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Female Bodies As ‘Symbols’ of Nation: A Reading of Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*

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Abstract:

In many different societies, women like colonized subjects have been relegated to the position of ‘Other’, ‘colonized’ by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonized race and culture an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. Violence was perpetrated on female body in a major way during the Partition of India into India and Pakistan and bloody conflicts between communal forces were played out on it. The Partition forms the central theme in Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels. The image of the female body is the image of Sidhwa’s novels and the most powerful symbol in them. However, it is the theme of violence inflicted upon women’s body by the sado-masochistic, despotic and proprietorial attitude of men that becomes the focus of attention and epicenter of gravity in her novels. The paper attempts to analyze the Partition violence played out upon the bodies of women and the representation of the female body as nation in Sidhwa’s novel *Cracking India*.

Keywords: Female Body, Nation, Violence, Partition.

In many different societies, women like colonized subjects have been relegated to the position of ‘Other’, ‘colonized’ by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonized race and culture an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. The difference of the post-colonial subject by which they can be ‘othered’ is felt most directly and immediately in the way in which superficial differences of the body and voice (skin colour, eye shape, hair texture, body shape, language, dialect or accent) are read as indelible signs of the ‘natural’ inferiority of their possessors. The body and the voice often become the signs in post-colonial written texts for alter/native cultures. The body, too, has become the literal site on which resistance and oppression have struggles, with the weapons being in both cases the physical signs of cultural difference, symbols and literal occasions of the power struggles of the dominator and dominated for possession of control and identity.

One of the strongest foci for resistance to imperial control in colonial societies has been the idea of ‘nation’. It is the concept of a shared community, one which Benedict Anderson calls an ‘imagined community’ which has enabled postcolonial societies to invent a self-image through which it could act to liberate themselves from imperialist oppression. Most recently a flurry of theoretical activity has made the nation and nationalism one of the most debated topics

of contemporary theory. It is especially in the Third World fiction after the Second World War that the fictional uses of 'nation' and 'nationalism' are more pronounced. The 'nation' is precisely what Foucault has called a discursive formulation¹ --- not simply an allegory or imaginative vision, but a gestational political structure which the Third World artist is consciously building or suffering from the lack of. From the point of literary theory, nationalism is of special interest since its rise is coterminous with the rise of the most dominant modern literary form, at least in European and European influenced cultures --- that of the novel. In this sense, the story of the nation and the narrative form of the modern novel inform each other in a complex and reflexive way.

Violence was perpetrated on female body in a major way during the Partition of India into India and Pakistan and bloody conflicts between communal forces were played out on it. It is the reason why the gendered violence figures prominently in partition narratives by women whether fictional or biographical. From personal as well as fictional accounts of partition, it becomes apparent that woman's body becomes the site of communal violence that became a sordid sideshow of the nations coming into being. But still worse, it remained unacknowledged by nationalist history. The painful corporeal truths of women rooted in suffering, displacement and rupture, which could have put the entire story of the independence of the two nations in entirely different complexion, were occluded from the narrations of the nation.

The Partition forms the central theme in the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa. Sidhwa is Pakistan's leading diasporic writer. She belongs to the Parsi community which practices the Zoroastrian religion. The image of the female body is the image of Sidhwa's novels and the most powerful symbol in them. Sidhwa is considered as a feminist postcolonial author whose novels --- *The Crow Eaters* (1978), *The Bride* (1981) and *Ice-candy-man* (1988; republished as *Cracking India* 1991) --- provide a unique perspective on Indian and Pakistani history, politics and culture. Alongside the Partition theme, she vividly depicts the traumatic and blurred picture of women obliterated at the altar of social institutions. However, it is the theme of violence inflicted upon women's body by the sado-masochistic, despotic and proprietorial attitude of men that becomes the focus of attention and epicenter of gravity in her novels.

Sidhwa's novel, *Cracking India* is set in the Partition period, i.e. the Partition of India into the two nations of India and Pakistan and recounts events surrounding the Partition through the eyes of Lenny, a precocious Parsi girl who has been disabled by polio. Through the character of Lenny, Sidhwa draws out the most damaging effect of the Partition, the symbolic desecration of women on both sides of the continent. "Victory is celebrated on a woman's body. That's very much the way things are, particularly in my part of the world." (Graeber 11) The Partition led to the outbursts of communal riots and thousands of people lost their valuables and even lives.

¹ "whenever between objects, types of statement, concepts or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order)...we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a discursive formulation" (Foucault 38).

Thousands were rendered homeless and rootless overnight. Friends turned foes overnight and their individual relationships were sucked by the ebbing surge of communal feelings and religious fanaticism. It also shows how the dehumanizing effects of communalism reduced human beings to the level of hunting beasts who drenched themselves in the blood of their own fellow beings.

The violence of Partition was taken out most viciously on the bodies of women and children. Ice-candy-man brings the shocking news when the first train filled with the dead bodies of Muslim refugees from Punjab reaches Lahore. In despair, he screams: “Everyone in it is dead! Butchered. They are all Muslim. There are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women’s breasts!” (159) When the riots reach Lahore, Ice-candy-man unthinkingly takes Lenny and Ayah to watch from a rooftop. In the crowd of angry and violent men, they see that ‘a naked child, twitching on a spear stuck between her shoulders, is waved like a flag: her scream less mouth agape, she is staring up at me’ (144). Lenny’s beautiful young Hindu nanny, Ayah also becomes a victim to the lust of men during the Partition riots. Ayah is kidnapped and raped by a group of mob who had previously courted her.

Ayah is the highly victimized woman who suffers excruciating pain and agony at the hands of the mob that tears her apart. Lenny sees the transformation of Ayah in the eyes of her admirers, from ‘all-encompassing’ to ‘a token’. It is especially the Muslim Ice-candy-man who starts focusing on her religious and ethnic background, asking her if she is Hindu, and enquiring why she wears saris instead of the traditional Punjabi *shalwar-kamize*. Still when the Partition is looming, there is nothing Ayah can do to keep the group of admirers together. One by one, her admirers leave the group to go to India, or else caught up in their own problems and disappear.

When trains filled with butchered refugees start the rapid escalation of fear, violence and panic on both sides of the border, violence comes to the hitherto peaceful and untouched neighbourhood of the Sethi family. A mob of Muslim men come to their house, looking for Ayah. She has never made a secret of being Hindu in front of her group of admirers, and now they have turned against her --- perhaps in jealousy, first killing Masseur and then coming to get her as well:

They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet [...] Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of the throat opens her mouth like the dead child’s screamless mouth [...] The last thing I noticed was Ayah, her mouth slack and piteously gaping, her disheveled hair flying into her kidnappers’ faces, staring at us as if she wanted to leave behind her wide-open and terrified eyes. (194-5)

This quick backward look in the middle of the kidnapping scene serves as a reminder that similar things are happening in countless homes all over Punjab and that Ayah is one of many.

The rapport which Lenny and Ayah share with the Masseur, the Afghan Knife-sharpener and Ice-candy-man is abruptly shattered as India is torn apart into two bleeding nations. The fantasy of romantic love is shattered and Ayah, the chivalrously courted beloved, becomes the victim of a male conflict. Overnight the secular landscape of Lahore is fragmented into religious enclaves. "One day everybody is in themselves --- and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing Ayah --- she is also a token --- a Hindu" (101). As a token, Ayah is abused in retaliation for the trainloads of dead Muslims and bags full of breasts of Muslim women cut off by Hindu men. As Millet (1969) has put it, rape is an offence "one male commits upon another -- - a matter of abusing 'his woman'" (75). Ayah becomes a victim of these sexual politics allied to the carnage set off by a departing colonial power.

The much-loved Ayah now becomes what Lenny's boy-cousin calls "the opposite of Virgin Mary" (88) --- a whore. Some critics have seen Ayah as a symbol of the united India and her abduction and rape as an image of the tearing apart of the country. Sujala Singh argues:

In *Cracking India*, Ayah's betrayal and rape not only fractures the multi-religious group but also signifies the manner in which the fragmentation of nation gets actualized. The traditional iconography of mother India in nationalist discourse was cast in the idiom of the virtuous woman as the guardian of the domain of the nationalist soul [.] At the end of the novel, Ayah's sexuality, once depicted as the core of a plural social micro-world, is brutalized as she is abducted and raped to satisfy the lust of sectarian nationalists. (16)

Thus Ayah becomes a symbol of united India, with her femininity as the force that holds all different religions and ethnicities together. When the country is torn apart by sectarian nationalists, her body, representing the country is violated. In this way, Ayah becomes India; her female body becomes the feminized land that the men fight over.

The narrative perspective changes from Lenny to Ranna when the realities of Partition catch up with his peaceful village. Ranna's village is taken by surprise by a large mob of Sikhs, probably coming to revenge the burning of their own village. And Ranna is most likely the only survivor after the attack. The men and boys of the village hear the women and girls' cries of pain and terror before they themselves are slaughtered by the mob. Ranna is hidden underneath the dead bodies of the men and boys of his family for hours and when he wakes up, he sees glimpses of what has happened to the women and girls in his village:

Everytime his eyes open the world appears to them to be floating in blood. From the direction of the mosque come the intolerable shrieks and wails of women. [...] once he thought he saw his eleven-year-old sister, Khatija, run stark naked into their courtyard. Her long hair disheveled, her boyish body bruised, her lips cut and swollen and a bloody scab where her front teeth were missing. (213)

Ranna also witnesses atrocities committed against strangers on his journey to the safety of Pakistan: “He saw babies snatched from their mothers, smashed against walls and their howling mothers brutally raped and killed” (219). These scenes are examples of how the bodies of women and children got the most brutal treatment from the enemy in the religious and ethnic conflict during Partition. In ethnic conflicts, violence is more often taken out on civilians than in military conflicts. The urge to humiliate the enemy people and try to extinguish their ethnicity results in women being the main targets of violence. Raping women serves to humiliate their men and by impregnating the enemy women, the enemy’s ethnicity will become washed out, as the rapists’ ethnicity will put its mark on the children resulting from the rapes. This strategy is enforced when the conflict takes place in a society where, as has been discussed before, women are burdened with embodying men’s honour.

Partition violence imprisons women as objects of possession and agents of belligerence and reprisal between opposed groups of men. While men may have been the principal actors, it is the women who were acted upon and it is their bodies that bore the brunt of history’s impalement. The body of the woman thus becomes the battlefield that bears the brunt of man’s celebration of victory as well as the shame of his defeat. As Didur puts it: “The suicide, ‘martyrdom’, sexual assault, abduction and social death suffered by women at the time of Partition underscore how the metaphorical representation of women’s chastity as representative of community honour was read as literal in patriarchal competitions for nationalist power” (30).

The suffering of women at the partition is rooted in national culture and gendered nationalism. Indian culture is deeply informed with myths that motherhood is best realized when dedicated to the cause of the nation as *veeraprasabini* (begetter of heroes); wifedom is accomplished when used as the source of the strength of the heroic husband, or sacrificed in honour of the deceased husband as *sati*; womanhood is best idealized as *shakti* and *birangona* in the fields of battle to vindicate, paradoxically the patriarchal causes and such ideals are thought to be patriarchal woman’s inevitable destiny and happiness can come only through it. Indeed all these myths enunciated in the Ramayanas, Mahabharatas and the Puranas have congealed into the Indian cultural imagination the icon of nation as motherland. In this iconic framework of imagination, women’s bodies have been represented as maps of the country. The spatial connection drawn between the female body and the territorial landmass symbolizes woman as the nation. The “Mother India” trope in Indian nationalist rhetoric has called upon men to martial duty towards the motherland and any secessionist movement has been termed matricidal betrayal.

The connections between ‘nationalism and sexuality’ are obvious in the suffering of women in the names of parochial nationalist aims. As Peter van der Veer says, “nationalist discourse connects the control over female body with the honour of the nation” (113). Celibacy and sexual potency have been argued as two major ways of asserting nationalism. According to Joseph Alter, Gandhiji through his method of Brahmacharya tried to reject the western emphasis on

sexuality (242). Similarly sexual potency has been used by the attackers to ravish women of the vanquished as a sign of their own physical or material power throughout the history. Ambreen Hai comments that through her novel, Sidhwa can "...intervene in male nationalist discourse and historiography via the belated remembering and retelling of this collective trauma by voicing the 'untold' traumas of women abducted and raped during Partition" (383).

Sidhwa has two stories to tell --- that of the woman and that of the nation. She sees parallels in the situations of both the woman and the nation and makes a self-conscious comparison of both. Relevant in this context is Loomba's comments on how "national fantasies, be they colonial, anti-colonial or post colonial play upon and with the connection between women, land or nation" (80). Loomba further states that "as national emblems, women were subjugated as mothers or wives and are called upon literally or figuratively to reproduce the nation" (80). The metaphor of female body or mother is often used for a nation or state. The female bodies are targeted most viciously in the Partition because the dignity, purity and honour of women have always been taken as sign of the dignity and integrity of a nation. Here the author speaks for all womanhood, standing up against the ignominy of woman being reduced to the status of a possession or property that can be seized, appropriated and conquered in the means of a nation.

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