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WOMEN AS A VICTIM OF PATRIARCHAL CONSTRUCT IN THE PAKISTANI BRIDE AND WATER

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidwa an ambassador of Pakistan Literature is not only a story teller but an artist who has very enigmatically related the plight and exploitation of women in the patriarchal society. When we talk of 'Feminism' we refer to the movement which has played an important role in projecting the suppressed status of women in the patriarchal society. The term also signifies the emergence of the power of the women over the constructs of male dominance and a movement to acquire the equal rights of the women with men in all walks of life, social, moral, economic legal and so on. Men establish their masculinity and feel elated and victorious as aggressors whereas women endure the pain and barbarity with humiliation and subjugation. But Sidwa talks about the emancipation of women just as she has done in her real life so the women in her fictional world. Her characters are intelligent, beautiful, strong willed, courageous and modest and not rebellious. The parental, societal and psychological pressures seem to loom large in their lives but when they find their identity in danger, they throw off the shackles and try to counter the foul attempts of their adversaries with grit and determination. In *The Pakistani Bride* and *Water* both the novels Bapsi Sidwa 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.

The objective of this paper is to show the changes in the role of women corresponding to the social, economic, cultural and political changes in life and their struggle for self-emancipation so that they have the power to take decisions of their life without the support of others. In the twenty first century the works of women writers have tried to transform the social and psychological life of women.

Keywords: Pakistani literature, Bride, Feminism, Patriarchy, Marginalization, Victimization.

Bapsi Sidhwa, an ambassador of Pakistan Literature, is a distinctive writer of English language fiction in Sub-continent because she is not only a story teller but an artist who believes in the inevitable role of well- knit plot and an enthralling story in the construction of novels. 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.

When Sidhwa decided to write novels during the 1970s, there were hardly any women writing English fiction in Pakistan. Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Salman Rushdie had already established a literary genre in Indian Fiction in English across the border. Therefore, Sidhwa is considered as one of the pioneers of Pakistani fiction in English. Sidhwa moved to America in 1983, with her husband and now lives in Houston, Texas. Living in America has been a liberating experience for Sidhwa but her love for her country of birth especially her city Lahore and her Punjabi identity is strongly felt by her. Being a resident of both Pakistan and America it has enriched her understanding of social issues concerning women in both societies.

In 1979, Bapsi Sidhwa self-published her first novel, *The Crow Eaters* marking the beginning of modern era in Pakistani English fiction writing. It was highly acclaimed because it was written in a characteristically humorous and ironic style, and it well presented an insider's view of the customs, rituals and life-styles of the Parsee community in Pakistan. Her next novels *The Bride* (1983), *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), *An American Brat* (1993) and *Water* (2006) are feminist explorations of the gendered existence of Pakistani women exhibiting a willingness to engage with issues of female sexuality, agency and resistance. She achieved International fame as she raised feminist concerns related to the female body particularly in her works. She considers it an essentialist reduction to the roles of mother and wife in the predominantly (so called) Islamic context of modern-day Pakistan.

Sushila Singh points out that Sidhwa's female characters in the fictional world exhibit similar characteristics to Sidhwa in real life, "rebellion is not in their nature. They try to cope with the parental, societal and cultural pressures in their life as much as they can but when they find their very life and identity are in danger they throw off all shackles and fight with full force to foil the foul attempts of their adversary" (Singh, 2005, p. 22). Furthermore, Sidhwa being a Parsee by religion, keenly talks about her religious and

cultural customs both praising and criticizing in humorous style the lives of her Parsee characters, especially in her novel 'The Crow Eaters'. However, being a woman, she pays close attention to the lives of women generally and within Pakistani society specifically. Her novels 'Ice Candy Man' and 'The Pakistani Bride' deals with Pakistani Muslim characters.

Feminism is a movement that has played a vital role in projecting the suppressed status of women in the patriarchal society. In the domain of patriarchal culture, woman is a social construct, a site on which masculine meaning gets spoken and masculine desires enacted. As Sushila Singh puts it in "Feminism and Recent Fiction in English":

Human Experience for centuries has been synonymous with the masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete.

Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life.

Many contemporary writers have projected the plight of women based on caste, creed, religion, gender- prejudices, community and beliefs, and are trying to suggest some pragmatic solutions to them. Though the conservative social norms and myths of feminine behaviour are challenged all over the world yet a change in the attitude of patriarchal society towards woman is almost negligible. The year 1947 was a year of disruption and turmoil in India, in fact it can be registered as a period of worst religious riots in the history of India but Bapsi Sidhwa's novel Ice-Candy Man is a marvelous representation of a series of female characters who have survived and sustained.

The transparency of the picture of carnage during Hindu-Muslim riots in 1947 is given in a realistic way by Sidwa. The novel mirrors men becoming adversary on the basis of their religion and also represents the changing political scenario of the country. Emotional turmoil, individual weakness, barbarities of communal riots and the brutalities inflicted on women amidst this iconoclastic ruthlessness and communal frenzy have been very realistically projected by the novelist. Lenny the female protagonist relates the horrors of violence and her personal observations and reactions with

such profundity that the protagonist not only observes but she also analyses men's libidinous and depraved attention towards women, abhorrent male sexual desire, women's affliction as they are reduced to the status of sexual objects, and relates the objectionable disadvantages both social and civil, to which they are subjected.

The Pakistani Bride and *Water* are novels about South Asian societies characterized by a mind/body divide, similar to the one that existed in the classical Western Cartesian Philosophy. Marked by a distinct and dominant reverence of religion in everyday life, these societies exhibit a clear inclination to privilege transcendence over imminence, the spiritual world over the material, rationality over corporeality, and consequently men over women. *The Bride* is a story about women and marriage written against the backdrop of the relatively newly independent Islamic Republic of Pakistan. *Water* set in the historical context of a pre-independent Indian Society revolves around the themes of marriage and widowhood. Both novels are linked and dominated by images of women who are primarily conceived in terms of corporeality and sexuality of their bodies. Sidhwa shows in *The Pakistani Bride* and *Water* that whether it is Hindu- Brahmin patriarchal society of pre-independence India or the Islamic andocentric social set-up of post independent Pakistan, both societies consistently focus on the physiological reproductive functions of women as far as the figure of the female body is concerned. They centralize it to establish the position of the woman's existence in the role of a wife/or mother.

The characters of Zaitoon, Carol and Shehnaz in *The Pakistani Bride* and those of Chuhiya, Kalyani and Shakuntala in *Water* illustrate that the woman has no right to assert her individual self in the prevalent patriarchal cultural norms and customs of Pakistani society and the dominant socio- religious doctrines of India, and she cannot achieve the status of an independent being like a man. She is always the other, the secondary, the marginal, the sublime, defined in terms of a system which exists with the sole purpose to procreate and immortalize the name of men almost giving them the status of Divine in life. A source of panic and anxiety for women is that she is not in control of her own body without any male supervision in almost all South Asian Societies. Consequently, the men become the rulers, the manipulators

in the institutions of marriage and widowhood in these societies that gives them complete and unquestionable control over the female bodies and particularly the sexuality of women thus making them commodities for use. Women act as the accomplice of men due to the internalization of patriarchal ideologies especially in Sidhwa's fiction as the women in her fiction tend to keep the patriarchal oppression in place by their strong will.

The Pakistani Bride is written in the vein of realist narrative. Zaitoon, the heroine of the novel while struggling to escape from the cruel Pakistani tribal society where she has been married manages to escape from there to find an independent life of her own. Sidhwa counters the domineering patriarchal discourse of Pakistani literature by providing an alternative image of a strong and confident female. This alternative image of a strong and confident female creates awareness about history and belonging. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1990) explain the concept of feminist Historiography as:

Historiography 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 unforgivable 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 tribal's 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 Dosenbrock, 1992).*

The real girl of the story becomes Zaitoon in Sidhwa's *The Pakistani 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, plots and the substance is. Nature and emotional instincts of the characters are outstretched to an extent that they tend to adopt themselves to exist in that harsh geographical place. The novel reflects conflict among man, woman and 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 a 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 Sikander, 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 her central figure of the novel.

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 Quila Gujjar Singh, Lahore. Qasim fixes her marriage at sixteen with Sakhi. He is the son of Qasim's cousin, Misri Khan. Miriam, Mustaq and Ashiq try to convince Qasim about the differences of the Punjab and Kohistani cultures, and opine that the marriage would be complete failure. 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. 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 sit 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. These two men rape her. And finally, after ten days of struggle, she is restless and half dead, moves by crawling to the granite bridge, the path to her freedom. 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.

Sidhwa opines categorically that the term 'wife', is not a fixed and closed term in our society. The women of the household have an unfixed, unlimited, ambiguous and always changing set of rules to observe. Men, whatever position they hold whether as husbands, fathers or brothers are the generators of those rules. They show no ambiguity in changing the rules. Their rules are the laws of the house. Words of 'shame', 'honour' and 'social position', have meanings only for women, men are free of such moral and religious bonds. They can be ruthless without losing their honour.

In *Water*, a Brahmin husband rages at his wife. "a woman's role in life is to get married and have sons. That is why she is created: to have sons! That is all."(p.8)

The story of *Water* is divided into two sections, in which the first part deals with the institution of marriage, while the second focuses on widowhood. In the first section, Sidhwa introduces her readers to the

family of her female protagonist, Chuyia. Through the dynamics of the marital relationship of Somnath, Chuyia's father and Bhagya, her mother, Sidhwa is able to capture the essence of Brahmin objectification of women as wives and mothers. This section closes with a discussion of Chuyia's marriage to Hira Lal which sheds light on the use of the institution of marriage by Brahmin patriarchy to control the sexuality of women and to use their bodies for socio- economic gain. The next section begins with the news of Chuyia's widowhood, followed by a detailed description of the rituals that publicly mark her status as a widow. She is abandoned by her mother-in-law in an ashram at Rawalpur where she meets widows of various age groups, some being young like Kalyani, others middle aged like Shakuntala or very old , as a Bua. The ashram is run by a widow named Madhumati who forcefully uses Kalyani for prostitution to cover the expenses of the ashram and to satisfy her personal drug addiction. Narayan, a young Brahmin follower of Gandhi, falls in love with Kalyani but his efforts to marry her thwarted by both his mother and Madhumati. Eventually, Kalyani commits suicide before her secret marriage to Narayan because she finds out that his father had been one of her regular customers. Being deprived of her source of income, Madhumati sends a very young Chuyia to one of her clients. Chuyia's rape galvanizes Shakuntala to send Chuyia away from Rawalpur with Narayan. Through the second section, Sidhwa captures the extreme destitution of the Brahmin widows who are sentenced to a life of shame and misery in the name of religion, and uses it to question the logic that necessitates their public humiliation and maltreatment. By exposing the economic benefits achieved by Brahmin men from the marginalization of widows, Sidhwa casts suspicion over the true motive involved in condemning Brahmin women to celibacy after the death of their husbands.

Marriage and widowhood are the two institutions that demarcate and define the structure of Hindu Brahmin Widowhood as presented by Sidhwa in her novels like the two opposite sides of the same coin. The body of Hindu Brahmin women, belonging to various age groups and economic strata, forms the central and connecting link between the two sections. It is a body that is loved and loathed, honoured and shamed, desired and desiring, doubted and subversive, licentious and pure, guarded and

violated, controlled and feared but most importantly, it is an inscriptive surface used by Brahmin patriarchy to construct an ideal woman which it can control, manipulate and use for its advantage.

The rituals and practices associated with widowhood in Hinduism are highlighted by Sidhwa through the characters of Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala and other widows living in the Rawalpur ashram. Martha Alter Chen reports in "Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India" that widowhood has come to be dreaded by Hindu women not only because of its grief and trauma but also because of the shame and guilt linked with it.

In today's perspective what I found challenging in the novels of Sidhwa is that she questions the rationality of the monolithic condemnation of all so called Brahmin widows, irrespective of their age and circumstances by making Chuyia one of the victims of the persecution and oppression resulting from widowhood, but also questions the compliance and criminal silence of the society that condones the marginalization and suffering of widows.

The remarkable relevance of the story can be ascertained from the ray of hope which flickers when Gandhi's train passes through the village, and makes the prospect of rescue from punishing Hindu traditions seems conceivable. The aura of the growing influence of Gandhi does in fact seem to predict a better future for the victims of tradition. The violent protests against Deepa Mehta's film remind us once again that the unthinking adherence to tradition is still palpable, still very much alive. Talking of *Water*, Sidhwa says, "Besides, being a gripping story, the plot also deals with the oppressive hold that traditions have on women and tells of oppression and constraints that govern even a girl child's life in a patriarchal society."

In *The Pakistani Bride* 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 denies women their identity and makes 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 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 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.

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 faithful 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 Pakistani Bride*, the woman is shown as a commodity, "any girl... was worth more than a loan due."(Sidhwa1984). 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 characters of Zaitoon and Chuyia, Sidhwa mocks the institution of marriage. She herself being a woman in status is far away from any of relationship. A man's superiority and authority is judged by

how well he can control his sanctity woman. Men in *The Pakistani Bride* exploit the custom of purdah to suit their interests. This exploitation renders purdah as a tool of patriarchal oppression for women. It renders purdah as merely female enclosures that begin to suffocate her and which need to be torn apart to assert individuality. Nilufer Bharucha (1998) in her article "Inhabiting Enclosures and Creating Spaces: The World of Women in Indian Literature" analyses novels by different women writers such as Bapsi Sidhwa, Dina Mehta, Attia Hosain and Gita Hariharan. These women writers belong to different ethno- religious backgrounds such as Parsee, Muslim and Hindu. Bharucha highlights how these women writers present their Parsee, Muslim and Hindu female characters living in male defined enclosures, which are both physical and metaphorical. Regarding Hindu and Muslim women she explains the doctrinal and scriptural force behind their physical enclosures and secondary status:

In Manusmriti, women are presented as meek, childlike creatures who have to be protected from their own waywardness- read as sexuality- by male control. A Hindu woman is bound within the enclosures of 'Izzat' (honour) and 'Sharam' (shame). (Bharucha 1998, p.100)

We find similar comments by Jain "living or dead, assertive or passive it is the men who are the centre of the novel, dividing property, siring children, violating woman, indulging in polygamy or visiting prostitutes, they define the line of action and limit of purdah" (Jain 1995, p.217) Tribal men who portray the attitude of keeping their women within the courtyards of their homes but boldly stare at Carol when they see her with the major.

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 tribesmen, and the cruel rapists. She escapes from all this hostility and survives.

The Pakistani Bride is about the “strength of nature- a force, perhaps of God, within one” (Sidhwa1984) human being Zaitoon is a symbol of human spirit which struggles against odds but exists with integrity. She is a representative of the strength of a woman, indefatigable, unyielding and irrepressible.

Thus we find that Sidhwa adopts a daring approach while dealing with issues like female identity. She being a Non -Muslim she focuses on her characters as individuals fending and coping with the unjust social attitude. They have an artistic and unique style to envision the image of woman in their perusal of identities under patriarchal structures that govern their daily lives. They explore the female identity in its entire complexity with female figures that either choose to submit or rebel according to their circumstances. Therefore Pakistani women writer, Sidhwa makes an effort to show not only multiple victimizations but the inherent courage, strength and resistance that woman is capable of. Sidhwa is famous for representing women’s psychology that has been conditioned since centuries and therefore she has a constructive approach towards the self effacement of women in her narratives and real life. Her novels end on a positive note and no woman character demeans herself as a lost person even though they sometimes might fail to change the course of their lives or not. It is noteworthy that the striving and tormented women in her novels fight against odds and injustice, exploitation and oppression with audacity and strength and serve as examples for other women in future to come out of their enclosed shelves and rise as new women against the constructs of age old patriarchal system-a system which should long be buried alive.

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