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…OF VEILS AND WAILS: BAPSI SIDHWA'S *THE PAKISTANI BRIDE*

Dr SONIKA SETHI
Dept of English
S D College, Ambala Cantt

Dr SONIKA SETHI

ABSTRACT

A distinguished writer, essayist and playwright, Bapsi Sidhwa began her writing career at the age of twenty-six. Stumbling upon impediments and overcoming them with resilience is perhaps one of the outstanding features of not only the novelist but also of the women characters of her novels. Faced with hardships since her childhood, Sidhwa has not allowed them to bog her down. Today, she is a celebrated diasporic writer of Pakistan, living in America, churning out stories from her experience of the subcontinent. Her writings are concerned with issues of the marginalized that may include the proprietorship of women in a patriarchal society like Pakistan, the minority status of the Parsis in a religiously fanatic country, the historical bifurcation of a country leading to the loss of dignity and life of the common man who had no say in this torturous severing. The Pakistani Bride is the first novel to be penned by Bapsi Sidhwa but the second to be published after The Crow-Eaters. The novel owes its genesis to a trip undertaken by the writer to the Karakoram Range where she was told this gruesome story of a young Pakistani girl who had dared to run away from an intolerable marriage, and had been killed in the Hindukush mountains by her tribal husband. The story obsessed her and she wanted to share it with the world. What began as a short story grew into her first novel. The novel poignantly describes the circumspect world of women in a world dominated by men where women are not individuals but objects to be possessed, nothing more than a piece of land and sometimes a beast that can be traded with. She has to observe Purdah, to cast off prying eyes of men, representing a sexually repressed society. Her docility, acquiescence, submissiveness is the pride of her lord and her smallest act of disobedience is treated as an attack on his inveterate honour. Women in this land have no say whatsoever in matters personal or professional, private or public, domestic or societal, regional or national. Such is the story of a young, enthusiastic girl Zaitoon who is given in marriage to a ruthless tribal for honour's sake. Zaitoon not only defies her destiny but also challenges it by running away from the clutches of her tyrant husband.

> In the instant their eyes met, the green and black of their irises fused in an age-old communion— an understanding they shared of their vulnerabilities as women. For an intuitive instant Carol felt herself submerged in the helpless drift of Zaitoon's life. Free will! she thought contemptuously, recalling heated discussions with her friends on campus. This girl had no more control over her destiny than a caged animal…perhaps, neither had she…. (*The Pakistani Bride*, 136)

Throughout its long history, civilization has been dominated by concepts that established the supremacy of man over woman. Aristotle's declaration that 'the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities' asserts an un/conscious attempt to negate a woman's individuality. In western thought, the body has been historically associated solely with women, whereas men have been associated with the mind. Susan Bordo, a modern feminist philosopher, in her writings elaborates the dualistic nature of the mind/body connection by examining the early philosophies of Aristotle, Hegel and Descartes, revealing how such distinguishing binaries such as spirit/matter and male activity/female passivity have worked to solidify gender characteristics and categorization. Bordo goes on to point out that while men have historically been associated with the intellect and the mind or spirit, women have long been associated with the body, the subordinated, negatively imbued term in the mind/body dichotomy. The notion of the body (but not the mind) being associated with women has served as a justification to deem women as property, objects, and exchangeable commodities (among men).

French philosopher, novelist and essayist, Simone de Beauvoir in one of her famous quotes, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" encapsulated an argument that propelled number of questions, simple and complex, into the minds of thinking and rational individuals of the society. Beauvoir in her polemical work *The Second Sex* argued,

> …there was no such thing as 'feminine nature'. There was no physical or psychological reason why women should be inferior to men, and yet, throughout history and across cultures, women had always been second-class citizens. Even when worshipped and adored, they have had no autonomy and received no recognition as rational individuals, any more than when they have been abused and denigrated. (Waugh, 320-21)

Writers of the twentieth century have felt an urgent need to represent this conscious struggle to resist patriarchy as also to disturb the complacent certainties of the patriarchal structure, through their writings. Their entire thrust lay on the projection of women as 'rational, thinking and speaking individuals' and also to express her misery in her own words. They continuously strived towards making their women characters a part of history making. In fact, Virginia Woolf in her celebrated work, *A Room of One's Own*, presents the pathetic and contradictory position of women in history:

> A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of anybody whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband." (43)

Women writers, the world over, consciously made efforts to assert a belief in sexual equality and overthrow sexist domination in order to transform society. They adopted the medium of literature not only to explore the anguished consciousness of the oppressed and exploited, but also to focus the indifference of the society towards them. Mary Ellman in *Thinking about Women* (1968), in connection with the sperm-ovum nexus of the pre-Mendelian days when men regarded their sperm as the active seeds which give form to the waiting ovum, which lacks identity till it receives the male's impress, reversed the male-dominated point-of-view by suggesting the independent identity of the ovum. (Selden, et al, 2005, 125)

Women writers from the sub-continent have rarely raised their voice for equal rights but they have been striving hard to bring to focus the indifferent and callous attitudes of the society towards women. Some of the writers like Tasleema Nasreen, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, to name a few, have been quick to

respond to the clarion call of their Western counterparts. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) is one such poignant tale of Zaitoon, an orphan girl from the plains of Punjab, adopted by a Kohistani tribal, Qasim. Having lost his entire family to small pox, Qasim moves to the plains but destiny brings him nearer home once again in the wake of India-Pakistan riots of 1947. He is on the Lahore bound train when anti-Muslim mob attacks its passengers mutilating whomsoever they could lay their hands on. Zaitoon's parents are massacred in this fanatic violence and in the dark of night she mistakes Qasim to be her father and clings to him for safety. Qasim adopts this little orphan and brings her up as his daughter taking pride in her intelligence and her adulation for him. Zaitoon is hardly fifteen when in a fit of rustic nostalgia for his tribe, he promises her in marriage to one of his tribesmen's son. Life becomes a nightmare for Zaitoon after her marriage. She not only has to face the rugged and all-engulfing environment of the Karakoram Range but also a ruthless, jealous and brutish husband, a typical tribal for whom life is nothing but a question of honour which rests on matters as trivial as a handful of grains.

The novel owes its genesis to a trip undertaken by the writer to the Karakoram Range where she was told this gruesome story of a young Pakistani girl who had dared to run away from an intolerable marriage, and had been killed in the Hindukush mountains by her tribal husband. The story obsessed her and she wanted to share it with the world. What began as a short story grew into her first novel. The novel poignantly describes the circumspect world of women in a world dominated by men where women are not individuals but objects to be possessed, no more than a piece of land and sometimes a beast that can be traded with. She has to observe Purdah, to cast off prying eyes of men, representing a sexually repressed society. Her docility, acquiescence, submissiveness is the pride of her lord and her smallest act of disobedience is treated as an attack on his inveterate honour. Women in this land have no say, whatsoever, in matters personal or professional, private or public, domestic or societal, regional or national. Such is the story of young, enthusiastic Zaitoon who is given in marriage to a ruthless tribal for honour's sake. Zaitoon not only defies her destiny but also challenges it by running away from the clutches of her tyrant husband.

The backdrop provides an apt location for the set-up of the novel as Kohistan has a rich local history as a crossroads between Central, South and Southwestern Asia. Predominantly inhabited by Dardic and Pashtun tribes since ancient times, Kohistan has been invaded and contested by Persians, Greeks, Scythians, Kushans, Turks, Mughals, and the British. The men of the land are fair, clean limbed with quick eyes and sharp features as is evident from the physical description of both Qasim and Sakhi, Zaitoon's husband. Due to appalling poverty the standard of health is poor and poverty is visible from the faces of women folk. Lush green forests, meadows and streams as well as massive mountains and hills literally make Kohistan resemble the Scottish Highlands of Britain. The Indus River divides Kohistan into two parts with the eastern portion referred to as the Indus Kohistan and the western portion referred to as Swat Kohistan. The Karakoram Highway passes through Kohistan on its way to Gilgit. The high mountains all-round provide a natural impasse to the region segregating it from the civilized society. The tribes here live by their own codes of conduct and honour. The first page of the novel acquaints the reader not only with the harsh surroundings but also to the rigors of day-to-day survival of its men:

> Chiselled into precocity by a harsh life in the mountains, Qasim had known no childhood. From infancy, responsibility was forced upon him and at ten he was a man, conscious of the rigorous code of honour by which his tribe lived. (*PB*, 7)

Whereas men folk are the bearers of the honour of the tribe, the women are a part of man's moveable property quite like the beasts that he rears and raises for profit. Women can be traded against a pending loan or can be given off to honour one's word. Without even asking for her consent, she can be tethered to some other post. "A wife was a symbol of status, the embodiment of a man's honour and the focus of his role as provider. A valuable commodity indeed and dearly bought." (138) That's how Qasim's father procures a young, robust, fifteen year old bride for his ten year old son. "To begin with, he 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 novel, though, centered on the story of Zaitoon, introduces the reader to two other 'brides' – Afshan and Carol. Afshan is the young bride of Qasim, who on seeing her husband on the night of their wedding, "didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She had been told that her groom was 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." (10) Afshan surrenders to her destiny, without batting an eyelid because she is aware of the fact that her destiny is controlled not by fate but by the men of the society she lives in. In contrast, Zaitoon is unable to accept this fate and her fiery, rebellious spirit rises against this slavish attitude. She knows that such disobedience will win her nothing but death, yet some distant dream of life away from these rugged men and mountains gives her fragile body an extraordinary strength and she dares to take a leap towards life. Zaitoon's enchantment for the mystic mountains, rivers with icy-cold waters and the man of her dreams, shatters as soon as she reaches Qasim's village or rather before reaching the village. She is smitten by the gentleness of the army jawan, Ashiq Hussain's lovelorn looks. She cries inconsolably in Qasim's arms and begs him to take her back to the city. Qasim sternly dismisses her plea as he cannot possibly go back on his word. The bond that he had forged with the girl over a span of ten years could not stand against the loyalty he owed towards his clan.

In a few days Zaitoon is married off to Sakhi and thus begins the nightmare of her life. On the night of their wedding, Sakhi recalls the scene he had discretely witnessed; the army jawan, Ashiq Hussain, touching Zaitoon's arm while trying to save her from falling on the rocks beside the river. The memory instantly makes him exhibit an intensely jealous attitude and he turns brutal to Zaitoon. His initial thoughts on seeing his diffident bride are, "Here was a woman all his own, he thought with proprietorial lust and pride....But, even as he thought this, the corroding jealousy of the past few days suddenly surged up in him in a murderous fusion of hate and fever." (159-60) Despite Sakhi's effort to domesticate her, he is unable to check Zaitoon's indomitable spirit. His repeated thrashings and brutish behaviour does not deter the rebel in her. She strikes a chord with Hamida, Sakhi's mother, in whom she finds a sympathetic soul and a mother-figure. She would sit with the resilient old woman for hours listening to her innumerable stories and anecdotes in which she "documented the restless history of her fierce clan." With time, she started to settle down in the domestic drudgery and also grew immune to the "tyrannical, animal-trainer treatment meted out by Sakhi." She finds some solace going to the river, spending some meditative moments on the rocks near the banks of the river and reliving the moments she had spent in proximity with the civilized human beings. She longs to be in the company of her gentle father, her uncle, Nikka and aunt Miriam. Sakhi forbids her from going there and once when he finds her sitting there he hurls stones at her, grazing her forehead and other parts. This brutal treatment makes her realize that she couldn't possibly spend the rest of her life in these mountains among such men. She is fully aware of the fact that her defiance could lead her straight to the clutches of death. It would be impossible for her to find her way through these inscrutable mountains and if caught, they would beat her to death. Despite all the odds being against her, her dauntless spirit refuses to surrender and one fine morning on the pretext of fetching water, she runs away taking a blanket with her to save her from the chill and a bundle of stale bread enough to survive a few days. Now begins her ordeal in the mountains which are as harsh as the men they house.

Hamida, who is the first one to detect Zaitoon's absence from the household, secretely wishes for her escape to the world of sanity, away from this frenzied madness, from this world based on men's honour, from this world of 'veils and wails' "Honour! she thought bitterly. Everything for honour— and another life lost!... Men and honour. And now the girl..." She is a witness to the threatening disgrace of the men of the clan. The tribals organize a manhunt for the missing girl without saying a word to one another. "They identified with the man's disgrace, taking the burden on themselves. Collectively, they meant to salvage the honour of the clan.... It would poison their existence unless they found the girl.

There was only one punishment for a runaway wife." (190)

Meanwhile, Zaitoon had been hiding in the mountains for over ten days and still she could not find the way to the Dubair Bridge, her route to escape. She went round and round the mountains and every time she seemed

to come back to the same rocks and boulders. Coming across natural dangers lurking around her, a diseased vulture and a snow leopard, hardly did she realize that the greatest danger lurking around was 'man'. The day she sees the "sky-blue stretch of wet satin trembling against white banks", she is filled with gratitude but her destiny has still more in store for her. She is raped by two tribal men on the banks of the river. Though her body cringes in pain and anguish, her zest for life is still undiminished and her resolution to reach to safety is undeterred. "She crawled farther and farther from the beach, creeping up through fissures and stony crevices. For a time she snuggled beneath a slaty overhang, like a wounded animal, to lick her bruises." (232) Finally, she reaches the Dubair bridge and is saved from the savage clutches of her husband, brother-in-law and father-in-law, who are out hunting for her near the bridge, by the army officer, Major Mushtaq Khan. Zaitoon recognizes him as the kind officer who had been considerate enough to let Qasim and Zaitoon stay at the army mess en route to Qasim's village. She vividly remembers the compassionate face that had shown concern towards her and assured her of every possible help, if required. Mushtaq Khan convinced the girls' relatives that she was dead and later on hid her in his friends' jeep that would take her far away from the blood-thirsty hounds. The bridge has been most beautifully used by the writer as a metaphor spanning the civilized and the uncivilized world, on one side of which is life and on other, death.

If Sidhwa has been critical about the tribal code of honour that treat their womenfolk as their property, she has been equally vocal about her resentment of the hypocritical status of women in the urban part of the country. The other 'bride' of the novel— Carol, has been shown to be in a highly perplexed state of mind resulting from a clash of her lofty romantic western ideals of 'womanhood' and the practical problems faced by her through her marriage to Farrukh— an offspring of the feudal system. Her enchantment with the mystic Pakistani patriarchal society, the gallant men, the world of harems and purdahs was soon over and Farrukh's courtly manner to the point of "slavishness" and assertive possessiveness that had made her feel cherished now seemed to result in revulsion. Her initial response to the social set up is highlighted through her letter to Pam, her American friend. "…sometimes I still think if I can't get away by myself I'm going to scream, but nobody understands that! You can't plan anything and have it come out the way you expect. Things happen, and you roll with them. But the most wonderful thing here is I don't feel programmed!" (108) She attended parties with and without Farrukh and enjoyed the attention that men showered on her. She thought they were valiant men enamoured by her white skin and American origin. Coming from a humble background, Carol also loved the luxurious lifestyle of the rich. Her courteous and devoted husband shows his true colours and mindset when he tries to assert his male authority over Carol through jealous arguments. His nervous and suspicious manner became unbearable to her. The jealousy, possessiveness and compromises that mark the lives of both Zaitoon and Carol differ merely in degree— but it is a difference that literally marks the variance between life and death. The two women who initially seemed to strike a common chord of vulnerability with each other are inevitably separated by a Cultural Divide. "But Carol, a child of the bright Californian sun and surf, could no more understand the beguiling twilight of veils and women's quarters than Zaitoon could comprehend her independent life in America." (180)

Carol begins to find it difficult to adjust to this environment of "repressed sexuality". Farrukh's unbearable jealousies, his insane suspicions were not making things work between them and they were 'falling apart'. Their marriage was struggling to survive. She soon detected that the outwardly socially amiable men and women actually represented an atmosphere charged with sensuality. The separation of sexes bred sensuality in every matter howsoever trivial. The author, however, is quick to bring to light the hypocrisy in Carol's nature. Though troubled by Farrukh's behavior and allegations she is not ready to part with all the luxuries which she is enjoying currently as the wife of a rich, feudal landlord. "These compensations made her stay despite Farrukh's morbid jealousy. They prevented her from carrying out her repeated threats to divorce him— to go back home." (114) She enters into a relationship with Major Mushtaq Khan considering it to be an act of just revenge on Farrukh, for all his male possessiveness. However, things take an ugly turn between her and the major when she professes her love to the major, she urges him to divorce his wife and marry her. Mushtaq laughs at the idea and shows his inability to do so. Carol becomes furious at the rejection and slaps

him although later on she confesses that her demand had been absurd. She decides to give her failing marriage another chance as she believed that she was enjoying her status as Farrukh's wife.

> As an American married to a Pakistani she was allowed much more freedom than a Pakistani wife. She could say things and get away with behavior and dress that would have been shocking in a Pakistani— and even in an American. Cut loose from the constraints of her own culture, she did not feel restricted by the new. She had become used to moving, thinking and speaking with an increasing sense of freedom. (218-19)

The knowledge of Zaitoon's plight, her flight into the mountains and her impending fate sends Carol into a reverie of thoughts. She remembers the "curious communion" she had experienced between them on the night their eyes had met. She understands, now, that those large sensitive eyes did not reveal the "hopeless drift" of her life but the dauntless courage and faith she had in herself. She asks Mushtaq if they could somehow help the girl. Mushtaq's casual approach towards the girl's future makes her nervous about her own future in this world of 'insanely jealous' men. Later in the evening when she and Farrukh go for a walk in the mountains, they come across a severed head of a woman, floating in the river. The sight horrifies Carol but Farrukh seems cool about it and his only words are, "Probably asked for it'. Carol's thoughts turn philosophical and for the first time she starts thinking as a rational and pragmatic woman. She contemplates on Farrukh's words:

> Women the world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, to get importunately impregnated, beaten-up, bullied and disinherited. It was an immutable law of nature…. Whoever said people the world over are the same, was wrong. The more she travelled, the more she realized only the differences. (226)

She now saw everything from a different perspective:

> No wonder women here formed such intense friendships— to protect themselves where physical might outweighs the subtler strengths of womanhood…. That girl had unlocked a mystery, affording a telepathic peephole through which Carol had a glimpse of her condition and the fateful condition of girls like her. (228)

Her conflicts regarding this culture are, at this instant, resolved and she informs Farrukh about her decision to leave him and his country. In no uncertain terms, she tells him, "Your civilization is too ancient…too different…and it has ways that can hurt me…really hurt me…" (229)

Carol's outburst is a late realization of the supremely claustrophobic environment around her. Though she belongs to a civilization that can boast of a comparatively advanced society, she cannot muster the courage to forego all the privileges and break her marriage. Zaitoon's exemplary courage paves the way for Carol's flight from Pakistan. Sidhwa's deliberate involution of the end of the story that she had heard about the killing of a woman by the tribesmen for running away, is a voluntary step towards the emancipation of women of traditionally patriarchal societies. Unlike her counterparts in the west, she cannot directly confront the male chauvinism in Pakistan, yet she, here and there, sprinkles the novel with sympathetic actions and words mouthed by the male characters. In bits and parts, all the male characters have been shown to understand the plight of women in a conservative society. Ashiq Hussain, Qasim, Nikka Pahalwan, Major Mushtaq Khan and even Sakhi, at some point of time, express sympathy towards Zaitoon and women like her. Mushtaq Khan, though, conservative when it comes to his own relationship with Carol, extends full support to save Zaitoon from the clutches of death at the hands of her in-laws. He confronts Sakhi, in order to prevent him from killing Zaitoon, when he is fully aware that for a tribal, his woman is his honour and he can hardly tolerate an outsider to even talk about her, let alone touch her.

Though societies like these will take an eternity to change, one can already feel a whiff of the changing times in the novel. Zaitoon had to face innumerable hardships in her journey from the plains to the mountains and back, she may have suffered abuse, torture, rape at the hands of her tormentors but, if there is one thing that the author has been successful in proving is that her spirit never accepted defeat. She represents the woman of today, though illiterate, yet ready to take on the world. She is not a persona, she is a

metaphor— the symbol of courage. Her attitude— to overthrow tyranny and resent subjugation in every form— lends voice to the multitudinous women around her. Sidhwa's endeavor to give voice to the marginal and a place in history through her works has been able to a carve a niche for her in the literary circle.

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A Brief bio of Corresponding Author

Dr Sonika Sethi presently serves as Assistant Professor of English in S D College, Ambala Cantt, Haryana, a premier Institute of North India with NAAC Re-accredited Institute CGPA 3.48. She was a Gold Medalist in Masters in English from Punjabi University, Patiala . She completed her Ph. D. on 'A Comparative Study of Historicity and Indianness in Postcolonial Novels' studying novels of 8 different authors. Her key areas of interest include— World Literature, Postcolonial Literature and Translation Studies. She has attended a number of International and National Seminars, presented papers and published research articles in Journals of repute.