

The Move to Normativity and the Regime of Punishment in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*

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Pakistan born Parsi novelist Bapsi Sidhwa's 1988 novel, *Ice-Candy-Man* has achieved critical as well as academic fame. The novel, variously known as *Cracking India*, has not only been turned into a film but is also taught to students as a Partition novel or a Parsi novel. Both epithets are well deserved. *Ice-Candy-Man* is a Partition novel because the novel deals with the Partition and the events leading up to the Partition of India: violence against women, rioting and the burning of cities and other motifs recur in the novel. It is a Parsi novel because Sidhwa herself is Parsi and because the novel deals extensively with the Parsi community in Lahore. It is narrated through the eyes of Lenny, a young Parsi female child, who suffers from a disability in her limb due to her history of a polio infection.

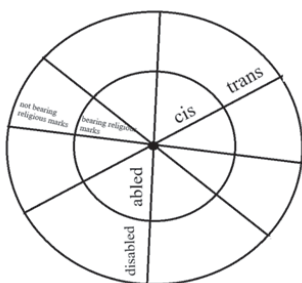
Sidhwa's humorous style of writing and her child narrator Lenny's apparent naivete disarms the reader to the novel's complexity. The novel is not just a Partition novel or a document of postcolonial Parsi writing but also demonstrates an acute awareness of the body, more importantly of what happens to vulnerable bodies during violent strife. However, scholarships around the text has ignored this last aspect of the body. In this paper, I intend to examine threats and negotiations that threatened bodies make in the text, voluntarily or involuntarily.

Firstly, we should note that Lenny's limb-based disability allows her to spend more time with the women in her family, away from the activities of other children. Her doctor, Colonel Bharucha declares that there is no need for Lenny to attend school, like other children. She can get married and have children instead. (Sidhwa 15) This is a remarkable case of a gendered experience of disability, allowing the lens of the text to be somewhat crippled. Lenny's relationship with her Ayah grows out of the mutual dependence shared by the two. Lenny is dependent on Ayah's company for her mobility and Ayah is dependent on Lenny to keep undesirable men (or advances) at bay. The first example of this can be seen in Ayah's reaction to an Englishman who tries to start an undesired conversation with Ayah. Sidhwa writes that Ayah uses her keen reflexes to "pull the carriage up short", (Sidhwa 2) almost using Lenny's pram to create a distance between herself and the man. Lenny's non-normative body becomes an instrument, a shield for Ayah. When it comes to them preventing unwanted advances, there exists a kinship between Ayah and the kids. Lenny kicks the Ice-candy-man and so does Adi. The children keep mum about Ayah's affairs, while conveniently protecting her in their own ways. At the beginning of the novel, Ayah is merely eighteen. Ayah's body is the sexualized body of a young woman. Sidhwa describes her as: "Everything about her is eighteen years old and round and plump...And as if her looks were not stunning enough, she has a rolling bouncing walk that agitates the globules of her buttocks under her cheap colourful saris

and the half-spheres beneath her sari blouses.” (pp. 3) The quote demonstrates that despite Lenny’s closeness to the Ayah, she views Ayah through a sexualized gaze; with almost a blazon like quality to the description.

However, the non-normative alliance at the early part of the book will shift towards greater normativity through two forms of violence: quotidian and spectacular. In the following section, I will analyse this change through the framework of the charmed circle developed by Gayle Rubin.

In her 1988 essay, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality”, Gayle Rubin constructs the difference between normative and non-normative sex in terms of hierarchy, and illustrates this through her well-known charmed circle hypothesis, which assumes that the normative is inside the circle and the non-normative is on the margins. The non-normative can inch closer towards the circle depending on social change but the perfect centre of the circle remains unreachable. Therefore, perfect normativity remains an illusion. One can only strive to be more normative but there is no perfectly normative sexuality. Through the charmed circle hypothesis, Rubin destabilizes the centre, proving that it is after all a construct, an object of imagination. Now, if we imagine sex practices as a function of the body and of social conditioning, we can map the body on the same model of a charmed circle. A charmed circle of the body would look like the following:



As the Partition dooms nearer, people change their bodies and start reigning in the sexuality of Ayah, drawing themselves closer to the illusory centre of the circle. The events leading to the Partition create a society which is more openly violent i.e. there is a progressive shift towards spectacular and unabashed forms of violence. However, this does not mean that violence did not exist in pre-Partition India. Nationalist anticolonial struggles in South Asia involved having to “prove” to the British that the natives were in fact capable of governing themselves. Non normative sexual practices were extensively curbed in order to construct the native man as capable of governing a nation. Ayah, who is likely from a lower caste background and is a working class woman demonstrates unabashed sexuality in her non-marital relationship with Masseuse. Ayah is shown to derive pleasure from her encounters with Masseuse (Sidhwa 19) and this remains a threat to the colonial order (now adopted by the native ruling class) and hence she is punished later, with violence inflicted on her body, in the latter parts of the novel.

The motif of a bodily shift towards normativity, often through violence, is present throughout the text. The first instance of violence in the novel is inflicted on Lenny herself when Colonel Bharucha operates on her limb, even though she does not seem too bothered by her disability. (Sidhwa 6) The operation is an attempt to normalize Lenny and her polio struck leg which she sticks out at the Englishman who wants to strike up an unwanted conversation with the young, desirable Ayah. Through it, the child’s desire

and agency are curbed by a parental, paternalistic gaze of older people, creating the first rupture in the world of Lenny and Ayah.

In the first chapter of the novel when Ayah is approached by an Englishman (see paragraph 3 of this essay), Lenny is used as a tool by both of them. While the Englishman wants to chat up Ayah and uses Lenny as a ruse, Ayah uses her as a shield. During the conversation, the Englishman insists that Lenny should walk in order to grow "strong". (Sidhwa 2) The colonial regime of "strength" is immediately juxtaposed next to Lenny and Ayah's regime of femininity and disablement, the agencies derived from both of which Ayah and Lenny perform thoroughly. Lenny's experience of the Partition therefore begins with the ableist idea of "strong", presented to her by a white man entrenched in racist heteropatriarchy. Therefore, the first time Lenny is introduced to "strong" as the normative and desirable is through a western colonial agent. This pattern would repeat, only through agents closer home, who are versed in this order. Lenny's deformed foot is corrected by Colonel Bharucha, a doctor educated in western medicine even though Lenny does not show any discomfort with the foot. The regime of medical knowledge facilitates the change in Lenny's body, pushing it from non-normative to normative.

The centrality of the body is ensured in the novel through the recurring story of the unusual mice with seven tails which Lenny's mother narrates to Lenny. In the beginning of the novel, while Lenny still has access to Ayah, the story is narrated such that the last of the seven tails of the mouse is chopped off. (Sidhwa 7) However, even this action by the mouse to fit in does not create the necessary acceptance that the unusual seven tailed mouse seeks in mice society. Later in the novel, after Ayah is abducted (and Lenny is clearly disturbed, blaming it on herself), Lenny's mother tells her the same story. (Sidhwa 213) Only this time, the mean bullying mice accept the seven tailed mouse when the mouse has one last tail. The altered ending to the story demonstrates a narrative shift towards acceptance by aping normative bodies. Bodies and the tone of the narrative shifts from the margins of the charmed circle to the centre.

In another instance, a group of men make fun of Hari the gardener and try to take off his dhoti. The underlying implication is that since his penis is not circumcised it is an object of curiosity and display for the circumcised men around him. Eventually when Ayah's kidnapper come to abduct Ayah, questions are raised over the condition of Hari's penis. We learn that as social boundaries grew tighter, Hari finally converted to Islam and circumcised himself. This incident too confirms the theory that with tighter social boundaries, there is a shift towards the normative. While conversion to Islam remains a matter of heated diatribe among Hindu ideologues in contemporary India, the overwhelming shift towards hardened versions of Hinduism and Islam cannot be ignored in the context of Sidhwa's novel. Hari is after all, a working class resident of Lahore, an overwhelmingly Muslim city. In that context, Hari is a religious minority, who has to change his body to fit a normative ideal as he fears persecution.

Ayah's sexuality too is eventually controlled by various men. Adi, while being protective of Ayah against the Ice-candy-man's advances kicks him and is further assaulted by the Ice-candy-man. (Sidhwa 30) Ayah's sexuality which was so far free flowing is controlled by male figures. Her body which lay as a thorn in the side of a nationalist marriage-centric heteropatriarchal order, is reigned in through a spectacular display of gendered violence involving her abduction, rape and forced marriage. Ayah's sexuality which revelled in deriving pleasure from male bodies, rather than giving it, is now pawned off as an object at the Heera Mandi, the red light area of Lahore.

Quotidian and Spectacular Violence in *Ice-Candy-Man*

A fairly dominant narrative exists on the Indian side of the border which goes that Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims lived peacefully in India until the British (along with a few bad apples), divided the country creating violence and mayhem. Propagators of this theory view Jinnah as a British agent and view the Partition in isolation from the day to day violence of pre-independent Indian life. To this narrative, violence is not primary but a deviation from the normal non-violent day to day life in undivided India. Sidhwa's novel outlines a pre-Partition society so steeped in violence that the violence of the Partition does not seem like a far cry from the violence of daily life. In other words, the violence of the Partition is only at an arm's length away and always expected by the reader. If the first narrative (that Partition violence was an irregular occurrence) dehistoricizes the Partition, Sidhwa's narrative rehistoricizes it through the lens of militant masculinities that gradually build up until the Partition in the anticolonial struggles of South Asia. Consider the training camps of Bengal where men were trained into bodily fitness and perfection in order to fight against the British. In Punjab, the rise of the Arya Samaj in the latter half of the nineteenth century energised and consolidated the lower middle classes through reformulated versions of traditional Hinduism. By 1906, a Punjab Hindu Sabha was founded. This proves that in the mid nineteenth century, a Hindu identity was created in Punjab which reached its logical culmination in the spectacular violence during Partition. (Tuteja and Grewal 3-28)

In Sidhwa's text, the Partition is only the culmination of a long process of violence inflicted on the body, the climax of something sinister and rotten in the state of society. To erase the violence inflicted on women's bodies and to make it purely about utopian pre-Partition times as opposed to the dystopian Partition is to make a masculinist reading of the Partition.

Perhaps understanding the patterns of violence inflicted on the body (existent in the text) would enable us to understand the need to shift towards the charmed circle. Women and children too, despite their location outside the charmed circle reproduce patterns of violence thereby inflicting upon others the violence that has been inflicted on their own bodies. Cases in point are the subtle sexual violence by Cousin on Lenny and the brutal physical violence on Papoo by her mother.

Foucault in an interview with *Quel Corps?* informs that constructing a powerful or strong body is an act of exerting power over one's body: through training, gymnastics, nudism etc. (Foucault 56) The bodies of children and soldiers belong to this regime as they are trained in order to "be strong". Once power produces this effect of producing a desirable body, the struggle of one's own body against power starts. This colonial regime of powerful or strong bodies is reproduced by the Englishman (already mentioned before) who encourages Lenny to walk in order to grow strong. The pattern is also reproduced by Colonel Bharucha in his operation, forcing Lenny to exert power over her own body. The body revolts against Bharucha and the parents' decision to "fix" it.

As soon as Lenny's deformity is "corrected" through surgery, she experiences a great deal of pain. The body does not remain a site for the exertion of power anymore. It speaks its own language and acts with agency. Through the hysteria, Lenny communicates her pain to her parents. Her mother declares to her father that he has to call the doctor "at once". (Sidhwa 7) But Lenny later finds out that they never meant to really call the doctor and were chiefly concerned about calming her down. This is Lenny's first sense of betrayal from the adult world. Later, Lenny reproduces betrayal when the Ice-candy-man comes looking for Ayah and is in turn betrayed. In the first instance Lenny believes

in the authoritarian figures of her parents. In the second instance, she believes in the authoritarian and well-meaning figure of the man over the domestic wisdom of her mother's household. The first episode is an instance of quotidian violence and the second is an instance of the spectacular.

Lenny and Ayah's bodies respond in different ways to said violence. After her surgery as she gives in to the pain, her body reacts through hysteria as her mental understanding gives in. The mind is dissociated, rationality subsides and the protestations of the body take over. In the case of Ayah, as she is kidnapped and taken away, she quite consciously fights back the power exerted on her. Finally, her hair flies into her kidnapper's face "staring at us as if she wanted to leave behind her wide-open and terrified eyes" (Sidhwa 184) thus creating a spectacle. In this case, we should note how Lenny is perceptive to sexual violence. As soon as Ayah is kidnapped, Lenny dissociates from Ayah's body and considers it as distinct parts: eyes, hair etc. instead of the whole. While previously Lenny had described Ayah in terms of her physical and sexual attributes, Lenny's descent into a blazonic portrayal of Ayah is clearest in this part of the text.

In order to gain attention, Lenny teases her brother Adi about his masculinity. She takes a sari clad doll and shows it to her brother saying that it looks like him while calling him "Sissy". (Sidhwa 23) The sari clad doll is reminiscent of Ayah who as we know prefers to wear a sari to get professional preference over the traditionally Punjabi shalwar kameez. In Lenny's behaviour with her brother, two levels of oppression are to be navigated: of gender and class-caste location. Ayah is not just a woman but is also a working class Punjabi one. While she is desirable to many men, she is also imagined as available. Lenny of all people would know of Ayah's sexual history and while Ayah's form of femininity is desirable it becomes a subject of ridicule in this pre-Partition society where quotidian violence upon women is a regular occurrence. The children although close to Ayah and dependent on her, also treat Ayah as a site for contestation of power. While Lenny is jealous of Ayah's growing love for Masseur, Adi tries to protect Ayah by kicking Ice-candy-man as the latter tries to touch Ayah underneath her sari. The Ice-candy-man, in retaliation, threatens to drop Adi unless Ayah goes out with him to the cinema. Thus, Adi attempts to control Ayah's honour while Ice-candy-man attempts to breach it, thereby reproducing a discourse of patriarchy that is dependent on class and caste. We already know that Lenny is possessive of Ayah. Indeed, it is not difficult to imagine that Adi too might have felt the same kind of right over Ayah's body. Kate Millett famously debunks the theory that rape is a crime of one man against another, (Millett 44) thereby allowing the foregrounding of female bodies on which said violence is exerted in the discourse on rape. The reduction of female bodies to sites where patriarchal power is exerted in quotidian life becomes absolutely clear when Adi and Ice-candy-man fight over Ayah.

While through Rubin's charmed circle model we can explain the normative shift in people's lives, we need to look at a more Foucauldian model in order to explain why Ayah is so vigorously punished by patriarchy towards the end of the novel. Ayah refuses to marry Masseur despite being romantically attached to him. Her sexuality sticks out like a sore thumb as she refuses to inch closer to the charmed circle. Ultimately, Ayah's resistant body is subjected to a regime of punishment in order to make her toe a patriarchal line.

Another disturbing instance of quotidian violence in the text is the mistreatment heaped upon Slavesister by Lenny's godmother Rodabai. Slavesister, who appears to live with Rodabai (Godmother), is given the job of cooking and is constantly insulted by Rodabai. The insults are heaped in a joking manner but the condescension in Roda's behaviour is clear. The violence inflicted on Slavesister is not an isolated one. Intra-generational

violence exists in Lenny's life too as Cousin often forces her to touch his penis and fondles her breasts. In another disturbing example of the attack on female children's bodies, Papoo, a servant in their household is married off by her mother at the age of eleven. Papoo's mother, Muchoo is disappointed that her child is a girl and abuses Papoo regularly, much to the horror of the bourgeois Parsi women.

I have already pointed out that any kind of uncritical acceptance that Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs lived peacefully before the Partition has to be problematized through gender. Peace is available only to powerful men; threats on women's bodies are ever present. Masculinities become progressively more violent but even before Partition-related overt militarization takes place, these masculinities are already mobilised through play as is proved by the example where Hari's dhoti is pulled. The incident has been described as homoerotic (Neutill 2010) and celebrated as a form of unconventional sexual expression before the Partition. However, let us take a close look at the language of the paragraph:

"Everyone *towers* (emphasis mine) over the gardener...even the sweeper Moti. Papoo the sweeper's daughter...brandishing a long broom. Yousaf casually shakes and *pulls* (emphasis mine) the hand, trying to loosen its hold on the loin-cloth, and Hari's slight, taut body rocks back and forth and from side to side." The homoerotic and playful sexual colouring in this paragraph comes filtered through a lens of apparently joyful violence. This playful exchange between the men and Papoo may appear to be innocent but when it is read in conjunction with the many other instances of quotidian violence described in the novel, we can see a pattern of permissible violence emerging.

The microviolences inflicted on Ayah by the Ice-candy-man is quotidian while her abduction and rape is spectacular. The violence that the Englishman inflicts by his insistence on a "strong" body and by sleazing on Ayah is quotidian whereas the violence of Lenny's hysteria is spectacular. It is only the spectacular that draws the attention of the grown ups who find such violence actionable while the children witness quotidian violence regularly. The creation of the spectacle is highly dependent on the location of the violence and the body on which the violence is inflicted. Ayah is abducted from the Sethis' family home, and the lines of violation are clear cut. Ayah's hair flying, her eyes haunting, create a spectacle. Whereas the violence on the female body was invisible before, the violence during the Partition turns the body into a spectacular object. There is an almost ritualistic and recurring quality to the violence inflicted on the bodies of women in this society. Violence appears to be so intrinsic to it, one can argue that this society will fall apart without the constant perpetration of violence. Lenny's relationship with Ayah or the camaraderie they share would never be built without her constant dependence on her caregiver and the need to exert her (Lenny's) authority on her. Meanwhile, Rodabai's cooking would never be done unless it is by Slavesister. The society that Sidhwa draws in the text is structurally dependent on violence to function.

The experience of the Partition also changes bodies. Through the regime of discipline and sexual trauma that I have discussed before, Ayah is shamed into considering herself something "less than" what she was before. She refuses to come to Lenny's home and seems to be in pain when they finally meet her. Meanwhile, Ice-candy-man seems to have made himself more cultured than before and carries with himself the elaborate courtesy of the Mughal court. He too, has moved towards a normative ideal. However, in the case of the Ice-candy-man, the heteropatriarchal and class based normative ideal benefits him. Meanwhile the jewellery bedecked Ayah, barely visible through her garments keeps her eyes open starkly and pleads to be sent back to her "folk". Ayah speaks through

her body that she has not accepted her boxing into the charmed circle. She has no wish to remain in this marriage and wishes to walk out of it. Despite Godmother's counsel, she refuses to live with Ice-candy-man, no matter how dramatic his declarations of love are in front of the Parsi women. Keeping up with her erstwhile transgressive life, Ayah again chooses to cross a border, this time an international one, into India. In a single haunting statement, Sidhwa informs us that the Ice-candy-man follows her across the border.

Perhaps the biggest triumph for Ayah is that she refuses to be contained anywhere. She says no to Masseur's proposal for marriage despite loving him. She refuses to stay within the boundaries of a forced marriage despite the advice of the Parsi women. The Recovered Women's Centre, in which is deeply ingrained the structures of patriarchy and national borders, (Butalia 164-165) and is run by bourgeois women too is not acceptable to Ayah. Rescue centres were just as steeped in patriarchy as the rest of post Partition society and women were encouraged to take up gendered professions like knitting, sewing etc. Ayah rejects this system even in the rescue centre. The heteropatriarchal and nationalist project of disciplining Ayah's body fails completely as she rejects every single one of these institutions and desires to quite literally cross the still porous international border between India and Pakistan. But the possibility of further violence remains intact as Ice-candy-man too, crosses over the Wagah Border after her. The novel leaves it to us to imagine how things would pan out between Ayah, her family and the Ice-candy-man across the border.

Thus, with every body that is yet undisciplined, every body that responds to power by challenging it, the spectre of punishment looms in the horizon. In Foucauldian terms, Ayah takes back control of her body from the regime of punishment and that creates the possibility of further punishment, further confinements into patriarchal spaces. The cycle of resistance and punishment is never resolved. It remains in a state of flux, a process of constant negotiation.

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