

Woman's Subjugation: A Critical Study of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*

PURNENDU SHANKER

Abstract. By definition, post colonialism is a period of time after colonialism and incorporates writings of those countries which have been affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. Bapsi Sidhwa, a post colonial voice of Pakistan, writes about the identity of the womenfolk of her country and in the novel, *The Pakistani Bride* has depicted the plights of the three brides – Zaitoon, Afsan and Carol who are subject to all types of gender biases and are victims of different social codes for males and females. Sidhwa's novel dexterously captures the condition of her women as subjugated entities and provides picture of the grim battle that they fight to secure bare minimum level of self-respect. The novel ends with the protagonist leaving the world of subjugation and entering the life of survival but the moot question is still unanswered, "Where should she go after all?"

Keywords : Colonial abandonment and alienation; identity of womenfolk; gender bias and gender segregation; patriarchy; subjugation and abuse of women rights.

Post-colonial literature is a body of literary writings that responds chiefly to the following subjects :

- Social or cultural change or erosion;
- Misuse of power and exploitation of the natives. In this subject, the main question is who really should be in power and why and how does an independence day really mean independence for the colonized citizens;
- Colonial abandonment and alienation. The individuals tend to ask themselves in the new country as to 'where do they fit' and 'how do they make their living'. The quest for identity is one serious point here.

Bapsi Sidhwa, a Punjabi -Parsi -Pakistani, is one such post-colonial Pakistani novelist who, in the independent Pakistan, that is a country free from British colonization, depicts in her novel *The Pakistani Bride*, the identity of the women folk. The novel mainly presents stories of three brides – Zaitoon, Afshan and Carol. Zaitoon, the most important bride, is the leading character of the novel. At the early age of ten, she is stopped from attending the school and is transferred the entire household tasks and with that begins her tale of subjugation. Afshan, another bride, aged fifteen, is married to a ten -year old boy named Qasim after the transaction of amount is made, clearly showing that the woman is but a commodity

of bargain. Carol, the third bride, is a lady from California, who falls in love with a Pakistani soldier, but she is denied permission to marry him on the doubt that she may get converted to Islam. Despite the fact, Carol marries Farukh and in his society faces the grim fact of gender segregation. She finds that it has different codes for male and female.

Sidhwa, in this novel, has vividly depicted the traumatic and blurred picture of woman, sacrificed on the altar of social institutions of our male chauvinistic society which has never been able to give proper right to the womenfolk. They have just assigned them duties without sanctioning them rights. A shloka from Bhartrihari, the great Sanskrit poet, is worth quoting here:

कार्येषु मंत्री, करणेषु दासी,
भोज्येषु माता, शयनेषु रम्भा ।
धर्मेऽनुकूला क्षमया धरित्री,
भार्या च षड्गुण्यवतीय दुर्लभा ॥ (*Nitishatkam*)

[Performing duties she gives advice like a minister, in serving she obeys like a maid-servant, in feeding she is like mother, as a bed partner she is Rambha, true companion during religious rites, forbearing like earth; such a life-partner possessing these six qualities is very rare].

The lines above assign the woman the duties of a maid, a housekeeper and of a wife and none speak about their rights. Women are supposed to be the speechless patience against patriarchal hegemonies and this universal question of women's subjugation is the central theme of this novel.

In the very beginning we come across a conversation between Qasim and his father wherein we get the impression that a woman is a tradable commodity. For paying his debts, Resham Khan has promised his daughter to be given in marriage to Qasim's father :

The sturdy, middle aged tribesman knew just how generous the offer was. Any girl – and he made sure that this one was able –bodied- was worth more than the loan due. (*The Pakistani Bride* 7)

Clearly, marriage is reduced to settling a bargain rather than being a relationship based on mutual understanding. When Afshan is married to Qasim, the son of Arbab, it is not she who accepts him verbally rather an old aunt:

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Thrice she asked if she would accept Qasim ...as her husband and thrice an old aunt murmured 'yes' on her behalf. (8)

Sidhwa is out here to interrogate the institution of marriage and the Islamic way of contract in marriage. The age old role of a woman as a child bearing machine is seen as the most important role and the question of her education, as secondary rather of least importance :

Now that she's learned to read the holy Quran what will she do with more reading and writing- boil and drink it? She is not going to become a Baboo or an officer! No, Allah willing, she will get married and have children. (52)

Women have been shown as a territory to be conquered by men. The relationship is but of a master and a slave, that of a colonizer and a colonized and the colonizer getting the freedom to abuse the occupied territory. A scene from the brothel street provides an ample evidence of the sadomasochistic attitude of men:

Now and again, standing with her in the enclosure shouted, "Nach Pagli! Dance mad woman and jabbed her with a cane. (65)

Later on, in the novel Qasim has been shown offering his daughter Zaitoon to one of his tribesmen simply because he has given his word and when Miriam tries to make him understand that she won't adjust to the tribal culture and code, Qasim grows furious and asserts his proprietorial rights by saying, "she is my daughter" and I have given my words!" the word of a kohistani." (94) When Miriam tells Zaitoon "tell your father you don't want to marry a tribal", she says "I cannot cross my father". (Ibid.)

Zaitoon's acceptance to go by the will of her father is the result of her long conditioning in an atmosphere wherein rebellion against the authoritative, anarchic and despotic patriarchal set up is seen as a sin against divine law. The ideology of submissiveness has been cultivated in her to such an extent that she views herself as an object of male gratification and as an entity to honour tribal men.

Later on, when Carol offers Zaitoon the gift, she is so full of gratitude that "their irises fused in an age old communion- an understanding they shared of their vulnerabilities as woman. For an instant Carol felt herself submerged in the helpless drift of Zaitoon's life. Free will! She thought contemptuously, recalling heated discussion with her friends on campus. This girl had no more control over last

destiny than a caged animal ... perhaps neither had she ... (136) and thinking so, she surrendered herself to her fate.

On the very first night of her stay in the hills, Zaitoon had a vague recollection of an unpleasant dream anticipating an unpleasant future that destiny holds for her in this land of tribals rather savage brutes. She cries in dismay, "Abba, take me to the planes. If I must marry, marry me to someone from the plains I will die rather than live here". (157)

Her cry in dismay kindles Qasim's wrath and he wrenched her slender, clinging fingers and pushed her away threatening her with dire consequences. The authoritative tone of Qasim finds best expression:

I have given my words. Your marriage is to be a week from today. Tomorrow your betrothed goes to invite guests from the neighbouring village. I have given my words. On it, depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life. If you besmirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands. (158)

Qasim behaves like a master lording over his slave.

The idea of a woman as a conquered land is not confined only to marriage but in other aspects of her life also. She is an entity for gratifying her husband's animal instinct. She faces sexexploitation under her husband:

Sakhi surveyed his diffident bride with mounting excitement. Here was a woman all his own, he thought with proprietorial lust and pride. (159)

When Qasim leaves the village, Zaitoon expresses a kind of shock. She cries and requests him to take her with him because, "she had gauged the savage subjugating will of the man she was married to. His uneasiness and effort to calm her were a desperate comfort." (169)

When Zaitoon waves her hands on a far off vehicle, seeking her emancipation, Sakhi inflicts choicest abuses on her, "you whore, he hissed ... He cleared his throat and spat full on her face. You dirty black little bitch, waving at those pigs. You wanted him to stop and f***k you didn't you. (185)... I'll kill you lying slut". (186) Lastly, she escapes and after her escape she is hunted by the clansmen as she has broken the brutal tribal code of conduct, and during her tortuous journey to freedom she is raped by a couple of beastly men from Cheerkul.

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Zaitoon's struggle for emancipation from the societal oppression comes to an end when Mustaq finds her half dead and half alive and takes her to his camp. He persuades Sakhi and his clansmen that Zaitoon is dead. On hearing this, "Misri Khan's massive shoulders straightened. He thrust his chest forward and his head rose high. It was as if a breeze has cleared the poisonous air suffocating them and had wafted an intolerable burden from their shoulders". (244)

In the end, we find Zaitoon ending her journey from subjugation and entering a life of survival. But the moot question is "where should she go". She cannot return to father's house as a girl running away from husband is not acceptable. Sidhwa leaves this question unanswered because the societal norms have become higher than the humanitarian standard.

Purnendu Shanker

Associate Professor, Dept. of English,
S.U.College, Hilsa (Nalanda)

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