

# Partition through The Subaltern Lenses in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Ice Candy Man*

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**Abstract**— Since the last two decades the theory of Subaltern has attained much recognition. The term subaltern, coined by Antonio Gramsci, designates the people who are socially, politically and geographically outside the power structure. This paper aims to study partition in the light of the subaltern theory. It tries to study the subaltern characters and partition through their eyes. More so, because the subalterns were only represented by others and so it puts forth the argument that whether they were modified while being represented. Would the story be any different if it were told by the subalterns themselves? The subalterns had nothing much to lose and did partition matter to them as they were already depressed enough.

**Keywords**— Subaltern, Partition, Gayatri. C. Spivak, Representation, Loss.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term subaltern was coined by Antonio Gramsci in connection to his theory of “cultural hegemony”. The term designates those who are socially, politically and geographically out of the power structure. This people are denied the means to present themselves and so are without a voice in the society. The term subaltern studies gained significance through the studies of a group of scholars who identified themselves as the Subaltern Studies Group. This group of theorists explored the political role of the masses than the elites. According to this group the term subaltern encompasses a much larger area; it refers to any person of inferior rank or station because of its race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity or religion. The agenda of this group was first summarized by its founder Ranajit Guha in his several works. He felt that the history produced by the elites are incapable of presenting the grim realities. Though it started as an insight into the political situation, the group later started engaging with the social and cultural condition. Some of the scholars associated with the Subaltern Studies Group include Eric Stokes, David Arnold, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha, Sudipta Kaviraj, Gyan Prakash, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak etc.

Since the paper aims to search the voice of the subaltern and whether the partition mattered to them, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay “Can the Subaltern Speak” is pivotal here. She has become the authoritative voice with the publication of her essay. Spivak, the post-colonial intellectual, was born in Calcutta on 24 February 1942. She graduated from Presidency College of the University of Calcutta in 1959 with first-class degree in English. She left India in the same year to take a Master's degree at Cornell University in the U. S. A. and it was followed by a year's fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge, England. Spivak returned to the U. S. A. after the completion of the fellowship in England for taking up the position of an Instructor at the University of Iowa. Meanwhile she completed her doctoral dissertation on the Irish poet W. B. Yeats and the research work was guided by the literary critic Paul de Man at Cornell University, New York. At present she is Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, New York. Her translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* brought international recognition for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Spivak, through her critical discourse raises the issues of marginal subjects such as the place of the subaltern in the society and their empowerment. Though the people could surpass the colonial rule, they are not actually free from its influences and power structures. According to Spivak, the subaltern women are colonized twice, once through colonization and again through patriarchy. Giving the example of Sati, she wonders if the subaltern can even speak as they face the problem of representation and are seen as anonymous and mute. The subalterns are never given a chance to tell their own story as the superior knows better. He knows the subaltern more than the subaltern can know himself and in this way suppresses him from even having a voice. And so, Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak as all his cultural history has been erased.

This paper takes up Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Ice Candy Man* published in 1988 to study the position of the subaltern characters in partition narratives. The novel traces Partition

through the eyes of an eight year old handicapped Parsi girl, Lenny, and her experiences with her nanny Shanta. Lenny along with Shanta visits different places and gathers myriad experiences. She meets people like the masseur, the shopkeeper, the gardener, the ice candy man etc. People she would have never known otherwise. Shanta's abduction at the end of the narrative brings about a twist and engages us as readers.

## II. SUBALTERN CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

Even though Lenny is the narrator and also it is her experiences that we feel, yet the character of Shanta is the one that takes us through the events. Both these characters can be designated as subalterns. Even if Lenny was from a rich family, yet she was handicapped, a little girl of eight, and also a Parsee. She was a subaltern because of her physical deformity, gender and religion. She was also left out of the power structure not only because of her age and deformity but also because of her religion. Shanta, on the other hand, though she belonged to the major Hindu religion, she was only an Ayah with no voice and no power.

The servant quarters of the Sethi house provides us with many subaltern characters. The sweeper's family is one such. The characters Muchoo (mother) and Papoo (daughter) work in the Sethi household. The gardener Hari is an untouchable Hindu. Again, the cook Imam Din is also a subaltern. The Kabuli who sharpens knives also is a subaltern as he is an outsider and there is little he can do or say on partition or even the abduction of Shanta.

If we look acutely we can also consider the Sethi Family as subaltern because of their religious minority. The Parsees wait to join the winning side. They try to remain as neutral as possible so that they can save themselves as they are very few. They believe that they have no say in Partition as it would hardly matter to them whichever side they end up on.

## III. ANALYSIS

The partition of India in 1947 has caused irreparable damage to the socio-political fabric thereby creating a breach to one of the oldest civilizations. It was the detachment of West Punjab, Sindh, the NWFP and East Bengal where the majority of the population was Muslim from the rest of India to form Pakistan. It is said to be one of the largest dislocation of population ever. This dislocation not only resulted in collateral damage but also unbelievable violence leading to the deaths of millions of people on both sides.

Partition Narratives provide an insight into and trace the lives of people who suffered during partition. They deal with the causes and consequences of the phenomenal event. They depict the horrors and experiences of the partition along with its sorrow, suffering, bitterness, pathos and compassion. They are powerful portrayals of the fragmented and wounded society which resulted from Partition. The Partition Narrative is also an attempt to give voice to the silenced. The narratives are mostly about the violence, the communal carnage, the cruelty and the suffering which engulfed the victims.

Unlike communal histories, the Partition Narratives discuss more about the actualities of human experience during Partition. They look at the problems and violence created through Partition with a sense of equality and impersonality and without any discrimination in treating the people of different communities. The characters, instead of traditional heroes and heroines are displaced, distressed and defeated personalities. They are drawn from all communities and all classes. The characters are true to life, effective and interesting. Partition Narratives reflect the Partition comprehensively in all its totality.

To begin with, the Sethi family can be seen as representatives of the Parsees and the Parsees were minorities, out of the power structure which makes them subalterns in a sense. The meeting prayer held which was actually a meeting to discuss their situation in the Partition. Their speeches surface their fear of being left out. The only solution they find is to sit back and side with the winning side. Colonel Barucha is the president of the Parsee community. He is the voice of reason cautioning his people to side with no one and to keep a low profile. As they are a vulnerable minority group because only two hundred Parsees live in Lahore and only one lakh twenty thousand Parsees exist world-wide. The Colonel understands the danger of the Parsee people's predicament and believes this is the only way that they can survive. Most of the Parsee, including the Seth extended family, survive in this manner.

The character of Lenny, though she is from a rich background can be considered to be a subaltern, because she is an eight year old Parsee girl child crippled by polio. She is the narrator and it is through her eyes that we see partition. Her myriad experiences with her ayah, Shanta, gives us an insight into the feelings of other characters. Lenny witnesses all the events first hand.

She gives us an over all view of partition. She also visits the village of Imam Din Pir Pindo and we see the plight of the poor Muslim families in a Sikh dominated village. The Muslims and Sikhs were like brothers. They

assure Imam Din that nothing will ever happen to them. The village belongs to both the communities. Later we see that Sikh Militants start coming in and when Iman Din's son confronts the Sikh priest he says that they are only for safety. Towards the end of the novel we see that Imam Din's relatives are all dead and only Rana along with an aunt who happens to meet him by chance in a refugee camp come to stay with Imam Din as they have nowhere else to go.

She also sees the fire burning out the town from the roof top of the ice candy man's house. She sees the changes taking place in the ice candy man. How he turns from a vendor to a man of God, the sudden religious fervour that drives him crazy. It is through her eyes that we see the violence meted out during partition. First she sees the gunny sacked body of the masseur and later she sees ayah being abducted. The female body is seen as a place for the outlet of frustrations.

A young Hindu woman, age 18 at the beginning of the novel, named Shanta works as "Lenny Baby" and Adi Sethi's nanny. Because Lenny is disabled and does not attend school, the closeness between them grows until Lenny loves "her Ayah" as she does her mother, father, and the rest of her family. Ayah takes Lenny everywhere she goes, and she therefore introduces Lenny to an adult world. Her extreme beauty, which she takes entirely for granted, make her a target of men's desire, drawing a coterie of characters to her daily trips with Lenny to the park. Ayah's cheerful and proud demeanor is punctured by the ruination of her beauty and her life as a captive dancing girl, or forced prostitute, imprisoned by the Ice-candy-man. Until Godmother intervenes to save Ayah and send her home to her family in Amritsar, which remains in India after Partition, her life is hopeless. Even after her rescue, Ayah is never the same again. Her previously light-hearted and joyful approach to life has been drained out of her.

Even the character of Papoo and Mochoo are of importance here. Though they do not have much of a say in partition yet the marriage of Papoo to a middle aged dwarf is significant from the subaltern perspective. Papoo is always thrashed by her mother for not working and one day we see that Papoo is being married off. She hardly had any say in any of it. Did partition even matter to Papoo and her mother. They are the subalterns in the real sense. They had nothing much to loose in Partition and were least affected by it. Even the violence of partition meant nothing to them as they were celebrating Papoo's marriage in midst of all the refugees staying in the servant quarters. Here we can also question the idea of misrepresentation as there are chances

that partition hastened the marriage of Papoo and that it was overlooked since she would be married anyway. They belonged to the low caste and may be her marriage instead of being seen as something tragic was passed off as usual.

The character of Hari the gardener is also a subaltern. He was from the low caste. It was Hari who found the body of the massuer in the gunny bag. Hari is a jolly person and good to everyone. He is however the target of every joke. All the others make fun of him by pulling off his dhoti. This act started off with innocence, simply as a joke but later we see that Hari actually suffered from it. The ice candy man was brutal to him the last time he pulled off the dhoti, flashing his private parts and jeering at him but Hari did not and could not fight back even if he was shamed. This act performed repeatedly showed Hari's weakness and his inability to speak up.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* brings forth the partition in all its totality. If one would want to relive the times it is the right book to go to. The novel encompasses myriad events and many characters. This paper has successfully linked the subaltern theory to Partition. Almost all the characters can be identified as subalterns yet there are some like the Papoo and Mocho who actually do not have any say in partition while others play their part, some as victims like Shanta and Rana while others as Saviours like Mrs Sethi and her friend who sells petrol in black to raise money to save women from forced prostitution and marriages.

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