

Women, Legacy and Hyphenated Identity in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* and Deepa Mehta's *1947: Earth*

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Abstract

Women across cultures are projected as subordinates to men, and this legacy of disparity continues to the present modern day. Woman and Identity are most controversial themes in literature. Many research works were carried out throughout the world to maximise their understanding in the contemporary age. The world witnessed massive changes in the patterns of politics but politics against women remained unchanged. Women's misery and stature varies from culture to culture. In this paper, an attempt is made to study gendered politics which has remained as bone of contention in women's growth. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* and Deepa Mehta's *1947: Earth* (1998) have lucidly discussed and justified many essential themes. A woman's identity is an underlying theme that arrests the attention of the readers. The traumatic experiences and their different broken identities are the special highlights of the paper. The objective of the study is also to demonstrate that women have different challenges in their stride and continue in their journey oblivious of their destiny.

Keywords: subordinates, legacy, disparity, hyphenated identity, gendered politics.

Introduction

Deepa Mehta, one of the most acclaimed diasporic filmmakers, has always been that kind of person who chooses controversial and thought-provoking issues to address in her movies. Her critics too acknowledge her for this weird kind of taste. It is witnessed in her movies that she chooses bold topics and larger-than-life characters to display her point of view. Mehta's *1947: Earth* (1998) in all its shades shows the grim and dark phase of violence, cruelty, rape, massacre etc. relating to Indian literature of 1940's. Prior to the movie's release date, a huge pandemonium caused shock and unrest due to the fundamentalist Hindus. The paper concentrates on Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* and its film version *1947: Earth* directed by Deepa Mehta. *Ice Candy Man* and *1947: Earth* compares the Parsi characteristics and Parsi as an 'Other' in an established milieu. Thus, Mehta like Sidhwa endeavours to give a diasporic taste to his much hyped movie *1947: Earth*.

It is quite interesting to note that the Parsis' historical journey to India and the amalgamation of the identities can be viewed as national importance because they produced rich Indian history specially relating to diasporic literature. There are numerous stories relating to the Parsi's migration to India. Needless to say, they were not easily accepted as a community in India. They were gradually accepted in the Indian soil for their wisdom and tactfulness. After signing a detailed agreement to abide the Indian laws and regulation they could enjoy their citizenship in India. In the words of Nilufer Bharucha, the terms and conditions to which they yielded are as follows: 1) The Parsi high priest would brief their faith to the king, 2) The Parsi would fully accept and speak the local languages, 3) The Parsi women would discard their Persian dress-style and would adopt Indian dress-codes, 4) The Parsi men would put down their arms (weapons), 5) And the Parsis would perform their wedding processions only at night time. Thus, such were the tough agreements the Parsis have to agree upon to maintain their self-identity in their pursuit to live in a foreign land.

The partition of India and Pakistan also created the same kind of dislocation, alienation and ambiguity amongst the citizens. The partition also formed diaspora – crossing the 'border' meant exile and dislocation, even if geographically and culturally the places and people were not that far as in other (Parsi) diaspora. But the whole concept of partition in the name of 'freedom' created confusion and emotional void. They had moved on to getting 'independence' and in the course they had lost the whole idea of 'interdependence'. As Menon and Bhasin point out, "they were forced to reckon with the twin aspect of freedom – disintegration and bewildering loss: of place and property, but more significantly, of community; of a network of more or less stable relationships and of a coherent identity" (Menon and Bhasin 120).

Mehta's *1947: Earth* is a disturbing tale about four young protagonists/characters in Lahore, three male and one a female who is known as Ayah or nanny in the only Parsi family in the village. In fact, the men portrayed are well established in their profession: who work as Masseur, an Ice-Candy Man, and a Gardener. *1947: Earth* testifies the relationship between the three men as the evil of partition expose its ugly head before their eyes. Their fraternity and political opinions and religions principles are tested as they have to balance the alteration of partition situation at once.

Mehta like Sidhwa promotes strong women characters who are against the discriminatory activities of men against women. They believe in equality and peace between man and woman in the society. The women portrayed in Sidhwa's novel are aware of their rights and want to set them right. For the same, Sidhwa chooses a lame parsi girl to narrate

the gruesome partition tale from her personal experiences. The lameness (handicap) is the resistance, subjugation, oppressiveness that the creative women writers face. The same can be applied to other women characters of the novel. By projecting Lenny as the narrator, Sidhwa tries to justify the feminine perspective of the sordid reality.

The Indian society projects an ugly image of itself when it does not treat its women in the same manner as it does to its men. When some ugly mishaps happen to some of the Indian women, it becomes extremely difficult for the conservative Indian society to accept them. Women, if fallen prey to men's sexual violence (assault) like that of Lenny's two Ayahs, cannot be accepted as dignified being again. In fact, women are not treated well because men still consider women as a thing of sexual gratification and pleasure. Moreover, women are always assumed to be at the wrong end. The conversation between Lenny and her godmother clarifies the emotional stance:

What a fallen woman? I ask godmother...

Hamida (the second Ayah) was kidnapped by the Sikhs,

Says godmother seriously... When that happens sometimes,

The husband – or his family won't take her back.

Why? It isn't her fault she was kidnapped.

Some folk feel that way – they can't stand their women
being touched by other men. (Sidhwa 215)

Mehta weaves the movie as a story of betrayal (betrayal by the different actors). The Ice-Candy Man betrays the little Parsi girl by making her give away the nanny's whereabouts; the little girl's naive and innocent betrayal of her Ayah or nanny, the Ice-Candy Man's betrayal of his lady love to the religious bigots, and the irrational and inexplicable behaviour of all the actors in the larger setting of an epic drama of the nation's partition into two nations as well as the horrific bloodshed remain an indelible and traumatic part of the subcontinent's history.

Bapsi Sidhwa through her novel *Ice Candy Man* attempts to highlight the monstrous experiences of women through the women protagonists/characters such as Lenny (the narrator), Ayah, Shanta, Godmother Rodhbai, Electric Aunt, Hamida, Salve sister, Mini Aunt, Muccho and Papoo and her daughter. Showak Hussain Dar rightly points out the feministic concern in the novel:

Its protagonists are mostly women and each of them represents a way of life that either collides with the premises of patriarchy or else challenges the patriarchal repressiveness in the most unassuming manner. Mother, Muccho and Salve sisters

represent the first case. The transformed role of mother as a welfare activist Ayah's sexuality and the resilience of her spirit and Godmother's positive qualities represent their redemptive potential. (Dar 2)

Public places play an important role in *1947: Earth*. Such a place which gained importance in the movie is the Lahore platform. The Lahore platform scene in the movie is a pathetic and heart wrenching – the platform where Dil Nawaz (Aamir Khan - Ice Candy Man) awaits the arrival of her dear sisters and cousins who were to arrive from Gurdaspore. But to his dismay, he meets his sisters raped and left naked which makes him go mad. Thus, he is motivated to join the Hindu slaughtering squad. The platform is the public space which experienced the most in the movie. The frenzied crowd comprising of different faiths is alarming.

Mehta, in one of her interviews, states that Sidhwa's story is fascinating which suits her taste of film-making. In fact, she feels overwhelmed with her new find that she desires to arrest the violent partition experiences in her movie *1947: Earth*: "The partition of India was like a Holocaust for us and I grew up hearing many stories about this terrible event. Naturally I was attracted to this subject" (Phillips 1+).

Deepa Mehta's *1947: Earth*, adapted from Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*, reflects the turmoil, the frustrations, and the lack of faith in people and institutions in the literary text, with nothing to redeem that actions of any of the characters in the end. It compels us to confront the irrational but cold-blooded choices that ordinary men like the Ice-Candy-Man are capable of, and the uncertainty of political laws and regulations that crush millions of people. There is no relieve but vigilance as the disjointed narrative directs to the remains of human relationships dissolved into identity politics. For the purpose of historical work of art and archive, *1947: Earth* perhaps serves as a proof of warning against the disastrous penalty of a singular identity policy.

The film and its narrative reveal a "political unconscious" in the representation of the Muslim voice. Deepa Mehta's film depicts the horrific pains of the birth of two nations. As representation of Muslim identities, Madhava Prasad's reminder is useful, "These texts are works of ideology, not mirrors of reality. The changing realities are, no doubt, one of the conditions that make these films possible and necessary, not in order to reflect these conditions, but to construct ideological resolutions for the contradictions that accompany these changes" (Prasad 237).

The movie *1947: Earth* is successful in generating voyeuristic pleasure for the audience watching the impact the violence has on individuals. This is mainly because the film

tends to focus rather obsessively on the abused body of Ayah, rendering the viewing experience erotic and voyeuristic. Thus, Ayah becomes the literal embodiment of what Ambreen Hai calls the “story otherwise too traumatic to be told” (Hai 391), namely, mass murder, gang rape, and prostitution. *Earth* is a love story gone sour in 1940s Lahore (present-day Pakistan), in which Ayah, the protagonist Lenny’s beautiful nanny and constant companion, is used and abused by the men around her, especially Ice-Candy-Man, even as she shares a loving relationship with Lenny herself. The Hindu Ayah’s two Muslim suitors, Ice-candy-man and Masseur, are set up as contrasts, the former being at first carefree and funny but letting the beast within him surface when the violence and destruction starts later in the film; the latter being gentle and understanding and eventually killed for his efforts to help those in need of protection. Ayah’s choice of Masseur as her man and the handing over of power by the British occur simultaneously, just as vicious religious violence breaks out in Lahore, traumatizing Lenny. Finally, Lenny Plunges into despair when Ice-candy-man tricks her into telling him where Ayah is hiding and drags her off in triumph as the film ends.

Mehta grew up in Lahore, Pakistan and personally related to the film’s events. She claimed she made the movie partly because she wanted to ask “dark political questions about the partition that the British establishment has not wanted brought to light” including the tendency to “romanticise Gandhi and Lord Mountbatten” (Phillips 1+). Accordingly, the violence of the 1947 partition of India into India and Pakistan is depicted in a personalized way, as events in the background of the lives of the main characters, who at first look on in disbelief and then are slowly drawn in. That violence itself had no parallels in Indian history. Indeed, G. D. Khosla claims that “history has not known a fratricidal war of such dimensions in which human hatred and bestial passions were degraded” to such levels (Khosla 3). One of the reasons it was such an unprecedented tragedy was the number of people who died in six months: anywhere from 200,000 (at a conservative estimate) to 250,000.

The narration of the partition events is remarkable. Mehta depicts the narration not as a child but of a child. *1947: Earth* is one of those varied and varying narratives that are a testimony to the ‘long shadow’ that the legacy of partition has left behind for the people of the Indian sub-continent. The writer is sometimes mysterious and in this context too she hides the reason why she prefers to conduct the subjective narration. She, perhaps, adopts a unique system to showcase the journey of a child to express how one event (Aayah’s rape) alters the entire perspective of the movie. The movie tries to expose the history, a sort of ‘reliving of history’ where each and every character is observed at once itself and unlike from itself. Lenny who is the narrator of the story is highlighted as a mediator between the writer and the

readers takes us for a different and horrifying experience but beautifully connects the readers with the novel (*Ice Candy Man*) and the movie (*1947: Earth*). Lenny's narration to the readers and to her own self is a conscious effort on the part of the writer to project seriousness and awe. Her position in the backdrop of partition is considered neutral as she is from a diasporic community.

Deepa Mehta, the Indian-Canadian filmmaker, for instance, is on record for expressing her frustrations about the precise identity of her work. In an interview, Mehta is quoted as saying, "The point is, can I – do I – have the ability to do a film that I really believe in? And that's what it's about. Because if I start thinking about "Am I too western, am I too eastern?" I'd never be able to do anything' (Levitin 273). Besides, she advises aspiring filmmakers in Canada to look beyond national funding bodies and institutions to help bring their projects to fruition (ibid 291).

A reader can observe that Mehta has extracted some narrative skills from Sidhwa's novel yet the projection style of showcasing her characters through the intense storyline is her major triumph. She plans her every frame in the movie (some of which are from the movie and some her own creation). Every frame is essential and serves the purpose for spontaneity of her movie. Thus, she maintains her creative and distinctiveness to highlight her version of 'partition'. Thus, this paper compares both Sidhwa and Mehta's work on their treatment of women with their horrific experiences during the partition.

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