

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the formation and unmaking of female identity in Bapsi Sidhwa's "*The Pakistani Bride*"

Vandana Rajan

Dr. Lalit Kishore Sharma

Department of English and Modern European Languages

Banasthali Vidyapith

Banasthali-304022

Abstract

The Pakistani Bride is an enthralling novel about the deplorable state of women in the society. The novel clearly shows that Bapsi Sidhwa strives to highlight not only the submissive characteristics of women, but also the revolutionary elements of women's nature. The portrayal of women's submissive nature's major goal is to demonstrate that women are constantly expected to be passive and subservient in the patriarchal society. They have no right to speak out against men's exploitative character. On the other hand, the novel depicts strong and protective parts of women's character in response to society's exploitation of them. This paper examines the novel *The Pakistani Bride* socio cultural background as well as the patriarchal Pakistani culture. The system of marriage and patriarchy despises and suppresses the self-identity of an orphaned girl. It also highlights the difficulties faced by a little girl named Zaitoon as an alien in an alien civilization and culture. It imposes expulsion as a means of molding a sense of belonging for her inner self.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Oppression, Identity, Female self, Culture.

Introduction

Literature is a reflection of the contemporary world. Throughout its long and complex history, society has been controlled by ideas that formed man's superiority over woman. Aristotle's statement that, "the female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" argues an unconscious/conscious attempt to deny a female's identity. Historically, the body has been linked entirely with women in Western philosophy, whereas men have been identified with the mind. Susan Bordo, a modern feminist philosopher, elucidates the dualistic nature of the mind/body connection in her writings by examining the early philosophies of Aristotle, Hegel, and Descartes, uncovering how such distinctive binaries as spirit or matter and male activity or female passivity have worked to reinforced male or female characteristics and categorization. Further, Bordo continues saying that, whereas males have

RESEARCH ARTICLE

traditionally been linked with intelligence and mind or spirit, women have long been identified with the body, the subjugated, negatively charged phrase in the mind and body dichotomy. The identification of the female body and not the intellect has used as justification for treating women as property, objects, and exchangeable commodities amongst men. Simone de Beauvoir, French philosopher, novelist and essayist, in one of her famous quotes, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” summarized an argument which propelled number of questions into the minds of thinkers and rational individuals of the society. Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* (1949) claims that,

...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. (320-21)

Through their work, twentieth-century writers felt an urgent need to reflect this deliberate struggle to oppose patriarchy as well as to disrupt the self-satisfied illusions

of the patriarchal society. Their entire emphasis was on portraying women as rational, thinking, and speaking individuals, as well as expressing her anguish in her own words. They were constantly striving to make their female characters historical figures. Indeed, Virginia Woolf in her famous work, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), explains the pathetic and contradictory position of women in the 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)

In general, a civilization is the result of a country's physical, mental, emotional, and philosophical resources. It oversees a society systems and tendencies in a certain territory. Culture is a collection of mechanisms of values, practices, systems and the institutions which describe reality.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A woman is always considered to be a bearer of culture and a representation of a civilization. However, in postcolonial time and place, they are also confronted with cultural dualism, cultural shock, cultural gap, and cultural difficulty. Women are subjugated economically, politically, socially, and mentally by patriarchy in every arena where patriarchy dominates. The formation of patriarchy supports the male inclination for dominance. A patriarchal societal structure permits males to be superior to women. Despite the fact that women have played an important part in the formation of civilization on the other hand, patriarchal mentality has always pushed them to the outskirts. Literature not only reflects social reality, but it also frames men and women's complex organizational patterns, interpersonal relationships, and perceptions of their socio-cultural reality. Woman is always seen as other and she is excluded, characterized exclusively by her divergence from male standards and ideals. The ultimate purpose of all feminist activity, including feminist theory and literary criticism, is to transform the world by promoting gender equality. Thus, whether we are consciously aware of these concerns or not, gender concerns have a role in every element of human production and experience, including the creation and experience of literature. Women writers from all over the world, have made purposeful attempts to demonstrate their

belief in sexual equality and to overcome sexist dominance in order to improve society. They used literature not just to examine the tortured awareness of the oppressed and exploited, but also to emphasize society's indifference towards them. Women writers from the subcontinent have seldom spoken out for equal rights, but they have worked hard to demonstrate society's insensitive and callous opinions toward women. These writers were deeply anchored on female subjectivity. Women were subjected to a variety of gender-based violations. In general, the society fosters gender inequality, from birth to death the female gender were subjected to a significant level of discrimination. Women are regarded as worthless by patriarchal culture, whereas males are seen as assets. Many writers have portrayed female characters in their works as inferior and incompetent. However, the reality is that women faces more issues and challenges than males. According to Sandra Lee Barkty in her article *Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power* (1988) asserts, "Women's oppression under male domination not only consists of solely in depriving women of political and legal rights but also extends into the structure of our society and the contents of our culture and permeates our consciousness".(69)

Western theoretical viewpoints on the cultural orientation and value of the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

female inner nature and sexuality have evolved. Women in the West have battled against institutionalized control of the female body and her identity. Bapsi Sidhwa is a well-known author who depicts women's plight in patriarchal culture, particularly in Pakistani society, which is recognized for its oppression of women using religious instruments as well as societal laws intended by men to subjugate women. She was born in Karachi and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, and is largely regarded as the country's best writer.

The Pakistani Bride portrays the socio-cultural foundation and the authoritative patriarchal Pakistani culture. The story depicts how the institution of marriage and patriarchy despises and suppresses the self-identity of an orphaned girl. It also highlights the difficulties faced by a little girl named Zaitoon as an alien in an alien place or civilization. It imposes expulsion as a means of sculpting a sense of belonging for her 'self-identity'. The novel is a heartfelt tale about a girl named Zaitoon's painful experiences before marriage and the aftermath in the male-dominated culture of Kohistan, Pakistan. The novel's plot is based on the story of Zaitoon, an orphaned girl from the Punjab plains who is adopted by a Kohistani tribal man named Qasim. After losing his whole family to smallpox, Qasim travels to the plains, but fate pulls him back home in the aftermath of the 1947 India-Pakistan riots.

He is on a train going towards Lahore when an anti-Muslim mob assaults its passengers, mutilating anybody they can get their hands on. Zaitoon's parents are slaughtered in this fanatical violence, and in the dead of night, she misidentifies Qasim as her father and clings to him for safety. Later, she is forced to marry a tribal guy, who destroys her married life. Here, it also depicts a woman's socio-cultural background and the issues she has as an immigrant in an alien country or civilization. It imposes expulsion as a means of sculpting a sense of belonging for herself. Zaitoon is strong enough to run away and rejects the alien culture and heritage. Women which are controlled and protected by the males in their family only allowed to leave the house. In the novel, Punjabi married women are portrayed going out to see friends or for shopping but they were seen wearing burkhas. Women are not expected to approach male strangers. Even when speaking to elders or males outside of their immediate family, they should cover their heads and faces with a veil or shawl to demonstrate modesty and hide themselves from male gaze. Women and men socialize to a very limited level because of the tradition of the Purdah system as narrated in the novel. Whereas, women and men in Western cultures are more accustomed to socializing and relating to strangers, friends, and professionals of the opposite gender.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Bapsi Sidhwa has been outspoken about her dissatisfaction with the traditional sense of morality, which treats women as property, as well as her dissatisfaction with the hypocritical position of women in the country's urban societies. Carol, the novel's other 'bride,' is revealed to be in a deeply troubled state of mind as a consequence of a collision between her lofty romantic western notions of 'womanhood' and the practical challenges she has as a result of her own marriage to Farrukh, an offspring of the feudal system. Her fascination with the mysterious Pakistani patriarchal culture, the gallant men, the world of harems and purdahs faded quickly, and Farrukh's courtly attitude to the point of slavishness and aggressive possessiveness, which had made her feel beloved is now seemed to culminate in repulsion. Carol's instinctive attitude to the social setup is illustrated in her letter to an American friend, Pam as:

“...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)

Carol went to parties with and without Farrukh and delighted with the attention which men bestowed on her. She mistook

them for chivalrous guys who were charmed by her white complexion and American heritage. The men Carol has met knows well how to control and channel their passionate emotions. Men and women do not learn how to interact with one other in a non-sexual manner when there is minimal contact between the sexes. Women's segregation stops males from learning how to communicate with female strangers in a polite manner.

The men were not overtly sexual: rather she sensed their sexual tension. Their desire for her carried a natural tenderness that was reflected in their behaviour to all women. They showed a surprisingly gentle consideration of her vulnerabilities, of the differences between the sexes that made her feel complete – and completed the men. (176-177)

Carol came from a decent family and admire the lavish lifestyle. When her respectful and dedicated husband tries to employ his masculine dominance over Carol revealing his true colours through jealous disputes and distrustful mentality. His tense and suspicious attitude becomes intolerable to her. The jealousy, possessiveness, and compromises which characterize both Zaitoon's and Carol's lives differ only in some extent but literally it defines the difference between life and

RESEARCH ARTICLE

death. The two females who seem to share vulnerability with each other are unavoidably detached by a Cultural Divide.

Zaitoon demonstrates two aspects of her personality. In this separated culture, this may be a general tactic for women. She is open, confident, and eager to enjoy her life when she is among the other ladies of the society whereas she her attitude is quiet, bashful, and obedient in front of her father. Zaitoon plays the character of the obedient daughter, doing whatever her father asks till the night before her marriage. She is also terrified of having to live among the people of hid clan after seeing how they live. Though, she asks Qasim to marry her to someone from Punjab but Qasim promptly relegates her to her lowly position and threatens to murder her if she causes him to violate his word and anyhow damages his dignity. Marriage is a form of lovable servitude and enslavement if two individuals do not have mutual understanding. It is portrayed as a means of creating a family rather than creating an established bond. The precise secret thoughts about marriage as a socially recognized and authorized sexual union between an innocent soul and a sexual desire soul, intimacy without expectation, are unusual. Zaitoon is the only female in the novel *The Pakistani Bride* who violates the rules of her culture with a purpose and chooses to prioritize her own life according to her own way. She succeeds in fleeing

away from the boundaries and makes it through the mountains to safety. Though, she is harshly chastised for her disobedience and indecency. She is raped as a result of being unprotected and being in the wrong location at the wrong time. More metaphorically, she is raped as a punishment for being out of purdah - and for breaking out society's rules. Zaitoon's punishment also includes being compelled to hide for the rest of her life in order to keep her father or spouse from discovering her. With the rape, the execution of the tribal girl, and Mushtaq's taking entire control of the situation, the women's rebellion is suppressed and the males come into the power. The women are silenced, and the males take responsibility for the women's future. Carol's female 'communion' with Zaitoon allowed her to see and comprehend some of what had previously irritated her. Carol observes the 'fateful' plight of the many females in Pakistan towards the end of the novel. She can see how the women are imprisoned in a role that gives them little control over how they behave and what they do. Carol also observes how female friendships become life-saving in their culture. Here, Bapsi Sidhwa argues for a female community that comes together to support each other. Zaitoon's acts demonstrate that women may oppose male dominance. She opens the door to a conversation practically unexplored which depicts female identity and strengthen a life of its own. The novel

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Pakistani Bride is a surprising and heartbreaking expose of the Kohistani group and their culture in general, where women are ruthlessly abused. Sidhwa attempts to demonstrate in the novel that in a male-dominated culture, there are clear cut boundary lines between the domains of men and women. They have no say in decisions affecting their own life. The contemporary era of women is transitioning from a conventional mythological structure to a postmodern arena through ideas such as the battle for liberty, independence, identity, social basis, and so on, which are still a source of concern for women. Women are inextricably bound by emotional bonds, and Zaitoon is lured and destined to accept her adopted father's commands since she had feelings for him. Her father, on the other hand, resembles the masculine emblem of male privilege culture.

The novel attempts to demonstrate a mirror to the society that how social conventions have become particularly restrictive and burdensome for women. Sidhwa celebrates her gender by giving voice to women who have been silenced for centuries, and *The Pakistani Bride* presents feminine sensibility without being anti-male. The novel might be seen as being not against males, but against the societal conventions that create obstacles in women's lives. The novel attempts to demonstrate how society has for a long time

exploited women. . But finally they identified their inner self and made their own decisions for their lives. Female characters are aware of this exploitation and work hard to break through patriarchal limitations and claim their control over their true identities, bodies and sexualities. As Sidhwa points out, such resistance is not accepted in a culture which believes in the subjection of women. Sidhwa promotes the value of female identity, resistance, their self-worth, and self-assertion and the survival of Zaitoon and Carol in the novel.

References

- Barkty, S. *Feminity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power*. New York: Routledge. 1990. Print.
- Bordo, S. *Feminism, Foucault and the politics of the body*. In Caroline Ramazanoglu (Ed.), *Up against Foucault: Explorations of some tensions between Foucault and feminism* (pp. 197-202). New York: Routledge. 1993. Print
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley, New York: Vintage, 1974. Print.
- Mansfield, Nick. *Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway*. New York: New York University Press. 2000. Print.
- Sidhwa, Bapsi, *The Pakistani Bride*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990. Print.
- Showalter, Elaine. *New Feminist Criticism: Essays on women*,

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Literature and Theory, New York: Panthom
books, 1995.Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*,
Hogarth Press, 1929. Print.