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Reading Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* through the Lens of Biopolitics and Sexuality

Abstract: *This paper examines Bapsi Sidhwa's* Ice-Candy-Man *through the theoretical framework of biopolitics. By employing a Foucauldian lens to interrogate the intersections of politics, sexuality, and bodily representation during the Partition period. The study argues that Sidhwa constructs women's bodies as sites of political inscription, echoing Kamala Bhasin and Ritu Menon's formulation of women as "bodies symbolising conquered lands." The study undertakes a critical textual and psychoanalytic analysis to explore how biopolitics operates through the female body and how sexuality becomes a key marker in defining selfhood amid national trauma. Focusing on Lenny's neurotic and fragmented consciousness. This paper investigates the psychological repercussions of the Partition and how her disability becomes emblematic of a fractured self-caught in the violence of history. Ultimately, this study concludes that Sidhwa's narrative serves as an archival testament to the embodied anxieties of the Partition. By positioning marginalised female subjects at the centre of a biopolitical discourse that exposes the entanglement of gender, power, and nationhood.*

Keywords: Biopolitics, Foucault, Politics, Sexuality, Body.

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Reading Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* through the Lens of Biopolitics and Sexuality

Akanksha Barthwal [1]

Introduction

In the twentieth century, the Partition of India stands out as a profoundly gendered political upheaval, where women's bodies became tools for communal honour and political dominance, as detailed in my book. Feminist historians like Menon, Bhasin, and Butalia have chronicled how abductions, rapes, forced conversions, and "recovery" operations formed a systematic regime of bodily control. The violence of the Partition not only took lives but also redefined women's identities by dictating their place of residence, their affiliations, and their ability to return home. As Pandey observes, "the history of violence has scarcely begun to be addressed" (189), particularly concerning how women's bodies became the battleground for asserting national boundaries.

This paper contends that the primary issue in *Ice-Candy-Man* is not trauma in general, nor sexuality or disability as separate categories, but the biopolitical regulation of women's bodies—a framework in which communal and national powers decide the worth, function, and disposability of women as symbolic bearers of honour. Employing feminist analysis to explore how women's bodies are perceived as national and communal assets, this study investigates how Sidhwa portrays violence as a political tool that governs life, controls sexuality, and reinforces patriarchal authority. The abduction of Ayah, the mutilation of women on the Gurdaspur train, and the state-led "recovery" operations exemplify the biopolitical processes through which the Partition shapes and manages gendered bodies. Through the perspective of the child narrator Lenny, whose disability heightens her awareness of bodily differences and vulnerability, Sidhwa reveals how biopower infiltrates daily life through surveillance, moral judgment, and internalised shame. The Introduction thus sets up the article's main research

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question: How does *Ice-Candy-Man* depict women's bodies as biopolitical sites through which gender, nation, and communal identity are governed during the Partition?

Michel Foucault's theoretical constructs of biopower, disciplinary power, and governmentality offer a vital framework for interpreting "Ice-Candy-Man" not solely as a trauma narrative but as a text that elucidates the mechanisms of power through the regulation of bodies during periods of political upheaval. Biopower, characterised as the modern state's engagement in "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" (Foucault, History of Sexuality 139), is manifested in the novel through the systematic targeting of women's reproductive and sexual capacities. The mutilated female bodies on the Gurdaspur train, reduced to anonymous fragments, exemplify Foucault's notion of the state's power to "make live and let die" (Society Must Be Defended 241), where communal violence serves as an extension of population control rather than a collapse of order. Disciplinary power operates at the micro level of the body, influencing gestures, shame, and self-surveillance. Lenny's compulsive policing of her own body—washing her "truth-infected" tongue after betraying Ayah—illustrates the internalisation of moral discipline, aligning with Foucault's assertion that modern power is most effective when self-administered (Discipline and Punish 202). Governmentality, understood as the rationalisation of power through institutions and norms, becomes evident in post-Partition "recovery" operations, where the state classifies, relocates, and morally evaluates women's bodies in the name of national purity (Menon and Bhasin WS4). Thus, Sidhwa's narrative stages biopolitics not abstractly but through concrete embodied scenes that reveal how power permeates both public violence and intimate life.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual methodology grounded in Foucauldian biopolitics and feminist criticism.

1. Detecting biopolitical methods within the narrative

Drawing on Foucault's notion of biopower—"the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" (History of Sexuality 139)—the study pinpoints instances where women's bodies

are controlled, enumerated, exhibited, or disciplined. These instances are viewed as political technologies rather than isolated acts of violence.

2. Performing detailed analyses of significant scenes

The analysis centres on three clusters of textual evidence:

a. the Gurdaspur train massacre with its depiction of mutilated women,

b. Ayah's kidnapping and sexual abuse, and

c. Lenny's observation of violence and her internalised bodily awareness.

These scenes are examined for their portrayal of female bodies as sites of population control, communal honour, and political symbolism.

3. Analysing gendered embodiment through feminist biopolitics

Feminist scholars (Menon & Bhasin; Butalia; Garland-Thomson) shed light on how women's bodies serve as indicators of communal purity and national legitimacy. Their frameworks are employed solely to interpret textual evidence without overshadowing it. Lenny's disability is interpreted not as a separate focus but as an emotional lens through which the novel exposes bodily vulnerability under Partition's disciplinary regimes.

Through these phases, the methodology avoids theoretical redundancy and connects textual details to biopolitical processes.

1. Partition Violence as Biopolitical Regulation

Sidhwa's depiction of mutilated female bodies foregrounds how violence is a technique of population management. The Gurdaspur train—carrying "only two gunny-bags full of women's breasts" (ICM 149)—reduces intimate flesh to political statistics. Women's bodies are not merely harmed; they are transformed into statistical evidence of communal victory and reproductive erasure. This aligns with Foucault's claim that modern power governs by deciding "who may live and who must die" (*Society Must Be Defended* 241). The absence of young women among the dead suggests targeted sexual and reproductive control—a biopolitical extermination of the enemy's future.

2. Ayah's Body as a Communal Battlefield

Ayah's abduction is the novel's central illustration of how national and patriarchal structures inscribe power on women's bodies. Her assault—"Her lips… open like the dead child's scream less mouth" and her torn clothing (ICM 183)—reveals the disciplinary logic of sexual violence: to humiliate the enemy by appropriating the women they claim to protect. Menon and Bhasin observe that women's sexuality "symbolizes manhood" and its violation demands retaliation (43). In the novel, Ayah's body is repeatedly claimed, displayed, and circulated, illustrating how women become communal property, the violation of which signifies political conquest.

3. "Recovery Operations" as State Biopolitics

Post-partition rescue missions further reveal the state's investment in controlling women's bodies. Historical records cited by Menon, Bhasin, Kidwai, and Deshmukh show that many women resisted being "returned," fearing punishment based on honour. The novel echoes these anxieties: the insistence on "restoring" women to their "legitimate" homes parallels the state's attempt to purify national identity by regulating women's sexualities. These operations function as governmental interventions that categorise bodies, determine belongingness, and impose moral norms.

4. Lenny's Disabled Body and the Witnessing of Power

Lenny's disability does not operate as a separate theme but as an embodied mode of witnessing biopower. Her limp marks her as "othered" within her community, mirroring the marginalisation of violated women. Her violent play with dolls—"I turn it upside down and pull its legs apart" (ICM 138)—unconsciously re-enacts the violence around her, illustrating how biopower infiltrates private gestures of the body. Her attempt to scour her "truth-infected" tongue after betraying Ayah (ICM 184) is a disciplinary act upon her own body, aligning with Foucault's notion that individuals internalise the mechanisms of power.

Her emerging sexuality—"the moulds beneath my nipples grow" (ICM 231)—reveals how disabled embodiment complicates normative expectations of girlhood, purity, and desirability. Her

cousin's fetishisation of her limp—"her limp was so sexy, everybody wanted to marry her!" (ICM 23), exposes how even disability can be absorbed into patriarchal scripts of desire, reinforcing that the body is always a site of political meaning and struggle.

5. Clarifying the Psychoanalytic Method: Trauma and Belated Witnessing

Although trauma is not the central analytical focus of this paper, a psychoanalytic framework is essential for comprehending the enduring effects of biopolitical violence in "Ice-Candy-Man." This study is more closely aligned with Cathy Caruth's notion of belated witnessing than with Freud's concept of repetition compulsion. In Sidhwa's novel, trauma is manifested not only through compulsive re-enactment but also through delayed comprehension, fragmented narration, and retrospective meaning-making. As Caruth posits, trauma is experienced "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known," and subsequently re-emerges in displaced forms (4). Lenny's child narration exemplifies this belatedness. Her fragmented understanding of violence, delayed recognition of Ayah's fate, and bodily expressions of guilt emerge only after the event, highlighting trauma as a temporal disruption rather than an immediate psychological response. This aligns with Caruth's emphasis on trauma as an ethical imperative to listen to what cannot be fully articulated at the moment of its occurrence. Importantly, trauma is not an individualised pathology but a structural consequence of biopolitical regimes that render certain bodies disposable. Thus, trauma functions as the psychic residue of systems that govern life, sexuality, and belonging under the Partition, reinforcing the paper's biopolitical argument rather than diverting from it.

Therefore, the novel's treatment of sexuality and disability must be read as interlinked biopolitical categories rather than parallel concerns. Lenny's disabled body and Ayah's sexualised body are governed by the same logic of regulation, visibility, and control. Disability marks Lenny as biologically "deviant," while female sexuality marks Ayah as politically vulnerable; both bodies are subjected to surveillance, moral judgment, and appropriation. As Garland-Thomson notes, disability exposes the norms through which bodies are rendered intelligible (1560), a function mirrored in how violated female bodies reveal the nation's dependence on regulating women to stabilise identity. Thus,

sexuality and disability operate as complementary sites through which biopower produces compliant subjects and expendable lives, making their intersection central to a biopolitical reading of *Ice-Candy-Man*.

Conclusion

Through a Foucauldian feminist lens, *Ice-Candy-Man* emerges as a narrative that elucidates the biopolitical underpinnings of Partition violence, wherein women's bodies become the primary sites upon which nation, community, and power are inscribed. Sidhwa's depiction of mutilated bodies, sexual abduction, and state-sponsored recovery operations illustrates that Partition violence was not merely episodic or chaotic but was systematically structured through technologies of power that regulated sexuality, reproduction, and belonging. Lenny's disabled perspective further reveals how biopower infiltrates subjectivity itself, embedding political violence within everyday bodily awareness and moral self-discipline. By explicitly linking sexuality and disability within a shared biopolitical framework, the novel demonstrates how bodies marked as sexually vulnerable or physically non-normative are subjected to intensified regulation and symbolic appropriation.

These bodies are not peripheral to the nation-making process but are central to it, functioning as sites through which communal honour and state legitimacy are negotiated. Trauma, interpreted through Caruth's notion of belated witnessing, emerges as the ethical and psychic residue of bodily governance rather than as an isolated psychological condition. Thus, a biopolitical reading of Partition literature remains critically relevant today. In an era characterised by intensified state surveillance, gendered nationalism, and the policing of bodily differences, *Ice-Candy-Man* offers a critical lens for understanding how power continues to operate through the management of life itself. By foregrounding gendered memory, trauma ethics, and the state's control over identity, Sidhwa's novel challenges dominant historical narratives and insists on recognising the embodied costs of political sovereignty. As the novel reveals, Partition is not only a historical rupture but also an enduring biopolitical condition.

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