

The New Woman In The Novels Of Bapsi Sidhwa Struggles And Challenges

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Gender identity and biological distinctions have been instrumental in giving a direction to human thought and human consciousness. 'Sex' is a biological attribute while as gender is essentially a socially constructed phenomenon but the socio biological ideologies have been the basis of the balance of personal relationship affecting the feminine consciousness in every walk of social life. Human creativity, sensitivity and constructive imagination have also been subordinated to the sexual politics. In a patriarchal social set up, 'masculinity' is associated with superiority whereas 'femininity' is linked with inferiority, and while masculinity implies strength, action, self-assertion and domination, femininity implies weakness, passivity, docility, obedience and self-negation. Women in spite of her natural talent and potential has always relegated to margins. Her identity remains invisible, potentially unrealized and talent unacknowledged. Their story remains hidden in obscurity. It has been observed: Women had no history so they were told and also they believed. And because they had no history, they had no future alternatives. Further the cumulative effect of myths and legends coupled with religious ideologies had been instrumental in constructing the psyche of both male and female and it inevitably confirmed the unbreakable margins of 'inferiority'.

Prejudices, like **"literature cannot be the business of a woman's life"** ¹ have controlled and subjugated female

creativity. The seeds of women writing in India can be traced back in last quarter of the twentieth century with the established prejudice that she should draw upon the limited fun of her own experience and the periphery of their creative imagination was confined to romances, fantasy and fairy tales. However, in earlier productions like Raj Lakshmi Debi's *The Hindu Wife*, Swarn Kumari Debi's *The Unfinished Song* (1913), Shanta Chatterjee's *The Cage of Gold* (1923), Sita Chatterjee's *The Knight Errant* (1931) are the earlier evidences of the narrative skills exhibited in the texture of woman Novelists. It inaugurated the era of women's writing but it can hardly be designated as feminist fiction. It is Cornelia Sorbji who with her writings likes *Love and Life behind Purdha* (1901) and *Between the Twilights* (1908) tried to penetrate the silken curtain of the 'purdah' and reveal the nuances of 'feminity'. It stirred an awareness to expose how women is caught in the traps of patriarchy and has been deprived of the freedom of action and thought. It is only the sweeping wave of independence and uncompromising patriotic impulse that brought a renaissance in slumberous spirit of woman and the cause of national freedom became a life current to induce new sparks of life in the passive and domesticated spaces of women. However the second wave of feminism in India beginning from Anita Desai marked a steady growth and concentrated effort to deconstruct the entire framework and the

underlying tactics of oppression working within the social structure. Women in context of shifting social dynamics, the social images are replaced by the concept of woman within her own experiences. The issues like female identity, woman's commitment to the traditional roles of motherhood, complexity of man-woman relationship, woman's assertion of identity beyond the burden of guilt and shame, quest for emancipation, longing for emotional bonding and the spaces for extra marital relationship shifted the paradigms of feminist fiction both in terms of choices of subject matter, character delineation, selection of techniques and language patterns. The focus on woman's inner world provided them spaces to express their own voices on the issues that were often imposed on the will of woman in the name of morality and religion and are the cause of suppression of woman at social and mental level. The process of self-awareness and the construction of the self among women protagonists reflect four distinctive modes: (i) awareness against suppression, (ii) quest for emancipation (iii) reconstruction of the self, (iv) the assertion of 'self' to redeem the burden of social traditions and to make unconventional spaces in socio-economic spheres. It is accepted that autonomy of the self is an inevitable necessity of human condition irrespective of sex-determined role:

For a woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as sexual need with as serious consequences when it is thwarted.²

India and Pakistan have enjoyed a common literary and cultural heritage till 1947 and have parted ways in trends and achievements after Partition. In spite of Pakistan's fragmentation and Sri Lanka's autonomy India dominates the subcontinent due to its size and literature.

The shared thought and heritage have produced in India a good many women writers whose work is copious and multifarious in its amplitude. But in Pakistan Bapsi Sidhwa is virtually only one established woman writer.

Sidhwa's women are not extravagant. They are ordinary, simple, devoid of feelings and sentimental creatures. In their limited orbits they are socially active and lead only a superficial existence. Even though they are active, they are flat characters. In a novel *The Pakistani Bride* where there is ample scope for the writer to explore, Sidhwa could not go deep into the psyche of her female protagonist, allowing methodical narration of events in sequential order. Jerbanoo, Rodabai and Carol are lively characters with natural instincts and imagination. They are more familiar to Sidhwa and are within her range of experience.

Bapsi Sidhwa in *The Pakistani Bride* has depicted the feminine force through Zaitoon. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* deals with the repression of women in the patriarchal Pakistani society. The novel related how Zaitoon, a Punjabi child, orphaned by partition, is captivated by the fantasies of her protector father's visions of the lost mountain paradise. Married eventually to a tribal man in the northwest regions of Pakistan, Zaitoon rapidly discovers that reality is harsh and her romantic dreams erroneous. She rebels at the cruel treatment, the beatings, and mistrust and realizes that her imagined ideal community is no longer: **"A region where men were heroic, proud and incorruptible, ruled by a code of honor that banned all injustice and evil.... Their women beautiful as houris and their bright rosy-cheeked children lived besides crystal torrents of melted snow."³**

Zaitoon's story is rather simple and straightforward. She is a child of partition. Her parents are dead when she is four or five. Brought up by Qasim as his own daughter, she grows up in Qila Gujjar

Singh, Lahore. At sixteen, her marriage is fixed by Qasim with Sakhi, the son of Mishri Khan, Qasim's cousin. The marriage, and the interlude of joy that follows, are both short lived. Zaitoon's torture begins on the very next day after marriage. Soon after that, she is broken in by her tyrannical, animal-trainer of a husband, who beat her on the slightest pretext.

It would seem that the entire code of honour of the tribe rests on notions of sexual superiority and possessiveness. Early after their marriage, Sakhi is taunted by his brother Yunus Khan of not being man enough to control his wife. This of course leads to increase savagery on his part towards his 'possessions'. In blind rage, he first batters his ox until the beast collapses and nearly dies when his mother tries to save the animal; he beats her with a stick. When Zaitoon tries to stop him from beating his mother, he begins to thrash her. This incident emphasizes the fact that Sakhi is simply exercising his rights of proprietorship. First he beats his ox, then his mother, and finally his wife. In each of the latter two cases, he stresses that they are being beaten because they are i) his, and ii) woman. Being a woman almost implies being owned, and being like a beast of burden. Just as the ox can be beaten, so can the women. In the perverse value system portrayed, the honour of a man is judged by how well he can oppress 'his' women. If Zaitoon is the heroine of the novel, Carol is the best supporting actress. Sidhwa reveals the treatment of a western, upper-class woman in the male-dominated society of the novel. Carol's story nicely complements Zaitoon's, and viewed together, they help convey the author's view of the status of women in the novel. Carol is a typically middle-class American of the sixties by birth and upbringing. After studying at Berkeley for a while, she drops out to learn more about life. While working as a sales girl in a cosmetic store, she meets Farukh, a Pakistani engineering student, and falls in

love with him. Carol, despite the veneer of sophistication and gentility that surrounds her life, is also oppressed. Farukh is overbearingly possessive of her and is also jealous. He seems, in this sense, like Sakhi. Of course, there are major differences. He never beats her and she decides to have an affair with Mushtaq on her own. Yet, slowly she begins to realize that the Major values her primarily as a sexual object. When Carol meets Zaitoon, her own position in society is clarified to her:

In the instant their eyes met, the green and black of their irises fused in an age-old communion – an understanding they shared of their vulnerabilities as women. For an intuitive instant Carol felt herself submerged in the helpless drift of Zaitoon's life. Free Will! She thought contemptuously, recalling heated discussions with her friends on campus. This girl had no more control over her destiny than a caged animal... perhaps, neither had she...⁴

Carol realizes fully about the status of women in society when she hears that Zaitoon has run away and the tribesmen are tracking her to kill her. As the Major observes casually **“happens all the time”?** **“Oh, women get killed for one reason or another... imagined insults, family honour, infidelity... Imagined infidelity?”⁵**

Carol remembers with horror how they chop off the noses of suspected adulteresses in Punjab and asks Mushtaq: **“Do you think Farukh would kill me?”⁶** He answers, **“Who knows? I might, if you were my wife.”⁷** Carol too, like Zaitoon, is exploited. That the system is indeed oppressive becomes clear even to old Hamida, Sakhi's mother. Hamida, once tall and pretty, is now a revolting hag, aged

prematurely at only forty by the hard labour and disease. Even in this condition, she is brutally beaten by her own. Her husband is already battering Zaitoon; it would not be surprising if her son too treated her like Sakhi treats Hamida. Zaitoon rejects this option by running away. The second option would be to die in the hills of starvation or fall prey to some wild animal. Through luck and sheer grit she escapes this fate. The third possibility of what could happen to her is that her head has been cut off clean by the tribesmen who all set out to hunt and kill her for there can be no mercy for any woman who tries to escape the tribe. The fourth option occurs to Zaitoon herself after two strangers rape her on the riverbank. When she wakes up, she is a total wreck: **“The men had kept her hostage for two hours. When Zaitoon regained consciousness, her body screamed with pain. She wept, putting her trembling legs through the shalwar. Her brown skin gaped through new rents in the cloth.”**⁸ It is then that Zaitoon remembers the mad woman she has encountered at Lawrence Gardens, Lahore. This is one of the most horrible images of the exploitation of women in the book:

For a moment, Zaitoon saw herself rushing wild and wanton over the mountains. She now knew the woman had been raped. Abandoned and helpless, she had been living on the charity of her rapists... and on theft.⁹

Though Zaitoon has survived, she could easily become mad like this unfortunate woman. Her triumph can be appreciated properly only when she is compared with the prominent images of the other women in the novel : Afshan, married to Qasim, a boy of ten, in lieu of a loan, Miriam, matronly and domesticated, always in Purdah; the grotesque, misshapen prostitute, and Shahnaz the high class courtesan, Hamida, a woman broken by

the hard life in the hills, beaten by her own son; Carol, the American wife of Farukh, sexually exploited by Major Mushtaq and the Crazy beggar woman of Lawrence Gardens, a plaything of her rapists. Against these images, Zaitoon’s choice of freedom over slavery, her rejection of the oppressive and brutal tribal society, and her courageous and heroic struggle for survival against impossible odds – all these are a testimony to the fighting spirit of the weak and the crushed. Zaitoon becomes a symbol not only of woman fighting against 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. It is only such strength, the book tells us that can withstand destiny, which can overcome every conceivable type of oppression. The Pakistani Bride not only offers the struggle and courage of a woman but a condemnatory view of the practices of the patriarchal society of Pakistan.

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