

Melting Façades: Ice-Candy Man and the Spatial Production of Hira Mandi in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*

ANNE JONES

Abstract: In Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, Ice-candy man's victimization of Ayah reveals the vulnerability of women's bodies during the Partition movement. This essay will explore how the varied personas he assumes within the story—the poet and the cultured courtier—work to actively produce the space of Hira Mandi. Moreover, I connect these spatial strategies to the larger spatial construction of the nation-state of India. In doing so, I show how the textual space of Hira Mandi and the territorial space of the nation-state are produced in similar ways. Finally, I explore how Lenny's Godmother dismantles Ice-candy man's façade and inscribes resistance to oppressive spatial strategies.

Keywords: Partition, spatial production, violence, nation-state, postcolonialism

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* is about the Partition of India and Pakistan as seen through the eyes of Lenny Sethi, a Parsi girl who resides in Lahore in the 1940s. Witnessing the vast changes brought about by the "cracking" of India in 1947 into two nation-states, Lenny comes to understand that a city and its inhabitants are permanently changed through this event. Through the character of Ayah, Lenny's Hindu nanny, Sidhwa especially situates the vulnerability of women's bodies to abuse during religious and national conflict. Prior to Partition, Ayah is the epitome of desirability, attracting men from varied religions and professions who court her attention and body. However, during Partition, she is abducted and raped by a mob of Muslim men led by Ice-candy man, one of her former suitors. Later, Ice-candy man becomes her pimp, making her a "dancing girl" in the Hira Mandi, the red light district of Lahore, and eventually marries her to "save her" (Sidhwa 261) from disgrace.

Much like the popsicles he sells, Ice-candy man's face can melt seamlessly from one form to another. As Birdman, he sells sparrows and parrots. As a poet, he spouts Urdu poetry effortlessly. As a Mogul courtier, he smacks of ancient royalty and passion. However, as we shall see, each of these personas hides violence under a garb of performance and euphemism. Additionally, Ice-candy man as a poet and a Mogul courtier not only *inhabits* the space of Hira Mandi but actively *produces* it. Discourses of art and history construct Hira Mandi as an oppressive space that is shielded by an appearance of glamor and regality. This paper will also connect the strategies of artistic and historiographic discourse that Ice-candy man uses to spatially construct Hira Mandi to touch on the larger spatial construction of the nation-state of India. In doing so, I show how the textual space of Hira Mandi and the territorial space of the nation-state are produced in similar ways. Finally, I will explore how Lenny's Godmother dismantles Ice-candy man's façade, exposing the "routine violence" (Pandey 1) inherent in the space of Hira Mandi and thus inscribing resistance to oppressive spatial strategies.

How does physical space function as a dynamic arena rife with power play? How are art and history used within nationalist discourse to hide the space of a nation-state as one where “violence ... [is] often dispensed with dream-eyed idealism”? (Chakrabarty 43) Can this spatial artifice be exposed? These are the larger questions guiding this paper. They are worth looking into because not enough attention has been paid to how space functions in discursive ways in South Asian contexts. Much of the scholarship on this novel, for example, focuses on its gender politics¹ and its status as part of the body of Partition literature that represents minority voices challenging official statist narratives.² While these are important perspectives, this paper draws attention to the different strategies by which space is produced within the novel and outside it and corroborates the observation that “space and behavior are intimately and intricately linked” (Jackson 57). I draw from the spatial theories of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, and postcolonial historians like Gyanendra Pandey, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty to place this novel at the intersection of spatial studies and postcolonial studies. This essay also close reads *Cracking India*, paying special attention to the various transformations of Ice-candy man and how they produce the spaces of Hira Mandi and, likewise, the nation-state of India.

The Space of Hira Mandi

I want to begin with the importance of considering space as beyond just a physical setting. Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* is a crucial theoretical text that helps orient focus on how space interacts with power. In this groundbreaking work, Lefebvre argues that space is customarily presented as a fixed geographical arena devoid of meaning, as a backdrop for action to occur. He calls this seemingly homogenous space as *abstract space*. As he explains it, “Capitalism and neocapitalism have produced abstract space, which includes the ‘world of commodities’, its ‘logic’ ... as well as the power of money and that of the political state” (53). In other words, abstract space is that which is produced by hegemonies to assert power over society (and for Lefebvre, a Marxist, this primarily produced by capitalism). Echoing Lefebvre, Edward Soja, another postmodern geographer, asks us to consider “how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life” (6). Space, he asserts, is far from “innocent”; it is a construct that is controlled by those in power, and maintained by violence (Lefebvre 52).

Both Lefebvre and Soja ask us to pay attention to how space appears to be undifferentiated and uniform but in reality is constituted by heterogeneity. It entwines layers of perceptions and meanings which can and must be contested. Because power works itself out through space and its production, sustained attention to territories is crucial in identifying and subverting dominant discourse. Along with them, I ask in this paper: how is a particular space produced and appropriated? What violence does this space hide behind its façade of homogeneity? Lefebvre points to the nation-state as an abstract space but I would argue that within *Cracking India*, we have another abstract space as well: Hira Mandi.

What do we know about the physical space of Hira Mandi in Pakistan? As the red light district of Lahore, Hira Mandi occupies a central place in the cultural imaginary. It is located within the old part of the walled city, flanked by the majestic Lahore Fort which was built by the Mughals, and the famed Badshahi Mosque. Historically, Mughal emperors constructed it to house their royal courtesans—dancers of artistic renown. While its present-day dancers are less concerned with the elite ethos of the performing arts tied to

its birth, the Hira Mandi still functions as a site of prostitution. As Louise Brown points out, although the outward form of the dancers has changed over the centuries, the logic of the exchange of social, economic, and sexual capital that underpins the dancing remains the same. "Wealthy men buy a re-worked cultural performance of prostitution" (Brown 411), inscribing Hira Mandi as a hybridized space that mingles the ancient and the modern. This hybridity is also reflected in its constituent demography. It brings together under one roof those considered as urban outcasts and the wealthy men who want to use their services (Chambers 115).

Lenny, the child narrator, however, does not apprehend the darker undertones of Hira Mandi. She constantly interprets outward signifiers at face value, mistaking the façade of glamor for reality. We see this in Lenny's conversation with her sexually-enlightened Cousin about Hira Mandi. Having spotted Ayah for the first time since her abduction, Cousin excitedly reveals to Lenny that he is certain Ayah is now a dancer at the Hira Mandi. Lenny misinterprets the linguistic signifiers because they are masked by glitz-tinted euphemisms. Firstly, she assumes that a dancing girl is akin to a glamorous actress. For her, this explains why Ayah had heavy make-up on when Cousin saw her whisked away in a car. Secondly, since Hira Mandi literally means Diamond Market, Lenny assumes that it is a shop for diamonds. Even when Cousin impatiently informs her, "the girls are the diamonds! The men pay them to dance and sing ... and to do things with their bodies" (252), Lenny still does not fully comprehend the violence that is masked behind the language of the dancing diamonds. Cosmetics and clothing also hide from Lenny the darker goings-on in the Hira Mandi. When Lenny later meets Ayah at her home in the Hira Mandi, she finds Ayah's outward appearance—bedecked with tinsel glitter, jewels, and high heels—"achingly lovely" (273), and her new Muslim name, Mumtaz, "fitting" (272). Finally, the physical space of Ayah's new home also tricks Lenny. She finds the glossy-green velvet sofas, ornate chairs, and the pink wall paint appealing like a "cool and delicious tutti-frutti ice cream" (272). For Lenny, euphemistic language, cosmetics, and spatial décor all combine to create the Hira Mandi as a space that resembles "a cross between a Swiss finishing school ... and a School for the Fine and Performing Arts" (279). Violence is absent from the picture, successfully hidden away behind a veneer of glamor.

Lenny's perception of Hira Mandi is solidified through how Ice-candy man produces this space. In fact, if not for his character, we (and Ayah and Lenny) may never have been introduced to Hira Mandi to being with. Thus, Ice-candy man is a crucial piece in this spatial analysis. He is intimately connected to the space of Hira Mandi in that he "belongs" there. Not only does he make Ayah a dancing girl in this space, he also settles with her there after marrying her, identifying it as "home". Additionally, his lineage is rooted in the kotha as well, his mother having been a dancer there. He proudly traces his ancestry to the "royal bastards" (258) of the past, connecting Hira Mandi as his "home" in an even larger transhistorical sense. However, not only does he "belong" in that space, he actively produces that space as, to use Lefebvre's term, an abstract space. As we will see, the strategies by which he does this finds a corollary in his many "elastic" faces (259). Just as his outwards persona as a seller of ice-candy transforms into many other personas over the course of the novel, the homogenous nature of the Hira Mandi is exposed as arena split into a spectrum of layers, especially through Godmother. Ice-candy man becomes the multi-faceted embodiment of the various ideologies underpinning the brothel, and this essay will see the character and the space in conjunction with each other.

Ice-Candy Man the Birdman: The Precursor to the “Mandi Pimp”

While Ice-candy man is linked to the Hira Mandi only in the final pages of the novel, we encounter from the beginning his casual treatment of violence. In one of the earlier scenes, Lenny describes how he “transforms himself into a birdman” (35) on the colder days when his ice-candy sales plummet. He coaxes unassuming English women into buying his caged parrots and sparrows through theatrics, brandishing a razor furiously and threatening to cut their heads. As the narrative and his performance progress, Lenny refers to him as Birdman—with capitalization—as if he no longer *acts* as this figure but *becomes one* with it. As their owner, Birdman has the power to cage the birds, and, for economic gain, taunt them mercilessly with brutality. His theatrics of violence is predicated and excused on a logic of possession and economics: the birds are his and he can do with them as he pleases for the sake of his livelihood. Moreover, even Lenny and Ayah normalize this logic. As they watch his performance, they are enthralled, applauding and excitedly shrieking, “cut their throats!” (36)

This scene occurs before the Partition—before Ice-candy man throws grenades into Hindu and Sikh houses, before he is part of the mob that gang-rapes Ayah, and before he forces her to become a prostitute. At this stage, he does not actually inflict physical violence on his possession. However, I would argue that his action not only narratively foreshadows his explosive violence later but is also the moral precursor to it. It embodies “the spirit of violence” that Gyanendra Pandey describes is present as “the prehistory of the more glaring and physical acts of political violence” (11). The persona of the Birdman shows that the violence that constituted the Partition was not an aberration, as Indian nationalist historiography has often portrayed, but was part of an existing pattern made unremarkable and invisible through normalization. More specifically, as Madhuparna Mitra argues, Ayah’s abduction too should be seen as part of a continuum in which there is a “routine acceptance of casual, almost banal violence” (26). Birdman is the forerunner to the “Mandi pimp” (Sidhwa 257).

Unlike Birdman, Ice-candy man the Mandi pimp is not a theatrical persona who merely *threatens* violence. Ayah’s body is persistently battered behind an aura of dance, glitter, and glory. The logic of possession and economics that underscores Birdman’s violence is taken to its sexual end within the space of the Hira Mandi. In the next section, we will see how Ice-candy man uses his personas to construct this space. Parallely, we shall also see how the space of the nation-state too is constructed using similar strategies.

“The Poet Approacheth”: Art and Spatial Production

When Ice-candy man comes to visit Lenny and her Godmother months after the Partition riots, they are stunned at his “incredible transformation” (257). He is no longer an uncouth thug “inhaling from the stinking cigarettes clenched in his fist” (37) but a poet with “dreamy kohl-rimmed eyes” (257), donning white muslin and a Jinnah cap. Not only has attire changed, his mannerisms and words too bespeak a shift from his old self. Reciting Urdu poets like Wali Dakni and Faiz Ahmed Faiz flawlessly with emotive gestures, Ice-candy man fits perfectly into his new persona. In fact, Lenny is so convinced by his transformation that, upon seeing him, she declares that “the poet approacheth” (256). Although subtle and momentary, this shift to an archaic tone in the narratorial voice registers the powerful magnetism of Ice-candy man’s “orbit of ... poetic vision” (275). As with Birdman, he becomes one with his new persona. Through the rest of the

novel, he recites Urdu poetry effortlessly and regularly to express his emotions, sealing the seeming authenticity of his transformation.

Poetry is only part of the artistic subject of Ice-candy man's effusive declamations; as a poet of Hira Mandi, he also becomes an art connoisseur more generally. He exalts Ayah's dancing and singing, praising her "divine gift". "She has the voice of an angel," he says, "and the grace and rhythm of a goddess" (259). In interweaving religious language into his description, Ice-candy man infuses a spiritual ethos into Ayah's performances. He elevates her bodily performance to a divine level, converting the Hira Mandi itself into an otherworldly space. In the picture Ice-candy man paints, listening to and watching Ayah transports her audience to a supernatural, ethereal space. Additionally, because of her skills, she is able "to command fancy prices" (259). Ice-candy man is not only careful to leave out from *whom* exactly she commands these payments (and who constitutes her audience) but also positions her as if she has control.

This portrayal of Ayah as a goddess who commands by virtue of her artistic skills produces Hira Mandi as a space in which poetry, dance, and music enthrall audiences. Eliding any hint of sexual violence or economic swindling, Ice-candy man constructs this space of prostitution as an artist's paradise. No wonder then that Lenny is befuddled by the contempt with which this "Institute of Culture" (279) is held by her Godmother. Ice-candy man's discourse normalizes the violence that underlies Hira Mandi through the façade of art.

In addition to the role of art in the spatiality of Hira Mandi, I want to suggest here that art is also often used to create the space of the Indian nation-state in a way that draws the curtains on its more unseemly aspects. Patriotic songs, speeches, and poems often exalt the nation by presenting only qualities that inspire nationalist fervor, such as democratic and secular principles which promote a spirit of "unity in diversity" (Pozza 200, Pandey 22). This spirit, however, is often undercut by a conscious or unconscious exclusion of marginal groups within the nation. For example, Andre J. P. Elias notes how India's national song *Vande Mataram* "reinforces a history of xenophobic and gendered associations with national purity" (92) through the ubiquitous nationalist metaphor of the motherland. Also paralleling Ice-candy man's designation of Ayah as a deity, the space of the nation-state is often produced by equating it to the figure of a goddess to be worshipped. As Sumathi Ramaswamy argues, the deployment of this bodyscape, especially within visual culture, transforms the nation from an empty geographical space to a space infused with spiritual meaning and deserving of affection. Inscribing the gendered body within the center of a nationalist discourse is a spatial strategy that effectively erases actual female subjects by elevating the spectacular female as the norm. Thus, like Ice-candy man uses art (and with it, the female body) to create the Hira Mandi as an ideal, homogenous space, art that follows a nationalist paradigm often chooses to ignore the violence implicit in making of the nation-state.

"He Sounds Like a Cultured Courtier": History and Spatial Production

Ice-candy man's use of the glory of art is entwined with his use of history to spatially produce Hira Mandi as a site of glamor. To explain to Godmother and Lenny why Hira Mandi is located in the shadow of the Old Mogul Fort, the Poet turns to its origin story. He tells them that Hira Mandi was built by the Mogul princes for their favorite concubines and their children. He christens it, with a mixture of shame and pride, "the cradle of the royal bastards" (258). He further elucidates that his mother belonged to "the old stock" (259) that descended from the House of Bahadur Shah, the Mogul emperor, as opposed

to the newer, run-of-the-mill prostitutes who lived under pimps. We can note several things in this narrative. Firstly, that pride is mingled with into this story points to the importance Ice-candy man places on his royal, even if slightly scandalous, lineage. He takes pains to set this distinguished lineage apart, making sure that his listeners understand that Ayah no common prostitute (and, by implication, he is no common pimp). Secondly, he doesn't seem to realize that there is only a very thin line—indeed, one could argue there is hardly any line at all—between the essential positions of the royal dancers and the common prostitutes.

This realization does not, understandably, strike our child-narrator either. In fact, to Lenny, the revelation of this royal heritage turns Ice-candy man into a Mogul courtier himself. Upon hearing this story, Lenny notes that “he sounds like a cultured courtier. His face, too, has acquired the almond-eyed, thin-lipped profile of the handsome Moguls portrayed in miniatures” (259). Later, when she and Godmother visit them at Hira Mandi, Ice-candy man “displays the exquisite courtesy of Mogul courtiers” (271). Lenny also thinks, upon hearing that Mumtaz is Ayah's new name, that “it is fitting that a courtier's wife be named after a Mogul queen” (272) For Lenny, Ice-candy man not only looks and behaves like a Mogul courtier, he has become one, paralleling his other transformations.

As a Mogul courtier, Ice-candy man produces the Hira Mandi as a space with the history of Muslim nobility as its bedrock. He mingles the glories of a past rooted in religion and royalty, even renaming Ayah after the wife of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan for whom the Taj Mahal was built. Two implications are clear from this renaming. Firstly, Ayah is no longer a “mere” Hindu nanny but, by virtue of their marriage, now part of the Muslim royal lineage to which Ice-candy man believes he too belongs. Ayah's original identity—her familial history, her religion, her profession—have all been erased. Secondly, her new name forcibly draws her into a relationship with Ice-candy man that is steeped with notions of timeless passion and romantic love. This Mogul courtier wants the world to know that his Mumtaz is the object of his ardent affection (even if his Mumtaz hardly shares the same sentiments), an affection having a famous historical precursor. He may not be able to build her a marble mausoleum but he will at least turn their home at Hira Mandi, as we have already noted, to resemble a space fit for royalty. Ice-candy man the Mogul courtier is also the timeless lover.

We have seen here how Hira Mandi becomes a space not only produced by art but also looks to history to derive its value. This history glorifies the dancing girls because of their connection with Mogul royalty, choosing to ignore the unjust and self-serving attitudes of the emperors in their treatment of the concubines and their children. Moreover, this very history also sanitizes Ice-candy man's violence towards dancing girls like Ayah by justifying her subjugation within Hira Mandi.

In a similar way, the space of the nation-state is also produced through history. In the case of India, the anticolonial movement relied on writing a version of history that countervailed colonial representations of India as “backward” and “uncivilized”. As a result, the Hindu past before Mughal rule was glorified as the ideal to which India needed to return. As Partha Chatterjee has shown, this nationalist move of using history as the source of nationhood still has implications for today (Chatterjee 60). The singularity of Indian historiography homogenizes the space of India as belonging to the Hindus, leading to the marginalization and oppression of minority religious groups. Like the abstract space of Hira Mandi silences violent undertones, the space of India produced by nationalist history silences subaltern voices that opposed or were excluded by nationalist

discourse. Additionally, like history abets Ice-candy man's tentacles of passion, nationalist history aims at stirring patriotism for the country. The loyalty of citizens towards a territorial space is crucial to the formation of the nation-state, as we see in partition literature like this one; a historiography that posits a specific glorious era as associated with a certain group of people and their lineage stirs nationalist fervor at the expense of other groups.

"Oh? What Kind of Man? A Royal Pimp?": Deconstructing the Artifice

To end this paper, I want to draw attention to how Sidhwa deconstructs the elaborate illusion Ice-candy man erects. As we have seen, he spatially produces Hira Mandi as a performer's paradise and a regal space rooted in history. In doing so, he hides the violence he perpetrates against Ayah and relegates her to quiet submission. As a child narrator, Lenny buys into this discourse of deception, seeing Hira Mandi the way Ice-candy man has produced it: glamorous, romantic, and safe. She even sees him as a "misused lover" (274), empathizing with him when Ayah/Mumtaz refuses his cajoling.

However, through Godmother, Ice-candy man and Hira Mandi are exposed. In what turns out to be an explosive conversation when Ice-candy man the Poet visits them, Godmother lays bare the contradictions of his representation. Challenging his narrative of "saving" Ayah from being killed by marrying her, she tells him that he purports to be Ayah's protector but also allowed her to be gangraped. Furthermore, she dismantles his euphemisms: words like "rape", "disgraced", "destroyed" "shameless" replace the glitzy picture Ice-candy man has painted. According to Godmother, he has "trapped [Ayah] in the poisonous atmosphere of the Kotha" (261). In this opposing narrative, Ayah is no goddess and the Hira Mandi is no glorious, ethereal space. Instead, it is a space where violence is inscribed on the woman's body in the name of art. Finally, Godmother also attacks his personhood. When Ice-candy man tells her despairingly that he cannot be expected to be faithful because he is only a man, Godmother lashes back, "Oh? What kind of man? A royal pimp? What kind of man would allow his wife to dance like a performing monkey before other men? You're not a man, you're a low-born, two-bit evil little mouse!" (260) In one swoop, she removes all pretensions by reinterpreting Ayah's dancing (or art) and Ice-candy man's identity (or "royal" history). Godmother reveals the logic of possession, violence, and economics that undergird Hira Mandi, and in doing so, she counter-produces that space.

While the narrative primarily relies on godmother for exposing the homogenizing abstract space of Hira Mandi, Ayah too resists in her own way. When Godmother and Lenny go to visit her, Ayah's voice is just a whisper but she is firm when she says she will not live with Ice-candy man. Even at the risk of being rejected by her family, she is determined to return to Amritsar. Unlike for Ice-candy man, Hira Mandi is not home (much less, a palace) for Ayah; it is a prison in which violence has left its traumatic mark. In the end, at Godmother's urging, she washes her face. Ayah is not only wiping away her overly made-up dancing-girl face, she is also exposing the battered self behind all the artifice of the Hira Mandi.

Godmother deconstructs Hira Mandi by identifying and attacking the linguistic euphemisms that represent that space. She pinpoints how Ice-candy man uses art and history to hide the violence perpetrated by Ice-candy man upon Ayah. Through this and Ayah's own resistance, a spatiality of "contending politics and contending subject positions" (Pandey 18) is inscribed.

We have seen how space is not a static entity sitting as a backdrop but a dynamic, socially constructed arena with political possibilities. This is true not only for a textual space like Hira Mandi but also real spaces like the nation-state. Space and power are constitutive of each other, often used by hegemonic practices for their own ends through various strategies. But this space is not devoid of resistance either, as this paper has observed. Partition literature like *Cracking India* shows us how spatial practices and discourses can be exposed and subverted.

Villanova University, Pennsylvania, USA

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