

Cracking India: 'A Gendered Subaltern Narrative'

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Abstract: 'Cracking India' by Bapsi Sidhwa is a semi – autobiographical novel which can best be analysed and interpreted as a 'gendered subaltern narrative'. Eight year old 'Lenny'- a Parsee who grew up in Lahore and suffered from polio is the narrator who unfolds how her community in general and women in particular suffered at the hands of the majority during the partition of India and Pakistan. Besides Partition crisis, the novel also deals with the Parsee milieu, their minority status, issue of child – marriage, women's problems and patterns of migration. An attempt has been made in the present paper to show how Sidhwa has successfully portrayed the trauma of woman who belongs to 'minority community' and how her status as 'minority within a minority' leads to her double oppression due to her gender and religion at the hands of the so – called 'superior' oppressors.

Key words: partition , gender , woman , subaltern ,sexual violation , minority , discrimination ,class , religion.

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I. INTRODUCTION :

The term 'subaltern', literally meaning "of inferior rank" is used to designate the people who are not the elite or the dominant groups. The best description of the term subaltern might be stated as "the general attribute of subordination in society, expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way". In 'Cracking India' the novelist Bapsi Sidhwa captures the plight of Parsee Community – a minority and also the plight of a lower class woman 'a minority within a minority'. On the backdrop of 'Partition'- these sufferings call for attention and reinterpretation which would lead to better understanding of inhuman behaviour of the humans provoked by the false notions of 'superiority' Gayatri Spivak writes in her famous essay, '*Can the subaltern speak*'- "Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual differences is doubly effaced. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow"(287) . Urvasi Butalia in her '*The other side of silence*' opines – "The violence that women faced in the aftermath of partition is shrouded in many layers of silence"(193). It is Partition Literature that gives voice to women characters to speak the unspeakable.

'Cracking India' :- Reality unfolded ...

It is no denying fact that a woman all over the world is subjugated, marginalized, silenced and victimised in many ways. In patriarchal society they are termed as 'inferior' and hence the target of violence and torture. *Cracking India*, originally published in 1988 as 'Ice Candy Man' and re- published as *Cracking India* in 1991, Bapsi Sidhwa presents a fictional account of Partition from three perspectives – Parsee, Pakistani and Feminist. While expressing her intention behind writing this semi-autobiographical novel she writes, " my intention was to write about Partition because very little had been written about it. There are certain images from my past which have always haunted me..... Although I was very young then, I saw chance killings, fires, dead bodies. These are images which have stayed with me This hostility needs to be dealt with" (Sidhwa and Sigh, *My Place in the World*, 292). The novel unfolds through Lenny, an innocent, eight year old Parsee girl who can look at communal violence without any prejudice and bias. The character of Lenny is the novelist Sidhwa herself. As an eight year old child, she had seen the flames burning parts of Lahore. The incidents of Ayah's abduction, her return to India and Ice –candy man following her in India are based on combination of two real incidents in which a murderous mob came to Sidhwa's parents' home but their Muslim cook saved them by assuring the crowd his employers were Parsees and not Hindus and the second, in which an Indian Sikh kidnapped and forcibly married a Muslim woman during Partition but she managed to get away from him and went to Pakistan where she got remarried.

Silence of the Subaltern in Cracking India:

The character of Ayah in the novel goes through constant sufferings due to her voicelessness. It is often seen that during any crisis sexual violence is perpetrated on lower and subservient class woman belonging to minority community. Ayah and Hamida's subservient status makes them vulnerable to violence and torture, whereas well to do women like Lenny's mother and Grandmother escape it. Ayah (Shanta) is doubly marginalised because of her poor economic condition and gender subordination. She is unable to resist the advances of her companions and she has to tolerate them. Ayah is oppressed by patriarchy (as a woman), class (as a lower-class woman), and nationalism (as a Hindu woman). The family which Ayah serves cannot protect her. They prefer to be the silent witness to her violation. They remain mute spectators when the rioters drag her out.

"They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched out, and her bare feet –that want to move backwards –are forced toward instead."

Ayah could not protest. Sexual violence renders her voiceless forever. She is surrounded by vultures. Ice-Candy-Man forces Ayah to convert into Islam and gets married to her. She becomes Mumtaz. Even under this new identity she cannot speak, Her gruff voice and damaged vocal chords are suggestive of the voicelessness of the subaltern. Ayah is shamed by all – the strangers as well as the familiar ones like Sharbat Khan, Ice Candy Man, Imam Din, cook, butcher and the other men.

Hamida also goes through similar violation. Lenny was told that Hamida was kidnapped by Sikhs and was taken to Amritsar. She was also told that if she comes back, her husband or his family wouldn't take her back. Thus a violated woman has to suffer twofold – the brutality of her abductors and the ostracization from her own family. She has four children and knows that her husband would never accept her back as she is violated by "others". While describing her plight to Lenny she calls herself "khut – putlis, puppets in the hands of fate." Blaming everything to her fate she says, "It is my kismet". While women belonging to the lower class suffered and violated, Lenny, though a child herself, is protected by her religion and her parents' affluent background. On the contrary Papoo, a low cast sweeper's daughter has to suffer. It is not that the oppressors are always the men; women also join hands to intimidate the victims.

Cracking India: A Gendered Narrative:-

Under patriarchy the woman is conditioned in such a way that she looks at herself through the eyes of men. Gender and its superiority takes the front seat and believing herself to be of inferior gender, she interprets everything as wished by the men. Hamida herself calls the rehabilitation camp as 'a camp for fallen women'. Like Hamida, raped and wailing women in the 'Recovered Women's Camp' blame all their sufferings on fate.

Though all women in the novel belong to the common Gender called 'female' not all of them are the same. Much depends on the position of woman in society. So there is 'discrimination within the discriminated'. Ayah and Hamida's victimisation has its root in their lower – class status which makes them more vulnerable than Lenny's women relatives.

Lenny witnesses gender discrimination in Lahore after independence: many women were restricted entry into public spaces as if they were the second citizens. Lenny's visit to the 'Recovered Women's Camp' and their separation from community forced her to misunderstand the camp as women's jail and women to be some criminals. This sense of guilt is put into the heads of victim systematically by the patriarchal society and as a result the rape-victim like Hamida considers herself a fallen woman and instead of fighting against injustice, accepts everything as her fate. Lenny expresses her rage, "*I've seen Ayah carried away – and it has less to do with fate than the will of men*" (*Cracking India*, 217). At least Lenny, a small girl, can see and analyse the gender discrimination in every sphere.

'Class' in gender also decides power that a woman holds. Ayah is able to exert power over her admirers through her sex appeal. Such power is secondary and limited. Whereas the power held by Lenny's mother and grandmother is the product of their class. Such power is superior and absolute. They can have their say in important matters and can at least make an effort to bring in some change. But lower class women like Ayah function merely as passive receptors, always at the mercy of their masters. Sidhwa makes a witty use of this discrepancy to highlight the disempowerment which results from belonging to both, a subservient class and gender, to give us more realistic portrayal of the degree to which women, belonging to different classes can protest against social obstacles put in their path by the patriarchy. She successfully shows how the degree of protest is directly in proportion to their status in society. Nothing changes and the condition remains the same for other subaltern characters like Papoo, Muccho, Mini Anti, Slavesister and Hamida. The shocking events like abduction, rape and forced prostitution in the lives of marginalized characters like Ayah and Hamida leave them all the more intimidated than ever. Hamida submits to her fate. Whenever she encounters Lenny's father, her eyes are downcast, her head bowed and covered as if she was a sinner. Papoo and Ayah make brave efforts to defy patriarchy, but fail to succeed. Papoo is tamed by coercing into child marriage, while Ayah is first raped, then forced into prostitution and finally forced to submit through marriage. Ayah carries the burden of shame

always and is ashamed to visit the Sethis. Lenny's personal experience with her cousin, Ayah's abduction and rape, Hamida's endless suffering awakens Lenny to the harsh reality of being a woman in a patriarchal society.

Women often are the worst sufferers during turbulent times. They are constantly exposed to the possibility of rape and other forms of gender-based violence. Lenny's cousin suggests her not to go to Hira Mandy or she might be raped. On asking the meaning of rape, he says that someday he will show her what is meant by rape. This shows that even the woman belonging to an affluent class is ultimately looked down upon as a 'female'. Irrespective of her education, social class and achievements she is often treated as an object of sex.

Lenny witnessing '*a naked child, twitching on a spear struck between her shoulders, waved like a flag*' (*Cracking India*, 134-135) foretells what was in store for the children, particularly for girls like Khatija. It is true that at any stage of life the woman is vulnerable: be it childhood or the youth or the old age. It is more so when Men from both sides want to prove their superiority in the most inhuman manner during the crisis like Partition.

II. CONCLUSION

In the opinion of Ranjit Guha (Subaltern Studies group), Bapsi Sidhwa's 'Cracking India' enriches the definitions of the Partition and recuperates the voice of the subaltern. Both sides targeted woman and used sexual violence as a weapon against religious minority and downtrodden class during Partition. Patriarchal constraints and societal norms silenced women who suffered gender based violence during communal riots. Subalterns have always been marginalized and elites received all the attention. It is the silence of the subalterns that speaks through the pages of *Cracking India*. It is the age-old cry of a discriminated gender that awakens the spirit of dead humanity. Be it Lenny, Ayah, Hamida or Papoo, all have to go through unspeakable trauma and have to pay the price of belonging to 'a weaker sex' – a woman. In patriarchy sexual violence against woman becomes the potent weapon in the hands of the aggressors and rape of a woman is considered as the rape of her community. Ayesha Jalal puts it aptly in her '*Reason and Religion*'- "*All said and done, the commonality of masculinity was stronger than the bond of religion. Men of all three communities delighted in their momentary sense of power over vulnerable women*" Sidhwa's '*Cracking India*' brings this ugly side of Partition and patriarchy very effectively to the fore, making it a 'Gendered Subaltern Narrative'.

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