for their social status and economic condition. There were many attempts by the women writers across the country. In literature many contemporary female writers proposed the predicament of women in view of caste, religion and gender and also suggested some solutions through their literary pieces. This paper addresses the effort of woman novelist Bapsi Sidhwa, who has been considered as a feminist who effectively deal with the issue of cultural confrontation and the plight and place of women in Indian women. Also it is an attempt to reveal that her real life character revealed through her characters portrayed in her work of art. This paper focuses especially on Bapsi Sidhwa's third novel Ice-Candy-Man that represents a number of female characters who survive the hectic period of 1947 in India, which can be registered as the period of nastiest religious riots in the history of India. The whole story has been narrated by the female protagonist Lenny who related the horrors of brutality and her personal observations and reactions. The protagonist not only observes but also analyses men's lascivious and debasing attention towards women, gluttony of male sexual desires, women's plight as they are reduced to the status of sexual objects, and relates the bizarre disadvantages, social and civil, to which they are subjected. The female characters are being suppressed by men establishing their masculine powers and often in real life women were brutally assaulted by men to fulfill their desires. They try to cope with the societal pressures in their life but they found it difficult. Hence I have concluded that Sidhwa's women are strong willed, assertive and courageous. They resolve their crisis in their own way.

Keywords: *Feminism, Plight of women, Bapsi Sidhwa's women characters, Ice Candy man.*

Feminism is an attempt to take a departure from the conventional mode to the modern world. It is a freedom struggle against male chauvinism and sex oppression finding a way for equality of women in the conventional patriarchal society. It also demands that women should not be treated as passive puppets rather an autonomous personality. There must be an equal opportunity to be given to women in terms of education, employment for their social status and economic condition. It is a range of political movements, ideologies and social movements that share a common goal of establishing equal opportunities for women in education and employment which results in filling gender gaps. The history of the modern western feminist movements is divided into three waves each deals with different aspects.

The first wave comprised women's suffrage movements of 19th and early 20th century, promoting women's right to vote, "Emmeline Pankhurst" travelled constantly, giving speeches throughout Britain and the United States, (after selling her home) in 1930. The liberty of women was the main aspect in the second wave of feminism. The social quality and status was claimed in it. Feminist worked to abolish the "Martial Exemption in rape laws" prohibited the prosecution of husbands for the rape of their wives.

The third wave is a continuation of, and a reaction to, the perceived failures of a second wave feminism beginning in 1990's. As Sushila Singh puts it in "Feminism and recent fiction in English":

"Human experiences for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Women has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life" (preface 7).

In literature many contemporary female writers proposed the predicament of women in view of caste, religion and gender and also suggested some solutions through their literary pieces. Feminist writers grazed upon various aspects of women's life. They being aware of women's subjugation, try to break off the fetters which are instrumental in their victimization. They portray their struggle against oppressive Patriarchal domain and their longing for a new social order with changed standards where women can be their true selves. They emphasize the emancipation of women.

One such scientist feminist writer was Bapsi Sidhwa - Feminist and realist. She has been considered as a feminist who effectively deal with the issue of cultural confrontation and the plight and place of women in Indian women. An American Brat and Ice-Candy-man are the examples of the cultural confrontation that revealed in the female characters. Sidhwa is a feminist and realist who realistically illustrate the place of women in the patriarchal society for their examinations of cultural conflict and their strong characterization. She describes her women characters with the strength of passion, the tenderness of love and courage of one's convictions.

Bapsi Sidhwa's real life character is revealed through her characters in the fictional works. The characters are intelligent, courageous and modest. They try Bapsi Sidhwa's third novel Ice-Candy-Man represents a number of female characters who survive the hectic period of 1947 in India, which can be registered as the period of nastiest religious riots in the history of India. Sidhwa has given a very practical and translucent picture of carnage during Hindu-Muslim riots in 1947.

The novel mirrors men becoming adversaries on the basis of their religion and also represents the varying political scenario of the country. Emotional turmoil, individual weakness, barbarities of communal riots and the brutalities inflicted on women amidst this iconoclastic ruthlessness and communal rage have been very realistically projected by the novelist. The whole story has been narrated by the female protagonist Lenny who related the horrors of brutality and her personal observations and reactions. The protagonist not only observes but also analyses men's lascivious and debasing attention towards women, gluttony of male sexual desires, women's plight as they are reduced to the status of sexual objects, and relates the bizarre disadvantages, social and civil, to which they are subjected.

Lenny as a teller of tales moves from one phase of her life, i.e., childhood to teenage years. During this voyage, she understands the changes taking place in the society, men's outlook towards women and women's subjection. The whole journey helps her to develop a more mature vision towards life. She gives a closer look at the relationship between men and women which awakens her young mind to build up a dream of her own.

The narrator relates her life as "My world is compressed" (Sidhwa Ice-Candy-Man1). As a physically handicapped girl, her world is limited to the four walls of the house. She spends most of her time with her Godmother. She terms her Godmother's room as,

"My refuge from the perplexing unrealities of my home on Warris Road" (Ice-Candy-Man 1).

She recalls:

"I can't remember a time when I ever played with dolls: though relatives and acquaintances have persisted in giving them to me" (Ice-Candy-Man 138).

This reflects the sexual identity plunge upon her time and again. Her schooling is blocked as suggested by Col. Bharucha, her doctor, as she was suffering from polio.

He concludes,

"She'll marry—have children—lead a carefree, happy life. No need to strain her with studies and exams" (Ice-Candy-Man 15).

Lenny concludes that the proposal made by Col. Bharucha sealed her destiny. It reveals the restrictions related with a girl's life. Development of feminine virtues with female nature and carrying out the everyday jobs associated with the domestic associations are considered as the only aim for women. Patriarchal civilization considers women as physically weak to venture into the world outside the four walls of their houses and too scarce to make vital decisions. Since ages it is considered that it is a woman's duty to tend house, raise children and give comfort to her family. Shashi Deshpande, a contemporary novelist, suggests that women should be given sufficient space to understand their true personality. She points out in a dialogue to Geetha Gangadharan:

"The stress laid on the feminine functions, at the cost of all your potentials as an individual enraged me. I knew I was very intelligent person, but for a woman, intelligence is always a handicap. If you are intelligent, you keep asking, "Why, why, why" and it becomes a burden" (Deshpande 253).

Simone de Beauvoir also holds the same sight about social habituation. According to her, mothers are very much answerable for inculcating feminine character of submission and self-abnegation in women.

Lenny as a girl learns that marriage of girls is supreme to their parents. Independence and self-identity are meant for men. The extreme anxiety for her marriage even in her childhood puts Lenny in depression. She states,

"Drinking tea, I am told, makes one darker. I'm dark enough. Everyone says, 'It's a pity Adi's fair and Lenny so dark.' He's a boy. Anyone will marry him" (Ice-Candy-Man 81).

She recognizes the biological escapade of women as she grows. As a child she cherishes her mother's love and her father's protection but the whole episode of Ice-Candy-Man and Ayah destroys all her conceptions about love. She was stunned to perceive Ice-Candy-Man pushing his wife Ayah into the dealing of prostitution. Lenny concludes: The innocence that my parents' vigilance, the servants' care and Godmother's love sheltered in me, that neither Cousin's carnal cravings, nor the stories of the violence of the mobs, could quite destroy, was laid waste that evening by the emotional storm that raged round me. The confrontation between Ice-Candy-Man and Godmother opened my eyes to the knowledge of virtuous indignation over compassion. The demands of fulfillment—and the immoral nature of desire to the merciless face of love (Ice-Candy-Man 252).

The site of Hindu and Muslim women being raped at the time of the riots petrifies her. She watches men changing into beasts leaving no room for ethical and soul values. Women including Ayah were becoming victim of men. Lenny was dazed to see the human mind which was built of nobler materials getting so easily crooked. Men were declaring supremacy over each other by sexually incursing women. Women had nothing in their favour. Envy, malice, grudge, rage for personal power and importance in men were leading to violence and injury. Shashi Deshpande states:

"Rape is for me the grossest violation of trust between two people. Whether it is someone in the family or your husband or any other man who commits a rape, it destroys the trust between men and women. It is also the greatest violence because it is not only the woman's body but it is her mind and feeling of her right to have a control on her body which is gone" (qtd. in Pallavi 126-127).

Sidhwa has also mapped out the aftermath of such inhuman and uncivilized acts against women after the riots. She has projected the farcical social conduct which victimizes women alone for any bodily brutality and leaves them to wail with their bitter experience which gives them a feeling of agony and sense of loss. Lenny is shocked to see the changing attitude of men towards one another. Religious enmity easily wiped out the threads of friendship. She concludes:

"And I become aware of religious differences. One day everybody is themselves — and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols" (Ice-Candy-Man 93).

Lenny is not ready to accept the prevailing social condition. As a grown-up woman she analyses the whole situation and draws some conclusions. She decides to hunt for her lost Ayah, who also becomes a prey of the

Hindu-Muslim riots. Lenny decides to talk to her mother regarding Ayah. She wants to save Ayah from the terrible profession of prostitution as told by her cousin. Lenny decides,

"If those grown men pay to do what my comparatively small Cousin tried to do, then Ayah is in trouble. I think of Ayah twisting ice-candy-man's intrusive toes and keeping the butcher and wrestler at arm's length. And of those strangers' hands hoisting her chocolate body into the cart I decide it's time to confront Mother" (Ice-Candy-Man 241).

Due to Lennys continuous persistence at home, she is informed about Ayah's whereabouts. The novel ends with Ayah being sent back to her parents' home.

Throughout the novel, Lenny appears as a daring and heroic girl who is not ready to cave into the communal frenzy. She is analytical, daring, onerous and lively. Sidhwa has given a feminist touch to the character of Lenny who moves forward in life despite of various hindrances and bumps. As she observes the lives of various women around her, she understands the constraints associated with women's lives in patriarchal society. She is shocked to see men backstabbing and sexually assaulting women and deeding them. Sidhwa as a writer embolden women to transgress the line of marginalization.

Lenny's mother is another enthralling female character in the Ice-Candy-Man. As a servile housewife, she limits her life to the four walls of her home. She secretly follows her husband, who is the decision-maker of the family. Lenny's mother is a representative of those traditional women who as subordinates never express their desire to establish themselves as better human beings. Sidhwa seems to demonstrate through Lenny that men have to dilute their ego and women have to dodge the image of deprived femininity. Change in mindset is needed in order to provide equality among the sexes. The patriarchal society should accept women beyond the roles of daughters, wives and mothers. Traditional male fantasies have created a particular image of women to suit their interests— submissive, servile, and docile. These fantasies have become alive, as women have been carefully trained by the patriarchal/ social system to assimilate them.

A big changeover is required at the social level, which will confess women as human beings with souls, desires, feelings, ambitions and potentials. Simultaneously women should use their potentials beyond their domestic life to affirm their individuality. The novel Ice-Candy-Man beetled through Lenny's mother that women should have a aspiration in life besides having the life within home which should be improved by them to the best of their competencies. Women need to encage themselves from the constraints of 'womanliness' which will erase the existing distinctiveness regarding their marginalization. Lenny's mother exhibits a change in her personality by the end of the novel. She becomes acquainted with the political changes occurring in the country during India-Pakistan division. She arises as a social worker. Along with Lenny's Electric-Aunt, she helps the victims of 1947 riots. She provides people with petrol who wanted to cross the border and helps the raped and exploited women.

Lenny's mother shows a lot of similarity with Bhabani Bhattacharya's female character Monju in So Many Hungers. Monju appears as a fuller and mature woman by the end of the novel. In the beginning she projects the womanly traits of being happy and content with her life and family. But gradually, with the passage of time, the pathetic incidence of Bengal famine and pictures of human life transform her. She learns to think beyond the realms of her own life and as a human cannot remain blind to and detached from the miseries and traumas of others. With a soul to feel and a mind to think it is very difficult to shut oneself behind the door when people are screaming for help and rescue. Similarly Lenny's mother could not resist herself from helping the victims of 1947 riots.

In all her novels, Sidhwa is closes the male chauvinism practices of society that tries to diminish the growt5h and development of women. Hence Sidhwa as a writer has a constructive approach towards women's predicament. By leading a contented life they paralyze their lives but if they desire they will have option to break through their plight and get opportunities for betterment. Hence we see that all her novels end on a positive note and no woman character is found as a defeatist in her works. It matters little whether they succeed in changing the course of their life or not. What is remarkable is that they never yield. They always strive to come out of their plight. They protest and fight against injustice, exploitation and oppression with vehemence and show the way for other women so that they may move forward from their degraded and tormented state to start their lives afresh. They are being suppressed by men establishing their masculine

powers and often in real life women were brutally assaulted by men to fulfill their desires. They try to cope with the societal pressures in their life but they found it difficult. Hence we find that Sidhwa's women are strong willed, assertive and courageous. They resolve their crisis in their own way.

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S.Senthil Murugan is currently working as Principal at Meenatchi Matriculation high School. Having a good academic background he has experienced as Educator more than ten years in the field of English Communication and Literature. He has first class degree in M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., in English and has submitted his Ph.D and waiting for public viva-voce. Besides, he attended many National and International Seminars and Conferences and presented various papers. He has a keen interest in Literature and English language Communication. A handful of teaching experience to different age group is an extra credit as well.