Ice-Candy Man highlights feminist concerns like victimization and suppression of women in patriarchal societies. Discuss with special reference to the major female characters present in the novel.

Answer

Originally published as Ice-Candy Man, Cracking India is a semi-autobiographical text in which Bapsi Sidhwa through the lens of her childhood memories recounts the events surrounding Partition. It represents a series of female characters who have survived in a chaotic time of 1947 in India, the period of worst religious riots in the history of India. This religion based division resulted in mass violence, murder, and rape. The novel Ice-Candy-Man may be read as a postcolonial novel attempting to portray the life and times of the Partition of India giving due importance to the other marginal sections of society based on the distinction of gender, class, caste, or religion. Sidhwa, through Ice-Candy-Man critiques the stereotypical images of women and fights for their empowerment. Ice-Candy-Man is a significant testimony of a gynocentric view of reality in the backdrop of a religious turbulence. This novel highlights feminist concerns about women's issues, particularly their experience of victimization and suppression within patriarchal societies and how this suppression takes a brutal form in the face of national upheaval.
The narrator is a young Parsee girl named Lenny, who is suffering from polio. Her lameness is suggestive of handicap, a woman writer faces, because writing – an intellectual exercise – is considered a male bastion, outside the domain of women. Lenny as a narrator moves from one phase of her life, i.e., childhood to adolescence. Throughout the course of the novel she observes men’s lascivious and degrading attention towards women, voraciousness of male sexual desires, women’s plight as they are reduced to the status of sexual objects. We can see that right from her childhood the sexual identity thrust upon Lenny – “I can’t remember a time when I ever played with dolls....relatives and acquaintances have persisted in giving them to me.” Lenny as a girl learns that marriage of girls is of utmost importance in the society. The intense concern for her marriage even in her childhood puts Lenny in dismay. She states, “Drinking tea, I am told, makes one darker. I’m dark enough.......It’s a pity Ad’s fair and Lenny so dark. He’s a boy. Anyone will marry him,” implying that a woman has to be beautiful to be desirable while a man is exempted from such conditioning. Her schooling is stopped as suggested by her doctor Col. Bharucha, because she was suffering from polio – “She’ll marry—have children—lead a carefree, happy life,” implying that a women has no need for education, for her only duty in this patriarchal society is marry, rear children and be efficient in household duties. Patriarchal society views women as physically weak to venture into the world outside the four walls of their houses, thus, limiting them to the domestic sphere where they have to accept the dominance of her male counterpart.

The formative influence of Lenny is her Ayah Shanta who is a Hindu girl of eighteen. It is Ayah who epitomizes the strength of the femininity and infuses in Lenny the ideas of freedom and will. The Ayah has accumulated a good number of admirers – the Ice-Candy-Man, the Government House gardener, the Masseur, the zoo-attendant, the restaurant owner, and a knife-sharpening Pathan. She is able to influence the men around her, although much of her influence stems from her physical appeal but her natural beauty and sensuality attract men, creating an intriguing source of power.
As Lenny observes these men she realizes that the gaze of Ayah’s admirer indicates not just lust, but a powerful desire for ownership, calling to attention the objectification a woman’s body.

Communal riots break out in Lahore. The Sikhs and Hindus start migrating to Amritsar and the Muslims are asked to quit Amritsar. While migrating, the people of the warring community attack each other and it is the women and children who suffer the most. The narrative takes a horrifying turn with the arrival of a train from Gurdaspur in which the Ice Candy Man expects his relatives return to Lahore from Amritsar. The train arrives and it is loaded not by passengers but with the dead bodies – “A train from Gurdaspur has just come..... Everyone in it is dead. Butchered........two gunny-bags full of women’s breasts!” The women were not only killed but first tortured, raped and then butchered like animals. Through this event Sidhwa questions the hypocrisy of people who glorified the image of the Indian woman and worship them as goddesses, but at the time of upheaval the same image is soiled for the sake of revenge. The bag of severed breasts is transformed into a public form of communication, a verification of nationalist power. With the arrival of the train, frenzied Dilnawaz becomes blood thirsty of the people of the warring community. This is when Ayah’s suffering begins. Dilnawaz (the Ice Candy Man) leading the Muslim mob raids Godmother’s house in search of the Hindus. Mad with rage, he throws Ayah into the hands of the frenzied mob just for Ayah being a Hindu girl – “They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms.....her bare feet – that want to move backwards – are forced forward. Her lips are drawn away from her teeth, and the resisting curve of her throat opens her mouth like the dead child’s scream-less mouth. "Four men stand pressed against her........their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces...” The image of these men satisfied and triumphant as they carry her away is horrifying for Lenny. Ayah is then raped mercilessly, beaten up and thrown away among the brothels of Hiramandi and is later forced to marry Dilnawaz who renames her as Mumtaz. This event of reaming the Ayah highlight the fact that a woman has no right over her identity, her sense of identity is associated with her husband.
This episode of Ice-Candy-Man and Ayah destroys Lenny’s conceptions about love. She was shocked to see Ice-Candy-Man pushing his wife Ayah into the business of prostitution. The site of women being raped during the riots petrifies her. She watches men turning into beasts; they were declaring superiority over each other by sexually assaulting women. Rape is the greatest violence because it implies that a woman has no rights on her own body and it can be used by anyone to meet their end. Such acts of violence are an intimate destruction of the feminine, and can also be read as an attempt to annihilate male honor. Feminine form was reconceived as canvas for nationalist messages in 1947 Lahore. The metaphor of female body or mother is often used for a nation. Thus the dignity, purity and honor of women have always been taken as sign of the dignity and integrity of a nation. Ranna’s community has a clear plan to safeguard the women from being used in such a way—“Rather than face the brutality of the mob they will pour kerosene around the house and burn themselves……The young men will engage the Sikhs at the mosque, and at other strategic locations, for as long as they can and give the women a chance to start the fire.” Thus the idea of protection shifts from keeping the women alive as long as possible to allow the women enough time to kill themselves. Such a plan reveals the importance of women’s purity to male constructions of community. The entire purpose of this encounter is to safeguard women’s bodies from public shaming. Honor was “located in the body of the woman”. Once raped, violated, and mutilated, they cannot be incorporated back into the spaces of the home or the nation. Siddha uses the figures of Lenny’s caretakers, to explore the fates of women who survived these acts of violence. Women, once they fall prey to men’s violence like Lenny’s two Ayah’s, cannot hope for their restitution to their own families. Through Ayah, Siddha demonstrates the loss of feminine power, and had the story ended at this point, the novel would be nothing but a traditional Partition novel, with the men as victors and the women as victims.

However, Siddha belonging to that group of women writers who affirms that women should utilize their potentials beyond the
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domestic life and assert their individuality, does not end the novel
with the pitiable situation of the Ayah. 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 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. Lenny’s
mother and aunts construct a refuge for these “fallen women” who
raped or forced into prostitution attempting to reunite the women
with their families or to find housing and work for those who, seen
as permanently shamed and defiled, and cannot return home. They
also smuggle gasoline to help their Hindu and Sikh friends cross the
border safely to India. In rescuing these women, Lenny’s mother
has clearly moved beyond the traditional role of housewife to
become a social activist. It is the two women who undertake the
risky job of saving lives in danger. She portrays women not only as
victims but also as saviors. They are shown performing heroic
duties to bring order to this chaotic world. Through Lenny’s mother
the narrator suggests that women should have a purpose in life
besides domesticity. Another character who epitomizes feminine
power is Lenny’s Godmother (one of her aunts) whose name is
Rodabai. Her authoritativeness, self-confidence, capacity to handle
extreme situations deftly is evident by her dealing with the Ice-
Candy-Man and the rescue of the Ayah from him. She scolds the
Ice-Candy-Man for disgracing the Ayah, “What kind of man would
allow his wife to dance like a performing monkey before other men?
You’re not a man; you’re a low-born, two-bit evil little mouse!”
When she realizes that Ayah does not want to live with him, she
decisively sets about to rescue her and manages to send her back to
her people.

Although Sidhwa indicts patriarchal culture and norms for
perpetuating violence against women, she does not hold
masculinity in dark light. In the case of Ice-Candy-Man, his behavior
may be described in relation to the larger forces of collective
psychosis. Sidhwa not only throws light on the suffering of women
cauised by men but she also explores the fact that women can also
be instrumental and cause of the suffering and exploitation of other female subjects. In the novel Ice-Candy-Man we see that slave-sister is harassed by her own sister Godmother and lives in perpetual obedience to her. She is leading the life of a bonded slave, forced to suppress herself in every interaction with the old lady; she is not allowed to exercise her will in any situation. Sidhwa wants to convey that the exploitation, manipulation and suppression of one individual by another are not confined to the male-female relationship. The feminists, it seems, are being made alive to the dangers of replicating the patriarchal principle and thus perpetuating the class of the exploiters and the exploited amongst themselves. Another instance where a female is perpetuating violence against another female character is in the relationship of Pappo and her mother Muccho. Muccho takes Papoo as her rival and saddles her with all the household chores, beating and abusing her on the slightest of pretexts. But despite this, Papoo cannot be browbeaten into submission; she is strong and high-spirited. To break her spirit Muccho arranges her marriage with a middle aged dwarf. Papoo is drugged with opium at the time of the ceremony to suppress her revolt. Lenny curiously studies Muccho’s face during the wedding ceremony and sees a contented smile on her lips. The sketch of Muccho suggests that women themselves are unconsciously bound by their conditioning and encumber their daughters with a repetitive fate, treating marriage as a cure of all ills.

Sidhwa talks of emancipation of women and ends the novel on a positive note with Ayah being sent back to her home. Throughout the novel, Lenny emerges as a courageous and bold girl, she is inquisitive, demanding and daring who moves forward in life despite various hindrances. She understands the limitations associated with women’s lives in patriarchal society. The suffering of Ayah is not the suffering of a single woman but it represents the pain of the thousands of women who were kidnapped, beaten, raped, and butchered like animals. Lenny, her Ayah, her mother and Godmother exhibit capability of assuming new roles and responsibilities. Despite her conviction that she is now an impure
person, the ayah retains her will to go back to her family and face life anew. Lenny’s relationship with her cousin upholds the principle of equality, for she does not allow him to manipulate her sexually. In no way does Lenny’s lameness constrict her psyche. Rather than being dominated by the male, she chooses not to conform, telling Cousin that she is not interested, making her own preferences known. Her cousin, consequently, is placed in a subservient role and laments his lack of power over.

Sidhwa in the backdrop of the communal violence reconstructs the postcolonial history from the perspective of the marginalized sections of society. Through narratives like Cracking India, women are able to reclaim their autonomy and express their account of Partition history. Throughout the novel Sidhwa has critiqued the stereotypical images of women as dark, mysterious, exotic and homely. The patriarchal society should perceive women beyond the roles of wives, daughters and mothers. A big transformation is required at the social level, which will acknowledge women as human beings with desires, feelings, ambitions, and potentials.