UNIT 2 THE NARRATIVE VOICE IN ICE-CANDY MAN

Structure

2.0 Objectives
2.1 Introduction
2.2 The Narrative Voice and its ambivalence
2.3 Lenny's Narrative
2.4 The Function of Narrator's several Identifications viz. the society
2.5 Let Us Sum Up
2.6 Glossary
2.7 Questions
2.8 Bibliography
2.9 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to study the unique narrative voice of Ice-Candy-Man. The author's reasons for employing a girl-child as the narrator of her novel set in the politically volatile period of India's Partition in 1947 will also be explored. We shall see how Lenny's dual aspects as the narrator and the chief character of Ice-Candy-Man modify a novel on the theme of communal antagonism into an intensely complex and personal statement.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Having read the novel the readers must have noticed that it is, above all else, the narration by an intensely self-reflexive and observant character. This character, an eight year old polio afflicted child, Lenny, narrates the incidents, introduces the novel's characters and talks aloud as it were, her ruminations on all the subjects included in her narration. Therefore, the narrative of Ice-Candy-Man becomes a character's autobiography. The text juxtaposes the child's psyche with the goings on of the adult world, while for this child the world around her itself is a text.

The dividing line between a child as the narrator and a writer speaking through a child's consciousness is deftly camouflaged by the use of first person narration in the present tense. This ambivalence in the narrative voice is revealed only on account of Lenny's acute self-awareness of her implication in the rather precious response she makes to the world around her.

So we have to address several issues when we discuss the narrative voice of this novel. Firstly, why is an ambivalent narrative voice employed by Sidhwa for this story? Secondly, why does she use a child's perspective to contextualise the events of a political battle in India's history? Lastly, why is this child a character marginalized from several locations of her social identity i.e what purpose is served by Lenny's being a handicapped Parsi girl child narrator?

The possible answers to these questions would provide valuable insights into the political sympathies of the novel itself.
2.2 THE NARRATIVE VOICE AND ITS AMBIVALENCE

The narrative opens with the Urdu poet Iqbal’s ‘Complaint to God’:

Shall I hear the lament of the nightingale, submissively lending my ear?
Am I the rose to suffer its cry in silence year after year?
The fire of verse gives me courage and bids me no more to be faint.
With dust in my mouth, I am abject: to God I make my complaint... (1)

It is often through ‘verse’ or art that the stifled sentiments of the victimised minorities in any culture are given a voice. For her novel Bapsi Sidhwa chooses the eight year old Lenny as the narrator to voice the anxiety of the underprivileged during India’s Partition. Lenny in the novel is not just marginalised as a child but also as a girl, as a Parsi and as a physically deficient member of her society. This makes her’s a very effective and resonant narrative voice both in the genre of Partition novels and in the *bildungsroman* writings.

Spoken from the margins of the mainstream discourses of patriarchy, nationality, religion and aesthetics, Lenny’s comments reverberate with questioning and critique even at their most naïve: ‘He [Gandhi] is a man who loves women. And lame children. And the untouchable sweeper – so he will love the untouchable sweeper’s constipated girl-child best’ (87).

I would also like the students to notice here how the narrator is distancing herself from the “untouchable sweeper’s constipated girl-child” in spite of the ironic similarity in their multiple marginalised status. Lenny is thus avoiding, even resenting, any gush of Gandhi—like pathos as a desired response to her narrative. Instead, the narrative carries the readers along a lighthearted current of irony and wayside observation into some of the most heart-rending areas of human experience.

Like most eight year olds, our child narrator is an untiring explorer. Forever asking questions, forever watching, listening – her curiosity to fathom the seen and the unseen dimensions of life around her is typical of growing children. And her intuition is stronger than most. The result is a collage – like narrative. Events, people and ruminations are unpredictably juxtaposed in it and hence, the various concerns the author has in mind are presented in an uncontrived manner.

The child-narrator is shown coming across post-colonial politics, gender divisions, victimisation and dilemmas of the minority communities, child-abuse et al. and she tells her story as such. In her interview for *The Hindustan Times* in 1998, Bapsi Sidhwa emphasized the importance of a writer’s location when he/she is writing. ‘I wanted to be in Pakistan/India. There are little details one absorbs, a sense of place, a resonance of being there, memory does not give you the feel’ she explains. Perhaps, the same can be said about Sidhwa’s use of a child as the story-teller. Narrating as a child (its autobiographical account) makes childhood the location of experience. It gives the feel that writing ‘about’ childhood as an adult might miss – “a resonance of being there”. So Lenny’s experience and her expression of it strike a special chord with the readers. Innocently wide-eyed sometimes, and at other times staggeringly precocious, Lenny’s perspective defamiliarizes the common places of adult experience ‘What is God’ she wonders (94) and “What is a fallen woman?” she asks her Godmother (215).

However, *Ice-Candy-Man* is not a child’s almanac only. The author, in fact, is keeping a close watch over this mini-narrator. In the introduction we said that there is a deftly camouflaged dividing line between the child-narrator and the writer.
speaking through a child’s consciousness. Let us look at this passage to notice the difference:

Switching the bulletin immediately mother recounts some observations of mine as if I’ve spent the entire morning mouthing extraordinarily brilliant, saccharinely sweet and fetching remarks.

And when mother pauses, on cue, I repeat any remarks I’m supposed to have made: and ham up the performance.

And as the years advance, my sense of inadequacy and unworthiness increases. I have to think faster—on my toes as it were—offering lengthier and lengthier chatter to fill up the infernal time of Father’s mute meals. Is that when I learn to tell tales? (79-80)

The omniscience and insight of passages such as this one clearly transcends the childhood narrative framework but remains connected to it through the uninterrupted use of present tense prose in the first person. Instead of remaining a child’s autobiographical account, the narrative becomes the autobiographical account of a prospective teller of tales. In “Why do I write?” Sidhwa observes—

... a part of me could observe my mind; admire its keenness, its subtlety with words, its ability to express not only what I wanted to say, but to extend my meaning (The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, 29).

Clearly, what we have in our hands is a fictionalized autobiography of the author who makes no attempt to hide this fact—allowing the author and the narrator to speak simultaneously in the text. Like Lenny, Sidhwa herself had witnessed Lahore burning in 1947. Afflicted with polio she could not get regular schooling but was taught by an Anglo-Indian tutorress at home. From Unit 1 we can easily trace the foliation between Sidhwa and Lenny. What is relevant to our discussion in this unit, however, is the craftsmanship with which the author and the narrator are interwoven in the narrative, and how, it enriches the novel both with a child’s insight and an adult’s hindsight.

Fusion of the two narrative voices (leaving apart Ranna’s story); the collapsing of the time zones into a simple present; and the collage format to narrate the events are some of the post-modern strategies of narration. They give an immense flexibility to the writer—a lot of discursive space to perspectivise a given event, character or idea in a myriad ways. At the same time, Ice-Candy-Man sticks to the realistic mode of writing by using a child as its apparent narrator.

Hence we have seen that the simplistic reading of the novel as a child’s narrative only will be inadequate. The narrative is characterized by an ambivalence which enriches its scope of significance. Now let us take an overview of the content of this narrative.

2.3 LENNY’S NARRATIVE

Lenny belongs to a reasonably well off Parsi family in Lahore (then a part of undivided India). Incapable of much physical movement on her own, she is perambulated around the city by her Hindu ayah. At the onset of the story, the two things which absorb her attention and whet her curiosity the most, are human relationships, and the paraphernalia of public life surrounding her microcosmic private world: the fair-skinned British regiments, the erratic Indian processions, the larger than-life figure of Queen Victoria, the grand reputations of Nehru, Gandhi and...
Ice-Candy-Man

Jinnah. As a result her narrative absorbs the personal and the political lives throbbing about her.

While polio prevents her from getting conventionally educated at a school, she is further set apart from average children by her inability to tell children's lies and get away with them. Tempered neither by cushioning cliches (usually taught at school) nor by complacent self-deception (which the harmless lies inevitably nurture) Lenny grows up taking in the particulars of her environment in their bare and harsh reality.

She observes the various sides of love and enmity among people both at the level of her own family and community, and at the level of those social groups with whom her own set would not, as a rule, intermix. She has access to this 'other' group through her sexually attractive ayah and the retinue of admirers who gravitate towards her, irrespective of their religion, profession or political affiliation. The ayah, the Ice-candy-man, Imam Din, Sher Singh, the Masseur et al are some of the significant characters of the novel who emerge out of this group.

As the political climate of Lahore gets charged with all the talk of dividing the country along Hindu and Muslim communal territories, the people, both within and outside her family, begin to act and speak like altered beings. Her mother turns from a coy and charming wife to a busy car driver, the ayah from a flirting manipulator of the opposite sex to a woman who wishes to marry and settle down, the admirers of ayah from being mere 'men' to becoming a Muslim, a Hindu or a Sikh. Amidst all this frenzy of changing self-definitions and roles, the man who conspicuously stands out — almost emblematic of all this change — is the Ice-candy-man. Lusting for the ayah with a fervid determination and possessiveness, he is the one who keeps changing his professions sniffing change in the political climate, his whim, or the prospects of profit. Though he is compulsive in his attractive virtuosity Lenny begins to suspect him as one suspects the art of a salamander. But the actual betrayal comes when he cons Lenny into telling him the ayah's hiding place. He leaves Lenny shocked at the terrible consequences truth telling can bring, and awakens her to the possibility of misplaced trust in the people.

Guided by lust and communal antagonism the Ice-candy-man violates the object of his desire. (Ayah is a Hindu and he a Muslim). Though at the close of Lenny's narrative, the kidnapped ayah is found out and released from the grip of prostitution and forced marriage to the Ice-candy-man, it is a sad story nonetheless.

Beyond the ambit of Lenny's narrative lies a world that is transformed beyond recognition or regret. It is important to note that while the child narrator lets go of the thread of her tale at the point where ayah goes away to her family and the Ice-candy-man disappears across the Wagah border behind her, she makes the audience realise that hereafter the narrative must perforce cease to be a child's. The jolt to Lenny's perceptions suggests a violence and violation as mutilating as any dealt out to the myriad victims in the novel.

The innocence that my parents' vigilance, the servants' care and Godmother's love sheltered in me, that neither cousin's carnal cravings, nor the stories of the violence of the mobs, could quite destroy, was laid waste that evening by the emotional storm that raged round me. The confrontation between Ice-candy-man and Godmother opened my eyes to the wisdom of righteous indignation over compassion. To the demands of gratification — and the unscrupulous nature of desire.

To the pitiless face of love (252).

Like her childhood friend Ranna, Lenny also ceases to be an innocent child when the experiences of adult life burst into her life in this unexpected manner. Ranna, who is playful, confident and secure in his ample family, loses it all during the Akali's attack on the Muslim village of Pir Pindo. His mother and sister are raped, his father's head
lopped off before his eyes, his village burnt and people killed or uprooted from their
ancestral land. When Lenny meets him later – and hears the story of his survival she
tries to understand the rules of the game.

It surprises me how easily Ranna has accepted his loss; and
adjusted to his new environment. So ... one gets used to anything
... If one must. (211)

And so, Lenny must get used to the loss of her childhood serenity and her
unsuspecting nature. A child of eight she is required to encounter the world with the
implicit aim to define her position within it. To make this choice she takes her cue
from other people with whom she identifies or else differs. Picking up information,
toing it with logic and intuition, making connections and confirming them,
Lenny's narrative charts her development from innocence to experience.

She recognizes that she is a 'social animal' – a Parsi colonized, physically disabled
girl child! These are her several identifications through which the author's political
sympathies are delineated. So let us study their effect on the novel in detail.

2.4 THE FUNCTION OF THE NARRATOR'S MULTIPLE
IDENTIFICATIONS VIZ. THE SOCIETY

As the Afghan, Sharbat Khan in the novel, bitterly states, “Children are the Devil...
They only know the truth” (192) Lenny's undeviating truth-telling characterises
the narration and makes its political outlook a sincere one.

While the child's voice is untainted by untruth or prejudices of religion, nationality or
gender, and so appears fresh and objective, it gradually gets implicated in the world
around her which begins to make impressions upon Lenny's psyche. The narrative of
Ice-Candy-Man features this change in Lenny with sensitivity and skill. In her
pliable, child's mind some amazingly tenacious identifications are waiting to cast
their mark. And before the character knows it, her story becomes the narrative about
the marginalized social sections. She awakens to her identity as a religious minority,
the 'second sex' and aesthetically lacking child. However, instead of speechifying
against these traditional marginalizations, the political wrongs of life are corrected by
the author in literature in Lenny's character.

Like most children, Lenny is shown imitating the adults and hence, holding a mirror
to their behavior. She wants to listen to the gossip between the ayah and her friends,
and withhold or dispense sexual favours from her cousin the way Ayah does with her
admirers. Having witnessed the vicious circle of communal crossfire and the
victimisation of the innocent in this sordid bargain, she vents her inexplicable
frustration upon her toys:

I pick up a big, bloated celluloid doll. I turn it upside down and
pull its legs apart...
I hold one leg out to Adi. 'Here', I say, pull it.'
'Why?' asks Adi looking confused.
'Pull, damn it!' I scream, so close to hysteria that Adi blanches and
hastily grabs the proffered leg... Adi and I pull the doll's legs,
stretching it in a fierce tug of war, until making a wrenching sound
it suddenly splits... I examine the doll's spilled insides and,
holding them in my hands, collapse on the bed sobbing...
'Why were you so cruel if you couldn't stand it?' he asks at last,
infurriated by the pointless brutality

(138-39).
The child's destruction of her doll has an allegorical significance. It is an allegory on the nature of violence. A young girl who is powerless to stem the tide of surging violence in Lahore and Amritsar, releases herself from it's terror only by inflicting violence upon a symbolic helpless object - the lifeless doll. Her act mimes the instinct that made several men, including Sher Singh and the Ice-candy-man, victimise the women and children of their rival communities during Partition. Thus, the narrative carefully juxtaposes vignettes from adults' politics and children's lives in the same milieu, creating a political satire.

Moreover, the narrator's identity as a child helps Sidhwa to pull the grown-ups' vocabulary and ideologies askew in the act of trying to understand them. Lenny asks,

"There is much disturbing talk. India is going to be broken. Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is? Or crack it further up on Warris Road? How will I ever get to Godmother's then? (92)"

So the flawed reasoning behind the socio-political norms gets exposed and questioned without overt argument. At the same time, children's consciousness is recognised as an important area of experience, instead of marginalizing it as unimportant or limited.

Lenny is also important as a 'girl' child. In the literature on Partition in English, she is perhaps the only prominent girl-child narrator, beside Attia Hosain's 'Laila' in Sunlight on a Broken Column. As a girl she addresses the issues of children's forced marriages to old and morally degenerate men and the gender bias to which girl children are subjected even by their own families. Lenny's inclusion of the untouchable servant-child Papoo's story in her narrative is the case in point. Papoo who is about two years older than Lenny is made to do all the menial chores by Muccho, her mother. She is constantly beaten up without any clear motive and then one day married off to the middle aged Tota Ram in her drugged state. While the "Christian marriage litany in Punjabi" (189) joins "the crumpled heap of scarlet and gold clothes" (186) in holy union with the insolent man, Lenny, though herself a child, is shocked as she imagines "the grotesque possibilities awaiting Papoo" (187).

Lenny's account also introduces Ranna's two child sisters who, unlike Papoo, revel in role playing as women. Thus, the narrative of Ice-Candy-Man implicitly questions the indifferent featuring in novels of girls as premature adults whose childhood is but a preparation of their future as domestic wives. Jasbir Jain in her article in The Girl in 20th Century Indian Literature asks

"Where does one find the girl-child in the pages of fiction?... To every Jane Eyre, there are many David Copperfields. Tom Browns and Huckleberry Finns" (p. 78)

She observes that even in those texts where girl children feature, they are usually cast in the readymade roles of wives and mothers. "Women it seems are never young. They step straight into adulthood and are expected to be responsible and wise" (Ibid, p.79). Aware of such devaluation of girl children's experience in fiction, Sidhwa in her work has acknowledged the complexity of their lived experience. Above all, Lenny's privileged positioning as the narrator achieves this end commendably.

Unlike most boy's narratives, Lenny's is not an adventure story. Her unlikely access to butcher houses, cheap restaurants, Imam Din's village or the prostitutes' quarters in 'Hira Mandi' are not sensational devices in the novel but occasions to reassess the stereo-type in her social circuit. Huckleberry Finn, (Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain, 1966) after all his escapades with his Negro slave ultimately sees the black man reaffirming a dubious stereotype in accepting the white man's superiority
unquestioningly. In contrast to Huck leberry Finn, Lenny’s involvement with characters who are considered socially inferior to her has a deeper basis, and as such, challenges the stereotypes.

The stereotype of feminine beauty is also challenged in this narrative. Siddha had experienced that the lives of girl children become all the more harsh if they do not conform to the standards of beauty in society. The ‘plain Jane’ syndrome is believed to mar any prospects that a girl might hope for in the man’s world. So our narrator is portrayed, in her own words, thus—“I am, skinny, wizened, sallow, wiggly-haired, ugly”(22). Besides, she is also lame. There is an occasional hint of the anxiety that she might not get a husband easily. Slavesister unwittingly remarks—“It’d be hard enough finding someone for you as it is ‘to which Lenny quickly responds in defence, “Mummy says: my husband will search the world with a candle to find me!”(216)

It is significant that though Lenny feels sorry for her state at some isolated moments, her spirit is not smothered by her lack of feminine attributes of health or beauty. While her cousin fondly and sincerely assures her that he finds her limp attractive, and offers to marry her Lenny is far from overwhelmed with gratitude—“Let’s see how I feel about marrying you when I grow up.”(218)! Her spirit is invincible.

As the curtin rises to her adolescence Lenny begins to recognise her sexuality and discovers a new dimension of her personality. It empowers her with a confidence and dignity before which the standards of physical beauty pale in significance.

As the mounds beneath my nipples grow, my confidence grows......What with my limp and my burgeoning breasts – and the projected girth and wiggle of my future bottom – I feel assured that I will be quite attractive when I’m grown up (220).

There is something refreshing in Lenny’s response to her various identifications, notwithstanding their traditionally marginalized status. Her treatment, in the narration of her Parsi identity is perhaps the most witty and readable rendition of the voice of the minorities. However, it will be covered in detail in Unit 4.

By filtering the saga of the subcontinent through a unique child’s consciousness, the narrative of Ice-Candy-Man contrives to highlight what in history has remained marginalized.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

The insights offered by the analysis of the narrative voice in this novel makes us realise that it is not unidimensional, but ambivalent.

Moreover this narrative voice has an age, a gender and some political viewpoint to offer. However, it is not smug or complacent in its approach, but is acutely self-reflexive. This kind of narration invites the readers to respond to multiple perspectives, and opens the text up for discussion on the several issues Lenny’s autobiographical account touches upon.

2.6 GLOSSARY

Almanac: A written record with extensive details of the proceedings during a period. A diary.
Ice-Candy-Man

Communal: Pertaining to a group that has shared interests, usually of a religious nature. Belonging to a community.

Marginalized: To be neglected, or exploited. The term has acquired theoretical overtones as a result of the growth of modern literary theories from feminism and post-colonialism to post structuralism. It is used to denote those identities that have suffered as underprivileged communities within the structures of patriarchy, colonialism, class system and racial prejudices.

Patriarchy: A social system in which individuals, biologically male, control the organisation. Power and control are completely posited with the men, whereas the women are expected to play a subordinate role in obeisance to the laws made by men. Man is not only the head of his family, but occupies the privileged position in workplace, society and religious premises. Several stereotypes regarding the biological, psychological and intellectual nature of the two sexes have come into circulation as a result of patriarchy which is endorsed in most civilisations all over the world.

Precocity: A state of being ahead of one’s age.

Satire: Use of ridicule, irony or sarcasm to criticise any objectionable premise.

Narrator: The person who narrates a story.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. How does the device of a child-narrator modify the reading of Ice-Candy-Man as a Partition novel?
2. Briefly discuss the ambivalence of the Narrative voice and the purpose it serves.
3. Ice-Candy-Man is an autobiographical fiction. Discuss with special reference to Bapsi Sidhwa’s status as a Parsi woman from the third world and Lenny’s multiple identifications as a handicapped, Parsi girl-child narrator.

2.8 BIBLIOGRAPHY


## 2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS
