



"Silenced Voices: Gender Subordination in Bapsi Sidhwa's Cracking India"

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Abstract:

The Indian subcontinent, a region encompassing various territories under British colonial rule, achieved its independence from the British Raj in the year 1947. This significant event led to the partition of the subcontinent into two separate states, namely India and Pakistan. The division under consideration emerged as a consequence of a profound religious conflict, which subsequently escalated into a significant regional tragedy. This unfortunate turn of events compelled millions of individuals to abandon their respective places of residence, while regrettably resulting in the loss of numerous innocent lives. The partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 resulted in significant hardships for women, rendering them the most vulnerable demographic on both sides of the newly formed border. Sidhwa adeptly examines the portrayal and status of women within a historical framework. This research paper aims to analyse the narrative of partition as depicted by Sidhwa in her literary work titled "Cracking India." The primary focus of this study is to shed light on the various forms of exploitation, manipulation, and oppression experienced by women within the contexts of politics, religion, and society, as portrayed in the novel. The publication of this novel serves to position it as a literary work with feminist undertones, prompting a re-evaluation of the rights and societal standing of women within the context of Post-Colonial Pakistan.

Keywords: displacement, otherness, subordination.

The existing body of literature about the significant historical event of Partition, with a specific emphasis on the experiences of women, reveals deeply unsettling narratives, shedding light on the pervasive nature of systemic oppression. Bapsi Sidhwa, a prominent figure in the realm of English literature in Pakistan, undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the prevalent gender bias that women encounter within the specific geographical context of their origin. In her literary work titled "Cracking India," Sidhwa delves into the multifaceted issues of homelessness and displacement, particularly as they pertain to women, within the context of culture, religion, and politics.

The publication of *Cracking India*, indeed, served as a significant catalyst for Pakistani writers, inspiring them to actively employ their literary prowess in advocating for women's rights. The present research paper aims to examine the theme of women's subjection within the context of a specific historical period, as depicted in the novel under analysis. The phenomenon of colonization and partition, which entailed the division of the Indian Subcontinent into two separate states, had a profound impact on the lives of women residing in this region. During the period of partition, they were among the individuals who experienced the most severe forms of violence. The present essay will undertake a critical evaluation of the intricate relationship between culture, religion, and politics, specifically in the context of women.

In her novel *Cracking India*, Sidhwa highlights the profound vulnerability experienced by women as the primary victims of historical events and societal structures. Subjected to the status of chattel, confined inside domestic confines, and excluded from engaging in political affairs, they ultimately succumbed to the oppressive influence exerted by societal norms, the prevailing political structure, and the regressive ruling regime. The author effectively examines the situation and possibilities of women by using a historical lens. Three of the author's works explore the thematic elements that arise from the



complex processes of colonization and division. In addition, Sidhwa places great significance on the veracity and accurate portrayal of reality.

According to Brittain (1943:5), it is suggested that the potential methods of achieving redemption may already exist within the context of historical events. These methods, while deliberately disguised by those who promote war, are believed to be awaiting rediscovery and subsequent recognition by those who engage in critical thinking. During an interview, Sidhwa responded to a query on the goal of the work by stating, "The novel aims to serve as a documentation of a specific historical account, with the aspiration that individuals may derive insights from said history, although it is doubtful that such lessons are acquired." Failure to acquire knowledge from past experiences will always result in the perpetuation of negative actions. Throughout history, individuals have engaged in conflicts driven by religious differences, territorial disputes, competition for romantic partners, social status, and materialistic desires. These factors continue to have a significant influence on contemporary society. The inherent character of humanity remains constant, however, individuals possess the capacity to endeavour and aspire for change. In a subsequent interview with David Montenegro (Dhawan & Kapadia, 1996; 15), the author expresses the belief that her work, particularly *Cracking India*, has provided readers in Pakistan with a newfound sense of agency, giving them a voice that had previously been absent. Historically, they have consistently been shown in a very unfavourable manner. There has been a prevailing trend among writers residing in Western countries to consistently criticize Pakistan. As an individual, I believe that if there is a small contribution I can make, it is to raise awareness and challenge the perception that our worth is diminished due to our residence in a financially disadvantaged country, which is often viewed through a Western lens as being primitive and fundamentalist. *Cracking India* explores the process of recalling memories to critically analyze facts from a fresh perspective.

Sidhwa's approach to the partition is characterized by its multidimensional nature. The individual engages in discourse about political matters, religious beliefs, societal constructs, hegemonic power structures, and marginalized subaltern collectives. The researcher endeavors to identify the specific subaltern groups wherein she seeks to ascertain the spatial dimensions accessible to women, as well as their societal standing as influenced by cultural, religious, and political factors. According to Leonard (2007:11), the article titled "Divided Homeland, Hostile Homes: Partition Women And Homelessness" highlights the dual objectives of literature about partition. One approach involved fostering a comprehensive comprehension of the ethical dimensions surrounding the circumstances of these women by adopting an empathetic perspective from within their subjective experiences. The utilization of literature served as a means to elicit the nuanced and intricate aspects of the female experience, which were noticeably lacking within the realm of political appeals and ensuing discussions. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to mention that the political discourse, whether intentionally or unintentionally, neglected to acknowledge or comprehend the profound distress experienced by these women. It is crucial to recognize that the narrative effectively captured the essence of this sense of "otherness" that permeated their experiences. Through the utilization of irony, writers played a crucial role in subverting the political discourse, thereby facilitating a moral acknowledgment of the suffering experienced by women. The existing body of literature on the topic of women's situation recognizes the inherent limitation of men speaking on behalf of women. Consequently, it emphasizes the importance of providing women with a platform to express their perspectives and experiences.

Another noteworthy illustration of gender-based prejudice is to the treatment of "Papoo" by her parents, particularly her mother. The little girl, who is around eleven years old, resides in the servant quarters of a person named Lenny. Additionally, she belongs to a social group that is considered to be of a lower caste. Despite the equitable distribution of responsibilities, she continues to endure severe physical abuse and mistreatment at the hands of her mother. According to Lenny's complaint, there seems to be a noticeable decline in the frequency of interactions between him and Papoo. The individual in question



consistently engages in the act of shaping the dough into flat patties, performing cleaning duties, as well as collecting excrement off the road and applying it onto the walls of their living space. According to Sidhwa (1988:94), Subsequently, her union with a gentleman who is almost of her father's generation exemplifies a devaluation of women's existence. As Menon (2004:117) says:

The process of socialization, which contributes to the establishment of gender differentiation and the perpetuation of sex inequality, commences at an early stage in the life of a female individual. The majority of the characteristics and attributes commonly attributed to individuals based on their gender, whether male or female, are primarily influenced by cultural factors. These gender-related traits and roles are predominantly shaped and determined by societal norms and expectations. According to prevailing societal norms, individuals are typically assigned a binary gender at birth, either male or female, which is expected to remain constant throughout their lifetime. The comprehensive array of societal mechanisms, encompassing nomenclature, attire, playthings, convictions, conduct, and principles, can be understood as an intricate phenomenon of categorization that commences upon the birth of an individual.

Cracking India engages in extensive discourse over the prevalent phenomenon of gender-based violence targeting women. In response, acts of violence including killings, torture, and sexual assault were perpetrated against those residing on both sides of the border. In her novel "Cracking India" Sidhwa provides a depiction of the circumstances faced by women during the period leading up to partition and migration. She mentions the arrival of a train from Gurdaspur. All individuals within the specified context have perished. All individuals in question adhere to the Islamic faith. There is an absence of deceased individuals who are young ladies. According to Sidhwa (1988:149), there were only two bags filled with gummy candies shaped like women's breasts. In their book titled "Borders and Boundaries," Menon and Bhasin (1998:42-43) present an account of a civil surgeon in Sheikhpura who provided testimony to a fact-finding team. The surgeon reported that one of the prominent forms of injury inflicted upon the wounded was the amputation of women's breasts. Additionally, the surgeon noted that six cases of severed breasts were brought to the refugee camp, all of which resulted in fatalities. A significant proportion of women were compelled to meet their demise as a means of evading instances of sexual assault perpetrated against them, to safeguard their chastity and uphold the honour of themselves and their respective individual, familial, and communal entities. The aforementioned tales include a variety of sexual transgressions, including acts such as stripping and parading in a state of nudity.

In addition to the partitioning of their former homeland, it is noteworthy that their residences and deeply personal connections were also dismantled, resulting in the erosion of their sense of purity. The female population in South Asia has been subjected to instances of ethnocidal rape through significant events such as the partition, the Bangladesh war, conflicts in Kashmir, and the recurring sequence of communal riots that have shaped the region's contemporary historical narrative (Leonard, 2007:23). In their analysis of the body, Kamla and Bhasin (1998:43) highlight that the most prevalent manifestation of violence against women, specifically about their gender, occurs when women from one community are subjected to sexual assault by men from another community. This act serves as a blatant assertion of the perpetrators' identity while simultaneously humiliating the other community by dishonouring their women. According to Chaudhri (1964:41), it is suggested that the rape and molestation of Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim women during and after partition adhered to a recognizable pattern of sexual violence, including acts of aggression, retaliation, and revenge. In certain societies, it was widely held that if a woman from a specific group was subjected to sexual assault by a man from another community, she would be stigmatized as being morally impure, socially undesirable, and ostracised. The prevailing notion posited that the mind is subordinate to the body, particularly when the body is compromised. Consequently, the female body serves as a locus for triumph, retribution, and degradation.



As a feminist, Sidhwa works within a framework that includes both traditional and new ideas. The individual adeptly traverses a complex network of systems and ideologies, effectively illustrating a common sentiment of detachment encountered by individuals identifying as women. The central focus of this inquiry pertains to the role and status of women within the context of culture, religion, and politics. As a result, this particular relationship has brought to light the existence of a pervasive "silent mechanism" that is present within all the entities involved in driving change and implementing reforms. The primary objective of colonization was to establish complete subjugation to imperial rules and regulations. In pursuit of this goal, the British Raj strategically empowered specific influential entities, such as feudal lords, religious leaders, and the bourgeois class, to effectively institutionalize their own ideologies, advance their objectives, and further the overall colonial agenda. The outcome of this interconnected association manifested as a phenomenon commonly referred to as "thought control," which subsequently contributed to the socio-political marginalization experienced by individuals belonging to lower socioeconomic classes as well as women within the societal framework. The phenomenon of colonisation was characterized by the imposition of conditions that rendered individuals voiceless, powerless, and submissive. Consequently, women were disproportionately affected by this political dynamic of diminishing their agency and subjecting them to a state of lesser status.

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