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"THE PAKISTANI BRIDE": WOMEN AS BEASTS OF BURDEN AND INSTRUMENTS FOR  
ENJOYMENT

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ABSTRACT

*The Pakistani Bride* which brought recognition to Bapsi Sidhwa, is wholly a serious book. According to the author, it is about the identity of Pakistan. It is based on an incident which occurred in Pakistan in reality. The narrative depicts the struggle for survival of Zaitoon, a tribal girl. The complexity of conflicts in the narrative makes the work a fictional document which is of great relevance. Bapsi Sidhwa's own identification with the hapless Pakistani girl is genuine. It even led to a change of ending. According to Robert Ross, this novel deals specifically about patriarchy and the traditions governing the male-female relationships.

The novel falls short of structural coherence. There are quite a few thematic elements in the narrative but the whole focus is on the heroic struggle of Zaitoon, fleeing from the brutal and harsh tribal society of Kohistan into which she has been married. Zaitoon is in fact a child of partition. She loses both her parents when she is four. She was brought by Qasim in Lahore and lives a cosy life. Zaitoon's marriage is fixed by Qasim jolts her comfortable life. Miriam warns Qasim about the gulf of difference between the life in hills and the city life. Zaitoon's torture begins the very next day after marriage. He treats his wife as a sex object. Zaitoon resolves to escape from the harsh and cruel tribal world. Zaitoon proceeds in the cold and malevolent terrain, After a week she reaches the river, half dead. She lunges towards the river, because her freedom lies across the river. But unfortunately she is raped by two strangers on the banks.

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Bapsi Sidhwa occupies an important place in post-colonial fiction..She stands next only to Ahmed Ali and Zulfiker Ghose. Pakistani fiction in English has been somewhat dreary. The milieu at home and the problem of language compel many creative writers in Pakistan to write in the language of the majority-Urdu. Bapsi Sidhwa, for whom English is a vernacular, writes for the Western World as the audience in English is quite larger. It was Bapsi Sidhwa who drew attention of the world to the quandary of Parsee community in the subcontinent, though Perin Bharucha in 'The fire worshippers' and B.K.Karanjia in more of an Indian handled

issues related to Parsee life much before she died. Thus Bapsi Sidhwa takes a significant place in Parsee fiction in English, i.e. that is fiction written by parsees dealing with parsee life. Bapsi Sidhwa is a writer from a distinct minority in India (and Pakistan) who has a different relation to her country. She encompasses “ a double migration” , enjoying a hybrid or fluid identity as many post colonial novelists do. Her work is pervaded by an ethos which is charestically Zoroastrian.

*The Pakistani Bride* which brought recognition to Bapsi Sidhwa is wholly a novel of seriousness. According to the author, it is about the identity of Pakistan. It is in fact an incident which occurred in Pakistan. The narrative depicts the struggle for the survival of Zaitoon a tribal girl. The complexity of conflicts in the narrative makes the work a fictional document of great relevance. Bapsi Sidhwa’s identification with the hapless Pakistani girl is genuine. It even lead to a change of the ending of the novel. According to Robert Ross, this novel deals specifically about patriarchy and traditions governing male-female relationships. The novel apparently lacks structural coherence. There are a few other thematic strands in the narrative but at the core is the heroic struggle of Zaitoon fleeing from the brutal tribal society of Kohistan into which she has been married.

Zaitoon is a child of partition. She loses both her parents when she is four. Brought up by Qasim in Lahore, she lives a cosy life.

Her marriage, fixed by Qasim, however, brings about a jolt in her placid existence. First Miriam warns Qasim of the differences between the life in the hills and Urban Life. Even Mushtaq and Ashiq try to dissuade Qasim. Zaitoon, the bride expresses her misgivings but Qasim is adamant. He even threatens to kill her if she transgressed his will. Thus Zaitoon’s marriage is an enforced one which is doomed to fail.

Zaitoon’s torture begins on the very next day after marriage. Sakhi, her ‘tyrannical, animal trainer’ of a husband beats her on the slightest pretext. Two months after her marriage, she is severely beaten up by her husband for going up to the river against his command. The river separates the tribal territory and the army. The world beyond the river is a familiar one to Zaitoon. Her wish is to return to it. Sakhi, however, stands between Zaitoon and freedom. A man of no human feelings, he treats his wife like an instrument of enjoyment. When she waves to the jawans across the river one day, in great fury, he almost kills her. This traumatic experience brings Zaitoon to the breaking point. She resolves to escape from the harsh and cruel tribal world.

At this juncture commences her painful journey. Referring to Zaitoon’s odyssey, Indira Bhat observes thus:

Zaitoon’s odyssey from the plains to the  
snow mountains and back to the plains is  
symbolic of the inner journey of the young  
woman from the fantasy world of love,  
romance and heroes, to the harsh and  
hostile realities of life, where man  
is the hunter and exploiter, cruel and  
inhuman treating women and animals alike.

With barely enough food and a blanket, Zaitoon sets out against heavy odds. She passes through the unfamiliar hills towards the bridge across the river. Meanwhile Sakhi and his kinsmen set out in search of Zaitoon in order to kill her, for there can be no mercy for any women who tries to escape in their tribal world. Like a prey at bay, Zaitoon proceeds in the cold and malevolent terrain. Barefoot, ill-clothed she moves through the mountains, terrified of being detected and killed.

During her journey, Zaitoon even experiences hallucinations. A leopard almost devours her once. After a week, with great difficulty she reaches the river, half dead. She lunges towards the river, because across the river lies her freedom. On the banks, two strangers rape her.

Finally, bruised and battered, ten days after her ordeal begins, she crawls to the base of the bridge. Her predators too reach the bridge. But fortunately, she is spotted by the sentries first. Carrying her bundle up in her old blanket, the major goes across the bridge and enters his territory. Sakhi, however, obstinately

follows him. Mushtaq tells him that Zaitoon is dead. Sakhi is forced to believe him as he is surrounded by soldiers. After his return Sakhi lies to his tribesman that he has buried his wife with his own hands. Thus Zaitoon survives ultimately. Referring to Zaitoon's struggle, Cicely Havelly writes :

The bridge ends Zaitoon's life and death  
struggle to find the bridge and cross it.  
It is a powerful symbol simply within the novel,  
but it also reflects on the patterns of Sidhwa's own writing:  
Life is like a risky crossing of the bridges. What waits for  
Zaitoon on the other side is a future which promises only  
loneliness, ostracism and further struggle.

Zaitoon's story highlights one of the pivotal issues in the narrative which shows us the position and treatment of women in society.

The picture of oppression and degradation of hapless women which emerges is strengthened by numerous other images of violence and subjugation of women. In the very first chapter of the novel, Sidhwa shows how the tribal society regards women as valuable commodities. 'Any girl- and he had made sure that this one was able bodied - was worth more than the loan due', thinks Qasim's father when a fellow clansman offers him his daughter in lieu of a loan that he owes. Afshan, the woman to be Qasim's wife, is fifteen, five years older than Qasim. Yet she has no choice but to accept him. Qasim's father decision to give the girl to his son is in fact generous:

To begin with, he had thought of marrying  
The girl himself. He had only one wife,  
But in twinge of parental conscience, he  
Had decided to bestow the girl on Qasim.

A few years later, before the marriage is consummated, Afshan is nearly raped by a stranger when he sees her bathing, protected by Qasim who is only a boy. Qasim hits the man with a large rock and escapes with his wife. Women are like commodities in the tribal society- to be bartered and traded. Once married, they become part of the property of their husbands, which the latter must protect. Otherwise, someone else may molest and rape them. Finally they have no option but to accept whichever husband is chosen for them by their fathers. First they are the property of their fathers, then they belong to their husbands.

Bapsi Sidhwa reinforces this macabre image of woman graphically in various sections of the novel. Zaitoon though she belongs to the next generation, is raised in Lahore, and even educated a little. She is forced to marry Sakhi much against her wishes. Her father does not consult her and when she begs her father not to force her, she is threatened with death. Once she is married to Sakhi, her life becomes a veritable hell. She is abused and battered very often on the slightest pretext and suspicion.

One day in a blind fury, he batters his ox until the beast collapses and nearly dies. When his mother tries to rescue the poor animal, he beats her with a stick:

"I will teach you." He hissed. I'll teach you meddling women. You think you can make me a fool of me? Do you?

When Zaitoon tries to stop him, he trashes her as well, saying:

"You are my woman. I'll teach you to obey me"

As more women gather to prevent further brutality, Sakhi walks away, triumphant, his honor apparently vindicated. He exercises his rights of proprietorship. First he beats his wife then trashes his mother for being a woman which almost implied being owned and being a beast of burden.

*The Pakistani Bride* does not merely chronicle the events, it does explore the feminine consciousness which is unique in post colonial fiction. The subject is a significant human experience. She makes it a contemporary issue concerning the extent to which women are psychologically free to change their lives.

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