

Dark Portrayal of Gender: A Post-colonial Feminist Reflection of Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* and *The Ice-candy Man*

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Abstract: The portrayals of women by fiction writers of Indian sub-continent can be seen in the context of postcolonial feminism. Sidhwa's novels may be a part of postcolonial fiction, which is fiction produced mostly in the former British colonies. As Bill Ashcroft suggests in *The Empire Writes Back*, the literatures produced in these areas are mostly a reaction against the negative portrayals of the local culture by the literatures produced in these areas are mostly a reaction against the negative portrayals of the local culture by the colonizers. About the role of postcolonial literature with respect to feminism, Ashcroft writes, "Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed and it is in their writings and through other arts such as paintings sculpture, music, and dance that today realities experienced by the colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential." Indian sub-continent fiction is the continuation and extension of the fiction produced under the colonial rulers in undivided India. As such it has inherited all the pros and cons of the fiction in India before the end of colonial rule in Indo-Pak. Feminism has been one part of this larger body of literature. Sidhwa has portrayed the lives of Pakistani women in dark shades under the imposing role of religious, social, and economic parameters. These roles presented in *The Pakistani Bride* and *The Ice-Candy Man* are partly traditional and partly modern – the realities women face.

Keywords: Gender, Postcolonialism, Feminist, Subaltern, Patriarchal, Partition, etc.

The portrayals of women by fiction writers of the Indian sub-continent can be seen in the context of postcolonial feminism. Sidhwa's novels may be a part of postcolonial fiction, which is fiction produced mostly in the former British colonies. As Bill Ashcroft suggests in *The Empire Writes Back*, the kinds of literature produced in these areas are mostly a reaction against the negative portrayals of the local culture by the pieces of literature produced in these areas are mostly a reaction against the negative portrayals of the local culture by the colonizers. About the role of postcolonial literature with respect to feminism, Ashcroft writes, "Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed and it is in their writings and through other arts such as paintings sculpture, music, and dance that today realities experienced by the colonized peoples have been most powerfully encoded and so profoundly influential."

Indian sub-continent fiction is the continuation and extension of the fiction produced under the colonial rulers in undivided India. As such it has inherited all the pros and cons of the fiction in India before the end of colonial rule in Indo-Pak. Feminism has been one part of this larger body of literature. Sidhwa has portrayed the lives of Pakistani women under the imposing role of religious, social, and economic parameters. These roles are partly traditional and partly modern – the realities women face. The women are initially bound and restrained by the chain of customs and tradition. They are depicted also as possessed by the demons of the social taboos which are man-made and used to control the lives of the women. The Pakistani bride Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride* is a generic victim-figure. Her most memorable feature is her ethnicity. She undergoes unbearable torture at the hands of her husband. She begs Qasim to be taken away. But he told her “I’ve given my word... On it depends my honor. It is dearer to me than life. If you besmirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands... You make me break my word, girl, and you cover my name with dung. Do you understand that?” Zaitoon realizes that this is not mere histrionics – in these parts it is the brutal reality. And her married life indeed proves brutal, with her husband’s every look and word a cruel assault. There is no room here for sentiment or romanticism. To defy it, or escape it, she courts nothing less than death.

Writers show that women find themselves on the many dilemmas while going through such circumstances. They were colonized and declared to be the ‘others’ and silent majority (subalterns). This subaltern status also dates back to the past traditions of this subcontinent. The Muslim and Hindu religions further contributed to making these taboos even stronger. The term ‘Post-colonialism’ is not the same as ‘after colonialism’ as if colonial values are no longer to be reckoned with. It does not define a radically new historical era, nor does it herald a brave new world where all the ills and evils of the colonial past have been erased. Rather, ‘post-colonialism’ recognizes both historical continuity and change. It acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representations common to colonialism are still tangible, even if the political map of the world has changed through de-colonialism. The post-colonial men re-colonized the bodies the minds of their women as a reaction and in an effort to preserve their cultural values.

Post-colonial literature often involves writings that deal with issues of decolonization or the political and cultural independence of people formerly subjugated to colonial rule. It is also a literary critique of texts that carry racist or colonial undertones. Postcolonial literature, finally in its most recent form, also attempts to critique the contemporary post-colonial discourse that has been honed in recent times. It attempts to assimilate this very emergence of post-colonialism and its literary expression itself. Emerging as a challenge to this tradition and legacy; the post-colonial to this tradition and legacy; the post-colonial perspective attempts to illegitimize the idea of establishing power through conquest. Post-colonial critique has often been dubbed as ‘theoretical Creole’.

With great compassion, Sidhwa conveys the cruelty of a rugged land where people lead lives formed by the harsh environment in her *The Pakistani Bride* (1983). The first section of the

novel contains a largely sympathetic portrait of the tribal society of Kohistan. In the second section, the protagonist Qasim goes down to the Punjab plains in search of work and is caught up in the madness of Partition – the historic breaking up of India and the birth of Pakistan in 1947. Qasim adopts an orphaned girl and names her after his dead daughter Zaitoon (previously known as Munni). With Zaitoon we are introduced to a world where the girl is welcomed by the women and children of the entire ethnic neighbourhood. “Entering their dwellings was like stepping into a gigantic womb, the fecund, fetid world of mothers and babies,” also described as “the mindless, velvet vortex of the womb.” Zaitoon is carefree in those years, one of “the little girls burdened even with even younger children on their hips”. Some years later at a very early age, Qasim gives her to marriage to his cousin’s son in a mountainous area in Pakistan. But the marriage proves an utter failure. Here men are harsh, dominating and cruel to the fair sex. In the final section in which a young American lady Carol makes her way through the forbidding mountains of the Karakoram Range, the land itself acquires a personality – oppressive, brooding and magnificent. In the end, it is the landscape that is not the backdrop but the heart of her story.

‘Gender regimes’ operate in Sidhwa’s novels in an overhauling way. Conceptually the men favour the education of girls but find it difficult to educate the girls because of the socio-cultural issues which include security concerns, customs, and traditions, negative attitudes of men-folk and poverty. The son preference is a dominant norm in the Indian sub-continent and the first priority is son’s education and employment. The girls are thought to be other’s property and hence the emphasis is laid on their marriages and dowry. It is discernible in *The Ice-Candy Man*, when Lenny’s parents take Lenny to consult a doctor, Col. Bharucha. The doctor tells about her schooling: “Don’t pressure her...her nerves could be affected.” The doctor farther advises, “She’ll marry-have children-lead a carefree, happy life. No need to strain her with studies and exams.” Thus the doctor seals her fate.

There is an reinstitution of Simone de Beauvoir’s critique of ‘natural gender’ in *The Second Sex* (1947) where she argues that no ‘biological’, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, posited between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.’ Nature is the way things are, and Culture what they make them out to be. One is not born a woman. When a girl becomes a woman, it is not for the pubertal transformation of her body (Nature) but the socializing processes of culture which influence how she should think of herself and try to dictate what she ought to do with her life. Women are not inferior by Nature but inferiorized by Culture. Here, oppressive Kohistani males push the women to the periphery. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) becomes the model for delineating the corresponding invisibility of women in a patriarchal and patrilineal society of Kohistan.

In *The Pakistani Bride*, the ideology of racial superiority gets easily translated into class terms when Carol, married to a Pakistani in the U.S.A visits the Karakoram Mountains with her husband and friend. Sidhwa also forces a comparison between Carol and Zaitoon upon the unwary reader. When not united by the bond of sisterhood the two women are inevitably

separated by a cultural Divide. Carol born and brought up in California can no more understand the beguiling twilight of veils and women's quarters there. She too learns the position a woman has in such a society: craved sexually but in every other way despised and regarded an inferior being. With pain and outrage as its impulse, the novel could have turned into a didactic tract exposing the cruelty of a patriarchal and brutalized society out of touch with a world in which a woman could hold a respected status. The feminine voice can be recovered by reading the discourse 'against the grain', by deconstructing historiography, by subverting the logic of history itself, as famous critic Walter Benjamin comments.

The impact of British imperialism in the Indian sub-continent caused even more changes at almost all the social levels which influenced the women as well. Women started to realize that they were kept deliberately out of the main flow of life by being denied many rights. Their demand for equal rights and individualism gave birth to feminism which was further enhanced because of female participation in freedom movements in India. This is the very reason that "Third World Feminism" is often related to postcolonial feminism, as Young has also pointed out: "in the post colonial state, post-colonial feminism begins from the perception that its politics are framed by the active legacies of Colonialism".

Therefore, the voice of feminism is more audible in postcolonial fiction, including the novels by Sidhwa, than anywhere else. The writers of postcolonial fiction have tried to portray women and women's issues in many situations. Third World women tend to be depicted as victims of male control and traditional cultures. Third World women are produced as subjects in historically and culturally specific ways by the societies in which they live and act as agents. Young says, Postcolonial feminism is certainly concerned to analyze the nervous conditions of being a woman in a post-colonial environment, whether in the social oppression of the post-colony or the metropolis. Its concern is not in the first place with individual problems but with those that affect the whole communities.

In order to preserve his honor and ego, a man will use women, and hence he becomes the biggest source of psychological upheaval for women. Zaitoon is forced to marry an unknown hill man who has a different set of circumstances and cannot adjust to Zaitoon's ways of living. The character portrayal of Zaitoon reflects two basic phases of her life: one in which she grows up under the loving people around her and a second in which she escapes from her bitter tribal possessors. She decides to rebel and finds the courage to break the shackles of time and place. She becomes successful in doing so but at a price. Zaitoon achieves the life of a free woman. But all this happened only after a long struggle and mental fearfulness.

A similar development takes place in Shanta in the *Ice-Candy Man* (1988), though the mode of emancipation is entirely different. Shanta had to pass through a great ordeal of losing a secure environment of the house of Lenny to find herself in the house of dancing girls. Shanta is a woman who is attractive, loving, caring and has a welcoming attitude towards all human beings. She welcomes everyone for comfort and peace like mother earth. But as usual, mother earth is

deceived, battered, and divided because of brutal human action. Shanta loses trust even in her long-standing lover because this same lover has found a way to sell her body, which is already bruised and battered. This changes Shanta and she turns from an innocent and loving girl into a mature woman who must seek a new identity. She openly refutes the love and care of her husband's affected love and asks her godmother to help her reach her family in India. She would prefer her family and their care instead of giving love and care to a man who had brought her to a place where bodies of women are sold. Only after long suffering and coming to an understanding about the world around her could she make this choice and change. The writer portrays the double impact of British colonialism through the character of Ayah (Shanta). Women's bodies were twice colonized, first by the British and then by the men in the Indo-Pak subcontinent.

In *Ice-Candy Man* the story of the partition of India is told through the eyes of young Lenny, a Parsee (a member of a Zoroastrian sect) girl growing up in Lahore. The power of *Ice-Candy Man* (also published in U. S. as *Cracking India*) stems from Sidhwa's creation of an idyllic picture of Lenny's childhood, and the relative inter-racial harmony of pre-Independence Lahore. We then watch with horror as the people around Lenny divide along racial/religious lines and eventually slaughter one another at the crucial juncture of Partition.

Lenny is already conscious of people treating her differently because of her limp. The novel begins with Lenny's statement: "My world is compressed." Lenny's mother leads other women in smuggling gasoline in order to raise money to send defamed women back to their families. The frightful Lenny, wise beyond her years, feels deep within that she will never again relive the peace once felt prior to the partition. Ayah's traumatic transformation at the Ice-Candy-Man, the suitor who finally possesses her, and Ice-Candy-man's own moral erosion through the Partition, figure the situation of all people involved in the ill-planned Partition, which resulted in migration, deaths, and incidents of rape and torture, all on a massive scale: "Hindus are being murdered in Bengal... Muslims in Bihar. It's strange... the English *Sarkar* can't seem to do anything about it."

Lenny somehow manages to know that her new ayah Hamida has children at her home. Lenny asks Hamida, "Don't you miss your children?" Hamida says that she likes her children nonetheless. Hamida replies that their father won't like her to visit her children. She farther says that "If their father gets to know I've met them he will only get angry, and the children will suffer. " Hiding her face in a shawl, she tells, "It's my kismet that's no good... we are *khut-putli*, puppets in the hands of fate." She does not talk about the brutality of her husband. She takes it for granted thinking it as the queer play of destiny.

Along with political ineffectiveness, Sidhwa draws out of the most damaging effect of the partition, the symbolic desecration of women on both sides of the conflict. Sidhwa recalls the chilling shrieks and moans of recovered women at the time. She asked herself, "Why do they cry like that? Because they are delivering unwanted babies, I'm told or reliving hideous memories. Thousands of women were kidnapped." (Sidhwa, "New Neighbors") Elsewhere, she continues,

“Victory is celebrated on a woman’s body; vengeance is taken on a woman’s body. That’s very much the way things are, particularly in any part of the world”.

Ranna, another narrator of the story wanders in the burning city of Amritsar. He sees with horror as men copulated with wailing children – old and young women. He also sees a “naked woman, her light Kashmiri skin bruised with purple splotches and cuts, hanging head down from a ceiling fan.” He watches that some jeering men set her long hair on fire. The mystery of the women in the courtyard deepens. Gradually Ranna comes to know that it’s not a jail inside which the women wail; it’s a camp for fallen women. One night Ranna is awakened by a hideous wail. He asks his mother about this. Ranna expresses his emotion in this way: “My heart is wrung with pity and horror. I want to leap out of my bed and soothe the wailing woman and slay the tormentors. I’ve seen Ayah carried away – and it has less to do with fate than with the will of men. “

Ice-Candy man comes to visit Godmother’s home. He says that he rescued her from evil hands and he has married Ayah. She has been christened Mumtaz by him. Godmother is furious over the Ice-Candy man. Godmother along with Lenny visits Hira Mandi (Diamond Market) – the red-light district where Ayah used to dance and sing before the amorous poets. Here the young girls are diamonds and their bodies are bartered for money. She cannot believe that the Ice-Candy man has married her. Ayah is always haunted by her past life when she was forced to dance before the babus for the entertainment of them. When Godmother tells her that “Worst things are forgiven. Life goes on and the business of happiness living buries the debris of our past. Hurt... happiness...all fade impartially... to make way for fresh joy and new sorrow. That’s the way of life”, Mumtaz says, “I am past that. I am not alive.” Ayah says, “I will not live with him.”

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” (written in 1985) talks of the problems and possibility of representations of the ‘subaltern’ in colonialist texts. Here Ayah along with other women cannot speak for themselves. Their articulations are suppressed. Ayah cannot forget the trauma and torture that she faced after being kidnapped by cruel hands. She only wants to go to her original home at Amritsar. It’s very difficult for Ayah to forget the cruel nightmare in her life. Ayah is totally broken down from a sense of sin and disdain. Lenny says, “When I think of Ayah I think she must get away from the monster who has killed her spirit and mutilated her angel’s voice.”

Spivak also claims that women in the subcontinent were simply a silent majority whom she termed as subalterns. According to her, this aspect of women in India had become even stronger because of the impact of colonialism. Pre-partition Shanta is the object of attraction for many Muslim and non-Muslim men, especially Masseur. But post-partition Shanta is only a ravaged and molested woman who has nothing to fall back upon rather than selling her body as a dancing woman. None of her lovers could save her from becoming so. Shanta is not one woman but a representative of thousands of Hindu, Muslim and other minority women who were raped, killed

and cut to pieces because of the aftermaths of British imperialism. But with her courage and determination, she survives and ultimately reaches her family in Amritsar.

Famous Post-colonial theorist N’gugi Wa Thiongo in “*Decolonizing the Mind*” says, “National liberation, national renaissance, the restoration of nationhood to the people, commonwealth: whatever may be the headings used or the new formulas introduced, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon.” Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, or of a mental shock, or of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.

Bapsi Sidhwa has made concerted efforts to bring to light the status of oppressed women. Their portrayals are reflective of the psychological and behavioral changes women undergo to achieve the status of emancipation and empowerment. Women may suffer but they emerge to compete with society, and the whole process renders them more against those factors which created such suffering. Faced with cultural constraints and linguistic barriers, the women of Sidhwa’s fiction still engage in a constant struggle of becoming confident and independent. Sidhwa portrays that women in every section of society undergo particular sufferings and problems. These circumstances make these women better, by better understanding their responsibilities to society and, also importantly, their responsibility to themselves. They learn the art of living and hence liberate themselves from the unnecessary restrictions posed on them by traditional social systems, as we find in *Zaitoon* and *Ayah*.

The women characters' muteness is created by the fact that even they utter words, they are still interpreted through a conceptual and methodological procedure which is unable to understand their interventions with accuracy. In reality, the voice of the woman is ventriloquized. It is not so much that subaltern women do not speak, but rather the others don’t know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener. The women characters, be it *Zaitoon* or *Ayah*, cannot express their independent views because their words cannot be properly interpreted. They are also victims of an identity crisis as Munni becomes *Zaitoon* and Shanta (*Ayah*) gets christened *Mumtaz* in the course of the two novels. Hence, the apparent silence of the female characters as the weaker sex is the result of the failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation. So, we find a dark portrayal of Gender hovers over the grand panorama of Post-colonial fiction, including the novels by Sidhwa.

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