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Struggle for Human Rights: Women in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*

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Abstract:

Human rights are the rights inherent to all human beings. These rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression etc. But women, because of their sex, often referred to as “weaker sex”, are denied their fundamental rights as human beings. Throughout the Ages of Literature, the image of woman has remained one of subjugated, sub-ordinate being, always to maintain silence in the public sphere and give unstinted respect to the male members of the family. They are forced to face many unfortunate situations like subjugation, violence— physical, mental and emotional, imprisonment in marriage, objectification, dehumanisation, child marriage, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, rape, ostracism, denial of identity and many more.

Bapsi Sidhwa, one of the most prominent Pakistani-Anglophone novelists, in her novel *The Pakistani Bride*, takes up as its theme one of the pivotal concerns of feminist discourse i.e. oppression and subjugation of ‘the soft target’, the ‘other sex’ in the patriarchal set-up. The novel not only vividly depicts the struggle of the Pakistani girl Zaitoon for human/women rights but the struggle of an American girl Carol also. All the major and minor female characters in the novel

are confined within the restricted framework of rules imposed by the patriarchal system of the society. None of these women is allowed to play any role in taking important decisions for her life even though her whole being might be at stake. Through the life-stories of different women in the novel, Sidhwa shows how dangerous the patriarchal world can be for a woman who dares to ask for her rights, and challenges or resists the so called codes of conduct defined by the male members of the society. The novel strongly and earnestly puts forward a demand for equal human rights for women.

Keywords: Human rights, patriarchy, feminist discourse, subjugation.

Human rights are the rights inherent to all human beings irrespective of their nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. These rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression etc. Human rights are non-discriminatory, meaning that no one can be excluded from them. Of course, while all human beings are entitled to these human rights equally, not all of them in reality experience them unbiased throughout the world. Many governments and individuals ignore human rights and grossly exploit other human beings on some or the other ground of discrimination. Gender discrimination is one of the ever-burning issues that deprives women of their human rights and therefore needs to be widely discussed to minimize and even eliminate it.

Women, because of their sex, often referred to as “weaker sex”, are denied their fundamental rights as human beings. Since creation, women have been treated and believed to be inferior to men on the grounds that women's biology justifies the societal pressures that make them subordinate to men. All that is passive, servile, docile, conventional, and emotional, and all that pertains to a subordinate and secondary position, is identified with what is termed feminine. Women are forced to face many unfortunate situations like subjugation, violence (physical, mental

and emotional), imprisonment in marriage, objectification, dehumanization, child marriage, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, rape, ostracism, denial of identity and many more.

Since time immemorial, woman has been commodified and treated as an instrument of luxury. Her rights as a human being have seldom found a voice at the familial and social levels. Her accommodating nature, compliant and undemanding attitude has made her an easy subject to all the trials and tribulations inflicted by man and society.

For ages, woman has been a matter of concern in the literary texts written by *men*. Myths, legends, epics and lyrics depict her as goddess and Mother Nature but at the same time, in cunning terms, portray her in negative light as a witch and seductress. Rarely has she been perceived simply as an individual with her own identity, a human being entitled to fundamental rights.

Throughout the pages of literature, the image of woman has remained one of subjugated, subordinate being, always expected to maintain silence in the public sphere and show unwavering respect to her father and husband. She has been continually instructed that her spiritual and social worth resides above everything else in her practice of and reputation for chastity. Sushila Singh explains in *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*:

Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or in his fantasy life. (7)

A woman's identity and her status are always established in relation to man and as dependent on and subordinate to man. A sense of her inferiority and male superiority is inculcated in her mind, heart, and her very being, right from her childhood, and discrimination begins as she

is treated differently by her family and society. Simone De Beauvoir's classic exposition of making of woman goes like this:

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (301)

A significant number of contemporary writers have strived to portray woman who has continually been robbed of her own identity and denied her rights as a human being. Several women novelists, themselves representing society's marginalised and silenced half and having a deep insight into the female psyche, more authentically present the woman's side of life. With their own unique voices, they offer a diverse range of feminine experiences, and thus contribute to the enrichment of literature, particularly feminist novels. Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, and South Asian novelists Mahashweta Devi Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De, Kamla Markandaya, Geeta Hariharan, Tasleema Nasrin, Arundhati Roy, Rukhsana Ahmad, Monica Ali are but a few to name. Through sexual awakening, sexual victimization, sexual discrimination, suffering, pain, struggle, agony, helplessness and exploitation, their female characters learn of the gendered oppressions that work through their bodies. These women writers vehemently take up cudgels against that patriarchal system of human society which denies human rights to women. By exploring and sharing a range of victimisation of female figures in their works, these novelists have not only exposed how female sexuality and bodies are defined but also controlled and exploited by men. They have invigorated the realistic novel by using it as a tool to expose how women's human rights are curbed by men under the guise of socio-cultural and religious traditions.

The present research paper examines Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* (1984) to explore and analyse the suffering, resistance, sexual trauma and painful experience of female figures, as well as their strive for existence and arduous struggle for attaining woman/human rights.

Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the most prominent Pakistani-Anglophone novelists writing today. *The Pakistani Bride* is her first written and second published novel. The novel takes up as its theme one of the pivotal concerns of feminist discourse i.e. oppression and subjugation of 'the soft target', the 'other sex' in the patriarchal set-up. It not only vividly depicts the plight of the Pakistani girl Zaitoon, but also that of an American girl Carol.

The novel is mainly a story of three brides – Afshan, Zaitoon and Carol, with Zaitoon being the titular character. Through an array of diverse cast of characters the novel highlights a range of issues for discussion including marriage, partition crisis and the condition of women in the sub-continent. However, the epicentre of gravity and nucleus of concern remains the violence, tyrannical and proprietorial attitude of men towards women and, thereby suppressing their human rights.

At the very outset of the novel, the conversation between Qasim and his father about Qasim's marriage and an old debt gives an expression that a woman is nothing more than a bargaining commodity. Ten years old Qasim is told that his marriage has been fixed with fifteen years old Afshan. Resham Khan, the girl's father, has not been able to reimburse the debt he owed to Qasim's father, and therefore he has instead offered his daughter for settlement as compensation for the loss. Thus, at the very outset of the novel, Sidhwa interrogates the sanctity of the institution of marriage through the circumstances in which Afshan and Qasim get married. There was no reason for Qasim's family not to accept her readily because: "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.” (7)

This forced marriage is thus a transaction of bodies and not a relationship based on mutual consent and understanding. Even the ill-proportionate age gap between the bride and groom is not taken into consideration. The extent of such injustice to a woman is also evident when it is revealed that Qasim's father once “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” (8). The fundamental view of women spelled out here is starkly evident, particularly in the context of tribal culture. The girl Afshan is rated as something purchased, and he has also ensured that she is ‘able bodied’. Having only ‘one wife’ with himself, he could have taken her for his own property but decides to hand over her to his son instead. Bapsi Sidhwa here underlines the harsh reality that a woman is treated by society just as an object of gratification that can be sold or purchased, and something of trivial importance. That notion is an absolute contradiction to the very spirit of human rights.

The fate of Afshan entirely rested in the decision of Qasim's father. She could have been made to live a life as Qasim's stepmother. So it was never a pre-arranged marriage. On the contrary, it was, in fact, a settlement to prevent a blood-feud, in which Afshan, without having any say was to accept her fate decided for her by others. The daughter is thus always a means for settlement, a commodity for transaction, for selling and buying, whatever the loan amount may be and her wish is never important, neither at the time of her transaction as settlement for agreement nor at the time of her Nikah. When Afshan, the object of settlement, is getting married to Qasim, it is not she who accepts him verbally, but rather some old aunt:

“Thrice she was asked if she would accept Qasim, the son of Arbab, as her husband and thrice an old aunt murmured ‘yes’ on her behalf”. (8)

Sidhwa, through the story of Afshan, very sensitively highlights the sad plight of subjugated womenfolk who are forced to accept their life-partners which are imposed upon them as a result of bargain in economic transactions. They have to suppress their ambitions and forget their desired life, just as Afshan does in the novel. This is one of the several ways in which a woman, the linchpin of the family, is subjugated and marginalised. Without expecting any recognition, she carries out her duties assigned to her by the man who controls and subjugates her and enjoys privileged status in family as well as in society.

The second and the most important bride of the novel is Zaitoon. Through her story, Sidhwa has given a detailed account of the feminine force as well as how women were victimized and repressed in the patriarchal Pakistani society during the turbulent days of the Partition.

Even though living in the city of Lahore where attaining education was not very difficult for girls even in those times, yet Zaitoon is denied the opportunity of education. She is sent to school only till class three. When at eleven she becomes pubescent, Qasim, on Miriam's (wife of Qasim's friend) advice, stops her from going to school, for Miriam considers it a total waste of time and says, "Now that she's learned to read the Holy Quran, what will she do with more reading and writing—boil and drink it" (52). Here, the novelist draws attention to the fact that women's rights are suppressed not only by the male members of the society but by female members also. Miriam continues "She is not going to become a baboo or or an officer! No, Allah willing, she'll get married and have children" (52). Sidhwa here points out the restricted and limited roles assigned to women in the patriarchal society of Pakistan. These simple but poignant lines show that their role as a child-bearing machine is of foremost importance. It is useless for women to get education as their primary duty is to become expert in household tasks, and not to question the supremacy of men by being educated and getting higher or equal positions to men. Such a view is

exposed through Miriam who with a sigh says, "Poor child... had she a mother she'd be learning to cook and sew ... does Bhai Qasim think he's rearing a boy? He ought to give some thought to her marriage ... who'd want an educated ...?" (53) Thus, the discrimination in our society starts at a very tender age. Ironically, women themselves are kept unaware of their own rights for leading a respectable and knowledgeable life.

Marriage is one of the most important decisions of a girl's life. The future of a young girl regarding her husband and his family is always precarious, as it entails entering a realm of uncertainty. When Zaitoon turns sixteen, her father Qasim fixes her marriage to his tribal cousin Misri Khan's son Sakhi in Kohistan. Just like Afshan, Zaitoon's consent is also not taken and she accepts her father's decision without a word. Miriam and Nikka oppose this decision as they fear lest the cultural difference between people living in Lahore on plains and the tribal people of Kohistan should make this marriage an unhappy affair and even a failure. Miriam points out the contrast and protests vehemently, "They are savages. Brutish, uncouth, and ignorant! She will be miserable among them...most of them are bandits; they don't know how to treat women! I tell you, she'll be a slave..." (93-94). But the adamant Qasim brushes aside her requests and pleadings; he furiously asserts his patriarchal rights saying: "She is *my* daughter" and "It is my word—the word of a Kohistani!" (94)

Qasim's words are more important for him than feelings of Miriam (a woman) and peace and happiness of his daughter (again a woman). This is the second instance in the novel that a bride's life is used as a commodity, as a scapegoat again, this time to start the trade of relations, as a means to please and re-establish the almost broken relations of Qasim with his tribe's people of Kohistan.

Wedding comes out to be the most fateful transaction of the bride's life and thus the bride becomes a symbol of man's power over the life, body, feelings, aspirations, desires and the future of a woman. Here "Qasim behaves more like a landlord who gifts his precious garden to a person who only guarantees destruction and annihilation of this garden." (2)

Zaitoon's forced marriage with Sakhi, another important male figure in her life, is a violation of human rights. It brings her no joy or comfort; instead it opens up for her a gateway of agony and pain. Her suffering, torture and sexual exploitation begin on the very first day of her marriage. Her tyrant and callous husband knows no words of love and emotion and behaves like a beast. Sakhi wants absolute obedience from Zaitoon. When he is taunted by his cousin Yunus Khan of not being man enough to control his wife, he "burned with an insane ungovernable fury" (171). "It would seem that the entire code of honour of the tribes rests on the notions of sexual superiority and possessiveness." (22) His cousin's taunt leads Sakhi to increase his savagery towards his "possessions" to show his manliness. Blinded by a savage anger, particular to "a land where pride and wrath are nurtured from boyhood" (171), he first batters his ox mercilessly almost to death. And when his mother Hamida comes to save the animal, he beats her also with a stick and abuses her without caring that she is his mother, "I'll teach you, he hissed, I'll teach you meddling woman. You think you can make a fool of me? Do you" (172)? Far away from any sanctity of a relationship, Hamida is just a woman in status and should be under his control. He thrashes Zaitoon also barbarously when she tries to stop him from beating his mother. "He struck her on her thighs, on her head, shouting, "You are my woman! I'll teach you to obey me!" Zaitoon stumbled and sprawled face down... Zaitoon, trembling like a leaf, and moaning in pain, was helped to her feet by the women" (172-173).

Zaitoon's waving hand to a far-off army vehicle leads her to a lot more difficulty. It becomes a matter of suspicion for Sakhi and he gets wild and furious. The thoughtless and cruel Sakhi hits her hard with sharp stones on her spine, head and forehead. Terrified Zaitoon hurriedly scrambles for safety but Sakhi drags her along the crags, inflicting 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!" "I will kill you" (185).

With all her innocence, submissiveness, obedience and other feminine qualities, Zaitoon possesses an extraordinary will to live. The brutality of Sakhi forces, Zaitoon resolve to run away, which is her only alternative to being a martyr to insults and tortures of the tribal Sakhi. So one day she goes to fetch water and hides herself behind the hills. She is aware that escaping in the treacherously pathless mountains is almost impossible, but she also knows that to achieve emancipation, rather survival, she must struggle and start a rebellion against the cruel code of conduct in which she is caught up. "She knew that in flight lay her only hope of survival. (186)

According to the tribal code of conduct, a woman cannot even think of divorce if she is unhappy, as it would mean raising a question about her husband's honour. Strange is the tribal code of honour. For honour, a father offers his daughter as a commodity to settle the question of debts; for honour, a father doesn't hesitate to kill his beloved daughter; and for honour, a husband treats his wife barbarously. That's not enough; even the entire community gets united to murder the woman who tries to free herself from the clutches of her brutal husband just to save their honour. Zaitoon, despite being aware of all this, chooses an unknown, indirect, difficult and untrodden path in the mountains, with a faint hope that if she escapes and crosses the bridge, she may get help. So she plans to flee from her husband's place but only to face further more hardships.

Two tribals from Chherkhil, appear from nowhere, keep her hostage for two hours and mercilessly rape her till she becomes unconscious. Here again, sexual violence against a starved, tired, helpless girl brings into focus how worthless this poor creature is before the eyes of men and how men take advantage of the helplessness of women and exploit them physically and psychologically. Again, she is pushed into the set-up of society as merely an object of sexual gratification and inferior and sub-ordinate woman.

For nine days and nights, Zaitoon wanders in the lofty hills like a wounded animal hunted by the tribal men. By the end of her flight, Zaitoon is such a total wreck and so starved that she doesn't look like a human being: "She scurried over the rock like a skeletal wraith. (233) Finally, this journey ends up when Major Mushtaq finds her half-alive and half-dead, "lifted her, huddled in a natal curl in the blanket. (239)

Fortunately, Zaitoon survives, but she is so tormented and shocked that her mental hygiene is unpredictable. There is, however, no doubt that her journey from subjugation to survival and from captivity to emancipation is a victory against the male chauvinistic system. The misery, torture and suffering that Zaitoon comes across during her flight for survival through the mountains just cannot be forgotten long after the book has been closed.

The pivotal character Zaitoon's plight is judiciously juxtaposed with the plight of Carol, an American girl, the third bride in the novel and the most important woman besides Zaitoon, exposing the central issue of the novel: the position, treatment and subjugation of women in one way or the other. Apparently, surrounded by gentility and sophistication, she is also oppressed and exploited by men in the male-dominated world. The account of this civilized, middle-class Western woman reinforces Zaitoon's story and conveys how women are denied their identity and human

rights, and are expected to have a silent voice or no voice. Also, she reflects the dilemma of an open-minded woman who unknowingly decides to settle down with a man who belongs to a very conservative religion. Her subjugation can be understood in her being a victim of sexual repression in a number of ways. Through her relationship with her husband Farukh and his friend Major Mushtaq and a chance encounter with some tribal people, Sidhwa underlines again how women are dehumanised by being treated just an object.

Though Carol tries to conform to the norms of the conservative society of Pakistan but she fails to understand the gender distinction and becomes an object of her husband, Farukh's possessive jealousy. He interprets Carol's ways and actions as expression of her sexual desires. Born and brought up in a sexually repressed society, he takes her friendly gestures for sexual invitations. Her laughter, friendly conversation and her 'touching' other men drive him mad, "I'm ashamed of you... You laugh too loudly. You touch men ..." (108). Farukh's sense of insecurity and suspicion make their marriage difficult with every passing day.

Though he does not torture her physically like Sakhi, but the mental and emotional trauma that he puts her through with his 'insatiable suspicions' and 'his morbid craving for what he called 'the truth' (110) shatters her completely.

The degeneration of an amorous relationship into distrust and suspiciousness breaks her heart, and she gets attracted towards Major Mushtaq's sexual stirrings; however, this man sexually exploits Carol and uses her like his wife, as and when he wishes.

Sidhwa reveals male hypocrisy through Mushtaq, who apparently seems to love his wife, cannot even think of forsaking him, and does not hesitate in sleeping with his friend's wife.

The novelist poignantly describes Carol's disillusionment with life. In context with Zaitoon's fleeing, Mushtaq and Carol get into a discussion about men's jealousy and the way women get killed or have their noses chopped off "for one reason or other . . . imagined insults, family honour, infidelity . . ." even "imagined infidelity". (223) Carol asks Mushtaq, "Do you think Farukh would kill me?" and he answers, "Who knows? I might if you were my wife". (224) All this disturbs Carol, and she suddenly has a realization that bursts out in her words:

'So that's all I mean to you,' she said, "That's really what's behind all the gallant and protective behavior. I've loved so much here, isn't it? I felt very special, and all the time I didn't matter to you any more than that girl does as an individual to those tribals, not any more than a bitch in heat. You make me sick. *All of you.* (224)

Through the images and glimpses of the lives of other women, such as Hamida and the dancing girl Shahnaz also Bapsi Sidhwa explores the plight of women and dual mentality of men. That the social system with the dominance of men is indeed oppressive for women's rights becomes clear even by the short presence of Hamida, Sakhi's mother. Hamida, once tall, pretty, is now a hideous hag, aged prematurely at only forty by the hard labour, continued pregnancies and disease. Even in this condition she is brutally thrashed by her own son.

Her husband 'used' her to produce children whom she carried in her womb, nurtured with great labour, but she has no rights over her husband and children.

The dehumanization of women is also highlighted by the appearance of women working as prostitutes or dancing girls in chapter eight. Men in the novel go to Hira Mandi, the prostitution centre of Lahore, whenever they want to enjoy the company of women. Under the cover of a place of music and poetry, the girls here are forced to do the business of prostitution, strippers and

courtesans. Nikka and Qasim also go to Hira Mandi to enjoy the dance of the dancing girl, Shahanaz. The youngest dancing girls of Hira Mandi are not much older than Qasim's twelve-year-old daughter Zaitoon. However, the protection of his daughter and enjoying the sensual company of the dancing girls are separate issues for him. The incident ironically satirises the double standards of men. Women at their homes are protected by *burqa* even from the people's glances and on the other hand, the helpless women working as dancing girls are compelled to remove the *purdah* and display their body to please the sex-starved men for a little money.

These dancing girls are denied identity, any rights as human beings; they are nobody. They are the 'property' of pimps who control their lives and movements; and instead of hiding their property, exhibit it to all to earn money. In any case, women in a *purdah* at home, or without any *purdah* as in Hira Mandi have no right on their own body and mind.

Sidhwa presents the pathetic picture of a disabled, blind and diseased woman also who is forced to dance before a number of spectators by a man who controls and guides her actions by hitting her with a cane. She is mocked at by the spectators who obscenely shake her body and call to her as to a monkey. The scene is really tragic as it reveals that the sick woman who is useless in the house or in the bed for the man who 'owns' her, is used by him as a dehumanized entity, as an animal that he can display to earn some extra money.

Sidhwa in *The Pakistani Bride* is deeply concerned about the refusal of human rights to women. The passing mention of little girls 'burdened with even younger children on their hips' (57) and a ten years old girl being pregnant put a sharp focus on the sexual exploitation of women and little girls at the hands of men and how they shamelessly and brutally curb their rights to live a graceful life.

To sum up, Bapsi Sidhwa successfully deals with the travails of the ‘other sex’, ‘the soft-target’, ‘the feminine of man’, ‘the dehumanized human being’. One cannot deny that though the setting and events of the novel are around the Partition yet the marginalization, subjugation and exploitation of women with varying degrees of intensity is still one of the universal harsh realities that the so-called civilized society is facing even today. All the major and minor female characters in the novel — Afshan, Zaitoon, Carol, Miriam, Hamida and Shahanz — are confined within the restricted framework of rules imposed by the patriarchal system of the society. None of these women is allowed to play any role in making important decisions about her own life, even though her whole being might be at stake. Through the life stories of different women in the novel, Sidhwa shows how hypocritically the male supremacy suppresses the rightful rights of a woman.

The feminist perspective of the novel demands for a society wherein a woman, ‘the other sex’, has her own identity, wherein human rights are bestowed on her not as mercy, wherein her status is not to be defined only in relation to man, wherein she is not exchanged as gift or ‘object of settlement’ to enhance or develop men’s economic and social relationships and wherein a rebellion against the authoritative, anarchic and subjugating patriarchal set-up is not viewed as a war against divinity.

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