



THE PAKISTANI BRIDE: AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE FACE OF THE 'OTHER'

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Abstract

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel The Pakistani Bride is famous for its portrayal of the plight of women in patriarchal Pakistani society. This paper deals with the power and resilience of two main women characters - Zaitoon and Carol, who despite being stuck in traditional societies manage to break free from the manacles of a stifling and constricting life and choose to become masters of their lives despite acute adverse circumstances. The male characters like Qasim, Sakhi, Mushtaq and Farrukh despite their diverse economic and societal status, somehow manage to show their masculine tendencies to control the lives of women they are connected with in totally different ways. Qasim and Sakhi are illiterate and uneducated belonging to Kohistani tribal area whereas Mushtaq and Farrukh are well-educated and socially polished but all four men are not completely liberal in their attitude towards women. The gender disparity is quite apparent in the novel as to the problems faced by the women characters in the novel.

Keywords

Domination, Kohistani, Other, Partition, Patriarchal etc.

Full Article

Many narratives have captured the interest of the readers in unraveling the chronicles of partition providing moving and emotional details of its after effects and consequences. There have been novels like *The Skeleton*, *Cracking India*, *A Train to Pakistan* and many others which have made statements on the withering of societal, economic and ethical order at the cost of selfish and communal divisions during partition. The influence of partition on the lives of people of diverse communities and religions is apparent and lucid in the novels dealing with this traumatic situation.

Though Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* is set during the time of partition, it deals more with the issue of gender polarity than the crisis of partition. The novel is essentially a statement on the gender disparity in a patriarchal Pakistani society that historically associates women with what French feminist Helene Cixous propounds as 'repression' that has kept them in the dark (Cixous, 876). Through times immemorial, Eastern as well as Western philosophy have somehow marginalized women and delegated them to the periphery. The peripheral role has scarred the importance of the central role that women play in each and every sphere of life despite being pushed to the margins.

Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is a seminal work in feminist thought, in which she says that women are constructed as "the Other" in relation to the male "Subject" (De Beauvoir, 8). This means that women are seen as what men are not, rather than being defined and known by their own identities.

De Beauvoir's analysis highlights the societal construction of women as objects of male play and desire, rather than as autonomous individuals with their own individuality and existence.



Zaitoon, the central character of the novel, represents those women who are forced by circumstances and staunch religious societal rules to give up the desire for a free and liberal life in favour of becoming a ploy to enforce patriarchal mechanics. Her desire to live life in a big city like Lahore among educated masses received a blow when her father Qasim Khan promised Misri Khan, a tribal Kohistani, to marry Zaitoon to his son Sakhi. The thought of leaving Lahore and living the rest of her life in the remote hills of Kohistan terrifies Zaitoon who requests her father to break off his promise and let her stay in Lahore. But despite the pleas of Nikka, the friend Qasim and Mariam, his wife Qasim is adamant and would not turn away from his word or promise. Otherwise, his Kohistani false pride would receive a terrible blow and he would not be able to live with this in dignity. For Qasim, this false masculine pride weighs more than the life and happiness of his daughter.

As it was expected the married life of Zaitoon was a horrible one. She is beaten and abused by her husband Sakhi because he is an uneducated rough man whose main motive is to use his wife for his needs without giving her respect and regard. Zaitoon, for him, is like a commodity that he has to control and use for his own petty pleasure. The male dominating culture of Kohistani life gives Sakhi ample space and allowance to exert his excessive domination over Zaitoon. Her life with Sakhi is a terrible nightmare which she had to run away from in order to live or otherwise there was the danger of losing her life or becoming mentally unstable due to the atrocities of her husband.

One night, Zaitoon resolved to escape from the prison-like home of her husband and give her life a new and fresh lease of air. It was a perilous idea because she knew that if Sakhi catches her on the way, he would definitely kill her. Her husband had beaten her black and blue and she needed to run away if she had to live: “That night, Zaitoon resolved to run away. Her sleepless eyes bright with shock, her body racked by pain, she knew that in flight lay her only hope of survival. Giving herself a chance to heal” (Sidhwa, 154).

The escape from Sakhi cost her not only her physical health but mental health also. It was a big ordeal for her which was fraught with risky and dangerous situations. On the way, there was fear of being swallowed by wild beasts or being caught by Sakhi and his men who were on a look out for her in all directions. She even got raped by gangsters but finally in an unconscious state, she got rescued by army personnel Major Mushtaq. Her deplorable and pitiable condition at the end of the novel leaves the readers filled with numerous questions about the fate of women in a traditional male-dominated society. The disturbing question that repeatedly baffles the minds of the readers is the inherent subjugating position that women have to face by belonging to the female gender. Perhaps the inherent gender subjugating role that women conform to in patriarchal society is deeply rooted in their psyche through their upbringing. Jan Mohammad, Saima Wasim, Syed Aamir and Zain Ul Abideen in their research paper “Analysis of Domestic Violence against Women in Pakistan: Attitudinal Acceptance of Violence and Its Associated Risk Factors” have done in depth research on domestic violence and position of women in the Pakistani society. They concluded:

In Pakistani society, women are brought up with the deep-rooted concept of gender roles where she is dependent upon the male member for providing livelihood, and in the process, the male member ends up being dominated as well as taking full advantage of the situation. The embedment of economic survival dependency of a female over a male, makes the women tolerate violence and continue being in an abusive relationship. Men who have witnessed parent-to-parent violence believe



the beating of a wife is a normalized behavior as well as their right to do so over women (Mohammad, 240).

But Zaitoon's victory lies not in her victimized acceptance of her plight but in her resilience and strength to escape the tyrannical chains that her husband had held her with. Another woman's story running parallel to the story of Zaitoon is the story of Carol, an American woman married to Farukh, a Pakistani engineer. Being an American and having been brought up in a broad-minded liberalised American society, Carol finds her life in Pakistan as Farukh's wife quite stifling and nauseating. She loses her freedom of living life at her own pace and the constricting role of being a traditional Pakistani wife adds fuel to fire for her. Farukh is unable to understand her dilemma and in order to get solace; she gets into an extra-marital affair with Major Mushtaq, a friend of Farukh. At first, Major Mushtaq's charming ways and his full attention towards her draws her towards him because Mushtaq gives her the time that she had wanted from Farukh. She thinks that life with Mushtaq would be fun-filled and smooth because she had hoped that he would marry her and give her all the importance that she needed as a wife. But unfortunately, Mushtaq was no less patriarchal than Farukh because he refuses to marry her on the plea that he is already a married man and would never divorce his wife. Carol wants him to divorce his wife because it's not difficult for men to get a divorce from their wives. But he tells her, "You don't understand at 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'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 ostracized" (Sidhwa, 150).

If he divorced his wife, it would stain his reputation as an army personnel and it could also mean losing the societal honour of being a wonderful family man. He could have a gala time with Carol but wouldn't take the responsibility of marrying her as marriage involves commitment. Moreover, he is already married and has a family and he very well knows that another marriage would definitely slur his reputation. It would also create problems in his promotion and prospects of a smooth professional life. He wouldn't mind having a secret love-affair with a married white woman but wasn't foolish enough to marry her.

So finally Carol decides to leave Farukh and Major Mushtaq for good and good back to the United States. After Zaitoon's escape from the house of her husband Sakhi, she is finally rescued by Major Mushtaq who tells a lie to Sakhi that she was found dead. Major Mushtaq knew that if Sakhi found her, he would definitely kill her there and then only. But Zaitoon's courage and strength enable her to miraculously run away from her husband:

Mushtaq recalled the girl's thin fingers pulling torn strips of cloth over her bare skin. She would be all right, he mused. In a few hours he would quietly stow her away in the vehicle taking Farukh and Carol to Lahore. Let Carol take care of her! She could hide her in the States! Or perhaps Ashiq could propose marriage after a decent interval—she would be as securely hidden in his village. Of course, the old Kohistani who had brought her here must never know she was alive ... a pity ... he had appeared to love her. Still, he was to blame for imposing his will on something that was bound to end in disaster... (Sidhwa, 202).

The novel ends on an optimistic note on the future of Zaitoon but her ordeal and struggle are pitiable and pose many questions regarding the fate of women in male controlled societies. Carol also makes her decision to return to her native country and live an independent life because she



finds her life in Pakistan hopeless and claustrophobic. Whether it is Carol, a western white woman or Zaitoon, a local Pakistani woman, both women make commendable efforts to break free from patriarchal chains and finally get the opportunity to live life the way they want to live even if both of them had to pay a heavy price for it.

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