



Agony of Partition: Thematic Insights in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*

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Abstract

This paper explores one of the most chaotic and brutal periods in the history of the Indian subcontinent—the Partition of India, which accompanied the country's independence from British rule. While freedom marked a new beginning, it also brought about one of the most devastating events in history, dividing India into two nations. The departure of colonial powers triggered immense physical and psychological suffering on both sides of the border. Millions were uprooted from their ancestral homes, forced to migrate, and subjected to unimaginable violence. Countless lives were lost, while women faced horrific atrocities, including abduction and assault.

Before Partition, diverse communities coexisted harmoniously, bound by a shared cultural heritage. However, the division disrupted this unity, transforming neighbors into strangers and friends into adversaries. This paper explores this turbulent historical moment, focusing on the deep fractures it created among people of different cultural and religious backgrounds. Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (formerly *Ice Candy Man*) serves as the primary text for this analysis. The novel provides a poignant portrayal of Partition, capturing its devastating human cost and lasting consequences. Central to this study is the theme of trauma, which emerges from the breakdown of social structures and psychological distress. The novel portrays history through the lens of Partition trauma, exploring its profound impact on individuals and their lives. The paper begins by outlining trauma theory and applies it to an analysis of the novel. It explores the causes of the trauma and its profound impact on the psyche of characters. Finally, the study evaluates Sidhwa's depiction of trauma, assessing whether the novel effectively conveys its depth and repercussions.

Keywords: Trauma, partition history, violence

Introduction

The Partition of India in 1947 was a deeply traumatic event, leaving lasting psychological scars on individuals and communities. It tore families apart, displaced entire populations, and disrupted identities, creating a profound sense of loss. The division not only triggered communal violence and forced migrations but also reshaped cultural and social bonds, leaving a lasting impact on the region's collective psyche.

Bapsi Sidhwa's dual identity as both a Parsee and a Pakistani profoundly shapes the themes and perspectives in *Cracking India*. This unique vantage point allows her to present a multifaceted exploration of the historical and political consciousness surrounding Partition, offering a multifaceted portrayal of its complexities. Having witnessed the 1947 Indo-Pak Partition firsthand, Bapsi Sidhwa vividly captures its profound impact in her work. In *Cracking India*, the characters are profoundly shaped by the trauma of Partition, reflecting Caruth's assertion that "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely process" (5). This suggests that trauma is inextricably linked to historical events, leaving survivors to bear the weight of a past that remains unresolved and beyond complete comprehension.

Like other catastrophic historical events, the partition of the Indian subcontinent had a profound impact on the mental and emotional well-being of those who experienced it. As J. Roger Kurtz explains, "We think of trauma as a pathological mental and emotional condition, an injury to the psyche caused by catastrophic events, or by the threat of such

events, which overwhelm an individual's normal response mechanisms" (2). The trauma of Partition extended beyond physical suffering, deeply affecting the emotional and psychological well-being of its victims. The sheer scale of violence, displacement, and loss overwhelmed survivors, making it difficult for them to process their experiences or find closure. Many were left with lasting emotional scars, fragmented identities, and unresolved grief, illustrating how trauma disrupts not just lives but also memories and sense of self. This shows that survival was not just about avoiding physical harm but also about coping with the lasting emotional and psychological damage caused by the catastrophe.

Trauma is not always immediately understood or processed by those who experience it. Instead of being fully realized at the moment of the event, trauma often remains hidden in the subconscious and resurfaces later in fragmented and disruptive ways. Richard Crownshaw, in his essay "Trauma Studies" in *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, conceptualizes trauma, "as that which defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall, and representation—generating the belated or deferred and disruptive experience of the event not felt at the time of witnessing" (167). Richard Crownshaw argues that trauma defies direct witnessing, meaning that even if someone sees or experiences a traumatic event, they may not fully grasp its impact at the time. Similarly, Cathy Caruth expands on this idea by suggesting that trauma is latent, meaning it does not reveal itself immediately but returns later, often in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, or an inability to fully articulate the experience. In *Cracking India*, Lenny, the

child-narrator, experiences the violence of Partition firsthand, yet its full meaning eludes her in the moment. As she later revisits these events, her recollections are fragmented, marked by omissions and silences. This narrative pattern mirrors the nature of trauma, where distressing memories are often repressed or incompletely processed, only to re-emerge later in a way that disrupts a person's sense of time and identity.

In the novel, the characters endure trauma that goes beyond physical suffering, deeply affecting their psychological state. This aligns with Caruth's idea that trauma is "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). The violence, displacement, and loss they experience leave lasting emotional scars, making it difficult for them to fully process or recover from their past. Their struggles illustrate how trauma is not just about bodily harm but also about the enduring impact on memory, identity, and mental well-being.

Ayah's trauma extends beyond physical harm, leaving her with deep emotional and psychological wounds that persist long after the Partition's violence. While physical injuries may heal, the mental anguish caused by abduction, forced identity change, and displacement lingers, making recovery far more difficult. Her experience shows how trauma alters identity and memory, proving that its impact goes beyond the body to deeply affect the mind and soul.

Cracking India offers a compelling exploration of trauma through its multifaceted narrative, as seen through the eyes of its child narrator, Lenny. Her observations capture the psychological and social upheaval of Partition, revealing how collective and individual trauma reshape human behavior and societal dynamics. The novel highlights a critical shift—from the struggle for freedom to the struggle for survival—emphasizing the deep scars left by violence and displacement. Lenny's reflections on the absurdities and atrocities of Partition illustrate the lasting impact of trauma across social, cultural, economic, and political spheres. The central theme of *Cracking India* revolves around the traumatic impact of Partition on individuals and communities, as witnessed by the young Parsee narrator, Lenny. The novel begins with Lenny's privileged and sheltered childhood, creating a stark contrast to the chaos and violence that follows. Through her daily interactions and observations, the narrative explores the psychological distress and shifting identities within the Parsee community, highlighting their struggle to navigate the larger, fractured landscape of Lahore during this turbulent time.

Cracking India provides a moving examination of trauma in the setting of broken boundaries, demonstrating how the atrocities of Partition profoundly damaged both people and society. The novel shows how communal violence destroys human connections, identities, and moral integrity in addition to physical boundaries. By illustrating social tensions and their catastrophic consequences, the story highlights the enormous human cost of trauma and the long-lasting psychological and emotional harm brought on by such fractures.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* (1991) offers a fictionalized portrayal of Partition through four perspectives: Parsee, Pakistani, Feminine, and Non-Partisan. Set in Lahore and narrated from a Parsee viewpoint, the novel vividly captures the horrors of Partition and its psychological toll on minorities and marginalized communities. It highlights their

sense of displacement and struggle for survival as they sought refuge in safer places. The Partition intensified religious hostilities, further alienating the already marginalized Parsees and deepening communal divides. In Lahore, where Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus lived side by side, Bapsi Sidhwa depicts the rich, multifaceted culture through the child narrator Lenny. Nevertheless, religious identities ultimately gained precedence, which resulted in conflict within communities. While visiting the Muslim town of Pir Pindo, which is close to Lahore, Lenny saw members of many communities having amicable conversations regarding the current conflicts in the metropolis. The idea of distinct identities was rejected in favor of their shared racial roots, and they were prepared to put their lives in danger for each other because they were bound together by a common sense of lineage.

Ice-Candy-Man is profoundly affected psychologically by partition, which fundamentally alters his personality. He loses his capacity for empathy after seeing his whole family brutally murdered by people from other communities on a train. He is consumed by the atrocities of community violence, which reinforces hatred's supremacy over human values and replaces compassion with resentment. He deeply admired Lenny's Hindu Ayah, Shanta. However, upon learning of the brutal massacre of his family on the train, he underwent a drastic transformation. Consumed by grief and rage, his human values gave way to radicalism. His love for Ayah was overshadowed by his newfound allegiance to religious identity, which took precedence over shared bonds and brotherhood. Driven by vengeance, he turned against Sikhs and Hindus, who had once been part of a unified community.

Sexual violence during the Partition of India in 1947 was not just an act of physical brutality but a deeply traumatic experience that left lasting psychological scars on its victims. In Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*, the depiction of sexual violence, particularly through the character of Ayah, examines the traumatic consequences of communal conflict. Bapsi Sidhwa portrays Ayah's abduction through the eyes of Lenny, the young protagonist. She remarks:

They drag out Ayah. They drag her by her arms stretched taut, and her bare feet - that want to move backward - are forced forward instead. Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat opens her mouth like a dead child's screamless mouth. Her violent sari slips off her shoulder, and her breast strains at her sari-blouse stretching the cloth so that the white stitching at the seams shows. A sleeve tears under her arm. The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands, supporting her with careless intimacy, lift her into it. Four men stand pressed against her, propping her body upright, their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces (183).

Trauma theory, which explores how extreme experiences disrupt an individual's sense of self and reality, helps in understanding the profound impact of such violence on Ayah and other victims. Ayah, once admired and adored, becomes a victim of the very men who once revered her. This shift from admiration to aggression reflects what trauma theorist Cathy Caruth describes as the incomprehensibility of traumatic experiences—the way victims struggle to make sense of a world that has suddenly turned hostile. The novel illustrates how trauma fractures identities, as Ayah, once a symbol of beauty and vitality, is

reduced to a mere object of communal revenge. Ayah's ordeal highlights the collective trauma of Partition, where women's bodies became battlegrounds for communal honor. The violence against her is not just personal but deeply symbolic, reflecting the broader disintegration of trust and human relationships. From a trauma theory perspective, her suffering represents the lasting wounds of Partition—both on an individual and societal level where memory, loss, and identity become permanently altered. Isabella Bruchi writes, "Ayah's body itself becomes a synecdoche of the broken land. Desired by all and ravished by those who courted and loved her, Ayah stands for all those women who suffered the agonies of pre- and post-Partition, on whose bodies disputes were held and nations built" (196).

From a trauma perspective, Isabella Bruchi's statement highlights how Ayah's body in *Cracking India* functions as a symbolic representation of the collective suffering experienced by women during the Partition of India in 1947. Ayah's body is not just her own; it becomes a site where the violence of history is inscribed. She is desired, objectified, and ultimately violated, mirroring how women's bodies were used as battlegrounds for power, revenge, and territorial disputes during the traumatic period of Partition. Trauma studies suggest that historical and political violence often manifests through personal suffering, particularly in gendered ways. In this context, Ayah embodies the generational trauma experienced by countless women who were abducted, raped, and forcibly displaced during Partition. Her body becomes a synecdoche—a part that represents the whole—symbolizing the deep scars left on the land and its people. The trauma is not just personal but collective, reflecting the national crisis of identity, belonging, and loss. The way her body is claimed by different men, representing different communities, parallels the way the land was violently divided, reinforcing how women bore the brunt of Partition's horrors. From a psychological standpoint, this also speaks to the erasure of personal narratives in the face of collective trauma, where individual suffering is subsumed into the larger history of violence.

By portraying Ayah's victimization, *Cracking India* exposes how trauma distorts human behavior, turning love into hatred and community into chaos. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the psychological devastation caused by such historical atrocities, reinforcing the idea that trauma is not just about physical suffering but also about the irreparable damage to the human psyche. Ayah's central role in Lenny's narrative enriches the story by highlighting the intricate dynamics of power, class, and personal relationships. Her character mirrors the broader societal upheavals of the Partition era, embodying the vulnerability and resilience of individuals caught in the midst of historical turmoil.

Lenny's evolving perception of society in *Cracking India* reflects a psychological shift driven by the trauma of Partition. Trauma theory, particularly the works of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra, helps explain how extreme events disrupt an individual's understanding of reality, leading to altered perceptions of identity and relationships. As Lenny witnesses the violence and communal tensions of Partition, her innocent worldview fractures, and she begins to see people not as individuals but as representatives of their religious communities. This transformation aligns with

Caruth's concept of trauma as an experience that resists full comprehension in the moment but shapes perception over time. Before Partition, Lenny's world was characterized by cultural diversity, where Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs coexist without rigid divisions. However, as communal violence intensifies, identities become politicized, and people are reduced to symbols of their religious affiliations. This loss of individuality mirrors what LaCapra describes as the "acting out" of trauma, where societal relationships are rewritten through the lens of collective suffering and fear. Lenny's changing perception of Ayah exemplifies this shift. Ayah, once simply a caregiver and companion, is now seen primarily as a Hindu, defined by her devotional practices rather than her personal qualities. Similarly, Imam Din and Yousaf, who were once just people in Lenny's world, become embodiments of Islam as they grow more devout. This psychological reordering of identity reflects the impact of trauma on perception where individuals, once viewed with personal affection, become markers of religious and communal divisions. Through Lenny's altered worldview, *Cracking India* accentuates that trauma not only affects individual victims but also reshapes the collective consciousness of a society in turmoil. It illustrates that extreme violence and suffering fracture human relationships, forcing people into rigid categories that erase their individuality, reinforcing the lasting and deeply embedded nature of trauma in the aftermath of Partition.

Although Imam Din attempted to shield Ayah from harm, the brutality of communal violence overpowered his efforts. In the chaos, even those who once seemed trustworthy turned into perpetrators, and Ayah, a helpless victim, was abducted and subjected to unspeakable trauma. She was brutally assaulted and discarded into a brothel in Hira Mandi, a grim testament to the collective suffering of women during Partition. The betrayal by someone she once trusted deepened her wounds, making her ordeal not just one of physical violation but also of profound emotional and psychological devastation. Through the lens of trauma theory, her suffering reflects the enduring impact of systemic violence, where individual and collective memory are scarred by acts of betrayal and dehumanization.

According to trauma theory, forced shifts in religious identity, such as Ayah's transformation into Mumtaz and Hari and Moti's conversions, show the profound psychological and social ruptures produced by Partition. Trauma is not simply a personal experience, but also a societal wound in which violence and displacement cause broken identities. Ayah's renaming as Mumtaz after her forced marriage to Ice Candy Man represents the erasure of agency and selfhood, a frequent outcome of trauma in which survivors lose control over their identity and destiny. Erasure of agency refers to the inability of an individual to make independent choices or control their own life due to external forces such as violence, oppression, or coercion. In the context of trauma theory, this loss occurs when a person's autonomy is stripped away, leaving them powerless in shaping their identity, decisions, and future.

In Ayah's case, her forced renaming as Mumtaz represents this erasure of agency. She does not choose her new identity; it is imposed upon her by the circumstances of abduction, forced marriage, and religious conversion. This erasure of her original selfhood reflects how trauma survivors often experience a sense of helplessness,

fragmentation, and alienation from their past selves. The erasure of agency during Partition was widespread, as individuals were forcibly displaced, coerced into new identities, and stripped of their cultural and personal autonomy. The trauma of forced reinvention highlights that systemic violence not only inflicts physical harm but also reshapes personal and collective histories in ways that are often irreversible.

Her forced religious conversion exemplifies how trauma emerges as compelled assimilation, robbing people of their feeling of belonging. Similarly, Hari's conversion to Himmat Ali and Moti's transfer to David Messiah demonstrate how surviving institutional violence frequently necessitates the concealing of one's background. Their new religious identities act as coping mechanisms in a context where being a minority made them vulnerable to persecution. This is consistent with Cathy Caruth's theory of traumatic recurrence, in which trauma survivors are forced to reconfigure their identities in response to ongoing threats. The trauma of Partition caused displacement, cultural heritage destruction, and forced identity reconstruction, illustrating the lingering effects of historical violence on people's and society's thoughts.

Imam Din's family, except for Rana, fell victim to religious violence, slaughtered by Sikhs in an act of communal brutality. Sidhwa describes the aftermath of the partition through Ranna:

His rags clinging to his wounds, straw sticking in his scalped skull, Ranna wandered through the lanes stealing chapatties and grain from houses strewn with dead bodies, rifling the corpses for anything he could use. He ate anything. Raw potatoes, uncooked grains, wheat-flour, rotting peels and vegetables. No one minded the semi-naked spectre as he looked in doors with his knowing wide set peasant eyes as men copulated with wailing children-old and young women. Ranna saw babies snatched from their mothers, smashed against walls and their howling mothers are brutally raped and killed (207).

The trauma of Partition, marked by identity-based persecution, created deep psychological and social scars. Ice Candy Man, forged by the violence and displacement around him, transforms into a fierce protector of his community, proving that trauma compels individuals to adopt new roles in response to shifting national and religious identities.

The aftermath of the Baisakhi fair exemplifies the collective trauma induced by communal violence, as attacks on Muslim villages near Amritsar and Jullunder leave communities in shock. Imam Din's disbelief reflects the incomprehensibility of such brutality, aligning with trauma theory's emphasis on the mind's struggle to process catastrophic events. The forced migration of villagers from Pir Pindo to Lenny's house highlights the psychological fragmentation caused by sudden displacement, where familiar spaces are lost, and identities destabilized. The villagers' confusion "Is Pakistan ready there?" (110) illustrates the disorientation central to traumatic experience, as they grapple with an imposed reality beyond their comprehension. The village Chaudhry's anguished questions about their land and livelihood reflect Cathy Caruth's notion that trauma disrupts one's sense of meaning, severing connections to the past and leaving individuals in a state of unresolved grief and existential rupture.

Ritu Menon describes Partition as "a metaphor for irreparable loss," (xi) emphasizing its lasting impact beyond official histories. Ritu Menon's perspective on Partition resonates deeply with *Cracking India*, where the trauma of Partition is not just a historical event but a personal and collective rupture. The novel captures this loss on multiple levels—physical, emotional, and cultural. For Lenny, partition marks the end of her innocent childhood, shattering her once-cohesive world of diverse friendships and harmonious coexistence. Ayah's abduction represents the violent erasure of agency and dignity that many women faced, highlighting how female bodies became contested sites of national and communal conflicts. Similarly, the disintegration of Lenny's close-knit circle—comprising individuals from different religious backgrounds illuminates how Partition fractured not just geographical boundaries but also human relationships and identities. In *Cracking India*, this idea is reflected in how Partition shapes personal and collective memory. Lenny's fractured recollections and Ayah's tragic fate illustrate how Partition's violence lingers, affecting identities and relationships across generations. Menon's idea extends to the generational impact of Partition, emphasizing its enduring trauma. In *Cracking India*, this is evident in Lenny's fragmented and retrospective narration, which reflects the lingering psychological wounds of Partition. Her struggle to process the past highlights how trauma persists beyond the immediate moment, haunting survivors and future generations. Rather than a concluded event, Partition remains an unresolved rupture, continuously resurfacing in memory and identity formation.

The Parsis, despite their neutrality in the communal violence of Partition, experienced psychological trauma as they struggled with questions of loyalty and belonging. Witnessing widespread brutality shattered their sense of security, forcing them to confront the horrors of identity-based violence. This moral and emotional conflict led to an internal crisis, where they felt torn between remaining passive or taking action. However, rather than succumbing to fear or division, the Parsis reaffirmed their humanitarian values, choosing to aid Hindus and Sikhs in crossing the border. Their response to trauma was not one of violence or vengeance but of compassion and resilience, demonstrating that in times of crisis, some communities channel their trauma into acts of solidarity rather than division. Their experience demonstrates that trauma does not always result in identity fragmentation; rather, it can strengthen one's dedication to universal human values.

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