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Apparatuses and Processes of Women's Subjugation: An Analysis of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*

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Abstract:

Patience, gentleness, endurance and forbearance have been documented as traits stereotypical to women. Such recognitions have limited the capacities of women as they are accorded work in line with images which are accepted as norms. Varied means are available and adopted to bring about stability in marginalizing and maintaining their position. The education imparted to women involves the process of "othering" which tend to control ambivalences and create boundaries. The nature of this training is so entwined with tradition that it pushes them to domestic slavery and subservience. In addition, their entire being is controlled by monitoring of dress, behaviour and mobility by means of familial, social, cultural and religious codes. These aspects are discussed in the present paper with special reference to Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*.

Keywords: Subjugation, patriarchy, commodity, education, stereotype, boundary.

The principal hindrance that women have to overcome to attain emancipation is to develop the ability to recognize the subjugation conspired against them. They have carried on with their roles unquestionably and have accepted whatever has been offered to them, thereby blinding themselves to identifying channels that operate to control them. The will of patriarchy is imposed upon women by means of two primary strands—social authority and economic force. Men have used both these channels in their benefit to enforce their control over the behaviour of women, thus, making them passive, docile, ignorant, virtuous and totally ineffectual unless utterly puppeted by them to meet specific desired ends. Majority of the women writers have perceived the piteous position of women and strived for using literature as grounds to battle for an honourable and equitable standing for women. With this perspective an effort is made to identify the apparatuses and processes that are used by patriarchy to exercise its dominance as is perceptible in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*. Such recognition is a necessary requirement to arm oneself to take on challenges that, under all possibility, stand in the way of women in their quest for freedom.

The men in society diligently observe and execute a number of means by which the position of women is degraded and marginalized. Commoditisation of women is one such means that allows the dominant and the powerful, in material and strength, to treat women as a

commodity which could be exchanged as other objects and things of requirement as food and clothing. Such a treatment finds expression widely in literature. Henchard in Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) sells his wife to a Sailor as he considered them hindering his career and consuming his energies. The father in *Ghasiram Kotwal* (1976) bargains his daughter for his own ambitions. Similar is the case of Begum Jan in Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf- The Quilt* (1942) who is married off to the aged Nawab so that the family could be rid off the financial burden. Bapsi Sidhwa too draws the reader's attention to three women in *The Pakistani Bride* who are treated as commodities that could be exchanged for the will and desires of men controlling them. Afshan is offered by her father against an outstanding loan and Zaitoon is bargained for five hundred rupees, maize, a few goats. Hamida who talks with pride "of the price her vivacious beauty had fetched on marriage" (PB 173) is a pointer that such exchange is a common phenomenon and a matter of pride. As Sidhwa opens the novel with the episode of Afshan's exchange she does not intend to pass over the issue of commodification of women as a mere occurrence but also to reflect upon the implications of such actions. Critics like Farrukh Khan (1996) appropriately puts forth that such a "'transaction' reveals the status of a woman as nothing more than a bargaining commodity, whose role as such has already been decided" (142). Afshan's father had to rid himself of the burden of the loan amount that he had taken from Sharbat Khan. He sees his daughter Afshan as the easiest way out of the debt. Qasim's nostalgia for his homeland is so engripping that he makes Zaitoon an instrument in an attempt to redeem the feeling of belongingness to his roots. A beautiful, delicate and sophisticated city-born Zaitoon is bartered to a barbaric tribesman, Sakhi. Such a practice of exchanging women as objects lead to their subjugation. Pointing at the embedded powerlessness of women, Singh adds that "the treatment of women as a commodity is an effort to silence women" and that silence makes women invisible and insignificant thereby turning women to mere objects (60). The identification of suppression by means of objectification is not only absent but the acceptance of priced objectification with pride hints at the pitiable position of women.

With the advent of the idea of private property it was woman who was confined to the home to produce heirs who could inherit property and carry father's name. Consequently, woman lost control over her own body facilitating their oppression. Her identity was merged with the identity of the man. In their association with men, there has been a loss of identity of women. Zaitoon too loses her identity in her association with Qasim: "Munni, you are like the smooth, dark, olive, the Zaitoon, that grows near our hills. . . The name suits you. . . I shall call you Zaitoon" (PB 30). As Qasim adopts Munni he aspires to justify his claim on the girl. As a result, she has to abandon her identity and adopt the new name Zaitoon in order to belong to her adoptive father. By such an action of renaming the girl so as to relate her somehow to him, Qasim suggests his tendency to treat Zaitoon as an object and project himself as the owner.

Education inspires mental faculties and can be considered as one key instrument for liberation of any group that has been long oppressed. However, it has not been free from the agenda of patriarchy and it is observed that its primary objective is to provide to the girls "an

education of the sentiments rather than of the understanding” (Mill 532). Access to education is a selective privilege and in orthodox societies like Pakistan, only minimal teaching is advocated. A discerning educational conditioning enables patriarchy to bring about mental enslavement such that no antithetical voice is raised or heard on the part of the women folk. To make things more difficult it is implicitly observed that women themselves promote the patriarchal ideology that they have absorbed over the years. Prem Choudhary (1998) aptly writes: “Ideologically and culturally socialized right from birth to accept their inferiority, women actually help to tighten the rein of patriarchy, reinforcing its ideology and becoming willing party to their own marginalization and exploitation” (17). In *The Pakistani Bride*, Zaitoon’s education is halted by Miriam who scandalized to see the girl’s time being wasted in education. Though Zaitoon has the merit of going to school for full five years, her training takes a different turn once she attains puberty. Miriam advocates patriarchal supremacy and opposes Zaitoon’s learning to read and write. Such a proclivity of Miriam is evident when she says: “Poor child... had she a mother she’d be learning to cook and sew” (PB 53). Zaitoon is expected to imbibe the cultural values of the society heavily loaded in favour of men and to be adept in household management. Education is further discouraged among women by means of feeding and establishing preconceived notions regarding education and conduct. In South Asian society, to be a clever woman is a disgrace. For her, intelligence is always a curse and, therefore, education is discouraged. This fact has been clearly voiced by the author when we see Miriam sternly discussing the idea of Zaitoon’s education:

Now that she's learned to read the Holy Quran, what will she do with more reading and writing – boil and drink it? She's not going to become a baboo or an officer! No, Allah willing, she'll get married and have children. (PB 52)

The tool that can promise liberty, independence and growth for women is perceived as a hindrance in attaining a peaceful and settled life that they are socialised for since childhood. The teaching-learning is limited to only the household chores and familial harmony.

The idea of education can be extended to the dimension of socialisation and training offered to women. Since childhood, the psyche of a girl child is moulded in a particular fashion to inculcate in her all forms of feminine traits. The resulting obedience, silence and submission never allow them to go beyond the rules and regulations set by the family for girls. Wifehood and motherhood, as idealised roles to be donned by women are calculatingly induced into the process of socialization of a girl for their future role as wife and mother. This objective utilises methods, legends, folklore and rituals that a girl child is introduced to in early childhood and acceptance of the state of affairs as norms is developed. In Rousseau's (1906) opinion:

The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honoured by them, to educate them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to make life sweet

and agreeable to them – these are the duties of women at all times, and what should be taught them from their infancy (263).

Such a prescribed pattern of women's education is followed till date. Zaitoon is taught the woman's way of life by Miriam. "From her Zaitoon learned to cook, sew, shop and keep her room tidy..." (PB 55). Recapitulation of Beauvoir's (1988) observation here deserves mention: "One is not born but rather becomes a woman.... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... described as feminine" (267).

The entire project of channelling out of stereotypical duties of womankind involves the process of 'othering' which tend to control ambivalences and create boundaries. The process of 'othering' by assignment of stereotypical roles and duties to women serves to externalize, distance and exclude factors which threaten male hegemony. Stereotyping has been explained by Michael Pickering (2001) as "a way of warding off any threat of disruption to 'us' as the 'same together'. It is a collective process of judgment, which feeds upon and reinforces powerful social myths" (48). Ironically, it is so much linked with tradition that it pushes women back to domestic slavery and subservience. The wisdom is passed down in legacy which is assimilated by women without much understanding. It has been observed that patience, gentleness, endurance and forbearance are stereotypes typical to women. They are, therefore, accorded work in line with these images. Women are put, as a result, behind the doors to be occupied with the household chores and nursing. The stereotypical work done by women has been put forth by Ann Oakley (1981):

Women's work' is typical work, which requires little training, little in the way of mental initiative, and characteristically consists of interruptible time span tasks. It is often also described as 'caring' work – work that promotes the welfare of others, rather than the welfare or development of the workers herself (155).

Even while lot of emphasis is laid on training women for house hold work, caring and nurturing, it is paradox to consider it as a kind of work that is unimportant as it requires as much mental input as any profession would otherwise require.

The home boundaries are far more difficult to transcend in South Asia than in the West. Women, very often participate in according cooperation from other women under their influence towards their own submission and also approve creation of enclosed domains that restrict the freedom of women. To meet these ends, the mythical, religious, familial and social forces, together, negate personal ideals of freedom. The mythic models from our epics and *Puranas* are promoted to maintain male hegemony. Millet (1971) writes: "In general the task of the woman is to serve man and the family through "womanly guidance," exercise some vague and remote good influence on everyone" (96). It is, therefore, not surprising that women themselves persuade other women to abide by guidelines as is demonstrated by Miriam in her training of Zaitoon. As a part of her "womanly guidance", Miriam instructs Zaitoon not to talk and play with

boys. She advises the girl to cover her face with a piece of cloth to protect herself from the gaze of the males, assuming that all men are stalking her: “You are now a woman. Don't play with boys- and don't allow any man to touch you. This is why I wear a burkha...”(PB 55). For Miriam, the burkha is a protective shield she wore to escape leering eyes or any sort of male attentions. She regarded it as a medium to protect the honour of her husband. Miriam's advice to Zaitoon and her justification of selecting a type of garment is indicative of the fact that clothes too have been a medium used by men to confine women. Laurence Langer (1959) holds a similar opinion when he writes:

...by imposing confining garments on women, or by otherwise hobbling her, man was enabled almost universally to keep her in a state of inferiority and subjugation to him as a personal possession (51-55).

Appropriating a type of garment for women creates boundaries that are, at the same time, physical and psychological in nature. While the garment physically wards off male attention, it psychologically gives a rise to a necessity of protection from the unknown ‘other’. The notion of covering extends from physical body to restricting physical movement. So, all efforts are made to repress the sexuality of young girls as it may invite unwanted male attention. Miriam's advice to Zaitoon not to play with boys not only points at the traditional concept shielding for security but also associates it with honour that plays an important role in the repression of girls. Any misdemeanor on her part could bring shame both to her and her family and could result in reducing her chances of getting a good match.

The separate sphere created for girls habituate them to remain meek, submissive and docile. They are kept busy surrounded and burdened with odd jobs. The author deplors the suppression of girls: “...little girls burdened with even younger children on their hips” (PB 57). The partition between male and female world is very sharp. While the boys occupy the roof tops to fly kites, the girls stay behind “keeping with their dolls and miniature earthenware pots and ladles” (PB 57). The author puts the division marvellously when she describes the *zenanas* as “gigantic wombs; the fecund felid world of mothers and babies” (PB 55). Nilufer E. Bharucha (1998) rightly states that:

the enclosure of the womb affords protection to the growing foetus and is therefore a positive factor. An androcentric world, however, has extended the analogy of biological female inwardness to create a feminine reductiveness. This has turned a biological virtue into a societal and cultural handicap (93).

Sidhwa peeps into the female world and tries to highlight man's dire need to restrict women. The *zenanas* were created by the society exclusively for women of the house where no male member was allowed entry. It was the outcome of the ideas of protectionism of the women of the house against any outsider, lest the honour may be shattered. Protection demanded seclusion of women from the public gaze where they could enter only in a *pardah/burkha*. This seclusion led to

woman's dependence, both economically and socially. The picture that Sidhwa draws of the *zenanas*, unfailingly suggests the degradation of women as a reproductive machine which men require and use to strengthen the future:

Rooms with windows open to the street were allotted to the men: the dim maize of inner rooms to the women – a domain given over to procreation, female odours and the interminable care of children... Generation of babies had wet mattresses, sofas and rugs... just in case the smells should fade, armies of new-born infants went on arriving to ensure the odours were perpetuated (PB 56).

The enclosure of the *zenanas* sharpens the partition between male-female world. With the restrictive ideology working in perfect coordination against women, there is little scope left for women to explore their abilities or find a place for themselves.

Sidhwa highlights the dismal condition of women in *The Pakistani Bride* and shows the powerlessness of womanhood. Certain factors like the societal norms, values and attitudes combine together to conspire against women and stand in the way of realising and developing their capacities. By conditioning women to seek ordinary task of womanhood reducing their capabilities by subservient roles, their position as embodiment of *Shakti*, *Saraswati*, *Lakshmi* has faded in mythological miasma. The methods used by patriarchy to subdue them are not the problem of one particular place or region or country; it is universal. Objectification, creating distinct identity, attire and specific spaces are some of the apparatuses which lead to subjugation of women. This discreet study of socio cultural orientation of women helps in understanding the reasons of dormant aspirations of women. There is a need to shake women out of their quiescence and step up for creating a world where they receive respect, space and their voice is valued in true sense.

Notes:

PB refers to the text *The Pakistani Bride*.

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