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Negotiating Subaltern Agency in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*

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Abstract

Subaltern agency is an important critical framework used in the literary studies and humanities. The term 'subaltern' is adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class. The term 'agency' refers to the ability to act or perform. So the term 'subaltern agency' refers to the ability of the subordinated or marginalized people to act or perform. It involves resisting an imposed authority, negotiating with institutions, creating alternative forms of solidarity, preserving cultural practices, appropriating dominant ideas for different purposes, refusing particular form of discipline and participating in collective political action. It is primarily employed in the analysis of postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, women's writings, and dalit studies. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* can be better interpreted using 'subaltern agency' as a critical framework. The existing critical work on *The Pakistani Bride* reveals that the novel has been analysed from the postcolonial, partition and gender perspectives. It is found that a detailed and systematic analysis of the novel has not been done using 'subaltern agency' as a critical framework. Hence, this paper attempts to examine subaltern agency in *The Pakistani Bride*.

Key words: Subaltern, subordinated, agency, hegemony, postcolonial, negotiation.

Introduction

Bapsi Sidhwa is a Pakistani-American novelist of Parsi decent who writes in English and is widely regarded as one of Pakistani's foremost English language writer. As a child she had experienced the partition of India which has become central to her fiction. After moving to the United States of America she worked in several universities there. Her best-known novels include *Ice-Candy-Man* (published in the United States as *Cracking India*), *The Crow Eaters*, and *An American Brat*. Her novel *Ice-Candy-Man* was adapted into the film *Earth* (1998), directed by Deepa Mehta. Her literary works explore themes of partition, gender discrimination, cultural identity, and the lives of marginalized communities. *The Pakistani Bride*, being one of the significant novels, deals with these issues. The review

of literature on this novel shows that research work has been done on it from the postcolonial, partition and gender perspectives. It is found that a systematic analysis of the novel has not been done using 'subaltern agency' as a critical framework. Hence, this paper attempts to negotiate subaltern agency in *The Pakistani Bride*. Before going to do so a brief plot of the novel and the concept of subaltern agency are provided.

A Brief Plot of *The Pakistani Bride*

The novel begins with the introduction of Qasim, a Kohistani tribesman, a ten year boy married to a girl, Afshan, much older to him. Due to pandemic Qasim loses all his family members. Then he arrives to Jullandur and works in a bank there. In the wake of partition of India he leaves Jullandur and boards a train destined to Lahore. Due to communal violence the train is ambushed, several people were beheaded, some escaped from there. While running for his safety Qasim notices a girl of three year crying for her parents and realizes that her parents have become the victims of communal violence. He adopts that young orphan girl and names her after his own loving dead daughter Zaitoon and raises her as his daughter. As Zaitoon grows up, Qasim arranges her marriage to Sakhi, a man from Kohistan belonging to Qasim's community. Zaitoon accepts the marriage with a lot of expectations but after moving to the mountain region, she discovers that her husband's harsh nature and the restrictive tribal customs make her life unbearable. Unable to endure the violence and oppression, she escapes into the mountains. It signifies her desperate struggle for survival and freedom. he novel ends with her escape into Lahore with the help of Major Mustaq.

The Concept of Subaltern Agency

The concept 'Subaltern Agency' comprises of two terms 'subaltern' and 'agency'. The meaning of 'subaltern' is 'of inferior rank'. Antonio Gramsci adopted it to refer to those groups in society situated outside or beneath dominant political and social power structures and who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to hegemonic power. Later subaltern studies historians used it as name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way. Thus it is an umbrella term encompasses all the voiceless marginalized groups. The term 'agency' refers to the ability to act or perform an action. It involves the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action or whether the things they do are determined by other influencing factors.

'Subaltern agency' refers to the capacity of socially, politically and economically subordinated groups to act, negotiate, resist, reinterpret and sometimes transform the structures that marginalize them. Further it refers to a person's or group's structural position in relation to power, representation and political voice. It involves challenging and resisting an imposed authority, oppression, exploitation, and dominant ideologies, seeking recognition and the ability to express one's experiences, using subtle acts of defiance, negotiation, or non-compliance, negotiating with institutions, creating alternative forms of solidarity, preserving cultural practices, appropriating dominant ideas for different purposes, refusing particular form of discipline and participating in collective political action. Agency necessarily needs not be an open rebellion; it can be overt or covert. Open resistance involves avoidance, rebellion, collective mobilization. Everyday resistance covers avoidance, non-compliance, strategic adaptation and cultural agency connotes maintaining or transforming language, traditions, memories and identities. Collective agency stands for forming associations, movements, unions, political organizations and discursive agency involves producing alternative interpretations of one's social positions. Thus agency operates through various dimensions and some of these are used as tools to examine the agency through the major characters of the novel.

Negotiation of Subaltern Agency in *The Pakistani Bride*

Most of the characters of *The Pakistani Bride* namely Zaitoon, Afshan, Carol, Mariam, Hamida, Qasim and Nikka embody subaltern agency. The writing of the novel by Sidhwa with more focus on the lives of women characters like Zaitoon, Carol, Mariam, Afshan and Hamida, tribal life and the partition issues itself is an effort by the author to provide voice for the subaltern. So, most of the characters can be examined as the subaltern agencies. For example Zaitoon who is the central character of novel. She is safeguarded by Qasim in the violence erupted due to partition of India. He adopts her as his daughter, admits her to school and showers on her the parental care and affection. Zaitoon adapts to the situation so well, that she becomes a darling child of Qasim and several families. This shows her agency to rise up in spite of lack of motherly care, guidance and challenges of partition consequences. While she was in the school she reaches her puberty, during such situations Mariam, motherly-heart neighbour woman, takes the entire care of Zaitoon. After the puberty, the same Mariam asks Qasim to stop Zaitoon from sending to school saying "Now she's learned to read the Holy Quran; what will she do with more reading and writing...she's not going to become a baboo or an officer...Allah willing, she'll get married and have children"(*The Pakistani Bride* 52). Qasim thinks that the girl is too young to marry off. For that Mariam replies, "A girl is never too young to marry..." (53). Here Mariam's views hold mirror to the psychological control of patriarchy on women. Qasim becomes serious about his daughter's marriage. One day Misri Khan, cousin of Qasim, has come to negotiate about the marriage. Qasim has decided to marry off Zaitoon to Saki, a tribal man and his relative. Nikka, Qasim's friend, and Mariam oppose the marriage on the grounds that the girl has grown up in Lahore, life in Kohistan Mountains is very tough and people also are very rude. As Qasim wishes to re-establish his connection with his people and land, he has decided to marry off Zaitoon to Saki. Qasim has not asked the opinion of Zaitoon. It reveals the control of patriarchy. Zaitoon accepts the marriage, packs up her things to go to Kohistan, steps along her father down the hill, along the rivers and roads, up the hills, down the rivers. A short distance they travel by a military truck. Zaitoon had a different vision about the place. After travelling, staying in the military camp and listening to the words of military authorities, she has got fear about the place and people. So she tells Qasim, "I am not of the hills. I am not of your tribe. I am not even yours" (*PB* 140). This shows her ability to speak and predicts future flight from that place. However, Qasim consoles by saying, "I loved you dearly! I had three children, once. But now you're all I have in the world" (141).

After staying for a night at the military camp Qasim and Zaitoon leave for their destination. The military officials know very well about Kohistani people who are engaged in murders and bloody family feuds. That is why Ashiq, one of the soldiers, who has come to the border to drop Qasim and Zaitoon, tells Zaitoon, "You will not be happy there. Please don't go. I will tell the Major Sahib that you don't wish to go"(144). Zaitoon replies crying, "Don't say anything to the Major. It is my father's wish. I must go with him!(144). Her remarks suggest that her vulnerable situation of being an orphan in a distant unknown region and Qasim's power over her as adopted-father have forced to her to accept that marriage. Major Sahib and Ashiq have told her to come back if she faces any serious problem. Finally they reached their place. Zaitoon observes the life there, poverty, harshness, their fight for survival and realizes that life is very difficult and she will not be successful and happy there. So, she pleads, "Abba, take me to the plains when you go. Please don't leave me here. Take me with you...I don't want marry. Look how poorly they live; how they eat! Dirty maize bread and water. My stomach hurts " (*PB* 157). Qasim tries to convince her that they are not poor as they appear, it is only their way of life and gradually she will like her husband and his people. Then also Zaitoon tells, "if I must marry, marry me to someone in the plains...I will die rather than live here" (157). Failing to understand her feelings Qasim warns her, "that is no way to speak to your father...I have given my word. On it depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life, if you besmirch it, I will kill you with bare hands" (158). Zaitoon attempts to articulate her worries and anxiety, but patriarchal norms, tribal norms, honour codes and her position as adopted daughter intersect to subdue her voice.

Zaitoon's marriage with Sakhi takes place with the tribal festivities. But her happiness does not last for a long time. Sakhi treats her as his commodity, behaves as if he is the owner of it, rudely and uses his position of husband to assault on her for sex. Literally Zaitoon is scared, shivers and screams for help. Just a few days after the marriage Sakhi started threatening and asking her why she was so close with Major and Jawan in the military camp. Further he says, "I saw the Jawan holding your arm all the way down to the river...you laughed together as if you were lovers, I could hear you all the way across the river" (165). Zaitoon is stunned and terrified to know this. She dares to share something with her father but she can't share anything with her husband due to the cruel nature of husband, tribal codes and honour-codes. Finally when Qasim decides to leave for Lahore, Zaitoon's sorrow multiplies and she cries. Qasim tells her, "you're a married woman now...not a child. Your place is with your husband. He is a good man"(167). After Qasim has returned, Zaitoon becomes completely upset and cries whole day. Her mother-in-law, Hamida tries to console her. Sakhi has felt distressed, mainly his male-ego got hurt and humiliated. Consequently he transfers his rage over animals, his mother and wife. His treatment of all these people displays the height of his cruelty and barbarity. Zaitoon understands much about cruelty, violence and barbarity of these people through Hamida who is also a victim of these systems.

One day Zaitoon comes to the river to get some relaxation from the sorrow and frustration she experiences at home. Her act of going to the river embodies agency. Sitting on a crag she looks at the region across the river; this is where Major and Ashiq are working. She feels that is her place and they belong to her. Accidently a jeep passes, its crew wave their hands to Zaitoon. She too waves. After this just in a few seconds Sakhi jumps from the above crag and places himself before Zaitoon. Sakhi has become disturbed, furious. It seems he would kill her. Dragging her along the crag, spitting on her face, he shouts, "you dirty, black little bitch, waving at those pigs...waving at that shit-eating swine. You wanted him to stop and fuck you, didn't you? (*PB* 185). Zaitoon cries and earnestly pleads him to forgive and promises she would not do it again. He says, "I will kill you lying slut" (186) and humiliates her with slaps, physical assault and carries her home. She spends sleepless night thinking over her situation and future life. She knows escaping from there is a Himalayan task, yet she resolves to run away. The following morning Zaitoon sets out with an empty water container, a bundle of maize bread and a blanket. Hamida who is unwell observes all this and tells Zaitoon to be back soon. This is the most daring act of resistance on her part.

When Sakhi returns home his mother tells him about Zaitoon. His heart becomes a furnace of anger. He feels deeply humiliated because it is the question of his manhood and control over his wife. So he utters, "I had invited the disgrace that now affected the entire clan. I should have killed her by the river! (189). The news has spread across the entire community, a group of men have come, speak very less, collect some weapons, identify with Sakhi's disgrace, take the burden on themselves and collectively they want to salvage the honour of the clan. From this one can guess the wrath of the entire clan. For them once she has crossed the river meant she is lost forever. Zaitoon with caution, pain, anxiety, fear, a little hope of surviving moves through the steep, rough, vast mountains, deep valley and wilderness. She is being searched or hunted by the enraged clan people. Zaitoon knows if she chooses the easier routes, she would be easily searched by the tribals. That is why she has chosen the most difficult route. She encounters the toughest challenges and unprecedented experiences for nine days. If she has not been strong and young, she might have died of the cold and difficulties. This illustrates her strong will to survive and agency. On the other hand the clan people are searching for her carefully; at times they get some clues about her movement and survival. They know that definitely she is heading towards Dubair Bridge because that is the only route to cross the river and go to the other side of the region. Mishri Khan has come to the camp and asks if the girl has come and begs the Major to hand over that girl if she comes there and tells him "his honour is in your hands, sir" (*PB* 205). Major has promised him to do so. After ascertaining that the girl has not crossed the river, Mishri Khan returns to his people and tells she is still with us and she hasn't crossed the river. Zaitoon encounters

hungry birds, animals and tribals and finally has come to the place where Mustaq notices her. He knows the Pattans are searching for her with eagle's eyes, decides to save her life and at the same time he wants the Pattans to stop searching for her. So he has asked her to wear military coat so that the Pattans should not suspect him, takes her to the camp, asks his soldiers to help her in crossing the river. So that she safely goes to Lahore. On the other hand he has collected the blanket that Zaitoon carried, bundled it and given it to Mishri Khan stating that it was floating on the river. Further he tells Mishri Khan that probably Zaitoon might have died and her dead body might have gone flowing with river water. Risking her life she has resisted here the patriarchal norms, tribal codes, gender norms, and honour-codes.Thus Zaitoon's act of flight from this place is an act of compelling subaltern agency.

Another important character in the novel is Carol, an American, married Farukh, a Pakistani. In spite of the opposition from the family, her decision to marry Farukh shows her ability to take decisions in the matters of her personal life. Compared to Zaitoon, Carol's socio-cultural background, education and privileges might have empowered her for this agency. Consequently "she had adjusted to the climate, the country, the differences in culture and people and had come to love them all" (*PB* 218). Due to her privileged position she is allowed much more freedom than a Pakistani wife. After coming to Pakistan Carol and Farukh have fought frequently over the issue of having children. In this matter she expresses her opinion strongly. She develops intimate relationship with Major Mustaq. This has caused a lot of disturbance in Farukh. After coming to know that Zaitoon is being hunted by men and she is on the run for nine days. Surprisingly Carol asks what do they do when they find her and gives her own answer, "women are killed for one reason or other...imagined insults, family honour, infidelity...why men are insanely jealous of women" (213). She asks Mustaq whether Farukh would kill her. She has come to Pakistan with a lot of expectations. But slowly she realises that the position and treatment of women, with some difference, are same. She recollects Farukh's words about women that "women world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, impregnated, beaten-up, bullied and disinherited" (225). In view of all these she is seriously reconsidering her decision. Once openly she tells Farukh, "your civilization is too ancient...too different...and it has ways that can hurt me...really hurt me...I'm going home"(228). She is not merely a passive object of attraction; she participates in romantic relationships and has her own expectations and desires. When Carol is examined through the concept of the *male gaze*, it demonstrates that within patriarchal structures, women are often positioned as objects of male desire rather than as subjects who possess desires of their own. In patriarchal social structures, women's sexuality is often regulated through marriage, family honour, and male control. Women's desires are frequently subordinated to the interests of fathers, husbands, and communities. But Carol's attitude towards romantic and sexual relationships challenges the assumption that women must conform to socially prescribed ideals of feminine respectability. She asserts the right to experience desire rather than allowing male authority or social convention to determine the meaning of her intimate life. Carol's agency is therefore real but constrained: she can make choices, yet she cannot entirely escape the gendered expectations and power relations shaping those choices. The episode of Carol displays that women's agency is shaped by the intersection of gender, culture, class, nationality, and personal circumstances.

Another important character that can be considered as an embodiment of subaltern agency is Afshan, wife of Qasim. Qasim's father has lent some amount to Resham Khan who is unable to pay it back. So he has agreed to give his daughter, Afshan, as the mode of repayment. Qasim's father has decided to marry her to Qasim who is just ten year old boy. Qasim who does not even know the meaning marriage agrees to marry Afshan because he can get a companion to play. Within no time the negations of the marriage are finalized. Even the opinion of the girl is not sought. In fact "an old aunt murmured yes, yes on behalf " (*PB* 8) of her. Thus the marriage of a grown up girl is made with a boy of ten year old. This displays that women's marriage, social roles, mobility, identity, sexuality are governed by male authority. She is denied agency. Yet she displays her agency in enduring all this "she accepted her lot cheerfully. She helped her mother-in-law, chaffed the maize, tended and milked the

two goats and frolicked her way through chores" (*PB* 10). Once when she went to river to wash the clothes, Qasim, provoked by her drenched body, tried to grip her breasts. Afshan pushed and slapped him hard. Initially accepts her circumstances, but she does not remain completely submissive in her domestic life. When Qasim behaves cruelly or aggressively, Afshan resists him physically and verbally. It demonstrates her refusal to accept male authority as absolute. Her resistance is significant because it takes place within marriage, an institution in which the prevailing social order expects women to be obedient to their husbands. Afshan's agency is particularly interesting because she does not overthrow the social system that subordinates her. Instead, she develops ways of negotiating her circumstances.

Another woman character in the novel that can be considered for examining the subaltern agency is Hamida, mother of Sakhi. Hamida's life is shaped by patriarchal oppression, domestic violence, and the restrictive customs of tribal society. As a woman, a mother, and a member of a socially disadvantaged community, she occupies a marginalized position. Hamida demonstrates subaltern agency through her acts of compassion, resistance and covert solidarity. She is a victim of patriarchal oppression. When Sakhi treats an ox cruelly Hamida tells him not to do so. Her compassion becomes a form of resistance to the unquestioned authority of the male household head. Immediately he subjects her to violence. This demonstrates that patriarchal authority can subordinate women regardless of their age or familial position. Hamida's relationship with her daughter-in-law, Zaitoon, provides an even more complex example of subaltern agency. She develops sympathy for the young woman because she understands, through her own experiences of suffering, the cruelty that women can endure within such a social structure. When Zaitoon escapes, Hamida delays informing Sakhi of her disappearance. This delay can be interpreted as an act of covert solidarity. Hamida's agency therefore operates through silence, concealment, and indirect resistance. Her silence is not simply evidence of submission; in this particular context, it can also function as a strategy for protecting Zaitoon. The character of Hamida illustrates the limitations of resistance under oppressive social conditions. Her acts of compassion and covert support to Zaitoon do not dismantle the patriarchal system or free her from Sakhi's violence. Agency need not be necessarily complete independence, unrestricted choice, or successful liberation. Ultimately, Hamida's subaltern agency lies in her ability to resist oppression from within the very structures that silence and subordinate her. Through her character, Sidhwa suggests that even women who appear powerless can exercise moral choice, resist violence, and support the struggle for another woman's freedom.

One more woman character that can be an embodiment of subaltern agency is Mariam, wife of Nikka Phailwan. Although Mariam occupies a subordinate position within a male-dominated society, she exercises her authority within the domestic sphere. Her character reveals an important contradiction: a woman can be oppressed by patriarchy while simultaneously reproducing its values and practices against other women. Qasim wishes Zaitoon to continue her education for at least five years. But Mariam opposes it, by saying, "Now that she's learned to read the Holy Quran, what will she do with more reading and writing...she's not going to become a baboo or an officer...she'll get married and have children" (*PB* 52). Thus, she reproduces aspects of patriarchal ideology and exercises limited authority over another woman. Mariam's significance lies in revealing the contradictory nature of subaltern agency: a marginalized woman can exercise power without necessarily resisting oppression.

There are two major male characters in the novel namely Qasim and Nikka. Though Qasim is a subaltern subject who experiences displacement, loss, and cultural alienation, he has exercised patriarchal authority over Afshan and Zaitoon. His agency is not an emancipator rather it enables him to exercise control over other vulnerable persons. Through Qasim, Sidhwa illustrates that a subaltern subject can simultaneously become an agent of oppression aslo.

To some extent Nikka can be considered as an embodiment of subaltern agency. Nikka uses his physical strength, political connections, and adaptability to improve his position in society. His

character allows us to consider subaltern agency not simply as resistance to oppression, but also as the ability of a subaltern to negotiate, manipulate, and sometimes benefit from existing power structures. Nikka is distinct from Qasim. Qasim is strongly attached to tribal honour and traditional values, whereas, Nikka is more pragmatic and willing to exploit changing circumstances. Nikka's character raises an important theoretical question: does exercising agency necessarily mean resisting oppression? The answer is no. Agency refers broadly to the capacity to act, make choices, and influence circumstances. It does not just imply a struggle for social justice or the liberation of marginalized groups.

Conclusion

Subaltern agency is an attribute of the marginalized. The degree and impact of agency depends upon several aspects. Like the position in the hierarchy, ability, socio-cultural contexts and listeners. So the nature, scope and purposes of using agency also vary from person to person and contexts. As it is context-based and heterogeneous, it is not identical with everyone one everywhere. Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* has offered a compelling subaltern agency within the intersecting structures of patriarchy, tribal customs, class hierarchies, and gendered oppression mainly through the women characters Zaitoon, Afshan, Hamida, Mariam and Carol.

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