



Caught Amidst Storm: Experiences of Children During Partition
(An Analysis of Veera Hiranandani's '*The Night Diary*' and Bapsi Sidhwa's '*Ice-Candy-Man*')
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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper Accepted: 18-04-2025 Published: 10-05-2025 Keywords: <i>Children, Confusion, Displacement, Innocence, Violence.</i>	The Partition of British India into two separate dominions- India and Pakistan, is the most crucial event of the history of Indian subcontinent. It resulted in one of the largest mass displacements and most brutal massacre, the world ever witnessed. Writers and researchers are still discussing and working on the subject of Partition, perhaps in a quest to find out various facets of it. It has been explored and analyzed through different point of views like that of women and marginalized communities. However, one of the most important perspectives is that of children which is somehow overlooked. Children's experiences were marked by trauma and confusion. There were children who witnessed the horrible killings of their near and dear ones. The partition had a frightening effect on their innocent hearts. Many of them lost their homes and families and were thrown into a gorge of chaos and ruin or uncertain future. Children mostly were unable to figure out the reasons of the sudden evolution of violence and hatred. As we revisit partition narratives, it is essential to address and analyze the experiences of children so that their voices do not get lost in the pages of history. This research paper aims to understand the trauma and confusions of children during the violence of partition. It will explore the partition

through the lenses of children with special reference to Veera Hiranandani's *'The Night Diary'* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *'Ice-Candy-Man'*.

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INTRODUCTION :-

During the seven decades after partition, the political, religious and social consequences and aftermath of partition have been thoroughly and extensively studied and discussed. However, the experiences of children during the cataclysm remained a comparatively less explored area of analysis and research. There were millions of children who were forced to leave their homes with their families and had to face numerous unutterable atrocities on their way towards the newly defined borders. Most of the children were not able to understand the reason of sudden change in society. They were confused and could not figure out why the long-awaited independence has snatched away their freedom to stay in their own homes. Children who had to leave their homes were destined to have not only a distorted future but also a fragmented memory of their childhood. Nisha, the protagonist in Veera Hiranandani's *'The Night Diary'* has penned down her fears of having scattered memories and divided childhood. She wrote in her diary-

“I would have memories of life here in Mirpur Khas and...in new India. My childhood would always have a line drawn through it, the before and the after.” (Hiranandani, 50)

This research paper aims to examine the experiences of children and provide an unbiased and more subtle understanding of the human cost of partition and its effect on the lives and psyche of children.

Veera Hiranandani's *'The Night Diary'* is a very beautiful novella written in the form of letters. A twelve-year-old girl Nisha records the experiences of atrocities after leaving her home in Pakistan and moving towards India. The letters are addressed to her deceased mother.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *'Ice-Candy-Man'* is another important novel which explores the partition and analyze the sudden change in human relationships through the eyes of an eight-year-old Parsee girl, Lenny. She could not understand the reason behind the newly generated hatred towards each other. As she says- “One day everybody is themselves – and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian.” (Sidhwa, 93)



Both of these books ask innocent questions from the point of view of children and provide an unbiased response to the widespread hatred.

***'The Night Diary'* by Veera Hiranandani :-**

Veera Hiranandani's *'The Night Diary'* is a remarkable novel depicting the experiences of children affected by the horrors of partition. A 12-years- old girl, Nisha records her trauma, confusion and ordeals in the form of letters addressed to her mother who died while giving birth to Nisha and her twin brother Amil. They were a well-to-do family, settled in Mirpur Khas (now in Pakistan). Her father, Suresh was a reputed doctor in the city hospital. Nisha represents millions of children like her, who were not able to figure out the reason of partition. They were mostly perplexed about if it was really possible to divide the country. When Amil confirms the announcement of inevitable partition to Nisha, she initially could not believe. Her brother as informed by Kazi, their family cook explained that India would be divided in two parts. One part would be allotted to the Muslims. The Hindus, Sikhs and all others will have to settle to another part of the land. She thought it to be insane as she could not apprehend that independence could lead to the division of country, that too on the basis of religion. Nisha wrote in her diary-

“I just never thought much about people's religions before. Does it have to do with India becoming independent from British ? I don't see how those two things go together.”
(Hiranandani, 17)

Indian society was 'inclusive' of all the religions. The cook of Nisha's family was a Muslim. Her father's best friend Dr. Ahmad was also a Muslim. Moreover, Nisha had only one friend, 'Sabeen', that too a Muslim. However, the announcement of Partition on 'All India Radio', soon polluted the environment of mutual affection with the poison of communal hatred. The society before partition not only had friends from different religions, but also inter-religion couples. Nisha's mother too, was a Muslim. However, no one in the family wanted to acknowledge that fact, perhaps in a fear that it may cause more trouble in the already spread chaos. Nisha nevertheless, did not want to veil her mother's religious identity. She wanted to gracefully admit the fact that her parents belong to two different communities. Moreover, she thinks that the confession of being half Muslim will provide them acceptance in that community too, and they may possibly be allowed to stay in newly formed Pakistan. The innocent heart of Nisha question the norms of society in her diary when she writes-



“Nobody ever mentions the fact that You were Muslim, mama...I guess we’re Hindu because Papa and Dadi are. But you’re still a part of me, mama. Where does that part go ?”
(Hiranandani, 17)

One day while going to school, Nisha and Amil were attacked by some Muslim boys. Nisha initially thought that the boys were angry on them probably because her brother has drawn some bad sketches of them. Amil however had some idea of being vulnerable to ‘attacks’ for being Hindu those days. Nisha was nonetheless uncertain. She was innocent enough to understand that the partition has perhaps created a permanent and deep gorge of differences among the dwellers of society.

Another day, their house was attacked by a violent Muslim mob. They were saved by Kazi but the incident really frightened the family. Nisha began feeling the change in environment and people getting ‘too conscious’ about religious belongingness. Her mind however could still not understand the reason behind the newly generated ‘hate’. There were millions of children like Nisha who felt- “the two sides were supposed to be us and the British. Why are we fighting each other ?” (Hiranandani, 36). The differences and distrust between the communities that had hitherto lived together, became clearly visible during the violence of partition. Children who perhaps never noticed people’s religion earlier, were compelled to see them through the communal lenses. They were however not able to understand what was happening and why the society suddenly changed so inhumanly. As Nisha wrote-

“ I used to think of people by their names and what they looked like, or what they did...Now...My teacher, Sir Habib, is now my Muslim teacher...Sabeen...my Muslim friend. Dr. Ahmad...a Muslim doctor.” (Hiranandani, 22)

Nisha got upset when her father told the family that they must leave now, as it was now not safe to live in Pakistan amongst the vicious Muslims. She did not want to leave her home, or else not to leave Kazi behind. Kazi was their family cook, who loved her unconditionally like his own child. Therefore, a child’s heart unaware of the communal differences did not want to get detached from the loving ones. She poured out her fear in her diary when she writes and expects her deceased mother to do some miracle so that their family would not be torn apart.

“ I didn’t want the new India...make sure that Kazi comes with us. Jinnah and Nehru can’t take him away from us.” (Hiranandani, 44-45)



On 15th August 1947, when the dawn of independence embraced the Indian land, newspapers were flooded with headlines like- ‘Birth of New India’, ‘Nation wakes to life’ and many such titles that made the countrymen proud and relaxed. Nisha however, now believed that every birth is not a happy one, perhaps the birth of new India was also a sad one like hers. She compares that when she and her brother were born, their mother died, similarly a new country is born but the homes of many common people are dying.

The psyche of children who were forced to leave their homes was marked by deep confusion, fear and emotional distress. For Nisha, like numerous children of her age, the idea of “home” was not about the name of country- It was where she played, went to school, have her friends and neighbours and where she felt secure. When such children were made to leave, often suddenly and under terrifying circumstances, it disturbed not only their physical world but also blurred their entire sense of identity and belonging.

Nisha’s father explained to the family that India is now an independent country and the place where they live now, is no more a part of India. Their beloved city, ‘Mirpur Khas’ is now in the newly formed Islamic country ‘Pakistan’. Therefore, they must leave for India where they would be safe amongst the Hindu- majority population. He also described that the Muslims in India will have to re-settle in Pakistan. Nisha was shocked to realize that tension has captured every community equally. She wondered as she wrote-

“Is there a Muslim girl sitting in her house right now who has to leave her home and go to a new country that’s not even called India? Does she feel confused and scattered too?”
(Hiranandani, 52)

One morning, before the dawn, Nisha’s family started their journey towards India. They found that there were many families like them heading towards the border. Their journey was very troublesome and horrific. Lack of food and water was the biggest problem. Moreover, the convoys were attacked frequently by the rioters. Little Nisha was very scared that they all might die soon. Amil nearly died of thirst when nature became kind enough to shower the sweet drops of rain. The struggle for life and scarcity of food made Nisha’s innocent mind generate anger for the national leaders, who were supposed to protect the countrymen, but had miserably failed. She wrote- “...I’m so angry at all the leaders, like Jinnah and Nehru...even angry at Gandhi for not being able to stop it.” (Hiranandani, 70)



The family halted at Rashida's house, who was Nisha and Amil's maternal uncle. Everything there from kitchen to garden reminded her of her own home. She constantly miss her ordinary life at Mirpur- Khas, which now seemed to be a beautiful fairytale. At Rashida's place they were warned not to go out. Nisha thinks what kind of freedom it was, that turned their lives to be like that of prisoners. She wrote- "We've never been less free." (Hiranandani, 103) . She felt lonely and longed for a friend. She and Amil secretly befriended Hafa, a little girl from Rashida's neighborhood. However, they were soon caught by their father and had to leave the place, the very next morning. They decided to board a train to Jodhpur, India. Attacks on trains were very common those days. As G. Sankar has described in his *'The Partition of India and Pakistan in the novels of selected writers in South Asian Countries'* that 'trains' were one of the most striking symbols of the violence during partition. In many novels, a train is shown as the "triggerer of violence" as they were used to carry the mangled corpses of people who were killed and even sacks full of breasts of raped and killed women.

Nisha has penned down a dreadful description of attack on their train. Many men, women and even infants were mercilessly killed. She was deeply frightened and almost frozen to see the pale and scared faces all around. The incident affected her psyche so badly that for many days she could not talk or act normal. She wrote about her trauma in her diary, a few days after they reached India-

"I had never seen anyone kill before...I wonder...who was the first to kill when they decided to break apart India?" (Hiranandani, 125)

Nisha was more upset to know about the horrible deaths and awful abuses on both sides of the border. She was of the opinion that every community has committed unforgivable crimes against the humanity. She could not figure out what wrong she and her family and many families like hers has done to be destined to such a tormented fate.

The family settled in a small flat in Jodhpur and their lives slowly began to move towards normalcy. One noon, while returning from school, Nisha and Amil found Kazi searching for their home. They later came to know that their dadi has written letter to him asking him to join them, and he crossed the border to reunite with his family. Nisha was overwhelmed with joy and considered it a miracle when she found her family to be complete again. Their family in true sense reflected the beautiful image of affection and inclusion that was engraved in the Indian society. She wrote- "Sometimes, I hear Dadi's high- pitched singing... her Hindu songs and Kazi's Muslim prayers, a sweet, rich music together." (Hiranandani, 133)

**'Ice-Candy-Man' by Bapsi Sidhwa :-**

Bapsi Sidhwa's '*Ice-Candy-Man*' is classified as an unbiased novel as it is narrated from the point of view of a handicapped little girl who do not belong to any of the two major communities- Hindu or Muslim. She was a Parsee, the community which has a very small population in the whole world. The community has served the British and earned their trust. However, the announcement of partition, popped up the seeds of uncertainty in their hearts too. As Colonel Bharucha, Lenny's doctor said in their community dinner-

"...We are the smallest minority in India...only one hundred and twenty thousand in the whole world. We have to be extra way, or we'll be neither here nor there..." (Sidhwa, 16)

Lenny for the first time heard about the news of communal violence at her family cook Iman din's village 'Pir-Pindo'. After dinner, the people from the village and nearby villages gathered together. The mullah of the village started the conversation with the news of riots and killings in the cities. He also said that the English government perhaps do not want to maintain the law and order. He said-

"...I hear there is trouble in the cities...Hindus are being murdered in Bengal...Muslims in Bihar. It's strange...the English Sarkar can't seem to do anything about it." (Sidhwa, 55)

The villagers were however affectionate enough that they thought that the city troubles will not reach to village. They felt they need not worry as they are staying together for generations and have inclusive and aligned lifestyles. They were therefore, ready to swear on their religious books to protect their neighbours of other religion. The village Chaudhry declared if the situation gets worsen, every Muslim of the village "will guard his Sikh brothers with no regard for his own life !" (Sidhwa, 57)

The inclusive nature of the pre-partition Indian society is adequately depicted in the novel. Lenny's family is Parsee. Her family's cook is a Muslim. Her ayah is a Hindu. The family has friends from different communities like- Parsee, Hindu, Sikh, Muslims and even Europeans and Americans.

However, after the announcement of partition, the city of Lahore was soon filled with the discussions on Hindu- Muslim conflicts. Lenny, like Nisha in Hiranandani's '*The Night Diary*' was confused about the possibility of division. She asked her cousin – "Can one break a country?" (Sidhwa, 92). She like other children of her age was earlier not adequately aware of the religious differences but the airs of 'hatred' soon made her feel it. As she said-



“Gandhi, Jinnah, Nehru, Iqbal, Tara Singh, Mountbatten are names I hear. And I become aware of religious differences...People shrink dwindling into symbols.” (Sidhwa, 93)

Lenny has described the regular processions carried out on streets. She and her friends, unaware of the dangers and the reasons, used to enjoy them. They slip into the groups and shout ‘Jai Hind’ or ‘Pakistan Zindabad’, depending on the ‘side’ of the mob. The discussions about which part of country will remain in India and which would be ceded to Pakistan became very common. Every little or big groups assembled at parks, roads or eateries were debating on the topic of how the orders of partition would be implemented. Lenny was in a small eatery with her Ayah when she heard her Hindu, Muslim and Sikh acquaintances having heated discussions about religious superiority. They discussed who should stay in and who should leave Lahore. They further discussed the possible consequences if an unwanted ‘minority’ tries to stay back in an area having majority of “other” religion. She got deeply scared and uneasy with such talks. As she said- “I don’t want to hear them...I try not to inhale, but I must; the charged air about our tables distils poisonous insights.” (Sidhwa, 131)

As the violence rose, Lenny witnessed burning of houses and Hindus and Sikhs leaving for India because it was not safe for them to stay in Lahore. She also expressed her fear and trauma when she saw horrible crimes by the mobs. The Ice-Candy-Man arrived with an information about a train that came from Gurdaspur, carrying the dead bodies of Muslims and “two gunny bags full of women breasts.” (Sidhwa, 149) . The train incident in Sidhwa’s *‘Ice-Candy-Man’* could be compared to that in Khushwant Singh’s *‘Train to Pakistan’*, the appearance of which destroyed the peace and harmony of Mano-Majra. Sikhs and Muslims who earlier were comfortable with each other, began suspecting each other. The thread of trust and affection which kept them together was tormented. “Everyone felt his neighbour’s hands against him, and thought of finding friends and allies.” (Singh, 137)

One afternoon, Lenny’s ayah realized that one of their neighbours Sher Singh has perhaps left the place and moved to India. The Ice-Candy-Man said that “it’s better they left sooner! The refugees are clamoring for revenge!” (Sidhwa, 156). He further declared that he too, want to avenge the brutal massacre of Muslims and the humiliation of their women folk in Gurdaspur. The vindictive psyche of refugees in the novel could be compared to that of them in Chaman Nahal’s *‘Azadi’*, as Chaudhri Barkat Ali said- “When refugees with stories of personal misfortunes land here...fan up further hatred.” (Nahal, 140)



With the growth of communal hatred, the Ice-Candy-Man became so wicked that he planned to kidnap Ayah for being a Hindu. When the mob arrived to take her away, she was hidden upstairs and the elders said that she has left for Amritsar. However, when the Ice-Candy-Man asked Lenny about her whereabouts, she unaware of the dangers, gave him the hint. The mob took away the Hindu ayah. This incident filled Lenny with guilt and shock. The transformation of Ice-Candy-Man from a charming vendor to a participant in violence and betrayal represents the loss of idealized figures in child's world. Ayah when found after some months, was so ashamed of herself that she did not want to see anyone, not even Lenny. Her trauma is similar to most of the women who were abducted and raped during those days. It was perhaps for the reason because they knew their society will always consider them to be 'impure'. However, Lenny was innocent enough to understand the hollow mentality of society. Her pure love and sympathy for ayah could be felt when she said-

"I more than ever want to see Ayah: to comfort and kiss her ugly experiences away...I don't want her to think she's bad just because she's been kidnapped." (Sidhwa, 254)

Conclusion :-

It is true that the awful "fights over religion" was a thing of few powerful people. The common people who lived together like families, perhaps never wanted the partition. Kazi in Veera Hiranandani's *'The Night Diary'* represent such people who put love and humanity above religion. The character of Nisha in the same book, represents the children who were happy and relaxed that the communal politics and religious hatred could not eliminate affection from the society. She writes a very powerful line in her last letter recorded in the book-

"To Nehru, To Jinnah, India and Pakistan, to the men who fight and kill- You can't split us. You can't split love." (Hiranandani, 131)

In Bapsi Sidhwa's *'Ice- Candy- Man'*, Lenny's innocent but observant eyes struggles to process and articulate trauma. As the tension rises, she witnesses the change in people's behaviors. The Ice-Candy-Man who was an admirer of her Hindu ayah, suddenly became evil for her and spoiled her life. Moreover, one striking moment is Lenny's unintentional betrayal of Ayah. That moment left an everlasting mark on her psyche. Her guilt and helplessness symbolizes a child's mental state when she suffers the trauma not through direct violence but observing the sufferings of her loved ones.



Thus, the partition left every section of society in a state of trauma, but for children it was a loss more than just of homes and loved ones. It caused them the long-lasting loss of hopes, trust and innocence. Their lives were thrown into a deep gorge of darkness before they were even able to understand the social differences and hatred. As Cathy Caruth, a trauma theorist suggested in her '*Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History*' that trauma is often "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore relived in fragments." (Caruth, 1996)

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