

# ‘Communal Violence in Partition Novels’

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Ruth Linden, writing on the European Holocaust, has said that its impact was all- persuasive; “No one survived the holocaust parse. They survived ghettos, deportations and concentration camps”. A similar point could be advanced for the partition, despite the differences between the contexts of these two violent events in twentieth century history. For the participant authors discussed here, there truly have been no survivors; in the sense Linden has it. Bapsi Sidhwa’s views are representative of those who survived the partition: “It was a devastating movement in our lives and a defining moment in South Asian History. It changed the map of the world. Its repercussions are still being felt; it’s not over”.

Memories of the partition are in circulation today, more than ever, before, not only because of its continued communal manifestation, but also owing to the literature inspired by the partition. Thematisations of the partition in the genres of novel, short story, drama, poetry, film, oral narrative, memories and formal history have all contributed to the new visibility of Partition today is the national discourse. From this considerable body of writing the focus here has been on novels of the partition written and published in English by writers who had personally experienced the partition and who have since thematised the partition directly in their novels using appropriate fictional techniques. Based on these criteria, Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice Candy Man* (1988) passionately and creatively deals with the historical event of partition.

The analysis of the chosen novels has been primarily textual. Along with the emphasis on the thematic study, equal emphasis has been placed on the literary devices employed, and the narrative strategies adopted by the writers to mediate between history and fiction. The intention here has been to clarify the various points of view from which the traumatic event of partition has been fictionalized. This approach has made the study largely descriptive and analytical. However, since description and

analysis go with an evaluative sense, the study moves towards critical assessments of the works considered.

In critically assessing the chosen works, no attempts has been made to regiment the text into a rigid pattern, as if there is ore ought to be a hegemonic argument that would fit all texts. The experience of partition itself has been so varied and diverse that it has affected different people in different ways; and authors, too have looked at it from different perspectives, while it is true that the authors are of a kind in the centrality they give to the partition experience, there are significant differences in their worldviews, which inform the specific choices they make as writers within the fictional text.

Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* explores the axiology of communal conflict through a formal plot, which attempts to read sense into human history. Singh celebrates the old order, characterized by a chared sense of community, which its symbolized for him by the social relations in *ManoMajra* and the symbol of the train in the novel. The dissolution of this shared sense of community becomes, ironically, the basis for a vindication of the ultimate triumph of good after long travail- which is also a vindication of the Sikh concepts of heroism. Singh’s focus is on the human tragedy of the partition, its pain and pathos, and the process by which it brought to an end a communally shared history. *Train to Pakistan* is a fictional record of this loss, as well as a celebration of the voice of sanity in all its human dignity in an insane world. As writers of partition fiction, Singh works on the microcosmic plane, Singh is a master of minute detail; he is a Punjabi writer, and knows the thos he describes, Singh celebrates the village and its codes. Khushant Singh views the partition as the crystallization of historical forces that led to the breakdown of shared cultural historis, the partition views as the manifestation of the violence that is essentially embedded in human nature and history.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *Ice Candy Man* is simultaneously a narrative of human loss, a vindication of Parsee traditions, a story of women’s trauma and suffering, and an attempt to revise received history. Sidhwa strives to accommodate many concerns in her text, through not always

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successfully. Her attempt to write an even-handed narrative that looks at both sides of the border objectively is troubled by her need to rectify some of the wrongs of history, particularly insofar as Jinnah is concerned.

Sidhwa's novel is in spirit closest to Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*. Both novels records the loss of a communally shared history, tracing the breakdown of shared cultural spaces where people of different communal affiliations were able to live together without irreconcilable hatred towards each other. Both novels deploy a common structuring device, that of evolving the plot around a series of discussions which hinge on the partition. This is not to say that there are no differences between the two novelists. Sidhwa uses the prism of Parsee culture and neutrality to arrive at an objective view of the partition. She uses the divide of a child narrator to write a novel based on her childhood experience of the savagery of partition. In addition, Sidhwa is more centrally concerned than Singh with loss and with the role of memory as compensatory gesture.

The recognition of differences among the author is essential to our understanding of the partition novel, making our for us the specific ways in which each writer extends the tradition of partition fiction. Such analysis makes possible an understanding of the 'poetics' of partition fiction, and of the ways in which particular texts endorse or subvert the conventions and features that have come to typify the sub-genre of partition fiction.

An important aspect of partition novels is the way in which they view the event of the partition. On one level, this is to be discerned from the placement of the event of the partition within the narrative. As Khushwant Singh's novel opens, the partition has already taken place, it is announced through the arrival of the train from Pakistan with its load of dead people. The arrival of the ghost trains concretizes the partition for the people ManoMajra. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, the partition is announced through a series of vignettes, which form part of a narrative of violence in the novel; the delay makes room for the operation of authorial strategies designed to view the partition as a process that has long been in the making, and one that eclipses shared cultures. In both the novels, the announcement of partition, is closely linked with the eruption of partition violence.

On another level, partition novels may be understood for the way in which the characters anticipate the onset of partition. In Khushwant Singh's novel, no one in the village forces the partition or its impact, though there are discussions on it a little before it actually hits the village. The sudden onset of partition for the villagers, though not for the reader or for the other character in the novel, intensifies the ironic effect of the mottled down of

independence. In Sidhwa, no one foresees the arrival of partition, except *Ice-Candy-Man*, which makes possible a gradual process of becoming aware of the partition and its effects.

Partition novels may be understood also from the point of the perspectives the authors bring to bear on the nature of the partition. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa attributes an urban origin to the violence of partition. In fact, Imam Din travels, with Lenny from Lahore to Pir Pindo in order to acquaint the villagers of the communal troubles that have begun in the city. Pir Pindo is wiped out by the Akalis, who come in from the urban center of Amritsar. Sidhwa also explores the economic ruthlessness of Hindu in specific terms. These economic conflicts accumulate over the years and erupt in the turbulent violence of partition. However, in general, partition novelists are not interested in causation. The direct focus on the partition in their novels implies that the novelists do not focus on the factors leading up to partition in their novels implies that the novelists do not focus on the factors leading up to the partition. These factors are taken for granted, or registered in passing, or analyzed merely in terms of the dramatic value of juxtaposing an idyllic past with a more tenebrous present. The complex process that led to partition are not subjected to scrutiny.

In the final analysis, fictional texts on the partition may be read as offering powerful commentaries on the ambivalence associated with freedom. Khushwant Singh aptly seems up the mood of the moment when he says in his most recent work, "For some time the shock of having been deprived of my house and belonging and the tragedy of civil strife. . . . was forgotten in the euphoria of the newly won independence. . . . When the moment passed, the truth slowly dawned on me. Was this the kind of Independence we were looking forward to?" (*The end of India* 86).

Recognition of the point is important when it is generally felt that the partition theme has not produced canonical works, as has the freedom struggle in India. Partition fiction foregrounds the partition as a central feature of the nationalist discourse and counters the process of elision that has tended to cast the possible learning from the past into the dustbin of history.

The novelist chosen for study view the partition in different ways: as a vivisection that causes a rupture that destroys and dismantles shared histories; as a problem that has to be managed with the available resource; as a problem that thwarts dreams and delusions of glory; and as an event that provides the basis for realizing a redemptive code of action. It is also seen as the surfacing of violent

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passions intrinsic to men; as a fratricidal strife between brothers; as religious conflict; and as a displacing force that brings about the trauma of migration. The partition is a tragedy that brings to an end a life shared decencies for women; a wear in which the sites of contest are the women of the other community, and nations of honor and purity; a bewildering force that destroys plans at the level of the individual and family. It is also a politically decided event that casts a shadow on the euphoria of Independence: the harbinger of the communal tragedy that haunts the nation; and above all, it is seen as the failure of man.

The fictionalization of the theme of partition not only underscores the philosophy of the author, but also is reflective of the ability of the author to locate his or her character in history in a meaningful way. The insights they offer into the experience of partition, and into the emotional trauma of displacement determine the degree of complexity with which the partition itself is realized in the novels concerned.

Partition novels locate the experiences of the fictional text in a recognizable period outside the text, and raise the problem of the relationship between 'history' and 'fiction' in a work of art.

Writers of partition fiction comment upon the grand narrative of statist history of making use of canonical texts for this purpose. Khushwant Singh makes a spoof on Nehru's grand, canonical statement making Independence, the famous "tryst with Destiny" speech in parliament, in order to posit a gap between statist and people's histories. The confusion in Sidhwa's child narrator regarding the material and metaphorical aspect of the partition comments on nationalist histories of the partition and explores the genesis of partition and its impact on the lives of ordinary people.

Sidhwa's novel is also concerned with Parsee cultural history as a means of acquiring models of resilience to tide over current crises. The motifs of migration and the dissolution of borders are juxtaposed with the Parsee tradition of neutrality in order to establish the Parsee identity in the troubled and displacing times of partition. Partition novels problematize history and depending on the worldview of the writer, either view the partition as a cataclysmic force which people can neither control nor understand. All writers of partition fiction are passionate and serious about representing their experience of partition, but in the course of the transmutation from 'history' into 'fiction' they reconstitute historical facts and trends within the fictional frame to suit their predilections and purposes. The attempt to reconstitute history leads to an important convention in Partition, texts, that of the border crossing.

In the novel under study, borders are seen as historical barriers, but not as fault lines. A border crossing usually at or towards the end of the novel. Kushwant Singh's Train to Pakistan concludes with the train safely crossing over from India to Pakistan. In Sidhwa's novel, Ice-Candy-Man crosses over into India following Ayah to Amritsar. This convention in partition fiction is used varying in consonance with the purpose of the authors. In Train to Pakistan, it is through Jugga's sacrifice that the metaphoric significance of the "crossing over" of the train from India into Pakistan reigns supreme at the end of the novel. In the Ice-Candy-Man, the border crossing is ambivalent and open-ended. The ambivalence probably results from the fact that Sidhwa derives it from the story of a Sikh peasant and his Muslim beloved as she found it, valorizing the Muslim. However, in investing the ending, the author finds that this valorization cannot stand the test of truth unless the character of Ice-Candy-Man is also valorized. Therefore, Sidhwa, rather belatedly, attempts to absolve Ice-Candy-Man from the violent role he has played during the partition.

The crossing of the border in partition fiction thus fulfills various aesthetic purposes: it signifies the death of the old order and the loss of identity, which typically characterizes the status of the refugee. Partition texts tend to view the border as a historical fixity and as a permeable line. As a historical ferocity, it reflects the exclusiveness engendered by the partition; as a permeable line, the border intersects shared cultures. The act of crossing the border is thus an act of transcendence, as also an act of affirmation; the crossing both threatens and affirms the reality of the border. In Train to Pakistan, the love of Jugga for Nooran intensifies his essential humanity and enables a crossing of the border through a heroic act.

In Sidhwa's novel, Ice-Candy-Man is the satanic figure, who destroys the garden of Eden. He is also the unrequited love, pining for Ayah and thereby presenting an example of a marriage across communal barriers. There is another possible cross-community marriage in the novel- the one between Ayah and Masseur. Sidhwa portrays the gradual reification of communal identities as the principle reason that prevents Ayah from taking up Masseur's offer of marriage. However, since Ayah does not commit herself to Masseur and the latter is killed under the pretext of the riots, and the novel does not present the actuality of her marriage with Ice-Candy-Man, it must be said that it keeps its options open.

Partition narratives work towards a mandatory even handedness that reinforces the ethical connotations of border crossing and cross-community marriages. This even-handedness which seeks to transcend the communal

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antagonism between the earring fictions, has become a convention for the partition novel. Writers seeks to realize it through specific strategies of writing; in doing so, they cross the barrier of communal identities in an effort to arrive at a balanced reading of the partition crisis that goes beyond the language of hate and revenge.

The even-handedness of partition fiction is seen in the equal blame that is placed on all the earring communities; in the presentations of an equal of good and evil characters, within the community and across communities, in the refusal to show one class of people as being more violent than the other; and in the cross community ties that are asserted between villages. It is also seen in the acts of reaching out to warn the other community of impending attacks; in the countless acts of decency in the midst of hatred; in the nostalgia that expresses dissatisfaction with the present; and in the presence of cross-community marriages that affirm bonds beyond borders. It is also seen in the recognition that the partition experience is equally traumatic for refugees on both sides of the border, in the realization of the need to forgive, and to seek forgiveness, and in the assertion of blurred space that deny binary oppositions.

Writers, however, ensure that the point of even handedness is not romanticized or rendered unrealistic. This is done through a foil character, who does not accept the ethical vision of the protagonist; or through the refusal to convert to or many someone from another religion; or despite the even-handedness, through attributing a greater degree of culpability on the other community.

A similar predicament becomes operational in Sidhwa's novel as the Sikhs and Hindus emerge as the more voracious perpetrators of evil. Sidhwa's recovers its praise as Imam Din points out that Koran and the Granth Sahib lie side by side in the Golden Temple at Amritsar and that the Sikh religion was formed to being about Hindu Muslim amity. As in Khushwant Singh's novel, so too in Sidhwa's novel, the majoritarian forces seldom hear the voices of sanity, through these are not the less precious for that.

The even-handedness of partition novels, however, does not preclude the apportionment of blame for the tragedy of partition. Surprisingly, it is seen that the blame on the British is muted or does not figure at all. Khushwant Singh views it as a politically decided partition, where the new leaders, corrupt and over-enthusiastic, are callous to the suffering of ordinary people. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa's desire to prop up the image of Jinnah leads her to lay the blame for the communal violence on Gandhi, and criticizes his philosophy of non-violence as a veneer for communal

hatred, through there is a passing reference to Gandhi's conciliatory role in eastern India.

Partition novels view the partition not just as a moment in history, but also a movement, a long-drawn process of uprooting and resettlement that led to the searing reality of the refugee crisis during partition.

When the author's concern is with the intrusion of the partition into idyllic spaces, as in *Train to Pakistan*, the analysis of the refugees' is peremptory; it is confined to the trauma of displacement, of leaving behind what had taken centuries to build.

In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa affords us an insight into the complex nature of the choice between leaving and staying on. While the Parsees take a humors look at migration, and talk about it lightly in order to survive its travail, the same cannot be said of the villagers of Pir Pindo, who look upon migration as a loss of identity. Partition novels shows how people decide to stay on because the landscape in which they live has become integral to their identities; or because of false rays of hope proffered by politicians; or the relative security and remoteness of their villages; or their inability to renounce shared histories overnight. Thus, partition novels throw nuanced light on the violent experience of displacement and migration at the time of partition.

Violence is an important theme in partition fiction that is factored into the fictional narratives. Partition novels emphasize violence as an important fallout of partition through the contiguity between the 'announcement' of partition in both the novels and the onset of violence. The violence in *Train o Pakistan* is shown only after the arrival of the ghost trains.

In *Ice-Candy-Man*, the communalization of Lahorean society begins after Gandhi's arrival but the conflagration begins only after the partition has become a certainty. However these linkages are not uniform, and the violence itself is qualitatively different in each novel. Partition novels discuss various kinds of violence such as the violence of betrayal, fratricidal, strife, physical and psychological violence, sexual violence, violence on women in various forms, the violence of communal conflagration, urban and rural violence, the violence of displacement and migration, heroic martyrdom, the violence of terrorism, violence of the state, and so on. Partition novelists like Khushwant Singh also distinguish between 'routine' violence and the violence of partition. Singh does not consider that violence is an essential and inalienable aspect of the human condition.

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In Sidhwa's novel, the mindless brutality of the violence is overwhelming for the child, and it is characteristic that Lenny takes recourse to an explanatory mythology of toys. The attempt to cover up an adult world under a veneer of childhood pursuits cannot stand the test of adult realities. It is with this emotional price of partition with which partition novelists are concerned.

From this point of view, the violence in the novel becomes an instrument of marking the boundaries of community. Violence also serves to mark other kinds of boundaries, leading novelists into irresolvable binds.

Whereas the child narrators who present the violence in Sidhwa's novel confront violence with maturity. Novels of the partition sometimes celebrate violence, but in the best of them, violence is used for aesthetic purposes, to evoke a world and to indict those forces that are inimical to civilization. At the same time, they are concerned with the impact of violence on people, on their sensibilities, motives and actions. Partition fiction explores the impact of violence on people, without valorizing or demonizing it but, importantly, without countenancing it either. It registers a strong comment of disapproval on violence and roundly condemns the "pointless brutality" of Partition (Ice-Candy-Man 139).

Partition novels foreground, to different degrees, the experiences of women and the violence done them during the partition. The focus on the experiences of women becomes sharper in recent texts, the younger writers factoring in feminist concerns into their reading of the Partition experience. In Khushwant Singh's novel, both Haseena and Nooran are women caught in the catastrophe of partition. Like most women of their time, they suffer bravely, but silently.

Sidhwa's novel attempts a more sensitive reading of the fate of women during the partition, and critiques the gendered nature of the nationalist discourse. Ice-Candy-Man is the only novel taken up for study here that explores the question of the 'Recovery of Women'. Sidhwa records the loss of multi-cultural ethos in Lahore, with consequent loss of composite space and women's agency, which is presented as the most serious loss brought about by partition. Partition novels are marked by sensitivity to the suffering of women.

On the other hand, despite this sensitivity, the novels disclose the suppression of women's identities as a central aspect of the partition.

In Ice -Candy-Man the violence against women during the partition is overt and cruel, but it is also an everyday affair, which is why Sidhwa juxtaposes the rape of Ayah with the marriage of Papoo. Ayah herself, despite her powers, is

thrown out of the Garden of Eden, Eve-like, and silenced forever at the end of the novel. The woman performs and controls, but she is also taken control of. The regal queen, who had presided over a composite world, is overthrown. The word "unwomaned" used by Sidhwa in this context (Ice-Candy-Man 236) points to the gendered nature of nationalist politics. While the perpetrators of violence are all men, the guilt of their crimes is attached to women. Lenny assumes that the recovered women's camp is a jail, even though the inmates "look innocent enough" (189). Sidhwa's text factors in the uncertainty that dogged the life of repatriate women.

Through these characters, the novel explores the different ways in which the partition affected women, their responses, their resilience, the way they chose to come to terms with personal and national history- and the way such choices were denied to them.

It is interesting to note that even the most mimetic of writers who write on the theme of the partition impose pattern upon their thematic of the partition experience through the choice of appropriate literary strategies. In Train to Pakistan, Khushwant Singh structures his narrative into four parts, with each part revolving around a discussion of the partition, which trace the loss of a shared cultural history.

Sidhwa's novel, Ice-Candy-Man, presents the violence associated with partition in a tripartite movement that establishes large correspondence within the text which record the inexorable breakdown of composite spaces, and trace a gradual movement from joy and laughter to woe and despair. The use of parallel scenes and a carefully structured pattern of discussions dramatize the growing conflicts between erstwhile friends, leading to the disintegration of familiar bonds. Such formal concerns reflects the particular stances of the authors vis-à-vis the partition to discover a form that is appropriate to the compulsions and concerns of fictionalizing the partition.

Towards the same end, the authors deploy a number of narrative strategies: Singh's discussions are arranged with calibrated intensity, each successive meeting registering a higher degree of formality and public participation.

The silences in the novel indicate the trauma of partition and qualify any positive connotation of freedom. Sidhwa's novel captures the turmoil of the times through the endearing agency of a child narrator who, across the tumultuous years of the novel's action, tries to make sense of both her growing-up pains and the collective anguish of a partitioned nation. Khushwant Singh and Sidhwa do not hesitate to use tunes from popular films in their novels to reflect the spirit of the times.

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Partition fiction is characterized by the use of typical symbols and imagery that realize the experience graphically and comment upon it. The image of the train, and the massacres associated with it, was entrenched in partition fiction by the eponymous role of the train in Khushwant Singh's novel. The symmetrical arrangement of the arrival of trains emphasizes the central significance of the train for the novel as a symbol of collective destiny, dramatizing the disintegration of shared communal histories in the village, and the transcending of fabricated borders in the novel's dramatic ending.

In Sidhwa, the trainload of bodies from India sets off a train of violence in Lahore. It is only in Khushwant Singh that the train is used ironically: it is a symbol of homogenous community, as well as of its destruction, but from the embers of it will arise a new order based on love and humanity.

This study has advanced the concept of "participant-author" as an implied author generated by the personal experience of the partition by the writers chosen for study. It is observed that all the writers, albeit to varying degrees, have undergone the experience of partition at first hand: Khushwant Singh as a lawyer émigré from Lahore. Sidhwa who witnessed the carnage of partition as child in Lahore. Both the authors chosen for study write 'autobiographical' novels that draw upon their personal memories of the partition and recast them imaginatively in the fiction text. Like Sidhwa, have specifically admitted the autobiographical basis of particular scenes in their novels.

The intensity of the experience of partition and the exclusive focus on it reveal the participant status of the authors concerned.

In *Train to Pakistan*, there is nostalgia for secular spaces and shared histories, which is juxtaposed with the traumatic experience of partition. The novel's treatment of the partition is shaped by the tension between nostalgia and trauma.

The novelists who thematic the partition "raise event psychologically and emotionally, to tie us into its complex of choices and pain" (Francisco 373). Crossing the barrier for a cementing of hearts, they make a passionate plea in favor of secular, cohesive, and syncretism mornings on which alone civilizations can thrive. Partition novels capture an inconvenient period in history, and enable the reader to come to terms with it. They also celebrated the unique power of a cultural to retain an awareness of loss in ways that emphasize the validity of secular spaces and the urgent need to revive them.