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Ordeal of Violence: Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price*: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract:

Women have been subjected to various sorts of dominance and violence. It is a global problem that occurs in every culture. Women are still esconced in the place where they are treated obnoxiously. However, their persevering torments lead them to embark on a new path which ultimately opens a door towards a promising future to them. Novelists, Bapsi Sidhwa and Buchi Emecheta have placed women at the center of their culture and their novels comment on cultural conflicts. They conspicuously exhibit the cultural institutions, beliefs, norms, and practices that are used to justify the gender-based violence put to women. This paper intends to explore how these writers have reconstructed women's experiences in their gynocentric novels *The Pakistani Bride* and *The Bride Price*. It exhibits how they respond confronting such gender-contextualized violence, racial discrimination and social conflicts by highlighting their actions to oppose it.

Keywords: Violence, repression, resistance, hegemony, polygamy, commodification.

Women writers have endeavoured to locate women characters at the center of their works. They investigate scrupulously feminine psyche and experiences; and they express it through their writings placing women at the core of their work. Gynocentrism is a term coined by Elain Showalter which attempts to explicate female experiences replacing male-oriented models. This approach has widened the framework under which women's issues are understood in a better way. In her essay, "Feminist criticism in the wilderness", Showalter explicitly enumerates this approach as:

. . . the study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition. . . . To see women's writing as our primary subject forces us to make the leap to a new conceptual vantage point and to redefine the nature of the theoretical problem before us. (Showalter 329-30)

This approach is applicable to these novelists as their novels revolve around women characters and their experiences. The gynocentric view of these novelists has helped them to showcase the feminine psyche and experiences. Their gynocentric visions focus women at the center of the story which revolves around women's experiences; it celebrates the innate virtues of women and castigates the vices of men. Their gynocentric novels explicitly solemnized the treatment of women under gender-contextualized societies of Nigeria and Indian subcontinent. They render women's plight and their repression under highly male dominated societies compelling them towards constricting traditional roles. In their novels, they have paved path for the emancipation of women through their actions of resistance, surpassing gender-based confinement. They critically probe how socially formed gender roles bar their liberties not only to their education but to personal decisions as well.

Women of Third World countries are still unheard but the writers of such countries have endeavoured to exhibit them explicitly with minute details of whatever is occurring to them. The cultures and societies of these Third World novelists, Sidhwa and Emecheta differ but the predicament of women more or less remain the same. India and Africa differ geographically and culturally but they share similar aspects like collective ethos, colonialism and women experiences. Emecheta's novel renders female experiences in Nigerian society whereas nature of subjection of women in Indian subcontinent is delineated in Sidhwa's novel. Both exhibit how women combat the constricting attitude of their societies. Sidhwa explores Pakistani ethos, the idiosyncracies of the Parsees and problems of Indian subcontinent women. Emecheta portrays African myths and traditions, self-assertion of Black women, their subaltern status, Igbo culture and grim urban realities.

Violence etymologically refers to any violent 'behaviour that is intended to hurt or kill somebody' (Oxford Advanced Learner dictionary) involving physical force and sometimes only verbal. It encompasses domestic violence, child marriage, 'honour' crimes, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, abduction, rapes and commodification. Violence still predominates in contemporary society; somewhere it is veiled or somewhere unveiled. In their different societies, women are seen harassed under male hegemony and chauvinism, even then they combat with all these traumas and emerge as an entirely different women with their self-assertion.

Bapsi Sidhwa is an eminent Pakistani novelist of post-colonial era. *The Pakistani Bride*, published in 1973, is a highly extolled novel which depicts sufferings of women. It explores how women are treated as the 'other' in the Muslim community. Pakistani society is depicted implicitly that renders male prerogatives. This society is universally acknowledged for the obnoxious treatment of women justified in the name of culture, tradition and religion. Men are considered individuals whereas women merely bodies, an object for their desire. This novel exposes patriarchal culture and religion as tools to entrench the male hegemony to control women. It episodically narrates the story of three brides – Asfaq, Zaitoon and Carol. Ashfaq, a

fifteen year old girl, is to be married to Qasim, a ten year old boy, because Ashfaq's father, Resham Khan, was unable to pay his debt that he has taken from Qasim's father:

The sturdy, middle-aged tribesman knew just how generous the offer was. Any girl – and he had made sure that this one was well bodied – was worth more than the loan due. His three older sons were already married and now it was Qasim's turn. The boy was still a little young, but the offer was too good to pass up. (Sidhwa 7-8)

Neither the age nor the amount of debt counted as the compensation was too good to neglect. The wish of the girl was not asked either. The wedding ceremony is arranged, where Ashfaq is asked whether she accepts Qasim as her husband and each time an aunt replies positively on the girl's behalf: "Thrice she is asked if she would accept Qasim, the son of Arbab, as her husband and thrice an old aunt murmured 'yes' on her behalf." (Sidhwa 8) This episode exhibits how women are subject to forced marriages. They are treated merely as commodity. It shows how women have less rather no right to speak against the societal role allotted to them. Despite this restriction Ashfaq's silence suggests her resistance to conform to this belief, she accepts it repressing her anger to dodge the further detrimental repercussions. Her silence can also be taken as a silent revolt against forced marriage and commodification of women. Later, when she first beholds her groom she laughs loudly at her own fate which signals her repression of her anger on reluctantly getting married to a boy younger than her. It helps her to prepare herself to accept her fate and lead a life without any conflicts.

Buchi Emecheta is a renowned post-colonial Nigerian novelist who focuses women and their plight at the center of Nigerian society. *The Bride Price*, published in 1976, revolves around the problems of women in post-colonial Nigeria. It narrates the story of Aku-nna whose father has recently passed away; and she is left in the hands of his elder brother. It exposes the evil norms and beliefs of Igbo society like bride price, forced marriages and all the traditional values that exert its pernicious violence against women. In the very first chapter, the issue of bride price is raised. It depicts how Aku-nna's family members are quite concerned with her slender physique as she is going to bring the bride price to her family. Her father, Ezekiel, treats her as her own:

He had named her Aku-nna, meaning literally "father's wealth", knowing that the only consolation he could count on from her would be her bride price. To him this was something to look forward to.

Aku-nna on her part was determined not to let her father down. She was going to marry well, a rich man of whom her father would approve and who would be able to afford an expensive bride price. (Emecheta 10)

Later, her mother, Ma Blackie, is forced to marry Ezekiel's brother, Okonkwo. It exposes the weird customs of Igbo community which reflects how a woman's life is confined under male

oriented society. Aku-nna becomes aware of this strange custom when Ogugua tells her about it in Ibuza:

'You're almost fourteen years old now and you still don't know the customs of our Ibuza people? Your mother is inherited by my father, you see, just as he will inherit everything your father worked for.' (Emecheta 64)

A woman is only expected to conform to the rigid custom, repressing her own will. In the Igbo community, women are placed to perpetrate the subordinate role despite having certain privileges of trading and to older women. Her step-father wishes to own the prestigious title, Eze, which necessitates money to perform certain ceremonies and he thinks that bride price would fulfill, as Okonkwo says: "Aku-nna and Ogugua will get married at about the same time. Their bride prices will come to me. You see the trend today, that the educated girls fetch more money." (Emecheta 75) This anticipation of a large bride price exposes how women are treated as a mere object. Even their education is allowed so that it could bring more money.

The *Pakistani Bride* is based on a true story narrated to the author while she camped in the remotest region of Karakoram. It is a story of a girl from plains who runs away from the brutality of the egotistical society. Unfortunately, she was caught and thrown in the Indus river. But the novelist here allows her protagonist succeed in her attempt to run away, crossing the bridge. At the age of thirty-four, Qasim loses his family and only he is left. He decides to leave Kohistan. While travelling in the train to Lahore, it was brutally massacred by the enraged Sikhs and only Qasim was left there. A little girl was seen and clasped Qasim calling her "father". The girl was from plains, he adopts her and names her Zaitoon after his late daughter's name. The story revolves around the story of Zaitoon. After describing the effects of Partition, murders and holocaust, the novel focuses on the life and victimization of tribal women graphically portraying the traditional world of mountain life. Qasim is thoroughly fascinated by the reminiscences of the mountain life of Kohistan as he says:

'You'll find how different it is from the plains. We are not bound hand and foot by the government clerks and police. We live by our own rules – calling our own destiny! We are free as the air you breathe!' (Sidhwa 100)

Becharmed by the vision of mountain life, Zaitoon desires to visit Kohistan, considering it her father's native land. When Qasim tells her that she is to be married to his nephew, Saki, son of Misri Khan, she agrees initially. Her neighbour Miriam, taking it merely at expense of certain profit or money, protests and says:

'Brother Qasim,' she coaxed, 'how can a girl brought up in Lahore, educated – how can she be happy in the mountains? Tribal ways are different, you don't know how changed you are'. . . 'They are savages. Brutish, uncouth, and ignorant. She will be miserable among them. Don't you see?' (Sidhwa 93)

Here the novelist has depicted how a woman is protecting another woman from the upcoming cruelty that might rule over her life. But Qasim is not moved and doesn't change his decision; when she says that her marriage is merely at the expense of some money, maize and goats, he replies, "Sister Miriam, it is not for the goats and maize, please believe me. It is my word – the word of Kohistani!" (Sidhwa 94) It exposes the rigid code of conduct of the tribal life. They are quite concerned with their words, honour and tradition of their life. And it is the women who become the prey to the victimization in the name of words and honour of male chauvinism.

Women in Africa are subordinated to male hegemony. Emecheta exposes the polygamous attitude of Igbo men, when Ma Blackie is forced to marry Okonkwo, Ezekiel's younger brother. Wollstonecraft has also expressed her detest to polygamy; in *A Vindication to the Rights of Woman*, she says: "Polygamy is another physical degradation; and a plausible argument for a custom, that blasts every domestic virtue, . . . if polygamy is necessary, women must be inferior to man, and made for him." (90) She exposes this evil norm of male hegemony of African community, illustrating Forster's opinion whose words she adds and writes: ". . . he adds, –if this be applied to the inhabitants of Africa, it is evident that men there, accustomed to polygamy, are enervated by the use of so many women, and therefore less vigorous; . . ." (Wollstonecraft 90)

Okonkwo's character symbolizes the polygamous attitude of African males. Even Obiajulu's father is shown to own many wives. It suggests the degrading Igbo society where men enjoy their prerogatives and women are merely the 'second sex'. The serious decisions like marriages are put in Okonkwo's hands. Many African families visit his home with the proposal of wedding; Obokoshi is considered the nice groom for Aku-nna. Women in Nigeria are twice colonised as the nation was colonized and the natives are treated as the 'others' or subaltern. Women could be considered other of the other, doubly colonized. The commodification or the bride price suggests, they were no more than mere bodies.

Forced marriage is depicted vehemently through violence. Aku-nna is abducted by the family of Okoboshi to get her married forcefully. She had fallen in love with Chike and wanted to marry him, but her family and step-father disapprove it as he was a descendent of slave and to be more specific in patriarchal ideology a woman is not allowed to take decision of her personal life. Emecheta names a chapter 'A Kind of Marriage' where the abduction is depicted:

After everything, she was nothing but a common native girl is kidnapped into being a bride.

The realization was so painful, and the men carrying her from one shoulder to another, that a kind of dizziness overcame Aku-nna. . . . When she arrived at her new home in Umueze, Aku-nna was a limp bride in need of revival. (Emecheta 126)

This exhibits the forced marriage through violence of abduction. Obokoshi's mother says: "My husband decided to get you for our boy this way because we saw and heard of the part that slave boy wanted to play in your life. No girl from a family as good as yours would dream of marrying a slave." (Emecheta 134) They have almost arranged everything to get her married to him. A mud couch was painted in a room along with a wooden bed, spread with a white cloth where her purity was to be tasted. She is determined to oppose it and resist to any sort of torments they were about to put over her giving her in the hands of Obokoshi: "A kind of strength came over her, from where she did not know. She knew only that, for once in her life, she intended to stand up for herself, for her honour. This was going to be the deciding moment of her existence." (Emecheta 136)

Here, she becomes aware of strength hidden inside everyone when it comes to defend her own self. She represses her delicacy and modesty and gets ready to combat for her own self. Her words suggest the verbal resistance to comply to the rigid tradition when after kicking him she speaks of her own impurity just to save her:

"Oh, yes, that is true. But today I passed my examination. We celebrated my success together," she snarled, her heart thumping in the knowledge that his people had probably been watching her all that day. She hoped Okoboshi would not ask any more questions, or else he might discover that she was making it all up. (Emecheta 139)

This episode illustrates how women take step in order to protect her self dignity. Violence in the form of forced marriages is implicitly executed by these novelists. In Indian subcontinent, woman is seen refusing to protest it vehemently because of the further brutal consequences while in Igbo community, woman is physically abused in the form of abduction. The commodification of women and forced marriage prevail throughout the world and has detrimental effects on women.

Sidhwa in her novel has interwoven the life of women in muslim community that moves episodically with the story of all three brides. She portrays how men are allotted the open room nearby the balcony symbolizing their status to be in touch with the outside world whereas women are given the room inside, one of the corner of the home where visit of men is scarce:

Rooms with windows open to street were allotted to the men: the dim maze of inner rooms to the women – a domain given over to procreation, female odours and interminable care of children. (Sidhwa 56)

She equally exposes the veil custom of muslim community:

After the wedding the burkhas, which hid a multitude of sins, allowed the women to revert to their sloppy style of dress. With no men to show off to or compete for complacent about their husband's sexual attentions, they visited one another in

their house clothes; . . . Young girls who did not observe purdah dressed tidily, covering themselves merely with their chaddars. (Sidhwa 89)

The veil custom is depicted to execute how it constructs women's life under patriarchal constraints of their husbands. It shows that women are nothing but merely the objects of their husbands' desires. They are not allowed to have any liberty to go beyond their allotted limitations decided by men and which is well justified in the name of religion.

However, Sidhwa's protagonist's action is depicted to show how women take challenging step in order to get rid of all sort of criminalities put against them. Zaitoon runs away from her husband's family to embark upon a new promising life. She undoubtedly succeeds in this action of resistance to the so-called traditional role of mountain-woman but before that she faces another sort of cruelty when she is raped by the two of the tribal men from Cheerkhil. Zaitoon prepares herself repressing the very emotion and feelings that were coming to her initially when she says:

Suddenly she longed to see him. With all her heart she wanted Sakhi to find her. His face, ravaged by concern, broken with remorse, floated before her – gently wooed her. . . .

And his soft caressing words lulled her to sleep. (Sidhwa 194)

She later becomes aware of the perilous mountain which was far away from her father's romantic mountain:

Now she was appalled at the country's sudden menace. She realised that Qasim's presence, and even the presence of Sakhi and the tribesmen had concealed from her truth; that the land she stood on was her enemy: a hostile inscrutable maze. (Sidhwa 197)

This native homeland becomes her foe. She overcomes her feelings for her husband that was about to take the form of love. She represses it before it ripens into love. As Wollstencraft has suggested that women repress such feelings just for her self-respect and which might prove to be pernicious to her ways to liberty by running away:

. . . she represses the first faint dawning of a natural inclination, before it ripens into love, and in the bloom of life she forgets her sex – forgets the pleasure of an awakening passion, which might again have been inspired and returned. She no longer thinks of pleasing, . . . (Wollstonecraft 66)

At last, she gains the freedom by crossing the bridge. She is helped by Mushtaq who helps her to cross the bridge. It shows how her victimized life is emancipated through this resistance which finally brings her success and her assiduous attempts freed her from the clutches of patriarchy. It also teaches the menfolk of mountain a good lesson:

The village was tense and the women talked of nothing else. Magic and witchcraft coloured their speculations. . . Who could tell what knowledge such women possessed? What dark forces befriended the girl? Anyway, this would teach the menfolk a lesson. (Sidhwa 216)

This shows if men's cruelty goes beyond their limitations, they know well how to bring the equilibrium in the society with their radical steps. It testifies that their action of repression and resistance is bound to bring the emancipation.

The same is true in the case of Aku-nna, she is promised for a new life with her slave lover, Chike. It becomes possible only because of her resistance to submit to Obokoshi. Here Wollestencraft's opinion of repression proves beneficial when she says that one emotion is repressed just to combat for her sex. She fights physically with Obokoshi. Chike succeeds in saving her from the clutches of her so-called forced husband, however before that she does face the physical brutality of male society when she is tightly slapped by Obokoshi which results in bleeding from the corner of her mouth.

It is also exhibited by Emecheta that how much a man shows his love towards his beloved when it comes to the question of her purity, it does affect him. Chike is shown pondering over this matter when he decides to begin his life with Akku-nna:

He had to admit that his faith in her wavered when the news came that she was not a virgin, but he still knew that he must have her, even if she was expecting Obokoshi's child. . . he was told never to rebuke a woman for something that had happened in the past, that it was the future that mattered. (Emecheta 152)

However, at the end of the story Aku-nna dies, but she does succeed in getting whatever she wished to. She did get married to the man of her choice, combating with all the existing norms not to get married to a slave. She breaks the shackles and restraints, putting her own wish as priority. When she dies, she names her child Joy as she feels proud of the motherhood that was showered on her.

In a nutshell, it could be said that these gynocentric novels revolve around women unveiling the torments they go through. They probe deep into feminine psyche. They delineate how women take all they really wish to by their tenacious efforts through repression and resistance. Violence has a devastating effect on women. They have to sacrifice their many things to fight against it squarely. They repress their emotion which stand as an obstacle taking the form of love, affection and anger. They vehemently resist to the constricting norms of the society. Aku-nna dares to challenge the traditional way of getting married to the man chosen by her people. She resists to be the wife of the one who has abducted and physically abused her. On the other hand, Zaitoon, a delicate girl from plains, shakes the male egotistical society of mountain by her success in the escape from the brutality of her husband.

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