

FATHOMLESS OCEAN

GOMEZ SOPHIA
U. ANAMICA



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
JAYARAJ ANNAPACKIAM COLLEGE FOR WOMEN
(AUTONOMOUS)
PERIYAKULAM, TAMILNADU, INDIA

*They were in their own sunshine,
basking in the golden glow of the Ocean*



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MARGINALISATION OF PAKISTANI WOMEN IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S *PAKISTANI BRIDE*

Dr. J. JOSEPHINE

Bapsi Sidhwa is widely recognized as one of the most prominent Pakistani-Anglophone novelists writing today. She was raised in the Parsi community, a religious and ethnic minority in Pakistan. She was born on August 11, 1938, in Karachi, Pakistan, then part of India. Her family belongs to the Parsi ethnic community which practices the Zoroastrian religion. She received her bachelor's degree from Kinnaird College for Women in 1956 and also served the advisory committee on women's development for former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. In 1991 she was awarded the Sitara-i-Imtiaz, Pakistan's highest national honor in arts. She has also received a variety of grants and awards for her fiction, including a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1987, a New York Times Book Review Notable Book of the Year award for *Cracking India* in 1991, and a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest award in 1993.

Bapsi Sidhwa is a Pakistan's leading diasporic writer. 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. She has received countless rejections for her first and second novels, *The Bride* and *The Crow Eaters*. So she decided to publish *The Crow Eaters* in Pakistan privately. Though the experience was one she says, "I would not wish on anyone," it marks the beginning of her literary fame (Sidhwa "Interview" 295). She has received numerous awards and honorary professorships for these first two works. She has gained awards for her two most recent novels, *Cracking India* and *An American Brat*. These include the Pakistan National honors of the Patrasn Bokhri award for *The Bride* in 1985 and the highest honor in the arts, 1991. Her third novel, *Cracking India* has also received the award for German Literature and a nomination for Notable Book of the Year from the American Library Association, and was mentioned as a New York Times "*Notable Book of the Year*," all in 1991.

Sidhwa's first three novels focus on Parsi families and the communities in the city of Lahore and outlying areas that were incorporated into the newly formed nation of Pakistan. *The Crow Eaters*—written after *The Bride*, but published first.

The Pakistani Bride (1990) is a novel which describes the tragic plight of women's struggle to live in a brutal and self-centered patriarchal society. It is a true story which is based on a girl from mountains who tries to escape from her husband's home and was followed and killed at the hands of her in laws. Although in reality the girl was murdered but in her book Sidhwa allows her heroine to run and to survive all odds laid down against her by her in-laws. The book primarily presents stories of three brides - Zaitoon, Afshan and Carol.

The novel is based on a true story which is narrated to Sidhwa and her family members who stayed at an army camp in the remotest regions of the Karakoram Mountains. A colonel incharge of the place and some engineers narrate the story of a girl from the plains. She is being threatened by an old tribal to marry his nephew. But the girl runs away after the marriage and hides herself in the cold mountains for fourteen days. The tribal men and her husband chase her, catch her and beat her severely, they throw her down into the turbulent waters of the Indus. Sidhwa with the help of her imagination and craftsmanship fictionalized this true story. She gives this sad tale a 'habitation and a local name'. The girl is named as Zaitoon. This novel more talks about the realistic picture of women, how they have been treated in the society. In this novel, Sidhwa also introduces a parallel story of an American girl and her flirtation with major Mushtaq of Pakistani army. In the main plot, Zaitoon is fascinated by her father's vision of the lost mountain paradise. When she got married in the mountains, she realizes that her romantic dreams of mountain life were only dreams. Reality shocks her. The novel ends with Zaitoon's epic struggle to find the bridge and cross it. Sidhwa makes a conscious departure from the ending of the true story. At the end of the novel, the girl is not killed; she safely crosses the bridge.

The first story is about a girl named Afshan. Zaitoon's father Qasim marries Afshan who is five years elder to him. The marriage takes

place out of compulsion because her father has not been able to repay his debts. Afshan has been offered as compensation for the loss and to cover up her father's failure. Neither the age gap matters nor the amount of the loan is mentioned. The amount could be ten rupee or ten thousand, however the daughter is always used for the settlement. This transaction exposes the position of a woman as nothing more than a "bargaining commodity". The wish of the girl is never important, not at the time of such settlements or at the time of 'Nikah' (marriage),

"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" (p.8). Afshan never sees her husband and she is quite surprised to see his husband's physical appearance. "She had been thinking that her groom was very young but she had thought that he would be, like herself, at least fifteen. She began to laugh, while tears of disappointment slid down her cheeks. She laughed uncontrollably and Qasim stung to the quick, rushed for the door". (p.10).

This shows the horrific dilemma of Afshan and how she reacts to her ill fate. Later in the story she further expresses her views: "I used to wander by the streams or sit on the some high place dreaming of my future husband .Gusts of wind enveloped me and I'd imagine the impatient caress of my lover", she said. She is accepted by the boy's family because "The sturdy middle- aged tribesman knew just how generous the offer was. Any girl- and he had made sure that this one was able-bodied – was worth more than the loan due" (p.7).

In our society women have to accept and adjust without any complaints in their everyday life. They are denied existence. Afshan, is left with no other option, than to accept her fate. The story has been dealt with utmost sympathy towards the subjugated women who are forced to accept their life partners as a bargain to the transactions amongst the male dominant society. It also highlights the innumerable sufferings that women have to go through in order to hold back their desires.

The second story in the novel is all about a lady from California named Carol. She falls in love with a Pakistani soldier but she is not

get converted to Islam and also that she may not be able to adjust to the highly conservative culture and traditions of the country. Finally she goes to Lahore, Pakistan where she experiences the over possessive attitude of her husband and she decides to go back to her native place. Through Carol's story tries to represent the problems faced by an open minded woman when she tries to settle down with a man of Islam religion. After her marriage Carol gets too much attention from her husband Farukh and the situation changes her. The Pakistani society has a strong segregation of genders.

Carol has brought up in the western style of living fails to understand this difference of genders and keeps on following her western ways. The unanticipated attention from Pakistani men flatters her and due to her western upbringing she enjoys this attention and feels attracted towards every friend, relative or acquaintance of Farukh who all the time criticizes her:

"You laugh too loudly, you touch men..." (p.109).

This male chauvinistic attitude of Farukh creates a gap in their relation. In the mountains of Dubair with Farukh, she gets attracted towards Major Mushtaq. Carol easily persuades Major Mushtaq as his family is in Peshawar and occasionally he visits him. The extra marital affair between Carol and Major Mushtaq results in Farukh's over-possessiveness and jealousy towards her. She asks Major Mushtaq to marry her but he also refuses saying:

"You don't understand all. 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 is a social responsibility...." (p.181).

Carol feels betrayed by Major Mushtaq and tries to settle with Farukh, but the separate moral codes of that society makes her to think about Farukh's reactions on her disloyalty. She knows:

“Women get killed for one reason or other...imagined insults, family honour, infidelity...” (p.223).

Terrified by the thought, she asks Mushtaq about Farrukh's reaction:

“Do you think Farukh would kill me? Mushtaq replies, “Who knows? I might, if you were my wife” (p.224).

Major Mushtaq's words reveal the true condition of women. Women have been subjugated, tortured, tormented and then killed at the hands of their male counterparts. And then it is said that women ask to get murdered. In our society there are different codes for males and females. Men and women are equally responsible for the crime but it is only women who are punished. Carol finds it difficult to cope up with the dual standards of the post-colonial society and decides to go back. She tells Farukh:

“I think I'm finally beginning to realize something...Your civilization is too ancient...too different...and it has always hurt me...really hurt me....” (p.229).

Even though she enjoys the undue attention and the over protective behavior of men towards her, she despises the dual standards of men. She feels restless by the traditional attitude of Pakistanis' towards the female members of the society. She goes back to America to regain her lost confidence and to be alive.

The third important bride of the novel is Zaitoon. She is the leading character of the book. She loses her parents in the communal riots during partition of the subcontinent, at the age of five. Zaitoon is going to Lahore along with her parents. Qasim is also in the same train. At the border, a group of looting Sikhs attack the train and murder Zaitoon's parents along with other passengers. In some way Qasim also manages to escape and in chaos he saves the little Zaitoon as well. Zaitoon, as called as Munni then clings to Qasim's legs calling him, “Abba, Abba, and my Abba!” Earlier he wants to cut her throat to get rid of her, as his tribal ways has taught him to end up the thing that bothers him. After a while

he accepts her as she reminds him of his dead daughter, who was also five years old at the time of her death. Therefore he adopts and name Munni after his dead daughter's name- Zaitoon. She adjusts herself according to the situation. With the help of Miriam and her husband Nikka, the childless neighbors of Qasim in Lahore, he brings up Zaitoon. Though they shower all their love and affection on Zaitoon, yet the societal norms make them behave in boundaries. Qasim has sent Zaitoon to school when she is ten years old, Miriam objects and tells Nikka:

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

This shows that women are subjugated not only at the hands of men but they themselves also play a part in suppressing other female members of the society. Initially this practice has been started by the male members of our society who fear that learned women might stand equivalent to them and these women might question their supremacy.

Also it clarifies that the discrimination starts at a very tender age. At the same time, it highlights the regular backbiting by other elder male chauvinists which continues the male dominance. In further sections of the story, Sidhwa gives a very clear description of the bias practiced against the women behind the four walls of the house. For female and male members of the society, the house is divided into separate portions - the inner and relatively darker parts of the room is given to the females to keep them safe from the outside world.

The environment inside the four walls of the house has been discriminated in form of polluted air to breathe is for the women and the furnishing too is in a very unhealthy and unhygienic conditions. It deals with the turmoil of the men folk during their stay at regions not suited to the basic development of womenfolk.

After her marriage Zaitoon has been treated very badly by her husband, Sakhi. On the very night of their wedding Sakhi behaves violently and beats Zaitoon:

"He crouched, lifting her legs free of silk. Fiercely kicking out, Zaitoon leapt over the charpoy. She screamed...and she screamed and screamed, 'Abba, save me,' she shrieked. Why didn't Qasim come? Or any of the others?" (p.160).

Moreover, Sakhi is provoked by his brother to keep his wife in his own hands:

"How is your wife from plains? You know, she requires a man to control her...'he murmured in thin-lipped scorn".

In one way or the other, Sakhi tortures and beats Zaitoon even for false reasons, he beats and kicks her until she faints and he gets exhausted.

"He beat her on the slightest pretext. She no longer thought of marriage with any sense of romance. She now lived only to placate him, keeping her head averted unless it was to listen to a command. Then her eyes were anxious and obsequious like those of Hamida (Sakhi's mother)". (p.174).

At the end, Zaitoon decides to run away from there and one day she goes to fetch water and hides herself behind the hills. After the journey of many days she reaches the military camp and is helped by the soldiers. Eventually her journey from subjugation to survival ends up, leaving her with a question, 'where should she go?' She cannot go back to the house of her husband neither she can go to Lahore where she will never be welcomed. Sidhwa leaves the question unanswered.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *A Pakistani Bride* is culminated with an insight into the insecurely poised position of womenfolk in the male dominant society. The writer has very clearly depicted the plight of women and the biased treatment of men towards them.

The novel provides us awareness about the domination of men and their atrocities on women. Zaitoon is a symbol of human spirit which struggles against all odds but exists with honesty. She is a representative of the strength of a woman. This male dominated society always tries to manipulate the laws and rules to overpower women. New unjust laws are

developed to silence the rebel. This novel also represents the female plight records the trauma of partition. Though the story speaks about Pakistani society or the Indian subcontinent yet the issues discussed are entirely universal. Since ages women have been tortured, killed and subjugated. Although the book reflects the society of 1940s but the issues discussed here still seem contemporary.

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