

## Lame Lenny as an Autobiographical Character of Bapsi Sidhwa

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to evaluate Lenny's character. The paper discusses how Bapsi Sidhwa launches her own character through Lenny. She expresses her bitter experiences during partition period and also expresses her social, political and religious thoughts through her autobiographical characters. Her like for Parsi community is quite comprehensible as Sidhwa was Parsi. Though she praises and favours Parsi beliefs, she never criticizes other religion's beliefs and values. She has equal respect and honour for all the religions. Thus, Lenny is an autobiographical character by every inch.

### 1. Introduction

*Ice-Candy Man* also known as *Cracking India* by Sidhwa's American publishers Milkweed Editions (1991) is her third novel. It is her most serious, political novel till now. *Cracking India* has three distinct strands, political, narrative and the child narrator. It is the only novel in which she uses a child narrator.

### 2. Lame Lenny as an Autobiographical Character

Anita Desai compares 'Lame Lenny', the protagonist of *Cracking India* with the character of Gunter Grass's Oscar in the novel, *Tin Drum*. Both the characters are isolated by their physical deformity. It gives an additional deceptiveness to the childish perspective which has been used by many writers. The child's perspective is used to make the so-called rationalism of the adult world strange. It is really unique to use a girl child narrator in the novel.

However Sidhwa's novel is unique as it establishes the girl child's point of view. At the beginning, Lenny, a Parsi girl of eight years old tells the story of partition in first person in the present tense. Sidhwa does not give more importance to the history of the partition struggle but for her the human struggle becomes of the utmost importance. The narrator who is recovering from polio announces at the outset that the world is compressed.

Sidhwa works this self-imposed limitation to her advantage by placing the privileged and spoiled Lenny in an adult world, which she apprehends and reports in a naïve manner. The events leading to India's partition and the communal violence unfold as wide-eyed observations by the child narrator Lenny.

Sidhwa is fond of citing the reference of the Fire Temple of the Parsis in Lahore and its inner pious atmosphere in her novels. When Lenny visits it with the Godmother she describes it:

The main hall of the temple is already full of smoke. Two priests, sitting cross-legged and swaying slightly, face each other across a fire altar. They are robed in a swollen froth of starched white muslin... Their chanting voices rise and boom in

fierce competition and the mask prevents specks of spittle from profaning the fire. They sit on a white sheet amidst silver trays heaped with fruit- grape, mango, papaya—and flowers. And the *malida* cooked by the priest's wife... The priests cannot be hurried. They go through a ritual established a millennium ago. They stoke the fire with silver tongs and feed it with sandalwood and frankincense. (41-42)

Lenny, like Feroza in *An American Brat*, often prays especially on such occasions when she finds herself in trouble. At the time of Partition, Lenny's mother helps many Hindu families in Lahore. When Lenny comes to know that her mother and aunt have stocked many barrels of petrol, she gets worried and thinks that her mother and aunt might set fire to the whole city of Lahore. She senses incrimination for her mother and her aunt. To get rid of this fear Lenny narrates:

"For the first time, unbidden, I cover my head with a scarf and in secluded corners join my hands to take the 101 names of God. The Bountiful. The Innocent. The Forgiver of Sin. The Fulfiller of Desire. He who can turn Air into Ashes: Fire into water: Dust into Gems! The angle of the walls deflects the ancient words of the dead Avastan language and the prayer resounds soothingly in my ears. (184)

Lenny wants to clear her doubts about the petrol cans stored by her mother and aunt. One day when she wakes up, her mother is preparing for the prayer. Lenny describes:

It is Friday, the day to invoke the great Trouble Easers, the angels Mushkail Assan and Behram Yazd. (In troubled times they are frequently evoked by the Parsees.) As mother prepares for the ceremony, spreading a white sheet on the bedroom floor and placing the small fire altar and photographs of the saints on it... Mother kneels on the floor and strikes a match to light the joss-sticks. She arranges the sandalwood shavings on the fire altar and places a criss-cross of small sandalwood sticks on top of them. (253-254)

Lenny gets frightened by the slogans of rioters and screams of women. Even in her sleep she is awoken by the horrors of commotion and riots. She remembers her lovely Ayah who disappears mysteriously. She has terrible dreams of Ayah haunting in her sleep. When she screams for Ayah in her sleep, her mother rushes to her side during night time. Lenny narrates the incident:

Mother rushes to my side and bends over me. In the faint glow from the night-light I see her hand sweep my body as she symbolically catches mischievous spirits and banishes them with a loud snap of her fingers. At the same time she blows on me, making a frightening noise like moaning winds: Whooooo! Whooooo! The sound is eerie enough to banish any presence: natural or supernatural. She places a six inch iron nail, blessed by the Parsee mystic Mobed Ibera, the disciple of Dastur Kookadaru, under my mattress to ward off fear. (225)

Lenny's family belongs to the Parsi religion yet her mother talks about spending money over the festival that belongs to Christianity. This shows that the Parsis have equal respect for Christianity. Not only Christianity but also all other religions are respected by this miniscule minority. The narrator Lenny says, "Christmas, Easter, Eid, Divali. We celebrate them all" (78).

Bapsi Sidhwa's fictional discourse in *Cracking India* asserts her idea that all the religions are equally honorable. In the days of communal disharmony or communal riots at the time of Rath Yatra or Tazia Procession, people should cultivate very healthy attitudes for honoring all the religions. This is how they consider Christmas, Eid, Natal as their own festivals. This reflects Bapsi Sidhwa's vision of life of honoring ethnic identities of different people as well as accepting people with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In fact, in the days of multiculturalism and multi ethnicity, it is a better way to live harmoniously, peacefully and joyfully. Sidhwa wants to give the message to the world that her religion has no bias or prejudice against any religion. The Parsis not only respect the other faiths but also enthusiastically participate in the festivals of other religious groups. The most important point to be noted here is that in her any religious discourse, she has never shown any disrespect for any religion. She has neither compared her religion to other religions nor showed that hers is a superior one. Instead, she praises the people of other religion, "The Sikhs are fearless. They are warriors" (104).

Being a child, Lenny does not know much about the other religious groups and their rituals and customs. When Mr. Rogers (A Christian) dies, she thinks that he will be put into the Tower of Silence. She is corrected by the Godmother who explains her that Christians are buried and the Parsis are put into the Tower of Silence. The Godmother enlightens Lenny:

Actually it is quite a simple structure: just a big round wall without any roof... the dead body is put inside the *Dungarwadi*... the vultures pick it clean and the sun dries out the bones. (112)

The Godmother uses the word *Dungarwadi* for the Tower of Silence. In fact, the English sahibs used this word for the Tower of Silence. The Godmother details the journey of the dead to little Lenny. She explains what happens to the dead body and why the Parsis believe in putting the body into the Tower of Silence. She explains:

It's only the body that is dead. Instead of polluting the earth by burying it, or wasting fuel by burning it, we feed God's creatures. (122)

Through the Godmother's character, Bapsi Sidhwa conveys sarcastically that the Hindu, Muslim or Christian customs concerning the dead bodies are not good for the earth or the atmosphere. The Parsis believe that the dead body of a person is of no use if it is buried or burnt. It must be offered as food to the hungry birds like vultures. When the godmother describes the Tower of Silence, Lenny gets curious to visit the place and expresses her wish to see it with her own eyes. But the Godmother informs her that:

We don't have one in Lahore. There are too few Parsees: the vultures would starve. But when you go to Karachi or Bombay you can see it from the outside. Only pall-bearers can go in...we have a graveyard in Lahore.(122)

The words of Godmother make it clear that the Parsis are flexible in terms of following their age old customs.

There is no doubt about the fact that Bapsi Sidhwa is very much fascinated by Jinnah's personality. There are many references in her novels where she has painted Jinnah to be the hero of the political scenario of the time. One of the most possible reasons for Sidhwa's fascination for Jinnah is his second marriage with a Parsi girl. Lenny's mother shows Lenny a photograph of a couple saying, "She is Jinnah's wife...She's Parsee" (123).

### 3. Conclusion

It can be concluded that Lenny is an autobiographical character in the novel. Sidhwa pen pictures her bitter experience during the partition period through Lenny, eight years old Parsi girl. Being Parsi, she loves and favours her religion however, she does not show any dislike or disrespect for other religions like Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. Through the character of Lenny she puts her views and thoughts regarding other religions and political parties. Almost all characters are very near to her own family members.

### Works Cited

Sidhwa, Bapsi. *Cracking India*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2006.