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**Re-Narrating Subaltern History in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride***

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**Abstract**

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* is a significant postcolonial and feminist text that exposes the oppression of women within patriarchal tribal societies in Pakistan. The novel redefines the subaltern experience through the life of Zaitoon, a young girl trapped between modern urban culture and rigid tribal traditions. This research article examines how Sidhwa reconstructs women's history through themes of gender oppression, partition trauma, identity crisis, honour politics, and resistance. The study also explores the contrast between tribal and urban cultures through the characters of Zaitoon and Carol. Using feminist and postcolonial perspectives, the article argues that Sidhwa transforms the silenced voices of women into narratives of survival and resistance. The paper further analyses the symbolic use of the bridge, mountains, and journey as metaphors for freedom and selfhood.

**Keywords:** Bapsi Sidhwa, *The Pakistani Bride*, feminism, post colonialism, patriarchy, subaltern studies, partition, resistance.

**Introduction**

Bapsi Sidhwa occupies an important position in South Asian English literature because of her portrayal of women's experiences in postcolonial Pakistan. Her novels focus on the historical and social realities of the Indian subcontinent, particularly the effects of Partition, patriarchal oppression, and cultural conflict. *The Pakistani Bride* is one of her earliest feminist works and is based on a real-life

incident of a Punjabi girl who was married into a tribal community in Northern Pakistan. Through this narrative, Sidhwa exposes the brutality of tribal customs and the condition of women trapped within patriarchal structures. The novel presents the story of Zaitoon, an orphan girl adopted by Qasim during the violence of Partition. Raised in Lahore, Zaitoon later becomes the victim of patriarchal honour when Qasim marries her to Sakhi, a tribal man from Kohistan. The novel depicts her suffering, humiliation, physical violence, and eventual escape from tribal oppression. Alongside Zaitoon's story, Sidhwa introduces Carol, an American woman married to a Pakistani man, to highlight that women's oppression exists across cultures and classes. This article analyses *The Pakistani Bride* from feminist and postcolonial perspectives and argues that Sidhwa re-narrates subaltern history by giving voice to marginalized women. Through powerful characterization and symbolic imagery, Sidhwa critiques patriarchal violence and advocates women's resistance against oppressive traditions. This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on feminist and postcolonial literary theories. Primary data has been collected from Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*, while secondary sources include critical essays, scholarly articles, and feminist interpretations of South Asian literature.

### **Partition and the Trauma of Displacement**

One of the central concerns of *The Pakistani Bride* is the trauma of Partition. Sidhwa vividly portrays the communal violence between Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs during the division of India in 1947. The brutality of Partition becomes the foundation upon which Zaitoon's story unfolds. Her parents are killed during the riots, and she is rescued by Qasim, who adopts her as his daughter. Sidhwa criticizes the careless political division of India and presents Partition as a human tragedy rather than merely a political event. She writes, "The earth is not easy to carve up. India required a deft and sensitive surgeon, but the British, steeped in domestic pre-occupation, hastily and carelessly butchered it" (Sidhwa 14). This statement reflects the suffering caused by colonial negligence and highlights the destruction of human lives and identities. The migration from India to Pakistan creates a sense of displacement and instability among the characters. Qasim's journey from Kohistan to Lahore symbolizes the transformation of traditional tribal identity into urban modernity. However, despite adapting to city life, Qasim remains emotionally attached to tribal honour and customs, which later shape Zaitoon's fate.

### **Patriarchy and the Condition of Women**

Sidhwa presents women as victims of patriarchal oppression within both tribal and urban societies. In the tribal community of Kohistan, women are treated as property and are denied freedom and individuality. Marriage becomes a transaction

in which women are exchanged to preserve honour and settle debts. The marriage of Afshan to the ten-year-old Qasim illustrates the commodification of women. Afshan is forced into marriage because her father cannot repay a debt. Similarly, Zaitoon's marriage to Sakhi is arranged without considering her desires or happiness. Miriam strongly opposes this decision and warns Qasim that Zaitoon cannot survive in the harsh tribal environment.

Sakhi represents toxic masculinity and patriarchal violence. After marriage, he treats Zaitoon with cruelty, suspicion, and possessiveness. He beats her for trivial reasons and constantly questions her honour. His violence reflects the tribal belief that women are responsible for maintaining male honour. Sidhwa exposes this mentality through Sakhi's brutal behaviour and the tribal code that permits violence against women. The novel repeatedly demonstrates that women are denied agency. Zaitoon's suffering symbolizes the larger condition of women trapped in patriarchal structures. Sidhwa writes that women throughout history have been "murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved" (226), emphasizing the universal nature of female oppression.

### **Zaitoon as a Symbol of Resistance**

Although Zaitoon is initially portrayed as a helpless victim, she gradually transforms into a symbol of courage and resistance. Her decision to escape from Sakhi's house marks the beginning of her rebellion against patriarchal oppression. The mountains, once romanticized in her imagination, become hostile spaces during her escape. Her journey through the dangerous terrain symbolizes both physical survival and psychological transformation. Zaitoon's struggle reflects the universal fight of women against social and cultural oppression. For nine days and nights, she wanders through the mountains while being hunted by tribal men. Despite starvation, fear, rape, and exhaustion, she continues to move forward. Her determination reflects what Makarand Paranjape describes as "the triumph of spirit over flesh." Zaitoon ultimately survives because of her inner strength and refusal to surrender. The bridge in the novel functions as a powerful symbol. It represents the connection between oppression and freedom, tradition and modernity, tribal confinement and liberation. Crossing the bridge symbolizes Zaitoon's transition from victimhood to survival.

### **Carol and Cross-Cultural Feminism**

Carol's character plays a crucial role in expanding the feminist scope of *The Pakistani Bride*. Through Carol, Bapsi Sidhwa moves beyond the oppression of tribal women and demonstrates that patriarchy is not limited to a single culture, religion, or geographical region. Carol, an American woman married to a Pakistani army officer

named Farukh, initially appears to represent freedom, modernity, and Western independence. However, as the narrative progresses, Sidhwa reveals that even a privileged Western woman becomes vulnerable within patriarchal structures.

Carol arrives in Pakistan with romanticized expectations about love, marriage, and cultural adventure. Pakistan appears exotic and exciting compared to her monotonous life in America. She imagines marriage as a pathway to emotional fulfillment and social identity. However, her experience gradually exposes the cultural restrictions imposed on women within Pakistani society. Though Carol possesses greater mobility and social freedom than Zaitoon, she slowly recognizes that her identity is still shaped and controlled by male expectations. Farukh initially appears sophisticated, educated, and liberal. Yet beneath this civilized exterior lies the same patriarchal possessiveness that governs tribal men like Sakhi. Farukh becomes jealous and suspicious whenever Carol interacts freely with other men. His protective behaviour reveals the patriarchal assumption that a wife is a symbol of male honour and social respectability. Carol begins to understand that even educated urban men continue to uphold traditional attitudes toward women.

The character of Major Mushtaq further deepens Sidhwa's critique of patriarchy. Mushtaq appears charming, modern, and emotionally supportive, and Carol is attracted to his confidence and sophistication. She believes that he genuinely understands and values her individuality. However, Mushtaq eventually exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal masculinity. Although he presents himself as progressive, he still views Carol primarily as an object of desire rather than as an independent woman with emotional autonomy. His anger when Carol speaks freely with tribal men demonstrates his possessive mindset and his inability to respect women's agency. Through Carol's experiences, Sidhwa reveals that patriarchy functions differently across cultures but produces similar consequences for women. Tribal women like Zaitoon experience direct physical violence and confinement, whereas Carol faces emotional control, social isolation, and psychological oppression. The contrast between these two women allows Sidhwa to compare different forms of female suffering within both Eastern and Western contexts.

One of the most significant moments in the novel occurs when Carol emotionally identifies with Zaitoon. Despite their differences in nationality, race, education, and class, both women recognize their shared vulnerability under patriarchal systems. Carol realizes that women everywhere are denied complete freedom and are often treated as possessions by men. This realization creates a powerful moment of cross-cultural feminist solidarity. Sidhwa writes: "In an instant,

their eyes met, the green and black of their iris fused in an age-old communion, an understanding they shared of their vulnerabilities as women” (Sidhwa 136). This moment symbolizes the universal nature of women’s oppression and the emotional bond that transcends cultural boundaries. Carol’s understanding of Zaitoon’s suffering also transforms her own understanding of marriage and identity. She realizes that even though her circumstances are less brutal, she too lacks complete control over her life.

Carol’s character therefore challenges the simplistic assumption that Western women are entirely liberated while Eastern women are entirely oppressed. Sidhwa avoids presenting feminism as a purely Western ideology. Instead, she develops a cross-cultural feminist perspective that acknowledges both differences and commonalities in women’s experiences. Furthermore, Carol occupies a liminal position between cultures. She neither fully belongs to America nor completely assimilates into Pakistani society. Her identity crisis reflects the larger postcolonial tension between tradition and modernity. Through this cultural displacement, Sidhwa demonstrates how women often become trapped between conflicting social expectations. Carol’s subplot ultimately strengthens the feminist message of the novel. While Zaitoon represents open rebellion against physical oppression, Carol represents psychological awakening and intellectual realization. Together, both women reveal the multiple dimensions of patriarchal domination and emphasize the necessity of female solidarity, self-awareness, and resistance.

### **Tribal Culture and Honour Politics**

One of the most significant themes in *The Pakistani Bride* is the depiction of tribal culture and the politics of honour. Bapsi Sidhwa critically examines how patriarchal tribal societies construct and preserve “honour” through the control of women’s bodies, choices, sexuality, and behaviour. Through the lives of Zaitoon, Hamida, and other tribal women, the novel exposes the violent consequences of honour-based traditions and the dehumanization of women within the Kohistani tribal system. The tribal society represented in the novel is governed not by modern law but by rigid customary codes and patriarchal authority. Men occupy positions of absolute power, while women are denied freedom, individuality, and decision-making rights. Honour in this society is closely associated with female obedience and chastity. A woman’s actions determine not only her own reputation but also the prestige and social standing of the men connected to her. Thus, women become symbolic carriers of male honour.

Sidhwa demonstrates that the tribal code of honour is deeply rooted in ownership and possession. Women are treated as property belonging to fathers, husbands, or brothers. Their identities are defined through male relationships rather than personal individuality. Marriage itself becomes a social contract designed to preserve tribal alliances and patriarchal control rather than emotional companionship. The marriage of Zaitoon to Sakhi clearly reflects this cultural structure. Qasim arranges the marriage not because it would ensure Zaitoon's happiness but because he believes he must honour his promise to his tribal relatives. His personal commitment to tribal honour becomes more important than his daughter's future. Miriam repeatedly warns Qasim about the dangers awaiting Zaitoon in Kohistan, but he refuses to listen because breaking his word would damage his masculine honour. Sidhwa thus shows how patriarchal societies often prioritize male pride over female welfare.

The tribal understanding of honour also creates an atmosphere of constant fear and surveillance for women. Zaitoon's movements, gestures, and interactions are interpreted suspiciously by Sakhi. Even her innocent act of waving at soldiers across the river becomes a supposed insult to his honour. Sakhi's violent reaction reveals how fragile masculine honour is within patriarchal systems. Men feel compelled to assert dominance over women to prove their masculinity and social authority. Sakhi's brutality toward Zaitoon reflects the normalization of violence in tribal culture. Physical abuse is not portrayed as an exceptional act but as a socially accepted method of disciplining women. Sakhi beats Zaitoon repeatedly because he believes it is his right as a husband. The tribal community does not condemn his behaviour because patriarchal customs legitimize male violence. In this sense, the novel portrays honour politics as a system that institutionalizes women's suffering. The concept of honour becomes even more destructive after Zaitoon escapes from Sakhi's house. Her decision to flee is interpreted not as an act of self-preservation but as an unforgivable insult to tribal masculinity. Sakhi and the tribal men immediately organize a hunt to kill her. Their objective is not simply to bring her back but to restore the "lost honour" of the family through violence. The tribe believes that a runaway wife deserves death because her independence threatens male authority and social order.

The mountains and isolated geography of Kohistan symbolize the rigid and closed nature of tribal society. The physical isolation of the region mirrors the intellectual and social isolation of its people. Tribal customs remain untouched by modern legal systems or progressive social reforms. Sidhwa contrasts this environment with Lahore, where women at least possess limited exposure to

education and urban life. This contrast emphasizes the conflict between tradition and modernity throughout the novel.

### **Conclusion**

Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* is a powerful feminist and postcolonial novel that exposes the brutal realities of patriarchal tribal society. Through the character of Zaitoon, Sidhwa gives voice to marginalized women and reconstructs subaltern history from a female perspective. The novel critiques honour-based violence, gender inequality, and the cultural consequences of Partition. Zaitoon's struggle for survival transforms her into a symbol of resistance and resilience. Alongside Carol's experiences, the novel demonstrates that women's oppression transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. Sidhwa ultimately argues that women must resist oppressive traditions and reclaim their individuality. The novel remains relevant because it addresses issues that continue to affect women across societies. Through her realistic portrayal of suffering and survival, Sidhwa creates a narrative that is both politically significant and emotionally powerful.

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