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A Reflection of Islamic Feminism in Bapsi Sidhwa's Novel: *The Pakistani Bride*

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Abstract:

Pakistan and Afghanistan share a common border near Kohistan mountain terrain. Many tribal communities found in this region are highly orthodox, barbaric and inundated with religious fanatics. Kohistani is one such tribe. Patriarchy is rampant in its social structure and restoration of male honour is one of the most important motives of their lives. Women in such tribes have been devoid of basic human rights since ages. They lead a parasitic life devoid of self-esteem, self-identity and is only expected to self-abnegate.

Many writers are challenging such orthodox approach of the religious fundamentalists who deny human rights to a major section of a society named women. Bapsi Sidhwa is one such writer who has blatantly exposed the inhuman practices prevailing against women in Kohistani community of Pakistan by so called preservers of religion and civilization. The present paper tries to examine the status of women in the Kohistani community. It also tries to analyse the reasons which make the Kohistani tribe patriarchal, barbaric and conservative tribal community. The paper delineates the growing urge of Kohistani women to liberate them from the hypocrite and callous patriarchal society and tries to unveil Islamic feminism as represented by Bapsi Sidhwa in *The Pakistani Bride*.

Keywords: marginalization, patriarchy, marriage, feminine traits, social conditioning, commodity, self-abnegation

Many tribal communities thrive in the adjoining regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. These tribal communities are highly religious, orthodox and are blind followers of Quran and Shari'ah. Kohistanis form one such fundamentalist community which is highly patriarchal in nature and count females as commodity. Kohistani women with no fundamental rights kept on serving men passively. The years of subjugation and exploitation is instigating them to raise their voice against the inhuman practices. This rebelling effort of Muslim women to liberate them from the confining walls of religion and patriarchy is being termed as Islamic feminism. The feminists, from around the world, are voicing the pain, agony and humiliation of Muslim tribal women whose lives revolve around gender roles and religion. The genesis of Islamic feminism is not

only bringing forth the revolutionary ideas of the feminists but also giving a platform to the common Muslim women, who were unheard for decades, to voice their plight. Islamic feminism is a term which receives both the accolades and criticism by its respective interpreters. It is being critically analysed by the religious fanatics as questioning of centuries old indoctrinations is eyed with suspicion and threat to religion and its sanctity. Asghar Ali Engineer explains, in *Islam, Misgivings and History*, the urgent need to change the stringent and fossilized outlook of Muslims towards its women:

There is an urgent need for Islamic feminist movement. Islam has given them rights like right to marry, right to divorce, right town property, right to earn their own living, right to education and right to inherit. Unfortunately, all these rights are being denied to them by the so-called keepers of faith. In Islam these rights existed all along but the male-dominated society never allowed women to avail them. (Engineer 137)

Though Islam follows the precepts of Quran which does not limit women to the four walls of the house yet most of the women are still facing the identity crisis due to the limiting and discriminating patriarchal outlook propagated by Shari'ah. Hence tribal communities like Kohistani, who are the ardent followers of religious precepts, are more conservative in their outlook. The religious onslaught by them on women has continued since time immemorial as they are blind to the precepts of Quran which gives equality to men and women:

The Qur'an provides women with explicit rights to inheritance, independent property, divorce and the right to testify in a court of law. It prohibits wanton violence towards women and girls and is against duress in marriage and community affairs. Women and men equally are required to fulfill all religious duties, and are equally eligible for punishment for misdemeanours. Finally, women are offered the ultimate boon: paradise and proximity to Allah. (Wadud 2002)

Though Quran preaches of equality between men and women, Shari'ah advocates patriarchy implicitly. The Muslim patriarchal society in the Asian subcontinent became the ardent followers of *Sharia* and considers it as immutable. Hence the rigid religious doctrines have made them view their women with a conservative approach. Not only the tribal communities but also a major part of Muslim society denied women of social, economic and political rights pushing them to an unending abyss of dejection and ignorance. Religion was the only education given to women. Afghanistan witnessed the worst atrocities inflicted on women due to Shari'ah when implemented by Taliban. Women were reduced to the position of slaves. The Pashtuns of Pakistan preyed on women. Women to them became equivalent to any commodity which was essential to lead a life of ease and comfort. Women due to social conditioning accepted their secondary status as the destiny of female gender. The Islamic feminists want to renegotiate the status of Muslim women as dictated by Shari'ah:

Those who are known as fundamentalists want to apply Shari'ah mechanically and unthinkably. They refuse to take modern conditions into account. It would be of great benefit to all if those who treat Shari'ah as immutable study the history of evolution of various schools of Shari'ah. Without the creative spirit of *ijtihad* one cannot play a useful role in modern times. (Engineer 24)

The religious indoctrinations have a deep impact on a society. It becomes difficult for the people to detach themselves from the precepts as it teaches them the code of conduct. Once accepted it fossilizes and becomes the norm of the society. Any question on the existing norm is taken as a threat to the religious and cultural sanctity. To what extent and by what means can limitations imposed on women by Sharia texts be renegotiated? [...] a "feminist" re-reading of the Sharia is possible – even becomes inevitable. (Ziba Mir-Hosseini 285). The tribes of Pakistan need an overhauling in their social structure and develop a liberalized attitude towards its women.

Many social reformers, activists, critics and writers have come up with various theories and objectives to improve the despicable and despondent position of Muslim women in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bapsi Sidhwa is one such diasporic writer who seems to sensitize the world about the pathetic condition of women in a conventional, orthodox Islamic society of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Readers of Sidhwa's novels find women struggling to voice their plight and overcome the marginalized roles set for them by the patriarchal society in the Asian sub-continent. Her novels vehemently portray the subservient position to which women are subjected. The religious fanatics, patriarchal social and cultural dictates, unjust traditions, position men as the decision-maker of women's destiny. Sidhwa comments in an interview, "Colonialism humiliated the men and they in turn humiliated the women. So whenever the condition of society is weak or humbled, the women suffer the most. And that pattern continues with expectations of subservience from the women." (Kanagayakam 48-49)

She has woven her novels around myriad themes such as partition, marginalization of women, marriage, diaspora, religion, and migration, social and cultural conflicts. The analysis of Sidhwa's novels also elucidates the presence of Islamic feminism. Her novels have a touch of autobiographical note as she has narrated her life experiences. She witnessed the subjugated position of women in the tribes of Pakistan. Devoid of human rights, women were treated as property and possession. The heart rendering incidents related to the life of tribal women forced her to voice their plights through her pen. Her visit to the Karakoram-mountain with her husband metamorphosed her into a writer. The tragic story of a girl, brought to the tribal community, at Karakoram mountain region as a bride and later murdered, compelled her to bring the horrors associated with women's life to the world.

The Pakistani Bride opens the world Kohistani community which is rife with horror of injustice, discrimination, exploitation, suppression and dejection. The novel intricately moves around three

prominent women characters: Afshan, Zaitoon and Carol. Afshan at the age of fifteen is married to Qasim, a ten-year-old boy. The marriage is forcibly consummated because Afshan's father was not able to clear his debts from Qasim's father, Resham Khan. Afshan is offered as compensation to the loss incurred by her father. The novelist unveils the patriarchal society which expects women to reticently accept the matrimonial alliance set by them for the females in their family. Bapsi Sidhwa elucidates:

The sturdy, middle-aged tribesman knew just how generous the offer was. Any girl – and he had made sure that this one was able-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 offer was too good to pass up.(7)

Many contemporary societies of the world do not take women's consent while consummating their marriage. Men are still the decision makers of females' destiny in terms of marriage. Simmi writes in *Encyclopaedia of Indian Women through the Ages* about the approach of Hindu society towards girls and their marriage. She elucidates, "According to Marichi, a father who gives in marriage a girl of eight attains heaven, the giver of a girl of the nine Vaikuntha, and one who gives his daughter before she reaches ten, attains Brahma Loka. The father of a girl married after puberty goes straight to hell" (Jain 80-90). Marriages in Hindu society were solemnized on the bargains done on "Streedhan". Dharmashastra talks about "Streedhan" which is [...] particularly related to the gifts, jewellery, clothes etc. given to the bride at the time of her marriage, usually from her relatives or friends. Dharmashastras clearly indicate that the bride had complete rights over the Streedhan-even to dispose them in case of her husband's death and yet the form Streedhan that would concretize in course of time was a serious aberration (Hasan 400). The Vedic phenomenon of "streedhan" was misinterpreted and implemented by the patriarchy for their benefit. Demands from the groom's family in terms of property, assets, money, and jewellery have to be fulfilled in most cases before the consummation of marriage. It is not only leading to innumerable dowry deaths of women in India every year but also to female foeticide. Women in India are treated as carrier of wealth and fortune to the groom's family. Bapsi Sidhwa too highlights women being treated as property; commodity or assets in Pakistan. They are used in any bargain as objects or animals. Afshan's plight mirrors passive role played by women in the decision-making process of the family.

Afshan too becomes the prey of the debilitating patriarchal set-up. Qasim was too young for her to be husband. Afshan kowtows before her predicament:

The girl did not 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 least 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)

Subjected to social conditioning, she easily acclimatizes to the new environment of her husband's family. The feminine traits are inculcated in females since infancy and they are strictly supervised and guided to carry out their domestic roles in order to perpetuate its designs. They are denied the right to create their own images of femaleness. "[...] the influence of others upon the child is a factor almost from the start, and thus she is indoctrinated with her vocation from her earliest years" (Beauvoir 9). Afshan too understood her role in the family as that of a naïve observer. She reproduces and loses six children. The men's bestial longingness for sensual pleasures has been strongly depicted in Sidhwa's novels. Women are sexually exploited within the family framework and also by the society. Afshan was also about to become the prey of the lustful carnal desires of a man. "He stared at Afshan's wet body, at the colour that flushed her cheeks and at her suddenly darkening eyes. His expression changed. A wary indecisiveness crept in his features. He snickered, leering at her. Afshan covered herself quickly" (11-12). Qasim, who was still a boy, saves Afshan by hitting the man with a stone. Sidhwa has glaringly raised the issue of women's insecurity in a rigid, conventional patriarchal tribal society. Men on the name of their self-respect and honour of the community are ready to slay women but themselves become the perpetrators of crimes which horrifically demean women by dishonouring them. Men, in order to meet their sensuous desires, outrageously lacerate the women of their dignity and self-respect.

Sidhwahar portrayed Zaitoon as an enfant terrible, who escapes from the barbaric kohistani tribal life. Zaitoon, an orphaned girl, who lost her parents during India Pakistan partition, was adopted by Qasim who names her after his own dead daughter. Qasim, a Kohistani by birth, has all patriarchal traits embedded in his personality. He treats his adopted daughter as property and is adamant to sacrifice all relationships in order to preserve his male honour. He moves to plains to make fortune:

A simple man from a primitive warring tribe, his impulses were as direct and concentrated as pinpoints of heat. No subtle concessions to reason or consequence tempered his fierce capacity to love or hate, to lavish loyalty or pity. Each emotion arose spontaneously and without complication, and was reinforced by racial tradition, tribal honour and superstition. Generations had carried it that way in his volatile Kohistani blood.(30)

She is brought up in Qila Gujjar Singh, Lahore. Though he is illiterate, he educates Zaitoon. She learns to read and write and becomes well-versed in Quran. Qasim has a strong affinity to his native place and he returns to it after fifteen years. The following words of Qasim prove his unbound love for kohistani tribe, "We are not bound hand and foot by government clerks and police. We live by our own rules – calling our own destiny! We are free as the air you breathe!"(100). When she is sixteen Qasim fixes her marriage with Sakhi, the son of Misir Khan, Qasim's cousin. Zaitoon knew that her life is going to transform as she was moving from city life to the tribal world. She concludes, "I cross this spot and my life changes,' she thought with

sudden reluctance. But the step into her new life had been taken a month back and she was moving fatefully on its momentum.”(153) Qasim agrees to consummate Zaitoon's marriage as he wanted to reunite with the tribal community. Miriam and Nikka try to dissuade Qasim as they were aware of the hardships of tribal life but Qasim rejected their plea. Zaitoon understood her plight as soon as she saw and understood the tribal life. She tries her best to convince Qasim, ‘But, Abba, I am not of the hills. I am not of your tribe. I am not even yours’ she said quietly.(140)In her desperation she urges her father to take her back with him, for she feels that ‘I will die rather than live here’(157). Qasim pays no heed to the relentless pleadings of Zaitoon. His honour became more precious to him than the life of his daughter. He cautions her:

Now understand this ... ‘Qasim's tone was icily incisive. ‘I've given my word. Your marriage is to be a week from today. Tomorrow your betrothed goes to invite guests from the neighbouring villages. I've given my word. On it depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life. If you besmirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands.(158)

Sidhwa also portrays the tyrannical attitude of husbands who treat their wives with violence and abuse them sexually. The novel exposes the oppression to which women are subjected to in an insular society. Domestic violence and incessant authoritative attitude of men relegate women to the status of a naïve observer. Women are born to serve and men are born to rule is the principle which flourishes in the tribal community:

She also grew immune to the tyrannical, animal– trainer treatment meted out by Sakhi. In his presence, she drifted into a stupor, until nothing really hurt her. He beat her on the slightest pretext. She no longer thought of marriage with any sense of romance. She now lived only to placate him, keeping her head averted unless it was to listen to a command. Then her eyes were anxious and obsequious like those of Hamida.(174)

Tribal manhood expects unquestionable submission from woman. Women are associated with domestic work and are expected to serve men and family. Neither women have social, economic or political rights nor do they witness any kind of development in their life. They indulge in household affairs and accept it as their destiny. The conservative norms of the tribe do not allow women to set a distinct identity of their own and they find themselves in a state of complete disarray. They are made to understand since their birth that they deserve an unquestionable secondary role in the society:

Her existence in those few days mirrored the grim drudgery of the mountain people. Subsisting on baked maize and water, supplemented occasionally by a little rice, she labored all day, chaffing, kneading, washing, and tending the animals and the young green rice-shoots and the sprouting maize. She collected animal droppings and, patting them into neat discs with her hands, plastered them to the hut. Dried by the sun, they provided cooking fuel. Occasionally she directed the

flow of irrigation waters, ingeniously, channeled from the stream into the terraced 52 patches of cultivation. Gradually, in her quest for fire wood, Zaitoon became familiar with the terrain. (174)

Zaitoon longs to have a life of freedom and respect. The tyrannical oppression and authoritative control over her life leave her perturbed. She had reached impasse in her life and expects no change in the tapestry of tribal life. She knew that the hegemony of men will never melt down and give space to women. Disheartened and dejected, Zaitoon decides to run away from the stifling environment of the tribe. A rebelling wife is never tolerated by the Kohistanis as it puts a question on their integrity and honour. Death is the only punishment accorded to them. A dishonouring wife is disgust to the tribe whereas a man dishonouring a woman is considered as a normal way of life. Zaitoon knew that if caught they will have no mercy on her. Hence she chooses the difficult mountain terrain to escape but loses the way:

Zaitoon knew that somewhere in the serpentine vaults of the ravine and in the glacier-riven valleys she had lost her direction, and that she river gorge could be hidden anywhere in the myriad furrows between the mountains. Darkness fell, and with it came fear. Mountains closed on her like a pack of wolves.(197)

She had to cross the river which divided the tribal community and the army. Zaitoon gets trapped and raped by two strangers. Zaitoon's plight depicts the hypocrisy existing in the Kohistani tribe. They can kill to preserve their honour but simultaneously they dishonor a woman to satiate their carnal desires. The incident depicts the bestial patriarchy which is rampant in Kohistani community. Shashi Deshpande states in an interview to Geetha Gangadharan:

Rape is for me the grossest violation of trust between two people. Whether it is someone in the family or your husband or any other man who commits a rape, it destroys the trust between men and women. It is also the greatest violence because it is not only the woman's body but it is her mind and feeling of her right to have a control on her body which is gone. (126-127)

Zaitoon is saved by Mushtaq who finds her in an unconscious state and brings her back to the camp. He also saves her from Sakhi and his clansmen by persuading them that Zaitoon is dead..The death of Zaitoon restored the lost respect of the kohistani tribe. Sidhwa has very poignantly portrayed the men's egotism and self-absorption which is not ready to lend a free space to its women.Zaitoon attains her freedom and solace but her true destiny is not clearly presented by the novelist.The novel depicts the different stages of women's life submerged in subordination and self-abnegation. Women suffer as daughter, wife and mother.

Afshan, Zaitoon and Carol represent the different facets of women's suppression. Carol, an American woman, leaves her job of shop assistant at San Jose and comes to Pakistan with her husband Farukh. Pakistan was to her a land of romance, love and adventure. Unaware of and unacquainted with the true world of veils and zennana she lands in a world which was quite

different from her native place in myriad ways. She gradually realizes, “the repressed erotic climate was beginning to affect her. In the States, what she had thought was unique attraction for Farukh had in fact been her fascination with the exotic, and later the attraction had disconcertingly extended itself to include his friends and relatives—and even acquaintances” (176). During her stay in Pakistan she gets inclined towards her husband's friend, Major Mushtaq and wishes to marry him. Mushtaq accepts the advances of Carol as a step taken by a liberal woman. The relationship also gave him comfort and respite in his lonely sojourn at remote posting. He denies giving a permanent stability to his relationship by marrying Carol because, “You'd find her life in the zenanna with the other women pitifully limited and claustrophobic – she'd probably find yours – if she could ever glimpse it—terrifyingly insecure and needlessly competitive” (180). Carol knew that Mushtaq will never take her as his wife hence she returns to Farukh. She dreams of having children, leading happy married life and going to the tribal world. Life unveils another bitter reality of life when she sees a tribal woman's head floating in the dark water of the river. Mushtaq explains to her, “women get killed for one reason or other ... imagined insults, family honour, infidelity ...”(The *Pakistani Bride* 223). Carol now understands the reality associated with the life of women in the traditional, insular society of Pakistan. Denied of individuality, identity and independence they were expected to live a life of parasites catering to the needs of the patriarchy. The issue of gender equality is still a remote dream. Shashi Deshpande states in her essay *No Man is an Island*:

The issue of gender equality, which embraces everything from female foeticide and equal pay to dowry and rape, has to be faced. Those who are afraid that women will turn freedom into license forget that the needs of daily life impose their own restrictions on human liberty. But often there are no limits to cruelty. And cruelty has to be opposed. To be silent is to abet it. (1992)

Women, being a witness to inhuman exploitation since their childhood, accept their passive roles and never question men's authority. The fate of women is death if they dare to defy the fossilized tradition of the tribal community. Amongst the sufferers, a few gather strength and will-power to challenge the atrocities inflicted on them. They dare to stand for their suppressed rights and lost identity. Through Carol and Zaitoon, Sidhwa shows two women from different cultures being trapped in a patriarchal community. Carol decides to return to her native place and Zaitoon decides not to give up. Hamida, Saki's mother, too comes out of her cocoon of silence and stands in favour of Zaitoon. For decades she bore the pain of three dead sons and felt stifled by the tribal community and its hypocrisy of self-respect and honour. She concludes:

Honour! She thought bitterly everything for honour – and another life lost! Her loved ones dead and now the girl she was beginning to hold so dear sacrificed. She knew the infallibility of the mountain hunters. The old woman was overcome by the memory of her three dead sons: the weight of each child in her body for nine months, the excruciating pain, drudgery, sweat: and scant years later, the heartbreak when, one by one, each of her sons was carried home on a

crude stretcher swinging from the men's shoulders, their faces grim with the weight of the corpse under an impoverished shroud. In each grief, a nameless dread: how many more lives would the dead one claim? The set faces of the men, their eyes burning with hate and a lust for revenge, their old make-shift guns forever loved and polished, the leather slings decorated with coloured bands and tassels, cherished even more for the men they killed. Men and honour. And now the girl. . . (190-191).

She deduces, "Anyway, this would teach the menfolk a lesson" (216). Sidhwa as a writer could not remain untouched by the horrifying incidents taking place in the lives of women who belonged to the tribal community of Pakistan. Denied of rights, respect, privileges, they lived a life of slavery. Women leading a dormant life become alive and sensitive to the need of recuperating from the deprived state. They become the voice of the *enfant terrible*. Cooke summarises Islamic feminism as, "Islamic feminism is a response to the patriarchal structure explicitly stated in Sharia and implied in all sections of the society and the state that deny women their place in the community. It has both theological and social underpinnings." (Cooke 151). The religious, socio-political and economic constraints have subverted women since ages. A major section of the Islamic society which is still imbibing to the age old indoctrinations needs to develop a flexible approach towards women.

The true colour of Islamic feminism revolting against the phallogocentric society is clearly visible in *The Pakistani Bride*. The novelist depicts Muslim women coming out of their cocoon of silence. It portrays women gradually unleashing themselves from the social conditioning which prepares the women to accept patriarchy submissively. The novel gives a glimpse of the offshoots of the Islamic feminism which finally ripped open the hard crust of orthodox society to witness *A Thousand Splendid Suns*.

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