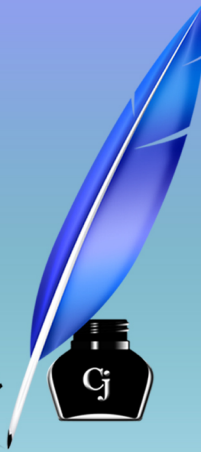


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The Conquered Land: A Feministic Reading of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*

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One of the most striking features of the contemporary literature in English from the Indian subcontinent has been the sprouting of Feminist fiction – feminist in the sense of being created by women as well as in the sense of giving voice to the pain, desire and assertions of women in the socially constructed male-dominated institutions. Almost every women novelist has tried to assess and interpret, overtly or covertly, the onslaughts on women at the altar of patriarchal institutions. Bapsi Sidhwa, internationally renowned novelist from the Indian subcontinent was born in Pakistan and like her Indian counterparts gives voice to her feministic ideologies through her fiction. Although the socio-political concerns like partition theme occupies much of her attention, she is not insensitive and blind to the women's question. Alongside the partition theme, she vividly depicts the traumatic and blurred picture of women obliterated at the altar of social institutions. In this context her *The Pakistani Bride* engaging with the themes of marriage, honour, partition and the position of women in Asian subcontinent is worth mentioning. However, alongside all these themes, it is the theme of violence inflicted upon women's body by the sado-masochistic, despotic and proprietorial attitude of men that becomes the focus of attention and epicenter of gravity. No matter how insensitive a reader of *The Pakistani Bride* to women's question may be, he can't turn a blind eye to the scenes of torture and a deaf ear to the screams of pain that Sidhwa has powerfully and artistically portrayed through the life of an orphan protagonist namely Zaitoon.

At the very outset of the novel, the reader comes across a conversation between Qasim and his father wherein the reader gets an impression that woman is treated as a commodity of transaction. For paying his debts to a neighbour Resham Khan has promised his daughter (p.7). Marriage becomes a transaction of body rather than a relationship based on mutual understanding. By presenting three married couples, Afshan and Qasim; Zaitoon and Sakhi; and Carol and Farukh before the readers, Sidhwa interrogates the institution of marriage. How the institution of marriage is manipulated and exploited to give legal sanctions to the appropriation and abrogation of women's personal freedom and body. When Afshan is married to Qasim, the son of Arbab, it is not she who accepts him verbally rather an old aunt: "Thrice she was asked if she would accept Qasim ... as her husband and thrice an old aunt murmured 'Yes' on her behalf" (p.8). Similarly when Zaitoon turns ten, Mirriam is of the opinion that "She'll be safe only at her mother-in-law's ... A girl is never too young to marry" (p.53). Although these words are from a woman's mouth but she too has been brought up and her ideology conditioned in a male-chauvinistic society where anything that sanctions some freedom of choice to women is seen as an aberration and a deviation from the norm. The age-old role of woman as a child-bearing machine is seen as the most important role and the questions of her education as secondary rather of least importance: "What will she do

with more reading and writing – boil and drink it? ... No Allah willing, she'll get married and have children”(p.52).

Woman is shown as a territory to be conquered by men. The relationship becomes one of colonizer-colonized type wherein the colonizer as if on an imperial offensive tries to possess and extend his powers so as to use and abuse this occupied territory. A scene from the brothel streets of Hira Mandi wherein a woman covered by men is mocked at by the spectators serves as an ample evidence of this sadomasochistic attitude of men: “Now and again, a man standing with her in the enclosure shouted, “Nach, Pagli! Dance, mad-woman – and jabbed her with a cane” (p. 65).

Qasim offers his daughter to one of his tribesman in marriage simply because he has given his word and when Mirriam tries to make him understand the she (Zaitoon) can't acclimatize herself to the tribal cultural and code, Qasim grows furious and asserts his proprietorial rights by saying “She is my daughter” and I have given my word! “the word of a Kohistani” (p.94).

When Mirriam tells Zaitoon “tell your father you don't want to marry a tribal,” she says, “I cannot cross my father”. Similarly, when Ashiq tells Zaitoon about the problems that she might face with the tribals and wants her to stay with him, she denies by saying “It is my father's wish. I must go with him”(p. 144).

Zaitoon becomes a scapegoat of not only the proprietorial and authoritative attitude of his father but also a victim of her own submissiveness and innocence. However, she can be exonerated of this tragic flaw simply because she has been brought up and conditioned in an atmosphere wherein rebellion against the authoritative, anarchic and despotic patriarchal set-up is seen as a war against divinity. The ideology of submissiveness has been infused in her to such an extent that she views herself only as a commodity of male gratification and honour for tribal men. In order to achieve emancipation she must start a rebellion against the tribal code of conduct in which she is caught up.

On the very first night of her stay in the hills, Zaitoon had a vague recollection of an unpleasant dream anticipating of an unpleasant future that destiny holds for her in this land of tribals rather savage brutes. She cries in a frightened mood, “Abba, take me to the plains. If I must marry, marry me to someone from the plains ... I will die rather than live here” (p. 157). Qasim blinded by his promise to a tribal threatens Zaitoon of dire consequences instead of consoling her with parental love and affection. The proprietorial and authoritative attitude of Qasim finds expression thus: “I've given my word. Your marriage is to be a week from today. ... I've given my word. On it depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life. If you be-smirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands” (p. 158). Qasim behaves more like a landlord who gifts his precious garden to a person who only guarantees destruction and annihilation of this garden.

The idea of woman as a conquered land finds expression in this novel not only in the institution of marriage but in every walk of Zaitoon's life. She is treated as a salable entity and a commodity of gratifying her husband's animal instinct and fulfilling her fathers' whims no matter at what cost. On the very first day of her marriage she undergoes an experience of sexploitation. Sakhi behaves like a beast: “Sakhi surveyed his diffident bride with mounting excitement. Here was a woman all his own, he thought with proprietorial lust and pride” (P. 159). “He tore the ghongat from her head and holding her arms in a cruel grip he panted inarticulate hatred into her face....He tugged at

the cord of her shalwar and the silk fell to her ankles. Before she could raise her trousers Sakhi flung her back....She screamed and screamed. 'Abba, save me', she shrieked. Why didn't Qasim come? Or any of the others?" (p.160).When Qasim leaves the village, Zaitoon expresses a kind of shock. She cries and requests him to take her with him. It is because "She had gauged the savage subjugating will of the man she was married to. His uneasiness and his efforts to calm her were a desperate comfort"(p.169).

Sakhi is man who believes in power politics. He knows no language of love and sympathy. He believes that it is only through violence and suppression that Zaitoon can be made a domesticated pet. He inflicts pain on Zaitoon – physically, psychologically and sexually. See how he treats her physically. He struck her on her thighs, on her head, shouting, "You are my woman! I'll teach you to obey me! Sakhi is blind to the feminine feelings. When Zaitoon waves her hand on a far-off vehicle, Sakhi drags her along the crag and inflicts infinite hatred on her: "You whore, he hissed,...He cleared his throat and spat full in her face. 'You dirty, black little bitch, waving at those pigs...' You wanted him to stop and fuck you, didn't you" (p.185)...."I will kill you, you lying slut" (p. 186).

Unable to bear the torture physical as well as psychological Zaitoon decides to flee from this concentration camp. "She knew that in flight lay her only hope of survival"(p. 186). After she escapes for emancipation rather survival, she suffers a lot. We see how Sakhi and his clansmen hunt for her as she has broken the tribal, barbaric and authoritative code of conduct. The reader also comes across the misery, torture and suffering that Zaitoon undergoes. Empty stomach, she tries to emancipate herself from the clutches of brutal and savage code. She is also raped by a couple of beasts from Cheerkul (p. 223). Zaitoon's struggle for emancipation from the patriarchal oppression comes to an end when Mushtaq 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 "Missri Khan's massive shoulders straightened. He thrust his chest forward and his head rose high. It was as if a breeze had cleared the poisonous air suffocating them and has wafted an intolerable burden from their shoulders (p. 224).

Towards the end of the novel, we are left to contemplate about the future of Zaitoon. It is not certain what she will do. Does she prefer to go States with Carol and Farukh? Or could Ashiq propose marriage to her. However, the disaster had already engulfed the whole fragile body. Qasim was to blame "for imposing his will on something that was bound to end in disaster" (p.245).

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