

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* : A Challenge to patriarchal Hegemony

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Abstract : The women writers like Bapsi Sidhwa have developed a new literary term known as 'feminism' to challenge the patriarchal society supporting male domination and invalidate the male exploitative attitudes. *Feminism* stands for the struggle against women's status and to fight for emancipation and liberation from all forms of oppression by the state, by society and by men. Her women protagonists reject the orthodox ritual. According to them, marriage is a ritual that makes one dependent. While men are free to do at their will and women are fully restricted and controlled. The present paper tries to expose the unexposed that is a saga of a woman in the patriarchal hegemony by introducing the tribal code of honour and the harshness of Pathan culture, which made them awfully brutal and ruthless in the age of transition where a woman is considered not more than a commodity, mere a living being like animals, and only a puppet to be played in the male-autocratic hands, whether it is a husband or somebody else. The novel is a story of three women brides : Zaitoon, Carol and Afshan who broke the silence of women and gave them their voice. Protagonist as well as narrator of the novel, Zaitoon, a new bride, is unhappy in her marriage and is contemplating the final escape. She is the victim of gender discrimination and sexual harassment that begins just after the first day of her marriage. And Carol is exploited sexually as well as emotionally by Major Mushtaq. The pain of the women, be it Zaitoon, Miriam, Carol or the countless women suffering the atrocities at the hands of their men is blatant. In nutshell, the novel *The Pakistani Bride*, is a battle against a male-dominated society exploring the savageness of Kohistani male- autocratic landscape and looking for hope and inspiration from tradition.

Key Words: Gender discrimination, Patriarchal, Hegemony, feminism, emancipation.



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Introduction

Being an internationally acclaimed and leading Pakistani, Parsi and diasporic woman feminist writer, Bapsi Sidhwa has given a distinct identity to Pakistani novel in English, Pakistani identity, culture at International level. In the contemporary context, feminism is commonly used to refer to all those who seek to end women's subordination. The modern age has witnessed the vigorous development of women writing questioning their status, role and identity in the society. Keeping this view in her mind she has produced four novels in English that reflect her personal experience of the Indian subcontinent's Partition, abuse against women, immigration to the US, and membership in the Parsi/Zoroastrian community. *The Crow Eaters* (1978), *The Pakistani Bride* (1982), *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), (Published as *Cracking India*), and *An American Brat* (1994).

Sidhwa has thrown light upon the gender differences, which have been imposed upon a woman under the guise of traditional taboos, as if it has been a convention to the girls, to have tied-up blindly in the cruel hands of a tyrant husbands. Zaitoon, the central character acquires various identities, for being a woman and a marginal one. Her journey from a daughter of Zohra and Sikandar and after their death a daughter of Qasim Khan, the Kohistani who gives her a new identity as Zaitoon, from Munni, the name of his deceased daughter. Quasim, a Kohistani tribal, now in city, decided to marry her to his cousin Misri Khan's son, Sakhi, without thinking about her hope and future. Being a faithful daughter, Zaitoon accepts Qasim's decision and gives up the civilized city life and enters into the hard inscrutable tribal life. Zaitoon has got a fluid identity from Munni to Zaitoon, Punjabi to Kohistani and plain to tribal. Zaitoon's husband, a man of the hills, rather, a savage, makes life hell for his young bride. And the tribal life becomes so unbearable and unhappy in her marriage and she decides to run away.

Miriam, wife of Nikka, friend of Quasim, loves Zaitoon as if she were her own daughter, because after having been adopted by Qasim she was carried to Lahore and was rendered to be reared up by Miriam; that's why, she condemns Qasim and expressed her disapproval: "Is it because that Pathan offered you five hundred rupees—some measly maize and a few goats? Is that why you are selling her like a greedy merchant? I will give you that, and more," she said with contempt" (Pakistani ~~Novels~~); but as such, a daughter was not more


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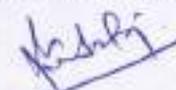



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valuable than the words given by her father. So, he says, "Sister Miriam, it is not for the goats and maize, please believe me. It is my word—the word of a Kohistani!" (94) Miriam, at railway platform, makes her last ditch attempt to dissuade Zaitoon from going and says, "You are ours. We'll marry you to a decent Punjabi who will understand your ways" (97-98). She tries to shed her burden of guilt by showing maternal love and concern for the girl, and emphatically says, "Tell your father you don't want to marry a tribal. We'll help you" (98). Miriam urged Qasim, "how can a girl, brought up in Lahore, educated—how can she be happy in the mountains? Tribal ways are different, you don't know how changed you are. . . And as rancour settled on Qasim's compressed lips, she continued in a rising passion, "They are savages. Brutish, uncouth, and ignorant! She will be miserable among them. Don't you see?" (Pakistani Bride 93) In this context, Sidhwa has raised the question of gender-discrimination and anxiety for Zaitoon's dangerous future in the hills; while Qasim, a man, is harsh and careless about the girl's condition only for the sake of his bloody word.

Sidhwa has raised the question against the girl like Zaitoon for not having the enough daring attitude; this suggests that a female should be strong enough to fight against gender-discrimination. Zaitoon had to follow the decision of her father and she did not stand against her father's decision. It shows the dominance of male hierarchy in the society. Miriam, a motherly woman, has no free will, and her compassion for Zaitoon proves to be weak in order to make Qasim, her so-called brother, dissuade from his overbearing decision. Unfortunately, Miriam was of no help for Zaitoon, as she had failed in convincing her, so she renders her own self to God saying, 'Bismillah'—'God bless you'. Henceforth, it is at the very outset that the cultural differences also begin to dominate the life of Zaitoon and it turns out to be a major theme in the novel, and acquires a pivotal significance to enhance the interest of readers and critics like Singh, R. P. commented, "The cultural difference is the pivot. . . Sidhwa shows how it is always a barrier to human relationships. Thus, racial, regional, national and cultural issues of historical as well as topical significance form the core of her novels"

The tribal code of honour is further exercised, when Zaitoon, after getting wedded with Sakhi, visits a river and waves hand at Army jeep going on the road; on beholding this, Sakhi


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loses his patience, and in fit of anger, he drags her along the crag and abuses: 'You whore,' he hissed. His anger was so intense she thought he would kill her. He cleared his throat and spat full in her face. 'You dirty, black little bitch, waving at those pigs. . . ' Gripping her with one hand he waved the other in a lewd caricature of the girl's brief gesture. 'Waving at that shiteating swine. You wanted him to stop and fuck you, didn't you! (Pakistani Bride 185) Commenting on the behaviour of Sakhi, a Kohistani husband, Makarand Paranjape writes: "It would seem that the entire code of honour of the tribe rests on the notions of sexual superiority and possessiveness" (99).

This is not much and Zaitoon's exploitation goes on further. Sakhi shakes her like a rattle, and says, "I will kill you, you lying slit!"; though, she apologizes to be forgiven again and again, yet he slaps her hard and swinging her pitilessly like a doll flings off her. Upon this brutal and unbearable act, "in a wild lunge she blindly butted her head between the man's legs" (Pakistani Bride 186); through the reaction of Zaitoon, author seems to have suggested that like man, woman is also a human being and she also feels pleasure and pain, and if she is ill-treated or say beaten cruelly then she also has her limit; in the above-mentioned case, the torture reaches over the limits or sustainability of Zaitoon, so she turns rebel. Sidhwa writes: Zaitoon knelt in misgiving and suspense. There was no viler insult a woman could inflict on a man." But on the man's side, a Kohistani husband's one, he thinks that how extreme humiliation he would have felt, had someone witnessed. Glowering with thunderous hatred "he aimed a swift kick between her legs, and she fell back. Sakhi kicked her again and again and pain stabbed through her. (186). Lifting her inert body across his shoulders, Sakhi carries her home. That night Zaitoon resolves to run away, as her only hope of survival lies only in absconding.

Sidhwa portrays the traditional taboos, partially imposed on women, and highlights the issue of gender-disparity in post-independence scenario; when Nikka, friend of Qasim, establishes himself in his business, his status in the society is elevated in comparison to his wife, Miriam. Sidhwa portrays how a Pakistani woman in such conditions has to suffer and change her behaviour in order to follow the patriarchal system of male-dominated society of the nation; author also shows how a woman is bound to follow the cultural paradoxes: "Miriam, reflecting her husband's rising status and respectability, took to observing strict purdah. She seldom ventured out without her veil" (Pakistani Bride 187)


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Gender discrimination and patriarchal domination have prevailed into the roots of Pakistani society, especially the mountainous one, so much deeply that woman has no right to have her view heard and be taken seriously in most of the matters affecting her life; this all is highlighted well in the story of Afshan, daughter of Resham Khan; even the right of a woman provided by the Islamic religion has been snatched from her. Sidhwa raises this matter skillfully. Afshan, a woman of fifteen, is married to Qasim, a boy of ten, as a repayment of loan. She is sitting amidst the huddle of women, and in accordance with the rule of Islam, she is being questioned whether she would like to get married with Qasim or not: "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" (Pakistani Bride 8); while on the other side of the fence, following the age-old tradition of gender inequality, at mid-night, the sleepy bride-groom is told that he is going to meet his bride, so he should smarten himself up in order to impress her with all his finery. Thus, Sidhwa appears to have suggested that the root cause of gender bias is girl's right, like Afshan, which often remains negligible and that is also left unfocused; it is the basic case study of gender inequality: The major female figures, like Zaitoon, Carol and 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.

Sidhwa seems to unravel here that on reaching its highest point, Zaitoon's torture becomes the cause of her elopement; it also signifies that the reason of this is the union of two human beings, hailing from different regions and upbringing: a plain-Lander's (wife's) behaviour seems doubtful and offensive to a highlander (husband); he endeavours to place a restriction of social taboos on her, and warns her not to cross the cultural barriers, laid down by his ancestors much ago. Another husband of the same kind and birthplace is Farukh, a Pakistani army man, who goes down the aisle with an American. He is an extremely jealous husband because his wife, Carol, is westernized and frank; she meets everybody openly and liberally. Though, Farukh is also an Engineer, and along with Carol, he belongs to the upper-middle class of Pakistanis, yet this western-educated husband fails to fill up the ideological gap, between the East and the West; if Carol talks and smiles with a man, he feels jealous, and probably, it seems that this is the reason for Carol to have extra marital relationship with Major Mushtaq. At this

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point, Farukh is parallel to Sakhi in general. This lack of trust makes him suspicious of his wife, and widens the gulf in their marital relation; that's why, after the elopement of Zaitoon, when Carol asks Major Mushtaq, if he would help the victim, he throws light on the plight of women in the hills: "women get killed for one reason or other . . . imagined insults, family honour, infidelity. . ." (Pakistani Bride 223). Carol, a sufferer of her husband's jealousy, questions Major Mushtaq: "what's the matter with the men here? Why are they so insanely jealous?" (223). Mushtaq answers that killing of and jealousy against the women is universal, so Zaitoon might be killed. On listening this, Carol gets disillusioned that she has accustomed and adjusted herself in this male-dominated region. For the first time, Carol knows that she has been exploited covertly by Major Mushtaq for a long period, just like a puppet and not more than a bitch in heat. This chapter proves that a woman, like Carol, is considered a commodity, and a man is inclined towards her to quench his lustful thirst. According to Robert Ross, "This novel deals specially about patriarchy and the traditions governing the male- female relationship." The author of the novel reflects through Carol the handling of a civilized upper class, western woman in the male-dominated world of the novel. The book *I Let You Go* had its female protagonist, an American woman and an artist- suffering at the hands of her abusive and jealous husband, the kind of man who is found in Bapsi Sidhwa's woman character, Carol.

Sidhwa unfolds that in Kohistan, male-chauvinists are aggressive, where man perceives himself superior to woman; in this kind of society, males are trained to be dominant, while females are forced to be submissive; in such condition, male, even being on the wrong path, are considered as right; while a female, on the other side of the fence, despite walking on the virtuous path, is often wrong thrust upon her. The moral judgment of such a society is taken on the gender-based dominion; for example, on the one hand, Sakhi is not opposed by people when he beats his own mother as well as his wife on the slightest pretext, though this is illegal in the eyes of Indian as well as Pakistani judicial system; while on the other side, having been exploited beyond limits by her husband, when Zaitoon ventures to flee from the harsh territory of Kohistan, her husband, father-in-law, and others chase to bump her off, because in Kohistan absconding of wife is a disgraceful matter for the family, and it is considered as an unpardonable offence, for which the punishment is death. Regarding this context, Simone de Beauvoir rightly observes almost the same: "Marriage subjugates and enslaves woman and it leads her to aimless



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days indefinitely repeated, life that slips away gently toward death without questioning its purpose" (500). Referring to Zaitoon's odyssey, Indira Bhat observes: 'Zaitoon's odyssey from the plains to the snow mountains and back to the plains is symbolic of the inner journey of the young woman from the fantasy world of love, romance and heroes, to the harsh and hostile realities of life where man is the hunter and exploiter, cruel and inhuman treating women and animals alike.' Similarly Tehmina Durrani in her autobiography, *My Feudal Lord*, exposed the hypocrisy of ruling elites in Pakistan generally and the cruel nature of her husband specially. In it she explored social customs of Pakistani married life with her own personal married life.

Conclusion

It is through the depiction of the matrimonial failure of an uneducated wife, Zaitoon, contrasting with Carol, an educated wife, successfully revolting against her husband in the society of Kohistan, the two cultures—Punjabi and Kohistani Pathan culture of Pakistan and American culture, have been deftly portrayed by Sidhwa. Covertly, author also raises the issue of female education, so that the gulf between man and woman, Kohistan and Punjab, hill and plain, literacy and illiteracy, Eastern and Western, dominant and submissive, tormentor and tormented, can be filled up. Author shows the mingling of three mutually incompatible cultures, and the aftermath of such union through the marriage of a plain-city-bred uneducated girl with an uneducated tribal, and an educated American girl with a Pakistani educated tribal man; the encounter of East and West is also interesting; author seems to convey that in such cases, not only uneducated couples fail, but education also fails in paving the way to a successful marital life of the duos in the age of transition. Indira Bhatt also perceives the same: The two cultures cannot meet, be they of Pakistan and America or the mountains and the plains.

The conclusion of the novel is in realistic scenario, one that a young woman in today's Pakistan would face in this situation. Additionally Sidhwa's portrayal of a young American woman, Carol, is deadly accurate and a scathing commentary on the ignorance, self-centeredness and ethnocentrism of the first world. Women, who fell prey to the tyranny of their men, regardless of the society/ community they belong to, Men are the same all over the world. The life of Women in certain countries is pathetic, what we like to believe. But the bitter fact is that

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the life of women in every country is really the same. Be it India, Pakistan, The Middle East, The USA or The European nations. Crimes against women occur because 'we ask for it' is the popular belief worldwide. However much the feminists might scream for justice and equality from the roof tops, life for women will be the same as it has been for a countless years now – abject and pitiable. Dipika Sahai remarked: *The Pakistani Bride* is a women's lyric cry in prose against the existential fate and societal abuse... She has written dramatically of a particular culture, marriage, loyalty, honour and their conflict with old ways.'

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