

**A Feminist Reading of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The  
Pakistani Bride***

**Mr. M. Siva Kumar,**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, (Reg. No. 192125411003),  
Department of English,  
Sri Ram Nallamani Yadava College for Arts and Science, Tenkasi,  
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.  
Email ID: msivakumaran709@gmail.com

**Dr. Bommiraja**

Supervisor and Associate Professor,  
Department of English,  
Sri Ram Nallamani Yadava College for Arts and Science, Tenkasi.  
Email ID: bommiraja88@gmail.com  
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.

The conviction that everyone deserves to have the same opportunities and rights is known as “feminism.” It is also a deliberate activity in support of the rights and interests of women. It is a collection of ideas and worldviews aimed at defining, advancing, and safeguarding equal political, economic, and social rights for women. The project includes working to create equitable opportunities for women in training or careers as well. A feminist promotes or defends women’s equality and rights. The purpose of the current research paper is to shed light on how marginalised and silent women are treated in patriarchal societies. It centres on examining the female character and how she defines herself in opposition to patriarchal norms and systems in Pakistani culture. Examining feminist literature in depth might help one better comprehend a woman’s place in society and her struggles. The writings of the second generation of feminist authors underwent a full transformation. They departed from the conventional depictions of compassion and selflessness and created an image of a new woman seeking individuality, independence, and space in a patriarchal societal structure. *The Pakistani Bride* by Bapsi Sidhwa is centred on the lives of women in a culture where men predominate and how they are denied their fundamental rights.

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One of Pakistan’s best English-language novelists is Bapsi Sidhwa. She was born in Karachi in 1939 to a prominent Parsi family. She is simultaneously a citizen of India, Pakistan,

and the United States, although she prefers to be referred to as a “Punjabi Pakistani-Parsi woman.” Peshotan and Tahmina Bhandara gave birth to her. They relocated to Lahore after she was born. When Pakistan had no history of English literature, Bapsi Sidhwa began to write in that language. Only Bapsi Sidhwa in Pakistan was able to bring English literature to life there. She therefore established herself as a pioneer in Pakistan for both the English language and women’s writing.

Many novels written by Bapsi Sidhwa feature female characters whose bodies are the subject of sexual, physical, and mental control attempts by male characters. However, these characters demonstrate their opposition to the customs and cultural practises that excuse the exploitation of women by males. They disapproved of the laws and standards established by patriarchal society. The majority of her writings are autobiographical in character because the narratives show typical Parsi society.

Reading Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels allows one to observe her feminist viewpoints as they are expressed through the many characters. One of Pakistan’s best English-language novelists is Sidhwa. She has also published a number of short stories and books. *The Pakistani Bride* is Sidhwa’s most influential work of fiction regarding feminism. The story that inspired the book was told to Sidhwa at an army camp. After being very moved by the tale, Sidhwa made the decision to publish it as a novel named *The Pakistani Bride*. But she altered the story’s conclusion, sparing the bride at the very end. She uses a variety of characters to explore the circumstances surrounding women’s respect, love, and existence in Pakistan.

Sidhwa attempted to depict feminist themes, the feminist awakening, and the plight of women on both a national and household level in her book *The Pakistani Bride*. It also emphasises how the female body in Pakistan is still predominantly a male domain. The novel can be divided into four sections: The Kohistani tribe Qasim’s marriage, the passing of his family, and her adoption of Zaitoon—an orphan and a victim of India’s partition—as her own daughter—are all covered in the first section. The second section details the union of Carol, an American lady, and Farukh, a Pakistani man, as well as the union of Zaitoon and Sakhi, a tribal guy. The novel’s conclusion also demonstrates how Zaitoon flees her nasty husband and the hard existence in the mountains. And how Sakhi and his soldiers pursued her, saving her at the end of

the story. Contrary to what the book's title, *The Pakistani Bride*, might imply, the story is not brimming with joy and happiness. The novel's brides experience the most suffering. The bride comes to represent the dominance and control that men have over a woman's life and physical appearance. Additionally, the males are the ones who make the most important decision in a bride's life—her marriage—and yet, she plays no part in that choice. As a result, it becomes evident that men are the ones who determine the fate of women.

*The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir addresses topics like marriage, parenting, and women's independence. According to Beauvoir, marriage is the fate that women have historically been given by society. She claimed that marriage has always been highly different for the two sexes, a reality that does in fact reflect the differences in status between men and women. The male world allows its members to find self-fulfilment as husband and father; women, by contrast, are absorbed into families dominated by fathers and brothers, and women "have always been given in marriage by certain males to other males" (Beauvoir 446). Marriage is imposed upon a woman for two reasons: firstly, she must provide society with children; secondly, she is needed "to satisfy a male's sexual needs and to take care of his household." (Beauvoir 447)

The main character, Zaitoon, struggles to fit in and have dignity in the patriarchal culture shown in this book by Bapsi Sidhwa. The writing style of American women's fiction from the nineteenth century is strikingly similar to that of *The Pakistani Bride*. The novel highlights the injustices done to women and offers a bleak outlook on their future or their rights in Pakistan. The novel's emphasis on female companionship and togetherness is its most significant feature. It encourages women to bond as sisters, support one another, and cross boundaries.

Sidhwa makes an effort to give readers a realistic impression of Pakistani society at the time the book was published. In Pakistan, numerous traditions and rituals are still practiced. The way that society views women has changed over the past 60 years, but the conditions in which these women live, particularly in rural regions, have not. Sidhwa discusses marriage structures, gender segregation, violence, and sexuality in this book. Women are viewed and handled in two different ways. Women who are family members or close friends are safeguarded, guarded, and kept away from other males or strangers, whereas women who are not related to them are viewed with lust. Both times, women are viewed as little more than toys or items for males to play with. It is pretty clear in the first chapters of the book that Afshan's marriage to Qasim was nothing

less than an agreement between the males of the two households. David Mandelbaum, Khawar Mumtaz, and Farida Shaheed all provide in-depth analyses of Pakistani patriarchy. The writers claim that marriage in Pakistan's patriarchal society is viewed as a business deal between the two families, not just the bride and the groom. The way Punjabis and indigenous people view the bride, however, differs. The bride is handed over to the groom in the Punjab. She will reside with his family and provide both additional labour and additional financial strain to the home economy. Thus, a dowry is given to the bride, initially as some of her own property, but in actuality, as payment from her parents to her in-laws for taking over her financial responsibilities.

According to Bapsi Sidhwa, "purdah" is another term for the oppression of women in Pakistan. The purdah means that men and women must have separate lifestyles. The women are kept in segregated rooms where they sleep, eat, and spend most of their time. Purdah, which refers to a curtain dividing men and women, is a term Sidhwa uses symbolically because in a society like this, the actual curtain is what separates the sexes. There are various reasons for the purdah, but the main one is the attitude toward women, which is seen as a man's honour, making it imperative for any woman to protect and uphold her dignity at all costs. Women cover their heads, occasionally their faces, and upper bodies with a shawl or burkah in order to keep their chastity. Wherever they go, they are always accompanied by guys, whether they are walking nearby or farther away. Carol encounters a culture that suppresses women and represses sexuality. Bapsi Sidhwa, in her book *The Pakistani Bride*, writes:

Slowly, Carol had begun to realise that even among her friends, where the wives did not wear burkas or live in separate women's quarters, the general segregation of the sexes bred an atmosphere of sensuality. The people seemed to absorb it from the air they breathed. This sensuality charged up every encounter, no matter how trivial. She was not immune. Her body was at times reduced to a carving mass of flesh. It was like being compelled to fast at a banquet. (111-12)

The prostitution sector of Lahore, known as Hira Mandi, or the Diamond Market, where men enjoy the companionship of women, was also highlighted by Bapsi Sidhwa in this book. Although Hira Mandi appears to be a place of music and poetry, there was a mix of prostitutes, strippers, and courtesans among the dancing and singing girls. The Hira Mandi seemed to Qasim to be a magical place. Sidhwa writes:

The pungent whiff of urine from back alleys blends with the spicy smells of Hira Mandi – of glossy green leaves, rose petals, and ochre marigolds. Silver braid hems blue dancing skirts; tight satin folds of the chooridar pyjama reveal rounded calves; girls shimmer in silk, georgette, and tinsel-glittering satin. Qasim, like a sperm swimming, is aglow with virility up to the tips of the hair on his knuckles, feels engulfed in this female street. (63)

Qasim occasionally visits the location and enjoys every second of Hira Mandi. For him, it is both a sexual and romantic sight. Hira Mandi is comparable to other areas of Lahore where men govern women in several ways. Women are manipulated in this Hira Mandi as well, where they are used to generate revenue by flaunting their bodies. Women are kept in purdah, similar to how the rest of Lahore is governed. Sidhwa writes:

Oh, let me stay in Purdah - don't lift my veil. If my purdah is removed...my mystery is betrayed. Allah...forbid! Allah...forbid! My veil has ten thousand eyes. - Yet you cannot see into mine. But if you raise my veil even a bit - Beware! You'll burn. So...let me stay in purdah - don't lift my veil. Allah – meri Toba! Allah –meri Toba! Oh God- who can have made me? Whoever it is – even 33 he doesn't know me... even he doesn't know me... man worships me – Angles have bowed their heads --- If my purdah is removed – my mystery is betrayed. Allah forbid! - Allaaaah- forbid! Allah forbid! – Allaaaah – forbid! (73)

In this society, a woman's only responsibility is to give birth to children and take care of the home. The melody of this song makes a woman want to hide behind a veil. In actuality, it portrays a lady as weak, enigmatic, and full of virtue. The irony of the scene is that males were more interested in their own lust—the male gaze and the feminine body—than in the song's message and the predicament of the woman. A further revelation made by Sidhwa is that young girls are also active in raising and caring for children, in addition to adult females. In the book, we see these girls carrying the infants on their hips. A ten-year-old girl who was pregnant is also mentioned. But Zaitoon only knows that having children after marriage.

When a female reaches puberty, she experiences the same pride and excitement that girls have when they learn they will have their breasts, which are a sign of sex. And Miriam has been attempting to marry her ever since. According to her Zaitoon will “be safe only at her mother-in-law's... A girl is never too young to marry...” (53). It is indeed fascinating to learn that women

are the ones that promote the patriarchal society's traditional beliefs in other women. And Miriam was the one who was so eager for Zaitoon to marry her and become a wife and mother. She values household duties more than Zaitoon's education.

The narrator says that, "marriages were the high points in the life of the women" (88). As a result, Zaitoon started attending weddings in her community. Unmarried girls use this platform to showcase their talents or skills through their handicrafts, dancing, and attire in an effort to impress partygoers. They also try to win over the older women there who have sons to marry off, "the beauty of their forms." (89) During these parties, Zaitoon exudes a sense of confidence, comfort, and relaxation. Sidhwa writes:

Zaitoon was in constant demand and obliged with energetic dances copied from Punjabi films. Jumping and grafting, making eyes and winking, shaking her shoulders to set her adolescent breasts atremor, she flaunted her young body with guileless abandon" (88-89)

Zaitoon sings and dances during these gatherings to fully express herself. However, Qasim has arranged for her marriage to a young man from his own mountain tribe. She was more than a little shocked by the news. Nevertheless, she has no knowledge of the highlands or the local tribes. She felt an odd exhilaration about her marriage and her aspirations. Miriam and Nikka, however, disagreed with Qasim's choice and advocated for her to wed a man from the plains instead. She begs her father to postpone the marriage after learning about living in the mountains. However, he was unmoved and now threatens to murder her if she disobeys and breaks his promise. However, they eventually started up mountains and arrived at an army camp. When Zaitoon appeared, the soldiers who had gathered there were taken aback. She attracted Ashiq, one of the troops. Sidhwa writes:

Her eyes were bold and large, contrasting roguishly with the dewy softness of her features. The skin of her full lips was cracked with cold. She kept flickering the pink tip of her tongue between them. Ashiq's lowered eyes stayed for a moment on her small feet, encased in childish, buttoned shoes. No wonder she seemed to fly when she ran. He imagined her bare feet, narrow, high-arched, and daintily plump. (102)

But regrettably, it was only a brief visit and a very fleeting relationship. Nevertheless, he was an excellent substitute for Zaitoon. However, they were unable to meet. In the meantime,

Carol arrives at the army barracks and has an affair with Major Mushtaq, a friend of her husband. More than any other character in the book, the narrator draws attention to her body. She is thus explained, but only via Mushtaq's male gaze: "His eyes, barely glancing at her face, nibbled on the curves beneath her sweater" (115). Later, he is, "Hungrily ogling the rich, flame-licked hues of her body" (178). Zaitoon was not comfortable in the company of the soldiers. She was so shy that she, "wrapped the shawl tighter around her shoulders, embarrassed by the avid curiosity of the men closing from all sides" (123). Carol enjoys the company of soldiers, especially Major Mushtaq's attention and warm feelings. Sidhwa writes:

She stretched her legs and arms and threw back her head. Her sweater slid up, exposing a slip of firm white stomach. Mustaq turned a little. Smug behind his dark glasses, he gazed obliquely at the tidy fork between her trousers... Languidly, she moved her long, trousered legs further apart.... She knew the direction of the Major's eyes and was warmed by an exultant female confidence. (110)

Thus, it demonstrates that Carol is more at ease around men while Zaitoon is more at ease around women. It can be because of the age gap or the cultural divide. Zaitoon was just 16 to 17 years old, whereas Carol was 25. Bapsi Sidhwa exposes the male hypocrisy in this book. When they have the opportunity, they never hesitate to indulge their desires. Whether it was Zaitoon, who was raped by two tribal men while attempting to protect herself from the tragedy, or Afshan, who was fighting Qasim when a tribal man intervened to separate the two and take Afshan for himself. Even Carol was tortured by the stares of these tribal men, and she exclaimed, "May be I shall wear a burkha... Haven't they ever seen a woman before?" (113). When Afshan was married to Qasim, Bapsi Sidhwa depicts her physical longing in this tale. Afshan discusses her sex before she marries Qasim:

I used to wander by streams... or sit on some high place dreaming of my future husband. Gusts of wind enveloped me and I'd imagine the impatient caresses of my lover. My body was young and full of longing. I'd squeeze my breasts to ease their ache. (10)

According to Bapsi Sidhwa, expressing one's sexual desire takes place in a society where women are expected to react to male sexuality. Zaitoon and Carol both experience emotions in a same way. Zaitoon, "Had romantic fantasies in which tribal lovers, bold and tender, wafted her

to remote mountain hide-outs and adored her forever” (161). Zaitoon had very little experience with or knowledge of sex because she was raised in an Islamic atmosphere and society. She is solely familiar with Qasim and Nikka, the male members of her family, and she cares for them with a mixture of filial affection and unconscious sexual desires. She has no knowledge of good or horrible sex. Before her, neither Miriam nor any other female had ever brought it up. She doesn't even understand “how babies come.” She was completely unable to control her own sexual urges or impulses since she was completely unaware of them. Once she came to Miriam and rocked her hips, she was slapped on this action, “stop it! Zaitoon had been surprised, and hurt by the rebuke that put an end to her innocent pleasure. She had felt rejected” (162). As a result, she is punished for the meagre expression of her sexuality. However, due to their acute poverty, Zaitoon and Qasim were sharing a room, which is against Islamic tradition and purdah regulations. Beauvoir contends that the way society views women is flawed. “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (Beauvoir 283).

Miriam was eager to wed her as soon as possible because of this. Zaitoon believes that marriage is her only option because of her naivete and lack of understanding of her emotions. The time has finally come for Zaitoon to spend her first night with Shaki. And in Zaitoon, there was a surge of emotion. Sidhwa writes, “The sap that had risen in her since puberty and tormented her with indefinable cravings for so long surged to a feverish pitch... She felt at the furious centre of her tumult a deep calm, a certainty that at last her needs would be fulfilled.” (161)

Thus Sakhi tries to understand her and her personality. He comforts her and sees her, “large black eyes that had flashed in one look her entire sensuality” (160). It was perhaps for the first time Zaitoon, was so anxious and was not able to control herself. Thus Zaitoon learned about herself, her body and even about the body of men. Sidhwa writes:

In dreams Zaitoon had accepted her lover's hands on her breasts not as a preliminary caress but as the final surrender to carnal intimacy..... For the first time she became aware of a wet, burning sensation, almost a painful inflammation, between her thighs. She had been discomfited by it before and had hugged her chest to ease her ache. Taboos, unconsciously absorbed, had prevented her from exploring lower and she had not really known any relief. (162)



As a result, Zaitoon started to understand what sex and marriage are all about. When they have their first intercourse, despite the fact that it initially seemed a little odd. But over time, she started to enjoy it, and eventually, she completely gives in to him. She started to relish it. Sidhwa writes:

This can be a glue to make arranged marriages work, although the glue is not strong in case of Zaitoon and Sakhi. Because Shaki's behaviour wasn't good and their relationship began to deteriorate day by day. Later he treats Zaitoon as an animal. He calls her a dirty, black little bitch. (185)

As their relationship becomes worse. In the end, Zaitoon decides to leave the harsh life of the mountains behind her. To escape their gaze, she took a treacherous route because, like an animal, she was terrified of them and was worn out and exhausted. "Like vermin seeking out dark crevices, Zaitoon felt safe only in the dark," writes the author. She suddenly felt panicky and started crawling like a crab across pebbles (194-195). After a difficult nine-day trek through the mountains and a few close calls, she was finally saved and brought to a safer location. As a result, the oppression of women in patriarchal societies—specifically, those of Pakistan and the rest of the world—is described in the book *The Pakistani Bride* as "an immutable law of nature." The novel offers some preventative strategies for the oppressed women in this culture as well. The work makes the argument that women should band together, especially in the face of injustice. They should support one another, especially during times of need. In order to protect Zaitoon from Sakhi's cruel treatment, Zaitoon's mother-in-law follows the lead of the strong women in this book, such as Carol. Only women are capable of feeling another woman's pain, hence, the female community must unquestionably support its victims. The book exposes patriarchal norms and their difficulties, as well as opposition.

According to Sidhwa's definition of the status of women in patriarchal Pakistani society, they are expected to obediently adhere to the restrictions imposed by their husbands, brothers, and fathers. Carol and Zaitoon, the two brides she introduces, are both caught up in the same fate. Both are subjected to physical and emotional exploitation by men. The tales shed light on the abuse, denigration, and tyranny women experience in this patriarchal culture. Men are shown as invading women's territory. It turns into a colonizer-colonized relationship where the coloniser, as though on an imperial offensive, attempts to acquire and increase his power so that he can exploit and misuse this seized region.

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