

Study of Trauma and Transgression of the ‘Adult-child’ in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man*

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa’s characterization of Lenny Sethi in her fourth novel, the 1991 historical fiction *Ice-Candy-Man*, is formulated by the heterogeneous impact of the 1947 partition of India on the psychopathology of children. This paper observes how the trope of trauma problematizes the embodiments of childhood, contradicting its axiomatic paradisiacal nature. Parallel to the chaos of communal massacre, mass migration, dysfunctional parenting and the marginality of women and children, Lenny’s traumatic experience surpasses a singular-episodic trauma, and is laden with a multiplicity of source factors, thereby generating “complex trauma” (van der Kolk et al., 2007, p. 202). The child narrator acquires symptoms of irregular curiosity, hyper-vigilance, somatic complaints, fear, PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and transgresses specific social norms. Lenny is a choreographed child, a problem-child, taxonomized as the ‘adult-child’ in the paper. Now, the question is whether to see the ensuing malfunction symptoms as a diagnostic criterion or adaptive human resilience? Drawing from Anjali Gera Roy’s concept of “intangible violence” (Roy, 2020, p. 43) the paper examines textual openings where the stages of childhood and adulthood deconstruct itself, approximates, and overlaps inside each other; taking cues from a relatively less-documented narrative angle of the child victim of partition.

Keywords: *Ice-Candy-Man*, Trauma, Transgression, Partition, Adult-child, Embodiment

1. Introduction

Analogous to the titular metaphor of “cracking”, in Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Ice-Candy-Man* (1991), also known as *Cracking India*, we may hypothesize a breakage in the model of childhood, consequential to the trauma of Lahore-based 1947 unrest. In the heart of the narrative is Lenny Sethi, a synecdoche of convoluted children of her times. There is a specific psychogenic connection in her characterization and the comprehension of the novel as a trauma text. The challenge here is: “‘trauma fiction’ represents a paradox or contradiction: if trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativised in fiction?” (Whitehead, 2004, p. 3). Unspeakability or aporia is an overt symptom of post-trauma experience, which Elaine Scarry describes in her book *The Body In Pain –The Making and Unmaking of the World* as “reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans...witness the destruction of language” (Scarry, 1985, p. 6). In Sidhwa, Lenny is in herself a literary technique, an embodiment of the ongoing nation-problem in her symptoms of “adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)” (Kelly-Irving et al., 2013, p. 721). Certainly, the loss of

paradisiacal childhood configures decentered subjectivities in extremis, which when analyzed in the narrator's way of telling and showing, discloses irregular curiosities and a state of hyper-vigilance, a sheer testimony of trauma. Coinciding with creative nomenclatures emanating from the child's mind, relation-words like Godmother, Slavesister, Electric-aunt, this paper assigns Lenny the title of an 'adult-child', a noun, which refers to a child with untimely adult-like behaviors.

To quote from the book *Literature, Gender, and the Trauma of Partition: The Paradox of Independence*, "Writings about children's experience of the Partition are scarce" (Mookerjee-Leonard, 2017, p. 166); however, works like Manik Bandyopadhyay's Bengali short story "Chhelemanushi", Bhisham Sahni's "Pali", Neelu in Sankha Ghosh's *Supuriboner Sari* (Lines of Areca Palms, 1990) and Deepu, in Prafulla Ray's *Bhagabhagi* (Divisions, 2001) represent the violence and dislocations of children. Lenny Sethi's understanding of the imaginary partition lines drawn across Lahore derives from her reception of the violent stories of Ranna (a child refugee) in *Pir Pindo*, the narrative accounts of Sharbat Khan, encounters of dismembered bodies on the street, reports from the radio, her wanderings with her nanny Shanta (Ayah), conversations between Masseur, butcher, Sher Singh, Yousuf, Hari, Ice-candy man, Government House gardener, and other characters who are not from the bourgeois class Lenny's family identified with in the text. Instead, her reception of partition narratives is from the collective mass, the less-privileged and the core quarter of brutality (ongoing mass sexual assault, death fetish, holocaust-like abuses, tribulations like ethnic cleansing). A close textual reading makes it clear that Lenny's trauma is not a single episode derivative, rather a "complex trauma" (van der Kolk et al., 2007, p. 202), with characteristics of "Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified (DESNOS)" which includes irregular anger modulation and sexual involvement, chronic characterological changes in aspects of guilt, revictimization of self and other, and faltered systems of social meaning (van der Kolk et al., 2007, p. 203).

2. Psychosomatic symptoms of trauma within the text

In this coming-of-age trauma novel, Lenny "becomes a means of commenting on violence legitimised at the level of the nation-state, often through compliant parental or familial silences" (Singh, 2004, p.15); distinguishes herself from her family where the "bourgeois adults are almost infantilised in their caricatured predictable responses" (Singh, 2004, p. 15). As a mediator of articulating the story of pain, Lenny imbibes certain non-childlike characteristics, with psychosomatic symptoms that transgress her from her identity of a child. Lenny is in a quest for a haven, which her parents fail to provide her. The sole respite is in the company of Godmother and Ayah, avoiding her mother's neglectful, "treacherous" parenting, with an "on-off pattern" (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 42). The constant search for a surrogate parent dismantles her child-like dependency and heightens the scavenger quality. Lenny remarks, "I reel dizzily on a fleetingly glimpsed and terribly grown-up world" (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 241). To quote Michelle Balaev, experiences are "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (Balaev, 2008, p. 150). The entire execution of Lenny's character is a process of adaptation to trauma and settling with a fragmented subjectivity.

One of the most significant episodes that throw lights into the subconscious pain of Lenny is the limb by limb dismemberment of her "bloated celluloid doll" (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 138), an act signifying imitative violence. This performance of mutilating an inanimate object, expresses impending anarchy in her psyche; it also argues that "trauma, abuse or maltreatment in childhood

has been linked to alteration of the brain structure and the neurobiological stress-response systems which have consequences for health and emotional well-being" (Kelly-Irving et al., 2013, p. 721). The limb dissection is a personal purgation, a self-found expressive therapy, for Lenny. It is also a moment in the text where we see reflections of a chaotic society affecting the child, resulting in PTSD. For instance, when she heard about the Gurdaspur violence, the "gunny-bags full of women's breasts" (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 149), the 'adult-child' immediately imagined the dismembered breasts of her mother. Her emotional health is charged with imageries of escalated violence around her. Lenny is a victim of "intangible violence" (Roy, 2020, p. 43), facing the "indirect effects of direct violence that shook the very foundations of the world they had taken for granted" (Roy, 2020, p. 44); in this case the foundation of childhood as a preliminary, de-sexualized, leisurely and passive stage of life is dismantled.

The 'adult-child' is evidently self-aware of her vulnerability as a polio-infected child; in fact she manipulates the adults in the text for information and self protection using her bodily condition. To quote, "sufferers from "traumatic neuroses" become enduringly vigilant for and hyperreactive to environmental threat" (van der Kolk et al., 2007, p. 217). As a narrator and a diagnostic criterion, Lenny is overtly conscious of her surrounding, especially as a receptor of the anecdotes of the admirers of her Ayah Shanta. She is also keen about religious discussions in the household, apolitical stances of her family, the use of jokes as a technique of digression from charged political opinions, details of Hindu-Muslim riots and the lives of the residents of Hira Mandi, etc. A noteworthy psychosomatic expression in Lenny is her "an abysmal sense of loss" (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 22) in a nightmarish adult world, and the recurring dream of a lion haunting her in sleep. To argue, "The hungry lion cutting across Lawrence Road to Birdwood Road prowls from the rear of house to the bed-room door and in one bare fanged leap crashes through to sink his fangs into my stomach" (Sidhwa, 1999 ,pp.23-24). This is symbolic of the contiguous violence channelized as a mental realization.

Another somatic complaint occurs when the 'adult-child' is guilt-ridden after the abduction of her nanny. There is a self-consideration of her testimony as the rationale behind the violent act of Ayah's seizure; and Lenny retches and vomits for three days and "stand in front of the bathroom mirror staring at my tongue...hold the vile, truth—infected thing between my fingers and try to wrench it out...punish it with rigorous scourings from my prickling toothbrush until it is sore and bleeding" (Sidhwa, 1999 ,p. 184). This act can be described as "alterations in self-perception: chronic guilt and shame; feelings of self-blame, of ineffectiveness, and of being permanently damaged" (van der Kolk et al., 2007, p. 203). The guilt and pain experienced by Lenny has a belatedness about it, which Cathy Caruth describes as "there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event" (Caruth, 1995, p. 4). It is in the reception of the experience by the 'adult-child' victim that the degree of trauma can be calculable, if at all.

3. Lenny's transgression and adaptative human resilience

It "would be inaccurate to suggest that either the medical problem of pain or the problem of expressing pain in medical contexts has been solved" (Scarry, 1985, p. 8). Pain and trauma is still a discursive topic when it comes to the linguistic scopes of its narratibility. In the context of the turbulent event of partition, variegated acts of transgression finds place. Some of them are forced maiming, sights of unpredictable slaughter by children, oppressive inspection of circumcision, mob violence, etc. During partition, violence itself mobilised unfamiliar people together, who

engaged themselves in eccentric behaviors and misalliances, what Mikhail Bakhtin terms as the “carnavalesque” (Bakhtin & Iswolsky, 1984, p.10). The otherwise socially unaccepted behaviors are arbitrarily accepted in the face of mob brutality. The protests turn out to be performances of festivity. The group-driven attacks of the mob on one another, categorizing each other as the “outsider”, on the basis of various love-hate relationships, gender and religious standing, create an invalidating situation for the regular mobility of Lenny on the street, during her visits to parks and Godmother’s house. She is “disabled” by the Partition hostility and imbibes distinct transgressive traits.

First, Lenny’s overt sexual curiosity is a transgressive behavior that discloses how “trauma leads to a variety of problems with the regulation of affective states, such as anger, anxiety, and sexuality” (van der Kolk et al., 2007, p. 184). Lenny disapproves of her mother’s closeness with her father and calls it “a prostitution of my concept of childhood rights and parental loyalties” (Sidhwa, 1999. p. 42). Remarks like, “cannot be in her room long without in some way touching her” (Sidhwa, 1999. p. 4) and description of Slavesister’s body as “melting tallow and oozing moisture from powdered pores” (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 165), Masseur’s dead body as “fair inside, creamy, and his arms smooth...” (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 174) are indicative. These phrases, in some way, contradict the prescriptive norms of conventional child behavior. The images and vocabularies used are undoubtedly adult-like, with signs of premature adulting of the ‘adult-child’. Lenny develops an incestuous relationship with her cousin brother, and is self aware of his sexual advances, “I know I’m supposed to feel a thrill so, I muster up a little thrill” (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 143). It is noteworthy that, “it is critical to distinguish exposure to traumatic events from a child’s reaction to those events (e.g., psychopathological symptoms)” (van der Kolk et al., 2007,p. 9). In similar line of thought, this sexual dysregulation is an evidential repercussion of trauma.

The narration of the child is intrinsic to the plot because we are not confined to a stationary perspective but allowed to be a part of an ongoing story, full of textual anxiety and narrative nervousness. To quote, “As a fictional Partition narrative, *Cracking India* presents alternatives to dominant historiographical paradigms through the characterization of Lenny as an in-between and, at times, subversive figure” (Barker, 2011, p. 99). Instances of her subversion imply at her manipulative nature, as she remarks “I manoeuvre a set of circumstances to suit me” (p.72). Lenny chooses her protective side, as a shield, and an adaptative human nature, a survivalist strategy. On finding the hacked dead body of Masseur (Ayah’s lover) in a gunnysack, she is still hopeful that her “lover lives somewhere in the distinct and possible future” (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 177). The latter’s sympathy towards an adult is accompanied with a self-comfort of being distanced from personal misery, a pinpoint disjunction. This meticulous layering of the text to situate a child choreographed by traumatic events is a credibility of the writer Sidhwa, who not only fictionalizes the trauma of an adult world, but makes a child its functionary mouth-piece:

“Literary texts and their fictional worlds allow for nuanced engagements with the subject of trauma, which is often personalized and contextualized, fictionalized and historicized, as well as psychologized and metaphorized at the same time. Literary approaches to trauma, then, have the potential to engage readers’ powers of emotional identification and sympathy on the one hand and critical reflection on the other” (Schönfelder, 2013, p.29).

From the perspective of an immensely oppressed category, as a female-child, Lenny offers resilience in the text, which is an intrinsic part of her “developmental process of psychopathology” (G. Buchanan et al., p. 18). Drawing from Ann S. Masten, the term resilience refers to the “capacity of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development” (Masten, 2011, p.494). The ‘adult-child’ is determined about adapting to

the violent atmosphere by enhanced self-protection and watchfulness, and her role as a narrator is a device capable of allowing her that agency.

4. Conclusion

A close reading into the psychosomatic developments of a traumatic experience and its ensuing transgressive actions provides a revisionist reading into the partition narrative of *Ice-Candy-Man*. The 'adult-child' Lenny Sethi, engages in a "personal narrative of disabled embodiment" (Barker, 2011, p. 95), evident in her words, "'No!' I scream, unable to bear the thought of an able-bodied future" (Sidhwa, 1999, p. 13). Her characterization opens ventures of looking into the text as a disability fiction, alongside a trauma fictionⁱ. The approach of, "a discomfiting oscillation between materialist constructions of disability as a social presence and the deployment of disability as a prosthesis standing in for colonial disablement and the mutilated – partitioned – body politic" (Barker, 2011, p.95), is already sought in the text by recent scholarship. Also, Lenny's identity has been "described as "queer", due to her liminal and disabled condition" (Ahn, 2019). This paper offers a dimension of trauma sanctioned adult-like behaviors and psychopathological responses of complex-trauma in the text, a definite addition to the discourse of vulnerable children in partition stories. Lenny Sethi, the 'adult-child', expounds rapture in the clear demarcation of childhood and adulthood, as two separate and linear stages of life. The pervasive effects of trauma destroy the axiomatic child, and endow a new survivalist identity. Sidhwa's child narrator is an exemplar of children in crisis, where the 'adult-child' subsists as a sheer dystopia.

Note:

ⁱ The phrase "trauma fiction" is elaborately discussed in Anne Whitehead's book *Trauma Fiction* (2004), concerning influential works like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Michele Roberts's *Daughters of the House*(1993), Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1997), Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991-95), Caryl Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997), etc. She delves into the issue of haunting, testimony, memory, intertextuality and improvisation. These aspects of trauma are also locatable in Sidhwa's text, and they affect the development of the child character Lenny.

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