

Post-Colonial Concerns in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*

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The phenomenon of colonialism has had a major influence in shaping the lives of three-quarters of the people living in the world. The influence extends not just to the political and economic sphere but to the cultural as well. The impact is perhaps best expressed by the art and literature produced in the erstwhile colonies. Bill Ashcroft et al in *The Empire Writers Rack* (1989) uses the term postcolonial to “cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (p.2). Consequently, according to this definition, the literature written in the colonized countries from the moment of colonization till the present day can be termed as postcolonial literature. The literature of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries and Sri Lanka are all postcolonial literatures. Technically the literature of U.S.A. should also be placed in this category, but because of its current position of power, and the neo-colonizing role it has played its postcolonial nature has not been generally recognized. Bill Ashcroft et al observe that what makes each of these literatures distinctly postcolonial is that “they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre.”

However an important point to be remembered is that the term post-colonial is also used for denoting a perspective or a theory—meaning a post-colonial perspective or a postcolonial reading of a text which is not necessarily produced or written in the erstwhile colonies.

The colonizer devalues the culture, literature, history etc. of the colonized. A postcolonial writer can counter this process by giving an alternate version of history. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* counters the European notions of African history by writing an alternate history highlighting the African culture. Bapsi Sidhwa in the *Ice-Candy-Man* rewrites history to undercut not only the British but also the Indian version of the history of the vast South sub-continent.

Bapsi Sidhwa writes an alternate history to counter the British and Indian view of the history of

the Indian subcontinent.

Sidhwa's re-writing of history is far more complex than it appears to be, since she is re-writing history not just from the Pakistan point of view but also from the Parsi point of view. In order to highlight the Parsi dilemma at the time of the Partition she goes back thirteen hundred years to the significant moment in Parsi history, when they "were kicked out of Persia by the Arabs" and "sailed to India" (37). After waiting for four days on the Indian coast they were visited by the Grand *Vazir*, with a glass of milk filled to the brim, symbolizing that his land was full and prosperous and in no need of "outsiders with a different religion and alien ways to disturb the harmony" (38). However the Parsi forefathers, intelligently, "stirred a teaspoon of sugar into the milk and sent it back" (39), symbolizing that the Parsis "would get absorbed into his country like sugar in the milk... And with their decency and industry sweeten the lives of his subjects" (39). In her fictional account however Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the dilemma the Parsis have faced over the centuries i.e. the dilemma of assimilating themselves into an alien culture and risking the loss of their identity.

The impending Partition of the country, as depicted in the novel, might prove that all the efforts the Parsis have made over the centuries to assimilate themselves into Indian culture are futile since the community all of a sudden faces the threat of extinction in the wake of the Partition. Thirteen hundred years ago the Parsis had tried to accept Indian culture with all its diversities, but now at the moment of Partition they might be forced to take sides with one of the dominant religious communities in India-Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. Thus Sidhwa undercuts the received historical view that the Parsis were totally indifferent to the partition of the country. Instead of indifference the Parsis had a complex attitude towards Partition, as brought out in the main-hall meeting in the Fire Temple. Colonel Bharucha, the president of the community in Lahore, argues that the Parsis should shun the anti-colonial movement and stick to their long standing stance of loyalty to the British Empire. He warns the Parsis that once they get *Swaraj*. "Hindus, Muslims and even the Sikhs are going to jockey for power and if you jokers jump into the middle you'll be mingled into chutney!" (*Ice-Candy-Man* p.36).

However Dr. Moody points out that it is not so simple. The Parsis cannot remain uninvolved and will have to take a stance otherwise, "our neighbours will think that we are betraying them and siding with the English" (p.37). Thus, however leads to a further complication, as voiced by a fellow Parsi, when he asks. "Which of your neighbors are you going to betray? Hindu? Muslim? Sikhs?" (p.37). This remark brings to the foreground the bitter fact that even after thirteen hundred years the Parsis feel alienated in the subcontinent. Their alienation from all the major communities in India ultimately forces them to support "whoever rules Lahore" (p.34). Col. Bharucha suggests, "Let whoever wishes to rule! Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. We will abide by the rule of the land" (p.39). Thus Sidhwa by giving voice to the marginalized Parsis demonstrates that their choice of remaining neutral in the context of the Partition was not out of indifference but forced upon them by a complex historical process. Sidhwa, rewrites history not only from the Parsi point of view but also from the Pakistani point of view. In an interview with David Montenegro, she clearly states this agenda.

The main motivation grew out of my reading of a good deal of literature on the Partition of India and Pakistan... what has been written has been written by the British and Indians. Naturally they reflect their bias. And they have I felt after I'd researched the book, been unfair to the Pakistanis. As a writer as a human being, one just does not tolerate injustice. I felt whatever little I could do to correct an injustice I would like to do. I have just let facts speak for themselves, and through my research I found out what the facts were.

(*Points of Departure* p.36)

The counter the British and Indian versions of the Partition, Sidhwa in the *Ice-Candy-Man* not only tries to resurrect the image of Jinnah but also demystifies the image of Gandhi and Nehru. Jinnah in the novel is highlighted as an “ambassador of Hindu, Muslim unity” (p.160). “Today forty years later, in films of Gandhi’s and Mountbatten’s times, in bookd by British and Indian scholars, Jinnah who for a decade was known as an ‘ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity’, is caricatured and portrayed as a monster” (p.160). To substantiate this image of Jinnah, Sidhwa quotes the Indian poetess Sarojini Naidu.

The sublime image of Gandhi constructed by British and Indian historians is totally undercut when he is seen through the eyes of the seven years old narrator, Lenny. “He I Gandhi] is small, dark, shriveled, old. He looks just like Hari, our gardener, except he has a disgruntled, disgusted and irritable look, and no one’d dare pull off his dhoti! He wears only the loin cloth and his black and thin torso is naked” (*Ice-Candy- Man* p.86). Unlike most of the Indian historians who credit Gandhi for single handedly ousting the British from India, in the *Ice-Candy-Man* Sidhwa reduces him to the role of an eccentric dietician, who advises every woman to “flush” (p.87) their systems with enemas. According to the masseur Gandhi “is a politician” and “it’s his business to suit his tongue to the moment” (p.91). Similarly Nehru is a shrewd politician who in spite of all the efforts of Jinnah “will walk off with the lion’s share” (p.131). Nehru according to the *Ice-Candy-Man* is “a sly one... He’s got Mountbatten eating out of his one hand and the English’s wife out of his other what not... . He’s the one to watch!” (p.131).

Even though Sidhwa tries to depict the atrocities committed by Hindu, Muslim, and Sikhs without partiality, being a Pakistani writer she makes it obvious that her sympathies are with the Muslim victims. Not only is the Sikhs’ attack on Muslim villages in Punjab described vividly, but also it is seen through the eyes of the Muslim child Ranna, which shifts the reader’s sympathy towards the Muslims. In an interview Sidhwa observes, “the Sikhs perpetrated the much greater brutality—they wanted Punjab to be divided. A peasant is rooted in his soil. The only way to uproot him was to kill him or scare him out of his wits” (Montenegro 50-1)

Thus we see that Sidhwa not only shifts the blame of the Partition on to the Indian leaders, but, also makes the reader sympathise with the Muslim victims of the Partition by accentuating the violence inflicted upon the Muslims by the Sikhs.

Sidhwa quotes various Urdu poets in her narrative to highlight Muslim culture. In fact the

novel opens with Iqbal's poem "Complaint to God" (1). At the beginning of chapter 13 the quote from Iqbal's poetry is a good example of the poet's anti-colonial subjectivity.

The times have changed, the world has changed its mind
The European's mystery is erased.
The secret of his conjuring tricks is known:
The Frankish wizard stands and looks amazed
(*Ice-Candy-Man* p. III)

Iqbal demystifies the notion of the Whites as a superior race by exposing the secret of its "conjuring tricks." At the same time Sidhwa undercuts the British notion of civilizing the Asians when they are blamed for introducing polio and syphilis in India. Colonel Bharucha while investigating the polio ridden Lenny says: "If anyone's to blame, blame the British! There was no polio in India till they brought it here!" (Ibid, 16), and later Lenny's father points out that "there was no syphilis in India until the British came" (Ibid, 61).

So Bapsi Sidhwa through the *Ice-Candy-Man* has not only been successful in questioning the British and Indian versions of the subcontinent's history but has also provided an alternate version of history based on the prevalent dominant sociocultural milieu.

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