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NPTEL ONLINE
CERTIFICATION COURSE

Partition of India in Print Media and Cinema

LECTURE 30 – ACCOUNTS OF THE SURVIVOR

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CRACKING INDIA

- This 1991 novel by Bapsi Sidhwa is set in Lahore, narrated by Lenny who is five at the beginning and ten at the novel's close.
- With her polio-stricken right leg, Lenny moves about her city and between her family's houses, observing the actions of those around her with solicitous eyes.
- As rising political tensions give way to mob riots, fires, and violent murders, Lenny's narrative about her family shifts its focus to her observations of Lahore, as it is consumed by violence.
- Lenny and her family, however, are Parsi and are considered to be safe from the violence largely initiated by and directed toward Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. The co-incidence of Lenny's eighth birthday and the creation of the new nation of Pakistan in one narrative moment inscribes the moment in which Lenny's narrative begins to consider what it means to have survived the Partition.
- She does so in terms of her newly-possessed Pakistani identity, for it is her newly-assigned Pakistani identity that affirms her status as a survivor of the Partition.



CRACKING INDIA

- What at first seems to be about a young girl's autobiographical experience during the time of the Partition becomes, as the novel progresses, a narrative about Lenny's attempt to ascribe meaning to the Partition both as a historical event and as a trauma. It is within this narrative shift that Lenny's role as narrator is most poignantly complicated by her inability to fully experience and witness the Partition as a trauma.
- Whereas Lenny's narrative is often characterized by innocent eyes that lack worldly experience, her youthful first-person narrative is interrupted by what seems as an older voice attempting to remember the time of the Partition. These moments of narrative interruption occur during the instances in which Lenny attempts to tell about the violence tearing through her city's streets and houses. These narrative interruptions corroborate that only within the failure of fiction is testimony to the trauma of the Partition most poignantly voiced.
- The narrative follows a guided tour of a small section of an affluent neighbourhood in the city of Lahore. As Lenny traverses through Warris Road, Queens Road, and Jail Road, and locates the houses of her Electric-aunt and Godmother, it becomes clear that this guided tour is actually the search for refuge 'from the perplexing unrealities of my home on Warris Road.'



CRACKING INDIA

- Lenny's narrative shifts its focus to her polio-stricken right leg and provides no direct reference for the 'perplexing unrealities'. Unable to walk properly, Lenny is forced to undergo multiple surgeries in which her foot is broken and recast into a functional position. Occurring in a series of repetitions, Lenny's right leg and foot is cast into the landscape of her body as 'pathetically thin, wrinkled ... gratifyingly abnormal— and far from banal' (ibid.: 24).
- Lenny fears that the surgeries will completely reshape her foot and therefore transform her otherwise unique identity.
- Scholarship on Cracking India argue that Lenny's broken body allegorically embodies the breaking of Pakistan from India and tells the story of a broken nation as well as the story of a new nation born out of a violent divide.

LOST CHILDHOOD

- When the Second World War gets over, Lenny describes how the elders of her generation are responsible for the destructive and war-ridden childhood of the current generation, during the world war as well as during the Partition.
- She refers to how dominant the atmosphere of war pervades her childhood - “I who have subversively hoped that the defector Bose and the Japanese enemy win the war. All the same I am swept by a sense of relief so unburdening that I realize I was born with an awareness of the war: and I recall the dim, faraway fear of bombs that tinged with bitterness my mother’s milk. No wonder I was a colicky baby.”

LOST CHILDHOOD

- Lenny as a young narrator helps the reader delve into the confused perspective of children during the Partition. The concept of partition for her is merely digging a deep canal between the two countries, as she says, “A new nation is born. India has been divided after all. Did they dig the long, long canal Ayah mentioned?”
- Like many children from her time, Lenny’s childhood has been affected by the turmoil. Despite the fact that Lenny represents the section not under direct threat during the bifurcation, her daily life is impacted by it. She witnesses the riots and murders.
- As a kid her birthday is special for her, but the elders are too traumatized by the ongoing to make her feel special. A chunk of her childhood gets lost during all this.

LOST CHILDHOOD

- Further, the author refers to the child protagonist and narrator's lost childhood in an instance where the Ayah comes across Lenny's white hair, to which she expresses her surprise that “our hair hasn't all turned white.”
- Lenny's innocence is misused by the Ice-Candy man, when he extracts the information about Ayah by deceiving Lenny. Within seconds Lenny realizes her trust has been broken, this will lead to a scarring experience for Lenny and a part of her innocence is lost with this incident.

CRACKING INDIA

- In the initial phase, when the Partition massacres reached out to Lenny merely as tales, there are surprise, questions, and disbelief in the characters.
- When Sharbat Khan tells the Ayah of the unknown dead bodies being found, she enquired if they were of the Hindu religion, to which he says “Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. One can tell they are from prosperous, eating-drinking households...”
- Ayah’s enquiry is an intentional interruption by the author to remind the readers that a body has no religion. It is only in the cultural space that one is assigned a religion.

TRANSITION

- The novel is a slow transition to the massacre. It starts off from a period when the Partition murders were more of a part of the rumors for the larger section, till the situation transitions slowly to unravelling dead bodies everywhere, as the rift between the religious communities increases. Those who were friends get divided on the basis of their religious identity. It further moves over to regularly coming across processions, riots, murders, rapes and the gory truth of the Partition.
- As the Partition massacres become intense, the identity of people gets limited to their religion. Lenny describes this transition and a shift in her own perspective towards people when, for the first time, she realizes that her Ayah is a Hindu woman.

COMMON PEOPLE AND LEADERS

- The common people were away from the decision making regarding the Partition, but bore the brunt.
- Regarding the protagonists of the anticolonial movement, Lenny expresses her surprise that they actually existed and aren't mythic figures - "Someone we'd only hear about and never see." This shows the distance between the common people and the leaders who sometimes were more of a part of the glorified narratives than the reality in the common people's lives.

BOUNDARIES

- The confusion regarding the new boundaries loom over the common people, there are debates, uncertainty, the fate of the commoners is supposed to be decided by a handful of people.
- The helplessness of the commoners regarding the new boundaries becomes evident in an argument of the locals where the masseur says “If the Punjab is divided, Lahore is bound to go to Pakistan. There is a Muslim majority here...”, to which the gardener replies that “Lahore will stay in India!” The butcher states that since “There is too much Hindu money here...They own most of the property and business in the city.”



CONTINUED...

- Lenny at a point expresses her frustration at the leaders, saying “What’s the point of talking so much about people we don’t know?”
- This can be seen as the child unable to comprehend the scenario and can also be seen as Sidhwa’s criticism of the decision of Partition being imposed on the commoners ‘from above.’

Excerpt from Ismat Chughtai, “Jadein”

“दोनों खानदानों की मौजूदा तीन पीढ़ियाँ एक दूसरे से ऐसी घुली मिली थीं कि शुबहा भी न था कि हिन्दुस्तान की तक्रसीम के बाद इस मुहब्बत में फूट पड़ जाएगी। हालाँकि दोनों खानदानों में मुस्लिम लीगी, कांग्रेसी और महा-सभाई मौजूद थे और मज़हबी और सियासी बहसें भी जम-जम कर होतीं मगर ऐसे ही जैसे फूटबाल या क्रिकेट मैच होते हैं। इधर अब्बा कांग्रेसी थे तो उधर डाक्टर साहब और बड़े भाई लीगी थे, तो उधर ज्ञान चंद महा-सभाई, इधर मँझले भाई कम्युनिस्ट थे तो उधर गुलाब चंद सोशलिस्ट। और फिर उसी हिसाब से मर्दों की बीवियाँ और बच्चे भी उसी पार्टी के थे।”

Thank You

