



BAPSI SIDHWA'S *THE BRIDE*: FROM FANTASY TO REALITY

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ABSTRACT

Bapsi Sidhwa's The Bride deals with the repression of women in the patriarchal Pakistani society. It provides an incisive look into the treatment of women. It is the most critical towards unjust traditions that undermine the structure of the community. Sidhwa brings into focus the issue of Pakistani women's plight through the eyes of an outsider, Carol, an American bride of the Pakistani man. Sidhwa's female characters in The Bride are as strong as the men who run their lives; in the way that they resist the limitations of the definition of 'woman' which circumscribes their identity. The Bride not only offers the struggle and the courage of a woman but also a condemnatory view of the practices of the patriarchal society of Pakistan. Sidhwa explicates the dangers posed to the development and stability of the country's community, not by the outside forces but by those within. Sidhwa emphasizes the two aspects of Nature and symbolically presents the external adventure of man into the unknown and his struggle for survival against the cruelty of Nature. Zaitoon's struggle is at one level a struggle of man against Nature but it is also at another level the struggle of a woman against both man and Nature. It is a struggle to cross the deep and unbridgeable abyss of the changeless and stagnant social order of the Muslim male and to become a whole person.

Key words: *Pakistani society, unjust traditions, exploitation of women and nature*

Since time – immemorial, woman has been bearing male dominance as part of her lot. For long, she has mutely suffered ineffable trials and tribulations perpetrated by man. Influenced by the development of cultural awareness among women at global level, some women writers have taken up cudgels against women's exploitation and suppression of whatever nature, genetic, social racial, cultural or professional. They rightly feel that women have to be made aware of the powers endowed upon them by nature. Purposefully, Bapsi Sidhwa in *The Bride* has depicted the feminine force through Zaitoon. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Bride* deals with the repression of women in the patriarchal Pakistani society.

The title at first suggests a happy story but it soon becomes evident that the novel lies heavy with irony. To be the bride in a patriarchal society that demeans women translates into bondage. In *The Bride*, Bapsi Sidhwa confronts a number of issues faced by the Pakistani's since the Partition of 1947, particularly the condition of women who are positioned at different levels in the class structure. Even though the women are denied an influential voice in national issues as well as in their everyday lives, Sidhwa's women are as strong if not stronger than the men who run their lives.

Her heroines are women who have refused to accept the narrow and constricting roles assigned to them under vague terms such as 'honour', 'shame' and 'modesty' among others.

The Bride is a damning indictment of the Kohistani community in particular and the Pakistani society in general with regard to its brutal treatment of women. The women are marginalized and in many instances have no say in decision-making processes, which may ultimately seal their fates. Quasim is offered a bride at the tender age of ten, because Afshan's father Resham Khan had been unable to repay a loan he had taken from Quasim's father. The amount of money is insignificant; but the transaction is carried out to prevent a blood feud. The 'transaction' reveals the status of a woman as nothing more than a bargaining commodity, whose role has always been decided.

Zaitoon, the heroine of the novel is introduced as a young girl with her Muslim parents, fleeing the Indian side of Punjab, because of 'Partition' of India. She is adopted by Quasim Khan who arranges her marriage to a tribal man, Sakhi. The tribals are savages, brutish and don't know how to treat women, whereas, Zaitoon is brought up in liberal ways of life in Lahore. Here Sidhwa emphasizes the two aspects of Nature and symbolically presents the eternal adventure of man into the unknown and his struggle for survival against the cruelty of Nature. Zaitoon's struggle is at one level a struggle of man against Nature but it is also the struggle of a woman against the cruelty of both man and Nature.

The first night of Zaitoon's marriage reveals the proprietorial lust and corroding jealousy for this delicate girl of sixteen in Sakhi. Sakhi's feeling of insecurity with Zaitoon surges in him murderous instincts and he treats her cruelly. The savage subjugating will of Sakhi frustrates her.

The barbaric episode of Sakhi beating an animal almost to death, his mother's attempt to save the animal and his beating both his mother and Zaitoon brings into focus the tribal manhood and the barbaric views of honour. The woman be it mother or wife is savagely ill-treated and there is no code of respecting the elderly woman. Man is the master, even if he is a child, points out Sidhwa, describing the relationship of Quasim and his grown up wife. The tribal men do not adhere to the laws of civilized life. Women are exploited both sexually and also for household work. She is not treated as an individual neither is she given any status as a

mother. She is simply a slave to the family and the men whip them anytime at their fancy. The Pakistani Muslim husband considers infidelity in his wife a sin by maiming her or killing her for dishonoring him. But they do not hesitate to rape women if they are provided with such an opportunity. Sakhi's cruel and inhuman behaviour drives her to despair and she decides to run away. Zaitoon's odyssey from the plains to the snow mountains is symbolic of the inner journey of a young woman from the fantasy world of love, to the harsh and hostile realities of life, where man is the hunter and exploiter, cruel and inhuman treating women and animal alike.

Sidhwa juxtaposes Zaitoon's plight with the civilized country's Carol's life with her Pakistani husband Farukh. To her Pakistan appears to be the land of romance and adventure. She is flattered by the attention she receives from Farukh's friends and does not realize that for the men it is merely a passing affair. She is attracted to Major Mushtaq and thinks he will marry her. She decides to divorce Farukh. For Mushtaq, it is one thing to have an affair with an American, but totally out of the question to forsake his wife and children and distinctly pints out to her the difference between the two ways of life. She now decides to come back to Farukh, thinks of having children and making her marriage successful. She even fancies going into the tribal world but it is shattered when she comes across a young tribal woman's head bobbing in the river. In a crude and painful manner, she grasps what is behind the 'gallant and protective' behaviour of the east. She has glimpses of the horror of generations of cloistered womanhood.

Through the eyes of an outsider, an American bride of the Pakistani man, Sidhwa brings into focus the issue of Pakistani women's plight. Through the plight of Zaitoon, Carol had a glimpse of the fateful condition of girls like her. The two cultures cannot meet, be they of Pakistan and America or the mountains and the plains. Sidhwa portrays that society which abides by the old traditional male made rules to be followed by women only. The novelist presents the consciousness of these two women of their victimization at the hands of age-old cultural, social and environmental forces of a different culture. Sidhwa attempts not only the social and cultural responses but also presents the states of being and quest for survival. It is a struggle to cross the deep and unbridgeable abyss of the changeless and stagnant social order of the Muslim male and to become a whole person.

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