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RE-LIVING / REVEALING THE PAST: 'IDENTITY POLITICS' IN DEEPA MEHTA'S
1947 EARTH

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ABSTRACT

Diasporic literature mainly captures the idea of 'belonging' – an individual asserts his/her belonging to the community. Though it is called an era of globalization and as Indians, we believe in *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, the term 'diaspora' in itself indicates a kind of displacement, as it refers to 'those who were forced into exile from their native homelands'. Therefore, the literature of the Parsi writers mainly manifests a quest for the roots and their heritage.

The paper focuses on the novel of Bapsi Sidhwa – *The Ice Candy Man* and its film version *1947 Earth*, directed by Deepa Mehta. Sidhwa as a Parsi writer is known for manifesting the *Parseepanu* in her novels. One of her novels for example is called *The Crow Eaters*, which indicates the old rhyme that the Parsi children sang – *parsee parsee kagra khaw*. The novels of Sidhwa are written/set in a Parsi milieu. However, a more relevant point in the comparison is that both – the film and the novel at some point deal with not only the Parsi spirit, but also the Parsi as an 'other' in a set locale. In Sidhwa's *Cracking India* the Parsi narrator sees the whole process of *Cracking India*, the process of the country being ripped apart. The paper points out how the Parsis are presented as a neutral community in the novel as well as in the film and there is a dark side to being neutral. The paper compares the novel and the film keeping in mind the effects of geographical boundaries on politics, culture(s) and on individual identity.

Keywords: Identity politics, Indian Diaspora, Bapsi Sidhwa, Ice Candy Man, Parsi Diaspora, Deepa Mehta

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Introduction

Diasporic literature mainly focuses on the idea of 'belonging' – an individual asserts her/his belonging to the community. Though it is called an era of globalization, and *Vasudhaiva kutumbakam* has always been a known concept in India, the term 'diaspora' in itself indicates a kind of displacement. To quote Bharucha, "Living in diaspora means living in forced or voluntary exile and living in exile usually leads to severe identity confusion and problems of identification with and alienation from the old and new cultures and homelands." (53) No wonder then, that the literature and the cinema of the diaspora mainly manifest a quest for the roots and their heritage.

This paper looks at Deepa Mehta's film *1947 Earth* as a Diasporic text and tries to put it at a parallel level with Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man*. The first half of the paper talks about the theoretical discourse on the text, narrative and authorship and the second part weaves the discussion on novel and the film into the theoretical frameworks of diaspora and intertextuality. The paper also shows how there is an 'ongoing dialogue' between the author, narrator, text and readers, and this ongoing dialogue at every stage enunciates the geopolitics of identity building, whole idea of 'construction' of the nation states, and how that deconstructs the idea of belonging to 'one' land or nation.

'Intertextuality' – the term was coined by Kristeva in the 1960s; the concept existed long before it, however. She defines intertextuality as "a passage from one sign system to another – the way in which one signifying practice is transposed into another" She further elaborates, "if one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality), one then understands that its "place" of enunciation and its denoted "object" are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated." (qtd in McAfee 26). In other words, there is no one meaning of the text possible as multiple possibilities of meaning exist, not only that, but "the literary work is viewed not as the container of meaning but as a space in which a potentially vast number of relations coalesce" (Allen 12). This concept of Intertextuality resonates with the concept of diaspora also. The Parsee diaspora, for example, or the (hi)story of the Parsee's taking refuge in India narrates that they left their 'homeland' in order to save their religious identity, which bound their community.

According to the popular story, the Parsis were 'accepted' in India and Indian community because of their 'wise' move of sending the sugar mixed in milk – indicating that they would 'blend' in the Indian community as easily as sugar in milk. However, what the popular story does not tell us is that they had to agree to certain conditions. According to Bharucha, these conditions were:

1. The Parsi high priest would have to explain their religion to the king.
2. The Parsis would have to give up their native Persian language and speak the local language.
3. The women would exchange their Persian robes for Indian costumes.
4. The men would lay down their weapons.
5. The Parsis would hold their wedding processions only in the dark.

This 'agreement' very clearly shows that the 'blending' part was not as easy or sweet as sugar in milk. There were all possible efforts to alienate them from their own language and culture. Not only that the list of conditions also suggests that they would have to get rid of their 'power' – whether it is in the form of their weapons, or in the form of their rituals. Thus, the beginning of the Parsi diaspora gradually leads to the very common diasporic dislocation between two extreme 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' conditions where the Parsees tried to stick to their roots and keep up with their own heritage on the one hand with their own original identity, and at the same time forcibly or voluntarily merged into the deconstructed space. Thus, the whole idea of original place/referent gets deconstructed, and in fact, the diaspora throws into question this 'origin' because it needs to hold on to a fixed past and yet stands against the possibility of a continuous past. This also raises question that how different representations and self-constructions of the diaspora hit up against any fixed idea of the nation.

Etymologically, the word 'text' is derived from the Latin *texere*, *textum*, which means 'to weave', 'woven'. Traditionally, a text was the 'fabric of words' or signs which made up a work of literature. It is also important here to bring in the debate of the permanence of the 'text'. Because while the very act of 'writing', penning down, as opposed to 'speaking' makes the work permanent, 'text' also becomes a term associated with the absence of stable and permanent meaning. To quote Barthes, "a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes qtd in Allen 13).

At this point, if we look at the text *Ice Candy Man* or which was later published as *Cracking India* - the novel, it's a story of ripping apart the multi-religious and multi cultural country, and specifically the city of Lahore. This takes us to the diaspora in the backdrop of partition. The partition of India and Pakistan also created the same kind of dislocation, alienation and ambiguity amongst the citizens. The partition also formed

diaspora – crossing the ‘border’ meant exile and dislocation, even if geographically and culturally the places and people were not that far as in other (Parsi) Diaspora. But the whole concept of partition in the name of ‘freedom’ created confusion and emotional void. They had moved on to getting ‘independence’ and in the course they had lost the whole idea of ‘interdependence’. As Menon and Bhasin point out, “they were forced to reckon with the twin aspect of freedom – disintegration and bewildering loss: of place and property, but more significantly, of community; of a network of more or less stable relationships and of a coherent identity.” (120) The novel is a first person narrative by an eight year old Parsee girl Lenny. The text here is structured on various levels, or boxes to use Derrida’s term. The first level is that of the author. Sidhwa writes the novel about partition, where the events are narrated from the perspective of an eight year old child. This in a way deconstructs the binary of knowledge and ignorance. Sidhwa at the time of partition was not only the same age as Lenny, but also of the same religion/community (Parsi) and with the same disability. At the same time, it is also important to note that Sidhwa did not write this as a ‘child’ but with the ‘adult consciousness’. At the same time, Sidhwa is a Pakistani diasporic author, but she also belongs to the Parsee diaspora. Thus, at the first level, the author writes the story of Lenny, giving Lenny’s ‘objective’ account of the events during partition.

At the second level is, what we have now a character called Lenny, who has been given the role of the narrator of the story. Lenny in a way becomes the mediator between the author and the readers and takes us into the mysteries of the text and establishes ties between the reader and the writer. Throughout the novel we see that Lenny’s communication with the readers in a way also leads her to the communication with herself, and that also becomes a part of the narrative, part of the story. At the same time Lenny’s position in the backdrop of partition is seen as ‘neutral’ or objective from many aspects. Mainly, she belongs to the ‘neutral’ Parsi community who were neither on the side of Hindus nor on the side of Muslims, who happened to be living there as a diasporic community. This neutral position of course creates a lot of debate and discussion within the community, as most of them, including Lenny’s parents at one point realize that even being neutral does not make it easy for them. Secondly, Lenny is an ‘elite’ child, who tags along her Aaya everywhere, and thus happens to meet people belonging to different religions – Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, different class (and yet at one point everybody was colonized) and different profession. At such meetings, which are quite frequent, Lenny becomes the ‘audience’, the objective listener and the viewer. Thus at this level, we see Lenny both as a narrator and as a part of the narrative.

On the third level we have the readers, who again are presented with a deliberate and yet (supposedly) objective narrative of the partition. As Sidhwa mentions in her interview, “what the

Indians write, will tend to reflect the Hindu point of view and their bias. When the British write it, they portray themselves favourable and present their bias. But there has not been enough writing from Pakistan to defend its position with any sophistication. So I felt that I needed to write this book, just a dispassionate, objective view stating the facts, because this, by itself would carry a fairer perspective.” (Sidhwa and Butalia) To some extent the power of being objective, holding the threads of the story remains with Lenny, until she becomes the part of the narrative. The objectivity of the narrative deconstructs when all the three levels merge, when the intertextuality happens, and when the power lies only in the text. The very fact that it is fiction, it engages all – the author, narrator and the readers in the same emotionally disturbed/disturbing account.

At the fourth level, we have the novel in the form of the film. Here again, at the parallel levels we have the author, the director (who is also the script writer), the characters of the story and the actors who play them. Very much like Sidhwa, Mehta belongs to the diasporic community of Indian cinema. As a writer and director, her task becomes all the more complex because she not only has to transform the novel into a film, she also has to bring the intertextuality of the novel into the film. The process involves deconstruction of the layers of meaning and boxes in which the text is framed, and eventually giving the text a new space, a new framework, and thus reconstruct the new layers of meaning.

At another level, the representation of the novel into film also becomes challenging because there is a direct threat of comparison with the ‘original’ text. The film faces the burden to live up to the expectations of

the readers of the novel. Of course, the film cannot and does not translate everything that is there in the novel, nor can the treatment of the text be the same because, the film, as a genre itself involves intertextuality. (in the sense that the 'meaning' or the interpretation of the text here is not restricted to only the writing and reading, but has a vast span of acting, music, songs – lyrics and music – location, cinematography etc also have major role to play. Talking about 1947 Earth, at the very basic level, the narrator in the film – Lenny, is not an eight year old girl, but a 60 year old woman who narrates the past, the story, thus is told in flashback. This again takes us back to the binary of knowledge/ignorance. Thus, in the film the position of the narrator is quite close to that of the author of the novel, she is narrating the events not 'as' a child (like in the novel), but 'of' a child. There could be various reasons why Mehta chose to do this. Acceptance on the audience's part could be the reason – the audience may not accept or believe a child's narrative of such a massacre. This technique also shows the journey of the child, and so demonstrates that how one event – the aaya's rape – leaves her with permanent guilt. This account in the film does not remain fully objective because it comes out of guilt. The narrator (older Lenny) builds the story neutrally until the climax point when she gives in to her affection/trust for the Ice Candy Man, and tells him where Aaya is hiding, and thus becomes the reason for the Aaya's rape. The last scene when the narrator is wandering in the tower of silence, again shows that she might belong to the neutral community, but as a human being who is closely connected with the sufferings of Aaya, she cannot be 'neutral'. And as Butalia puts it, the power of the narrative lies in the fact that it is not really objective. So while the film is trying to reveal the history, it also becomes the 'reliving' of history where every identity is seen at once itself and different from itself.

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