UNIT 6  BAPSI SIDHWA'S *ICE-CANDY-MAN*: A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

Structure

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to analyse Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* from a postcolonial perspective, with special reference to her creation of an alternate history of the sub-continent and her use of the English language.

6.1 WHAT IS THE POSTcolonial?

The phenomenon of colonialism has had a major influence in shaping the lives of three-quarters of the people living in the world. The influence extends not just to the political and economic spheres but to the cultural as well. The impact is perhaps best expressed by the art and literature produced in the erstwhile colonies. Bill Ashcroft et al in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) uses the term postcolonial to "cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (p. 2). Consequently, according to this definition, the literature written in the colonized countries from the moment of colonization till the present day can be termed as postcolonial literature. The literature of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries and Sri Lanka are all postcolonial literatures. Technically the literature of U.S.A should also be placed in this category, but because of its current position of power, and the neo-colonizing role it has played, its postcolonial nature has not been generally recognized. Bill Ashcroft et al observe that what makes each of these literatures distinctly postcolonial is that "they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre" (Ibid, 2).

However an important point to be remembered is that the term postcolonial is also used for denoting a perspective or a theory--meaning a post-colonial perspective or a postcolonial reading of a text which is not necessarily produced or written in the erstwhile colonies. For instance, Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* does not fall in the category of postcolonial literature but the play can be read from a postcolonial perspective. A reading which can highlight, for instance, how Shakespeare anticipates the psychological implications of the phenomenon of colonialism. However, Aime Cesaire's *A Tempest* (1969), an adaptation of Shakespeare's play, can be included in
the category of postcolonial literature since it is not only written by a postcolonial writer but specifically deals with the phenomenon.

### 6.2 WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF A POSTCOLONIAL WRITER?

Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the Kenyan writer, in his work *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) observes:

The real aim of colonialism was to control peoples' wealth... colonialism imposed its control on the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonized, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others. (p. 16)

To achieve this aim the colonizers deliberately undervalue a "peoples' culture, their art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, and literature and the conscious elevation of the language of the coloniser" (Ibid, 16). Thus one of the main functions of the postcolonial writer is to rehabilitate the faith of colonised people in their own culture, art, religion, history etc and thereby liberate them from the chains of mental colonisation which continues to exist even after the country has gained independence. This purpose is perhaps best summed up by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe, who in his first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) wanted to show "that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity" (qtd. in Griffiths 13).

### 6.3 STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE POSTCOLONIAL WRITER

Various strategies are used by the postcolonial writers in order to meet their purpose. A detailed discussion of the various strategies is beyond the scope of a study such as this. However, we can discuss some of the strategies which will help us to analyze Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* from a postcolonial perspective.

a) As mentioned earlier, one of the main factors of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs the language of the colonizer as a 'standard' and the native languages are marginalized as impurities. "Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth', 'order', and 'reality' become established" (Empire Writes Back p.7). Since language is used as a medium of power it becomes imperative that "post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place" (Ibid, 38). Thus adapting the colonizer's language to suit his/her purposes becomes the prime objective of the post-colonial writer. There are two ways in which it is done. "The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remodeling the language to
new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege" (Ibid, 38). Later we will discuss how Sidhwa remoulds the English language for her purposes.

b) As mentioned earlier, the colonizer devalues the culture, literature, history etc of the colonized. A postcolonial writer can counter this process by giving an alternate version of history. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* counters the European notions of African history by writing an alternate history highlighting the African culture. Bapsi Sidhwa in *Ice-Candy-Man* rewrites history to undercut not only the British but also the Indian version of the history of the vast South Asian sub-continent.

### 6.4 *ICE-CANDY-MAN*: AN ANALYSIS

Let us now see how Bapsi Sidhwa writes an alternate history to counter the British and Indian view of the history of the Indian sub-continent.

Sidhwa’s re-writing of history is far more complex than it appears to be, since she is re-writing history not just from the Pakistani point of view but also from the Parsi point of view. In order to highlight the Parsi dilemma at the time of the Partition she goes back thirteen hundred years to the significant moment in Parsi history, when they "were kicked out of Persia by the Arabs" and "sailed to India" (37). After waiting for four days on the Indian coast they were visited by the Grand Vazir, with a glass of milk filled to the brim, symbolizing that his land was full and prosperous and in no need of "outsiders with a different religion and alien ways to disturb the harmony" (38). However the Parsi forefathers, intelligently, "stirred a teaspoon of sugar into the milk and sent it back" (39), symbolizing that the Parsis "would get absorbed into his country like sugar in the milk ... And with their decency and industry sweeten the lives of his subjects" (39). The short account, whether true or not, is elaborated in detail, earlier in this block in unit 1.5. In her fictional account however Bapsi Sidhwa highlights the dilemma the Parsis have faced over the centuries i.e. the dilemma of assimilating themselves into an alien culture and risking the loss of their identity.

The impending Partition of the country, as depicted in the novel, might prove that all the efforts the Parsis have made over the centuries to assimilate themselves into Indian culture are futile since the community all of a sudden faces the threat of extinction in the wake of the Partition. Thirteen hundred years ago the Parsis had tried to accept Indian culture with all its diversities, but now at the moment of Partition they might be forced to take sides with one of the dominant religious communities in India—Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. Thus Sidhwa undercuts the received historical view that the Parsis were totally indifferent to the partition of the country. Instead of indifference the Parsis had a complex attitude towards Partition, as brought out in the main-hall meeting in the Fire Temple. Colonel Bharucha, the president of the community in Lahore, argues that the Parsis should shun the anti colonial movement and stick to their long standing stance of loyalty to the British Empire. He warns the Parsis that once they get Swaraj, "Hindus, Muslims and even the Sikhs are going to jockey for power: and if you jokers jump into the middle you'll be mingled into chutney!" (*Ice-Candy-Man* p.36). However Dr. Moody points out that it is not so simple. The Parsis cannot remain uninvolved and will have to take a stance otherwise, "our neighbours will think that we are betraying them and siding with the English" (p.37). This, however leads to a further complication, as voiced by a fellow Parsi, when he asks: "Which of your neighbors are you going to betray?... Hindu? Muslim? Sikhs?" (p.37). This remark brings to the foreground the bitter fact that even after thirteen hundred years the Parsis feel alienated in the subcontinent. Their alienation from all the major communities in India ultimately forces them to
support "whoever rules Lahore" (p.34). Col. Bharucha suggests, "Let whoever wishes to rule! Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. We will abide by the rules of the land" (p.39). Thus Sidhwa by giving voice to the marginalized Parsis demonstrates that their choice of remaining neutral in the context of the Partition was not out of indifference but forced upon them by a complex historical process.

Sidhwa, further, demonstrates that the neutral stance adopted by the Parsi community towards the freedom struggle did not prevent them from participating in the developments in whichever way they could. M.F. Salat observes that Sidhwa contradicts the received discourses through showing the "silent but positive role played by Lenny's parents in helping both the Hindus and the Muslims" (Magic Writings... 102), suggesting that "the Parsis too were involved in their own ways in the events of the time and that they were not just indifferent and passive onlookers to the awful human tragedy" (Ibid, 102). Salat observes that it is a revelation meant not only for Lenny but also for all those who are ignorant of the Parsi involvement in the Partition when Lenny's mother explains the secret of her outings. She explains: "I wish I'd told you ... we were only smuggling the rationed petrol to help our Hindu and Sikh friends to run away. And also for the convoys to send kidnapped women, like our Ayah, to their families across the border" (Ice-Candy-Man p.242).

Sidhwa, as mentioned earlier, rewrites history not only from the Parsi point of view but also from the Pakistani point of view. In an interview with David Montenegro, she clearly states this agenda:

The main motivation grew out of my reading of a good deal of literature on the Partition of India and Pakistan ... what has been written has been written by the British and Indians. Naturally they reflect their bias. And they have I felt after I'd researched the book, been unfair to the Pakistanis. As a writer as a human being, one just does not tolerate injustice. I felt whatever little I could do to correct an injustice I would like to do. I have just let facts speak for themselves, and through my research I found out what the facts were. (Points of Departure p.36)

To counter the British and Indian versions of the Partition, Sidhwa in the Ice-Candy-Man not only tries to resurrect the image of Jinnah but also demystifies the image of Gandhi and Nehru. Jinnah in the novel is highlighted as an "ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity" (p.160): "Today forty years later, in films of Gandhi's and Mountbatten's times, in books by British and Indian scholars, Jinnah who for a decade was known as an 'ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity', is caricatured and portrayed as a monster"(p.160). To substantiate this image of Jinnah, Sidhwa quotes the Indian poetess Sarojini Naidu:

The calm hauteur of his accustomed reserve masks, for those who knew him, a naive and eager humanity, an intuition quick and tender as a woman's, a humour gay and winning as a child's - pre-eminently rational and practical, discreet and dispassionate in his estimate and acceptance of life, the obvious sanity and serenity of his worldly wisdom effectually disguise a shy and splendid idealism which is of the very essence of the man. (p.161)

The sublime image of Gandhi constructed by British and Indian historians is totally undercut when he is seen through the eyes of the seven year old narrator, Lenny: "He [Gandhi] is small, dark, shrunken, old. He looks just like Hari, our gardener, except he has a disgruntled, disgusted and irritable look; and no one'd dare pull off his dhoti! He wears only the loin cloth and his black and thin torso is naked" (Ice-Candy-Man p.86). Unlike most of the Indian historians who credit Gandhi for single handedly ousting the British from India, in the Ice-Candy-Man Sidhwa reduces him to the role of an eccentric dietician, who advises every woman to "flush"(p.87) their systems
with enemas. According to the masseur Gandhi "is a politician" and "it's his business to suit his tongue to the moment" (p.91). Similarly Nehru is a shrewd politician who inspite of all the efforts of Jinnah "will walk off with the lion's share" (p.131). Nehru, according to the Ice candy man is "a sly one ... He's got Mountbatten eating out of his one hand and the English's wife out of his other what not ... He's the one to watch!" (p.131).

Even though Sidhwa tries to depict the atrocities committed by Hindu, Muslim, and Sikhs without partiality, being a Pakistani writer she makes it obvious that her sympathies are with the Muslim victims. Not only is the Sikhs' attack on Muslim villages in Punjab described vividly, but also it is seen through the eyes of the Muslim child Ranna, which shifts the reader's sympathy towards the Muslims. In an interview Sidhwa observes, "the Sikhs perpetrated the much greater brutality -- they wanted Punjab to be divided. A peasant is rooted in his soil. The only way to uproot him was to kill him or scare him out of his wits" (Montenegro 50-1).

Thus we see that Sidhwa not only shifts the blame of the Partition on to the Indian leaders, but also makes the reader sympathise with the Muslim victims of the Partition by accentuating the violence inflicted upon the Muslims by the Sikhs.

### 6.5 SIDHWA'S USE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

A major preoccupation of the postcolonial writer is language. Should the writer write in the language inherited from the imperial power or should he/she revert to the native language. An opposing stance has been taken by the two African writers Chinua Achebe (Nigeria) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya) regarding language in postcolonial literature. Ngugi after writing his earlier works in English has rejected the language and now writes in his native language Gikuyu. Explaining his choice in *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi asks: "What is the difference between a politician who says that Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says that Africa cannot do without European Languages?" (p. 26). Ngugi's point is that language has been always used by the coloniser to mentally and spiritually control the colonised: "The domination of a peoples' language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised" (Ibid, 16). By continuing to write in the coloniser's language one is colonized on the cultural level, and instead of enriching one's own native language and culture one only ends up enriching the European traditions. However, writers such as Chinua Achebe and Gabriel Okara disagree. Achebe argues: "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings." (qtd in Ngugi 8). He best demonstrates this new English in his much acclaimed work *Things Fall Apart*.

Now let us see how Bapsi Sidhwa uses English in the *Ice-Candy-Man*. Sidhwa's view is similar to that of Chinua Achebe. In her interview with Feroza Jussawalla she states:

> My first language of speech is Gujarati, my second is Urdu, my third is English. But as far as reading and writing goes I can read and write best in English. I'm a tail-end product of the Raj. This is the case with a lot of people in India and Pakistan. They're condemned to write in English, but I don't think this is such a bad thing because English is a rich language. Naturally it is not my first language; I'm more at ease talking in Gujarati and Urdu. After moving to America I realized that all my sentences in English were punctuated with Gujarati and Urdu words. (*Interviews with Writers* p.214)
So even though Sidhwa writes in English it is a new English -- an English punctuated with words from the native language. However it is not a simple addition of words from the native language to English. While the writer translates a number of words from the native languages, several words are also left untranslated. For instance, the following words have been translated: "pahalwan, a wrestler" (p.27), "choorail, witches"(p.21), "shabash, well said!"(p.245), "ghar ki murgi dal barabar. A neighbor's beans are tastier than household chicken" (p.232), "khtut putli, puppets" (p.222), "Mamajee Uncle" (p.77). What does such a translation of individual words do? Bill Ashcroft et al in The Empire Writes Back observe that such translation of individual words are the most obvious and most common authorial intrusion in cross-cultural texts. Juxtaposing the words in this way suggests that the meaning of a word is its referent. But the simple matching of words from the native language with its translated version in English reveals the general inadequacy of such an exercise. The moment a word from a native language is juxtaposed with its referent in English, instead of clarifying the meaning it shows the gap between the word and its referent. Bill Ashcroft et al argue that the implicit gap between the word from the native language and its referent, in fact disputes the "putative referentiality" of the words and establishes the word from the native language as a cultural sign. For instance, let us take the word "kotha" (p.267), which is translated in the novel as "roof" (p.267). It becomes clear in reading that the Hindi word "kotha" does not simply mean "roof", but is a place of prostitution. The gap between the word "kotha" and "roof" establishes "kotha" as a cultural sign.

Apart from these words there are certain others used from the native language which are not translated, such as: "sarkar" (p.157), "yaar" (p.91), "doolha" (p.180), "chachi" (p.199), "arrey bhagwan" (p.26), "angrez" (p.28), "haramzadi" (p.45), "haramkhor" (p.95), "chaudhary" (p.198). What purpose is served by not translating words of the native language? The use of untranslated words "is a clear signifier that the language which actually informs the novel is an / other language" (Ashcroft p.64). Even though the Ice-Candy-Man is written in English, the untranslated words remind the reader that the language of conversation of the characters is not English but Hindi, Urdu or Punjabi. The untranslated words are part of the strategy of the postcolonial writer to highlight the cultural difference.

Apart from using the strategies discussed above, Sidhwa perhaps quotes various Urdu poets in her narrative to highlight Muslim culture. In fact the novel opens with Iqbal's poem "Complaint to God"(1). At the beginning of chapter 13 the quote from Iqbal's poetry is a good example of the poet's anti-colonial subjectivity:

The times have changed; the world has changed its mind.  
The European's mystery is erased.  
The secret of his conjuring tricks is known:  
The Frankish wizard stands and looks amazed. (Ice-Candy-Man p.111)

Iqbal demystifies the notion of the Whites as a superior race by exposing the secret of its "conjuring tricks." At the same time Sidhwa undercuts the British notion of civilizing the Asians when they are blamed for introducing polio and syphilis in India. Colonel Bharucha while investigating the polio ridden Lenny says: "If anyone's to blame, blame the British! There was no polio in India till they brought it here!" (Ibid, 16), and later Lenny's father points out that "there was no syphilis in India until the British came" (Ibid, 61).

6.6 LET US SUM UP

Thus, we see that Bapsi Sidhwa through the Ice-Candy-Man has not only been successful in questioning the British and Indian versions of the subcontinent's history but has also provided an alternate version of history based on the prevalent, dominant
Pakistani point of view. She has succinctly adapted the English language to suit her purposes. Further, she has not just provided the marginalized Parsi community with a voice but also a large number of Pakistani readers. She is justified in saying:

I think a lot of readers in Pakistan, especially with Ice-Candy-Man, feel that I've given them a voice, which they did not have before. They have always been portrayed in a very unfavourable light. It's been fashionable to kick Pakistan, and it's been done again and again by various writers living in the West... And I feel, if there's one little thing one could do, it's to make people realize: we are not worthless because we inhabit a poor country that is seen by Western eyes as a primitive, fundamentalist country only. (Montenegro 51)

6.7 GLOSSARY

Agenda: Programme of things to be done.

Alienation: Estrangement, remoteness, separation, setting against.

Decolonizing: A term of common usage in postcolonial literature / theory dealing with the process of liberating the people from the various ideas, notions, ideologies, cultural habits, etc, imposed upon them by the colonizers in order to mentally enslave them.

Native: Local inhabitant as distinguished from immigrants/ foreign race ruling the country.

Neo-Colonialism: A form of colonialism which continues even after a country has gained independence. In this form of colonialism the ruling elite continues the same form of oppression as done by the colonial rulers in the past.

6.8 QUESTIONS

Q 1. What is postcolonial literature? Discuss the term in relation to Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy-Man.

Q 2. Give a postcolonial reading of Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy-Man.

Q 3. Discuss Bapsi Sidhwa's use of the English language in the Ice-Candy-Man.

6.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Reading


**Secondary Reading**


**Works Cited**


