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The Dilemmas of the Colonized Women: Sexuality, Alienation and Displacement of Women in *Pakistani Bride*

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Abstract:

Postcolonial fiction attempts to reveal the colonial ideologies by feminizing, marginalizing and dehumanizing the natives as the “other”. The writers stressed on the issues of fractured identities of the characters, displacement, gender discrimination, oppression and the dilemmas of the people living in the colonized societies This research paper focuses on the dilemmas of the colonized women, their displacement and alienation caused by the events of cultural collision and power politics. Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* is based on an actual incident involving a Pakistani girl who becomes Zaitoon Bano is also called Dilshad in the novel. She launches a scathing indictment of a patriarchal society that not only fails to protect women, but also preys on them. The research paper discusses that women in Pakistan were made the victims of sexual oppression and male subjugation. They were traded like commodities by their native people.

Keywords: cultural collision, marginalizing, dehumanizing, gender discrimination, oppression, identity crisis

Postcolonial fiction attempts to reveal the colonial ideologies by feminizing, marginalizing and dehumanizing the natives as the “other”. The writers stressed on the issues of fractured identities of the characters, displacement, gender discrimination, oppression and the dilemmas of the people living in the colonized societies This research paper focuses on the dilemmas of the colonized women, their displacement and alienation caused by the events of cultural collision and power politics. As Nelson puts it: “[...] issues of identity, problems of history, confrontations with racism, intergenerational conflicts, difficulties in building new supportive communities,” are some of them (1992). The post-colonial writers were confronted with new challenges and writers such as Anita Desai, V.S. Naipaul, Shashi Tharoor, Hari Kunzru, Salman Rushdie, Bharti Mukhrjee, Bapsi Sidhwa, Monica Ali, Taslima Nasrin and Khaled Hosseini have projected the life – pattern of the society by means of symbols, images, and other literary media to magnify the historical and cultural events. Sudesh Mishra observes in his *From Sugar to Masala: Writing by the Indian Diaspora*, “Panic, nausea, schizophrenia, hysteric, time-lag, estrangement, violence, nostalgia, madness...,” are some major theme of the post-colonial fiction. The voice of feminism is more perceptible and prominent in Pakistani and Bangladeshi fiction. Bapsi Sidhwa, Monica Ali, Taslima Nasrin have portrayed women and their issues .Third world women are depicted as victims of male control, their life was paralyzed by the events of partition and cultural collision. They were subjected to injustice, oppression, and exploitation by the colonizers. Young says, “Postcolonial Feminism is certainly concerned to analyze the nervous conditions of being a woman in a post colonial environment, whether in the social oppression of the post colony or the metropolis. Its concern is not in the first place with individual problems but with those that affect the whole communities”.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* is based on an actual incident involving a Pakistani girl who becomes Zaitoon Bano is also called Dilshad in the novel. Zaitoon runs away with her

son to the urban sanctuary of Peshawar. To her dismay, city-dwellers turn out to be no less predatory than their tribal counterparts. Having entrusted her son to a wealthy, childless couple in exchange for one anna to buy food, Dilshad is tricked into parting with him. She is traded like commodities in the exploitative society. In *The Pakistani Bride*, Sidhwa depicts poignantly the exploitation of women in patriarchal society as,

“Women the world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, to get importunately impregnated, beaten up, bullied and disinherited. It was an immutable Law of nature.” (226).

Bapsi Sidhwa launches a scathing indictment of a patriarchal society that not only fails to protect women, but also preys on them. This real story was narrated to her when Bapsi Sidhwa and her husband Noshir had been invited to a remote army camp in the Karakoram Mountains, and there she heard the story of a fine young Punjabi girl who had run away from her tribal husband. Her husband could not bear the incident of losing his honour. The girl survived for almost two weeks in the lofty mountains. But then on finding her, her husband killed her on the spot. Bapsi Sidhwa in her *Why Do I Write?* records her experiences thus:

The girl's story haunted me, it reflected the hapless condition of many women not only in Pakistan but also in the Indian subcontinent. Telling it became an obsession. I thought I'd write a short story; after all it had barely taken minutes to narrate. Before long I realized I was writing a novel. It became *The Bride*, or *The Pakistani Bride*, as it is titled in India (28)

It is quite interesting to note that women in Pakistan were made the victims of sexual oppression and male subjugation. They were traded like commodities by their native people; many of the poor women were sold as prostitutes and sent to Hira Mandi, a famous brothel of Lahore. Sidhwa depicts the facts of the corrosion of culture and partition in the novel. In fact, women were more at risk from the very people who were supposed to “guard” and “value” them. Zaitoon's story runs parallel in a number of ways to the nation's turbulent history. The treatment given to women by the Kohistani tribal men is suffocating, here Sidhwa has portrayed that the life in the hills is difficult while that in the plains is easy. The honour of the tribesmen is more important than the feelings of their women. Novy Kapadia observes thus:

The Bride is a damning indictment of the Kohistani community in particular and the Pakistani society in general with regard to its brutal treatment of women. The women are marginalized and have, in a number of cases, no say in decision-making processes or actions, which may ultimately seal their fates. (142)

Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* has several plots, and especially in the beginning it can seem quite fragmented. The novel can be roughly divided into four parts. The first part describes Qasim's marriage, the death of his family and the accidental way in which he ends up adopting the Punjabi girl Zaitoon, who has lost her family during the violence of the Partition. The next part deals with Zaitoon's childhood, as she takes over the place as the protagonist of the novel. The third part tells the story of Zaitoon's marriage to the tribal Sakhi. A secondary protagonist Carol is introduced. She is an American and is travelling around the country with her Pakistani husband. In the fourth and last part of the novel, Zaitoon runs away from her violent husband, who chases her through the mountains, and in the end, she is saved. In *The Pakistani Bride*, the

main issues concerning female protagonists are patriarchal oppression, marriage, gender segregation, violence and sexuality. For the men in the novel, a sharp line is drawn between the women of their own family and the women on the outside. Women who are relatives are protected, guarded and kept secluded from public life and from men who are not family. Women, who are not relatives, are viewed with lust. In both cases, women are treated as objects. This perspective on women is predominant in the first part of the novel, and it remains central throughout the second part as well.

In their books, David Mandelbaum as well as Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed give detailed discussions of oppressive patriarchy in Pakistan. Their insights on gender relations are especially useful when it comes to *The Pakistani Bride*. In the patriarchal society of Pakistan, marriage is seen as a transaction between two families, not only between the bride and groom. There is, however, a difference in the way the tribals and the Punjabis look at the bride. In the Punjab, the bride is given away to the groom. She will live with his family and can be seen as an additional work force, but also as an additional burden, to the household economy. A dowry is thus paid from her parents to her in-laws for taking over the economical responsibility for her. The tribals do not practice dowry. In the tribal hills, a wife is bought with bride-price. It is more difficult to find a wife in the mountains, due to hard living conditions and a high mortality rate. The bride is thus bought, like a commodity. Thus, a woman is not an independent person. The tribal practice of bride-price as well as the common attitude towards women in *The Pakistani Bride* is introduced on the first page of the novel, when Qasim's father thinks about the girl that has been promised to his son:

Any girl – and he had made sure this one was able-bodied – was worth more than the loan due. [...] To begin with, he had thought of marrying the girl himself. He had only one wife; but in a twinge of paternal conscience, he decided to bestow the girl on Qasim' (7-8).

In this short passage, the fundamental view of women in the tribal culture is spelled out clearly. The father sees the girl as something he has purchased. He has even made sure she is 'able-bodied', and the association to the buying and selling of livestock is disturbing. Having 'only' one wife himself, he considers taking her for his own property, but decides to 'bestow her' on his son instead. The language used here shows the father's attitude towards the girl as a piece of property that he can give away or use as he sees best fit. This is returned to later in the novel, when Major Mushtaq explains the tribal marriage traditions like this:

A wife was a symbol of status, the embodiment of a man's honour and the focus of his role as provider. A valuable commodity indeed and dearly bought' (137).

Qasim, who is at this point ten years old, already has incorporated his father's attitude to women. He sees his bride as a toy and thinks about 'the prospect of a playmate he knew he would have the sanction to tease, to order about, and to bully!' (8) Qasim's family has had a feud with the girl's family over a loan given by Qasim's father. Now, they are given a wife for Qasim instead to settle the feud. In Pakistan, the segregation of the sexes results in an erotically charged atmosphere. Men and women do not know how to socialize in a non-sexual manner, and men are desperate just to have the chance to see women without "burkas" or veils. The American woman Carol experiences the atmosphere of repressed sexuality like this:

Slowly Carol had begun to realise that even among her friends, where the wives did not wear burkas or live in special, women's quarters, the general segregation of the sexes bred an atmosphere of sensuality. The people seemed to absorb it from the air they breathed. This sensuality charged up every encounter, no matter how trivial. She was not immune. Her body was at times reduced to a craving mass of flesh... It was like being compelled to fast at a banquet. (111-112)

Tribal men have no respect for women and for women's individual rights. This is a result of women being treated as objects in their society. These men take advantage whenever they have the opportunity. This leads to sexual harassment, to violence and rape.

When the men in the novel want to enjoy the company of women, they go to Hira Mandi, the Diamond Market, which is the prostitution district of Lahore. The dancing girls in Hira Mandi are a mix of prostitutes, strippers and courtesans, the business is hiding behind the pretence of being a place of music and poetry, and the girls all can dance or sing. To Zaitoon's father Qasim, the Hira Mandi is a fairy land:

The pungent whiff of urine from back-alleys blends with the spicy smells of Hira Mandi – of glossy green leaves, rose petals, and ochre marigolds. Silver braid hems blue dancing skirts; tight satin folds of the “chooridar pyjama” reveal rounded calves; girls shimmer in silk, georgette, and tinsel-glittering satin. Qasim, like a sperm swimming, aglow with virility up to the tips of the hair on his knuckles, feels engulfed in this female street. (63)

The focus on the sex as seen from the outside is very strong in the first half of *The Pakistani Bride*, with prostitution as the central theme. The looks resting on Zaitoon and Carol, both the wanted and unwanted ones, in the second half are outweighed by the deep focus on female sexuality. Both the women's feelings about their own sexual and sensual feelings, as well as their experiences of sex are explored by Sidhwa. The focus on female sexuality is foreshadowed in the early days of the marriage between Qasim and Afshan, where Afshan tells Qasim openly about her sexual feelings before marriage:

I used to wander by streams [...] or sit on some high place dreaming of my future husband. Gusts of wind enveloped me and I'd imagine the impatient caresses of my lover. My body was young and full of longing. I'd squeeze my breasts to ease their ache' (10)

Zaitoon is forced to marry a tribal man and soon discovers that reality is harsh and her romantic dreams erroneous. She rebels at the cruel treatment, the beatings, mistrust and realizes that her imagined ideal community is no longer. Robert L. Ross, *The Research for Community in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novels* observes thus:

A region where men were heroic, proud and incorruptible, ruled by a code of honour that banned all injustice and evil.... Their women beautiful as houris and their bright rosy-cheeked children, lived besides crystal torrents of melted snow.”¹ Zaitoon's escape from this rigid, traditional tribal community is considered by Fawzia Afzal-Khan as a spirit of defiance which “endorses a challenge to the structures of patriarchy.”(9)

Both Carol and Zaitoon have these fantasies that Afzal-Khan writes about. Zaitoon's sexual relationship with Sakhi has as its foundation that he represents the man from the fantasy, and she does not realize what his possessive behaviour will entail outside of the bedroom. In contrast to Carol, Zaitoon's experience of sexuality is covered with secrecy and therefore more surprising to find in a Pakistani novel. To her, sex has been a non-subject. This makes her transformation from girl to woman all the more interesting:

Brought up in a sexual vacuum she did not think of sex as good or bad –it merely did not exist. Neither Miriam, nor Qasim, nor any of the women she visited ever mentioned it. She floundered unenlightened in a morass of sexual yearning. Once, snuggled up to Miriam she had rocked her hips and Miriam had snapped, "Stop it!" Zaitoon had been surprised, and hurt by the rebuke that put an end to her innocent pleasure. She had felt rejected. (162)

These two passages show the pre-pubertal or early pubertal Zaitoon, who does not know 'how babies come' or that sex exists at all. Living in 'Muslim seclusion' in a 'sexual vacuum', she does not know the origins of her impulses. Interestingly, the non-existence of sex does not initially make Zaitoon ashamed of her yearnings or make her control herself. Not knowing what her behaviour signifies or what her impulses arise from, she is totally free of shame and she follows her feelings unchecked.

However, the relationship between Zaitoon and Qasim has more to it than indicated by the passage quoted above. Due to poverty, they sleep in the same room, something which is fundamentally against the regulations of purdah system. Zaitoon spends a night in the cave with Qasim as an unmarried woman. She begs him to take her home and rather marry her to a Punjabi, and she "clung to him desperately, digging her fingers into his shirt, her legs grasping him in a vice. He felt her body quiver against him" (157). Furiously, Qasim closes his hand around her throat, and threatens to kill her if she makes him break his word. Both in the United States and in Pakistan, Carol has been insistent on her right to freedom and she has been intellectually aware of the oppression of women. This experience, however, shakes her to the core and wakes her up to a feminist, political view of the world:

Women the world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, to get importunately impregnated, beaten up, bullied and disinherited. It was an immutable law of nature. What had the tribal girl done to deserve such grotesque retribution? Had she fallen in love with the wrong man? Or was she simply the victim of a vendetta? Her brother might have killed his wife. Lenny's low self-esteem is brought on by thoughtless comments from the grown-ups around her. (90).

The Pakistani Bride depicts the reality of the plight of women, the sexuality of women and the sufferings caused by the cultural clashes. All women are the victims of oppression of men and patriarchy, Like Zaitoon Carol is victimized, Sakhi's mother Hamida was pretty, tall and beautiful personality but she lost all her glamour at the age of forty as she looked now a hideous hag. She is savagely beaten and tortured even at this age. Zaitoon is already being battered by her cruel husband. Zaitoon is raped on the bank of the river. When she wakes up, she is a total wreck:

The men had kept her hostage for two hours. When Zaitoon regained consciousness, her body screamed with pain. She wept, putting her trembling legs through the shalwar. Her brown skin gaped through new rents in the cloth. (230)

Sexual violence against women is a social reality. The background and escalation of the violence of Partition is shown through Ice-candy-man's news reports and the kidnapping of Ayah. Still, the most violently realistic account of the Partition violence comes from Ranna. Her village is taken by surprise by a large mob of Sikhs, probably coming to revenge the burning of their own village, and Ranna is most likely the only survivor after the attack. The men and boys of the village hear the women and girl's cries of pain and terror before they themselves are slaughtered by the mob. Ranna is hidden underneath the dead bodies of the men and boys of his family for hours and when he wakes up he sees glimpses of what has happened to the women and girls in his village:

Every time his eyes open the world appears to them to be floating in blood. From the direction of the mosque come the intolerable shrieks and wails of women. [...] Once he thought he saw his eleven-year-old sister, Khatija, run stark naked into their courtyard: her long hair disheveled, her boyish body bruised, her lips cut and swollen and a bloody scab where her front teeth were missing. (213).

Conclusion:

Sidhwa has depicted the heart rending scenes of barbarian brutalities, naked women crying for help, babies snatched from the mothers, smashed against walls and their howling mothers brutally raped and killed. These scenes are examples of how the bodies of women and children got the most brutal treatment from the enemy in the religious and ethnic conflict during Partition. In ethnic conflicts, violence is more often taken out on civilians than in military conflicts. The urge to humiliate the enemy people and to try to extinguish their ethnicity results in women being the main target of violence.

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