

*Cracking the Nation:
Gender, Minorities, and Agency
in Bapsi Sidhwa's "Cracking India"*¹

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FICTIONAL AND HISTORICAL narratives that portray the rise of the modern nation-state often mobilize the figure of "Woman" in the "construction, reproduction, and transformation of ethnic/national categories" (Anthias 7). Nationalist discourse in South Asia is no exception to this practice. Here, "Woman" has been used as the alibi for colonial *and* nationalist interventions into the everyday lives of South Asians. Feminist critics have demonstrated that concern about women's status in colonial and postcolonial contexts often has less to do with changing the actual material conditions of their lives and more to do with *patriarchal* "struggles over community autonomy and the right to self-determination" (Mani, "Multiple" 30). For instance, it is now well established that in colonial and postcolonial representations of *sati* (widow immolation) in India, "women become sites upon which various versions of scripture/tradition/law are elaborated and contested" (Mani, "Contentious" 115). The women themselves "are neither subjects nor objects, but rather the ground of the discourse of *sati*" (Mani, "Contentious" 117).

The practice of making women the "ground" in patriarchal debates over community and state identity is the place to begin questioning totalizing notions of the gendered subject, agency, and Pakistan's national imaginary. My discussion stages a confrontation between the structures of meaning that characterize conservative-nationalist discourse and fictional representations of a young Parsi girl, Lenny, and her *ayah's* (the Hindi word for nanny) "everyday" experience in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Cracking India*.² Conservative-nationalist discourse in Pakistan constructs Pakistani citizenship as normatively Muslim, elite, and feudal-

patriarchal and pushes minorities, women, and subalterns to the margins of the national imaginary. This notion of citizenship is troubled when it is juxtaposed with the grid of intelligibility that informed the socio-historical context of Partition and the “everyday” experiences represented in *Cracking India*. The tension between the material and imaginary events inscribed in Sidhwa’s narrative suggests how the discourses of gender and nation overlap, converge, and become increasingly restrictive of women’s agency as the country faces independence. Whereas before Partition, Ayah³ is able to express her sexuality within her circle of companions in a multiple and fluid fashion, after Partition, her sexuality is exploited, policed, and made emblematic of the national imaginary. Lenny, on the other hand, is figured as gaining an awareness of how her interpretive agency can be used as a means to resist these pressures. Lenny’s narrative practice dislocates conservative-nationalist discourse by rendering herself and Ayah as subjects within the “location” of Lahore, India at the time of Partition. Her narrative maps how their desires and discontents “mediate, challenge, resist, or transform discourses in the process of defining their identities” (Canning 377).⁴ My discussion traces how Sidhwa’s fictional, partial, and episodic figuration of events through Lenny’s eyes is an analogue for the fragmented, non-linear, and contradictory experience of “independence” alluded to in the “cracking” metaphor of the title.

Agency continues to be one of the most ill-defined concepts of theories of postcolonialism and discourse analysis. Because deconstructive practice has been so successful in making visible the “figurative nature of all ideology” (Poovey 58)—such as the conflation of women’s identity with that of the nation—it is easy to forget that this reading practice would be impossible “without the interventions of agents who render them contingent and permeable” in the first place (Canning 377). In other words, it is the situated action of responding to the text that gives the reader, critic, writer or speaker the possibility of intervening in the interpretive processes that mediate the experience of living in the world. Of course, this is a somewhat different notion of agency than the one that has dominated Enlightenment thought, where the individual is supposed to act with

full autonomy. This kind of agency has been critiqued, most famously, by Gayatri Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak." Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot "speak," or in other words, have access to what is understood as direct agency in liberatory discourse without reinscribing an Enlightenment notion of subjectivity.

In perhaps what is the most controversial contribution to the debate surrounding "voice" in feminist discourse, Spivak concludes this essay with the statement: "The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in a global laundry list with 'woman' as pious item. Representation has not withered away" (308). In response to criticism that this argument precludes any possibility of agency for the gendered subaltern, in a subsequent interview that refers to this essay, Spivak stresses that her aim was to problematize, but not dismiss the concept of agency. She cites her conclusion in this essay as a direct response to Bhuvanewari Bhadhuri's nieces' representation of her suicide as a case of "illicit love" *despite* Bhadhuri's attempts to displace this motive. Spivak reiterates that, even though Bhadhuri committed suicide while she was menstruating (thus deflecting the interpretation of her death as shame over an unplanned pregnancy) and left a letter explaining her motives, the political "intent" of taking her own life was overlooked. Spivak states,

What I'm saying is that even when, whether showing her political impotence or her political power, she tries *to speak* and make it clear, so that it would be read *one way*, the women in the family—radical women—decide to forget it. The rhetoric of the ending [of my essay] is a rhetoric of despair. It was at that moment, right after the story, when I said, throwing up my hands, "The subaltern cannot speak."
(89; emphasis added)

Rather than suggesting that the subaltern has no agency, Spivak argues that totalizing readings of identity or "voice" (or attempts to read the text "one way") ultimately *require* the subordination of the text to the assumptions of the reader. The figurative quality of any "record" of experience, however, requires that the reader be attentive to the multiple and contradictory discourses that shape subjectivities if s/he hopes to provide an ethical interpretation of the text. Moreover, if the unified rather than split subject remains the focus of the reader's discussions of

agency, s/he forecloses recognition of everyday resistance that is neither conscious nor direct. Thus Spivak's critique and other examples of feminist deconstructions of the unified subject or agent do not negate or dismiss the concept of agency but rather call for its "critical reinscription and redeployment" (Canning 373).

The logic of women's actions figured in Sidhwa's novel can be better understood if representations of their experience are reinscribed and redeployed as interpretations rather than reflections of "reality." As Kathleen Canning points out,

This emphasis on construing reframing, and reappropriating [experience] implies that subjects do have some kind of agency, even if the meanings they make "depend on the ways of interpreting the world, [and] on the discourses available to [them] at any particular moment." Indeed, experience, as the rendering of meaning, is inextricably entwined with the notion of agency, with a vision of historical subjects as actors who . . . "put into practice their necessarily structured knowledge."⁵ (377)

Agency in these terms is conceived of as "the site of mediation between discourses and experiences" which "dislodge[s] the deterministic view in which discourse always seems to construct experience but also to dispel the notion that discourses are, to paraphrase Ortner, shaped by everything *but* the experiences of 'the people the text claims to represent'" (Canning 378).

Sidhwa's novel is narrated from the perspective of Lenny, a young Parsi girl coming of age at the time of Partition and independence. As the narrative unfolds, it quickly becomes apparent that her subjectivity is mediated by a community identity undergoing a double-edged crisis. The shift in power from a British to the Hindu and Muslim centric states of India and Pakistan respectively signals the end of the Parsis' privileged relation, despite their minority status, to the ruling class.⁶ The novel dramatizes the confusions and contradictions that face a young girl being initiated into the norms of her community and society just as those very norms are being furtively reconstituted to suit better a new set of conditions of power. In this sense Sidhwa's text offers the reader an imaginary peek into the "location" of the Parsi community of Lahore as a "conjunctural site of indetermination" (Sangari 872) where the discursive meaning

of "belonging" is under revision. Sidhwa's text engages with the implications of the end of British rule in India, the rise of competing conservative-nationalist imaginaries and their intersections with the patriarchal power relations that circulate in the "compressed" world (Sidhwa 11) of Lenny's local community. In addition, Lenny's intimate relationship with her *ayah* and her visits to the Sikh/Muslim village of Pir Pindoo take her outside the bourgeois circle of the Parsi community and make her aware of the heterogeneous cultural context of her society at large. Sidhwa's text figures Lenny exercising agency by questioning the hegemonic structures of meaning that infuse her "everyday" experiences. Her decentred view of the end of British rule within her local community helps to defamiliarize the dominant interpretation of history and nationalism at the time of Partition and discloses its patriarchal and majoritarian underpinnings.

Lenny's use of narrative as a form of agency can be tracked in and through the novel's preoccupation with the rhetorical and literal implications of representation at a linguistic and thematic level. The conventional relation between the figurative and the literal becomes a thematic concern of Sidhwa's text when the normative distinction between these two things becomes a counter-intuitive preoccupation for Lenny. Repeatedly, she is figured as struggling to separate the literal from the figurative meaning of Partition in order to grasp the "reality" of its consequences. For instance, when Lenny overhears discussions about the partitioning of the nation she wonders how this is materially possible: "There is much disturbing talk. India is going to be broken. Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is? Or crack it further up on Warris Road? How will I ever get to Godmother's then?" (101). Later, when Lenny hears her Aunt Mini talk about "the Mountbatten plan to tear up the Punjab," (121) she comments: "And the vision of a torn Punjab. Will the earth bleed? And what about the sundered rivers? Won't their water drain into the jagged cracks? Not satisfied by breaking India, they now want to tear up the Punjab" (124). Lenny's (mis)recognition of the metaphorical use of the images of cracking, breaking, and tearing as literal, highlights the tension between (rather than distinct usage of)

the figurative and literal aspects of language and by extension, the thoroughly mediated nature of representation. The creation of two new nation-states may not have been accomplished by the material act of “digging a canal” as Ayah suggests elsewhere (101); nevertheless, the discursive construction of two different monolithic national imaginaries is shown to have other substantive material implications.

Lenny’s naive narrative perspective also dramatizes the way the tension between text and context opens up a space for interpretation, rather than the search for “T”ruth, in literary representations of “everyday” history. The act of narration gives Lenny the opportunity to intervene in the various struggles over the meaning of historical events. As the country moves toward independence, Lenny’s narrative tracks the increasingly constricted and gendered definition of nationalist discourse. For example, it becomes apparent that despite the nation’s expression of concern for “abducted” women’s safety and happiness, women like Ayah are neither subjects nor objects of the discourse, but what Lata Mani has called the “ground” or “currency” (“Contentious” 118) for nationalist struggles.⁷ Lenny’s narrative, however, counters this practice; when the Recovered Women’s Camp is first established in the servants’ quarters behind their neighbour’s house, Lenny assumes “it’s a women’s jail, even though they look innocent enough” (201). The manner in which the women are kept under guard, separated from the community (“There is a padlock the size of a grapefruit on the gate, and a large key hangs from the steel bangle around the Sikh’s wrist”) (201), and the way “[t]he servants evade questions as if there is something shameful going on” (201), leads Lenny to think that the women must be guilty of some crime. Indeed, while this may not be the way the women’s treatment is justified, Lenny’s naive observations point to the anxiety surrounding their sexual “contamination” by the “Other” community. Ayah’s replacement, Hamida, who has just been released from the camp and sees herself as a “fallen woman,” tries to explain that the women are “fate-smitten,” but this does not satisfy Lenny who recalls: “I’ve seen Ayah carried away—and it had less to do with fate than the will of men” (226). When she asks Godmother to

clarify what Hamida means by calling herself "a fallen woman," Godmother explains that "She was taken away to Amritsar. Once that happens, sometimes, the husband—or his family—won't take her back" (227). Lenny is outraged at the scapegoating of the women. "It's monstrously unfair" she thinks, but also notices "Godmother's tone is accepting" (227). Lenny's interrogation of the normalized assumption that inform "abducted" women's treatment helps to make visible the way patriarchal conservative-nationalist interests produce their identities as victims. Moreover, her off-centre view highlights how the women's suffering is both a product of their abduction from and rejection by their original families and communities *and* the state's effort to erase their history.

At the time of Partition, the patriarchal construction of women's identities, and in particular, their sexual purity as symbolic of community honour and integrity, made them subject to particularly gendered and humiliating acts of aggression as India and Pakistan sought to establish their sovereignty. The physical suffering and displacement "abducted" women experienced at the hands of individuals, their families and communities confronted the two states with one of the first challenges to the seamless presentation of the modern-nation as a universally accessible and equitable expression of the social contract. Public outrage over the presence of "abducted" women living in the communities of the Other in India and Pakistan in 1947 and after, placed social pressure on the state to intervene and "recover" them on behalf of the (masculine) citizen-subject. Regardless of their own wishes, Hindu women were "recovered" to India and Muslim women were "recovered" to Pakistan.

Despite the state's and community's combined efforts to contain "abducted" women's agency, they appear to have had some say in the determination of their "fate"—if only in isolated cases. Women like Ayah, for instance, who were aware of the "multiple subject positions they occupied at any given moment," were the most successful in contesting their objectification in and through these patriarchal legal interventions (Canning 384). Sidhwa's text opens up a narrative space that resists this objectification, where Ayah and Lenny are portrayed as neither "her-

oines" who rise above the patriarchal conservative-nationalist struggles that engulf their communities nor are they complete "victims" of its physical and discursive violence. Instead, they are figured as negotiating their subjectivities within the interstice of experience and interpretation and shaping the outcome of material events as they do so. Moreover, Sidhwa's narrative practice helps to imagine the kind of complex and contradictory power relations that exist between social structures and individual agents. Her novel engages with the material and discursive implications of Partition and makes visible the "conjunctural sites of indetermination" where "agencies slip through structures in new situations, at transitional moments or in liminal areas" (Sangari 872). Where women like Ayah or Lenny question the interpretation of their identities by patriarchal community and state interests, they perform an act of resistance that destabilizes the dominant order. *Cracking India* figures Lenny as conscious of Ayah's strategic use of her multiple subject-positions as a means to subvert the discourses that inscribe her body in multiple and contingent ways. In what follows, I will explore the reception, contestation, and multiple meanings of these interpretative acts in the epistemological context of postcolonial Pakistan in order to "resist the tendency of discourse analysis to displace the subject or to reduce her 'to mere bearer of systemic processes'" (Canning 384).

The question of what would count as transformative agency in this conservative-nationalist temporality of struggle is a difficult one to answer when agency is understood only as direct. The concept of direct agency refers to the actions of individuals that are public, self-conscious, collective and unfettered by social structures—actions taken by the autonomous subject I mentioned earlier. None of these things can be said to characterize women's agency in *Cracking India*; on the contrary, their actions are generally isolated, in the private sphere and mediated by restrictive social discourses that are not necessarily "self-conscious" in Enlightenment terms. This, in turn, makes it difficult to imagine how women's agency contests the structures and practices of subordination in everyday material and discursive practices. Because examples of direct agency are unlikely in

representations of women's everyday experience, there is the danger of interpreting their behaviour as passive or dictated by "ruling ideology." "What one needs to keep in mind," however, as Sumit Sarkar suggests, "is a vast and complex continuum of intermediate attitudes of which total subordination and open revolt are only the extreme poles" (273). In order to account for "inventory possibilities adequate to a thoroughgoing politics of change" (Sarkar 273) the critic must problematize the division between the public and private and recognize their co-implication.

Indirect agency could thus include, as Kumkum Sangari argues, any "range of actions which take forms that are difficult to fit into commonly understood typologies of organized political activity" (868) but nonetheless, impact on the flow of power. Gyan Prakash and Douglas Haynes attempt to account for this "range of actions" in their book, *Contesting Power*. Here, they call for a notion of resistance that "can be applied to a much wider range of sociocultural practices and takes into account the ways in which the subjectivity of the dominated is constrained, modified and conditioned by power relations" (2). This nuanced understanding of resistance or agency rethinks power as "constantly being fractured by the struggles of the subordinate" (Prakash and Haynes 2). "Social structure" Prakash and Haynes argue "rather than being a monolithic, autonomous entity, unchallenged except during dramatic instances of revolt, appears more commonly as a constellation of contradictory and contestatory processes" (2-3). In this context, there is no "pure form" of domination or resistance because "the two are so entangled that it becomes difficult to analyze one without discussion of the other" (Prakash and Haynes 3).

The entanglement of domination and resistance is apparent in Lenny's observations about her experiences in her family home and community. Here, Sidhwa illustrates how the exercise of indirect agency can be used to reinscribe or displace the norms of women's subjectivities. From the outset of *Cracking India*, Sidhwa represents Lenny as internalizing a sense of inferiority and subsequent lack of autonomy as a girl located in the hierarchy of family power relations. One of Lenny's major preoccupations are the

differences she perceives between her brother and herself. Physically, she compares herself unfavourably to her brother: "I am skinny, wizened, sallow, wiggly-haired, ugly. He is beautiful. He is the most beautiful thing animal, person, building, river or mountain that I have seen. He is formed of gold mercury" (32). Lenny's apprehension of her brother's favoured status in the family is conveyed in this passage through her choice of comparing him with "gold mercury" and contrasting him with her own "ugliness." The gendered nature of Lenny's perception of herself as ugly as compared to her brother is evident in the derogatory connections she makes between femininity and shame. She explains,

His name is Adi. I call him Sissy. He is too confused to retaliate the first few times I call him by his new name. At last: "My name is Adi," he growls, glowering.

The next day I persist. He pretends not to notice. In the evening, holding up a sari-clad doll I say, "Hey Sissy, look! She's just like you!" (32)

Lenny's internalized hatred of her gender identity is exemplified in this passage by the taunts she directs at her brother and the hyper-feminine connotation of the doll she goads him with. Her sense of inferiority in relation to her brother is compounded by her racial identity: Lenny's skin colour is noticeably darker than her brother's, who is able to "pass" as "British" in the playgrounds around Lahore. Ayah demonstrates pride over this fact, calling Adi her "little English baba" and enjoys the assumptions strangers make about his racial heritage being white. Lenny notes,

Ayah is so proud of Adi's paucity of pigment. Sometimes she takes us to Lawrence Gardens and encourages him to run across the space separating native babies and English babies. The ayahs of the English babies hug him and fuss over him and permit him to romp with their privileged charges. Adi undoes the bows of little girls with blue eyes in scratchy organdy dresses and wrestles with tallow-haired boys in the grass. Ayah beams. (35)

This quote emphasizes the racial and patriarchal privilege that Adi shares with the white boys when he literally and metaphorically crosses "the space separating native and English babies." Trading on assumptions about his racial heritage, he is able to

harass the young white girls without reproach and compete as an "equal" with the "tallow-haired boys." Lenny, on the other hand, expresses anxiety about the consequences of her dark skin. She recounts how

Every now and then Slavesister serves Godmother strong half-cups of tea which Godmother pours into her saucer and slurps. I too take an occasional and guilty sip. Drinking tea, I am told, makes one darker. I'm dark enough. Everyone says, "It's a pity Adi's fair and Lenny so dark. He's a boy. Anyone will marry him." (90)

As a girl, Lenny's surplus of pigment is considered a double liability. Her inferior status in a racist and patriarchal society places pressures on her to negotiate patriarchal patronage through marriage and identification with the white colonizer.

Despite this internalized sense of inferiority, Lenny's narrative suggests that she learns how to exercise indirect agency from witnessing and participating in the negotiations of power relations between her parents. Though Lenny figures the dominance of her father in all matters including finances, favour and family harmony, on several occasions, she also carefully records the way her mother negotiates her needs with her father, thus exercising some agency (albeit, highly individualized) in how matters will be resolved. On one particular morning, for example, Lenny reports,

Father is in a good mood. So, Mother too is in a good mood. She gives me a hug. She puts toothpaste on Father's toothbrush. She tells me to take Father's empty cup and saucer to the pantry. But Father latches on to me with such a show of speechless anguish and consternation at the thought of being parted from me that Mother says, "Let it be. Yousaf will take them."

She smiles indulgently: as if she could cross my father if she had a mind to. (74)

This scene exemplifies Lenny's awareness of how her father's disposition dominates any situation where decision making occurs. Lenny articulates the way her mother's mood hinges on her father's in the opening sentence of this passage by linking the two sentences in terms of their meaning; her mother's "good mood" and the reason for it is inscrutable in this sentence without reference to her father's mood in the previous sentence. When Lenny's father refuses to release her to perform a task that

her mother requests her to do, Lenny notes how her mother quickly retracts her order—but not without first indicating that she could contradict his will if she wanted to: “She smiles indulgently: as if she could cross my father if she had a mind to.” The contingency that the phrase “as if” adds to this statement promotes the sense of uncertainty that Lenny associates with her mother’s will as a woman subordinated to the patriarchal privilege of her husband.

In general, it appears that Lenny’s mother uses her agency in a consensual fashion—in the interest of maintaining her patriarchal patronage—and thus contributes to the perpetuation of elite patriarchal practices. “Patriarchies,” Kumkum Sangari argues, “are resilient not only because they are embedded in social stratification, divisions of labour, other political structures, religious/cultural practices, institutions and categories, but also because of the contractual and consensual elements in them” (868). Rather than confront her husband about the various inequities in their relationship, Lenny’s mother uses indirect agency to get what she wants without seriously challenging the basis of her subordination. It becomes apparent, however, that even these privileges are not without their costs. The negative effects of this unequal but mutually constitutive relation of subjection are not lost on Lenny who represents the “games” her mother and father engage in over the distribution of the family finances as a playful, but ultimately degrading activity. She depicts how her mother chases her father around the bedroom attempting to get money from him for some household expenses and comments:

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. Father has the knack of extracting the most talented performances from us all—and from all those who work for him. (76)

Lenny’s perception of the different positions of influence which her parents occupy in this negotiation process is evident in the analogy she draws between this “performance” and the theatre—as well as the employer/employee relation this relationship mimics. While her mother is the performer, “juggling the range

of her voice," her father is the director, "extracting the most talented performances from us all." Though there is an underlying fluidity to the circulation of power in this "game," ultimately, her father is in the dominant position. Even though a playful mood pervades the scene, Lenny's understanding of the way this process demeans her mother is conveyed through her description of the events; like an animal her mother "scrambles across the mattress on all fours" as she tries to catch her husband. When she "warns" him of her determination, Lenny describes her voice as "tearfully childish" (76). In this scene, Lenny's mother is figured as exercising consensual agency to shore up her access to middle-class domestic security rather than intervene or displace the patriarchal and class conventions that govern her marital relation.

The gendered, unequal and yet agonistic qualities of this power struggle take on a darker significance for Lenny, who finds that she is increasingly complicit in her mother's struggle for favour with her father. Hints are given in the narrative that Lenny's father is involved with another woman and that he beats his wife; Lenny comments: "But there are other things they fight about that are not clear to me. Sometimes I hear Mother say 'No, Jana; I won't let you go! I won't let you go to her!'" (224). One day Lenny reports: "I surprise Mother at her bath and see bruises on her body" (224). When she reflects on their daily ritual of greeting her father when he returns home from work, she is acutely aware of how her mother monitors her father's reaction to her stories, redirecting the conversation to maintain a positive response. When her father expresses annoyance over her brother's behaviour, Lenny reports how "[s]witching the bulletin immediately, Mother recounts some observation of mine as if I've spent the entire morning mouthing extraordinarily brilliant, saccharine sweet and fetchingly naive remarks" (88). After being called upon regularly to repeat or invent these kinds of remarks Lenny figures herself as internalizing her simpering performances: "As the years advance, my sense of inadequacy and unworth advances. I have to think faster—on my toes as it were . . . offering lengthier and lengthier chatter to fill up the infernal time of Father's mute meals" (88). The hellishness Lenny associ-

ates with these interactions between her parents is a far cry from the playfulness connected with the earlier scene discussed above. During these lunch time performances, Lenny's awareness of her inferior status as a girl in a patriarchal society, the different and unequal expectations her parents have for her and her brother, her mother's subordinate position in the marriage and her own complicity in its production telescope, and are only deferred by her act of story-telling. In one of the rare retrospective and self-reflexive narrative moments in the novel, Lenny asks: "Is that when I learn to tell tales?" (88). With this move, Sidhwa emphasizes Lenny's growing awareness of how her use of discourse has the potential to be either complicitous or resistant to the definition of her identity and actions within the terms of the unequal relations of power that circulate in her home and community.

Where Lenny's mother's actions often result in "overly individualized private resolutions" (Sangari 867) to her subordination, Ayah's use of indirect agency becomes a source of inspiration for Lenny. The difference between these two examples of indirect agency in terms of their transformative potential seems to hinge on Ayah's intimate relationship with Lenny and her "unregulated" expression of desire. In other words, Ayah and Lenny's relatively unsupervised time together allows them to build a bond of unmanaged intimacy that challenges patriarchal, racial, and bourgeois conventions. Lenny's admiration of the influence Ayah's sensuality gives her over British and native (male) Indians is established from the outset of the novel. As Ayah pushes her in a pram along Jail Road, Lenny comments,

The covetous glances Ayah draws *educate me*. Up and down they look at her. Stub handed twisted beggars and dusty old beggars on crutches drop their poses and stare at her 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, pushing my pram with the unconcern of the Hindu goddess she worships. (12; emphasis added)

The "education" that Lenny refers to in this passage is a central feature of her interactions with Ayah, and can be read as an example of an undisciplined affectionate relationship between a servant and child that Ann Stoler terms an "education of desire" (109). An "education of desire" is Foucault's phrase for the

process though which the subject learns about the "correct" expression of his/her sexuality. Correct, in this sense, refers to the epistemological assumptions that inform any discourse of sexuality in a given culture. In her book *Race and the Education of Desire*, Stoler takes Foucault's argument one step further to argue that an "education of desire" could also refer to the cultivation of emotional ties between children and their nannies. These ties can be seen as potentially subversive, as in Lenny and Ayah's case, when the "cultivation of the self" they involve crosses "carefully marked boundaries of class and race" (Stoler 191).

Sidhwa's representation of an affectionate relationship between Lenny and Ayah that goes unmonitored by her parents demonstrates the subversive potential of desire. This relationship gives Lenny insight into the contradictions and the potential for resistance to her society's dominant codes. The relatively unsupervised relationship between Ayah and her charge allows Lenny's "education of desire" to unfold without the usual injunctions against her developing too much familiarity with her nanny. Her narrative figures her growing awareness of the links between the power relations she experiences as a girl growing up in a patriarchal, minority community and the pressures Ayah negotiates as a female Hindu servant living in colonial India and postcolonial Pakistan.

Clearly, the fascination that Ayah holds for Lenny is related to her ability to exercise agency *despite* the subordinate social position she occupies. In the pre-Partition world of Lahore, Lenny perceives Ayah's "chocolate chemistry" as allowing her to negotiate her desire for sexual intimacy with a variety of men from diverse cultural backgrounds and thereby subvert the patriarchal expectations for her behaviour. Lenny notes, for instance, the "subtle exchange of signals and some of the complex rites by which Ayah's admirers co-exist" (29). Once Ayah has made a decision about who she will spend her time with, Lenny remarks how the other men, "[d]usting the grass from the clothes . . . slip away before dark, leaving the one luck, or the lady, favors" (29). Ayah's ability to displace the codes of monogamy and chastity suggest an alternative to the patriarchal relationships that govern Lenny's mother's life.

Lenny likens Ayah's hold over the men in her social circle to "the tyranny magnets exercise over metals" (29). The type of agonism this metaphor suggests is repeatedly associated with Ayah's influence over the men: "Ayah's presence *galvanizes* men to mad sprints in the noon heat" (41; emphasis added). From the naive perspective of a child, Ayah's negotiations with Ice-candy-man and others take on the semblance of a military action in which Lenny learns to participate in order to extract attention, treats and favours for herself:

Things love to crawl beneath Ayah's sari. Ladybirds, glow-worms, Ice-candy-man's toes. She dusts them off with impartial nonchalance. I keep an eye on Ice-candy-man's toes. Sometimes in the course of an engrossing story, they travel so cautiously that both Ayah and I are taken unawares. Ice-candy-man is a raconteur. He is also an absorbing gossip. When the story is extra good, and the tentative toes polite, Ayah tolerates them.

Sometimes a toe snakes out and zeros in on its target with such lightening speed that I hear of the attack only from Ayah's startled "Oof." Once in a while I preempt the 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)

This passage depicts how Ice-candy-man's seduction of Ayah through story telling is coupled with a military-like strategy (suggested by the words "target" "attack" and "strike"), that occasionally leads to the reciprocal expression of desire between them. As Lenny points out, Ayah sets conditions on the manner and circumstances in which she is willing to entertain Ice-candy-man's advances ("[w]hen the story is good, and the tentative toes polite"). In all cases, the emphasis in Lenny's figuration of these encounters is on the unequal but not unmanageable relations of power between Ayah and the men in her social circle.

While Ayah's body is inscribed as a symbol of India by conservative-nationalist rhetoric, her desires continue to subvert and remake that imaginary at the local level; she holds the group of her admirers together and diffuses conflict among them, at least temporarily, despite the intensification of racist and patriarchal discourse at the time of Partition. A case in point here occurs when the men in Ayah's social circle engage in divisive racialized rhetorical attacks against the Hindu and Muslim com-

munities alternately. Lenny comments on how it is Ayah who redirects the conversation by changing the topic of the discussion to the character of the British Viceroy and his wife. Lenny notes: "She, like Mother, is an oil pourer" (99). As a symbol of India (initially, all the men co-exist peacefully and productively in her presence), and target for patriarchal struggles for power, the subversive effects of Ayah's bodily expression of desire articulate a more permeable and heterogeneous definition of the national imaginary than the narrow, restrictive one that eventually prevails in Pakistan.

If Ayah's bodily experience of desire as agency represents a challenge to conservative-nationalism, it is this same site that becomes the focus of scrutiny in the struggle for power that unfolds. The fluid and liminal discursive configuration of community identity that Ayah's pre-Partition interaction with the group of men exemplifies, is shown as gradually eroded as the country moves toward independence. When political events portend the prospect of Partition, it becomes apparent that her heterogeneous experience of day to day life is being undermined. It becomes increasingly difficult for Ayah to negotiate her autonomy in the group of men. The intensification of women's discipline of the self according to community and national patriarchal codes is illustrated in Sidhwa's text when Lenny observes how Ayah's relations with the men in her social circle become circumscribed by a more rigid definition of her racial, gender and sexual identity. One of the first hints of this occurs when Ice-candy-man provides Lenny and Ayah with a run down of the latest "news of the world" (38). After he reports how Chandra Bose has stated that "If we want India back we must take pride in our customs, our clothes, our languages . . . And not go mouthing the got-pit sot-pit of the English!" (38), Lenny recounts how

Finally, narrowing his focus to our immediate surroundings, he says to Ayah, "Shanta *bibi*, you're Punjabi aren't you?"

"For the most part," Ayah agrees warily.

"Then why don't you wear Punjabi clothes? I've never seen you in *shalwar-kamize*." (38)

Ayah's response that *ayahs* who wear saris (and thus mimic that stereotype of more formally educated Goan *ayahs*) earn more

money than those who wear Punjabi clothes, discloses that she is not unaware of the identitarian politics that prevail in her contemporary surroundings. She deflects Ice-candy-man's attempt to pigeon-hole her identity as narrowly "Punjabi" by responding to his question about her "identity" with dismissive assent: "For the most part" (38). In this brief scene, Sidhwa weaves together the micro and macro-political discursive contexts of the Punjab in 1943 to disclose how women "are being redefined as semiotic objects on which the actions of the state are to be inscribed" (Das 70). Here, however, the elaboration of the practices of the biopolitical nation-state are shown as dialogically informed by the everyday practices of self-representation.

In this and other key moments in the narrative, Ice-candy-man is cast as both synecdoche and supplement to the patriarchal power relations in Lahore at the time—simultaneously enforcing and elaborating definitions of national identities as they relate to the traffic of women's bodies and practices of living. Later, as the conservative nationalist political rhetoric intensifies in the discursive realm, Lenny becomes "aware of religious differences" for the first time:

It is sudden. One day everybody is themselves—and the next day they are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. People shrink, dwindling into symbols. Ayah is no longer just my all-encompassing Ayah—she is also a token. A Hindu. Carried away by renewed devotional fervor she expends a small fortune in joss-sticks, flowers and sweets on the gods and goddesses in the temples.

Imam Din and Yousaf, turning into religious zealots, warn Mother they will take Friday afternoon off for the Jumha prayers. . . . Crammed into a narrow religious slot they too are diminished, as are Jinnah and Iqbal, Ice-candy-man and Masseur. (101-02)

Lenny's account of the changes in Ayah's and her followers' behaviour emphasizes the way the narrowing and shoring up of community identity diminishes the vitality and complexity of social relations in the community. Ayah and the others reconfigure their self-presentation when they sense their interests are in danger of being marginalized—or conversely, elevated to a privileged position—within the shifting relations of power pervading the country.

A direct relation between the intensification of these patriarchal nationalist discourses and the disciplinary pressures on

women's subjectivities can be traced in Sidhwa's rendering of the escalation of gendered sectarian violence at the time of Partition. As tensions within Ayah's group of followers intensify, they engage in arguments about the future of each community in what will become Pakistan. In their debates, images of emasculation are linked with the identity of the minority community on each side of the boarder. In one such discussion, the local "restaurant-owning wrestler" proclaims: "Once the line of division is drawn in the Punjab, all Muslims to the east will have their balls cut off!" (139). The subjugation of the Other nation/community is repeatedly associated with a feminization of the men and the violation of the women. When the first reports of the riots begin to trickle in, Ice-candy-man reports how "[t]here are no young women among the dead! Only two gunny-bags full of women's breasts!" (159). The fact that women are singled out as special targets for torture and abduction is not lost on Ayah. When Ice-candy-man takes Ayah and Lenny up to the roof to witness the burning of Lahore, Lenny recalls how Ayah begins to withdraw from the group in a defeatist attitude: "Ayah moves away, her feet suddenly heavy and dragging, and sits on the roof slumped against the wall. She buries her face in her knees" (147). As the violence against women increases, Ayah begins to lose her ability to negotiate her desire in an on-going fashion.

Ayah's effort to displace the increasingly constrictive patriarchal nationalist discourses that intersect in her body, of course, eventually fails. When her current lover, Masseur, is found butchered in the street Lenny notes how "[t]he glossy chocolate bloom in her skin is losing its sheen" (188); what was once a seductive tool fades in the dualistic logic that pervades community identity. The moment of her subjection to dominant patriarchal logic comes when, led by Ice-candy-man, some of the local Muslim men, exuding "surety and arrogance" (191), take Ayah from Lenny's parents' house by force:

They drag Ayah out. They drag her by her arms stretched taut and her bare feet—that want to move backwards—are forced forward instead. . . . The men drag her in grotesque strides to the cart and their harsh hands, supporting her with careless intimacy, lift her into it. Four men stand pressed against her, propping her body upright, their lips stretched in triumphant grimaces. (195)

The emphasis in this rendering of Ayah's interaction with the men is on the use of force and her effort to resist physically; she is "dragged" and "forced" and "pressed" into submission. Discursive efforts to define her identity are abandoned and brute force is deployed to resolve the ambiguity of her position. As Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, the triumph of discourse "has always been dependent on the mobilization, on its behalf, of effective means of physical coercion" (2). Within the constricted patriarchal logic of the modern-nation state, Ayah's body is recouped into a subordinate role, dependent, at least temporarily, on the patronage of Ice-candy-man for her protection from the violent crowd.

Prior to the escalation of Partition tensions, Ayah is able to negotiate the unequal relations of power with the men in her community around issues such as the expression of her sexuality and community affiliation. After Partition, she is more constrained and eventually her body becomes a fulcrum for the power struggles between the warring communities. As Veena Das argues in relation to the treatment of women during Partition violence: "[t]he woman's body . . . became a sign through which men communicated with each other" (56). Nevertheless, though Ayah's body is inscribed with competing patriarchal conservative-nationalist discourses, Sidhwa's text suggests that she is not just "the systemic bearer of process." On the contrary, my reading of *Cracking India* suggests that Ayah is also able to resist and rewrite those inscriptions through the expression of her own desires, however imperfectly it may seem. The tension between the material and imaginary in and through these inscriptions points to the possibility of indirect agency as desire that evades the normalizing process of power and brings the concept of the unified subject to crisis. Lenny's "education of desire" in her close relationship with Ayah takes her out of the confines of the bourgeois Parsi community and exposes her to the heterogeneity of socio-cultural perspectives that make up a "temporality of struggle" representative of Lahore at the time of Partition. Her narrative discloses the "conjunctural sites of indetermination" that characterize experience, the relationship between text and context, the entanglement of the public and

private, and figures how agency (or interpretation) can shape the outcome and understanding of historical events. Though the nation and community are "broken" through the events of Partition, it is clear that Lenny has "cracked" the patriarchal-nationalist code that (re)asserts itself in the aftermath.

NOTES

- 1 Support for this research was partially funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute. I am grateful to Judy Barton, Terry Goldie, Craig Gorden, Teresa Hefferman, Marie-Christine Leps, Arun Mukherjee, and Bart Simon for reading and commenting on various drafts of this paper.
- 2 This novel was originally published under the title *Ice-Candy-Man* in 1988. My references are to the 1991 publication. My understanding of "everyday" experience derives from Joan W. Scott's essay, "The Evidence of Experience."
- 3 Lenny identifies her ayah as Ayah throughout the novel. Her actual first name, Shanta, is mentioned only once, by Ice-candy-man (Sidhwa 38).
- 4 "Location" in this sense refers not to a fixed point but rather a "temporality of struggle" "characterized by multiple locations and nonsynchronous processes of movement 'between cultures, languages, and complex configurations of meaning and power'" (Mani, "Contentious" 26).
- 5 The definition of discourse that informs this understanding of agency is what Canning describes as a "modified Foucauldian one of a convergence of statements, texts, signs and practices across different, even dispersed, sites" (379).
- 6 The history of the Parsi community in colonial South Asia is shown as fraught with contradictions in that they, like the rest of South Asians in India, were subject to colonial rule, but at the same time enjoyed a privileged relationship with the colonial administration and often expressed outright admiration for British colonial culture. Questions regarding the positionality and identity of the Parsi community at this time and, subsequently, in postcolonial India have been investigated by Tanya Luhrmann in her recent book *The Good Parsi*. In this study, she tracks assumptions about racial and cultural superiority that characterized the dominant Parsi community identity under colonial rule and its consequences for their postcolonial situation in India. "The Good Parsi," in Luhrmann's analysis, is a trope for the ideal Parsi colonial subject in colonial India. This trope characterized Parsis as "charitable, truthful, racially pure, and as like the British as a native community could be" (100). It was invoked to support claims that "the moral qualities of the Parsis must be classified as more European than Indian, and, like the British, as Superior to the moral qualities of the native Indian" (100). See especially pages 100-10.
- 7 The phrase "abducted" women refers to women displaced from their families and communities during the migrations and sectarian violence that accompanied partition. From 1948 to 1956, these women became the object of "recovery operations," in India and Pakistan "which sought to recover those women who had been abducted and forcibly converted during the upheaval, and restore them to their respective families and countries where they 'rightfully belonged'" (Menon and Bhasin WS2). The scare quotes that Menon and Bhasin place around the phrase "rightfully belonged" suggest the questionable legitimacy of this judgment. What qualified as the "rightful" communities, families, and countries for these women appears to have been a particular construction of their identity determined

by the state-sanctioned Central Recovery Operation. See articles by Ritu Menon, Kamla Bhasin, and Urvashi Butalia for an extended discussion of these activities. See my recent essay "Fragments of Imagination: Rethinking the Literary in Historiography through Narratives of India's Partition" for a discussion of how fictional partition narratives can be a resource for unpacking the patriarchal and majoritarian power relations that inflect India's national imaginary.

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