Bapsi Sidhwa’s *The Bride*: An Alternative Viewpoint in Pakistani Literature

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**Abstract**

Sidhwa, an ambassador of Pakistani Literature, represents in her novel *The Bride* a number of issues confronted by the female strata of Pakistani society. With a very strong interest and involvement in the condition of women, she talks about their place in Pakistani gender-based class structure. Women in this part of the world are denied a significant place in national and domestic issues. But female characters of her all novels generally, and of *The Bride* specifically resist the limitations of the patriarchal definition of ‘woman’. Sidhwa shows her females as strong and capable enough to run the affairs of daily day to day life without spoiling their identity. Although Sidhwa belongs to the privileged Pakistani circle, she talks about the marginalized persona of indigenous society whose position is cowed to the absolute minimum. She counters the domineering patriarchal discourse of Pakistani literature by providing an alternative image of a strong and confident female.

**Key Words:** Pakistani Literature, Bapsi Sidhwa, The Bride, Feminism, Patriarchy

**Introduction**

Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the best and the most successful English-language Pakistani novelists. She is distinctive among the writers of English language fiction in Sub-continent because of her sharp wit, nice humour, and reliable observations of human behaviour. Through her individual voice, which is unique indeed, she represents Parsi (Zoroastrian) ethos as well. We also find in her writings the cultural complexities of post 1947 era in Pakistani society.

As an artist and story teller, Bapsi sidhwa is not a follower of the non-realist narrative tradition. She believes in the inevitable role of well-knit plot and an enthralling story in the construction of novels. In an interview to David Montenegro (1992), she expresses about the importance of realist narratives thus: “In the west storytelling has been lost in the byways of verbal acrobatics and the need to be smart and innovative in writing, the story element is very often lost in what they call ‘literate fiction’ in these parts of the world”. *The Bride* is written in the vein of realist narrative. It was published in 1983. It revolves around the survival-struggle of Zaitoon, the heroine of the novel, while struggling to escape from the cruel Pakistani tribal society where she has been married. Zaitoon, an orphan heroine of the novel, is arranged to be married into a feudal and rural Pakistani community. She manages an escape from there to find an independent life of her own. Although *The Bride* is known to be based on a true and pessimistic story, Bapsi Sidhwa’s fictional version ends on a note of futuristic happiness. Sidhwa received the Pakistan National Honours of the Patras Bokhari award for this novel in 1985.
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Bapsi Sidhwa has painted a canvass with wit and compassion. According to Anita Desai, her novels, though, different from one and another share in common “a passion for history and truth telling” (Sidhwa, 1989). Fawzia Afzal Khan calls her novel The Bride “a challenge to the patriarchal culture and values of Indian Pakistani society” (Ross, 1991). She further says that the novel is an effort to liberate “the female self that remains marginalized within the system” (Ross, 1991). An Indian critic Makarand Paranjape states, “it would seem that entire code of honour of the tribe rests on the notions of sexual superiority and possessiveness” (Dhawan, 1987).

The Bride: A Feministic Analysis

Sidhwa counters the domineering patriarchal discourse of Pakistani literature by providing an alternative image of a strong and confident female. This alternative image creates women’s awareness about history and belonging. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1990) explain the concept of ‘Feminist Historiography’ as:

Histoiry may be feminist without being exclusively women’s history. Such historiography acknowledges that each aspect of reality is gendered, and thus involved in questioning all that we think we know, in a sustained examination of analytical and epistemological apparatus, and in dismantling of the ideological presuppositions of so-called gender-neutral methodologies. A feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women as something to be framed by a context in order to be able to think of gender differences as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations.

Sidhwa’s strong characters are women, and they refuse to be represented as non-living phenomena under the labels of ‘shame’, ‘modesty’, ‘honour’ etc. The Bride deals with the repression of women in Pakistani society. It is based on a true story narrated by army personals at an Army camp in Karakoram Mountains. According to the story, a girl from the plains is taken by a tribal into the mountains and is married to a tribal man. The girl, however, runs away after a month of the marriage. She manages to survive for fourteen days in Karakoram mountains and tries to find her way out to the plains. But a runaway wife is an unforgiveable insult for the tribesmen, they keep on searching her and finally find her near a bridge over river Indus. The husband severs her head and throws her into the river.

Sidhwa was touched by this real account as much as she fictionalized this story. She criticized the brutality of the tribal code of honour and the ruthless customs of their daily existence. In an interview Sidhwa gave an account of why she decided to write a novel about that incident:

…I felt I had to tell her story. I had not written before…I had a compulsion to write the girl’s story and the story of the tribals hidden away in this beautiful part of the world. I started writing a short story about this girl, without my really being aware of it, it was developing into a long story. It was an obsession (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock, 1992).

The real girl of the story becomes Zaitoon in Sidhwa’s The Bride. Zaitoon is an orphan Punjabi child adopted by a tribesman. The setting of the novel has an influence on its characters and governs the plot also: the river, the road, the mountains are as central to the narrative as the characters, plot, and the substance are. In the background of this particular and harsh setting, the characters’ instincts and emotions are stretched beyond ordinary limits to show their need to exist in that harsh geographical place. The novel reflects conflict among man, woman, nature. It shows tension among different cultures as well. The narrative structure of the novel, which is curious indeed, consists of stories almost independent in nature. The central story is of Zaitoon’s. Carol’s story is its foil. Nikka’s story of his rise from
a Panwalla to a strongman of Lahore is also captivating. The reader encounters some smaller stories of Sikandar, Zohra, and Qasim earlier in the novel. Zaitoon’s story has three divisions: childhood, marriage fixing episode and voyage to the hills, and her struggle for existence and survival. Only the last part of her story makes him central figure of the novel. Earlier she is shown very briefly in some sections of the chapters 4, 5, 6. The novel shows the shifting of the points of view also. Thus each tale has its own independent central figure/protagonist, action, and point of view. Here, in this novel, the protagonist even can not be said as central. Multiple and complex human experience is reflected through various events. Life in itself is important here, not the individuals’ fortunes.

Qasim is to marry at the age of ten to a girl five years older to him. Qasim also receives his first gun at ten. His wife is raped before the consummation of their marriage, and he kills the rapist very early in the narrative. In next coming few years, all of his family is consumed, except him, by small pox. Sikander and Zohra story is the reflection of all partition (1947 partition of the subcontinent) stories showing communal riots, migration, blood, and family break-ups. Sikander and Zohra both are killed and Munni, called Zaitoon latter by Qasim, is orphaned. Qasim adopts Zaitoon, thus a family is reconstituted. This was an unlikely combination of two cultures, the Punjabi and the Kohistani, the urban and the tribal, the brown and the fair. Account about Nikka reflects polished evil of Lahore, of a civilized culture, which stands in comparison with violence of the tribal areas. Nikka is shown as a professional murderer who works for powerful political people. The readers get familiarized to the ways of the urban life through his visits to Hira Mundi, the brothels in Lahore. Sidhwa exposes the reality of the hypocritical myth of ‘respect’ for women in our society. Nikka and Qasim go to the red-light area of Lahore. Sidhwa shows the real character of the men who do not hesitate to kill anybody who even looks discourteously at their ‘honour’. The same men are revealed by Sidhwa: they pay for the ‘honour’ of someone else, and watch a naked ‘honour’ of somebody in the company of other drunken men.

The term ‘wife’ in our society, Sidhwa reveals, is not a fixed and closed term. The women of the household have an unfixed, unlimited, ambiguous, and always changing set of rules to observe. Men, either they are husbands, fathers, or brothers are the generators of those rules. Words of ‘shame’, ‘honour’, and ‘social position’ have meanings only for women, men are free of such moral and religious bonds.

Zaitoon is a child of partition time. At the age of four she loses her parents. She is brought up by Qasim, who adopts her, and grows up in Qila Gujjar Singh, Lahore. Qasim fixes her marriage at sixteen with Sakhi. He is the son of Qasim’s cousin, Misri Khan. Miriam, Mushtaq and Ashiq try to convince Qasim about the differences of the Punjabi and Kohistani cultures, and opine that the marriage would be a complete failure. Zaitoon also shows here strong unwillingness, but Qasim is determined and threatens to kill her if she does not agree. Zaitoon’s agony starts at the next day of marriage. Her husband, a tyrant figure, beats her even at a slightest issue. She is savagely tortured by her husband for going near the river. The river is marked as a boundary between the tribal area and the army. The world of Zaitoon is across the river on the side of army. This is the world Zaitoon is familiar with. She yearns to move back to it. In chapter twenty two and onwards, she is shown in her struggle to escape from there for her survival. Just with a small blanket and very little food, not enough for a full meal indeed, she tries to find her way through the unfamiliar hilly area to the bridge over the river. But the men of the tribe set out to find her and kill her as there is no mercy in the rules for the woman who tries to escape. In the open harsh mountains Zaitoon have hallucinated visions of her harsh husband. She spends almost a week there without food, shelter, and protection. A leopard nearly kills her. At last she reaches near the river. There two men rape her. And finally, after ten days of struggle, she, restless and half-dead, moves by crawling to the granite bridge, the path to her freedom. The men of Sakhi’s tribe too reach
the bridge. Luckily enough she is traced by the army men first. The Major carries her over the bridge to his own side of the river. Sakhi comes after him there. But he is told that the girl is dead. Sakhi has no choice but to believe in their words as the Major is surrounded by his men. So Sakhi has to tell the lie to his tribesmen that he buried his wife with his own hands. In the end Zaitoon survives.

Zaitoon can be considered as the heroine of the novel, and Carol as the best supporting actress. 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 account about Carol reinforces Zaitoon’s story. Both stories convey Sidhwa’s concept about the treatment of women in the world of the novel. Women are expected to have silent voices overcast by the shadows of their husbands, fathers and brothers. Sidhwa presents the view that Pakistani family home deny women their identity and make them nobody. To Sidhwa, Burka is the symbol of ultimate silence and shadow. Wearing a Burka, Zaitoon can walk near her father unrecognized. When Carol gets offended by the stares of a some tribal men, she sarcastically says, “Maybe I should wear a Burka!” (Sidhwa, 1984). One supposition of this statement is that this world of shadow can hide her, metamorphosing her and shifting her to an anonymous part of the womankind. Taken through this way the negative meanings of the silence and shadows have positive connotations as well. The Zenana (female world) can be seen as a shelter from the male world:

A domain given over to procreation, female odours and interminable care of children. Redolent of easy hospitality, the benign squalor in the women’s quarters inexorably drew Zaitoon, as it did all its inmates, into the mindless, velvet vortex of the womb. (Sidhwa, 1984)

But this also gives emphasis over the gender apartheid in Pakistani culture. The positive, soft and sheltering concept of the Zenana is overshadowed by its image as a prison.

Carol, an American woman, falls in love with Farukh, a Pakistani student in engineering. She accompanies him on his posting at the mounts of Kohistan. Carol and Farukh’s amorous relationship degenerated into distrust and suspiciousness. Carol also could not cope up with repressed sexuality. Her occidentalized customs and practices of socialization are misinterpreted by Farukh. Farukh’s insane jealousy and distrust in Carol breaks her heart and faith in this relationship, and she is allured by Major Mushtaq. Major who apparently seems to love his wife in fact has no problem on sleeping with his friend’s wife, Carol. He considers it liberal. But his traditional side appears when Carol asks him to introduce her to Sakhi. He gets furious and says:

Get in and close the window...you know how their minds work. He will spread it all over, I am keeping a tart! ... Do not you know by now that women do not ask for introduction to such men (Sidhwa, 1984).

Mushtaq’s reaction exposes the fear of a woman being more than what is expected of her.

Carol and Zaitoon meet coincidentally, and Carol recognizes that her and Zaitoon’s fate are same. Both are play things in the hands of men. Mushtaq refuses to marry Carol as to have an extra-marital affair with the American woman is enough because it satisfies his lust for body in the remote areas during posting. To leave his wife and children is beyond question because family is a social institution and break up of any type exposes a person to a public scandal which a common typical man can never dare. After being rejected by Mushtaq, she again turns towards Farukh. But she is shattered when comes across a young tribal girl in the waters of the river. All her fantasy is dashed to ground. She says in disillusionment, “women get killed for one reason or other…imagined insults, family honour, infidelity…even imagined infidelity” (Sidhwa, 1984). Carol could not save her marriage because very soon the emotional avalanche brought her to the realization of the striking
differences between the cultures of Orients and Occidents. She saw with her own eyes the status of women in this part of the world which was not “more than a bitch in heat” (Sidhwa, 1984).

Sidhwa presented the plight of a Pakistani woman through the eyes of an outsider. She exposed two brides, Carol and Zaitoon, but both with the same fate. Both are exploited by men. Zaitoon “unlocked a mystery, affording a telepathic peephole through which Carol had a glimpse of her condition and the fateful condition of girls like her” (Sidhwa, 1984). The stories of both the women expose the main issue of the novel, the position and treatment of women in Pakistani society. The stories bring into focus the violence, degradation and oppression faced by women in an episode in *The Bride* the woman is shown as a commodity, “any girl…was worth more than the loan due” (Sidhwa, 1984). The textual line “you are my woman! I will teach you to obey me” is the thesis of the state of the Asian woman.

Through the character of Zaitoon, Sidhwa mocks the institution of marriage. Zaitoon, like many of the women, is forced to marry a person against her desires. Sidhwa shows here how a marriage becomes a hell in such a forced situation. Zaitoon is abused and beaten daily with or without any reason. When she raises her voice against this domestic violence and tries to stop the slapping hand of Sakhi the family abuses her. Even Sakhi is humiliated for not being able to control his wife. Sakhi in rage beats his ox and when his mother tries to stop him he beats her too with a stick and calls her a “meddling woman”. Being a woman is like being a beast of burden. Woman is a woman in status far away from any sanctity of relationship. A man is judged by how well he can control his woman. The violence is not only verbal and physical but sexual. On the very first night of his marriage Sakhi establishes his ownership over Zaitoon’s body.

Zaitoon’s escape from her brutal marriage is a victory against the male chauvinistic system. Her fleeing is a spirit of bravery and courage on the part of a woman which “endorses a challenge to the structures of patriarchy” (Ross, 1991). She is a survivor: She gets able to be free from the clutches of the brutal marriage, the wild hills, the honour-thirsty tribes men, and the cruel rapists. She escapes from all this hostility and survives. Abrioux states:

Zaitoon is ultimately protected and saved, which suggests that an awesome, ancient, natural order combined with a young girl’s defiant spirit can overcome the oppressive shackles of a conspiracy of men (Abrioux, 1990).

Zaitoon’s choice of freedom from the slavery of a brutal marriage is a courageous and heroic action, a testimony to the never yielding spirit of a woman.

**Conclusion**

*The Bride* is about the “strength of nature------a force, perhaps of God, within one” (Sidhwa, 1984) human being. Zaitoon is a symbol of human spirit which struggles against all odds but exists with integrity. She is a representative of the strength of a woman, infatigable, unyielding and irrepressible.
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