

Unmasking Oppression: A Beauvoirian Analysis of Gender Dynamics in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Pakistani Bride*

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Delving into the intricacies of Pakistani society, this study offers a poignant exploration of the profound identity crises experienced by women, as depicted in Bapsi Sidhwa's seminal work, *Pakistani Bride* (1990). Sidhwa's narrative serves as a compelling lens through which to examine the multifaceted challenges faced by women within the patriarchal confines of Pakistani culture. Through the character of Zaitoon, Sidhwa adeptly navigates the intersections of tradition, patriarchy, and societal expectations, shedding light on the marginalized status of women in Pakistan. Employing qualitative research methods and drawing upon the theoretical framework of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1949), this study delves into the nuanced complexities of female identity formation within a male-dominated society. Key themes such as identity subjugation, patriarchy, and the clash between social and traditional boundaries are meticulously analyzed. This research not only offers a critical examination of Sidhwa's narrative techniques but also serves as a potent call to action, urging societal introspection and advocating for the empowerment of women in Pakistani society.

Keywords: identity crisis, patriarchy, social and traditional boundaries, male domination

Introduction

This study examines the plight of women in the 20th century through the lens of Sidhwa's female character, Zaitoon, highlighting issues of female identity, oppression, gender inequalities, and sexual assault that have been enduring concerns across different literary eras. Sidhwa's portrayal of the Pakistani Bride reflects the societal status of women in Pakistan post-marriage, with a particular emphasis on the complexities faced by married women in the country. Zaitoon serves as a representation of the challenging life experienced by Eastern women, who are often suppressed by societal and religious norms.

The narrative underscores the universal struggles faced by women worldwide, regardless of their social class or historical period, as they endure exploitation within their male relationships. Despite the passage of time, the condition of women has not significantly improved, and Zaitoon's character symbolizes the broader experiences of Eastern women. The narrative depicts how issues of identity impact Zaitoon's personal and social life, as she grapples with maintaining her physical and psychological well-being. Through themes of social injustice, identity crisis, role confusion, and subjugation, the narrative highlights the negative consequences of power misuse.

Furthermore, Beauvoir's concepts from *The Second Sex* are utilized to illustrate the marginalization of women, providing a theoretical framework for understanding their struggles within the narrative. Beauvoir posited that identity subjugation entails individuals being rendered inferior or powerless by societal and cultural norms constraining their freedom. She contended that women, specifically, frequently endure identity subjugation as a result of patriarchal societal structures (De Beauvoir, 1956, p. 112).

Beauvoir saw identity subjugation as a form of oppression that limits individuals' ability to fully realize their potential and achieve their goals. When individuals are made to feel inferior or powerless, they may internalize these messages and begin to view themselves as incapable or unworthy, which can have a profound impact on their sense of self and their ability to pursue their desires and goals. Beauvoir believed that identity subjugation could be overcome through the process of asserting one's self and challenging the societal and cultural norms that limit individual freedom. By recognizing and resisting these norms, individuals can begin to create their own authentic sense of self in the world.

Sidhwa depicts marriage as a societal construct wielded to suppress and undermine the self-identity of Zaitoon, an orphaned protagonist. This portrayal also sheds light on feminist issues prevalent within Kohistani culture, characterized by its rugged terrain and a lack of compassion for women in tribal societies. Zaitoon's narrative reflects a disillusionment with the romanticized notion of Kohistan, juxtaposed with her journey to establish her own identity. Initially taken under the care of Qasim Khan after losing her parents during the Indo-Pak partition riots, Zaitoon finds solace in Punjab, where Qasim assumes a paternal role and Mariam, Qasim's friend's wife, nurtures her maternal bond. However, at sixteen, Zaitoon faces the coercive imposition of marriage to a clansman in Kohistan, denying her access to education as her father perceives it as a hindrance to marital success for women. This denial of education serves as another layer of identity threat, hindering Zaitoon's ability to assert her individuality and social standing. Throughout the narrative, Zaitoon is identified by familial or marital ties, further obscuring her autonomy and personal agency. Moreover, religious beliefs are exploited to justify the subjugation of women, as exemplified by Qasim's assertion that divine decree prohibits the education of girls. "Now that she's learned to read the Holy Quran, what will she do with more reading and writing—boil and drink it? She's not going to become a *baboo* or an officer! No, Allah willing, she'll get married and have children" (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 49). This excerpt underscores the systemic barriers that impede women's advancement, emphasizing the pervasive nature of gender-based oppression within societal structures.

The *Pakistani Bride* depicts the subjugated life of women. Sidhwa has illustrated the limited world of women who are facing ambiguous and limited changes in social rules and regulations. According to Fawzia Afzal, the *Pakistani Bride* is a challenge to the beliefs of Pakistani society and the patriarchal culture (Ross, 1996, p. 74). The *Pakistani Bride* elaborates on the sexual and psychological marginalization of women in the restricted and conservative tribal society. The three major women characters are Afshan, Zaitoon, and Carol who are representatives of diverse approaches to cultural, lingual, and social differences. Afshan is a married woman who lives in Lahore and she is an exponent of Punjabi culture, Carol is an English woman and Zaitoon's life is a showcase of Punjabi and Kohistani culture. The lives of women become complicated in the tribal society which leads to the rule of the jungle to run the social system.

The novel moves around the story of an orphan girl who is married in Kohistan to the man of her father's clan. Within a month of her marriage, her life becomes hell and she struggles to leave the place and come back to

Punjab. Her married life exposes the brutalities and restricted life sphere in the Kohistani culture. The novel is formed in the feminist narrative discourse and presents the themes of ID crisis, patriarchy, and power. Sidhwa's women characters revolt against the abuse and power hegemony. Zaitoon revolts against the cruel social system and challenges the traditions. Women are considered the property and territory that are conquered by men in the tribal system. The husband of Zaitoon, Sakhi searches for a cause to beat and disgrace Zaitoon. "You are my woman! I will teach you to obey me" (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 173). Sidhwa portrays the ruinous institute of marriage, the concept of fake honor, the blind followers of ambiguous norms and traditions, life insecurities, and the manipulative pictures of men.

Gender Perspectives in Beauvoir's *Second Sex*

Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1949) delves into the feminist challenges confronted by women particularly in how societal discourses shape their identities from infancy. Beauvoir contrasts the upbringing of girls with that of boys, noting that girls initially seem privileged as they receive affection from both parents, while boys are taught to comport themselves as adults from a young age. The boy, on the other hand, is told from a very young age to behave like an adult as he is too a "little man" like his grown-up male relatives (De Beauvoir, 1956, p. 296). This is the stage where some boys develop feminine feelings and feel a desire within themselves to be a girl. However, as children mature and their bodies develop, societal attitudes shift. Boys are encouraged to take pride in their masculinity, while girls are taught to conceal their bodies. These early experiences imprint upon both genders the notion of male superiority and female inferiority. Girls are socialized to conform to traditional feminine roles, reinforced by societal expectations and the media. For example, playing with dolls often reinforces the idea that a woman's sole purpose is motherhood. Consequently, girls internalize the belief that men are the dominant figures in society, shaping their self-perception and societal roles.

This process leads Beauvoir to assert that society constructs distinct spheres based on perceived biological differences between genders. She highlights historical references and critiques the limitations imposed by social institutions. Beauvoir argues that while biological disparities exist between women and men, these should not serve as grounds for women's discrimination by men. She observes that women are often confined to roles within the private sphere, such as marriage and child-rearing, which consequently reinforces men's dominance in spheres like politics, economics, and culture.

Beauvoir elucidates that within the institution of marriage, motherhood becomes synonymous with womanhood, imposing familial responsibilities upon women. This association reinforces the cultural perception that motherhood is an inherent role for women. Beauvoir's perspective challenges societal norms by highlighting how marriage, as a social construct, solidifies rigid gender roles, attributing cultural significance predominantly to men while relegating women to natural roles. She argues that power dynamics are perpetuated through cultural norms, as culture embodies knowledge, which in turn enables the creation and perpetuation of meanings. Essentially, Beauvoir contends that marriage serves as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining masculine dominance, thereby marginalizing women from participation in political and social spheres.

Beauvoir is deeply related to the matter and affairs of culture and imperialism because the exploitation of the subjugated nations started with the arrival of colonial powers in the far-flung areas. No doubt, the colonial powers are the producers of the ID crisis at the worldwide level by establishing their colonies to get material advantages.

History has countless examples that demonstrate how women are raped, killed, and enslaved due to their identity and race. Feminist scholar Stoler describes social and racial prejudices in her work "Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule" (Stoler, 2010). She concentrates on the condition of women of color as she asserts that racial notions of gender and sexual differences are the projected and constructed reality of the colonial powers that erase the difference in the trading between commodities and women. In one of her previous works, "Making the Empire Respectable" she exposes that women were sexualized and rules were established about which girl could be married and who was only used for bedding (Stoler, 1989, p. 636). The author supplies historical background and contextual reference to the condition of black women who are mistreated due to gender and racial bias.

According to Beauvoir, the bodies of women are treated in an animalistic way but also attributed all hegemonic movements to the surveillance of the female body. There is a power relation in the existence of colonial and native people, white vs. black, and men vs. women. The women are weaker which demonstrates the weaker position of the women in the society who were treated badly due to their color differences because black color indicates negativity, devilish act, and slavery. The history of colonial powers provides countless pieces of evidence that reveal that they used the native women only for their sexual lust and, as a result, the children that are the result of the sexual lust of the white master are called bastards having no mercy and place in the society (Butler, 1986, p. 36).

Beauvoir describes identity and gender as fabrications of society. As she elaborates "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (De Beauvoir, 1956, p. 273). Identity, gender, and sex are three different concepts that are set and recognized according to the social coalition. A girl is born as a woman because she is treated and brought up as a deity of chastity who is not allowed to damage her chastity and virginity for her respectable identification in society. While the patriarchal system gives complete freedom to men in their personal and social lives. Sex and gender are connected with social identification. Sex is considered to be the anatomically distinct, invariant, and crucial aspect of the human body that is divided into male and female due to particular aspects. The use of the word "Become" by Beauvoir refers to the construction of the social identity of an individual and she declares that identity is a social and cultural formation that is based on accepted and preset ideas and traditions. In the farewell of Laertes, the behavior and wording that is used by Laertes are clearly a reflection of the strong influences of gender and social identification on women who are restricted in their actions and sexuality.

Beauvoir asserts that cultural ideologies and myths wield considerable influence over individuals' lives, permeating society with national uniformity. She likens myths to a factory churning out traditional women who are wholly dependent on men. In Pakistani society, women are unable to assert themselves independently, as Sidhwa portrays through his depiction of female characters in a subservient and marginalized position. They are relegated to the role of obedient subjects to male authority, devoid of agency or worth. The cultural fabric reinforces this dynamic by defining women primarily in relation to their familial roles as daughters and wives, rather than as autonomous individuals.

Unveiling Gender Constructs: *Pakistani Bride* through the Lens of *Second Sex*

Sidhwa's novels vividly depict the plight of female characters grappling with identity crises within the patriarchal confines of their society. Bound by rigid gender roles and expected to submit to the authority of their husbands and in-laws, these women find themselves ensnared in a web of powerlessness. Zaitoon, for instance, is

forcibly wedded against her wishes, her struggle to assert herself within the confines of marriage emblematic of the broader societal constraints. Her experiences of trauma and violence at the hands of her husband exacerbate her identity crisis, leaving her traumatized and disempowered. Such harrowing ordeals not only perpetuate feelings of shame, guilt, and worthlessness but also underscore the enduring impact of patriarchal oppression on women's sense of self.

Sidhwa's narrative lays bare a myriad of social and ideological barriers, exposing the entrenched patriarchal norms that govern the lives of Eastern women. Generations of these women have grappled with their identities being subsumed under those of their male counterparts, stripped of individual recognition. Characters like Zaitoon, Hamida, and Carol serve as poignant embodiments of the myriad challenges faced by Eastern women, denied their fundamental rights and relegated to a position of contempt.

In juxtaposing Zaitoon and Carol, Mukherjee astutely observes the intersections of racial superiority and class divisions. While bound by a shared sisterhood, they also grapple with the chasm between their respective cultural upbringings. Beauvoir's *Second Sex* resonates through Sidhwa's portrayal, elucidating the feminist underpinnings inherent in the text. Central to Beauvoir's argument is the notion that women are oppressed not merely as individuals but also as societal outsiders, objectified and dehumanized within patriarchal structures. Sidhwa has exposed the different traditions and social norms that are used as a medium for the lives of women. Child marriage is a curse that is prevailing in the Kohistani culture. Boys and girls are married even though they do not understand the meaning of marriage. Afshan's plight exemplifies this tragedy, married off at a tender age without understanding the gravity of her situation. Confronted with a child groom on her wedding night, she is denied even the basic right to choose her life partner. Love marriages are deemed sinful, and women are silenced from expressing their desires. Afshan's incredulity upon encountering her youthful groom underscores the dehumanizing nature of such unions, where women are reduced to mere objects devoid of agency. Her subsequent realization that she is tasked not only with domestic duties but also with nurturing her husband epitomizes the insidious power dynamics that govern patriarchal societies, robbing women of their autonomy and relegating them to subservient roles. "Was this a joke? She glanced beyond him, fervently hoping to see the man who had pushed his small brother forward to tease her. But there was no one." "Are you my husband?" she asked incredulously (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 6).

Beauvoir delves into the societal perception of women as prostitutes, a role devoid of respect and dignity. Women resort to leveraging their bodies for financial gain through illicit liaisons, devoid of emotional attachment and reduced to mere objects of male gratification. Termed as "hetairas" by Beauvoir, these women exist solely to fulfill men's desires in exchange for monetary compensation, enduring bitter treatment in the process. Sidhwa's narrative unveils the duplicitous nature of characters like Nikka and Qasim, who project an image of respectability within their families while engaging in morally dubious behavior. Traditions exert different pressures on men and women, with men often enjoying leniency in their moral and social transgressions while women are denied their rightful privileges. Qasim's denial of Zaitoon's education beyond the age of sixteen exemplifies this unequal treatment, depriving her of opportunities for personal and intellectual growth. Despite imposing restrictions on his daughter, Qasim himself exhibits a lack of moral conscience, indulging in nocturnal visits to red-light districts.

A man shifted, making room for him. The crude sack fence came up to Qasim's chest. A woman, bells tied to one twisted ankle, was hobbling around in the small enclosure. Her short, thick-waisted body jerked grotesquely. Now and again, a man standing with her in the enclosure shouted, "Naach, pagli!"—dance, madwoman—and jabbed her with a cane. At this, she would raise her arms and twist her wrists in a grim caricature of dance movements. Her jaw hung slack in an expressionless face, and sick yellow eyeballs stared unseeing. Qasim was horrified. Would any of these men sleep with her, he wondered? (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 62).

The narrative vividly portrays the plight of women forced into degrading circumstances, exemplified by a woman with a despairing countenance forced to dance for male patrons, enduring physical abuse without recourse. Such extreme circumstances serve as a poignant indictment of societal norms and prompt a call for the preservation of women's dignity and respect. It underscores the dire socio-economic conditions prevalent in underdeveloped countries, compelling women into exploitative practices as a means of survival.

Hetairas is a synonym for sexual abuse. Prostitution is looked down upon in Pakistani society. They come to see their dance, laugh at them, and spend the night with them, but they do not actually like them. It is a gender hypocritical prejudice that men are not blamed and they are free from guilt. In contrast, women are blamed, abused, and humiliated. The depiction of dancing women indicates the pathetic condition of Hetairas who moves her body forcefully for the happiness of her clients. Men's laughter is a sign of selfishness.

This was nothing human. It was a sick excrescence. Did the pimp think that by exercising the excrescence he could stir sensuality? The woman continued her monotonous, mechanical spasms, one hip jerking higher, jaws dribbling spittle. There was laughter, and Qasim realized they were mocking her. A man, obscenely shaking his body, called her a monkey. A couple of men laughed, enjoying the sport. (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 63)

According to Beauvoir, while a woman knows how to be as active, effective, and silent as a man, her situation keeps her active by preparing food, clothes, and lodging. She worries because she does not do anything, she complains, she cries, and she may threaten suicide. She protests but doesn't escape her lot. As pointed out by Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, she may achieve happiness in "Harmony" and "Delight." Beauvoir thinks it is pointless to try to decide whether a woman is superior or inferior and that it is obvious that the man's situation is "infinitely preferable". She concludes that there is no way out other than to work and fight for their liberation. After visiting the mud huts, the dense maize bread, and the poor lifestyle of Kohstanis, Zaitoon tries to raise her voice against her marriage. Sadly, her words are snatched away when she learns of the murder. Man's honor is attributed to the silence of women. Rather than canceling her marriage to a tribal man, Qasim prefers to kill Zaitoon with strangers who cannot understand her feelings. Zaitoon's destiny is in Qasim's hands as a Godfather.

"Now understand this ..." Qasim's tone was icily incisive. "I've given my word. Your wedding will be a week from today. Tomorrow your bride intends to invite guests from the neighboring villages. 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" (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 158).

The term 'frigidity' refers to a woman's coldness and indifference to men. Beauvoir has elaborated on the causes of frigidity in women. The biggest cause of fear of their bodies is what a woman feels on her first wedding night. She suffers the trauma of male ineptitude. Zaitoon's frigidity prevents Sakhi from overpowering her body. She is married at the age of sixteen and she does not understand the demands of marriage. She is not educated about how she has to behave with her husband. She screamed for help when Qasim entered the room. The

criticism is directed toward child marriage practices in Eastern cultures where women are expected to be obedient wives and have children.

She screamed. She backed up against the straw and mud-plastered the wall. She screeched, leaning against it, covering her chest and crotch with her hands. Sakhi stood across the room, incapacitated by the shrill animal noise, and she screamed and screamed. "Abba, save me," she shrieked. Why didn't Qasim come? Or any of the others? (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 160).

Marriage is a social custom that is used as a cord around the neck of a woman. In Eastern society, when a girl gets married, she has to spend her whole life with the person. To build her house, she is asked to endure his credulity and atrocities. Zaitoon flees from the sick tribal system. She understands that she cannot survive in this environment. The whole clan chases her because they want to kill her to save their fake social image and respect. They want to sacrifice the life of Zaitoon to restore Sakhi's respect in the tribe as a brave man who kills his wife because she tries to leave him. She spends nine days and nights in the mountains in freezing temperatures. She eats a few chunks of dry bread that she dips in the stream water while sleeping on bare granite. It is the extreme degree of mercilessness that drives her to flee in order to save her life.

"The whole bloody clan's out hunting her. I only hope her luck holds!" Hunting her? What will they do when they find her?" Beat her up. Probably kill her ... She's hiding in the mountains—she could be trying to reach us. She's been on the run for nine days. Imagine! Nine days in that trackless waste! (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 224).

Beauvoir thinks that it is "pure absurdity" to ask a couple to help each other attain sexual satisfaction for their whole lives only because they are tied to each other with some practical or social and moral system i.e., marriage. She states that the routine life of married women is burdensome. They remain busy with cooking, sweeping, house cleaning, and the production of children. Further, they must emphasize the importance of professionalism in earning money when their husbands are unemployed. "What makes a lot of the wife-servant ungratifying is the division of labor which dooms her wholly to the general and inessential" (Beauvoir, 1956, p. 494). In demonstrating her inherent inequalities, she has shown how a husband and wife spend their time not in love but in "conjugal love". She calls marriage an oppressive institution for women. Zaitoon is beaten by Sakhi. She is only a source of sexual pleasure for Sakhi who treated her like a goat.

He slapped her hard and swung her pitilessly by the arm, as a child swings a doll, he flung her from him. A sharp flint cut into her breast, and in a wild lunge, she blindly butted her head between the man's legs. (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 186)

Conclusion

Sidhwa's literary contributions serve as a poignant commentary on the plight of women within Pakistani society, grappling with the oppressive constraints of conservative norms and the resulting turmoil inflicted upon their lives. Through her narratives, she sheds light on the pervasive domestic violence and maltreatment endured by women at the hands of their fathers and husbands. In the landscape of twentieth-century literature, women's voices have emerged as powerful agents of change, adept at illuminating the intricacies of life within specific cultural contexts. This is particularly pertinent in a country like Pakistan, where the condition of women remains precarious. Shockingly, the statistics reveal a grim reality—over 2000 women fall victim to honor killings annually, with perpetrators often evading justice.

Honor killings, a barbaric practice rooted in the misguided notion of preserving familial reputation, epitomize the systemic injustice faced by women. The tragic loss of life is tragically construed as a means to salvage the honor of the family or community, perpetuating a cycle of violence and impunity. As we confront these stark realities, it becomes evident that addressing the plight of women in Pakistan demands urgent attention and concerted efforts towards legislative reform and societal transformation. Sidhwa's work serves as a poignant reminder of the urgent need to challenge entrenched norms and advocate for the rights and dignity of all individuals, regardless of gender.

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