



Gender and Power Dynamics in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*

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Keywords

Gender, dynamics,
society,
complementary

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intricate relationship between gender and power in Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride*, set in the patriarchal and tribal society of Kohistan, Pakistan. It examines how male dominance and cultural traditions perpetuate the subjugation and commodification of women, restricting their agency and identity. Through characters like Zaitoon and Carol, Sidhwa exposes the harsh realities faced by women who challenge entrenched gender roles and power structures. The study highlights how patriarchal power is maintained through social norms that prioritize male honor and control over female autonomy. Drawing on feminist theories and concepts of hegemony, the paper argues that women's struggle for self-identity and freedom is persistently undermined by a society that equates female autonomy with dishonor. Sidhwa's narrative ultimately advocates for recognizing women as equal beings deserving dignity, respect, and the right to self-determination, challenging the deeply ingrained gender inequalities in radical societies.

Introduction

Since the evolution of human race there is always a gap between the two genders, which can be seen in family, society and in literature too. In a male dominated society male has always maintained the privilege over the female. They not only assumed the power but denied the females of their righteous right. Gender and power are complementary to each other. The gender that has always claimed to be superior has secured the power and denied the same for the other one. If the power is not associated with the concept of superiority of genders then there is no point of discrimination at any point of time or in any part of the history. It is always the gender that has assumed the power in writing the history from its own perspective and outlook to suit its own benefits and maintain power dynamics. The powerless has to accept this narrative and the surrender left with almost no option. Arlene Swindler narrates the psychological perception of male dominated society, "Man is the principal and end of woman, as God is the principle and end of man... woman exists for the man, not man for the woman" (Swindler 115). Any conflict for the power at this moment leads to social unrest. The power dynamics and gender become more problematic in society that is itself radical and riddled with the religious dogma. A Parsee writer working out the structure of thought in an Islamic radical society challenges a lot of

established belief and ideologies. The working space is actually doubly problematic and lands the writer in a dubious space. Drawing a final conclusion in this space is quite slippery but the kind of calibre that Bapsi Sidhwa possesses, makes it safe for the readers. The conflict of belonging and not belonging is similar to William Shakespeare's idea of Hamlet's "To Be or not To Be". The characters of Sidhwa are willing to move out of the situation but crippled by the ideology in which they have spent their lives make it really impossible for them to do so. Mary Kassian, in her book *The Feminist Mystique Mistake*, exposes the mentality of patriarchal society saying:

Men have broad and large chests and small hips, and more understanding than the women, who have but small and narrow breasts, and broad hips, to the end they would remain at home, sit still, keep house, and bear and bring up children. (Kassian 34)

Bapsi Sidhwa born in Pakistan, presently living in USA is from Parsee Zoroastrian Community. She is best known for her works like *Ice Candy Man*, *An American Brat*, *Crow Eaters and Their Language of Love*. Sidhwa majorly deals with the issues of Culture, Partition, Patriarchy, gender and power conflicts especially in *The Pakistani Bride*.

The Pakistani Bride reveals the influence of patriarchy, gender and power in a male dominated Society. When the novel starts we clearly see the influence of patriarchy and power as Qasim's father gets him married to an elder girl, due to an old feud between his father and Resham Khan "Resham Khan has promised us his daughter" (Sidhwa 07). Qasim belongs to a tribal community and such things are very common in their communities.

Qasim was a Kohistani and he loses his wife and children in a disease, he moves to Jullunder, where he works as a night watchman. But the partition of India and Pakistan forces him to move back to Lahore. While coming to Lahore, he meets Munni a five year girl, who lost his father and mother in a train attack. Munni reminds him of his own daughter Zaitoon. He adopts Munni and takes her with him as his own daughter. There he meets Nikka Pehlwan and Miriam. Good time passes soon when Miriam reminds Qasim about the marriage plan of Zaitoon (Munni). Meanwhile Zaitoon attends school of basic education. Qasim never got out of the memories of his native land and he dearly wants to visit his own land. So one day he meets Misri Khan, a man of his native land, a tribal man, a Kohistani. He promises Zaitoon to Misri Khan's son in marriage. When Miriam listen this news, she gets furious on Qasim. She knows in her heart about the tribal people. She says:

'Brother Qasim,' she coaxed, how can a girl, brought up in Lahore, educated – how can she be happy in the mountains? Tribal ways are different, you don't know how changed you are ...' And as rancour settled on Qasim's compressed lips, she continued in a rising passion, 'They are savages. Brutish, uncouth and ignorant! She will be miserable among them. Don't you see?' (Sidhwa 93)

Qasim filled with the romantic memories of his land – The Kohistan, he abandons the arguments of Miriam. He was firm in his decision of getting married Zaitoon to a tribe man. He says to Miriam "it is my word – the word of a Kohistani!" (Sidhwa 94)

The domination of one gender over the other is not based only on sexes but also between the male supremacy. Major Mushtaq, an armyman while talking to Carol about the ways of tribal life he mentions about the fights for honour, pride, reputation and revenge, he says: "They have their own notions of honour and revenge; a handful of maize stolen, a man's pride slighted, and the price is paid in bloody family feuds" (Sidhwa 115). Gramsci's concept of hegemony asserts this: A social class achieves a predominant influence and power, not by direct and overt means, but by succeeding in making its ideological view of society so pervasive that the sub-ordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression. (Abrams 151)

Qasim along with Zaitoon was coming back to Kohistan accompanied with an army man to Pattan. The groom to be Sakhi observes things that are not in the tradition among the hilly people. His jealousy and anger is clearly visible when the army jawan Ashiq helps Zaitoon in climbing down the truck, he touches her and Sakhi "Hwakeyed, he followed each movement with growing feelings of humiliation and jealousy. Hatred and fury burned within him" (Sidhwa 148) for this act of innocence Zaitoon has to pay after her marriage with Sakhi. On the second

day after her marriage with Sakhi:

Sakhi was seething with jealousy . . . the jawan's grip on the girl's arm, her laughter and ease in his company – the persistent vision inflamed him.

'Why did you let him touch you?' He hissed, turning dangerously.

'I saw you,' he shouted. 'I saw jawan hold your arm all the way down to the river.' (Sidhwa 165)

Qasim determined to marry Zaitoon to a tribe man he leaves to the Mountains along with her daughter. The bride to be, Zaitoon has no power to resist her marriage to a tribe man; she accepts her fate decided by her father. On their journey back to the mountains they stay one night in an army camp. There they meet Major Mushtaq and Carol and when they found that the girl is not the real daughter of Qasim, and Zaitoon too is not one of the tribal people. They feel pity for the girl as they were helpless in providing a helping hand to Zaitoon. Carol says:

For an intuitive instant Carol felt herself submerged in 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.... (Sidhwa 136)

The setting of novel is based on a Pakistani province- the Kohistan where Gender plays a crucial role in defining the role of two sexes. Sidhwa was very well aware of the disparities prevailing between the two sexes in a radical society where one is the bread winner and the other as mere a commodity. In the novel she clearly states the roles of one gender in terms of marriage, family, society and nation:

Mushtaq had been in the tribal regions long enough to be well acquainted with the marriage formalities. 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. (Sidhwa 138)

Though, we see a voice of revolt in Zaitoon's heart for her marriage with a tribe man which is subsided by Qasim's fierce anger. Zaitoon was in a dilemma about her marriage but power dynamics always left her on the receiving end. Bill Ashcroft puts his view, “

Women in many societies have been relegated to the position of other, marginalized and, in a metaphorical sense, colonized, forced to pursue guerrilla warfare against imperial domination from positions deeply imbedded in, yet fundamentally alienated from that imperium.” (Ashcroft 174)

This informs us that a woman is not supposed to take lead. She only has to be calm, sit and listen without any objection to what the man says. She was not sure whether she will be happy among the hilly people or not. So before her marriage she says to Qasim “if I must marry, marry me to someone from the plains. That jawan at the camp, Abba, I think he likes me. I will die rather than live here”. (Sidhwa, 157) Qasim become furious. He was shocked by her brazen choice of words and boldness of her contempt for his people and latches on the neck of Zaitoon:

A decent girl doesn't tell her father to whom he should marry her. You make me break my word girl, and you cover my name in dung! Do you understand that? Do you? I have given my word. On it depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life. If you smirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands. (Sidhwa158)

Power plays a pivotal role in ruining a girl's life, making her life terribly miserable. In pursuit to escape from her miserable married life Zaitoon sets off one early morning from her husband's house. Soon the missing of Zaitoon from her house reaches to Sakhi, his family and among his tribesmen. There becomes a tense situation in the community. Before her no bride has taken such a bold step to escape. Simone De Beauvoir's classic *The Second Sex* elaborates the idea that gender difference is a human construct. As she asserts:

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. (De Beauvoir 295)

The pride and honour of the family and the tribal community was at stake. Every member of the community got ready to salvage the honour of the family and to take revenge:

One behind the other, they emerged, eyes ablaze in fanatic determination. The crowd of tribals dispersed in a hushed understanding, each to get his own gun and prepare for the hunt. Not a word was said. They identified with the man's disgrace, taking the burden on themselves. Collectively they meant to salvage the honour of the clan. The runaway's only route lay across the river. Once across, she was lost to them forever. How then would they hold up their heads? The threatening disgrace hung like an acrid smell around them. It would poison their existence unless they found the girl. (Sidhwa 190)

Hamida, mother-in-law of Zaitoon narrates the horrific effects of challenging the power of male supremacy. She knew that step taken by Zaitoon of abandoning her husband and her home will not be forgiven by her community. She tells how she lost three sons in the name of pride and honour. Hamida feels utterly sad for Zaitoon because now her fate rests in the hands of her tribal men. For tribal people pride and honour are top priority:

Honour! She thought bitterly. Everything for honour – and another life lost!

Her loved ones are dead and now the girl she was beginning to hold so dear sacrificed. She knew the infallibility of the mountain huntsman...

Man and honour. And now the girl...

They'll be back soon with that bitch's corpse, your son's honour vindicated, (Sidhwa 190-191)

Like Zaitoon, Carol too was the victim of this gender and power supremacy. Carol was from USA and got romanticised with a healthy built Pakistani man Farukh. She married Farukh and came to Pakistan leaving behind her family. Though Carol's family was not ready for her marriage but eventually surrendered for Carol. In Pakistan she had the liberty to roam around in Lahore at her will, which was not same for the Pakistani women. She dressed like she wanted to but this didn't last for long time. Women since time immemorial have always been running after the men. Helen Longino discloses, "a woman's limitations are varied. In an argument with her husband, man is always right and any woman who tries to dominate her husband is considered a monster" (Longino 131). The relationship between Farukh and Carol soars in confrontation and jealousy, whenever she laughed while looking and talking to a man. She remained alone when Farukh was busy with his

work in Army camp, there grew a friendship between Carol and Mushtaq. They both cared and loved each other's company and when Carol reveals to Mushtaq that she loves him and wants to marry him. Mushtaq reveals that he is already married and has children. It was a hard nut to swallow and she learns the position of women whether it's Pakistan or any other place in the world. She says:

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... had she fallen in love with the wrong man? Or was she simply the victim of vendetta. (Sidhwa 226)

And finally, Carol like Zaitoon tries to free herself from the clutches of this gender based victimisation. She sensed that she doesn't belong to this society and their ways of tradition are different. She realised:

I think I'm finally beginning to realise something . . . your civilization is too ancient"

. . . too different . . . and it has ways that can hurt me . . . really hurt me. . . I'm going home.

'Lahore?'

'San Jose.' (Sidhwa 229)

Towards the end of the novel when Zaitoon finally makes her way near the bridge close to the army camp, where the news of Zaitoon's elopement is known to Major Mushtaq and his soldiers. They not only save her from her husband Sakhi and his family but also provide protection. Major Mushtaq arranges an escape plan from army camp as soon as possible because he knew that if they got the news about Zaitoon being in army camp it would be catastrophic situation for Zaitoon and himself.

Bapsi Sidhwa through her watermark novel proves that women are not subject to

commodification and objectification rather they deserve to be treated with dignity. They are equal to men, their integrity should be maintained and no discrimination should be done on gender basis. Women can't be caged in just a single role. They should not be considered mere as a commodity rather they form the half circle into full circle. Through the character of Zaitoon and Carol, Sidhwa puts a strong statement for the radical society that we must give them due share of respect and sense of belongingness to a woman, they deserve in a family and society. Seeking an independent identity is considered only the male's privilege. The core problem for women is not sex but identity which has always been denied to them. Friedan says that a woman can never ask questions like 'who am I? What do I want?' but for the first time women are becoming aware of this identity crisis. Friedan declares:

For woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfilment, autonomy, self-realisation, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need, with as serious problems are, in this sense, by-products of the suppression of her basic need to grow and full fill her potentialities as a human being, potentialities which the mystic of feminine fulfilment ignores. (Friedan 282)

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