

Depiction of Partition and Victimized Women in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and *Cracking India*: Journey through the Lens of Child Narrators

S. Kathar Usean, Ph.D. Research Scholar and Dr. A. Dastageer

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Abstract

The sudden and rude shock of the India – Pakistan Partition unnerved men, destroyed their human attributes, transformed them into wild beasts. Women became a special target of communal fury. They were indeed the worst sufferers in the crisis ridden days. The stories dealing with the partition reveal the psychological trauma, the mental torture that the people have undergone. In Indian fiction in English children rarely exist as a significant and progressive theme. But the complex milieu of our country during the partition crisis pressed many writers to place child at Centre. Conceivably they put in use the child as narrative medium in their writings to give the fare and genuine image of pitiless violence of post partition crisis. Many Female writers emerged to express the agony experienced by the inmates of the Sub-Continent. Surprisingly both Attia Hosain's novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and Bapsi Sidwa's novel *Ice-Candy-Man* depict girl characters who are the victims of the socio-political turmoil but instinctively rebel against the prevailing fundamentalism of the times. The present research paper analyses the ill effects of partition through the lens of child narrators in the novels of Attia and Sidwa.

Key Words: *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, *Cracking India*, Partition, Trauma, Milieu, Agony, Fundamentalism.

The partition of India remains as one of the human tragedies of the century which cannot be wiped out off the memory of the people of both India and Pakistan so easily and so soon. The sudden and rude shock of the partition unnerved men, destroyed their human attributes, transformed them into wild beasts, who perpetrated extremely barbaric cruelties against their fellow human beings. They looted and burnt shops and houses, killed small children and made millions of people refugees. Women became a special target of communal fury. They were indeed the worst sufferers in the crisis ridden days. Men too suffered physically, mentally and lost material comforts. But, women were abducted, raped, and paraded naked in the streets with shaven heads. For them the suffering was not a temporary one, they continued to bear its burden ever after the partition.

Indian English literature is greatly influenced by the ill effects of partition as it has stirred the creative imagination and the urge of many writers. The stories dealing with the partition reveal the psychological trauma, the mental torture that the people have undergone. In Indian fiction in

English children hardly ever exist as a significant and progressive theme. Childhood as a significant theme came with the generation of R.K Narayan and Raja Rao, in whose writings the children as an individual don't do anything on their own wish, even don't act in response to the social realities around them. So, children commonly give the impression in their writings as a parental happiness and father's longing for offspring. But the complex milieu of our nation during partition crisis pressed many writers to place child at Centre. Possibly they put in use the child as narrative medium in their writings to give the fare and genuine image of pitiless violence of post partition crisis.

Many Female writers emerged to express the agony experienced by the inmates of the Sub-Continent. Among them Attia Hosain, a writer, feminist and a broad caster, born in 1913 in Lucknow stands as the first female Muslim writer to depict the partition and her novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is the only novel written by a Muslim Woman on the theme of partition. Attia Hosain offers an impartial study of the whole situation. The Hindus were praised for saving the Muslims from the cruel violence. The novel portrays the impact of the partition on the members of a family living safely and quietly in a nest like house "Ashiana", at Lucknow far away from the main streams of bloodshed and cruelty.

Bapsi Sidwa, a Parsi living in Pakistan during partition depicts partition and the communal war in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* through the eyes of an eight-year old Parsi girl Lenny who leads a comfortable life with four of her family members and a Hindu Ayah Shanta. While Attia Hosain records the trauma of Muslims at Lucknow, Bapsi Sidwa tries to show the dreadful condition at Lahore, they give us a clear picture of women's struggle during the adverse political historical conditions prevailing in the country. Yet, surprisingly both Attia Hosain and Bapsi Sidwa depict girl characters who are the victims of the socio-political turmoil but instinctively rebel against the prevailing fundamentalism of the times. In both the cases the girl-child is the narrator of the novel.

However, there is an age difference between the two girl narrators. While dealing with the partition problems there seems to be a common ground between them. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, the narrator Lenny a precocious Parsi girl, just eight years old with a handicapped foot narrates the story of the changing world with wonder and sophistication and in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* the narrator Laila describes the socio-political condition of the nation at 15 years of age. Both the protagonists have expressed their desire to strengthen personal ties and front a sort of pain when they were broken.

They believed that India had a harmonious and composite culture in which Men and Women of all religions lived together peacefully. Large upheavals damaged such a culture making women's lives miserable. Both Laila and Lenny realize there are no easy solutions to communal holocausts except intense struggle against dogmatism. Laila's intensive attempts at breaking from traditional customs, the negation of despair and recognition of struggle are upheld by Attia Hosain. Her narrator-heroine doesn't lapse into a glorification of the past or take refuge in mysticism.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

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Similarly, Bapsi Sidhwa indicates that there are no winners in the communal holocausts of Partition. Her novel written at a period of history when communal and ethnic violence threaten disintegration of the subcontinent is an apt warning of the dangers of communal frenzy. Attia Hosain in her novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) deals with India's struggle for Independence and proceeds to present the ironic reward of the struggle to individuals. It depicts the ugly acts of communal violence, shows how the fight of the Indians against the British rule turned into the fight among themselves and tries to diagnose the pain of the partition and its indescribable consequences.

Life after the partition is described vividly, through reminiscences and memories of Laila the child narrator. As Laila grows up she finds people of both communities participating in the national struggle for Independence under the leadership of Gandhi in the thirties. In the true veins of nationalism, Hindus and Muslims came out together on the streets, in parades and processions, shouting slogans of freedom. Innumerable young men and women participated in these agitations whole-heartedly. Asad, a member of the family believes wholly in Gandhian principals and dedicates himself completely to the cause of freedom. But then, unfortunately, the united struggle degenerated into a communal one. Asad, the spokesperson, sees through the sinister game of the alien rulers and make their latent motives and intentions clear. He explicitly states that the British had given us the message: "*Hate each other-love us*". (SBC.56) When Zahid expresses his fears that there may be a riot during Muharram, Asad remarks, "*May be because there haven't been any for too long, not even Hindu-Muslim ones.*" (56)

These words of Asad make Laila sleepless and panic. The Indian freedom movement suffered a setback as the religion bigotry entered politics. Envy, hatred and violence became dominant and the traditional Lucknow courtesy is completely lost:

No one seemed to talk any more, everyone argued, and not in the graceful tradition of our city... It was as if someone had sneaked in live ammunition among the fireworks. (230)

Hamid's attempts to keep his family united fails and he sees crumbling of all his dreams and ambitions. The communal violence leads not just to the partition of the country but to that families and individuals. Saleem opts to go to Pakistan while Kemel decides to stay in India, he laments to the split of the family. A devoted follower of Mahatma Gandhi, Asad practices non-violence and works hard in the eastern riot-hit areas in 1946. Even after his brother, Zahid was killed in brutal communal violence; Asad continues to render his service, thus, bringing forth the message of love, nonviolence and tolerance. Laila happens to know about the acts of violence, murder, rape and mutilation which were invariably seen on both parts of the border. Through the narrator, Attia Hosain, though a Muslim, criticized the Muslims who vomited hate against the Hindus. She praises the Hindus for protecting the Muslims. She says:

Where were you, Zahra, when I sat up through the nights, watching village after village set on fire, each day nearer and nearer? Sleeping in comfortable house, guarded by policemen, and sentries? Do you know who saved me and my child? Sita, who took us to her house, in spite of putting her own life in danger with ours. And Ranjit, who came from his village, because he had heard of what was happening in the foothills and was afraid for us. He drove us back, informing others that we were his family, risking discovery and death. What were you doing then? Getting your picture in the papers, distributing sweets to orphans whose fathers had been murdered and mothers raped. (304)

She accuses the Muslim leaders for fanning hatred and violence and then running away to safer side of the border. She adds,

Do you know who saved all the others who had no Sitas and Ranjits? Where were all their leaders? The only people left to save them were those very Hindus against whom they had ranted. To stop the murderous mob at any cost, even if it meant shooting people of their own religion. (304)

The second text reserved for examination is *Ice-Candy Man (1988)* by Pakistani novelist Bapsi Sidhwa. *Ice-Candy Man* make public the whole unseen agony of separating wall of Indian sub- continent and its result through the polio-ridden girl child-narrator namely Lenny who at the outset declares, “my world is compressed” which she points out about her limitations of personal world. It is in fact this stratagem of child-narrator which facilitates Bapsi Sidhwa to treat the misery of partition short of morbidity and censure. The novel mentions, “*She is child gifted with faculty of intuition. I intuit the meaning and purpose of things*” (ICM,28). Sidhwa’s turn of preparing Lenny with all kinds of tools is highly significant as it authorized the child-narrator to witness as well as to narrate the hurtful violence of partition event. Bapsi Sidhwa very expertly displays the brutalization and the fear of partition through the lens of child narrator.

Similar to Attia Hossain’s novel, Bapsi Sidhwa also in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* narrates the brutality of communal frenzy through the child narrator Lenny: *The whole world is burning. The air on my face is so hot I think my flesh and clothes will catch fire. (137)* The novel *Ice-Candy-Man* depicts people from all communities —the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Parsis living in Lahore before Partition. Bapsi Sidhwa here introduces the device of child-narrator.

The eight-year old girl Lenny narrates the events around her from a child’s point of view. The novelist also portrays the child growing, becoming more conscious about the changing environment around her. Seen through the lens of a marginalised minority girl-child, it focuses on the deteriorating communal climate in Pre-Partition days. Lenny’s naiveté, her privileged position, and her religious background lend her version of Partition a quality that other novels about this tempestuous period in Indo-Pakistani history lack. Protected by her own religious background and her parents’ status, Lenny is not directly affected by the contumelious situation of Partition days, but she keenly observes and comments on the events happening around her. The tendency of a reporter which she adopts for recording the events or criticising them enhances the poignancy of

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:1 January 2019

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the emotions which are linguistically underplayed. The hilarious nature of the Parsi's Jaslian prayer, organized to celebrate the British victory in the Second World War is soon replaced first by the acrimonious bickering between Mr. Rogers and Mr. Singh, then by the vague fears and apprehensions unsettling Lenny's group, and later on by the details of murderous mob fury unleashing death and destruction over whoever comes across them. Lenny comes to know that India is going to be broken, and has many unanswered queries, "*Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is? Or crack it further up on Warris Road? How will I ever get to Godmother's then?*" (92)

Bare facts present the horror of the greatest communal divide in history. Bapsi Sidhwa aptly pictures the inexorable logic of Partition which moves on relentlessly leaving even sane people and friends helpless and ineffective. Partition is shown as a series of events depicting human loss and agony. "*Within three months seven million Muslims and five million Hindus and Sikhs are uprooted in the largest and most terrible exchange of population known to history*". (159)

The dislocation of settled life is aptly revealed by Lenny's understanding of the demographic change in Lahore. In awe she observes, "*Lahore is suddenly emptied of yet another hoary dimension: there are no Brahmins with caste-marks—or Hindus in dhotis with bodhis. Only hordes of Muslim refugees.*" (175)

Ayah's admirers, in the pursuit of love temporarily sidetrack communal feelings and Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsi are as always, unified around her. The others without such motivations are deliberately sitting with members of their own community, huddled together preserving cultural and religious identities. The Brahmins form their own circle of exclusivity. Burkha-clad Muslim women and children too, have their own group. The bitterest fact as observed by Lenny is that even the children do not mix whilst playing.

Ayah's admirers who maintained a facade of unity by cracking ribald jokes on community characteristics also become vicious—and prey to communal frenzy in the near future. Bapsi Sidhwa also cleverly delineates the psychological impact of the horrors of Partition on the lives of people. The communal frenzy has a distorting effect on people—and lead to feelings of suspicion, distrust and susceptibility to rumours. The novelist shows how rumour preys upon the frenzied minds of men vitiated by communal hatred.

The child-narrator is conscious of the difference and pain caused by the huge exchange of populations. Sidhwa shows that during communal strife, sanity, human feelings and past friendships are forgotten. At the Queens Park in Lahore, the friends and colleagues had argued endlessly about the impossibility of violence against each other and of fleeing from their homeland. Yet ironically, whilst the elders—Masseur, Butcher, Ice-Candy-Man, Sher Singh and Ayah—gossip about national politics the child-narrator senses the change in the days before Partition.

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The child's understanding of political issues is understood through Lenny's reaction to the imperialist view point "if we quit India today, you will bloody fall at each other's throats" which she countered by dig at the "Divide and rule monkey tricks." (62, 63). Thus, the repeated references to the effect of the partition on "her mind" give a new lens to perceive the partition crisis. Same we see in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, When Saleem expresses his fears that in free India the Hindu majority will acquire part and use it to take revenge for the deep grudges they harbour against the Muslims, Aunt Saira remarks: *Oh dear, there is no question, it would be better to have the British stay on than the Hindu ruling.* (SBC,234) Saleem's brother, Kemel, opposes to his brother's views and expresses surprise at his changed attitude: "How you've changed! You used to say the British encouraged Hindu-Muslim quarrels and drove them apart in order to divide and rule." (255) Laila adds sarcastically: "And now I wonder how far apart we will drive each other ourselves." (255)

This makes well-known the impact of partition on the children which we notice from the expressions of child-narrator who give the impression of being afraid of the division of India and its consequent results. These are the realities which we see through the neutral eyes of Lenny and Laila who are children free from the religious prejudices. As has been stated by Rousseau "...childhood has ways of seeing, bearing in mind and feeling particular to itself; nothing can be more foolish than to substitute our ways to them". Thus, by using the children as narrators and childhood as motif, novelists skilfully represented the silent opinions of major historical violence of post-partition scenario.

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Mr. S. KATHAR USEAN

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Jamal Mohamed College, Tiruchirappalli. katharusean@gmail.com

Dr. A. DASTAGEER

Research Advisor &

Associate Professor of English, Jamal Mohamed College, Tiruchirappalli

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