

More than Victims: Versions of Feminine Power in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*

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The Partition of India in 1947 was accompanied by the migration of nearly ten million people between the newly defined borders of India and Pakistan. Accordingly, in much of Partition literature, it is not just the literal terrain of India that is cracked or divided, but members of the population as well. Writings about Partition often portray the massacre, mutilation, abduction, and rape of citizens' bodies, particularly female bodies. Manju Jaidka specifies that many writers of Partition literature chose to focus on the marginalization and victimization of women because they served as "symbols of the community to be subjugated; their bodies became sites of contested power" (48). As Jaidka points out, not only do women function as "objects of oppression" in Partition texts, but their utter disempowerment often becomes "the focal point of the narrative, highlighting the impact of history on the meek and powerless" (46). Correspondingly, Rosemary George observes that Partition texts routinely depict women as "communal sufferers, familial victims, and second-class citizens" (138), while men are more often portrayed as dominant and powerful. Because of this focus on female victimization, much of the writing about Partition reduces both men and women to "perfect binaries—rapists and raped, protectors and protected, villains and victims, buyers and bought, sellers and sold" (142). Moreover, in making violence against women the focal point, some Partition literature and the criticism it engenders allow "no space for either gender outside of these binaries" (143), thereby further entrenching limited gender roles through selective portrayal.

Accordingly, much of the criticism of Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India* (originally published in 1991 as *Ice-Candy-Man*) has emphasized the victimization of women. In *Modern South Asian Literature in English*, Paul Briens declares that *Cracking India* is characterized by a "pattern of oppression that haunts all women in the novel, from highest to lowest" (107). Likewise, Manju Jaidka states that "the women sufferers in the story must find an escape route [and] bow to the dominant power, or else suffer" (49). While I acknowledge that the female characters in *Cracking India* experience oppression, I assert that they do not operate solely as victims; rather, Sidhwa's women possess distinct forms of power: Lenny, as the narrator, exhibits narrative agency, though her

moments of agency happen largely prior to Partition; Ayah, similarly, enjoys influence over the male community before Partition—though her authority is primarily based on her physical appeal—which gives Sidhwa an opportunity to comment on the temporal and limited nature of sexual power and physical attraction. Through the events of Partition, Ayah’s power evaporates; she is kidnapped by a group of local men and forced into prostitution. However, the strongest—and most subversive—examples of feminine power in the novel stem from women who are able to completely step outside their traditional domestic roles and utilize their community connections as a source of influence. Both Lenny’s mother and Godmother demonstrate the power gained through economic status—both women are upper-class and educated—and both proactively exert influence and make changes in the lives of those around them. Whereas Lenny and Ayah’s comparatively temporary power is based on physical traits or childish willfulness, the power of Lenny’s mother and Godmother is centered in their identity as influential and privileged community figures, and their ability to step outside their traditional feminine roles to enact deliberate change, working for the good of less fortunate women who have been damaged during Partition.

By appreciating the complexity of gendered power relations that Sidhwa portrays, we, as readers, gain a more comprehensive understanding not only of specific female character traits, but also of how *Cracking India*, like texts by female authors Quratulain Hyder, Amrita Pritam, and Jamila Hashmi, breaks free from the hegemony of patriarchal Partition narratives to provide a distinct female counter-narrative. More specifically, I agree with Ambreen Hai, who perceives *Cracking India* as a piece of “narrative border feminism that undoes binary oppositions” (390). By utilizing a female narrator, Sidhwa presents a uniquely gendered perspective of Partition. Moreover, Sidhwa’s novel provides a comparatively inclusive view of the diverse feminine roles during Partition, roles in which the female characters are not entirely empowered nor entirely victimized. Thus, *Cracking India* is able to “describe, restore, and heal some of the damage done by...male neo-nationalistic discourse” (390), facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the various ways women were influenced by and responded to, Partition. Rather than simply perceiving Sidhwa’s women as perpetual victims, worthy of being “pitied and patronized” (Hubel 111), I will examine how the female characters in *Cracking India* demonstrate not only survivorship, but also agency, using their familial and communal connections and unique perspective to affect change and bring healing. At several points in *Cracking India*, Lenny, her ayah, her mother, and her godmother are able to move beyond traditional female disempowerment to exercise autonomy and influence within their patriarchal society.

Lenny, the narrator, facilitates this sense of feminine agency through the novel's narrative structure, her own increasing awareness of social constructions, and her ability to utilize these constructions to advance her own purposes. Although Lenny is young, female, and physically disabled, all characteristics which traditionally signify disempowerment, her youth and gender give her a unique narrative angle. As Ambreen Hai observes, Lenny's narration creates a "double feminist lens...challenging the centrality and exclusivity of...masculinist master narratives" (390). As a female narrator, Lenny facilitates a more well-rounded perception both of the female characters and of the social systems which they were able to surmount.

Lenny's relationship with Ayah augments her understanding of gendered social norms. While observing the romantic playfulness of Ayah and Ice-Candy-Man in the park, Lenny remarks, "I learn...to detect the subtle exchange of signals and some of the complex rites by which Ayah's admirers coexist" (Sidhwa 29). After extensive observation, she is able to anticipate their interactions and successfully interfere. She explains, "Once in a while I pre-empt [Ice-Candy-Man's] big toe's romantic impulse and, catching it mid-crawl or mid-strike, twist it. It is a measure to keep the candy bribes coming" (29). Through her observations of Ayah's interactions with her suitors, Lenny specifies that she learns not only about the nature of individuals and the way to get what she wants from them, but also about the particular dynamics of their gendered interactions.

In addition to her unique perspective as a young, female narrator, Lenny demonstrates increasing agency by purposefully differentiating herself from social norms. As she learns of the constructed systems that define her society, Lenny makes conscious decisions to comply with or deviate from them. Just as she freely admits to utilizing "the manipulative power of my limp" (56) to win attention and candy, Lenny's narrative suggests that, after watching her parents, she learns to selectively utilize gender performance to achieve certain results. Though Lenny recognizes the dominance of her father, she also carefully observes the way her mother "handles" him, noting, "Mother's voice teeters between amusement and a wheedling whine. She is a virtuoso at juggling the range of her voice and achieving the exact balance with which to handle Father" (76). Lenny also reflects on the family's daily ritual of greeting her father when he returns home from work, acutely aware of how her mother monitors her father's reaction to her anecdotes, effectively redirecting the conversation to achieve a positive response. When her father expresses annoyance over tales of her brother's misbehavior, for example, Lenny reports how "switching the bulletin immediately, Mother recounts some observation of mine, as if I've spent the entire morning mouthing extraordinarily brilliant, saccharine sweet and fetchingly naïve remarks" (88). Armed with this awareness of what is expected of female family members, Lenny

can then choose to utilize these behaviors herself. She recalls, “when Mother pauses, on cue, I repeat any remarks I’m supposed to have made and ham up the performance with further innocently insightful observations” (88). After being called upon regularly to repeat or invent these kinds of remarks, Lenny is able to clearly recognize and articulate the strategy required in these interactions. Thus, Sidhwa emphasizes Lenny’s growing awareness of how her use of discourse has the potential to be either aligned with or resistant to the expected feminine behaviors. In the aforementioned case, Lenny observes gendered social norms and chooses to comply.

In other situations, however, including her interactions with her male cousin, Lenny demonstrates agency by electing to deviate from traditional gender roles. Lenny and her cousin sometimes dabble in romance; they kiss, pursue each others’ affections, and promise to marry. Yet, in their exchanges Lenny does not demonstrate the expected feminine behaviors of submission and compliance; rather, she is assertive and maintains an atypical degree of control. In contrast to her mother’s routine indulgence of her father, Lenny does not feel obligated to cater to her cousin’s preferences. Instead, she is forthright and direct, expressing her honest opinions and occasional disgust with his actions. When he tries to coax her into new sexual behaviors, she states, “I like Cousin. I’ve even thought of marrying him when we grow up, but this is a side of him I’m becoming aware of for the first time, and I don’t like it” (172). Here, Lenny clearly evinces her knowledge of what is expected in romantic relationships—increasing intimacy and eventual marriage—but she decides she does not wish to engage in these actions. Subsequently, rather than submitting to masculine authority, Lenny exerts control over Cousin. “Bent on further pleasuring me, squashing his panting chest on my flattened bosom, Cousin gives me a soggy kiss. Poor Cousin. His sense of timing is all wrong...Pushing him back and holding him at arm’s length, I say, ‘If you don’t tell me everything at once, I’ll knee your balls’” (243). In this interaction, Lenny reverses the expected gender behaviors. Rather than being willingly dominated by the male, she chooses not to conform, telling Cousin that she is not interested, making her own preferences known, and threatening to further “insult” his masculinity if he does not respect her wishes. Her cousin, consequently, is placed in a subservient role and laments his lack of power over Lenny, whining, “She loves approximately half of Lahore...Why can’t she love me?” (245). Lenny’s willfulness and refusal to enact traditional feminine behavior have left Cousin longing for masculine control. Instead of functioning exclusively as a naïve and powerless female victim, Lenny demonstrates a powerful narrative voice and sense of awareness, recognizing, questioning, and selectively participating in social systems.

Although Ayah is physically victimized in the latter part of *Cracking India*, she also exudes a degree of control, able to uniquely influence the men around her. Much of Ayah's influence stems from her physical appeal; her natural beauty and sensuality attract men, creating an intriguing source of power (Brians 105). Lenny details how "stub-handed twisted beggars...drop their poses and stare at [Ayah] with hard, alert eyes. Holy men, masked in piety, shove aside their pretenses to ogle her with lust. Hawkers, cart-drivers, cooks, coolies, and cyclists turn their heads as she passes" (Sidhwa 12). Men of all economic and social backgrounds are captivated by Ayah's appearance and sexual appeal. Her effect is not limited to Indian and Pakistani men; a British man is also intrigued by Ayah's "stunning looks" and "rolling bouncy walk that agitates the globules of her buttocks...and the half-spheres beneath her short sari-blouses" (13). Ayah's effect on men is so strong that Lenny compares it to "the tyranny magnets exercise over metals" (29), which "galvanizes men to mad sprints in the noon heat" (41). While strolling through the park, Lenny and Ayah are stopped by an officious "short, middle-aged, pointy eared" Englishman, who demands to know why "such a big girl" (12) is not yet walking by herself. Undeterred by Lenny's revelation of her leg brace, the Englishman insists on the benefits of exercise. Lenny explains their dismissive reaction: "Ayah and I hold our eyes away, effectively dampening his good-Samaritan exuberance.... [Eventually,] wagging his head and turning about, the Englishman quietly dissolves up the driveway from which he had so enthusiastically sprung." By the time he recovers his voice, Lenny and Ayah are already strolling away (12). In this scene, the British male, as a dominant member of patriarchal society, attempts to interfere, and is corrected and then disregarded by two marginalized female characters. Rather than the Englishman influencing the behavior of Lenny and Ayah, they change his course of action instead. Their indifference causes his enthusiasm to be "dampened," and he physically "turns about;" his spirited interference is reduced from "enthusiastic" to "quietly dissolving" (12). Lenny and Ayah's refusal to demonstrate traditional feminine submission effectively deflates the Englishman's masculine energy and dominance. In dismissing his suggestions and patriarchal authority over herself and her young charge, Ayah asserts her own feminine independence.

In addition to sexually attracting and inspiring men, Ayah holds her community of male admirers together, creating an oasis of cohesion in the midst of Partition hostilities. Like the statue of Queen Victoria which overlooks the park, Ayah successfully presides over "a spectrum of working-class males: cooks, gardeners, masseurs, traders, butchers, wrestlers, and Ice-Candy-Man" (Hai 398). Ayah's unique influence renders her able to bring together men of disparate occupations, ethnicities, and religious affiliations; she functions as "the magical goddess of racial harmony, the locus of convergent desire, the border terrain that

neutralizes...difference” (Hai 398). Even as religious and ethnic violence divides Lahore, Ayah’s presence is unifying, calming, and safe; Lenny observes, “only the group around Ayah remains unchanged. Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Parsee, are, as always, unified around her” (Sidhwa 105). In addition to her naturally unifying influence, Ayah directly and consciously diffuses conflict. When the men in her social circle engage in divisive racialized attacks against the Hindu and Muslim communities, Ayah neutralizes the conversation. She threatens, “If all you talk of is nothing but this Hindu-Muslim business, I’ll stop coming to the park” (101). This declaration prompts the men’s immediate assurance: “For your sake, we won’t bring it up again” (101). Lenny notes, “She, like Mother, is an oil pourer” (99), recognizing Ayah’s choice to utilize her influence to inspire action, lessen conflict and bring peace. However, Ayah is eventually kidnapped and forced into sexual subservience, while Lenny, tricked by Ice-Candy-Man into revealing Ayah’s presence to a group of local Muslims, sobs helplessly on the front porch.

Through Ayah, Sidhwa demonstrates awareness of the traditional feminine loss of power, and had the story ended at this point, with Lenny and Ayah’s temporary influence completely negated, the novel would simply function as a traditional Partition novel, with the men as victors and the women as victims. However, Sidhwa’s two strongest examples of feminine power are yet to come. Prior to Partition, Lenny’s mother played the role of a dutiful wife, catering to her husband’s every need, rubbing his feet when he returned from work and managing the household. During the events of Partition, however, Lenny’s mother begins to subvert the patriarchal social order by rescuing and housing women. Directly ignoring the warnings of a male neighbor, who cautions the family to “stay neutral,” Lenny’s mother steps outside the role of traditional woman and of impartial Parsi community member to affect change in the lives of women who have been injured or abused. After women in their community are raped or forced into prostitution, Lenny’s mother and aunts construct a refuge for these “fallen women” behind a neighboring house, attempting to restore the women to their families or to find housing and work for those who, seen as permanently shamed and defiled, cannot return home. Additionally, they smuggle gasoline to help their Hindu and Sikh friends cross the border safely to India (254). In rescuing these women, Lenny’s mother has clearly moved beyond the traditional role of housewife to become a social activist. Rather than having her influence destroyed by Partition, like Ayah, the crisis of Partition provides an occasion for Lenny’s mother to act and create positive change.

Even Lenny notices this difference in her mother. No longer content to remain home all day to supervise the housework and cater to her husband’s demands, her mother now “develops a busy air of secrecy and preoccupation She shoots off in the Morris, after Father drudges off on his bicycle; and returns

late in the afternoon—and scoots out again” (182). Lenny’s specific descriptions of her mother’s and father’s commutes emphasize the comparative energy and efficiency of her mother; her father “drudges” to work while her mother “shoots” and “scoots” in the family car, aggressively pursuing recovery efforts. These verbs exemplify the agency of Lenny’s mother, adding to the autonomy she exhibits in assembling a community network of support and exerting a positive influence in the abducted women’s lives. By highlighting the independent action and influence of Lenny’s mother, Sidhwa demonstrates that all women did not sit by, helpless or indifferent, as their fellow females were ravaged. Rather, the complex character of Lenny’s mother encompasses “the heroic role of women in leading the revolution against inequality, abuse, and social injustice, both for themselves and for the other exploited groups in society” (Sethi 133). Lenny’s mother demonstrates agency by engaging in a crucial and life-saving act for the “fallen” women, affecting widespread and valuable change.

Finally, the unique power of Lenny’s godmother is evident as she exerts the most notable feminine influence in the novel, traversing social boundaries and ultimately determining the futures of Ayah and Ice-Candy-Man. Lenny can sense Godmother’s unique power and feels safe in her presence: “The home of her godmother is Lenny’s haven...There she becomes borderless...she is free” (Gravley-Novello 85). In fact, Lenny describes her bond with her godmother as “stronger than the bond of motherhood. More satisfying than the ties between men and women” (Sidhwa 4). In privileging an exclusively female relationship, Lenny emphasizes the security and assurance connections to other women can provide. She recalls, “When I at last look into her shrewd, ancient eyes, I can tell...everything’s going to be all right! (263). It is not only Lenny’s empowering relationship with Godmother, but Godmother herself who constitutes feminine strength. Unlike many of the characters in the novel, and in direct contrast to Ayah, who loses the agency she had once possessed with the onset of Partition, “Lenny’s godmother retains her power throughout the events surrounding Partition (Gravley-Novello 88), influencing multiple facets of society and eventually liberating Ayah and condemning Ice-Candy-Man.

Godmother’s knowledge extends beyond the traditional feminine realm of the domestic to include a nearly omnipotent awareness of the events in her community. Lenny explains that this knowledge has been developed over time: “Over the years, Godmother has established a network of espionage with a reach of which even she is not aware....She has access to many ears. No one knows how many” (Sidhwa 223). Because Godmother “makes it her business to know everything about everybody” (239), she has developed connections in various levels of society. Thus, like Ayah, Godmother serves as an important link between different social groups, demonstrated when she invites “four students

from the King Edward Medical College dorms to tea. Their parents, who have at some point in time known either Godmother or one of her kin, have requested her to keep an occasional eye on them. Godmother invites them whenever her brother-in-law visits Lahore...to be in the company of a full-fledged doctor” (178). Lenny specifies, “Godmother is influential. Even Colonel Bharucha visits her. Neighbors of all faiths drop in to talk and to pay their respects” (223). Clearly, Godmother’s facets of influence include the upper-class; her social interactions range from monitoring the progress of students at a prestigious medical college to maintaining connections with established doctors and military officers.

Godmother’s all-encompassing awareness can also be credited to her own faculties of knowledge and perception. Lenny notes, “the day-to-day commonplaces of our lives unravel to her undercurrents that are lost to less perceptive humans. No baby — not even a kitten — is delivered within the sphere of her influence without her becoming instantly aware of its existence” (223).

Correspondingly, Godmother is shocked when Slavesister mentions a new arrival, remarking suspiciously, “Somebody has a baby I don’t know of ?” (151). As Lenny explains, Godmother’s wealth of knowledge and skill is multi-faceted:

[Godmother possesses a] reservoir of random knowledge, [including] knowledge of ancient lore and wisdom and herbal remedy. You cannot be near her without feeling her uncanny strength. People bring to her their joys and woes. Show her their sores and swollen joints. Distilling the right herbs, adroitly instilling the right word in the right ear, she secures wishes, smooths relationships, cures illnesses, battles wrongs, solaces grief and prevents mistakes. (223)

In this statement, Lenny details Godmother’s adeptness in healing and comforting, her efforts to ensure justice and maintain peace. Godmother uses her unique range of influence to aid her friends and family.

In addition to being exceptionally informed and insightful, Godmother also has the power to exert influence; her feminine power lies not only in knowledge, but also in action. Lenny has ultimate confidence in Godmother’s ability to affect or prevent change, stating, “She can move mountains from the paths of those she befriends, and erect mountainous barriers where she deems it necessary” (223). Godmother even facilitates Ranna’s acceptance to a prestigious convent school, which Lenny refers to as “a minor miracle...as difficult as transposing him to a prosperous continent, and as beneficial, not only for him, it is said, but for seven succeeding generations of the Ranna progeny” (223). This demonstrates that Godmother possesses the power not only to change the current circumstances of individuals, but to influence their futures and those of their descendants, altering the overall trajectories of their lives.

Godmother's agency becomes particularly evident as she extricates Ayah from her physical and marital subjection to Ice-Candy-Man. In this extrication, Godmother repeatedly exerts authority over men, specifically Ice-Candy-Man; her verbal berating of Ice-Candy-Man exemplifies her superior position and influence. Godmother interrogates his abhorrent treatment of Ayah, demanding, "You permit her to be raped by butchers, drunks, and goondas and say she has come to no harm? ...What kind of man would allow his wife to dance like a performing monkey before other men?" (260). In her verbal attack of Ice-Candy-Man, Godmother calls into question not only his morality, but also his manhood, pointing out his failings as an honorable husband and as a masculine protector. In addition to highlighting Ice-Candy-Man's indifference in regards to Ayah's abuse, Godmother specifies his participation in Ayah's abduction and maltreatment. She demands, "Can't you bring yourself to say you played the drums when she danced? Counted money while drunks, peddlers, sahibs, and cutthroats used her like a sewer?" (262). She clarifies his hateful actions as both a moral disgrace and a marital failure, stating, "You have permitted your wife to be disgraced! Destroyed her modesty! Lived off her womanhood!" (260). Godmother also emphasizes Ice-Candy-Man's failings not only as a husband and protector, but as a dutiful son as well, declaring, "You could have your own mother carried off if it suited you! You are a shameless badmash! Nimakharam! Faithless!... You're not a man, you're a low-born, two-bit evil little mouse...the son of pigs and pimps!" (261). Specifically negating his manhood, Godmother compares him to mice, pigs, and other distasteful animals. She concludes by reminding him of her influence, elaborating on the various punishments she can choose to have inflicted on him. She threatens, "I can have you lashed, you know. I can have you hung upside down in the Old Fort until you rot! ... It's no good crying now. You'll be shown as little mercy as you showed her" (261). Ayah's blatant and debasing judgments of Ice-Candy-Man and her threats of physical punishment clearly demonstrate her authoritative position in their interactions.

In addition to her verbal dominance over Ice-Candy-Man, Godmother's body language reveals that she is clearly the more powerful party. Lenny observes, "Arching her back like a scorpion its tail, she closes in for the kill (260), and adds, "when I inhale I can smell the formidable power of her attack" (262). Accordingly, Ice-Candy-Man's physical reactions exemplify his vulnerability and subjection to Godmother's power. In response to her accusations, "Ice-candy-man's head jolts back as if it's been struck....[He is] visibly shaken. His hazel eyes dart frantically...for sympathy or a means of succor" (260). As Godmother itemizes the atrocities he has committed against Ayah, Ice-Candy-Man is physically humbled: "Struck by the naked power and fury of her attack, Ice-candy-man's body twitches. His head jerks forward and his long fingers gouge the

earth between his sandals....[He] shifts his eyes to the ground....Tears, and a long strand of mucus from his nose, drip into the fissures at his feet....His head hangs between his knees. His arms move helplessly, not knowing where to rest” (261). Eventually Ice-Candy-Man completely abandons his confident façade as “his eyes, red with the strain of containing his tears...flit to Godmother in mute appeal” (275). Instead of proclaiming his own merits and justifying his actions, Ice-Candy-Man is physically humbled, reduced to begging for Godmother’s mercy: “Gliding forward on his haunches Ice-candy-man clasps her hands in both of his and places them on his bowed, penitent’s head...[Yet] Godmother, in a coldly significant gesture withdraws her hands from Ice-candy-man’s head. He remains like that, stranded...” (277). Godmother’s feminine power over Ice-Candy-Man is evinced not only through her verbal dominance, but through her physical ascendancy and his corresponding physical subordination. In the face of her influence, Ice-Candy-Man can do no more than “hold a pathetic vigil for Ayah” (Rastegar 31). Through her social power and verbal accusations, Godmother has shattered Ice-Candy-Man’s confidence, reducing him to “a deflated poet, a collapsed peddler” (Sidhwa 276) who slinks away, disappearing “across the Wagah border into India” (289).

In her verbal and physical dominance over Ice-Candy-Man, Godmother reverses traditional patriarchal power dynamics. Employing “a posse of policemen” (286) to execute her wishes, Godmother exerts control within—and, at times, above—the social realm of men. Through her appropriation of traditionally masculine authority, Godmother succeeds in successfully extricating Ayah from her marriage. Lenny specifies that Godmother’s actions were not dependent on any masculine support; rather, she “singlehandedly engendered the social and moral climate of retribution and justice required to rehabilitate our fallen Ayah” (285). If Sidhwa’s novel had ended with Ayah being dragged away to a life of misogynistic bondage, the message of the novel would have not have departed from the trajectory of most Partition literature. However, with the closing victory of Godmother over Ice-Candy-Man, the patriarchal binary of power is clearly subverted.

By situating Godmother’s triumph at the end of the novel, Sidhwa makes a clear statement about the feasibility and particular facets of feminine power. For example, Ayah is eventually elevated from pure victim to speaking subject, and she verbally expresses her desire for escape to Godmother and is freed from the clutches of Ice-Candy-Man. However, her wish for freedom is only realized through Godmother’s connections. Ayah’s power, based primarily on her sexual appeal, is limited and transitory, while the power of Lenny’s mother and Godmother, rooted in their social standing, financial security, and community connections, is much more entrenched. Both of these comparatively privileged

women are able to *maintain* agency, and more clearly *exert* agency, through the events of Partition. This tension between gender and class reveals how sexual violence is more often perpetrated on lower-income characters like Ayah, while the “typically bourgeois” (Rastegar 27) characters, including Lenny’s mother and godmother, escape it. Sidhwa’s middle and upper-class female characters are more clearly able to demonstrate agency and help those less fortunate, while lower-class women like Ayah function merely as passive receptors of the benevolent action undertaken on their behalf. This discrepancy allows Sidhwa to accentuate the specific disempowerment which results from belonging to both a subservient class and gender, therein providing a more realistic portrayal of the degree to which women in particular situations are able—or unable—to surmount social obstacles.

Though she is also disempowered, albeit due to her age rather than her ethnicity, as the narrative progresses Lenny is able to exert agency. Her agency is most clearly demonstrated through her decision not to enact revenge on Ice-Candy-Man, who loiters outside their gate every day, spouting lines of poetry and wailing for Ayah. Instead of being consumed by hate for Ice-Candy-Man because of his brutality, Lenny is able to realize that Ice-Candy-Man, who has lost all he once valued, should be pitied rather than resented. Lenny’s agency comes from her ability to move forward, and rather than focusing her efforts on punishing Ice-Candy-Man, Lenny chooses a higher path.

In her female characters, Sidhwa has created a nuanced variety of feminine roles. She presents a clear progression of women, from Lenny and Ayah, who display selected instances of personal agency, to Lenny’s mother and Godmother, who are able to act autonomously and exert increasing amounts of influence on surrounding individuals and circumstances, changing the lives of others as well as shaping their own.

By examining the female agency and empowerment that Sidhwa portrays, we, as readers, can appreciate how, although women’s bodies are often fragmented and victimized in the largely patriarchal discourse of Partition literature, the novel’s specific “adaptation of a marginal point of view” provides “an alternative to this discourse” (Bruschi 146). *Cracking India* offers a counter-history to the dominant national history of Partition, one which functions as “reconstitutive and salutary in the revision of national history and identity” (Hai 410). Rather than portraying women as exclusively victimized, Sidhwa provides a more nuanced depiction of the variety of ways women influenced—and were influenced by—the events of Partition. By examining the complex portrayals of women in *Cracking India* and other counter-narratives of Partition history, we are able to “redirect the gaze of the reader/researcher away from women’s bodies and total victimization” and instead to create an awareness of how these narratives

“intervene in [the] totalizing discourses that have spoken, and continue to speak, for [women’s] experiences” (Didur 13). Through narratives like *Cracking India*, women are able to reclaim their autonomy and express their own uniquely gendered—and equally valid—account of Partition history.

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