



Exploring Female Individuality and Dual Representation of Women in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel *Cracking India*

*¹V Jibin Monish and ²Dr. M Kannadhasan

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University Serkkadu, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India.

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Thiruvalluvar University, Serkkadu, Vellore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Following the 1947 Partition of British India, which resulted in the formation of India and Pakistan, there was a significant escalation in ethnic violence to an unimaginable extent. Prior to and following the establishment of independent nation-states, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs committed numerous acts of homicide, abduction, sexual assault, and arson, resulting in a significant but unknown number of casualties. The period preceding and following the establishment of "independent" nation-states witnessed similar atrocities. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, renowned for its profound portrayal of violence during the Partition, serves as a valuable resource for studying such violence due to its comprehensive description of many strata of Lahore society before to and following the city's integration into Pakistan. The narrative encompasses events that occurred both prior to and subsequent to the city's integration into Pakistan.

Cracking India juxtaposes feminine identities. Because of her involvement in the Partition, Lenny's mother possesses great strength. Nevertheless, Lenny's mother fulfils the role of a compliant, devoted, and dutiful spouse to her husband. Lenny's mother was involved in the partition. Ayah also presents a contradictory perspective on femininity. Initially, we observe how her charm captivates a varied assortment of men. Following her abduction and transformation into a dancing girl, she endures torment from her acquaintances and admirers, including Imam Din and Sharbat Khan. Additionally, she is wedded to an individual known as the Ice-Candy man. As a result, she is stripped of all power and is unable to exercise any form of judgment.

Keywords: Dual representation, kidnapping, female individuality, partition

Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* (1991) is renowned for its insightful depiction of the violence during the Partition. It can be analysed as a comprehensive exploration of this violence, as it portrays a diverse range of characters from Lahore society, both prior to and following the city's integration into Pakistan. The reason for this is that the work encompasses Lahore's historical events both prior to and during Pakistan's independence. Lenny Sethi, a little child, tells the story. Ayah, Lenny's Hindu nanny, gets abducted by a gang led by Ice-Candy Man, a disillusioned Muslim admirer, but manages to free herself from his grasp. During the period preceding and following India's partition, numerous women, including Ayah, experienced significant suffering. The perpetrators abducted and sexually assaulted these women.

The work's criticism has concentrated on women as victims. In *Contemporary South Asian Writing in English*, Paul Brians calls *Cracking India* a "pattern of oppression that haunts all women in the story, from highest to lowest" (Brians 107). Manju Jaidka says, "the women suffering in the novel must discover an escape path and yield to the dominating authority,

or else they would suffer" (Jaidka 49). Although *Cracking India*'s female characters are oppressed, Sidhwa's female characters have a variety of powers, including the following: Ayah, like Lenny, wields power over the male community before Partition, despite her physical appeal. Sidhwa might comment on the fleeting nature of sexual power and physical desire. Lenny's narrative agency is mostly pre-Partition. Ayah is kidnapped by a local gang and enslaved into prostitution after the Partition takes her authority. The novel's most powerful women are those who can break out of their traditional domestic duties and use their communal connections to influence others. This power subverts the most. Lenny's mother and Godmother demonstrate economic strength. Both educated, upper-class women actively influence and impact the lives of those close to them. Lenny's mother is his primary caregiver. Unlike Lenny and Ayah's fleeting relationship, where power is based on physical characteristics or childish willfulness, Lenny's mother and Godmother's power comes from their identities as influential and privileged community figures and their ability to step outside of their traditional feminine roles to enact deliberate

change for the benefit of less fortunate women who were damaged during Partition.

A female narrator gives Sidhwa a fresh perspective on Partition's gendered dynamics. Sidhwa's account also includes all the roles women performed during Partition. These are female protagonists who are neither powerful nor downtrodden. *Cracking India* can "describe, restore, and heal some of the damage done by male neo-nationalistic discourse" (Hai 390), allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how women were affected by Partition and responded to it. This study explores how *Cracking India's* female characters employ their familial, social, and individual perspectives to bring about transformation and healing. This study examines the novel's portrayal of Sidhwa's women rather than just viewing them as victims to be "pitied and patronized" (Hubel 111). Lenny, her mother, her ayah, and her godmother are offered opportunities throughout *Cracking India* to break free from female enslavement and exercise agency and influence in their patriarchal society.

In *Cracking India*, Sidhwa built strong female characters and told the narrative from Lenny's perspective, but she also showed the reader Indian women's realities. Despite Sidhwa's empowerment of her female characters. In the book, women are sexually objectified and exploited as part of daily life. *Cracking India* contrasts feminine identities. Lenny's mother was involved during Partition, but she was also a submissive, devoted, and serving wife to her husband. Mother is strong, independent, and capable of humanitarian work outside of her role as a wife. Mother is an abused woman at home. Ayah also offers a conflicting view of womanhood.

Cracking India is recounted from a female perspective, putting women at the centre of the story and giving us a fresh perspective on the Partition. Lenny, a naive, timid, and easily affected young girl, learns from what she sees and eavesdrops on various circumstances and conversations. The novel's narrator, Lenny, lets us understand and relate to many characters. She is so upfront and honest about her situation that we can easily grasp it. "Having polio in infancy is like being born under a lucky star" (Sidhwa 20), Lenny says, but it makes her more vulnerable and dependent on others. Showing her callipers would make others pity her and give her whatever she desires. This differs from how other kids acquire what they desire. Her condition prohibits her from attending school, which Lenny sees as a blessing because it saves her from a "laborious and loveless life" (Sidhwa 23).

Lenny's role as narrator and major character is important because of her relationship to Bapsi Sidhwa's childhood. This connection makes the story seem real. Bapsi Sidhwa said, "partially I took things directly from my own experience, but the rest is created." (Sidhwa & Singh 291). Sidhwa, like Lenny, was a young girl in Lahore when India and Pakistan were partitioned. Because Lenny is the novel's narrator, readers can connect with Ayah and Godmother, two of Lenny's most inspiring and influential women, as well as Ice-Candy man, a controversial and intriguing character. Ice-Candy Man is controversial and intriguing in the novel. The reader experiences Lenny's "compressed world" (Sidhwa 11) via her eyes. Women are autonomous, yet patriarchal society oppresses them.

Lenny spends much of her time with Ayah in *Cracking India*, and therefore with all of her suitors from different countries. She spends the most time with the Muslim masseur and ice-candy vendor, but also with Faletti's Hotel's cook, Government House's gardener, Sharbat Khan, and the zoo attendant. Lenny's perspective on Ayah and her suitors helps

readers appreciate Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh coexistence. Before the Partition, life was calm and religious and cultural differences were ignored. Lenny learns from Ayah's experiences because she travels with her and witnesses her private moments with her suitors. Lenny says, "I learn of human needs, frailties, cruelties, and joys." She also teaches me how magnets dominate metals (Sidhwa 29). Ayah's power over men intrigues Lenny.

As the story progresses, the nation, which had previously been unified into India and Pakistan, and its people are split in two. "It is sudden. The next day, everyone is a different religion, such as Christian, Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim. One day, everyone is themselves. The people become fewer and fewer, dwindling into symbols" (Sidhwa 101). Due to the city's unbearable tension, Lahore is no longer safe for non-Muslims.

In point of fact, despite the fact that Ayah is Hindu, she appears to be neutral among them. She seems to take this stance in order to impose a neutral position, so that religion can be set aside and conflicts between her admirers can be avoided. Therefore, it is plausible to assert that she possesses the ability to bring together men of varying ethnicities in a setting where people are killing one another due specifically to their religious differences. However, Ayah is not only an important figure in Lenny's life and in the coming together of a diverse group of admirers, but she is also the protagonist of the most shocking moment in the book, which occurs when she is kidnapped by a group of Muslims led by Ice-Candy man.

This incident is the most shocking thing that happens in the book. Lenny is appalled to learn that Ice-Candy man is entirely controlled by the beast that possesses him, something Lenny really fears. Additionally, this moment is significant since Lenny is the one who discloses Ayah's hiding place to Ice-Candy man. Lenny inadvertently betrays Ayah, oblivious to the possible hazards and consequences associated with the circumstance. Due to Lenny's Parsee background, her family adopts a detached and impartial stance amidst the Partition tensions. Due to their minimal representation in the Indian population, the Parsees are not perceived as a potentially hazardous demographic. During India's colonial era, the Parsee community embraced contemporary British conventions and was inspired by Western education and ideas. Furthermore, they were immersed in Western society.

Therefore, during the time of the Partition, they attempted to avoid conflict and were not compelled to leave or convert to Islam because they were able to remain the same and, once again, adapt to the current situation by keeping themselves as unnoticeable as possible. This allowed them to avoid being forced to leave their homes or convert to Islam. Some scholars, like Bharucha, argue that Lenny's betrayal symbolises the betrayal of the Parsee community for turning their back on the conflict: "the wider and constant betrayal by all Parsees of the one land which has given them refuge" (Bharucha 82), implying that, by keeping the neutral and distant position of a witness, they are actually betraying the land of India that welcomed them.

At the very least, we do not get the impression that Lenny's family is in a completely removed position from the happenings not its female constituents. We have been informed that both her mother and her aunty are involved in the conflict in some fashion. Initially, when Ayah informs Lenny, Cousin, and Adi about the fuel cans in the family vehicle, they believe that Lenny's mother and aunty are responsible for setting fire to Lahore and that they are the ones who are responsible for the arson. Then, they learn that

Lenny's mother and aunty are smuggling petrol in order to assist their Hindu and Sikh friends in escaping, as well as to rescue kidnapped women by delivering them to their families on the other side of the border or to the Recovered Women's Camps. As a result, we are able to see how Lenny's mother and aunty make use of their status as Parsees in order to assist their friends and other women who have been kidnapped, despite the fact that doing so puts their own lives in danger. They do this rather than remaining merely as witnesses to the tragedy.

Roda, who is Lenny's godmother, is another female character who does not remain in the role of a mere witness to the events that take place. Godmother is portrayed as an essential component of Lenny's life from the very first scene: The intensity of her tenderness and the concentration of her attention are narcotic. "I require no one else" (Sidhwa 17). Ayah is ultimately freed from the Hira Mandi and returned to her family in Amritsar, proving that Roda is as bit as powerful and revered as she is portrayed to be throughout the story. Also, Roda is a figure who is characterized as having a great deal of influence.

In point of fact, Godmother is the character in the book that best exemplifies the strength and agency of women. She has the courage to challenge the Ice-Candy man, calling into question his masculinity and even threatening to kill him. She brings to his attention the evil that he has done to Ayah by stating, "You allowed her to be raped by butchers, drunks, and goondas... you have permitted your wife to be shamed!" She had all of her modesty ruined! Her femininity was her livelihood!" (Sidhwa 260). She makes him cry and feel ashamed of his behavior. She also decides to journey with Lenny to his home in the Hira Mandi to check on Ayah and defy the patriarchy by defeating the Ice-Candy guy.

Sidhwa has created strong, independent women in an environment where women are usually passive and submissive. Kleist claims: The women in the book who can entirely go outside of their traditional domestic responsibilities and use their community connections as a source of influence have the most potent and subversive instances of feminine power. Lenny's mother and Godmother demonstrate economic strength. Both ladies are upper-class and educated, and they actively influence and modify the lives of their loved ones.

In *Cracking India*, Sidhwa built strong female characters and told the narrative from Lenny's perspective, but she also showed the reader Indian women's realities. Even if she empowers her female characters. In the book, women are sexually objectified and exploited, women are not seen as individuals but as bodies men can possess, young boys like Cousin see sexual abuse as normal and make fun of it because it is the example they have been given, and women are blamed for being women, being abducted and raped, and bringing dishonour to their families.

Thus, *Cracking India's* female identities contrast Lenny's mother is influential because of her Partition involvement. However, Lenny's mother is a submissive, attentive, and serving wife to her husband. Partition occurred. Lenny's mother was active. "She puts toothpaste on Father's toothbrush, removes his sandals and his socks if he is wearing socks, blows tenderly between his toes, and with cooing noises caresses his feet" (Sidhwa 75-76) show Lenny's mother's subordinate role at home. "One day I surprise Mother at her bath and see the bruises on her body" (Sidhwa 224), suggesting that Lenny's mother was abused. Thus, Mother is empowered in the humanitarian community but

abused at home. Ayah also offers a conflicting view of womanhood.

Kleist claims that "Sidhwa presents a uniquely gendered perspective of the Partition," and it does. Sidhwa's work also highlights the diverse roles that women assumed during Partition, encompassing positions where they were neither dominant nor submissive. *Cracking India* showcases resilient female protagonists who are constrained by society and cultural conventions. Women in a patriarchal society are deprived of equal rights and are expected to be submissive inside their households, so impeding their ability to exert complete control over their lives.

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