

## Partition Violence in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*

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*Cracking India* takes the form of a Bildungsroman, a novel of education. It also offers a multicultural reading experience. As the book opens, the narrator presents a rich account of a childhood in an exotic Asian city during the early 1940's. Part of the book's interest lies in this faithful rendering of Lenny's daily life with her nuclear and extended family, as well as her adventures with Ayah. Even though Lenny belongs to the upper class, she experiences all levels of society, and being an astute observer, she provides a variegated account of life in the homes and on the streets of Lahore. Also interesting are her revelations about the Parsis, an Asian community of 200,000 or so people who are descended from Persian immigrants and whose faith is Zoroastrianism. As the story progresses, though, the specter of partition disrupts this cozy life, and Lenny's education gets under way.

First, Lenny watches Ayah's circle of admirers dissolve. Once a number of Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Sikh men were drawn together by Ayah's beauty, but not even her feminine allure can overcome religious intolerance. Lenny learns, too, that the little Muslim boy she had played with during her trip to the countryside was the only survivor when a marauding band attacked his village, massacred the men, and violated the women. From the roof of their house, she and her brother watch parts of Lahore burn. They listen to the weeping of women who had been raped and then, rejected by their families, were relegated to rehabilitation centers where few would be restored. Finally, she watches the kidnapping of Ayah by a gang that Ice-Candy-Man leads.

Moving from innocence into grim reality, Lenny ends her account on a positive note. Caught up in history, the naïve, spoiled, and fortunate little Lenny gains knowledge about the larger world: It is full of deception, injustice, hypocrisy, religious enmity, and cruelty. At the same time she

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has witnessed the resilience of the human spirit and the power of individual courage. She has also realized the role women can play, women such as Godmother: You cannot be near her without feeling her uncanny strength. People bring to her their joys and woes. Show her their sores and swollen joints. Distilling the right herbs, adroitly instilling the right word in the right ear, she secures wishes, smooths relationships, cures illnesses, battles wrongs, solaces grief and prevents mistakes.

These revelations and the knowledge she has gained from them will serve her well as she enters an uncertain world. Some reviewers have complained about the narrative voice, observing that Lenny is too precocious for her age. In making such a criticism, they seem to ignore the second narrative voice, that of an unidentified adult who reveals herself rarely. This other narrator stays in the background until Lenny has established her own authority firmly, and she speaks for the first time when Lenny tells how her mother repeats clever remarks the child has made. This scene closes with the line, “Is that when I learn to tell tales?” This “I” is not little Lenny, but an adult Lenny looking back on a moment in childhood. Such a fictional technique seems all wrong: Here is a novel, written at times in an almost lyrical fashion, a historical account told in the present tense, viewed from a child’s perspective except when an adult adds her comments. Yet the technique, however odd, works. The narrator is not a child after all, but the child in the adult.

When the novel was originally published in London, it appeared under the title Sidhwa had intended, *Ice-Candy-Man*. In the 1991 American edition, the title was changed to *Cracking India*, because the publishers thought Americans would misunderstand “ice candy” and confuse it with drugs. Unfortunately, the new title diminishes Ice-Candy-Man’s centrality and blurs his symbolic role. In an interview, Sidhwa said that this character represents what she considers the “icy,” unstable quality of politicians who determine the fate of those they rule. In fact, at one point in the novel the second narrator comments, after Lenny relates how her mother took her to see Mahatma (Mohandas K.) Gandhi, “It wasn’t until some years later . . . that I comprehended the concealed nature of the ice lurking deep beneath the hypnotic and dynamic femininity of Gandhi’s non-violent exterior.” (57) Other political figures of the time—

Jawaharlal Nehru, Louis Mountbatten, J. C. Bose, Mohammed Ali Jinnah—do not fare much better in the novel, identified as they are with Ice-Candy-Man. As Lenny realizes, it is the ordinary person, a woman like Godmother, who “battles wrongs,” not the remote, icy men in power.

This exquisitely written, tightly constructed novel offers an engaging glimpse into Asian life and a vivid record of a dark chapter in history. At the same time, it follows a child’s education, which prepares her for entry into an adult world whose vilest side she has witnessed at first hand. Finally, the novel presents a vision of a place where feminine values will rule and, in Lenny’s words, where Ice-Candy-Man becomes “a truly harmless fellow,” and where “the guard lets down his guard.” (95)

When India gained independence from Great Britain in 1947, the subcontinent was divided into separate nations: India, the Hindu homeland, and Pakistan, the Muslim homeland. To carry out this political solution to long-standing religious conflict, millions were forced to move, and this mass migration soon turned into slaughter. While exact numbers are not known, it is estimated that hundreds of thousands died. Those who survived also suffered—becoming refugees, losing fortunes and homes, succumbing to hunger and disease. Countless women were raped, then punished anew when their husbands and families rejected them as polluted. Much of the bloodshed and anguish took place on the Punjabi plains in northern India, a rich farmland intersected by five rivers. Lahore, a major city in the Punjab once known as “the Paris of India,” was given to Pakistan. Because of the city’s strategic position, it turned into a massive refugee camp and the site of some of the worst partition violence. This is the historical background for *Cracking India*. The novel’s first-person narrator is an eight-year-old named Lenny. At first consideration, this young girl from Lahore might seem to be a strange voice to tell such a story, for at the outset she admits, “My world is compressed.” Taking full advantage of this limited view, however, Bapsi Sidhwa relates through the eyes of her child narrator the partition story from a domestic standpoint and, more significantly, from a feminine view. Lenny’s naïveté, her privileged position, and her religious background lend her version of partition a quality that other novels about this

tempestuous period in Indo-Pakistani history lack. The momentous events leading to partition and the aftermath are constructed incrementally through the child narrator's point of view, as she repeats overheard adult conversations, tells of strange sights, and sometimes even misrepresents or misinterprets situations which are later explained.

Protected by her family's wealth and stability, Lenny herself is not directly affected by the chaotic conditions. She lives in a safe and predominantly woman's world, spending most of her time with either Ayah or the elderly woman she simply calls Godmother. To Lenny the world of men remains shadowy on the personal level, except for her encounters with her cousin, who is exploring his newly discovered sexuality. Those men on the national level who make the decisions for millions of people remain incomprehensible. As she understands the situation, remote and calculating men create the climate for violence, and ordinary men carry out the acts. Women, she learns, are often the victims, as is the case with Ayah and the women who have been raped, then placed in the rehabilitation quarters next to Lenny's family home. On the other hand, she witnesses her mother's display of strength when a gang threatens their home, and she learns about the risk taken by her mother and Electric-aunt when they smuggle gasoline to Hindu friends fleeing Lahore.

Godmother also serves as a feminine ideal; she is a powerful personality who can face wrongdoing head on and correct matters. All in all, Lenny grasps an important truth: Women do not resort to violence to solve problems; men do. In this retelling of the partition story, the role of women emerges paramount: first as victims, then as saviors. Historical reports show that during the rage of partition violence, women were paraded naked through the streets before mass rapes; their children were thrown into the air and caught on swords as they watched; and their bodies were mutilated, their breasts chopped off. At the same time, women like those portrayed in *Cracking India* performed heroic deeds and possibly brought some order to the chaos. Although nonstrident in tone, the novel focuses squarely on the victimization of women and on their resilience.

Much of *Cracking India* was drawn from personal experience.

Sidhwa grew up in a Parsi home in Lahore during the 1940's, suffered from polio as does Lenny, had her own "ayah" (nursemaid), watched the horrors of partition unfold, and must have realized, like Lenny, that in her shaken world she would find the greatest solace among women. This novel is widely admired in Asia and abroad. That Sidhwa, Pakistan's internationally recognized novelist, repeatedly examines the role of women in a patriarchal society makes her not only a significant figure in women's literature but a singular one as well.

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