

FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS CLASS BOUNDARIES: A STUDY OF THREE CONTEMPORARY NOVELS BY WOMEN WRITERS FROM THE INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT

This article seeks to examine the depiction of female intimacy and friendship that cut across class boundaries in three novels by contemporary women writers from Pakistan and India : *Ice-Candy-Man*¹ (1988) by Bapsi Sidhwa, *The Hottest Day of the Year* (2001) by Brinda Charry and *The End of Innocence* (2006) by Moni Mohsin. I will attempt to evaluate what the three authors' depiction of tenuous female relationships reveals about the complexity of gender and class politics in the Indian sub-continent².

At the heart of the narrative in the works in question lies the relationship between a beautiful young maidservant and the protagonist, a preadolescent girl, belonging to a middle or upper-class family. Apart from striking class differences, the substantial age difference between the little girl and the maidservant is crucial to our understanding of their relationship. The oldest protagonist is eleven-year-old Nithya in *The Hottest Day of the Year* while Sudha, a domestic live-in helper is twenty. Laila in Mohsin's *The End of Innocence* is eight and Rani is the fifteen-year-old granddaughter of a woman employed by Laila's grandmother. In Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*, the child protagonist Lenny is between four to eight years old, while her Hindu nanny referred to as Ayah is in her late teens³.

Although the servant status of the three young women is never really in question, there are important distinctions in their social roles. Nithya has been strictly forbidden from referring to Sudha as a servant since she is a high-caste Hindu, a Brahman, like Nithya's family. She is employed by Nithya's aunt and uncle with whom Nithya is staying in a small town in Tamil Nadu, while her parents are away. Sudha is a priest's daughter and is in fact related to her employers⁴. Away from the hustle and bustle of Bangalore, living with her

¹In the United States this novel was published under the title *Cracking India*.

²An earlier version of this essay was presented in May 2010 at the Gender and Difference conference organised by the Centre for Critical and Cultural Theory, Cardiff University and the Englisches Seminar, University of Cologne. I would like to thank Prof. Claire Davison-Pégon at the Université de Provence for her encouragement and insightful comments.

³ The narrative in Sidhwa's novel slows down in the months leading to and following the Partition of India. Lenny's eighth birthday coincides with the Partition of India in August 1947.

⁴ According to Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj: 'In small towns and villages, upper caste women even today are confined to home bound activities and involved in responsibilities and
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reticent relatives and contemptuous of the only neighbour of her own age, Nithya inevitably seeks out Sudha for companionship. This relationship, which lacks the intensity of the corresponding relationships in the other two novels under discussion, stems primarily from an overwhelming sense of boredom made worse by the debilitating heat. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Ayah is responsible for carrying, bathing and feeding the little girl resulting in a strong physical bond between the two. Furthermore, she sleeps in the children's bedroom and not in the servants' quarters. Polio-afflicted Lenny, having been dispensed from school, spends most of her time in the streets of pre-Partition Lahore with Ayah to whom she is deeply attached, although the age difference between the two is perhaps too great for Ayah to realistically feel anything more than affection for Lenny. Rani, in *The End of Innocence*, while not technically a servant herself, lives with her grandmother in the servants' quarters of Laila's grandmother's haveli in rural Pakistan⁵. It is not surprising that Rani's servant status is never contested since among the landed aristocracy in Pakistan entire families are seen to be beholden to the landowners. Laila and her sister attend school in Lahore and visit their parents in the country during holidays, spending most of their time in Rani's company. Laila is completely devoted to Rani, fascinated by her many talents: 'Rani alone had the unique ability to make the everyday wondrous and the dull delightful [...] She knew how to mend a parrot's broken wing or get a wild squirrel to eat off her hand [...] She could do cartwheels, climb to the top of the tallest tree and weave stories [...]' (11) The novel traces the winter of 1971 when Laila is home, recovering from typhoid. With her elder sister in Lahore, she hopes to cement her relationship with Rani who she knows regards her less as a friend and more as 'an acolyte, whom she could indulge or ignore.' (12) While Laila is conscious of her age difference with Rani, she is far less aware of the impact of class on their relationship.

If, to varying degrees in the three texts, the little girl considers the maid a friend, this perception is not shared by the servant. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Lenny imagines affinities which in all likelihood would not occur to Ayah and is keen to believe that she shares certain 'female' experiences with her. For instance, when Lenny's cousin makes amorous advances towards her and Ayah reprimands him, Lenny reads this gesture as repayment for checking Ayah's ardent admirer Ice-candy-man, when he tries to slip his toes under Ayah's sari. An element of reciprocity, albeit implicit, is present in the relationship. As Lenny points out: 'I gain Ayah's goodwill and complicity by accommodating her need to meet friends and relatives. She takes me to fairs, cheap restaurants and slaughter-houses. I cover up for her and maintain a canny silence about her doings. I learn of human needs, frailties, cruelties and joys.' (20) Thus, Lenny gains access to the excitement of the adult world and for Ayah, it results in greater freedom and physical mobility, within her own class. When Lenny learns of Ayah's wedding plans, she is overcome with jealousy and panic, leading Ayah to respond as follows: 'Silly girl, I won't leave you . . . and even if I have to, you'll find another Ayah who will love you just as much.' (158) Ayah humours Lenny for the eight-year-old child that she is but also clearly recognizes her role in Lenny's life: that of a servant, who can and will be replaced. Of the three texts, the nature of the relationship is

interests limited only to their kith and kin.' "An overview of the Status of Women in India" in *Readings in Indian Government and Politics: Class, Caste, Gender*. Ed. Manoranjan Mohanty. New Delhi: Sage Publications India. Pvt. Ltd. 2004. 312.

⁵ Rani lives with her grandmother since her father's death and mother's second marriage.

perhaps best articulated by Rani in *The End of Innocence* when she tells Laila: 'I matter to you as Rani who lives in Kalanpur. I don't matter to you in school with all your friends who come in cars, or when you go to the cinema in Lahore, or when you're sitting in a hotel eating ice cream. Do I?' (66) She spells out the sense of privation that comes with being a servant: 'The things that Laila and Sara spoke of – airports, swimming pools, circuses with Chinese acrobats – were as remote to her as the moon [...] she would never see Lahore. Never ride in a train or wear high heels or own a suitcase.' (42) Interestingly, Mohsin's narrative neatly avoids a collision of the two worlds: on the one occasion that the girls do try to organise a trip to Lahore for Rani, the idea is immediately vetoed by Rani's grandmother. Perhaps it is a tacit recognition of the improbability of this friendship outside a specific context. In fact, all three authors appear to have created a liminal space within the narrative allowing this relationship across rigid class boundaries to develop and allowing also for it to be perceived as friendship. As we have seen, the 'mitigating' circumstances include the little girl's illness, resulting in the absence of companions of her own age and class or in Nithya's case, a contempt for girls of her own age. Also important is the child protagonist's as yet incomplete assimilation of class differences. As Ann Laura Stoler points out, 'children are of course bearers of adult cultures but [...] only in partial and imperfect ways. They learn certain normative conventions and not others and frequently defy the divisions that adults are wont to draw'⁶. Interestingly, the only time Nithya refers to Sudha as her friend is when her aunt forbids her from spending time with the maid once she becomes pregnant following an illicit liaison with Nithya's uncle which results in her fall from Brahmanic grace. Nithya while attempting to understand Sudha's relationship with her uncle, thinks: "Maybe she liked him because he made her feel pretty and desirable even though she was a servant, the daughter of a poor priest [...] Maybe that's how the high-school girls at St Mary's – the sports captains and house leaders – really were. Beneath their smart jackets and skirts and swinging hair.' (123-124, my emphasis) The use of 'maybe' when comparing a servant with the well-to-do older girls at her school highlights Nithya's understanding of class as a defining personal trait. Although, she is able to see beyond adult hypocrisy and is not duped by her elders' warnings about calling Sudha a servant, Nithya has inevitably internalised class stereotypes, seeing servants as Others, inherently different from her and other members of her own class even when they share the

⁶Ann Laura Stoler. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. 119.

same gender and caste. Lenny, in *Ice-Candy-Man*, unquestioningly accepts certain class boundaries in the geography of her own home: 'Aware of the impropriety of entertaining her guest on the front lawn Ayah leads us to settle on a bald patch of grass at the back near the servants' quarters.' (28) The sentence structure seems to indicate that neither the author nor Lenny consider challenging the supposed 'intrinsic' impropriety of a servant entertaining her lower-class guests on the scrupulously maintained and manicured front lawn, a space which is clearly upper-class. Laila in *The End of Innocence*, on the other hand, has constantly to struggle with her grandmother who disapproves of the importance that Laila gives to Rani: 'Now, give me a kiss, and next time don't go rushing off to hang around servants. You give them ideas above their station.' (182) During a visit to the village cinema, the servants are expected to sit in a separate row from their employers and it is only upon Laila's insistence that Rani is allowed to sit beside her. It is again on Laila's encouragement that Rani dares to eat and drink in front of Laila's grandmother, which is considered impertinent behaviour. While Laila is unable to understand Rani's feelings of deprivation, she is not unaware of the changes in Rani's body language in the presence of her parents: 'With Fareeda's departure, she changed from an awkward, tongue-tied adolescent to a poised young woman. Accustomed to Rani's shyness in front of her parents, Laila did not comment on her transformation.' (32) Though perhaps Laila does not realize it fully, this shyness is not just the timidity of a teenager before an adult but also that of a servant girl in the presence of a member of a wealthy landowning family.

The three texts also illustrate the complex interplay of age difference and the privileges of class in particular when the maid turns to the child for information thereby inverting, to a certain degree, the adult-child equation. The visit to the village cinema is one such example. While Laila is much younger than Rani, she has already been to the cinema several times while it is Rani's first trip. Rani understands that Laila's privileged lifestyle includes access to experiences which are denied to her and overestimates the extent of Laila's knowledge when she asks her to explain how the film works. But Laila, although a frequent cinemagoer, at the age of eight does 'not understand the mysteries of projection in enough detail to attempt an explanation.' (18) In the same vein, Sudha, while discussing her brother's future plans, asks Nithya about the implications of the Indian government's reservation policy for seats in colleges and universities for the scheduled castes. Not surprisingly, Nithya is unable to answer with any authority. However, in Charry's and Sidhwa's novels when the maid's thoughts and ideas are infantilised, the characterisation is somewhat lacking in conviction. Let us consider the following passage from *The Hottest Day of the Year*: 'Sudha was overwhelmed by any length of time longer than twenty years. The Indus Valley civilisation is 5,000 years old, I liked to tell her, and it is nearly 2,000 years since the birth of Christ, and the British left 39 years ago. Her eyes would widen.' (48-49) It seems odd that an eleven-year-old would find it easier to understand the concept of time than a twenty-year-old servant who also happens to be literate. Similarly, in Sidhwa's novel when the division of India becomes imminent, Lenny wonders: 'There is much disturbing talk. India is going to be broken. Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where the house is?' (92) Ayah's explanation of what Partition would entail echoes the naiveté of her eight-year old charge: 'They'll dig a canal [...] This side for Hindustan and this side for Pakistan. If they want two countries, that's what they'll have to do – crack India with a long, long canal.' (92) This is particularly unconvincing since Indian politics and current affairs are shown to be a regular topic of detailed

discussion in Ayah's wide social circle. The maid's relative ignorance concerning world affairs is perhaps an authorial device to echo and underscore her innocence and 'in-between' sexuality: she is not yet a woman but no more a child. However, it has, quite possibly, the unintended effect of further subalternizing her, especially in *The Hottest Day of the Year* and *Ice-Candy-Man* where the maid's voice is relatively inaudible since both novels are narrated in the first person by the child protagonist. This narratological choice could indicate that the authors consider the upper-class child's mental landscape more 'interesting' and her thoughts worthier of being recounted and transmitted to the reader than the maid's. This is less so the case in *The End of Innocence* where the narrative is in the third-person and while Laila's point of view is certainly explored in greater detail, the focus shifts exclusively to Rani on several occasions and the reader is made privy not only to her thoughts but also situations where Laila is neither present nor concerned. Alternatively, it can be argued that the relative inaudibility of the maid's voice reflects the authors' recognition of their own distance from the servant and the consequent danger of attempting to speak on and for her – a possibility that is no less problematic. As Sara Ahmed points out, such cultural relativism 'assumes distance and difference in order precisely not to take *responsibility* for that distance and difference.'⁷ In fact, Sidhwa appears to have endowed the female members of Lenny's upper-class family with a distinctly protective attitude towards the lower-class female characters. For instance, Lenny's mother rescues Papoo, the daughter of a violent servant, after a particularly brutal beating and later in the text, it is Lenny's godmother who liberates Ayah from her forced marriage with Ice-candy-man (see below). In Charry's novel, however, it is Nithya's uncle who is responsible for Sudha's plight and her aunt Janaki does nothing to help the maid.

In all three novels, the relationship between the servant and the little girl ends under violent and socially shameful circumstances for the maid: In *The Hottest Day of the Year*, fearing dishonour when she cannot find a safe means of getting an abortion, Sudha commits suicide. Afterwards, Nithya laments her innate inability to provide emotional support to Sudha in her time of despair: 'If I had not been me, if I had been a different kind of person, I would have reached out and taken her hands as they lay on her lap and said something [...] I sometimes feel a pang of guilt when I think of that last bus ride together and wonder if I could have made a difference somehow, if I could have averted what happened the next day.' (157) The dangerous intersection of childish concerns and

⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London: Routledge, 2000. 167.

profoundly adult anxieties is particularly striking in *Ice-Candy-Man* and *The End of Innocence* where the child protagonist unwittingly betrays her friend and directly contributes to the ensuing tragedy. However, given the child's very young age the author clearly absolves her of blame. Sidhwa shows how following the Partition of India, Lahore became the site of a brutal witch-hunt of Sikhs and Hindus. When a Muslim mob arrives at Lenny's house, demanding all Hindu servants to be handed over, Lenny's mother and other servants manage to convince the mob that Ayah has left for India. Then in a dramatic coup de théâtre, Ice-candy-man, one of Ayah's Muslim admirers, emerges from the crowd. Reassured by his promises to protect Ayah, Lenny reveals to him her hiding place in the house. He then betrays her trust by handing Ayah over to the mob, which drags her away. Lenny immediately realises her mistake and is overcome by self-revulsion: "For three days I stand in front of the bathroom mirror staring at my tongue [...] I punish it with rigorous scourings from my prickling toothbrush until it is sore and bleeding. I'm so conscious of its unwelcome presence at all times that it swells uncomfortably in my mouth and gags and chokes me." (184) Following her abduction and gang rape, Ayah is forced into prostitution by Ice-candy-man who later compels her to marry him. After being rescued by Lenny's godmother, she returns to her family in India to an uncertain welcome, reflecting an important historical reality: women kidnapped and raped during the Partition riots in 1947 were considered 'polluted' and were often rejected by their own families⁸. Laila's betrayal in *The End of Innocence* too takes place under complicated circumstances. She knows that Rani is involved in a secret relationship with a young man but is not aware of her illicit pregnancy. She inadvertently reveals the truth to Mushtaq, Rani's step-father who brutally murders Rani for her 'shameful' actions⁹. It is years later, upon meeting Mushtaq again, that Laila grasps her contribution to that fatal event.

In *The Hottest Day of the Year* and *Ice-Candy-Man*, the maid's youth, beauty and eventually her tragedy become a conduit of sexual discovering and coming-of-age of the little girl while in Mohsin's novel, Laila's childish innocence in all matters sexual is almost hermetically maintained. She dreams of solving mysteries and her fantasy world is peopled by characters from Enid Blyton books; she is even shown to be unable to distinguish between romantic and filial love. Although aware of Rani's beauty, Laila cannot make sense of her budding sexuality. In sharp contrast, Lenny's mental landscape in *Ice-Candy-Man* is heavily eroticised. She remarks at the beginning of the text: 'The covetous glances Ayah draws educate me.' (3) In fact it appears that even before becoming aware of Ayah's beauty, Lenny discovers the effect it has on men. She is a close observer of Ayah's interaction with her lovers and her behaviour becomes a yardstick for Lenny to understand her own feelings for the opposite sex. Furthermore, Lenny's gaze alighting on Ayah's

⁸ See *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).

⁹ Recently dismissed from his job for disorderly behaviour and refused help by Laila's father, Mushtaq's path crosses Laila's at a moment when he is looking for someone to exact revenge. Since he himself was born out of wedlock, for which he was cruelly persecuted as a child, he is particularly intolerant of Rani's pregnancy. He confesses proudly to the honour killing: 'I had been appointed by Allah to put both the sinful mother and her bastard child out of her misery and shame awaiting them in later life.' (325) He also sees this murder as a means of washing away his own sin of having been conceived illegitimately.

voluptuous body often mirrors the gaze of her male admirers. Consider the following description of Ayah's captivating charms: 'Up and down, they look at her [...] Hawkers, cart-drivers, cooks, coolies, and cyclists turn their heads as she passes [...] she has a rolling bouncy walk that agitates the globules of her buttocks under her cheap colourful saris and the half-spheres beneath her short sari-blouses.' (3) According to the critic Ambreen Hai, Ayah functions 'as the center of fascination for the upper-class child narrator, for whom [...] she acts as both an idealized self and other—beautiful, desired (before Independence) by men of all religious and class backgrounds—an adolescent body through whose adventures the narrator vicariously acquires dangerous knowledge from a safe distance.'¹⁰

Moreover, as Hai has also pointed out, Lenny's female desire for Ayah's body is not recognized within the narrative and is camouflaged in a condemnation of male violation. Charry's novel, on the other hand, overtly equates the girl's gaze with the male gaze objectifying the servant's body: 'She almost seemed naked because the water made her skirt stick to her long legs and outlined the curved bones of her hips, her flat stomach and her rounded breasts under the cheap cotton of her blouse and underclothes. **I wanted to reach out and touch her. I knew that this was what Sundar and the men on the street who looked at her saw, even when she had a sari on.**' (142-143, my emphasis) Both Nithya's desire to physically look like her lower-class companion and her desire for her are explicitly recognised. Furthermore, the violation to which Sudha is subjected is also not a lower-class affair: it is the college-educated Brahman employer who seduces Sudha and then deserts her when she becomes pregnant. On the other hand, in Sidhwa's and Mohsin's novels, the perpetrators are strictly low class males who are additionally of lowly birth¹¹—an authorial choice that perhaps suggests an element of class conservatism stemming from the authors' own privileged backgrounds.

The maid's tragedy leaves a permanent scar on the child protagonists in the three texts. In particular Lenny and Nithya are confronted with the notion of shame in their society tied in with a woman's sexuality: any sexual 'deviation' on her part, whether it is pre-marital sex or even rape results in profound social disgrace as she is seen as a

¹⁰ Ambreen Hai, "Border Work, Border Trouble: Postcolonial Feminism and the Ayah in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 2 (summer 2000): 379-426.

¹¹ Both Mushtaq and Ice-candy-man were born out-of-wedlock. Furthermore, Mushtaq's family is described as 'low caste and dirt poor' (242) while Ice-candy-man grew up in the red-light district of Lahore.

repository of her family and community's honour. Furthermore, Lenny's painful coming-of-age is accompanied by the realisation that a woman's body, already weighed down by patriarchal values, becomes a ready target in times of communal conflict.

As we have seen, the three novels, notwithstanding certain limitations, deftly illustrate the importance of both patriarchy and class in understanding female identity and relationships. In consciously exploring encounters between two polarized classes, Sidhwa, Charry and Mohsin underscore the formidable challenge, despite the best of intentions, of not only forging and maintaining but also imagining cross-class relationships in the Indian sub-continent.

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