

Partition under the light of 'Post-colonialism' in the writings of Bapsi Sidhwa and Khushwant Singh

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Abstract

Postcolonial literature refers to writing from regions of the world that were once colonies of European powers. The term refers to a very broad swath of writing in many languages, but my emphasis in this class is on writings in English. The writers in this course come from quite different backgrounds, but they struggle with some similar issues, chief among them being the legacy of colonialism – of European dominance. Postcolonial literature is of particular importance partly because much of it is stylistically original and different from earlier European literature. The best postcolonial literature aims to tell good, entertaining stories while seriously attempting to represent some of the most troubling conflicts and injustices imaginable. Postcolonial writers attempt to develop their own literary voices in regions of the world that may have been described in the colonial era as “primitive” or “savage” – where literature and culture were considered absent or somehow illegitimate. The larger project of moving past this colonial legacy, what we might call the “decolonization” of writing, brings up a wide array of themes. In this course literature, politics, and social theory will be inextricable for the simple reason that the texts themselves are intensely concerned with social and political problems. The postcolonial experience has been extremely violent and complex, with new forms of oppression and violence.

Here I would strictly wish to observe the theme of partition under the light of post-colonialism. A number of novels in the Indian sub-continent have been written on this theme, This unforgettable historical moment has been captured as horrifying by the novelists like Khushwant Singh in *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice -Candy - Man* (1991).

These novels examine the inexorable logic of Partition as an offshoot of fundamentalism and fanaticism sparked by hardening communal attitudes. They effectively and realistically depict the vulnerability of human understanding and life, caused by the throes of Partition. The two novels share a lot of details while retaining their individuality as well. Instead of depicting the events in political terms, the novelists have provided human dimensions which bring to the event a sense of reality, horror and believability. Bapsi Sidhwa narrates the story of upheaval of the 1947 partition of India through the eyes of a young Parsee girl Lenny growing up in Lahore. The character of Ayah is introduced to refer to several millions of displaced, looted and raped Hindus and Muslims during one of the harshest political phases in the history of the subcontinent. While on the other hand, *Train to Pakistan* not only records man's bestiality, but it also proves that man is essentially humane and sincere. Even society's marginalized characters like Juggat Singh can be a ray of hope and life for the depressed and distressed souls.

Keywords: postcolonial literature, partition, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice -Candy - Man*, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, communal attitude, India, Pakistan, oppression and violence

Introduction

The atrocious declaration by the British government of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in August 1947, turned it into a diabolic region, dividing it into two separate states for Hindus and Muslims, India and Pakistan respectively. Affecting millions of people, it changed the map of the sub-continent. This historical event proved very fatal for the people of both newly born nations. The large number of people was the victims of wickedness, violence, rapes, abductions...etc. Millions of people migrated from both sides of borders. The violence and communal riots were uncontrollable and consumed everything that came in its path. The countries of the region still live under its shadows. The present study intended to investigate the portrayal of the Partition by two English language writers from India and Pakistan, Bapsi Sidhwa and Khushwant Singh in their novels, with the objective to focus upon and highlight their respective perspectives on the Partition, mainly, in *Ice Candy Man* and

Train to Pakistan respectively. The study was based upon the exhaustive analysis of the texts, from the two novels in the light of postcolonial theory. The study has shown that Sidhwa has her own individual and independent perspective on Partition, while Singh subscribes to official Indian perspective on it.

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

Post-colonial 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.

Sidhwa in *Ice Candy Man* shows that before the Partition, the different communities and religions lived in peace and harmony socially, culturally and religiously. She shows that the Muslims and the Hindus could even fall in love with each other across religious distinctions. Shanta, a Hindu girl and Ayah by profession, is desired by a group of her admirers consisting of the Muslim protagonist of the novel, Ice Candy Man, Sher Singh, the Sikh zoo attendant, a Hindu masseur, Hari, the gardener, the Muslim butcher, the restaurant owner and Sharbat Khan, a Pathan and many others. Sidhwa shows that all these people belonging to different communities interact with each other on a normal, human level and live like friends. She describes through Lenny, the child narrator, the harmony between Ayah and her admirers and also amongst themselves, in *Ice Candy Man* (Sidhwa, 1989, p. 19) ^[1]. As portrayed in *Ice Candy Man*, the Muslims and the Sikhs live in peace and harmony and are not conscious of their religious identities, in the narrow sense of the world. They share each other's joys and concerns. They regard the children of their friends from other religions as their own. Love and affection permeates the atmosphere.

Sidhwa's portrayal of the Partition is not influenced by the official ideology of Pakistan as claimed by Zaman (2001, p. 17). However, Sidhwa is conscious of the divisive forces and factors between the Hindus and the Muslims, in the form of social and cultural difference and biases. She shows, among other things, the Brahmin ideology of purity contributing towards Partition of the sub-continent. She makes it clear, that in spite of the co-existence of Hindus and Muslims for centuries, the mountain high social and cultural barriers separating the two communities remained as insurmountable as ever. A caste Hindu would not even touch his food in the presence of a Muslim. A Muslim entering a Hindu kitchen would pollute it. Lenny, the child narrator in *Ice Candy Man* describes one such incident when the food of a Brahmin priest is polluted by the shadow of non-Hindus (116-117). This reflects the deep hatred and disliking of the caste Hindus for the Muslims, who were driven by their ideology of purity. The Brahmin thrust on the ideology of purity made Muslims conscious of their own separate identity. This contributed to the Muslim demand for a separate homeland. She in *Ice Candy Man* offers her most eloquent and comprehensive response and perspective on the philosophy, ideology and rationale of Partition through the use of an image of Hindu banya being partitioned alive by the Muslims resulting in the horrible death of the Hindu banya and the partitioning of a Punjabi Sikh in *The Bride* (Sidhwa, 1987, p. 16) ^[7] again by the Muslims resulting in the unnatural, violent division and death of the Sikh. Sidhwa describes the partition of a Hindu banya by a Muslim mob, in *Ice Candy Man*, roaring Allah-o-Akbar! (135).

Khushwant Singh is a Sikh, Indian writer whose *Train To Pakistan* is a historical novel published in 1956. It too recounts the Partition of India in August 1947. Instead of depicting the Partition in terms of only the political events surrounding it, Singh digs into a deep local focus, providing a

human dimension which brings to the event a sense of reality, horror, and believability. Khushwant Singh in his novel, *Train to Pakistan*, like Sidhwa, also shows that all the diverse communities in India live in peace and harmony, before politics of Partition shatters it. At Mano Majra, which stands for India, the day begins with the Muslim prayer leader facing west toward Mecca and calling Allah-o-Akbar to the believers. This is followed by the Sikh priest's prayers (6). Similarly, the day at Mano Majra ends with the Imam calling the faithful to prayers with, "God is great". Then the Sikh priest leads the evening prayers at the Sikh temple. Khushwant Singh portrays the peaceful co-existence and the fine harmony, at religious, cultural and social levels among the two major communities of India before Partition (6). The fact that the Sikh priest waits for his turn and allows the Muslim priest to finish his call to prayers, indicates, the kind of harmonious atmosphere that prevails in India among various religious communities. Singh stresses upon the compatibility of diverse religious communities by showing that the mosque and the Sikh temple stand on the same village common in the center of the village, along with the only brick house of a Hindu money lender. Singh further shows in *Train to Pakistan* that in spite of religious differences they all pay their reverence to the same village deity, the deo (4). He also shows trains going to and from Lahore to other parts of India including Delhi, there by stressing and establishing the geographical unity of India.

Khushwant Singh in *Train to Pakistan* presents his opposition to the Partition and establishes the indivisibility of the cultural, social and political heritage between the *Mohammad Ayub Jajja* 213 Sikhs and the Muslims after centuries of intermingling. He reveals his Indian identity and projects the official ideology of India. Interestingly Zaman and Crane do not take notice of this aspect of *Train to Pakistan*. He maintains that the Partition was unnatural, artificial and illogical. Singh suggests that the two communities were the product of the same inseparably intertwined social, cultural and political past. Singh presents the Indian perspective at the broader and political level through a metaphor of purely personal relationships. Nooran, a Muslim girl and the beloved of Sikh protagonist, Juggat Singh, Jugga, carries his child (1988, p. 115) ^[2]. Singh uses this child inside the body of a Muslim girl fathered by a Sikh as a metaphor for the intermingling of the Hindu-Muslim strands and the Hindu Sikh contribution to it. The child inside the body of a Muslim girl fathered by a Sikh is a metaphor for the joint social, cultural and political past of the Hindus and the Muslims, their peaceful co-existence, suggesting the indivisibility of the combined and hybrid identity of the Hindus/Sikhs and the Muslims, but threatened to death by Partition. Zaman does not highlight the significance of this symbol of child in the body of a Muslim girl fathered by a Sikh. This is nothing but the presentation of official Indian perspective on Partition. India, being an indivisible entity, consisting of combined Hindu-Muslim heritage. It will be interesting to see the portrayal of the conduct of Sikh Juggat Singh towards his Muslim beloved by Singh in *Train to Pakistan*. The Sikh protagonist of the novel sacrifices his life for the sake of Muslim refugees and his Muslim beloved. The dacoits at Mano Majra plan to attack a Muslim refugee train in revenge for many train massacres in Pakistan (72). They have strung a thick rope across the bridge

over which the train is to pass. This is their additional arrangement to sweep off the people sitting on train roof. Singh casts Juggat Singh in a heroic mould. Jugga knows that his beloved Nooran is on the train and no matter what might happen to him, he must ensure the safety of his beloved and that of the other Muslim refugees from his village. He keeps hacking at the rope, indifferent to the hail of bullets which are rained upon him by Malli and his men as the train is rushing towards him (157). Khushwant Singh shows that the Sikh protagonist sacrifices his life to save the lives of the Muslim refugees and that of his Muslim beloved. Crane in *Inventing India* calls it the portrayal of the essential humanity of the individuals by Singh. Crane believes that Singh shows that love and humanity can win against all odds (1992, p. 148) ^[4], but this display of generosity and humanity on the part of Sikhs during the Partition riots is not recorded by other non-literary discourses. Singh creates a new identity of the Sikhs. This is the portrayal of the Indian perspective on Partition. Khushwant Singh in *Train to Pakistan* does not say anything on the conduct and role of the British in Indo-Pak partition and communal riots bursts after the declaration of partition. Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the controversial role played by the British government and officials during the days of partition in *Ice Candy Man* and the *Bride*. Sidhwa raises questions on the image of Britishers being competent, capable and neutral. She blames the rulers of the empire for not paying enough attention to issues concerning partition. Post-colonial Sidhwa holds them responsible for the bloodshed and massacres, staining the dawn of freedom with the blood of millions of people. Bapsi Sidhwa in the *Bride* (1987) shows the British in rush and hurry to wind up and quit. Bapsi Sidhwa in *Ice Candy Man* shows that the Radcliffe Commission members were dealing out Indian cities between the two countries like pack of cards. Sidhwa is extremely conscious about the criminal negligence and lack of seriousness by the British, while undertaking and supervising the partition. On the other hand Khushwant Singh in *Train to Pakistan* does not say much about controversial role of the British and their failure towards India and its people in maintaining peace and neutrality between the major communities. Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *Ice Candy Man* repeatedly projects the price of partition. She wants her readers have fresh assessment of partition. She shows that the millions of victims of partition pay a terrible price for freedom. She presents the readers with constant sufferings of human beings and their misery. However, she holds both Muslims and Hindus responsible for partition and related violence without becoming partial. Sidhwa does not oppose the partition openly like Chaman Nahal in his famous novel *Azadi*, wants the reader to come up with final judgment. Sidhwa shows in *Ice Candy Man* the greatest migration in the history of human civilization as a result and price or impact of partition. Khushwant Singh like Bapsi Sidhwa, in *Train to Pakistan* also depicts the migration that accompanied the partition. He highlights miseries and sufferings of the Hindus moving towards India and Muslim moving towards Pakistan. The partition of India has to pay a large amount of price in the form of thousands of lives, abductions, rapes on innocent women, massacres...etc. by the partition affected people of both nations. Train massacres are very oftenly described by

both Khushwant Singh and Bapsi Sidhwa. Bapsi Sidhwa projects another price of partition in the form of train massacres. She presents the train massacres as the most horrible association of the partition of India for inhabitants of Punjab. The Muslim protagonist of *Ice Candy Man* is waiting for relatives from Gurdaspur, instead he meets with mutilated bodies and sacks full of breasts cut off from Muslim women (p.149). Khushwant Singh in his *Train to Pakistan* also refers to the repeated train massacres of Sikh by Muslims, which brought about chaos in society and Kalyug (Dark Age) (p.74). Khushwant Singh described very horrible scene of thousands of Sikhs murdered by Muslims is disposed of by burning with wood and Kerosene oil collected from the village- Mano Majra. The whole village witnessed the cremation of Muslim cruelties and Sikh victims. Singh does not show the picture of Muslim atrocities against the Sikhs. (p.75). Singh presets train as a Ghost train which is arriving from Pakistan are full of Sikh and Hindu corpses. Singh points out that Bulldozer is used to dispose of the corpses of Sikh and Hindu refugees. (p.126).

Conclusion

The study of both Bapsi Sidhwa and Khushwant Singh's novels *Ice Candy Man* and *Train to Pakistan* respectively based upon analysis of texts in the light of post colonialism has shown that both writers associate partition with evil and destruction. They stressed the peaceful atmosphere, communal harmony before partition days. However both writers show that there were difficulties and challenges in the synthesis of Hindu-Muslim societies.

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