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The Plight of Women in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*

Bapsi Sidhwa has been known as a post-colonial feminist author who addresses effectively the issues of cultural difference and the place of women in Pakistani and Indian society. Critics have noted *The Pakistani Bride* for its investigation of cultural struggle and strong characterization. Sidhwa is a feminist and realist. One can see in her women characters the strength of resentment, the warmth of love and courage of one's beliefs. They combat to overcome the hurts of time and escape the hold of fate in whose hands they are often mere puppets.

Bapsi Sidhwa has very realistically depicted women's plight and exploitation in the patriarchal society. Men demonstrate their masculine powers and hence satisfy their desires by savagely assaulting women. Men as assaulter feel rejoicing and successful whereas women bear the pain and disgrace of the atrocity enacted upon them. But Sidhwa, as a novelist, talks of liberation of women.

All her novels are gynocentric but her second published novel, *The Pakistani Bride*, based on a real life story, is an exclusive praise to women's enthusiasm for life, their ability and unsubduable courage. In this novel Sidhwa presents a number of issues faced by the members of general public of Pakistan during and since the Partition of 1947, with a particular interest in the condition of women who are positioned at different levels in the class structure. This novel is a damning indictment of the Kohistani community in particular and the Pakistani society in general with regard to its brutal treatment of women. The women are marginalized and have, in a number of cases, no say in decision-making processes or actions which ultimately seals their fates. Women are denied an influential voice both in national issues and those which concern the power over their everyday lives. Sidhwa's female characters in *The Pakistani Bride*, as in all her other novels, are as strong if not stronger than the men who run their lives in the way that they resist the limitations of the definition of 'woman' which circumscribes their identity. "The Bride is dedicated to the incredibly simple, deprived, and courageous women of this magnificent country" (Paranjape 94).

It is mainly a story of two brides – Zaitoon and Carol, but it is prefaced with a short account of yet another bride, Afshan. She, at fifteen, is given in marriage to Qasim, a boy of ten, just because her father Resham Khan has not been able to repay the loan he took from the boy's father, Arbab, a year ago. So Afshan is sold into marriage to compensate for her father's failure to repay the money. This transaction reveals the status of woman as nothing more than a bargaining commodity, whose role as such has already been decided. The full extent of this injustice is brought into focus when it is revealed that Qasim's father "had thought of marrying the girl himself" (Sidhwa, *The Pakistani Bride* 8). Afshan becomes Qasim's wife without knowing how close she had been to ending up as his step-mother.

Unfortunately, neither Afshan nor her children survive the ravages of the epidemic. Qasim goes to Jullundar, gets a job as watchman at a bank and lives there happily for three years. In the wake of Partition violence he kills one person and boards a train to Pakistan. Of thousands of people, sitting on the roof of the train, there are Sikandar, his wife Zohra with a baby on her lap and their little daughter, Munni. The train is ambushed near the border. Zohra and Sikandar are killed among others. Of the few lucky survivors there are Qasim and Munni. Munni clings to his legs saying, "Abba, Abba, my Abba!" (The Pakistani Bride 29) For a moment Qasim is at his wit's end. Her size and sobs remind him of his own little Zaitoon lost long ago but he suppresses his nostalgia and moves forward untangling the girl's grasp mercilessly. Fearing the danger from the noise he stops. He takes out his knife to cut her throat but she presses herself to him for protection. He closes the knife. The girl looks up and in her tear-stained face he finds a resemblance to his daughter. He kneels before her and the girl looking into his eyes, says, "You aren't my Abba" (The Pakistani Bride 30). Moved to tenderness Qasim says, "Munni, you are like the smooth, dark olive, the zaitoon, that grows near our hills. . . The name suits you. . . I shall call you Zaitoon" (The Pakistani Bride 30). Munni thus becomes Zaitoon and Qasim, her new father.

Zaitoon is now sixteen years old and her father Qasim is nearing fifty. Age has made him nostalgic. He often talks about his past life in Kohistan and his accounts are so fascinating that Zaitoon sometimes has a yearning desire to see what she considers her native land. In her imagination she can see tall, light-skinned, proud, heroic and incorruptible men living beside crystal streams of melted snow, with their bright, rosy-cheeked children and beautiful women.

Qasim arranges Zaitoon's marriage to the tribal man. It is Miriam who brings out the contrast and points out how Qasim himself has changed, "they are savages. Brutish, uncouth, and ignorant!... most of them are bandits, they don't know how to treat women!" (The Pakistani Bride 93-94) Whereas Zaitoon is brought-up in liberal ways of life in Lahore. She is educated and really belongs to the plains. Miriam is even prepared to adopt her as her own daughter since she has doubts about the ways of the tribal. She tries to explain this to even Zaitoon but Zaitoon does not listen to her. As she is young, she is guided by "visions of the glorious home of her father's forefathers and of the lover her fancies envisaged" (The Pakistani Bride 98). Both Nikka and Miriam advise her to return to them if circumstances required so.

Thus begins the journey of Zaitoon into unknown yet romantic mountains, into the civilization completely different from the one in which she is born and brought up. The novelist brings into focus the old world of Kohistani mountain-life to which Qasim now returns after fifteen years of his life, where "we are not bound hand and foot by government clerks and police. We live by our own rules—calling our own destiny! We are free as the air you breathe!" (The Pakistani Bride 100) But he forgets that it is difficult and insecure world for his daughter, the bride to be of the hillman. There is shift not only in the scenario of the novel but also the tone of the novel. The novel which so far appears episodic, gets its central focus when the novelist introduces us to the inner world of the mountain life, especially to the life of the tribal women. Even before the marriage Sakhi the bridegroom is jealous of Ashiq who helps Zaitoon to scramble down the cliff.

Sidhwa marks out the old world of savagery into which Zaitoon has to step in. Zaitoon herself is aware of this and says "I cross this spot and my life changes.... But the step into her new life had been taken a month back and she was moving fatefully on its momentum" (The Pakistani Bride 153). Although she is just sixteen yet she is aware of her predicament, she steps into the closed world of mountains almost the pathless

wilderness. The nature which is attractive and majestic is also terrifying and dangerously suffocating. Sidhwa emphasizes the two aspects of nature and symbolically presents the eternal adventure of man into the unknown and his struggle for the survival against the cruelty of nature. At one level Zaitoon's struggle is a struggle of man against nature but at another level it is also the struggle of a woman against both man and nature.

Sidhwa sharply focuses on the significant events and situation of life into which Zaitoon finds herself. She is revulsed by the faces around her, the rubbery bread offered to her and the cave like huts instead of the rosy picture of her dreams. Bapsi Sidhwa places Zaitoon in the unfamiliar and savage surroundings and describes fully the mountain people and their life with great insight. The conflict at this stage is presented deftly. To Qasim the mountain man, his honour is dearer to him than his own life or his daughter's life even though he has a nagging fear for the girl's life. Man's wish to realize his own dreams even by sacrificing his own child's life to insecurity and hardships of the cruel traditions of the tribal men is fully explored by Sidhwa.

The first night of Zaitoon's marriage reveals both the proprietorial lust and jealousy on one hand and sympathetic consideration for this delicate girl of sixteen in Sakhi. Sidhwa artistically and delicately describes the tragic and comic aspects of the first night of marriage. Very few women writers, whether Indian or Pakistani have endeavoured to describe the initiation into sex life of the young bride in such detail.

Sakhi's sense of insecurity with this girl of the plains always surges up in him murderous instincts and he treats her cruelly. He frightens her to such an extent that her attempts to adjust herself to her fate appear futile to her. She cannot understand Sakhi's murderous jealousy and hate as she is brought up and educated in the liberal ways of life in Lahore. The savage subjugating will of Sakhi frustrates her. Bapsi Sidhwa fully explores this moment in the life of Zaitoon who finds herself at a point of no return. Her fantasy shatters like the ice broken into tiny pieces at the first touch of reality.

The episode of Sakhi hitting the animal almost to death and his mother Hamida's attempt to save the animal, his beating his own mother and even Zaitoon brings into focus the tribal manhood and the barbarous views of honour. The woman whether she is a mother or a wife is savagely ill-treated. It is man against woman and there is no code of respecting the mother or an elderly woman.

When Zaitoon realizes that her attempt to adjust herself to tribal life is not appreciated and that her husband Sakhi is always jealous and keeps beating her for her innocently gazing at the jeeps in the distance, she resolves to run away. She is not ready to be a martyr to the imaginary insults and infidelity that is attributed to her by her husband. His thoughtless, cruel and inhuman behaviour drives her to despair and to the only alternative of running away. Sidhwa presents a powerful character in a sixteen-year-old Zaitoon who prefers death in the mountains to being beaten into a spiritless woman like her mother-in-law Hamida. She is aware of the fact that escaping in the mountains is almost impossible as they are treacherously pathless. She does not even know where she would be going at the end of her journey. She simply feels that if she could escape and cross the bridge, she may get help. In order to avoid being caught up by the members of her family, she chooses an indirect, difficult and untrodden path and consequently is lost in the mountains. The mountains whose magic and splendour she had loved and admired are now her enemy. For nine days and nights she wanders the mountains like a wounded animal hunted by the tribal men. Zaitoon is trying to escape from her prison-like conditions but it is not escaping to freedom as she knows that one cannot cheat one's fate. The next moment she instinctively and courageously hides herself to survive. She succeeds in her struggle to reach Major Mushtaq and his military

camp. 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 realities of life, where man is the hunter and exploiter, cruel and inhuman treating woman and animal alike. It is a barbaric world of uncivilized people.

After placing Zaitoon's plight at the centre of the novel Sidhwa juxtaposes the civilized Carol's life with her Pakistani husband Farukh. An ordinary young American working in a store, Carol has not completed her studies. To her, Pakistan appears to be a land of romance and adventure, and Farukh seems an answer to all her drudgery in life. Though she fails to understand the twilight world of veils and zenanna but after a year or so she slowly realizes that "the repressed erotic climate was beginning to affect her. In the States, what she had thought was unique attraction for Farukh had in fact been her fascination with the exotic, and later the attraction had disconcertingly extended itself to include his friends and relatives—and even acquaintances" (The Pakistani Bride 176). Though she tries to conform to the norms of the country, Farukh's jealousy combined with the flattering attention she receives shatters her resistance when she comes across Farukh's friend Major Mushtaq. The Major is an attractive, handsome young man who seems to have stepped out of the romantic poetry. In Farukh's absence she flirts with him and thinks that she had really fallen in love with him. She decides to divorce Farukh and marry Mushtaq since "growing up in the 1950s, Carol was inexorably conditioned to marriage. She had only one recourse with which to reconcile her feelings and her actions. She had found her true love. He must marry her" (The Pakistani Bride 179). Little does she realize that in Pakistan men marry their cousins and as Mushtaq explains:

In spite of what you hear about our being able to have four wives, we take marriage and divorce very seriously. It involves more than just emotions. It's a social responsibility ... For one thing, at the very least, my wife's life would become unbearably confined, drab and unhappy. And we're cousins, you know. Our families would make my life – and yours – miserable. We'd be ostracised" (The Pakistani Bride 181).

For Mushtaq, it is one thing to have an affair with the American woman who is liberal in her ways, since she could fulfil his need for a woman in the loneliness of his remote posting, and another thing to have a permanent relationship of marriage with the wife of his friend. Besides, he cannot even dream of forsaking his wife and children and distinctly points out the difference between the two ways of life. After being rejected by Mushtaq, Carol turns back to Farukh, thinks of having children, and making her marriage successful. She even dreams of going into the tribal world but this fantasy too, is shattered when she come across a young tribal woman's head bobbing up and down in the dark waters of the river. In a crude and painful manner, all her romance and fantasy, are crushed to disillusion. Mushtaq asserts that jealousy is universal and "women get killed for one reason or other ... imagined insults, family honour, infidelity ..." (The Pakistani Bride 223) all the time in Pakistan. Now Carol faces the realities of woman's life in Pakistan and comprehends fully the fallacy of her fantasies.

The novelist poignantly describes her disillusion with life: "Her fantasy—set off by his startling handsomeness, his intense animalism, and her fascination with tribal lore and romantic savagery – took wing" (The Pakistani Bride 221) only to be shattered into thousand pieces. She could not even salvage her marriage to Farukh as she has glimpses of the horror of generations of cloistered womanhood. The encounter with the floating face of a tribal girl triggers the avalanche of emotions bringing her firmly to the ground. She realizes the difference between the two cultures: "A branch of Eve had parted some

way in time from hers" (The Pakistani Bride 227). She becomes fully conscious of her plight "her independent attitudes would get her killed!" (The Pakistani Bride 227) Sidhwa brings into focus the issue of Pakistani women's plight through the eyes of an outsider, an American bride of the Pakistani man. This is apprehended through the plight of Zaitoon: "That girl had unlocked a mystery, affording a telepathic peephole through which Carol had had a glimpse of her condition and the fateful condition of girls like her" (The Pakistani Bride 228).

Carol's life so far has been a hopeless drift but Zaitoon with courage and faith deflects the direction of her life. Carol, who is from the free world, can think in terms of her individuality but Zaitoon has no such notions. She does not wish to live at the mercy of the cruel men. She instinctively chooses to be herself even like the eagle bird with broken wings trying to fly into the sky. Her fight is against both man and nature which she can vanquish through her sheer will-power (Khudi), "the strength of nature—a force, perhaps of God, within one" (The Pakistani Bride 229).

The two cultures cannot meet, be they of Pakistan and America or the mountains and the plains. Carol's conflicts are resolved when she decides to accept her failure in her marriage to Pakistani Farukh and decides to go back to her own culture and land. Zaitoon's successfully getting the help from across the bridge, from the Major, resolves her struggle and she may see the light of the rising sun in her own land.

The novelist has used the bridge as a symbol of the divide between the two cultures. Zaitoon of the plains awakens the tribal women to comprehend their plight which is crystallized in Hamida whose sympathies are with Zaitoon and who does not want Zaitoon to be caught and killed by her own men. Silently but forcefully Zaitoon has established her individuality. We have the picture of Zaitoon moving from passivity to active assertion of her will against the cold, cruel men and rigid patterns of existence. She escapes to the powerful and terrifying mountains and ultimately defying her fate she crosses over to free and normal life of civilization. What is adventure for both Carol and Zaitoon into the romantic rosy world of fantasy turns out to be a voyage into dark and cruel layers of humanity. It is a struggle to seek freedom from negation of life and freedom to attain one's identity.

The images and glimpses of the life of other women in *The Pakistani Bride* are not less encouraging. Hamida, Miriam and Shahnaz counteract the patriarchal power in their own ways. On hearing the voice of the ox being mercilessly beaten by her son, Sakhi, Hamida not only rushes to the spot but flings herself at him, wedging her body between him and the ox. The cruel Sakhi does not spare even his mother and hits her on the shoulder and the legs with his staff. She gets badly injured but she succeeds in saving the life of the ox. Again, she feels great sympathy for Zaitoon though she has run away. The very thought that Zaitoon will be killed by her son and his clansmen fills her with disgust for their code of honour.

Miriam is thoroughly a domesticated woman. She regards Qasim as brother and though they live in the same house as one family, she seldom talks to him but when she learns of his decision to give Zaitoon in marriage to a tribal, she gets so overwrought that she uses harsh words not only for him but also for his whole clan. Her protest has no immediate effect as Zaitoon is married to a tribal but on the very next day of the marriage Qasim realizes, "Miriam after all might have been right" (The Pakistani Bride 166).

Shahnaz's profession as a dancing-girl demands that she dance before everyone who pays her money but it doesn't mean that any Tom, Dick or Harry is allowed to use her as he likes, and when some lout like Nikka tries to do so, he is handled so tactfully that his attempt is foiled without causing any embarrassment. She entertains Nikka and Qasim

with some songs and dance but Nikka is not satisfied. He wants to see her dance without clothes on her body and pays extra money for it. Shahnaz goes on taking off her clothes till she is stark naked. She dances erotically and teases them wantonly “secure in the knowledge of her inaccessibility” (The Pakistani Bride 78). Nikka and Qasim, with their carnal desires fully roused, want to fall on her to satisfy their lust but they find themselves utterly helpless as their doctored drink has fixed them to their place. They are not in position even to sit properly. Shahnaz and her so-called mother succeed in safeguarding their honour.

Sidhwa exposes the patriarchal practices of the society which marginalize their growth and development and also represents women’s psychology that has been toned by centuries of conditioning. Hence, we can conclude that Sidhwa as a writer has a constructive approach towards women’s predicament. By leading a contented life they paralyze their lives but if they desire they will have option to break through their plight and get opportunities for betterment. Hence we see that *The Pakistani Bride* ends on a positive note. It matters little whether it succeeds in changing the course of their life or not. What is remarkable is that they never yield. They always strive to come out of their plight. They protest and fight against injustice, exploitation and oppression with vehemence and show the way for other women so that they may move forward from their degraded and tormented state to start their lives afresh. Zaitoon manages to save her life despite the looming threat. Carol, an American girl who is equally oppressed in her married life, decides to break free and returns to her own American culture.

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