

ISSN: 2278-9529



GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

July 2015 Vol. 4. Issue IV

www.galaxyimrj.com

Editor-In-Chief- Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Questioning the 'khudi' of Zaitoon in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*

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Abstract:

Set in the partition days, Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) represents the horror and ravages of communal violence interlinked with the theme of the oppression of women during and after the partition of India. Sidhwa emphasizes that the plight of women in male-dominated society remains the same. The partition provides an opportunity to further demolish and destruct the female body as it represents the honour of the male- husband, father, brother- whom she belongs to. The female body becomes the site of revenge taking and thus becomes the easiest victim of violence. In this harsh backdrop, Zaitoon, the protagonist of the novel becomes aware of her disadvantageous position and seeks to break the shackles that bind her in a brutal marriage. This paper questions what Zaitoon achieves for herself and other women through her rebellion.

Keywords: marriage, oppression, violence, rebellion, honour, customs

"...she will be a slave, you watch, and she'll have no one to turn to." (94)

The sanctity of the institution of marriage is deconstructed and laid bare at the very beginning where women are exchanged in marriage as commodity between men as a means of preserving their "code of honour". Qasim is married at a very young age to a woman older than himself as a price for the loan his father had extended to Resham Khan. Later on, in a similar fashion, Qasim fixes the marriage of his step-daughter Zaitoon to one of his kinsmen without knowing her will or letting her exercise her choice. The marriage of Zaitoon and Sakhi proves a disaster as Sakhi's overpowering attitude forces Zaitoon to run away even if the punishment for this crime means death in the tribal code of honour. But Zaitoon's struggle is not limited to this. The path to freedom passes through a tortuous landscape, threat of being killed by animals or starvation or cold, rape and danger of being caught again. The process emboldens the 'khudi' of Zaitoon to such a height that she, though famished, succeeds in reaching the bridge that takes her to her liberation. And yet, her future continues to remain uncertain as Mushtaq ruminates about disposing her somewhere safely. She is wasted and so much broken in the process that her freedom is achieved at an immensely high cost. Like Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), she must remain a social outcaste for the rest of her life, cut off from everyone, hiding in anonymity. Therefore, the intention of the novel is questionable to the extent of the feminist agenda that it seeks to propound.

Zaitoon surfaces as the main protagonist only later in the novel when she comes to embody the challenge to the patriarchal tribal structure. In fact, she undergoes a major development in her character from a minor role of Munni to a demure, obedient step-daughter of Qasim who dare not "cross her father" to the rebellious woman who refuses to bow down before her abusive husband. Thus the title of the novel is not meant to refer to Zaitoon only but to other women as well, like Afshan or even Carol, who accompanies her husband to the hilly region of Kohistan

fascinated by the exotic men. Both Zaitoon and Carol (and to some extent Afshan as well) have fantasies about their respective future lovers and both are subsequently led to disillusionment. The title represents the preoccupation of the novel with exploring the oppression of women not just in freshly partitioned Pakistan but also bringing home the similarity of creed that governs the institution of marriage, on which the structure of society rests, across the class differences and racial distance. Bapsi Sidhwa utilizes the setting of partition- fraught country to highlight the body politic of the colonizer and colonized. "Woman is shown as a territory to be conquered by men. The relationship becomes one of colonizer-colonized type wherein the colonizer, as if on an imperial offensive, tries to possess and extend his powers so as to use and abuse this occupied territory" (Ahmad, p-3). During the partition, communalism turned the body of woman as icons of a community's honour and hence its rape, immolation and destruction by the other as a rationalized means of taking revenge. The transcendence from being colonized to attaining freedom is fraught with struggle and carnage. It cannot be a peaceful process and must necessarily be a violent one, to be attained at a certain price. The 'khudi' embodied in the character of Zaitoon is the collective challenge to the male dominance as it also brings realization to Carol who "had had a glimpse of her condition and the fateful condition of girls like her" (228). The 'khudi' is the determination of all "Pakistani Bride(s)" who take on the charge of fighting for their identity and not remain limited to the tag. They decide to discard the "voluminous red veil" (8) and the "heavy silver bangles" (8) (*italics mine throughout*) that are a symbol of their burden. But on the larger front, Zaitoon's act of daring fails to bring about any major social change or transform the patriarchal structure. She is subsumed in the same male-controlled world where her future will be decided by the likes of Mushtaq, in the same way Carol is lulled to sleep by Farukh just when she reaches to some kind of knowledge about her situation. The hope for any change in the position of women remains bleak. Their rebellion is stifled and the men resume control with the rape, the killing of the tribal girl and Mushtaq taking control of the situation. Therefore the novel seems to fail in providing any radical solution to the plight of oppressed women in Pakistan and elsewhere.

What is the kind of oppression that the women face in *The Pakistani Bride*? This question needs to be asked first in order to reach at the conclusion of the defiant act of Zaitoon. And to what extent does the novel itself succeed in raising its feminist voice. The focal point of the novel is women, how their lives are constricted by men and how they try to manoeuvre inside a narrow space of rules and expectations to improve their conditions. The novel is feminist in the sense that it has been written by a woman and that it seeks to portray the pain, desires and assertions of women within the male-dominated institutions. But its feminist agenda is not limited to this definition. In this context, Kumkum Sangri and Sudesh Vaid explain the concept of 'Feminist Historiography' as:

Historiography may be feminist without being exclusively women's history. Such historiography acknowledges that each aspect of reality is gendered... A feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women as something to be framed by a context in order to be able to think of *gender differences as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations.*"

This means that men in patriarchal society are as well forced to unwillingly take up roles which they would otherwise not prefer. Their customs override their will and control all their actions. On having promised his daughter in marriage to one of his kinsmen, Qasim finds himself bound

by his word, the breaking of which will entail dishonor and shame which can only be avoided by killing his daughter. He makes it clear to a frightened Zaitoon: "I have given my word. On it depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life. If you besmirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands"(158). Qasim repeats "my word" so many times in one go that it emphasizes his state of mind bound by his tribal codes and that he cannot go back on them, even if the world turns upside down. How so much does he love his daughter, he will kill her if she makes him break his tribal code. Similarly, Sakhi is encouraged time and again to beat up his wife and keep her in control to keep the male dominance intact. It does not befit a tribal man to please his wife and to give in to her desires. An Indian critic Makrand Pranjape states, "It would seem that entire code of honour of the tribe rests on the notions of sexual superiority and possessiveness."

The female body thus becomes the inscriptive surface on which the patriarchy inscribes its hegemonic power through the use of culture and religion. One way to break from this stereotyping is to be aware of one's own sexuality and desires. Afshan, in a casual but atypical manner tells Qasim that she expected her husband to caress her; instead she "very nearly suckled him". Similarly Carol is aware of her sexual fantasies and enjoys the glare of the Pakistani men which becomes the reason for her husband to become jealous. Her affair with Mushtaq provides her an opportunity to discover her longings and dissatisfaction in her marriage with Farukh. While Carol is mature, confident, vocal and sexually experienced, Zaitoon represents a picture of naivety and innocence. Zaitoon has long been non-sexual, brought up in a "sexual vacuum". Sex has been a non-subject for her so much so that she misunderstands her sexual desires for her filial love. "Knowing only Qasim and Nikka, she had loved them with a mixture of filial devotion and *vague unacknowledged sexual stirrings*"(161). Zaitoon does not undergo any sexual awakening, unlike Celie in Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*. There is no hope of any sisterhood which offers a safer haven for sexual subversion or autonomy. Carol might feel a real bond that unites her destiny to Zaitoon and all the women in the world. But it is only an imagined as their birth separates them not only in moral and material choices but psychological framework as well. Sidhwa thus highlights the gap between the two women: "Carol, a child of the bright Californian sun and surf, could no more understand the beguiling twilight world of veils and women's quarters than Zaitoon could comprehend her independent life in America"(180). The connection only exists in Carol's mind and it does not offer any safe escape route for Zaitoon. The zennana, on the other hand, which seems to be the symbol of female camaraderie and ties, is in fact a place within the patriarchal structure meant to keep the women within the limits of the house. The burqa might be removed in the interiors of the house but it does not ensure any assertion of selfhood or identity. The sexually intimate scenes between Sakhi and Zaitoon on their first night after marriage border on rape and violence. Sakhi comes to assume that now he is her husband, he owns her body and she cannot deny any access to it. Her desires matter very little to him and though her blood turns into honey and she wishes to "be flesh of his flesh" (163), she does not reach a point where she is mystified or reaches a culmination by her sexual encounter. The allusion to the marital rape culminates in her rape by two strangers. It might be seen by conservatives as a just punishment for moving out of *purdah* but it is actually a termination of the violence on the body of Zaitoon. She does not achieve any sexual liberation, for one fact, while her physical freedom from the grips of death remains to be seen in the light of what she has gathered through the emboldening of her 'khudi'.

Zaitoon becomes a symbol not only of women fighting against oppression in Pakistan but of the human spirit struggling against all physical odds to survive and maintain integrity. She represents

khudi or the mental and spiritual strength of human kind, indefatigable, indomitable and irrepressible (Dhull, 2010). How does Zaitoon achieves this khudi- the stubborn determination supported by godly aid? She succeeds in changing her destiny which was bound to an abusive husband and suffering for the rest of her life. The fear of death is overpowered by the will to be free. She intentionally chooses the more difficult terrain as an escape route because she knows that long walk to freedom will take its toll on her. On the way, Zaitoon loses the female self and comes to identify herself with the hideous birds and vermin. The gender difference loses its significance in the wilderness and it becomes a question of survival. She is the one who is hunted. She is not killed by an animal but violated and raped by men. Her act of running away required ample courage but it is not inspired by any feminist consciousness and neither does she put up a fight in demand of her rights. She is no icon of feminist agenda. In fact, Zaitoon is guided only by an instinct of self-preservation (Salam, 33) and not working for the defiance of other women's rights. However, Zaitoon is finally saved which, according to Abrioux, suggests that "an awesome, ancient, natural order combined with a young girl's defiant spirit can overcome the oppressive shackles of a conspiracy of men."

When inspected more closely, the lacunae appear. The honour of men has been saved. They return with the news of the death of the rebellious girl. "The Major had witnessed the body. His son's claim was corroborated. The girl was dead! Misri Khan's massive shoulders straightened. He thrust his chest forward and held his head high"(244). Zaitoon's presence is obliterated. She disappears from the scene as a mere "sack of herbs". She is not allowed any word of triumph. She has crossed the bridge and on the other side she is in safe hands. But her future remains uncertain. She has not secured any independent space for herself where she can live the rest of her life peacefully and hence remains dependent on the mercy of the like of Major Mushtaq, Carol and Ashiq Hussain. She must lead a secretive life from now onwards hidden from Sakhi and his tribesmen and even Qasim. Thus the "natural order" that Abrioux talks about is indeed one where the male authority subdues the unruly and rebellious voice and resumes control after a brief rest. In such case, Zaitoon's victory is highly questionable. She fails to make a dent in the rigid patriarchal structure. Perhaps, Sidhwa did not aim for any radical and unlikely transformation in the kind of society she portrays but even the hope of any dissent is rather bleak. Mushtaq without a doubt puts the blame on Qasim who was supposed to think better about the future of his daughter but how far can he alone be blamed for the deep-rooted, "ancient" customs of a patriarchal culture that thrive on the male superiority. Women become the scapegoat for the restoration of any break in the order and honour.

Zaitoon is rubbed off from the pages of history or perhaps her tale might be narrated to caution others. Narrating her story might have provided her an opportunity to seek meaning of her defiance and courage but she is denied even that by the author at the end of the novel. Based on the fact that Sidhwa chose to weave a plot around the story she actually heard about a tribal girl being killed and thrown into the river. Zaitoon has been muted and made non-existent. Her feelings are not revealed nor her plans for the future disclosed. Tehmina Durrani, belonging to the same society but different class and perhaps different cultural values, becomes the author of her-story in *My Feudal Lord* (1991). Writing becomes a means of liberation when the author asserts herself and deals with the propriety of her actions. Zaitoon's khudi does not win her any recognition neither a place in the society. Yet she has foreseen the future, like when she dreams about her meeting with Sakhi on the bridge where she knows that inspite of what Sakhi really feels in his heart, he is bound to kill her. And thus she is able to change her destiny and take a

different course which though leads to anonymity, yet leads to life. She has chosen life over death and made her will obeyed. She might not have triumphed against the patriarchal structure, yet she has defeated death. She may be indeed “dead” for all other purposes but she will continue to live. This might be the beginning of a superior revolution.

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