



The Pakistani Bride as the Study of Common Ache of all Women

Dr. Shaista Maseeh

Department of English
Qassim Private Colleges, Al Qassim, KSA

URL: <http://www.els.ngo/jels/2455-393X-64.pdf>

Abstract

There are a few things that run in and that bind the lives of all the women on the face of this globe, no matter to what creed, color, race, religion, class they belong to. The ache of being a woman is one of those things. This ache originates from being relegated to a marginalized position in life and society. This is the reason that when literature by women is read, a distinguishing color of feminism is found to have colored them all. The Pakistani Bride by Bapsi Sidhwa is remarkable novel in this aspect because she has tried to sketch and expose how women belonging to different culture suffer the pangs of a secondary citizen, how menfolk are the deciding masters of their life and how the gap will always be there in spite of being their educated and liberated. This paper will analyses the novel from feminist perspective but focusing only on the similar lot of different women.

Keywords: *Feminism, women, third world women*

Full Text

Luce Irigaray puts most straightforwardly that, “Sexual difference is one of the most important questions of our age, if not in fact burning issue. According to Heidegger, each age is preoccupied with one thing, and one alone. Sexual difference is probably that issue in our own age which could be our salvation on an intellectual level.” (Rice and Waugh, 236) This sexual difference is observed, without any exemption, by all the women of our world, irrespective of their creed, color, race, religion and class. Literature, as it is a mirror of society, has always reflected this blunt reality of life. From Mary Shelley to Toni Morrison, each woman writer has expressed the ache of this discrimination. *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) is one such novel that has successfully shown the common ache that is born in women by sexual difference.

The Pakistani Bride is written by Bapsi Sidhwa, the Pakistani diasporic writer. It is the story of the life of Zaitoon, who is orphan but is adopted by a tribal man, Qasim. She is brought up in the actively brimming city of Lahore but is married off to a man from a mountain tribe. The drastic metamorphosis from Lahore to mountains proves extremely strenuous upon the existence of Zaitoon. Her experience of marital life comes as a blow, which ultimately compels her to run away to her Lahore. The novel has only one woman protagonist but has several women characters who substantially expose the working of a sexual difference through their lot. There are multiple episodes in the novel, which will be taken upon in course of this paper, that prove that the novel is a study of an ache that is the destiny of all women of our world.

Bapsi Sidhwa has penned the life and fate of women belonging to three different stratas. First, there are women from city; second, women from mountain tribes; and third an American woman. Conceivably, they should get different behavior from their respective societies because they are from different social category. But, as the truth of our world goes, each one is secondary, each one is defenseless, and each one is dependent on their male counterparts.

The story begins with the wedding of Qasim. He is married to Afshan because her father, Resham Khan could not pay back the debt taken from Qasim’s father. She is shocked and confused when she finds her husband to be a little boy. “Afshan didn’t know whether to laugh or cry She had been told that her groom was very young, but she had thought that he would be, like herself, at best 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. (10) But this mismatch is not strange in tribal regions. Later in course of the story it is confirmed by the experiences of Mushtaq, a character in the novel, that in tribal regions, “a wife was a symbol of status, an embodiment of man’s honour, and the focus of his

role as provider. A valuable commodity indeed, and dearly bought.” (138) This episode reflects two critical thoughts: first, Afshan’s destiny is drafted by her father and her father in law, who don’t even think to take into consideration the wishes of a girl. She is settled like a debt, in kind instead of cash. Secondly, it shows the working of ‘binary opposite,’ where one is provider other is dependent; one is savior other is guarded.

Then there is Hamida, mother in law of Zaitoon, who has undergone a similar life of being governed by men. To Zaitoon, Hamida, “talked of her youth, of the price her vivacious beauty had fetched on marriage . . .” (173) The readers learn that it is not only wife that has a negligible status in the eyes of her husband, but the mother is also similarly fated. Sakhi, Hamida’s son severely whips her with sticks when she comes to rescue an ox from his wrath. The thrash is savage but Hamida survives it because she is a woman of mountains and she is perhaps accustomed to these sufferings since childhood.

The commodification of women is not only seen in the instances of marriages. At their wedding night Sakhi touches Zaitoon a way too intimately that it hurts her. On the reflexive hesitation of Zaitoon, he says, “Why not? Its my cunt!” (162) These words come as an assertive declaration out of possession not out of love. This possessiveness is proved later when he wants to teach obedience to Zaitoon by beating her up. He says, “You are my woman. I will teach you to obey me!” (172-173) The result of this disobedience is fatal on life of women from mountains. When Carol, the American woman married to Farukh, a Pakistani, goes for walk by the river, she finds a strange shadow in the water. The face of a tribal woman emerges. Somebody had cut the head off the body and threw it in the river. The reason could be one of many but none could be so serious as to incur a punishment as severe as her destiny.

When we move to the women/ girls who belong to city, we don’t find a direct repression but, to use the concept given by Italian neo Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci, ‘hegemony.’ It is a situation in which, as explained by M. H. Abrams, “a social class achieves a predominant influence and power, not by direct and overt means, but by succeeding in making its ideological view of society so pervasive that the subordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression.” (151) In the city also the mental state is only that, “A girl is never too young to marry.” (53) Zaitoon, as a girl, loves to go to Mullah’s house in her neighborhood. His two wives live together without any tussle among them. The house is again patriarchal where males of the family enjoy their position as honor savers and providers of females of the household. Bapsi Sidhwa has painted the minute detail of the household that shows the subtle difference in the activities and games of boys and girls. In summer the young girls carry young children on their hips and play

hop scotch; in winters they go to roof tops where boys fly kites and girls play housekeeping games; in spring girls get the privilege of holding the kite string, flying kite, when boys fly kites.

The lives of women in city change for a while when there is wedding around somewhere in neighbor's. "Inside zenana they remove their burkhas and revealed their finery, the older women revealed their generosity and worth of their husbands, and the unmarried girls the beauty of their forms and the cunning of their fingers in fashioning embroidery. They admired each others' jewellery, joined the girls in their singing . . ." (89) These instances recall what Luce Irigaray writes in 'Sexual Difference'

It is man who has been the subject of discourse, whether in the field of theory, morality or politics. And the gender of God, the guardian of every subject and discourse, is always paternal and masculine in the West. For women, there remain the so called minor art-forms: cooking, knitting, sewing and embroidery; and in exceptional cases poetry, painting and music. (Rice and Waugh, 236)

Alia, the Pakistani friend of Carol, lives an exuberant and luxurious life. But this exuberance is only a cover to hide a truth too dark to reveal. "In friendship unveiled, layer by layer stripped of their guard, she had glimpsed in the recesses of those eyes the horror of generations of cloistered womanhood. And the pitiless arrogance of absolute power: A memory of ancient tyrannies . . ." (227)

Carol's perspective becomes a prism through which the reality of sexual dichotomy is seen very clearly. The question arises that why Carol, woman from America, with her own set of independent thoughts could see through the unsaid plight of the tribal woman, or Zaitoon or Alia. The only reason that is able to provide the answer is that because of the similarity of experience of all these women. The conduct they receive from their men is, more or less, similar. She is American but she has her own constraints and restrictions, the ones not visible like those of other women but might be more torturous upon her soul. She suffers the distrusts of her husband Farukh. He spares no chance to prick her with harsh charges: "You enjoyed it. Every bit of it. Most likely you encouraged him. You welcomed him. You devoured him. You open your arms wide thrusting out your pink tits." (110)

The negatively sharp remark of Farukh over the head of tribal woman floating in river stream comes as a shock as well as an eye opener for Carol. He says that the tribal woman was killed because she "probably asked for it." (225) It becomes impossible for her to bear. "She can no more survive among them than amidst a pride of lions. Even if she survived the privation, the filth and the virmin and the swarm of germs carrying alien diseases, her independent attitude would get her killed! So much foe her naïve co ed fantasy."(227)

What we find in novel that a thread of pain runs through the lives of all women. They are different yet they are same. They relate with each other's ache. They recognize the unspoken sensibility of mind as reflected in eyes. Hamida's warm welcome to Zaitoon is a proof of this connection. When Zaitoon escapes and men from the tribe go to hunt for her Hamida hates this culture of tribes. "She, who had been so proud and valiant and wholeheartedly subservient to the ruthless code of her forebearers, now loathed it with all her heart." (191) When Carol meets Zaitoon for the first time she envisions, "an old age communion- an understanding they shared of their vulnerabilities as women" (136) Carol even finds a connection between the condition of Alia and "in comprehensible brutalities of tribals." (227) She thinks about the dead tribal woman. "Had she fallen in love with the wrong man? Or was she simply the victim of a vendetta? . . ." (226) he introspection goes to all women. ". . . what the Farukh has said? Women the world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, to get importunately impregnated, beaten up , bullied and disinherited." (226)

In his essay 'The Early Novel of Bapsi Sidhwa,' Makarand R Paranjpe quotes Sidhwa: "*The Pakistani Bride* is dedicated to the incredibly simple, deprived and courageous women of this magnificent country. (Dhawan and Kapadia, 94) The novel is a truthful presentation of how women residing in different social precinct are bound by a string of womanhood. This string also carries the nuances of ache that is being underwent by them from time to time. The struggle of Zaitoon, Hamida, Carol, Alia, and Afshan is each other's instead of only one.

Works Cited

Abrams. M. H. A Glossory of Literary Terms. Seventh Edition. New Delhi: Harcourt India, 1999. Print.

Dhawan. R. K. and Kapadia Novy. Eds. *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa*, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1996. Print.

Phillip Rice and Patricia Waugh, eds., *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. London: Arnold, 1989. Print.

Sidhwa, Bapsi. *The Pakistani Bride*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1990. Print.