



Honor Killing of a woman in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*



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Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* is supported on a touchable episode connecting a Pakistani girl who grows to be Zaitoon, the sixteen years old central character, in the novel. This actual story was narrated to her when Bapsi Sidhwa had been invited to a out-of-the-way army camp in the Karakoram Mountains, and there she heard the story of a fine young Punjabi girl who had run away from her tribal husband. Her husband could not bear the incident of losing his honour.

The girl survived for almost two weeks in the lofty mountains. But then on finding her, her husband killed her on the spot. Bapsi Sidhwa says:

The girl's story haunted me: it reflected the hapless condition of many women not only in Pakistan but also in the Indian subcontinent. Telling it became an obsession. I thought I'd write a short story; after all it had barely taken 30 minutes to narrate. Before long I realized I was writing a novel. It became *The Bride*, or *The Pakistani Bride*, as it is titled in India.ⁱ

Zaitoon, in the novel, is an orphan Punjabi girl. She loses her parents at the time of partition. Qasim, who has left the isolated hill town, his birthplace, and makes a home for himself and his wife in the city of Lahore, adopts Zaitoon. Qasim is to marry at the age of ten to a girl five years older to him. Qasim also receives his first gun at ten. His wife is raped before the consummation of their marriage, and he kills the rapist very early in the narrative. In next coming few years, all of his family is consumed, except him, by small pox. As the time



passes on Qasim makes a wealth but grows more and more nostalgic about his days in the mountains. Zaitoon is brought up in wellbeing in Qila Gujjar Singh, Lahore. She has better socio-cultured background. She learns dancing and turns out to be a well-behaved and cultured girl. But unfortunately Qasim promises her in marriage to a man of his tribe. Qasim's friend Nikka and his wife Miriam request him to change his mind if it is possible. However Qasim sticks to his commitments saying that he has already given his word. Qasim sticks to his word to Misri Khan, his cousin, whom he has promised Zaitoon in marriage to his son Sakhi. Qasim is resolute and threatens to kill her if she does not agree. When there is so much of cultural difference between the tribal people and the people living in Lahore on plains, it is beyond doubt that Zaitoon's marriage to Sakhi will be an unhappy affair. It is difficult to say how long cultured and beautiful Zaitoon's relationship with uncultured and cruel Sakhi will continue. Even at the Railway platform at the time of the departure of Qasim and Zaitoon, Miriam once again tries to dissuade Zaitoon from leaving Lahore. She tells Zaitoon:

You are ours. We'll marry you to a decent Punjabi who will understand your ways. Tell your father you don't want to marry a tribal. We'll help you.ⁱⁱ

At this step Zaitoon is vulnerable. She cannot tell her father Qasim that she does not want to marry and leave Lahore. Even Miriam's all efforts to change his mind are in vain. Qasim says: "She is my daughter" and I have given my word! "the word of a Kohistani" (p.94).

It is personal misfortune of Zaitoon that she has no voice of her own. The major theme of *The Pakistani Bride* is the marriage in which the fusion of two totally different cultures is quite difficult, if not impossible. Secondly, the treatment to women in Pakistan also forms a part of the theme of the novel. It also focuses on the harsh lives of handsome people hidden away in the granite folds of the Karakorams. As the novel unfolds, one realizes how savage and brutal these handsome people are. They have different maxims for their honour. The plight of a woman in such tribal areas of Pakistan is horrible. Once a woman marries a tribal



man, there can be no escape except death. In a tribal family, if one's wife is not happy, she cannot think of divorce because it will raise a question of the tribal husband's honour. Strangely enough for the so-called honour sometimes-entire tribal community is united to do away with the woman who tries to free herself from the clutches of her brutal husband. Both Qasim and Zaitoon meet Carol and the Major Sahib on their way to Qasim's native land. Carol is an American girl married to Farrukh but she takes absolute liberty even with the Major Sahib in absence of her husband who is kept busy with excursions by the Major Sahib. The Major helps them to reach Misri Khan's place where Zaitoon's marriage is to take place. After marriage, Zaitoon realizes how crooked, jealous, brutal and savage her husband Sakhi is. Bapsi Sidhwa details his barbaric behaviour with Zaitoon on the very first night of their marriage thus:

Sakhi surveyed his diffident bride with maintaining excitement. Here was a woman all his own, he thought with proprietarily lust and pride, a woman with strangely thick lashes and large black eyes that had flashed in one look her entire sensuality. But, even as he thought this, the corroding jealousy of the past few days suddenly surged up in him in a murderous fusion of hate and fever. He tore the ghoongat from her head and holding her arms in a cruel grip he panted inarticulate hatred into her face.ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus, her husband the way she should be treated in normal course of human behaviour does not treat Zaitoon. Sidhwa further narrates Zaitoon's experiences with her husband on the first night of her marriage:

Zaitoon looked at him wildly, terrified as he dragged her up and roughly yanked her red satin shirt over her head. Her arms flew to cover her breasts. He tugged at the cord of her shalwar and the silk fell to her ankles. Before she could raise her trousers Sakhi flung her back. He crouched, lifting her



legs free of the silk. Fiercely kicking out, Zaitoon leapt over the charpoy. She screamed. She backed towards the straw and mud-plastered wall, and screamed. Leaning against it, covering her chest and crotch with her hands, she screamed. Sakhi stood across the room, incapacitated by the shrill animal noise, and she screamed and screamed, 'Abba, save me', she shrieked.^{iv}

Zaitoon, being a cultured girl, fails to adjust with her tribal husband who has his own maxims for everything. Her husband beats her even at a slightest issue. She is savagely tortured by her husband for going near the river. The river is marked as a boundary between the tribal area and the army. Later on Zaitoon is humiliated and treated as an animal. Her integrity is suspected, though she is a chaste woman. Zaitoon's waving at the army people leads her to a lot of difficulties. This made her husband furious and wild. Sidhwa narrates:

Skimming the boulders in vast strides, Sakhi seized her. He dragged her along the crag. 'You whore,' he hissed. His fury was so intense she thought he would kill her. He cleared his throat and spat full in her face. 'You dirty, black little bitch, waving at those pigs....' Gripping her with one hand he waved the other in a lewd caricature of the girl's brief gesture 'waving at that shit eating swine. You wanted him to stop and fuck you, didn't you!'^v

The novel ends with the feelings of surprise, hope and new alliance, bringing hope and solace to the tortured soul. Though the man loved the girl but to him his honour was more important hence he lost her. Mustaq has to say: Mustaq recalled the girl's finger's pulling torn strips of cloth over her bare skin. She would be alright, he mused. In a few hours, he would quietly stow her away in the vehicle taking Farukh and Carol to Lahore. Let Carol take care of her! She could hide in the States! Or perhaps Ashiq could propose marriage after a decent interval – she would be as securely hidden in his village. Of course, the old



Kohistani who had brought her here must never know she was alive ... a pity ... he had appeared to love her. Still he was to blame for imposing his will on something that bound to end in disaster.^{vi}

Bapsi Sidhwa`s second novel *The Pakistani Bride* has quite a few memorable women characters. Zaitoon, Nikka`s wife-Miriam, Carol, Sakhi`s mother Hamida.

Zaitoon is the central character in *The Pakistani Bride*. She is introduced for the first time as a young girl, along with her Muslim parents, Sikander and Zohra, on the Indian side of Punjab province; as they along with millions of others are forced to flee because of `Partition` of India. Zaitoon`s mother Zohra is killed before her eyes, soon afterwards, her father is also murdered by the attacking Sikhs. It is then that she blindly runs into Quasim and immediately starts calling him father. Zaitoon`s decision power and extraordinary ability to adjust herself accordingly to the situation is revealed in her immediate response to massacre. Qasim adopts her as a daughter. Farrukh Khan observes:

Through Zaitoon`s fight and escape from the inhospitable environment and Kohistani men, Sidhwa seems to make a statement with regard to women`s plight in a country like Pakistan. The path to "freedom", in this case of a personal nature, can come about only after a "partition". And as with the Partition of India, those in power would use whatever means they have in their disposal to prevent the person or a nation of attaining statehood/selfhood. Sidhwa articulates that women, though jealously coveted by their men from outsiders are more at risk from the very people who are supposed to "guard" and "value" them. Zaitoon`s story runs parallel in a number of ways to the nation`s turbulent history. Just as the Muslims of this country felt stifled and suppressed in India, Zaitoon knows that it is almost impossible for her to survive in the Kohistani community.^{vii}



The treatment given to women by the Kohistani tribal men is suffocating, here Sidhwa has portrayed that the life in the hills is difficult while that in the plains is easy. The honour of the tribesmen is more important than the feelings of their women. Novy Kapadia has to say:

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 have, in a number of cases, no say in decision-making processes or actions, which may ultimately seal their fates. Qasim is offered a bride at the tender age of ten, not because he has done anything significant or heroic to deserve that honour, but for the mere fact that Resham Khan had been unable to make payment on the loan he had taken from Quasim's father. And so Afshan sold into marriage to compensate for her father's failure to come up with the money. This is not a pre-arranged settlement. But is done to prevent a blood feud. The amount of money is not significant; it could have been ten rupees or a thousand rupees, the daughter was available anyway. This "transaction" reveals the status of a woman as nothing more than a bargaining commodity, whose role as such has already been decided.^{viii}

Nikka's wife Miriam and Sakhi's wife Hamida are typical tribal women characters. They don't have any individuality at all. For instance her son Sakhi for no fault of her own beats Hamida. Men practice double standards as far as their treatment towards women is concerned. For instance Nikka and Qasim go to Hira Mandi, which is the red-light area of Lahore. Bapsi Sidhwa presents, the very men who uphold their women's privacy above everything and would not hesitate to even kill a man who would dare even to look indecorously at their "honour". Strangely enough Nikka is able to pay for someone's honour to dance naked in front of a whole group of drunken men. The major women characters



like Zaitoon, Carol and Miriam are confined within the narrow framework of rules imposed by the patriarchal society. These major women characters are not supposed to play any role in taking important decisions, even though their feelings and their whole being might be at stake. On arriving in the hilly region Zaitoon was filled with mixed emotions; Qasim comments: At once her heart was buoyant-and at the same time filled with misgiving. Would he like her? In a country where lightness of complexion was a mark of beauty, her own deep brown skin dismayed her. But the jawan liked her. His eyes left no doubt of it. She fell to dreaming. Surely her future husband would like her young face and her thick lashes.

She felt alternately fearful and elated.^{ix}

After her first encounter with Sakhi when he also shows concern and his hand touches hers, she experiences the feeling of elevation and ecstasy; otherwise she had mixed feelings towards Sakhi and moreover she was afraid of the new surroundings. Zaitoon showed the symptom of withdrawal after the displacement from the plains to the hills. The ways were totally different than that of her childhood days, the food was totally bland and the geographical changes were too much to digest for Zaitoon. "Sakhi's hand tenderly pressed her breast. Zaitoon craved the touch." She further experiences a feeling of elevation as her carnal desires are fulfilled for the first time as she was brought up in a closed environment. Moreover girls are trained from childhood in such a manner that anything pertaining to their physical self is to be concealed and protected; so under such circumstances Zaitoon was totally unaware of the pleasure of proximity, which she encountered with Sakhi. Her feelings are reported:

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. Brought up in a sexual vacuum she did not think of sex as good or bad-it merely did not exist. Neither Miriam, nor Qasim, nor any of the women she visited ever mentioned it. She floundered unenlightened in a morass of



sexual yearning. Once, snuggled up to Miriam she had rocked her hips and Miriam had snapped, stop it! 'Zaitoon had been surprised, and hurt by the rebuke that put an end to her innocent pleasure. She had felt rejected. Sakhi's fingers slid lower, probing the curling hair. For the first time she became aware of 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. His fingers were rough but it was a roughness she hankered after- she discovered now the natural center of her love. Sakhi's breath was infinitely sweet in her ears and her own breath weaved carefully in and out, intent on listening to the new notes pulsing in her body. She was dimly aware of Sakhi removing her shalwar and her nakedness was suddenly the most natural thing in the world.^x

Comparisons are inevitable in life and when we compare the two characters like Zaitoon and Carol. Indira Bhatt remarks:

Carol's life so far has been a hopeless drift but Zaitoon with her dauntless courage and faith serves as a brake and deflects the direction of her life. Carol from the free world of fair and just social order can think in terms of her individuality but Zaitoon has no such notions; she simply does not wish to be a role-model of Hamida, always cowering, frightened to death and at the mercy of the cruel code of honour of men. She instinctively chooses to be herself even like the eagle bird with broken wings trying to fly into the sky. Sidhwa uses the



image of the crippled but flying bird to emphasize the condition of Zaitoon. Such a bird cannot be easily caged or tamed even if it is maimed. Her fight is against both man and Nature, which she can vanquish through her sheer willpower," the strength of nature, a force, perhaps of God, within one.^{xi}

The character of Carol is also a pathetic one as she is unhappy with her husband and is attracted towards Farrukh. She wishes to marry him at any cost. She tells her parents that she has finally decided to marry Farrukh. They think that her husband would convert her to Islam and force her to live in a harem. Carol considers herself an agnostic, and Farrukh puts no pressure on her to adopt his religion. Finally her family is reconciled to the marriage, and the young couple leaves for Lahore. On reaching the hills, Zaitoon's initial feelings were of fear, she found life fearful, the food was bland and she missed the life in the plains. On clinging to his father Qasim, she said:

"That jawan at the camp, Abba, I think he likes me. I will die rather than live here".^{xii}

On hearing this statement from Zaitoon; Qasim was furious as his honour was at stake. He rebuked the child. The might made the girl quiet and she suppressed her feelings; accepted the situation, which was awaiting her fate.

Sidhwa has portrayed the character of Zaitoon differently from other women characters. Her triumph can be appreciated well only when she is compared with other women in the novel like Afshan, married to Qasim; Miriam who is always in purdah; Shahnaz, the high class courtesan; Sakhi's mother Hamida; Carol and the beggar woman of Lawrence Garden Makarand Paranjape rightly puts it: Zaitoon is a symbol not only of woman fighting oppression in Pakistan but of the human spirit struggling against all physical odds to survive and maintain its integrity. Zaitoon represents khudi or the mental and spiritual strength of human kind, indefatigable, indomitable, and irrepressible. She represents the triumph of mind over matter, of spirit over flesh. It is only such strength, the book tells us, that can withstand destiny, which can overcome every conceivable type of oppression.



Even God is compelled to seek human consent by such strength of spirit. After all, those who are weak, dispossessed, powerless and suppressed what other strength do they have to struggle, to fight, not to give in against overwhelming odds, even to win, except the will, the spirit, the resolve to fight? It is this that the novel celebrates through the struggle of an obscure girl against oppression.^{xiii}

Miriam had affection for Zaitoon, and when Qasim arranged for her marriage, she was shocked, as she believed that a girl brought up in the plains, couldn't adjust to the ways of the hills. Life in the hilly region is difficult, so also are their ways. Miriam as a mother is duty bound towards her daughter and speaks with fervour, to Qasim to discontinue with the alliance:

It was almost six years since Nikka's release from prison. As he listened to his wife expostulate with Qasim, he showed weariness, a reluctance to impose his will as forcefully as of old.

Miriam blew her nose into her shawl. She wiped the damp left on her fingers on the strings of the charpoy. She had no control over the tears that slipped down her face.

"Sister, I gave him my word," Qasim spoke gently. "Your word! Your word! What has your word to do with the child's life? What? Tell me!" Qasim did not reply. Miriam glanced up and noticed Zaitoon's intent face at the balustrade. "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 rancor 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?" Qasim stiffened. A beggar, his limbs grotesquely awry, manipulated his platform to Qasim's feet. He grimaced defiantly. "Paisa," he demanded in a hoarse inhuman whisper. "Babooji from the hills, paisa." Attuned to the whims of alms-givers, he sensed the futility of his plea and wheeled himself away before he was kicked. Qasim tried to control his fury. "Sister, you forget I am from those hills. It's my people you're talking of." "But you've been with us so long, you're changed.



Why, most of them are bandits, they don't know how to treat women! I tell you, she'll be a slave, you watch, and she'll have no one to turn to. No one!" Qasim flushed. He glared at Nikka while directing his icy remarks at Miriam. "How dare you," he said. "You've never been there! You don't understand a thing. I have given my word! I know Zaitoon will be happy. The matter should end." I know she won't! Oh dear, how I love her. She's like my daughter...I've reared her...

"But she is my daughter!" Qasim cut in with biting finality.

Miriam flashed into hysteria. "Is it because that Pathan offered you five hundred rupees – some measly maize and a few goats? Is that why you are selling her like a greedy merchant? I will give you that, and more," she said with contempt.

"Nikka will! How much more do you want? We will buy her!" Qasim now looked at her directly, his face white with anger, his eyes malevolent. Miriam felt the chill impact of his fury and an anguished stab of futility broke her voice. She continued in a crazed whisper. "Why not marry her to my husband here? Yes, I'll welcome her, look after her. We have no children and she'll be my daughter. She'll bear Nikka daughters and sons." Nikka vainly tried to cut in. "Look!" she said, "I have grey hair. I'm getting old. She will comfort our old age." Sidhwa further narrates:

"Miriam, Miriam, you don't know what you are saying! "You are overwrought," Nikka soothed her. Qasim was in an angry sweat, ashamed and touched. Sister Miriam, it is not for the goats and maize, please believe me. It is my word -- the word of a Kohistani! Nikka was dazed by the trend the conversation had taken. "It's the suddenness of the news that is upsetting us so much. I'm sure it's not as bad as we imagine. After all, Zaitoon is Qasim's daughter, and he will do his best by her...look, bibi, why don't you ask the girl yourself...see what she has to say? That is, if Bhai Qasim agrees...?" Qasim remained silent. Heedless of the



impatient honk of a truck, a horse-cart rumbled by the warning jangle of Tonga bells, shrill cries of tea stall urchins taking orders, all the clamor of the dense place, combined to spin a cocoon of privacy around the charpoy.^{xiv}

This elaborate conversation between Qasim and Miriam is laced with many colours and overtures. Qasim is keen on marrying Zaitoon to Sakhi the tribal man. He has given his consent and for him his word is more important than the girl's feelings and future life. He is totally in oblivion as regarding the girl's view and her lifestyle in the mountains of Karakorams after her marriage. It is typical of a father to not bother of small aspects. While Miriam on the other hand being a woman can see through the consequences of the future. Moreover she is affectionate for Zaitoon as she has taken motherly care for her. She argues passionately with Qasim, her motherly feelings come to the fore and foresightedness of a woman. But as she was unable to convince Qasim, regarding his decision; she finally agreed and gave the girl a warm farewell:

Then Miriam, knowing Zaitoon's mind was made up, stroked her head and said 'Bismillah'- 'God bless you'. She gave her a gold necklace embedded with coloured glass, a dozen gold bangles and her red wedding outfit. Miriam stroked Zaitoon's arm as if she were a blind woman leading a loved one. She could feel the girl quiver with excitement. Are you happy, child? She asked. 'Yes', said Zaitoon, and at once felt embarrassed. God give you a long life; keep you always happy and smiling. Miriam caressed her head. She too, had married at sixteen. Bless you', she said, and Zaitoon, suddenly tearful, hugged her close. They clung together weeping, the girl lost in the folds of Miriam's burkha. Zaitoon did not need to say, 'Thank you for everything,' or, I'll miss you. She sobbed, whimpering 'I'm leaving my mother...'^{xv}



These feelings shared by two women portray the bond, which the women share between themselves. It also portrays the helplessness of women in decision-making. Without uttering too many words, they do tell a lot about their feelings towards each other. Afshan, Qasim's wife was younger to him. Initially they did not share a healthy relationship but with the passage of time their marital life acquired stability. To quote Qasim's fatuation, we have an incident when once she was washing near the river, seeing her figure he was attracted. Qasim had often filled the containers while she washed and she looked on him as a younger brother. Dousing her face, she suddenly blinked and opened her eyes. Qasim was staring at the white undulation where her shirt parted. Her breasts and the taut nipples were clearly visible through the wet cloth. 35

Miriam was a good caretaker, she explained to Zaitoon when she reached adolescence. Miriam played her roles as a wife and a mother well. She was a good cook; housekeeper and a caring and loving mother to Zaitoon. She took good care of Zaitoon when she approached puberty. To quote her words:

She also told her that any day now she might find blood on shalwar. She was to tell no one and come straight to her. We all bleed. It's to do with having babies and being a woman... of course you won't have babies –not till you're married- but you're growing up. Zaitoon too distracted by her garbled talk to understand anything.^{xvi}

From Miriam, Zaitoon learned many things and they shared a friendly affectionate bond with each other. In this novel though Miriam is a foster mother, the role of mother is of importance. Otherwise motherhood does not play a prominent role in the lives of the modern women.

From her Zaitoon learned to cook, sew, shop and keep her room tidy: and Miriam, who spent half her day visiting neighbors, took Zaitoon with her. Entering their dwellings was like stepping into gigantic wombs; the fecund, fetid world of mothers and babies.^{xvii}



It is observed that all the women characters play a subservient role in the novel, *The Bride*. Miriam and Zaitoon share a friendly bond; both these women help each other rather than encroaching upon others. Here the role of the mother is of little significance; though Miriam tries to be dutiful but her approach and feelings are not taken care of by the men folk and their strict code of conduct. Sidhwa has portrayed real incident with real characters. The end of the novel appears to be quite optimistic, which is a trait of Sidhwa to change horrid into a loving situation.

An honor killing of Zaitoon by other characters, due to the perpetrator's belief that she has violated the principles of a community, for reason refusing to enter an arranged marriage. Zaitoon is a pictogram of self-fortitude which moves violently against all odds but continue living with uprightness. She is an envoy of the strong point of a woman, immovable and wild.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bapsi Sidhwa, "Why do I write?" R. K. Dhawan and Novy Kapadia Ed. *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa*, p.28
- ¹ Bapsi Sidhwa *The Pakistani Bride* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India Ltd., 1990). P.97-98.
- ¹ Ibid, p.159&160
- ¹ Ibid, p.160
- ¹ Ibid, p.185
- ¹ Ibid, p.245
- ¹ Novy Kapadia "The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa" p.149
- ¹ Ibid, p.142
- ¹ Bapsi Sidhwa, *The Pakistani Bride* Penguin Books India 1990 p.149
- ¹ Ibid, p.162
- ¹ Novy Kapadia, "Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa" p.162.
- ¹ Bapsi Sidhwa, *The Pakistani Bride*, p.157
- ¹ Makarand Paranjape. "The Early Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa" *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa*.



P.105.

¹ Bapsi Sidhwa, The Pakistani Bride pgs.93&94.

¹ Ibid, p.11.

¹ Ibid, p.54.

¹ Ibid, p.55.