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## Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*: A Thematic Study

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### ABSTRACT:

*Bapsi Sidhwa's novel Ice-Candy-Man is a realistic narrative, set in Lahore. The story takes up the themes of communal tensions using religion as a way to define individual identity, territorial cravings, political oppressions, power and love, and binds them together in a very readable narrative. The novel revolves around people from diverse religious backgrounds—Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Parsee—living in complete harmony till the rumours of the Sub-Continent's imminent division tear them asunder. Lenny's narration starts at her fifth year and ends after her eighth birthday. Lenny's passionate love for Ayah and the loss of innocence that accompanies their changing relationship through partition is an energetic centre to the plot. The tale revolves around Ayah, and her several suitors and what becomes of them interestingly enough. Sidhwa gives each one of Ayah's suitors of different religions and cultural backgrounds.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Ice-Candy-Man, partition, communal violence.*

Bapsi Sidhwa was born and brought up in United India. In this age of globalisation, it is really very difficult to categorise some writers; Bapsi Sidhwa is one of them. She likes herself to be described as a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsee woman. Her fiction deals with both the pre-and postcolonial period of the Indian Sub-Continent. What is most remarkable about her work is her dual perspective which is based on both the Pakistani and the Parsee point of view. She speaks both for the Pakistani's and the marginalised Parsee community. She picks some significant incidents from her own life or from the lives of other people and fleshes them out to create a larger reality of fiction. Her writing career began at the age of twenty-six. She has many novels at her credit. It was her third novel *Ice-Candy-Man* that earned Bapsi Sidhwa international acclaim and acceptance as one of the most promising English novelists from South Asia, placing her from among the literary leading lights like Khushwant Singh, Anita Desai and R.K.Narayan. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, the child protagonist, Lenny, is reminiscent of Sidhwa's own childhood. Like Lenny, Sidhwa too suffered from polio as a child due to which she was not sent to school and had frequent visits to hospital. Like the protagonist, Lenny, Sidhwa at the time of partition was an eight-year-old girl living in Lahore. Recalling the nightmarish experience of those days, Sidhwa tells Feroza Jussawalla:

*When I was a child living in Lahore at the time of partition, my maiden name was Bhandara, which sounded like a Hindu name. After most of the riots were over, a gang of looters came in carts into our house thinking it is an abandoned house. They were quite shocked to see us and my mother and everybody there. At that time our Muslim cook came and said, what do you damn people think you are doing? "This is*

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*a Parsee household”, and they said, “We thought it was a Hindu household” and they went away. I decided to write a story about partition because this scene was vivid in my mind.<sup>1</sup>*

The novelists of Indian Sub-Continent have carved a niche for themselves and have won accolades—prestigious awards and prizes—making significant contribution to literature of the world. Bapsi Sidhwa belongs to India, Pakistan and the United States simultaneously but she likes herself to be called as a Punjabi-Pakistani-Parsee woman. She picks up some significant incidents from her own or from the lives of other people. She is unique because of her raucous humour, caustic wit, a sense of fair play and shrewd observations of human behaviour. Sidhwa has a distinctive Pakistani, yet Parsee ethos in her writings but above all a unique individual voice. Sidhwa’s novel *Ice-Candy-Man* examines the inexorable logic of partition as an offshoot of fundamentalism sparked by hardening communal attitudes. First published in 1988 in London, this novel is set in pre-partition India in Lahore. It is the second novel on partition by a woman author, the first being Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. Both these women writers share similar perspectives on the calamities of Pakistan. The novel skilfully recreates the ethos of partition as a historical event through the view point of a precocious eight-year-old Parsee girl Lenny. The novel captures the effects of communal frenzy that follows partition through the innocent eyes of Lenny, the child narrator of the novel, much more like her creator, polio-ridden, precocious and a keen observer of the happenings around. Partition figures in all her novels set in the Indian Sub-Continent. Of her novels, *Ice-Candy-Man* is the serious and popular one. Effectively using the persona of a child narrator, the novel critically presents the kaleidoscopically changing socio-political realities of the Indian Sub-Continent just before its partition. The novel was filmed as a motion-picture by Deepa Mehta with the title “Earth 1947”. The movie does not include many incidents and characters of the novel, but the novelist feels that it has been successful in retaining the spirit of the novel told from the perspective of a child from the Parsee community of Lahore, the novelist has done an amazing job of presenting the story of partition and Hindu-Muslim riots from a neutral perspective. Lenny is a raconteur. She is a polio-stricken girl. The novel is presented from her viewpoint. Lenny has a deformity in her foot. She is apprehensive that Dr. Bharucha may finally be able to correct her leg by repeatedly putting it in a cast. Her deformity imparts a special status to her. She is rather happy with her deformity. She uses it to gain sympathy and favour. She abhors the competitive world of normal children. She grows up in comfort and tranquillity in her house on Warris road in Lahore. She is reconciled to her deformity and does not blame anyone for it. In fact, she considers it a blessing as she doesn’t have to attend a regular school and compete with other children. We are also introduced to Lenny’s Ayah, a chocolate-brown and short woman. Incapable of much physical moment on her own, Lenny is perambulated around the city by her Hindu Ayah. Lenny is not a particularly attractive child. This is how she describes herself:

*I am skinny, wizened, sallow, wiggly-haired, and ugly. (p.22)*

Elsewhere we are also told that she is of dark complexion. The narrator says:

*It’s a pity Adi’s(Lenny’s little brother) fair and Lenny so dark. He is a boy.  
Any one will marry him. (p.81)*

The lameness of the narrator-protagonist becomes suggestive of the handicap a woman creative writer feels. She decides to wield the pen. Because writing being an intellectual exercise, which is considered a male bastion, outside the routine of a woman's submissive domesticity. Her recuperation symbolises the over-coming of the constraint on the intellectual activity of writing by Bapsi Sidhwa. Col. Bharucha, being the spokesman of the Parsee community in Lahore cautions his community against an active part in the politics of the day. He advises his people to hunt with the hounds and run with the hare to safeguard their interest. In a tone of admonition, Bharucha says:

*I hope no Lahore Parsee will be stupid enough to court trouble—I strongly advise all of you to stay home—and out of trouble. (p.37)*

The Parsee paradox of whether to support 'Swaraj' or to maintain their loyalty to the British Raj is also humorously delineated. A piquant touch is given to his dilemma. The Parsees in Lahore at a special meeting at their temple hall in Warris Road have an acrimonious debate on the political system. If India is divided and independence is achieved, political glory, fame and fortune will be acquired by the two major communities, Hindus and Muslims. Col. Bharucha says:

*Hindus, Muslims and even Sikhs are going to jockey for power and if you jokers jump into the middle you will be mangled into chutney. (p.36)*

Shanta, the eighteen-year-old Hindu Ayah of Lenny, has a seductive appearance and attracts many admirers. When Ayah takes Lenny in the evenings to the park, her several admirers mill around her. Among them are Falletities Hotel cook, the government house gardener, a head-and-body Masseur, the Zoo attendant Sher Singh and Ice-Candy-Man, all vying for her attentions and her favours. Ayah has such stunning looks that she draws covetous glances from every one. Beggars, holy men, hawkers, cart-drivers, cooks, coolies and cyclists turn their heads as she passes and ogle at her. Even the English men are not able to resist her magnetic charm. They are people of different faiths—Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs—yet they live together amicably in a spirit of oneness.

Of these Masseur and Ice-Candy-Man are Ayah's most favourites. Lenny is continuously haunted by her nightmares. Her younger brother, a handsome and fair Adi is also under the care of Ayah, Shanta. Ice-Candy-Man, one of the admirers of Ayah, is the titular hero of the novel who turns out to be an anti-hero in the end. Lenny observes the transition of the Ice-Candy-Man through the roles of the Ice-cream vendor, bird-seller, cosmic connector to Allah via telephone, and pimp. In an interview, Bapsi Sidhwa declared:

*Part of my title Ice-Candy-Man did reflect on Ice-Candy-Men, that is manipulative politicians who hold out false candies to people. <sup>2</sup>*

Ice-Candy-Man possessed chameleon like qualities. He poses himself as a Sufi, telephoning Allah and earning money with the help of such antics. He earns money at the expense of gullible-burqa-clad Muslim women. He is all wired up because he has become Allah's telephone. He puts up such a convincing show that the woman parts with two silver rupees in exchange of an assurance that after four daughters, she is going to be blessed with a son at last. His antics are amusing. R.L. Ross discusses the figure of Ice-Candy-Man as follows:

*First a seller of an Asian luxury that melts and has no substance, then a trickster with flying things, there is a holy pretender, Ice-Candy-Man weaves in and out of the action to take up, at last, the despicable profession of pimping. Ice-Candy-Man as a metaphor for those who wield power provides an inventive and indirect way to explore the role politicians played in the bloody birth of Pakistan and the new India.... Because the manoeuvring of those in power has no more substance or performance than melting Ice-Candy, this seller of so ephemeral a product, this man who shifts from one role to another turns into the unlikely symbol of those who were making history—or at least thought they were.<sup>3</sup>*

The protagonist Lenny has some nightmares. A nightmare that Lenny has is that of the Zoo-lion breaking loose and sinking his fangs into her stomach:

*.... The hungry lion cutting across Lawrence Road to Birdwood Road prowls from the rear of house to the bed-room door and in one bare fanged leap crashes through to sink his fangs into my stomach (pp.23-24)*

The hungry lion foreshadows the lust for blood and the murderous cruelty with which people of different communities will treat one another at the time of independence and partition. With these personal nightmares of Lenny's, Sidhwa sets the stage for lurid details of real violence in public life. As the action of the novel unfolds, we confront a pattern of communal amity where the three communities—the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs—are still at peace with one another. But the intimation of an imminent death and destruction lurk in the symbolic significance of Lenny's nightmares at the break of the dawn. Lenny's nightmares symbolize the impending vivisection of India which was as cruel as the dismemberment of that child. One evening Lenny's parents invite their Sikh neighbour Mr. Singh, Mr. Rogers, the Inspector General of Police, and their families to dinner. At that time, Lenny's father makes a jocular comment about British soldier. Mr. Singh lets out a loud guffaw but the Rogers don't relish it. Their discussion veers round the politics. Mr. Singh asks Mr. Roger to quit India. Mr. Roger says that rivers of blood will start flowing the moment the British leave India as all Indians will fall at one another's throats. Their conversation leads to ugly conclusions. Lenny notices a change in the behaviour of people around her. Ayah starts visiting temples. Imam Din and Yousaf turn into religious zealots and they take Friday afternoons off for the Jhumha prayers. The Sharmas and the Daulatrams flaunt their caste-marks. The caste and religious differences come to the fore:

*Hari and Moti—the sweeper and his wife Muccho, and their untouchable daughter Papoo, become ever more untouchable as they are entrenched deeper in their low Hindu caste. (p.93)*

Even the Christians get infected:

*The Rogers of Birdwood barracks, Queen Victoria and King George are English Christians: They look down upon their noses upon the Pens who are Anglo-Indians, who look down theirs on the Phailbuses who are Indian Christians, who look down upon all non-Christians. (p.94)*

In a world gone, topsy-turvy, friends turn into foes. In an attempt to save their lives many convert. Some Hindus become Muslims, some Christians. Everyone is not saved. Partition becomes a reality. Communal harmony is a thing of the past and the Hindus start leaving Lahore.

Things start turning ugly and violent. Houses are looted and burnt. There are riots. And as Lenny watches, she sees the destruction and the killing. Ayah moans at the horror of the scene and collapses.

But the violence excites many; among them is Ice-Candy-Man. The novelist describes an ugly scene through the eyes of Ice-Candy-Man:

*A train from Gurdaspur has just come in... Everyone it is dead. Butchered. They are all Muslims. There are no young women among the dead. Only two gunny bags full of women's breasts. (p.149)*

The Hindus and Sikh families leave Lahore as communal trouble brews. Loads of Muslim corpses arrive by train from Gurdaspur, which has now gone to Pakistan, among them relatives of Ice-Candy-Man who becomes a religious fanatic now. Ice-Candy-Man would like to avenge those deaths, those rapes and mutilations. He becomes a rabid communalist. He joins the gangs of Marauding hooligans in their looting and killing spree. Revenge becomes the major motivation for the Ice-Candy-Man and his friends. Imam Din's entire family has been wiped out in Pir Pindo. Ranna alone has survived to tell the gruesome tale. Ice-Candy-Man not only abducts Ayah and throws her to the wolves of passion in a Kotha but also kills out of jealousy his co-religionist Masseur. The plight of charred limbs and burnt bodies is nothing but a 'tamasha' for Ice-Candy-Man. This shows how the communal hatred has hardened the hearts of people. The scenes of violence have a baleful influence on children. Ayah is gang-raped and then taken to Hiramandi, the red-light district of Lahore. After that Ice-Candy-Man marries her. Ayah has now a new name, Mumtaz. Finally God-mother traces her to a brothel in Hiramandi. Then God-mother saves Ayah and the Ice-Candy-Man and moved her to the camp for recovered women near Lenny's bungalow. Hamida is another victim of men's atrocity. She represents those women who are kidnapped and raped, and then rejected by their families; are relegated to rehabilitation centres where they are subjected to all kinds of inhuman treatment. Hamida gets employed as a nurse-maid by Lenny's mother. Lenny's mother, God-mother and electric-aunt do all they can for the riot-victims. Bapsi Sidhwa is definitely a Pakistani. It biases her in favour of Pakistan. So her novel presents a Pakistani version of partition. Gandhi is venerated all over the world. But in *Ice-Candy-Man*, he has been described as a tricky politician. Sidhwa depicts him through the character of Lenny as an:

*Improbable toss-up between a clown and a demon. (p.91)*

The novel closes with Ayah's departure for Amritsar followed by a harmless Ice-Candy-Man. Ayah is restored to her family in Amritsar. Beaten and defeated, Ice-Candy-Man follows her across the Wagah border to Amritsar with no glimmer of hope of ever being reunited with her. He seems to have lost interest in the world. The novel raises an issue that is always of serious concern for both the countries. Sidhwa's treatment of the subject is so fresh and refreshing that this dark and sordid tale of partition turns into a powerful truth-telling narrative. It is a powerful account of independence which includes a cast of characters—Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Parsee and Sikh. Sidhwa's portrayal of men as perpetrators of dreadful outrage, and women as sufferers and saviours confirmed to her feminine perspective on partition and independence.

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