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The Power of Sexual Aesthetics and Sisterhood: Cultural Feminism in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*.

Abstract

Culture bans any discourse on sexuality as a desire to control power. Bapsi Sidhwa, as a cultural feminist from the tiny minority of Parsis in Pakistan, rejects the phallogocentric systems of language and seeks to wake people up to the importance of women's sexuality. *The Pakistani Bride* is a novel not only of women as objects of male control but also of women as subjects of their own feelings. The image of the female body is the key to Sidhwa's feminist project novel *The Pakistani Bride* and she seeks to create change via highlighting woman's uniqueness and feminine qualities free from male dominance. Sidhwa too highlights sisterhood as a source of women's consolation and salvation and affirms that women need a powerful means to revolt against the male-supremacist cultural norms. She attempts to reclaim women's identities through her characters' female bonding that constitutes a real challenge to institutionalized phallogocentric ideology.

Key words: Sexuality, Parsis, Phallogocentric, Female Body, Sisterhood

Culture bans any discourse on sexuality as a desire to control power. New directions in Cultural Studies has claimed the discourse on sexuality as its exclusive property and has opined complete power of what is said and not said about sexuality. Michael Foucault claims sex and sexuality as the creation of nature rather than of culture, as his *The History of Sexuality* "was constituted as an area of investigation, this was only because of relations of power had

established it as a possible object” (98). Thus sexuality is the name given not to some hidden or profound human reality but rather to a historical construct organised according to strategies of knowledge and power.

As no justice was done to woman’s feelings, emotions and desire, feminist thinkers opposed androcentricism in fictions. Luce Irigaray says, “The ‘feminine’ is always described in terms of deficiency, or atrophy” (69). Cultural feminism wants to overcome sexism by celebrating women’s special qualities, women’s ways, and women’s experiences, often believing that the women’s way is the better way. They celebrate the biological difference of female body. Alice Echols opines that “... cultural feminists were generally essentialists who sought to celebrate femaleness” (6). Irigaray celebrates “the pleasure of caresses, words, and representations that remind woman of her sex, her sex organs, her sexes” (qtd in. Bristow 111). Irigaray asserted, “Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide ...” (qtd. in Bristow 113,114). Gradually, feminists all over the world started reinterpreting human sexuality to highlight the fact that all men and women are sexual beings.

Bapsi Sidhwa, as a cultural feminist from the tiny minority of Parsis in Pakistan, rejects the phallogocentric systems of language and seeks to wake people up to the importance of women’s sexuality in all her novels. The image of the female body is the key to Sidhwa’s feminist project novel *The Pakistani Bride* and she seeks to create change via highlighting woman’s uniqueness and feminine qualities free from male dominance. Female body, especially female sexuality is copious in the novel *The Pakistani Bride*. *The Pakistani Bride* is a novel not only of women as objects of male control but also of women as subjects of their own feelings. In the novel, Zaitoon neither knows what is going to happen to her body nor the consequences of it in terms of fertility. Later in the novel, after Zaitoon has been raped, a touchingly innocent memory from her puberty comes back to her:

Zaitoon remembered the morning when she discovered the slight taut swell in her flesh – her promised womanhood. Suddenly shy, she had glanced around, making sure of her privacy in the dingy bathing cubicle. . . She crooked her slight neck and looked at herself. Her eyes and fingers probed the enchanting novelty. The softness was delicious to the touch of her childish, inquisitive fingers... this way and that... pummelling and distorting. A wondrous, possessive pride welled up in her. All along, she had accepted Miriam’s pendulous bosoms as symbolic of her sex and the incipient manifestation of breasts of her own filled her with ecstasy. She now longed each day for the privacy of her bath. ... (231-32)

In the above passage, Zaitoon's sexual and sensual feelings are evident. Further, the focus on female sexuality is foreshadowed in the early days of the marriage between Qasim and Afshan, where Afshan tells Qasim openly about her sexual feelings before marriage: " '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).

Here, the tables are turned upside down from the traditional cultural pattern. The woman is the one who expresses longing and desire, while she is normally in this culture expected to be responding to male sexuality rather than being active herself. Sidhwa, being a cultural feminist, is honest and unbiased when she writes about women's feelings and passions. Afshan's awakening erotic feelings are depicted genuinely. Helene Cixous inscribes in "The Laugh of the Medusa", "She must write herself. ... Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (319). The control of female sexuality is a pattern of cultural influence by which girls and women are made to avoid feeling sexual desire and to refrain from sexual behaviour. Further, "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" (162). Zaitoon does not know the origins of her impulses. Interestingly, the non-existence of sex does not initially make her ashamed of her yearnings or make her control herself. Not knowing what her behaviour signifies or what her impulses arise from, she is totally free of shame and she follows her feelings unchecked.

Sidhwa recognises woman's sexual drives, urges and needs, and presents sex as an act in which woman is not merely an equal participant but also an initiator. When Zaitoon is alone with Sakhi for the first time, her body is raging with feelings that are waiting to be met and released "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). In the first moment that they see each other, Sakhi is just as much an object of lust to Zaitoon, as she is to him. Zaitoon's lack of knowledge about her sexuality is clearly appreciated by her husband who sees her sexual ignorance as the kind of modesty a virgin bride should display. She does not know what a naked man looks like, and she does not know what exactly to expect from sex: "With each impact she felt an astonishing sweetness radiate from her loins, a deep stirring within her that

churned her senses and turned her blood to honey. Straining towards him, her nails digging into his back, she sobbed in anguished but releasing moan” (163).

When this tension is released in the sexual meeting of Zaitoon and Sakhi’s bodies, it creates a connection between them. This connection could however have been made with anyone else who helped release the tension. Niaz Zaman in the article “Images of Purdah in Bapsi Sidhwa’s Novels” says “Sidhwa shows how seclusion keeps women innocent but also at the same time creates a sexual excitement which makes arranged marriages work” (159). The combination of not having any sexual experience and of having all her sexual excitement focused on one person makes it easy for Zaitoon to accept Sakhi as her husband, since their sexual acts stand out as special to her. Despite the sexual connection they make on their wedding night, the relationship between the two soon deteriorates. Despite Sakhi’s abuse of her, there is still a sexual spark left within Zaitoon: “At night she acquiesced docilely. Sometimes though, when the lamplight gilded their isolation, she surrendered to him with an unreasoning passion” (174).

Finally the term sisterhood is used among feminists to express the connection of women who are not biologically related but are bonded in solidarity. “Cultural feminism is a variety of feminism . . . What women share, in this perspective, provides a basis for “sisterhood,” or unity, solidarity and shared identity.” says Jone Johnson Lewis. It provides an alternative to women in their pursuit of spiritual independence. Sidhwa too highlights sisterhood as a source of women’s consolation and salvation and affirms that women need a powerful means to revolt against the male-supremacist cultural norms. She attempts to reclaim women’s identities through her characters’ female bonding that constitutes a real challenge to institutionalized phallogocentric ideology.

The characters in *The Pakistani Bride* repeatedly appeal to the sisterhood between women and advocate that women have to stand up for each other and reach out across borders. Women have to stick together and help one another, as Carol tries to help Zaitoon, like Zaitoon’s mother-in-law tries to defend her when Sakhi beats her and like Miriam tries to persuade Qasim to marry Zaitoon to a Punjabi. Most of these efforts are useless and are overruled by men. But the female world is there for support, and this support system will at least try to hold their sisters when they fall.

While Zaitoon is fleeing into the mountains, Carol gets to know what has happened, and she urges Mushtaq to do something to save Zaitoon. When he refuses to take her seriously, Carol has a realisation: “‘I’ve loved so much here, isn’t it? I felt very special, and all the time I didn’t matter to you any more than a bitch in heat. You make me sick. All of you.’ She stood

up and walked slowly to the Mess door” (224). She finally understands how far most of the men she is dealing with will go to protect their honour. Both in the United States and in Pakistan, Carol has been insistent on her right to freedom and she has been intellectually aware of the oppression of women, “Women the world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, to get importunately impregnated, beaten up, bullied and disinherited. It was an immutable law of nature” (226). Thus she negotiates with Mushtaq to save women community. This experience, however, shakes her to the core and wakes her up to a feminist, political view of the world.

Thus the women characters in Sidhwa’s novels who will not remain passive and will not continue to bear male-oppressive environments, emancipate themselves by celebrating their female body and seek the help of women rather than men to empower their feminine strength. They learn the art of living and hence liberate themselves from the unnecessary restrictions imposed on them by traditional social systems.

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