

**Contextualizing Ayah's Abduction:  
Patterns of Violence against Women  
in Sidhwa's *Cracking India***

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The 1947 Partition of British India into two independent nations (India and Pakistan) was accompanied by communal violence unspeakable in its brutality and ferocity, leading Mushirul Hasan to label it a “bloody vivisection” (*The Partition Omnibus* xii). One of the profound ironies of the period is that while a rhetoric and ideology of non-violence prevailed in the political push for freedom from colonial rule, a bloodbath accompanied the actual attainment of this goal.<sup>1</sup> In the months immediately preceding and following the creation of “free” nation-states, untold numbers of murders, kidnappings, rapes and arsons were committed by ordinary citizens of all the major religious groups (Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) caught up in the turmoil. Many historians have documented the horrors that unfolded, often, like G. D. Khosla in *Stern Reckoning*, with painstaking thoroughness. It is certainly true that communal violence was not unprecedented in sub-continental society,<sup>2</sup> but the fact of impending Partition and subsequently, its reality, unleashed a maelstrom that was so horrific that some aspects of its history have been occluded.<sup>3</sup> There is substantial evidence that many instances of religious violence were orchestrated by politically organized groups; however, there is also plenty of evidence that some of the violence was also “spontaneous,” where individuals, incited into group-think, perpetrated opportunistic acts of aggression, sometimes unleashing escalating cycles of retribution. How did people who lived together for centuries (albeit sometimes uneasily) turn upon one another; how did average people become murderers, kidnappers, rapists and arsonists?

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, which has garnered considerable attention as a trenchant portrayal of the violence surrounding the Partition, can profitably be explored as an examination of this issue, for

it depicts a broad cross-section of Lahore society both before and after the city became a part of Pakistan. This approach to the novel, one that treats it as a quasi-historical register, necessitates an acknowledgment of arguments about Partition historiography. In recent years, historians have directed attention to the shortcomings of treating the grand narrative of the state's central, bureaucratic archive as the definitive History of the event. As scholars such as Gyanendra Pandey have shown, the "concentration on high politics" (65) has to be supplemented or even supplanted by a focus on the everyday experiences of the people who lived through the "History."<sup>4</sup> Urvashi Butalia's seminal compilation of oral histories has proven to be both influential and instructive. The impulse to document people's lives is, of course, the primary impulse behind literary narratives (fiction and/or autobiography) like *Cracking India*. Though fictive, we can approach it as akin to documentary material, provided we are mindful of its status as fictional representation, and attend to its narratological nuances. Jill Didur has written persuasively on this subject in her essay "Fragments of the Imagination," cautioning us about the need for "tracking the epistemological assumptions about representation embedded" in literary texts.<sup>5</sup> In the analysis that follows, I treat *Cracking India* as a piece of fiction that seeks to represent the psychological and social realities of a specific place at a specific time (Lahore ca.1942–1948), and am attentive to the representational strategies that allow the text to accrue meaning.

Deploying a child-narrator, Lenny Sethi, the novel's plot focuses on Lenny's Hindu nanny or Ayah (referred to as Shanta twice in the novel),<sup>6</sup> her abduction by a mob led by one of her (spurned) Muslim suitors, Ice-candy-man, and her eventual escape from his clutches. The Ayah's story is paradigmatic: like her, thousands of women were abducted and/or raped by men of the "enemy" community during the chaotic months before and after Partition. Scholarship on the novel has repeatedly, and justifiably, focused on the figure of the Ayah, analyzing the ways she inhabits the subaltern subject position and how her abduction and recovery participate in the contested ideologies of Partition history.<sup>7</sup> While the centrality and symbolic power of Ayah's story is indubitable, it is worth noting that the novel's canvas is expansive, affording us a multi-

layered view of Lahore society. Lenny herself is a child of privilege, born into an upper-middle class Parsi family and is thus a doubly “neutral” narrator, by virtue of her age and ethno-religious affiliation. While her perspective is that of the upper-class child, her attachment, both physical and mental, to her Ayah allows her (and the reader) access to the working-class world of cooks, gardeners, masseurs and ice-cream sellers. Thus, the novel belies its own opening statement that Lenny’s “world is compressed” (11) for Lenny roams well beyond the boundaries of her own Parsi family and community. Indeed, the plot repeatedly allows her forays outside the “affluent fringes of Lahore” (11), going so far, on a couple of occasions, to visit, with the family cook, a village forty miles outside Lahore, removing her from the “elevated world of chairs, tables and toilet seats” (67).<sup>8</sup> Lenny engages socially with a wide variety of people, and one striking motif is the pervasiveness of sexual predation and violence. If we attend to the patterns evident in the numerous events that cumulatively depict Lenny’s life, we note just how many of them are marked by physical or psychological aggression motivated by male sexual dominance. The novel suggests that Punjabi society, even in a state of pre-Partition “normalcy,” relatively untinged by communal conflict, was suffused with violence, particularly that directed against women, and thus what occurred during the Partition was not an aberration but merely a re-contextualization or a re-calibration of an already familiar phenomenon.

Sudhir Kakar, perhaps the most well known psychoanalyst in India today, has noted the connection between social mores and sexual violence in his book *The Colours of Violence*:

The chief reason for the preponderance of specifically sexual violence in the Partition riots in the north is that, as compared to many other parts of the country, the undivided Punjab was (and continues to be) a rather violent society. Its high murder rate is only one indication of a cultural endorsement of the use of physical force to attain socially approved ends such as the defence of one’s land or of personal or family honour. There is now empirical evidence to suggest that the greater the legitima-

tion of violence in some approved areas of life, the more is the likelihood that force will also be used in other spheres where it may not be approved. In this so-called cultural spillover effect there is a strong association between the level of nonsexual violence and rape, rape being partly a spillover from cultural norms condoning violent behavior in other area of life. (38)

Kakar's analysis dovetails neatly with the patriarchal world that Sidhwa depicts, a world in which male aggression, especially against women, is ubiquitous. The novel's title refers to a rupture, and Partition certainly ruptured both political constructs (cleaving British India to form India and Pakistan), and families and communities (migrations, murders, and mayhem). Yet the ruptures are belied by the continuities evident in the patterns of violence inscribed in the text. This essay, then, will focus attention on a number of narrative threads in the novel that portray a routine acceptance of various kinds of casual, almost banal violence, and suggest that these episodes indirectly show that the Ayah's (paradigmatic) abduction is one point (though admittedly the most prominent one) in a continuum. While other analyses of the novel have accurately reflected the Ayah's centrality, my essay will show how the lives of other women in the novel depict a pattern of victimization. My contention is that while the main plot of the Ayah's story focuses attention on the abductions of women as the symbolic epicenter of communal violence, other ancillary episodes, especially involving women, show how the sexual objectification and exploitation of women was an accepted, almost routine element in the society. At the novel's outset, the Ayah is a sexually empowered woman, deploying her sensuality to rule over a circle of religiously-diverse suitors. Even as Sidhwa celebrates this sensuality, she implies, through the Ayah's fate and through that of the other women in the novel, that sexual violence is a pervasive presence in these women's lives. It is precisely the pervasiveness and habitual acceptance of sexual violence that eventually leads to the proliferation of violent acts enacted on the bodies of women; the turbulence of 1946–47 re-labels or re-calibrates rape and other acts of domestic violence against women as acts of "communal" aggression.

### Violence Against Women: Papoo's Story

Early in the novel, we are introduced to Papoo, the sweeper's daughter who lives with her family in the servants' quarters behind the Sethi bungalow. A little older than Lenny,<sup>9</sup> Papoo draws attention, at first, to the ways class differences affect the treatments meted out to the girl child. While the polio-stricken Lenny is doted on, Papoo lives a life of deprivation, a life all too routine for most subcontinental girls. We find out that her mother Muccho routinely "maltreats her daughter" (21); she is hospitalized for two weeks after a presumed beating by her mother results in a concussion. The underlying cause of Muccho's wrath is never explicitly identified, but one concludes that Papoo is subject to abuse simply because she is a girl, and thus a liability to the family. In a subsequent episode, we see Muccho's anger explode at her errant daughter for shirking household chores: "Bitch! *Haramzadi!* May you die" (54). "Yanking cruelly" at her hair, Muccho hurls further abuse, calling the child, "*Haram Khor!* Slut! Work-shirker!" She "pounds her daughter with her fists and with swift vicious kicks" (54). Despite her mother's ill-treatment, Papoo has spunk and displays a remarkable resilience. Lenny comments that Papoo, "unlike other servants' children ... is not browbeaten into early submission" (56). The aforementioned beating (seemingly) knocks out Papoo; as the other servants present chastise Muccho for her harsh treatment of her daughter, she relents a little and tries to pour water into her daughter's mouth to revive her. Papoo, who had actually been pretending to be unconscious, spits the water back in her mother's face, and jumps up making "mocking sounds and gestures" (55). This episode thus marks Papoo as a "strong and high-spirited" young girl, one not easily cowed by authority (56). But as Lenny notes, her fighting temperament and madcap antics will be short-lived. Though "it is not easy to break her body," she will be broken in "subtler" ways (56).

The rebellious Papoo is "broken" when her family marries her off to an unappetizing older man. Papoo initially resists, "enact[ing] tempestuous tantrums of protestation," but is eventually restored to a "precarious semblance of docility" (197). When Lenny arrives at the "celebration," she finds the young bride lying in a "crumpled heap of scarlet and gold clothes" (197) and when Lenny tries to wake her up, she appears to

be drunk. Later, Muccho shakes her awake, calling her “*ufeemi*” [an opium-addict], and Lenny realizes that Papoo “has in fact been drugged” (200). She is married off to a dwarf,<sup>10</sup> “a dark, middle-aged man with a pockmark-pitted face” and a roving eye. Lenny is left “imagining the shock, and the grotesque possibilities awaiting Papoo” (199). The story of Papoo’s coercion into marriage reflects accurately the misfortunes of millions of sub-continental girls routinely married off before the legal age of consent. It also draws attention to ways sub-continental society in general connived at the subjugation of women, affording societal consent to sexual enslavement. It is especially ironic that Papoo’s mother is the primary agent of her daughter’s plight. Though “the grotesque possibilities” that Papoo will have to endure are left to the readers’ imaginations, we assume the worst; in all likelihood, she will have to endure continuing violence, possibly sexual now, not just physical. No voices are raised in protest against the coercion of a young girl; indeed, the marriage is attended and *celebrated* by the extended family and the community at large. Papoo’s rebellious spirit is ground into subservience and conformity.

After her marriage, Papoo disappears from the narrative; her story, however, is only one strand of the composite picture of women’s lives that Sidhwa paints in the novel. It is precisely the systemic and pervasive disregard for female consent that enables and leads logically to the abductions of women during the Partition violence. Thus, if our initial introduction to Papoo encourages a class-based comparison between her and Lenny, her marriage calls attention to the parallels between her fate and Ayah’s. It is no coincidence that the chapter devoted to Papoo’s wedding directly follows the Ayah’s abduction. Both Papoo and the Ayah are victims of a system that essentially legitimizes sexual predation. Both Ice-candy-man and Papoo’s husband are versions of the same male impulse to exercise control over women, a control executed through societal consent. While we can certainly view the abduction of the Ayah through a political prism and see it as an ideologically freighted event with communal implications (a minority Hindu kidnapped by a Muslim mob), it is also at another level a more routine opportunistic sex-crime.<sup>11</sup> The mob is overtly instigated by her former suitor, Ice-candy-man, and the

narrative leaves open the possibility that he is motivated as much, if not more, by his need to possess the woman who has rejected his advances as he is by a desire to take “revenge” on Hindus.<sup>12</sup>

The Ayah's post-abduction story, unfolding in fragmentary fashion once she is traced by Lenny's mother and Godmother, complicates the ostensible ideological freight of her initial abduction (woman essentialized as “Hindu,” abducted by a Muslim mob and raped repeatedly over a period of several months).<sup>13</sup> Whereas Papoo is coerced into marriage while she is drugged, Ayah is, presumably, coerced into accepting Ice-candy man as husband once the kidnapping and rapes have left her no option. In the course of a conversation between Ice-candy-man and Godmother, it becomes clear that after the Ayah's abduction in February 1948, the Sethi family tracks her down, and when they have “arranged to have her sent to Amritsar” where she has family (262), Ice-candy-man marries her in May, and installs her as a “dancing girl” in Lahore's red-light district. Ice-candy-man “change[s] from a chest-thrusting *paan*-spitting and strutting *goonda* [thug] into a spitless poet” (257); he assumes the “role of the misused lover so dear to Urdu poets” (274). Spouting erotic verse, Ice-candy-man claims descent from the “*Kotha* [a high-class brothel] ... the cradle of royal bastards” (258), and distinguishes between common prostitutes and the “dancing girls” associated with “old families from distinguished homes” (259):

We protect our women. We marry our girls ourselves. No one dare lay a finger on them! They are artists and performers ... beautiful princesses who command fancy prices for their singing and dancing skills! (259)

When Godmother challenges this rhetoric of “protection,” which elides the violence by which Ayah was made one of “our women,” Ice-candy-man, resorting to the language of the love-lorn, declares that he would “do anything to undo the wrong done to her [Ayah] ..., that no one has touched her since [their] *nikah* [marriage],” and that he “can't exist without her” (262).

The Ayah's post-abduction story, I suggest, re-calibrates the ideological terrain that is her body. While she presumably has to convert to marry

Ice-candy-man (she is re-named Mumtaz), his sexual control over her is more a story of a man's desire to subjugate a woman than one of religious-communal identity politics. When Godmother and Lenny finally meet Ayah/Shanta/Mumtaz, she declares that she is "not alive" (274), and begs them to "get [her] away from" her husband (275). Lenny's reaction to the Ayah's plea is intriguing in its psychological complexity:

When I think of Ayah I think she must get away from the monster who has killed her spirit and mutilated her "angel's" voice. And when I look at Ice-candy-man's naked humility and grief I see him as *undeserving of his beloved's heartless disdain*. . . . While Ayah is haunted by her past, Ice-candy-man is haunted by his future; and his macabre future already appears to be stamped on his face. (276 emphasis mine)

Notice that Lenny does not think of Ayah's captivity in the context of communal conflict; deploying the idiom of "lover/beloved" she processes it as a romantic relationship. She seems to evince sympathy for Ice-candy-man, though she labels him a "monster." It leads the reader to ask: why is Lenny's reaction so ambivalent? Do we assume that Lenny is too young to really understand what the Ice-candy-man has done?<sup>14</sup> Is she so naïve that she is taken in by the rhetoric of the spurned, romantic lover? I would like to argue that Lenny, pre-pubescent at this time (1948), is conditioned by her own sexual experience into thinking that predatory male behavior is normative, and thus worthy of sympathy. This becomes clear when we examine the contours of Lenny's relationship with Cousin.

### **Violence Against Women: Lenny's Relationship with Cousin**

As mentioned earlier, the novel leaves unrecorded Papoo's initiation into sexual knowledge; we can only guess at her tribulations as a wife and possible sex slave. In contrast, the novel, as a coming-of-age story, documents Lenny's growing awareness of others' and her own sexuality. To some extent, *Cracking India* traces Lenny's fall into knowledge—about religious difference, about class, about sectarian violence, and above all, about sex. From early in the novel, she is aware of Ayah being the cy-



nosure of the male gaze, the object of the male grope, and is perhaps in love with Ayah herself.<sup>15</sup> But when it comes to sexual *experience*, Lenny's tutor is her hyper-sexed Cousin.<sup>16</sup> Nursing a crush on Lenny (230, 244), Cousin goes to great lengths to get Lenny to respond to his amorous overtures. Once the kidnapped Ayah's whereabouts are located to Lahore's red-light district of Hira Mandi [literally, Diamond Market], it is Cousin who brings the news, and explains to a still-naïve Lenny what this means: "There are no real diamonds there, silly. The girls are the diamonds. The men pay them to dance and sing . . . and to do things with their bodies. It's the world's oldest profession" (252). To elucidate somatically to an uncomprehending Lenny, Cousin proceeds to demonstrate: "Ever ready to illuminate, teach and show me things, Cousin squeezes my breasts and lifts my dress and grabs my elasticized cotton knickers." Lenny resists at first, but then Cousin "succeeds in deknickering" her, and "putting his hand there, trembles and trembles" (253). We can write off Cousin's behavior in this scene as adolescent fumbling, but a subsequent episode brings up a more disturbing picture. Lenny one-ups her Cousin by being the one who, accompanied by Godmother, gets to visit Ayah at Hira Mandi. The voyeur in Cousin wants to know "everything" that happened, and when Lenny has no salacious details, he says, "You would have seen a lot more if you'd gone there after dark" (277). When Lenny asks for a clarification about what she would have seen, the following exchange ensues:

"Girls dancing and singing—and amorous poets. *And you would have been raped.*"

What's that?

(I never learn, do I?)

"I'll show you someday," says Cousin giving me a queer look.

(277–78 emphasis mine)

What is peculiar about Cousin's hypothetical fantasy is not (just) that Lenny would have *witnessed* "a rape" but that she herself would have been subject to the experience. His sexual fantasy is predatory, turning adolescent experimentation into an exercise of violent power. And when Lenny asks for terminological clarification about rape, he prom-

ises, chillingly, to “show [her] someday.” As Cousin reveals to Lenny all he knows about the world of prostitutes and pimps,<sup>17</sup> he brings her into a world of sexual knowledge where sexual violence appears the norm, where sexual exploitation is garbed in the fake aesthetics of entertainment. It is thus not surprising then that Lenny’s sympathies, as I noted earlier, are pulled in opposite directions when she finds Ayah in thrall to Ice-candy-man. While she recognizes that Ayah has lost all her radiance and animation (272), she is all too willing to overlook the sinister quality of the Ice-candy-man’s proprietary predation. The novel thus implicitly presents a society that subtly indoctrinates its men and women to entwine sex with violence and to accept male sexual dominance as the natural status quo.

### **Violence Against Women: Lenny’s Mother’s Story**

As mentioned earlier, the Sethi family belongs to the privileged upper-class in pre-Partition India, mixing socially with other affluent Indians and with representatives of the British ruling class, like the Inspector General of Police (69–74). Seemingly the powerful matriarch, Mrs. Sethi has a retinue of servants to take care of her children and her household. But behind the closed doors of the marital bedroom, she is under her husband’s thumb, and has to wheedle her husband to get enough money for household expenses (76–78).<sup>18</sup> This particular instance of Mrs. Sethi cajoling money out of a reluctant husband is treated in a fairly light-hearted way, but the indignity visited upon her as a subservient female is inescapable. Her relationship with her husband progresses (or regresses) to the realm of outright abuse later in the narrative. Ironically, the revelation of her status as a battered woman comes in the context of her activism on behalf of abducted women.

Reaping the benefits of class, and of being a member of the “neutral” Parsi community, Mrs. Sethi engages in humanitarian efforts to assist women who have been victimized by Partition violence. She participates in efforts to help Hindu and Sikh families cross the border safely to India, and to “recover” and shelter kidnapped women.<sup>19</sup> As Lahore erupts into communal violence, Mrs. Sethi oversees the housing of abducted women in a house abandoned by a departed Hindu

family. She even employs one of the “rescued” refugees from a “camp for fallen women” (226), a woman named Hamida, to replace the abducted Ayah as the children’s nanny. While she is an empowered figure out in public, behind closed doors, Mrs. Sethi is herself an abused woman. Lenny’s fragmentary understanding of her parents’ marital discord is worth quoting at length:

And closer, and as upsetting, the caged voices of our parents fighting in their bedroom. Mother crying, wheedling, Father’s terse, brash indecipherable sentences. Terrifying thumps. I know they quarrel mostly about money. 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!” Sounds of a scuffle. Father goes anyway. Where does he go in the middle of the night? To whom? Why ... when Mother loves him so? Although Father has never raised his hands to us, one day I surprise Mother at her bath and see the bruises on her body. (224)

Mrs. Sethi protests her husband’s infidelity (“I won’t let you go to her”), and presumably pays the price for her outspokenness.

In an episode featuring a conflict between Mrs. Sethi and the cook, Imam Din, the narrative explores the ways the violence against women (both the monumental, historical variety and the humdrum domestic type) has a ripple effect. When Imam Din catches a *billa*, a tomcat, sneaking into the kitchen (236-37), he threatens violence against the offending “one-eared monster” (237). A chorus of voices (Hamida, Lenny, Yousaf) urge him to go easy on the intruder. When Mrs. Sethi walks in on the scene, she has just returned home from one of her rescue missions. She berates Imam Din: “Let *her* [my italics] go at once!” screams Mother ... she cannot see the cat’s gender—it is secreted behind the door—but the rest of us know it’s a *him*” (237). She tries to restrain Imam Din by grabbing his shirt, and when she fails, she proceeds to hit him with a fly-swatter. Eventually he disarms her, and she shames him for “tormenting a small cat” (238). It is apparent from the episode that Mrs. Sethi, consumed vicariously with the psychological traumas of the

brutalized women she works to rescue, and her own at home, jumps to the conclusion that the cat is female, and feels compelled to defend it against a violent male. Imam Din's threats against the cat function to trigger her protective instincts, and she displaces her anger at the male perpetrators of violence—including, presumably, her husband—onto an available offending male, who, as an underling, an employee of the household, can be beaten, whereas she cannot retaliate against her husband.<sup>20</sup> As I have noted earlier, Imam Din is something of a sexual predator himself, a groper and pedophile who enjoys a little bit of “*masti*” (57). It is unclear whether Mrs. Sethi is aware of his questionable behavior; however, the reader's knowledge of Imam Din's lechery accentuates our appreciation of the circulation of gendered violence.

Imam Din is deeply offended, not just because he has been hit by a woman, but because he has faced the ignominy of being hit by a fly-swatter. He complains to Mr. Sethi later in the day, but before the household patriarch can respond, Mrs. Sethi intervenes, and makes light of Imam Din's grievances: “Stop sniveling ... Go in, someone, and get him bangles. If he whines like a woman he must wear bangles” (239). Mrs. Sethi diffuses a potential escalation of the conflict by reminding the cook that he can avert being (further) feminized by avoiding a stereotypical female response (sniveling); in effect, she underplays the implications of the aggressive, “masculine” behavior that she herself has displayed. To keep herself in her husband's good graces—we have to assume that she has every reason to suppress and deny her anger against her own husband—she makes herself into the quintessential non-threatening woman. As a sheepish Imam Din walks off, Lenny notes that “Mother laughs and clings to Father” (239). This episode marks something of a reconciliation between the feuding couple who are not on speaking terms as Mr. Sethi, not castigating his wife, speaks directly to her, “addressing her instead of the four walls, furniture, ceiling,” and opines that Imam Din is upset because he was hit by a fly-swatter, and that he would have been more tolerant of a beating with a stick (239). Thus it is clear that Mrs. Sethi leads a dual existence: while she rescues women from the clutches of other predatory males, she has to don the helpless feminine persona to maintain her status as a wife. She has only

circulated, displaced and passed on the violence done to her and other women, not put a stop to it.

The circulation of violence in a gendered context also surfaces in Lenny's description of some of the backyard games the servants engage in. Early in the novel, Lenny describes a "game" routinely enacted in the "servants' yard" (53); all the servants, including Yousaf, the odd-job man, Moti the sweeper, his daughter Papoo, Imam Din, the cook, and Lenny (accompanied by Ayah), engage in a "high-spirited gambol" (54); they attempt to disrobe Hari, the Hindu gardener:

But we play to rules. Hari plays the jester—and he and I and they know he will not be hurt or denuded. His dhoti might come apart partially—perhaps expose a flash of black buttock to spice the sport—but this happens only rarely. (54)

The reader gets the impression that Hari is the butt of these physical games not just because he is diminutive—"everybody towers over the gardener" (53)—but also because as a gardener, he is low down in the hierarchy of power among the servant group. In the early manifestations of the game, group identity is not religiously inflected.

A second instance of this disrobing game is enacted as communal tensions are heightened by the prospect of Partition. On this occasion, Lenny registers her discomfort by saying that "it doesn't seem quite right to toy with a man's dhoti when it is so cold" (125). It is worth pausing over Hari's attire: clad in a dhoti (a long piece of fabric wrapped around the lower part of the body), and a "mauve lady's cardigan (Mother's hand-me-down)" (126), Hari is *feminized* in appearance. This time around, the romp is not so good-natured, as the battle between Hari and Yousaf (a Muslim) becomes subtly tinged by their contesting religious affiliations. Lenny feels a "great swell of fear for Hari, and a surge of loathing for his *bodhi* [a tuft of hair left at the back of a shaven head to designate a Hindu man's caste affiliation]. Why must he persist in growing it? And flaunt his Hinduism?" (126). This complex emotional mix of fear and loathing assumes a "violent and cruel shape" as Lenny enters the fray. Unlike the previous occasion, this time, the "gambol" becomes more vicious, and Hari's dhoti and his shirt and cardigan are

ripped off: “Like a withered tree frozen in the winter landscape Hari stands isolated in the *bleak center of our violence* [my emphasis]: prickly with goose bumps, sooty genitals on display” (126). The appearance of the “sooty genitals” confirms his masculinity, and belies the vulnerability implicit in a figure sporting two markers of victimhood—a *bodhi* and a lady’s cardigan.

The echo of these two instances of the “let’s disrobe Hari” game is heard in the episode describing the raid on the Sethi household, which culminates in Ayah’s abduction. The mob first targets Hari who has converted for self-preservation and is now called Himat Ali. Interestingly, Hari is wearing, not a dhoti (a garment of a Hindu man), but a shalwar, in accordance with his newly-embraced Muslim identity. The narrative implies that the Muslim mob’s threat of disrobing Hari/Himat Ali to determine whether he is somatically a (circumcised) Muslim is another version of the gantlet of servants who disrobe him to prove that he is a man. He is asked to “undo his shalwar” and prove that he is a “proper [i.e. circumcised] Muslim” (192). Fortunately for Hari/Himat Ali, the cook Imam Din vouches for his conversion and circumcision, and this fact is seconded by the barber who performed the anatomical adjustment. He is then made to recite the *kalma* [Muslim prayer] to the satisfaction of the mob to prove the efficacy of his conversion. Kavita Daiya has analyzed this episode with acuity, showing how “this transaction dramatizes not only the somatic intimacy of ethnic identity but also its very production” (225). Though Hari, alias Himat Ali, is able to avert the humiliation of having to take off his shalwar to prove his newly-embraced religious identity, the episode resonates with the reader because it echoes earlier instances yard-games where the servants play a “game” that subjects Hari to the humiliation of disrobing. Interestingly, Hari, as a male, is “fortunate” in that he can resort to circumcision as a somatic imprint of his conversion. A woman, on the other hand, has no such recourse.

### **Violence Against Women: Sexual Harassment as Tactic**

These episodes involving violence directed at servants (Imam Din and Hari), feminized and rendered powerless in various ways, create a pattern that is reflected in other episodes which feature the power-plays of

sexual harassment as an unremarkable aspect of public life. As plans for the Partition take hold, Lenny becomes “aware of religious differences” (101); but even as people are “crammed into narrow religious slot[s]” (102), for a period of time, the bonds of friendship supersede religious group identity. Thus the Muslim Ice-candy-man aids the Sikh Sher Singh in evicting some tenants who refuse to vacate their rental quarters (130). This episode presenting Sher Singh’s problems with his tenants is a part of routine life in Lahore. Already construing the world through the religious lens, Sher Singh is at first skeptical of Ice-candy-man’s offer to help: “You’re a Mussulman. . . . The tenants are Mussalmans . . . Why should you help a Sikh?” (131). Ice-candy-man asserts that he privileges the tie of friendship above all: “So what if you’re a Sikh? I’m first a friend to my friends” (131). He then goes on to describe how the ejection of the unwanted tenants is effected. Along with a group of men, he and Sher Singh expose themselves, showing their “dangling ding-dongs” (132) to the women of the house. Thus Muslim and Sikh men are united in launching a sexual harassment scheme against women. The controlled exposure of genitals to frighten and harass women, a gendered power-play, is a contrast to the “games” targeting the feminized Hari, where the objective is to expose his genitals.

Recounting the “*hulla-golla*” [hubbub] that ensues, Ice-candy-man remarks: “the women screamed and cursed. You’d have thought we’d raped them” (132). His comments imply a curious disjunction in logic. On the one hand, he is perfectly aware that this hostile, sexually aggressive gesture (exposing genitalia) is designed precisely to outrage the women, and impugn the “manhood” of the males in the family for being unable to “protect” their women. Its desired result, the ousting of the tenants, is dependent on all parties understanding the gesture for what it is—sexual harassment. But he also seems to be implying that sexual harassment is, in and of itself, too innocuous an act to merit the kind of reaction the women have; their reaction would have been understandable if they had been raped. On the one hand, we can argue that the Ice-candy-man is being disingenuous. On the other, it is worth noting that he represents a (decidedly) male perspective which seeks to dismiss sexual harassment as harmless, not as an act that defines the power dynamics between

the genders, a power dynamic wherein sexual harassment and rape are points along a spectrum of violence against women.

This use of sexual harassment as a tactic of removing unwanted tenants mutates into an instance of ethno-religious cleansing when reprised in post-Partition Lahore. Now in the newly created Pakistan, rendered unsafe for non-Muslims, it is Sher Singh's family that is subject to sexual harassment and has to flee. Ice-candy-man, always somewhat edgy in his behavior, is transformed into an active participant in communal violence after the women of his family are mutilated and slaughtered on a train as they are fleeing to Pakistan (159). Ice-candy-man's earlier language privileging the bonds of friendship above that of religious commonality is reversed as he reports on Sher Singh's family's fate, acknowledging that he "was among the [Muslim] men who exposed themselves" to these Sikh women (166):

There's natural justice for you. . . . You remember how he got rid of his Muslim tenants? Well, the tenants had their own back! Exposed themselves to his womenfolk! They went a bit further . . . played with one of Sher Singh's sisters . . . Nothing serious—but her husband turned ugly . . . He was killed in the scuffle. Well, they had to leave Lahore sooner or later . . . After what one hears of Sikh atrocities it's better they left sooner! The refugees are clamoring for revenge! (166)

Again, note Ice-candy-man's language—the sexual threat is described as a game; the men "played" with one of the women. These two episodes, featuring identical sexual harassment tactics, one pre- and the other post-Partition, highlight the continuities between sexual mores and attitudes. The fact of Partition turns what was an *apolitical* act (removing tenants) into a politically-inflected one (removing tenants for ethno-religious cleansing). Thus violence is sometimes re-calibrated by religion or class, but the targeting of women remains a constant.

#### **Coda: Godmother, the Empowered Woman**

Even as representations of disempowered women, subject to male sexual predation, proliferate in the novel, the character of Lenny's Godmother