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## A FEMINIST READING OF BAPSI SIDHWA'S THE PAKISTANI BRIDE

**Dr J. V. Jeeva**

*Associate Professor & Head (Rtd),  
Research Guide, Department of English,  
Pioneer Kumaraswamy College, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, India*

**Mrs. N. A. Prabha Pitchai**

*Research Scholar & Assistant Professor  
Department of English, Pioneer Kumaraswamy College, Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, India*

Feminism basically seems to be a movement that demands equal rights for women. It tries to identify women as creative and equal contributors of values. Feminism is said to be an extension of existentialism and it is echoed in world literature. This struggle for existence establishes one's own identity and all these aspects are found in the novels of women writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Nayantara Sahgal and Bapsi Sidhwa. Bapsi Sidhwa strives hard to bring women's issues of the Indian subcontinent into public discussion. She has expressed her personal experiences during partition and also her pains in witnessing abuses against women, her feelings in connection with immigration, injustices towards women and religious intolerance.

Feminism as a movement plays a very important role in projecting the suppressed status of women in the patriarchal society. Today, feminism occupies a vital place in modern literature. Today's feminism is anti-patriarchy but not anti-man just as it is pro-woman without seeking to replace patriarchy with matriarchy. In the domain of patriarchal culture, woman is a social construct, a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires are enacted. In the first novel of Sidhwa *The Pakistani Bride*, also published under the title *The Bride* Sidhwa presents a number of problems faced by the Pakistani people during the partition of 1947, keeping in mind the condition of women. The physical tortures and psychological outburst of women during the division of the subcontinent is brought out in the novel.

Sidhwa writes this story based on a real incident that happened in the Karakoram mountain area of Pakistan with her husband. This is a story of a young girl brought to the tribal area as a bride. The girl who was unable to bear the tortures imposed on her ran away trying to escape from the tortures. Later after fourteen days of wandering in the mountains she was found by her husband. This act of the

girl was considered as dishonour and disgrace to the tribe and hence she was murdered. Her head was cut and her body thrown into the river. Sidhwa was very much touched and moved by listening the story that it obsessed her mind when she came back to Lahore. She wished to write the poor girl's story and also about the poor tribals and their pride in their valour and honour. Thus inspired by this story Sidhwa started her writing career at the age of 26 by writing a short story which turned out to be her first novel *The Bride*.

The girl's story haunted me: it reflected the hapless condition of many women not only in Pakistan but in the Indian subcontinent, telling it became an obsession. I thought I'd write a short story, after all it had barely taken 30 minutes to narrate. Before long I realized I was writing a novel. It became *The Bride* or *The Pakistani Bride*, as it is titled in India. ("Bapsi Sidhwa: *Why Do I Write*" 28)

But in this novel Sidhwa changes the end of the story. She allows her protagonist to escape. Zaitoon survives the mountains and is saved by the Major from the other side of the river. The novel ends with an optimistic note that finally Zaitoon is safe in her homeland – Pakistan. To fulfil the aim of writing and to give a message to her readers, Sidhwa has made few amendments and changes in the real story, while writing *The Pakistani Bride*. Though *The Pakistani Bride* does not deal with the Parsi community, it however brings to light how a Parsi woman writer sees women in Pakistan and portrayed their aspiration for transformation. The partition not only is a forced dislocation from familiar places but also, from cultures and people. Pakistan seems to be a dramatic example of the suffering of people that they endured during the time of partition. More than a million people died during this dislocational period. Sidhwa brings to light the misery caused by such events through her novels. This 'partition' with 'dislocation' seems to be a recurrent motif in *The Pakistani Bride*.

Women too are dominated, divided, exploited, tortured and dislocated. They are treated just like an insect.

*The Pakistani Bride* is a damnatory indictment of the Kohistani community and the Pakistani society and the brutal treatment imposed upon the women. The women are marginalized and their fates have been sealed. The novel starts from Kohistan and ends there. The real condition of those women have been presented where they suffer in silence all the time. They are ill-treated in all means. Qasim is the first character in the novel who is exposed to the brutalities of partition. He is shown to be under the ravages of typhoid and small pox due to which he is decimated from his family. Due to certain circumstances he is completely dislocated to an alien landscape, people, tribe and culture. Qasim's father, made all the decisions as he wished and Afshan was not given any opportunity to express anything that she felt. Hence Afshan is forcefully partitioned from her family and dislocated away from her home to a completely new environment to her. Later she is forced to call the new home as her home. But anyhow easily she wins the love of her husband Qasim's mother because she was able to adapt herself quickly. Afshan since she is so elder to Qasim, her feelings towards her husband is not like that of a wife to husband but rather something like maternal.

Zaitoon, the heroine and the second bride of this novel is introduced for the first time as a young girl. Zaitoon who is actually called as Munni loses her parents, Sikander and Zohra during the rebellion of partition in 1947. She travels in a train with her parents in the beginning. As the train is derailed by the group Sikhs before reaching its destination, the passengers, mostly Muslims are massacred with great cruelty by Sikhs. Zaitoon's mother and father are killed before her eyes by the Sikhs. At that moment she runs to Qasim a hill man and calls him father. Since Qasim has lost his family to small pox epidemic, he adopts the little girl and thereafter calls her Zaitoon, which is the name of his late daughter. Qasim was on his way to Jullundur. He is touched by Zaitoon who calls her "Abba, Abba, my Abba" (*The Pakistani Bride* 29). He makes a home for the two of them at Lahore.

In Lahore, Qasim meets Nikka pehelwan who later becomes his friend and also a business partner. His wife Miriam loves and looks after Zaitoon as her own child. When Zaitoon becomes young, Qasim in a fit of bucolic nostalgia, decides to marry her to a man of his own tribe. Qasim promises Zaitoon in marriage to a man of his tribe in the mountains. Miriam warns Qasim that Zaitoon will not be happy there but she will suffer. It turns out to be real.

For Zaitoon, brought up in the civilized city atmosphere, the tribal life becomes traumatic. Upon reaching Kohistan and coming across with her husband Sakhi, Zaitoon understands that she can never fit into the male-dominated tribal society. After the bestial treatment dealt out to her Zaitoon decides to run away though she knew such act would mean death punishment by that tribal people. Yet she gets into succeeding her plan of the ultimate escape finally – the one from which she feels that there is no return. Thus through this Zaitoon's experience, Sidhwa throws light upon the history of gender-discrimination prevailing in the mountainous region of Pakistan. Bapsi Sidhwa deals effectively the issue of the fusion of different cultures and experience of the people on diverse levels.

Gender discrimination and patriarchal domination have existed in the roots of Pakistani society, particularly in the mountainous region. It is so much rooted that women have no right to express herself or have her own view even in the matters that affect her life. This point we can easily find in the life of Afshan. She has been snatched the right given to her even by the Islamic Religion. Sidhwa skilfully brings out this matter. When Afshan is sitting amidst few women, she is questioned if she would like to marry Qasim: "Thrice she was asked if she would accept Qasim, the son of Arbab, as her husband and thrice an old aunt murmured 'yes' on her behalf. Then the mountains reverberated with joyful huzzas, gunfire and festivity" (*The Pakistani Bride* 8). Thus it is clear that women are not given opportunity to play any important role even in the significant moments of their life. Furrugh Khan in his essay puts:

The major female figures, like Zaitoon, Carol and Miriam (Nikka, the shop vendor's wife) are confined within the narrow framework of rules imposed in general by the patriarchal society and the male figures of the household in particular. They are not expected to play any pivotal role in the "significant" decisions, even though their feelings and their whole being might be at stake. This aspect of their suppression is abundantly enunciated by the treatment meted out to the young Afshan. . . . (145)

Sidhwa also portrays how a Pakistani woman in such conditions had to suffer and change her behaviour to fit herself to the patriarchal system and the male-dominated society. Zaitoon in the beginning when taken to the mountains, she realizes that she will not be able to adjust with the tribal people and she requests her father to take her away in the plains because she is not ready for that marriage. She says: " 'Abba, take me to the plains when

you go. Please, don't leave me here. Take me with you.' . . . 'Abba', she sobbed, 'I don't want to marry. Look how poorly they live; how they eat! Dirty maize bread and water! My stomach hurts.' . . . 'I will die rather than live here' " (*The Pakistani Bride* 157). To this Qasim gets angry and shouts at Zaitoon: "A decent girl doesn't tell her father to whom she should marry her.' . . . 'If you be smirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands' " (*The Pakistani Bride* 158). At last Zaitoon is married to Sakhi and lives in the mountain village with her husband. Her husband beats her up often for obedience. Through the behaviour of Sakhi towards Zaitoon, the author seems to pass on that one must keep in mind that it is not only a brutal behaviour, rather it is morally a shameful act of hardness towards women.

Zaitoon's tortures become the cause of her escape. This also shows that the reason for this is the union of two human beings, hailing from different regions and upbringing. Another husband of the same kind parallel to Sakhi is Farukh, a Pakistani, who goes down the aisle with an American. He is completely a jealous kind of husband because his wife is modern, westernized and frank. His wife, Carol talks openly and liberally with everyone outside. This makes Farukh to be jealous which is the reason for Carol to have extra-marital relationship with Major Mushtaq. After the escape of Zaitoon, Carol asks Farukh if he would help the victim, he says that "women get killed for one reason or other. . . imagined insults, family honour, infidelity. . ." (*The Pakistani Bride* 223). He also says that killing women is universal and Zaitoon might be killed when she is caught. Hence for the first time in her life, Carol feels that she has been exploited covertly by Major Mushtaq for a long period. She has been used just like a puppet and not even more than a bitch in heat. She also feels that she has been used as a trade good and Major was inclined toward her to blow out his lustful desires.

Sidhwa also shows the condition of women through animal imagery which is prominent in the novel. Zaitoon is so much tormented that even in her dream she could "sense the savagery of the people". Tribals take the guns to hunt her as if they hunt animals, because in Kohistan absconding of wife is a disgraceful matter for the family, and it is considered as an offence which can never be pardoned and for which the punishment is said to be death. Zaitoon after her escape she went on and on intuitively following the river downstream. At a point she stopped to take rest. It was a moonless night. She shut her eyes and prayed. "Allah help me, help me, Don't let me be afraid. Allah protect me from the animals" (*The Pakistani*

*Bride* 193). In her journey Zaitoon becomes tired and hungry. One day she hears a sound. She sees two men. Those men were attracted towards her and she was raped.

It seems to be very much tough time for Zaitoon. She finds her life to be in the most difficult situation to live. She faces difficulties which she has never imagined in her life. There is no one to protect her. She is nostalgic about her sweet good old days with Miriam and Nikka where she was fully protected. But everything seems to be changed at the present situation. She anyhow steps on a stone then moves on and on imagining that if Sakhi is near he would kill her. Finally the Major finds the skeletal creature Zaitoon in the dark hollow between the stones. He wondered if it was the same Zaitoon. The poor girl tries to cover her nakedness by pulling her torn clothes. Mustaq felt a kind of pity and huddled the girl in a blanket and sent it to the Army Mess telling the jawans that it was a bundle of roots. He then informed Sakhi: "Your wife is dead" (*The Pakistani Bride* 243). Sakhi felt humiliated: "For the first time he faced a humiliation he could not avenge: a sorrow he dared not share" (*The Pakistani Bride* 243). For everyone there the girl was dead.

Mustaq pictured a new world for Zaitoon. Qasim was to be blamed for having imposed his will on something that was bound to end in tragedy. Thus we find in the novel how female emotional demands are crushed under male dominance and patriarchy by violence. The novel is based on a true story; but it is a work of fiction, so Sidhwa has changed and left out certain parts of the story, like the murder of the escaped wife. Sidhwa does this for the purpose of a successful and didactic plot. Thus we find in the novel that the female body is only given importance and they are used only as an object of lust by men. Zaitoon suffers lot of trauma as the novel proceeds and she is escaped at the end. Not only that, Sidhwa wishes to give the message to the readers in an optimistic note:

Sidhwa's view of life is optimistic. She loves life inspite of all its ugliness, brutality and horror. In the original story on which *The Pakistani Bride* is based, the girl is murdered but Sidhwa makes Zaitoon survive. She seems to give a message to women that life must be preserved at all costs since one can fight oppression only when one is alive. It is worthy of note that no woman character dies in any of her novels. (Singh 89-90)

Bapsi sidhwa's views are so broadened that she stresses men to co-operate with women whole heartedly in all walks of life.

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