UNIT 3 FEMINIST INSCRIPTIONS IN ICE-CANDY-MAN

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit provides a summary of some of the premises of feminist literary practice in order to enable the students to analyse Ice-Candy-Man with reference to feminism. The women characters are studied extensively so that their separate as well as common experiences can be placed in the context of some of the chief issues addressed by women's studies. These issues range from sexual exploitation of women within and outside their homes, to the stereotypes attributed to them: Virgin, Mother, Angel in the House, Superwomen, Earth Mother. It is not our aim to impose feminism as an ideology upon the text, but to study the text for its ideological leanings with respect to gender related issues.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

What is it that invites a feminist critique of a particular text, should be our first question. The next question should be: what do we mean by the term "feminist"? Only then can we do justice to the text in its analysis viz. a specific political approach, which in this unit is feminist.

Since gender as a defining category of difference between the human species is a pan-global phenomenon, the response to this difference in any context, potentially invites a feminist study. But how does a feminist study of representation of sexual difference differ from any objective assessment? What are the special premises of feminism? How is it relevant in a particular context? These are some of the questions I will try to address by explaining what we mean by feminism. Thereafter I will highlight the various aspects of Ice-Candy-Man that might benefit from a feminist approach. Lastly we shall explore the poetics of the text Ice-Candy-Man with reference to its treatment of gender differences.

3.2 FEMINISM

The term broadly refers to the new woman's movement which emerged in the 1960s. The experiences of women and the status of women in the sexual hierarchy were the
concerns of this movement, which implicitly as well as explicitly questioned the positioning of women as "inferior" or "defective" (Aristotle), "passive" and "subordinate" in comparison to men. Feminists challenged these assumptions of woman’s secondary status to the primary status of man and the presumptuousness of compartmentalising her essence as a home maker, a mother, a stationary presence in stark contrast to the stereotypes of masculinity, male strength, wanderlust and aggression. The feminists identify the origins of this "sexist" bias in patriarchy. According to the epochal study of Kate Millett, patriarchy constitutes ‘perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power’ (Sexual Politics, 1969 : p. 25). Since in personal as well as social relationships between man and women power is ascribed to the former, and powerlessness is imposed upon the latter, Millett sees "sexual politics" at work behind the accepted definitions of man and woman, and their roles.

Toril Moi a later feminist critic explains:

In keeping with Millett’s approach, feminists have politicised existing critical methods, and it is on this basis that feminist criticism has become a new branch of literary studies. (Feminist Literary Criticism... p.205)

Since it resents all essentialisations, as being a patriarchal ploy for preserving an exploitative order, feminism does not intend to provide alternate definitions of woman/man, masculinity/femininity, male/female. In other words, today’s feminism is anti-patriarchy but not anti-man just as it is pro-woman without seeking to replace patriarchy with matriarchy.

As a critical approach its purpose is to scratch the surface of the so-called ‘neutral and ‘objective’ texts and reveal that these are in fact, appropriated by patriarchy to preserve its voice against any possible resistance.

Feminist critics have been unearthing the women writers whose expression has remained largely marginalized in the literary canons all over the world. Women’s writings: diaries, poetry, are now studied by the feminist critic for specific conscious-raising projects. However, they are carefully studied by feminists not to present all women writers as "feminist”. While writings by women and about women - like the novel and the author under this discussion – are of interest to the feminist critic, they might or might not be feminist in themselves. As Toril Moi explains, they might not be per se emancipatory reading for women ("Feminist Literary Criticism"...p.230).

Mills and Boon popular literature is a case in point. Rosalind Coward in ‘Are Women’s Novels Feminist novels?’ argues, “The Mills and Boon romantic novels are written by, read by, marketed for, and are all about women. Yet nothing could be further from the aims of feminism than these fantasies based on sexual, racial, and class submission which so frequently characterizes these novels (Coward 1980, p.230). Instead, if a text dramatizes the sexist stereotypes with the intention of subjecting then to critical scrutiny, only then does it have a feminist commitment.

### 3.3 FEMINIST INSCRIPTIONS IN ICE-CANDY-MAN

The prominent characters in Ice-Candy-Man are mostly women, and at the centre of them is Lenny - a girl child who is also the narrator. Though the paradigm of ‘woman-as-victim’ features in almost all writings on the theme of Partition (see Chaman Nahal’s Azadi, Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan and Manohar Malgankar’s A Bend in the Ganges) Ice-Candy-Man stands apart from the rest in its dramatization of this paradigm. The extensive featuring of women’s shared experiences of victimization in the communal riots is here complimented by a presentation of their oppression and the strategies to overcome the oppression even at
a personal level inside their homes, and in their relationships with husbands and lovers. In this novel, the fundamental schism between man and woman cannot be hidden even from the eyes of the eight years old Lenny. If, as discussed in the previous unit about the child-narrator, we acknowledge that Lenny’s narrative is the most important clue to the political commitment of the novel itself, then it follows that the use of her consciousness as the dialectical site of contest between different ideologies (specifically gender related) makes the text polyvalent: one in which I argue, the feminist inscriptions are markedly visible.

Its protagonist’s world-view is largely determined by her limited range of movement around her house.

My world is compressed. Warris Road, lined with rain gutters, lies between Queens Road and Jail Road....

Rounding the right-hand corner of Warris Road and continuing on Jail Road is the hushed Salvation Army Road....

Jail Road also harbours my energetic electric-aunt and her adenoidal son....

Opposite it....Is the one-and-a-half room abode of my godmother... This is my haven. My refuge from the perplexing unrealities of my home on Warris Road.

A few furlongs away Jail Road vanishes into the dense bazaars of Mozang Chungi. At the other end a distant canal cuts the road at the periphery of my world (Ice-Candy-Man p.1,2).

The extent to which politics determine the goings-on within this rather homely area of Lenny’s experience vividly comes across in Lenny’s narration. Unlike mainstream writing, which is hero-oriented and represents women and home in its sentimental paraphernalia, Ice-Candy-Man foregrounds the women’s consciousness as they are affected by the political battles mentioned above. The novel highlights their domestic roles, their individual characteristics, their shared experiences of sexual exploitation, their survival and their sexuality against the backdrop of Partition. And this experienced realm deeply affects Lenny’s psyche. We can argue that Sidhwa has recreated a universe where women appear as biological beings ‘female’ as compared to the stereotype ‘feminine’. This is not to say that by depicting so many women, the text or Lenny’s narrative perse becomes ‘feminist’, or even that all or some of its characters are feminist. What we are suggesting is that a woman-centred writing such as this in the genre of the Partition novel - has to be placed alongside the new awareness regarding the ‘second sex’ as Simone de Beauvoir identified women in the patrilineal hierarchy. Let us now look at the several characters in the novel to facilitate our study. Each of these characters brings out a trope of the relationship between the two sexes in society.

3.3.1 Lenny

Women tend to be treated as casualties and such is their (non) representation in the mainstream literature, that a girl-child (we would agree) has even fewer chances as a character and much less as a narrator. As discussed in the previous unit - a girl-child is usually ‘an invisible silent presence’ (Jasbir Jain in The Girl Child in the 20th century Indian Fiction: p.78). We instantly recognise that Lenny in Ice-Candy-Man is a far cry from the girl-child whose presence is patterned on 'submission and subordination' (Ibid. p.78) Though she is located on the margins of her milieu – as a physically ‘handicapped’ ‘girl’ ‘child’ belonging to a ‘religious minority’, Lenny is lively, even demanding, very curious to ‘know’ things; and one who is dynamically involved in the construction of her identity. Not only the subjects of her narration but each inflexion in her voice, as she gives the account of her growth from childhood to
adolescence during the country’s division, is significant. While the particular political
crisis of the period awakens her with a jolt to her religious and national identities, her
sexual identity is thrust upon her time and again as a matter of routine. More arbitrary
than religious or national segregations, she realises that the gender divide cuts across
class, race and community. Women and men have roles to play. In Colonel
Bharucha’s clinic where Lenny goes for her polio treatment, the doctor announces
rather positively: “She’s doing fine without school…. She doesn’t need to become a
professor… She’ll marry – have children – lead a carefree, happy life” (Ice-Candy-
Man p.15). Before this meeting, Lenny reports that Colonel Bharucha was “applying
stethoscope to the emaciated chest of an infant” who was accompanied by a father
and a burka covered mother. Each time the doctor put a question regarding the
infant’s health, the husband consulted his wife:

This time the woman addresses the doctor directly looking at him through the
netting covering her eyes, “He vomits everytime he has milk… five, six times
a day”. Her voice is incredibly young. She couldn’t be more that twelve, I
think, surprised. (p. 12)

The narrator need not say more. Her surprise is a shocked recognition of the fate
which awaits a girl child be it the twelve year old mother or be it the child-bride
Papoo, a fate glamorised by Colonel Bharucha in his conciliatory definition of a
woman’s aim in life.

Both men and women inhabit Lenny’s universe when she is young, but as she grows
up, she develops an anxiety regarding men in spite of her interaction with Cousin,
Ayah’s wooers and her own father:

The mystery of the women in the courtyard deepens. At night we
hear them wailing, their cries verging on the inhuman …

And closer, and as upsetting, the caged voices of our parents fighting
in their bedroom. Mother crying, wheedling. Father’s terse, brash,
indecipherable sentences. Terrifying thumps…. Although Father has
never raised his hands to us, one day I
surprise Mother at her bath
and see the bruises on her body (p.212).

Nilufer Bharucha in her article “A Feminist Reading of Three Parsi Novels” points
out that “Lenny… is not male - identified. She has strong female models with whom
she has a woman - to - woman bonding” (The Fiction of Rohinton Mistry p.48). This
bonding is not born instinctively, it occurs gradually just as her alienation from the
men is a gradual process. As a child sensing a void in her life she gravitates towards
her Godmother who has nurtured her instead of her biological mother. Extolling this
relationship Lenny says that it is ‘stronger than the bond of motherhood. More
satisfying than the ties between men and women’ (Ice-Candy-Man p.4). Her bonding
with mother and Ayah are separate realms of experience.

Through them she is initiated into the norms of heterosexuality and romantic love.
While Ayah’s sexual life in particular is vicariously gratifying for Lenny, she finds
herself recognising the appeal as well as exploitation of women’s biological
existence. Mother’s marital sex life and Ayah’s ‘free love’ are carefully counter
balanced in Lenny’s psyche (More of this in the later sections: 3.3.2 and 3.3.3).

These woman-to-woman bondings at the level of ordinary routines described in the
novel mature into a stronger ‘female bonding’, which feminists extol, in the face of
the women’s victimisation in the communal violence of 1947. Lenny’s ayah is
rescued by the collective efforts of her mother and Godmother. Her new ayah,
Hamida, herself a ‘fallen woman’ offers sympathetic nods and looks to the other
women in the Recovered Women’s camp. Though Lenny is just observing these
developments – they fill her with a lot of questioning regarding the lives of women.
Dynamic, painful, struggling and posing — most women in Ice-Candy-Man live out the consequences of their relationship with men.

She wonders, why her father acts indifferent or superior to her mother and the mother pampers him still. What are fallen women? What are the things men do to women in Hira Mandi? Lenny’s narrative poses these fundamental questions hence it operates as a ‘feminist allegory’ (Bharucha p. 48). Bharucha observes that through the character of Lenny, Sidhwa explores a female universe hemmed in by the restricting and reducing forces of patriarchy and colonialism (ibid.).

3.3.2 Lenny’s Mother

Lenny’s mother is not conspicuously ‘feminist’. Instead, as an obliging wife, an accomplished hostess, a guilty mother and an attractive woman, she conforms to all the roles considered ‘feminine’ in patriarchal society. However, interest in this character as an individual is aroused only when she begins to drive out of the house with her car-load of petrol canisters. Lenny is always shown a little baffled by her mother’s intractability in spite of her apparent feminity.

Her motherliness. How can I describe it? While it is there it is all-encompassing voluptuous…but it switches off, this motherliness…it is treacherous. Mother’s motherliness has a universal reach. Like her involuntary female magnetism it cannot be harnessed…I resent this largesse (Ice-Candy-Man p. 42).

This possessiveness for her parent and the consequent jealousy are easily transformed into suspicion regarding her actions later in the narrative. The children jump to the conclusion that in the climate of communal tension, Mother and Electric Aunt on their driving sprees actually go to set Lahore alight, when the truth is that they go out distributing petrol to people who need to cross the border. At one level the children’s theory of their mothers’ actions can be read as their tendency to fantasise, but at another – a deep-seated distrust can be read into their relationship. Why is it so?

Lenny is used to seeing her mother in the context of the latter’s marital relationship with her husband. Inspite of Mother’s charming presence she is necessarily an appendage to Father. She plays hostess to his friends, and humours his whims every day. Let us look at a passage on the mother’s subservience in order to compare it with her role as a social worker during Partition:

I hear the metallic peal of father’s cycle bell and rush out to greet him.
Mother rushed out of another door.

Mother removes his wet curls back.

Mother relieves him of the ledgers and taking hold of his other arm winds it around herself, making little moaning sounds as if his touch fills her with exquisite relief (Ibid p. 79).

To further interest him she indulges in some harmless lies and endless chatter –

A little later, mention of Adi’s hostile antics causes father to scowl…switching the bulletin immediately mother recounts some observation of my extraordinarily brilliant, saccharinely sweet and fetchingly naïve remarks (Ibid p. 79).

Lenny’s observations are incisive enough for her to report Mother’s behaviour critically. Only, she does not realise that the same sense of inadequacy which she detects at the bottom of her own need to concoct stories to “fill up the infernal time of father’s mute meals” (p. 80) is also present in her mother’s behaviour. Why does a woman overplay feminine subservience to her husband if not to make up for a void, an inadequacy (inspite of her best efforts) in their relationship. This is a paradigmatic
question that concerns not only Mother but also innumerable women across the globe.

Having subtly but firmly positioning this feminist concern, Sidhwa goes on to delineate this aspect of Mother’s character since she belongs to the economically privileged strata of society. Lenny’s mother has a number of servants to attend to her domestic chores, while socialising takes up all her time. It is largely into Ayah’s care that the children are left. Though relieved of the dual duties of housekeeping which includes rearing children and socialising, mother has to face a guilt conscience for neglecting her children. “I don’t know where I went wrong”, she says, “It’s my fault... I neglected her – left her to the care of Ayah. None of the other children who went to the same park contracted polio.” (p. 16). Behind the roles of a formidable ‘Baijee’ of her household, we can detect the enormous pressures of socially constructed gender ‘duties’ that a mother is expected to fulfil. Excelling in some – she feels she has failed in some others; and in the midst of them Lenny notices her parents’ marriage falling apart. The unrelieved irony of mother’s predicament impresses itself upon Lenny’s sensitive psyche as she grows up.

Mother’s new ‘avatar’ as a social worker, who helps the victims of Partition cross over to their allotted nations and tries to rehabilitate the abducted, orphaned and raped women, is her partial release from her sorry state. She strikes a new chord in Lenny’s heart once the child is told about the true purpose of her mother’s manoeuvres. Through her character Sidhwa presents some of the commoner forms of woman’s exploitation within her domestic sphere, and her ability to retain her sense of individuality in the midst of that exploitation.

3.3.3 The Ayah

Female sexuality with the ramification of its celebration as well as its exploitation by men is highlighted in Ayah’s portrait. A substantial part of the narrative revolves around her character. It is through Ayah that Lenny is introduced to most of the people outside her family circle. When she moves around under her nanny’s charge, her child’s world expands to include awareness of community, nation, sexuality and barbarity.

It is interesting that while a nanny’s role amounts to a paid extension of motherly functions – bathing, massaging, clothing the child and taking her to the park for fresh air – Lenny’s Ayah has other correspondences with her mother, as well. In her pedestrian way she replicates mother’s sex appeal. Like mother, she knows that she cannot afford to offend men but might get her way in the man’s world through subterfuge. In the Victoria Garden where she walks with Lenny, Ayah accumulates a fleet of admirers including the Ice-candy-man, a masseur, a gardener, a restaurant owner, a zoo attendant, a knife-sharpening pathan and several more. Though yielding to none, she rules the roost. Lenny writes-

I learn fast. I gain Ayah’s goodwill and complicity by accommodating her need to meet friends and relatives. She takes me to fairs, cheap restaurants and slaughter houses. I cover up for her...I learn of human needs, frailties, cruelties and joys. (Ice-Candy-Man p. 20).

The men vie with each other, by turns to win her favour; while she dispenses it according to the degree to which they gratify her psycho – sexual needs. The Ayah is an assertive woman who, as shall be seen later in her story, holds her own even in the face of ineluctable misery.

Reading between the lines of Lenny’s depiction of her Ayah we find that Shanta is a product of her circumstances. She is a Hindu girl of eighteen who is employed away from her family in Amritsar. Like the countless girls from poor homes she has to leave the protection of her parents to go out and earn. Employed in a relatively decent
profession and with good masters Shanta’s condition is ultimately that of an unproctected young woman who has to fend for herself.

The covetous glances Ayah draws educate me. Up and down they look at her. Stub-handed twisted beggars... drop their poses and stare at her with hard, alert eyes. Holy men, marked in piety, shove aside their pretences to ogle at her with lust (Ibid, p. 3).

The Ayah, conscious that she is a sex-object for the male gaze learns to manipulate her sexuality to achieve her meagre goals - from obtaining cheap bosky clothes or cashews from peddlers to the gratification of her ‘female’ ego. Hers is a strategy of survival that she rather enjoys though it reaffirms her exploitation. By playing her wooers one against the other for favour, she manages to remain intact in their midst for a good time.

It is difficult to overlook that while Lenny’s mother’s sexuality is marked with unfulfilled longing and anxiety, Ayah’s is full-blooded and self-serving. It is through the latter that Lenny is able to differentiate between physical desire, romantic love and animal lust; “Ayah is nervous in [Sharbt Khan’s] presence... they don’t need to touch. His presence radiates a warmth that is different from the dark heat generated by Masseur’s fingers – the lightning stroke of Ice-candy-man’s toes” (Ibid, p. 75).

This distinction become obvious the moment Ayah’s lover, the Masseur is murdered under the garb of communal hatred and Ayah herself abducted, sold, and raped, by the Ice-candy-man (who later marries her). In spite of his protestations of love and conciliatory apologies, he cannot restore Ayah’s former warmth or spirit, far less win her love.

Between the characterisation of Ayah and Lenny’s mother, Sidhwa is able to prompt a dialogue on female sexuality versus the male power structures within or outside their homes. Understandably, there are no happy marriages in this novel though there are several memorable sexual encounters. Lenny’s parents get alienated; Rosy and Peter’s parents are visibly incompatible, the Masseur is killed and Ayah’s hope of loving union with him shattered; the Godmother and her old husband’s relationship is merely a matter of mention; Lenny’s tutors Mrs. Pen and her husband have the look of wasted carnal life. Imam Din’s four marriages and insatiable lust undercut any possibility of matrimonial affection. Also there is Papoo’s child marriage to a much older man.

The text is implicitly suggestive of an unbridgeable emotional rift between the sexes. The violent molesting of women and children under the excuse of communal revenge actually highlights the gender divide, which is more absolute and hostile than communal or racial fundamentalism. Women, once they fall prey to men’s violence like Lenny’s two ayahs, cannot hope for their restitution to their own families. Let us once again read this dialogue between Lenny and her godmother:

“What’s a fallen woman?” I ask Godmother...
“Hamida (the second Ayah) was kidnapped by the Sikhs”, says Godmother seriously... When that happens, sometimes, the husband- or his family – won’t take her back.”
“Why? It isn’t her fault she was kidnapped.”
“Some folk feel that way – they can’t stand their woman being touched by other men” (Ibid, p. 215).

The conversation shows how inscrutable the unwritten laws of patriarchal constitution are. The women themselves often internalize these laws into their perception of self identity. For Hamida it is her ‘kismet’ to be shunned by her family. For women like Lenny’s servant Mucho, her attitude to life is unthinkingly endorsed in her behaviour. She frantically beats up her daughter and later drugs her to marry.
her off to an unlikely groom in an inexplicable act of parental duty. Nilufer Bharucha interprets Mucho’s relationship with Papoo as a manifestation of self-hatred since she sees her daughter as an extension of herself. It is the consequence of her patriarchal up-bringing ("A Feminist Reading of Three Parsi Novels" p. 49). The violence that one woman inflicts upon another can be a subtler and more vicious version of violence inflicted by men upon their womenfolk.

In the character of Lenny’s Godmother and of Slavesister, let us now explore how women inadvertently mime the social and personal hegemonies of patriarchy.

### 3.3.4 Godmother and Slavesister

Though Lenny is cared-for by her mother and her nurse, in the course of her daily routine, she responds the most to her Godmother, Rodabai.

The bond that ties her strength to my weakness, my fierce demands to her nurturing, my trust to her capacity to contain that trust and my loneliness to her compassion - is stronger than the bond of motherhood. More satisfying than the ties between men and women. (p.34)

The image of ‘mother’ in Lenny’s consciousness is in fact split up into the three portraits of the Mother, Ayah and the Godmother. It is therefore imperative to analyse ‘Godmother’ viz. her actions and person, and viz. Lenny’s perception of the character.

The narrative voice persistently celebrates her. Lenny’s relationships with her godmother is rich with details, and is a mutually fulfilling one. The sheer presence of the latter is amply given credit to by the child who demands her due of forbidden knowledges, and attention from the mother figures. The godmother as a character, therefore, is almost entirely an idolised product of another character’s opinion whom she gratifies in a super-motherly way. For a close reading of her character, we might at places have to read the narrative against its grain.

The godmother has a certain way with people. Her immense presence, comforting society, razor-sharp wit, resourcefulness and her social commitment make her an adorable character in the novel. As Subhash Chandra has identified, she is also endowed with a profound understanding of human existence. The most glorious example of her self-confidence, authoritativeness, capacity to handle crisis-situations deftly is provided by her dealing with the Ice-candy-man and the ayah’s rescue. Subhash Chandra writes, ‘Godmother concentrates in her character what the feminists feel is very important for a woman to realise her individuality: the feeling of ‘self worth’.” (p.180)

The strength of her personality, the magnitude of her affection for Lenny, and her coarse khaddar sarees covering her from head to food make her a very consistent and simple person to understand, it seems. For the preadolescent who is subjected to the baffling flux of life and range of attractions from all around her she has a sexless and steady appeal. Compare Lenny’s comparison of her parents’ behaviour when they are in company, with her response to Godmother’s several faces.

Half asleep I can still hear them laugh. Was that really Father? That communicative person making "pooch-pooch" noises...and that hooting, rollicking woman my remote and solemn mother? (p.65-66)

and

She (godmother) catches my watering eye and winks. Only I ever see her wink. Her dignified bearing and noble features preclude winking. She relaxes her guard with me. No one sees her as I do. (p.33)
Justified admiration for the straight-forward character of Godmother notwithstanding, Lenny is unable to see the difference between the circumstances of her mother and her godmother. One depends upon her husband and society for her sense of self-worth while the other (godmother) is relatively free of such domestic and wifely care. The godmother and her household is indifferent of her 'Oldhusband's' presence in it. Instead, it is completely a woman's house with the wise and resourceful godmother at the helm of affairs - not having to please or placate a husband, not needing to entertain his friends or relatives. She is the head of the family with her younger sister to do all the household chores for her and to humour or tease according to her whim. We must not be blind to the fact that the hegemony in her household is a transposition of the man-dominating-the-wife pattern to the smarter woman-dominating-the cruder woman variation. Lenny calls the younger of the two sisters, 'Slavesister'. To the Slavesister's chagrin, Godmother can turn quite nasty towards her:

"Don't think I've not been observing your tongue of late! If you're not careful, I'll snip it off..."

"Really, Rodabai! How long will you treat me like a child?"

"Till you grow up! God knows, you've grown older - and fatter - but not up! This child here has more sense than you. Now stop eating our heads. Say your prayers and go to sleep." Slavesister retreats to the kitchen and commences mumbling (164).

In a research on the declining Parsi population Ketayun Gould, a demographer, observed that unmarried state is common in the Parsi community. The average marrying age among Parsis is among the highest in the world ("The Parsis in India: A Community under Stress). Given these facts, an oldmaid of unenriched intellect and plain looks - like Slavesister - might have to put up with her family's insensitivity in lieu of the protection and company they might offer her.

At the same time, Godmother remains a positive and a fascinating character. A formidable matriarch, a sensitive guardian, an undaunted feminist she lashes out in anger at the Ice-candy-man. Resourceful as she is, she manages to trace the whereabouts of the ayah from within the burning and rioting Lahore, and has Ayah's kidnapper and husband, the Ice-candy-man before her.

"You have permitted your wife to be disgraced! Destroyed her modesty! Lived off her womanhood! ... And you talk of princes and poets? You're the son of pigs and pimps! You're not worth the two cowries one throws at lepers!...

"Get out of my sight, you whining haramzada! says Godmother (p.249).

She even threatens the Ice-candy-man with her obvious ability to have him put behind bars.

What gives the Godmother this authority? Is her existence itself constructed along the lines of an able patriarch or has she risen beyond sexuality?

Seen from Lenny's eyes it is as though Rodabai's person is above the push and grind of worldly affairs. She seems to have seen it all - the hostility between people, between sexes, their prejudices and their pains. And so, she is able to gather her inner as well as the outer resources and build up her strength to an awesome proportion in the moment of crisis. For the pre-adolescent, Godmother is at once a strong and sobering presence: almost a deity, an 'Earth Mother' figure.
Toril Moi, in her perceptive introduction to some of the important issues raised by feminism, warns against such tendencies to deify women as essences of a higher and purer nature, 'the tendency to venerate them as virgins and mothers of God...' ("Feminist Literary Criticism" p. 213). She explains that "gratifying though it is to be told that women really are strong, integrated, peace-living, nurturing and creative beings, this plethora of new virtues is no less essentialist than the old one, and no less oppressive to all those women who do not want to play the role of Earth Mother" (Ibid, p.210).

We, as readers, should be able to see that while Lenny idealizes Godmother, in her narration the godmother is humanized viz. her family relationships. This is sheer technical brilliance - possible only in the art of a writer who is aware of the different nuances of Feminist studies.

In an overview of all the women characters in the novel, the godmother's significance actually lies in her encouraging womanly confidence and inspiring self-worth in Lenny's evolving sensibility.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

In an interview Bapsi Sidhwa remarked: "As a woman, one is always marginalised. I have worked among women to create an awareness of their rights and protested against repressive measures aimed at Pakistani women and minority communities..." (The Hindustan Times. Sunday Magazine 26 April 1998).

This unit has tried to demonstrate that Sidhwa's novel, Ice-Candy-Man, highlights feminist concerns about women's issues, particularly their experience of victimisation and suppression within patriarchal societies.

Its protagonists are mostly women and each of them represents a way of life that either colludes with the premises of patriarchy or else challenges the patriarchal repressiveness in the most unassuming manner. Mother, Mucho and Slavesister represent the first case. The transformed role of mother as a welfare activist, Ayah's sexuality and the resilience of her spirit and Godmother's positive qualities represent their redemptive potential.

Moreover, the novel is a Bildungsroman of a girl-child's consciousness. Her gradual assimilation into woman's sisterhood is the result of her first-hand-observation of the cunning with which the men she has known all her life betray and victimize the women around them. While she continues to respond to them and interact with them at a social and personal level i.e. while her position is not radical, she has learnt to recognise the 'sexual politics' that make women's and men's lives what they are in contemporary urban society.

3.5 GLOSSARY

Bosky: An archaic expression to describe a tight fitting garment covering the breasts.

Bildungsroman: It is the youthful development of a central character. A term used by German critics, it foresees the idea of travelling to gain experience.
**Essentialization:**
The tendency to give simplistic and hence reductive definition to identities which are actually complex.

**Female:**
Woman as a biological sex. The term refers to morphology rather than any specific characteristic.

**Feminine:**
A gender construct that enables essentialization of female as an essence. Subordination, beauty and passivity are considered feminine.

**Feminist:**
A way of radically questioning the gender stereotypes and a strategy to politicise women related studies.

**Paradigm:**
An example or model used as a standard for the whole group of an archetype. Also the framework of theories and concepts forming the background of a scientific approach.

**Promiscuity:**
Sexual activity with a number of partners usually in short casual relationships.

**Polyvalent:**
Multiple points of view.

### 3.6 QUESTIONS

Q.1 What do you understand by the terms ‘feminism’ or ‘feminist’ and how do they differ from ‘female’ and ‘feminine’ in the critical vocabulary? Does this distinction help us to understand women’s experiences better?

Q.2 Discuss the women characters in *Ice-Candy-Man* with reference to their roles in affecting Lenny’s consciousness of her identity.

Q.3 Give a contrasted reading of Lenny’s mother and Godmother in the novel.

### 3.7 BIBLIOGRAPHY


Suggested Readings


UNIT 4 PARSI IDENTITY IN *ICE-CANDY-MAN*

Structure

4.0 Objectives
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4.4.1 Nostalgia or preserving folk traditions
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4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are two-fold (a) to give a socio-political background of the Parsi paradox and the way it is represented in two of Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels, *The Crow Eaters* and *Ice-Candy-Man*. The comparison is essential as what transpires in her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* is like a sequel to the earlier novel; (b) to provide a background of the Parsi ethos and the changing shape of the identity of this hybrid community during the communal riots of Partition. Taken together they convey the Parsi identity in this novel very aptly. It also shows Sidhwa’s remarkable ability to parody some of the pretensions and attitudes of her own community. The illustrations from the text are taken from several chapters to provide a comprehensive view.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

4.1.1 The Parsi Paradox and the British Raj

The *London Times* of July 1905 made a pertinent remark about the Parsi community under the British Raj. It said, “whether from necessity or inclination, the Parsi of the twentieth century is almost a foreigner to the great mass of the Indian population as was his predecessor of the eighth century.” The British regarded the Parsis as ‘elite’. Sir J.R. Carnac, the English Governor of Bombay said on 11 August 1877: “Then, gentlemen Parsis, I would ask you to remember that you have what is called the very bluest blood in Asia.” Thus the conscious anglicisation of the Parsis and their alienation from other Indian communities are major paradoxes which stem from certain historical factors.

The process of assimilation started in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Surat was the most important seaport on the west coast of India and a major trade centre for both the Moghul and European trading companies. Unimpeded by religious taboos or a dominant clergy, the early Parsis showed a lot of flexibility and developed commercial relationships with the foreigners. They were employed as chief brokers...