

# **Cognizance of Veritable Culture And Social Veracity in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride***

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Culture is a factor that is prevalent in many arenas and has been widely patronized for various reasons. It is upheld to proclaim the prominence of a particular clan. Culture acts as status-marker, unifying factor and badge of identity. Bapsi Sidhwa in her novel *The Pakistani Bride* has deeply probed into the aspect of culture and social conflict. The research paper investigates the causes of cultural conflict in the work and also analyzes the social norms of the Kohistani community. The ethnocentric beliefs of the tribe and the reasons for their assumed superior status have been explored.

Bapsi Sidhwa utilizes her ingenious energy to enable catharsis and employs illustrious literary devices to paint the portrait of society and culture of which she has profound knowledge. Her statements are influential, thought provoking and persuasive. On entering the terrain of the strange inhabitants of the Karakoram Mountain Range, the writer took efforts, in order to comprehend their culture and accepted beliefs. Bapsi Sidhwa during her stay in the Karakoram Mountain Range observed the rites, rituals and lifestyle of the Kohistani tribe. The firsthand knowledge that she obtained through cognition was utilized when she brought her first novel *The Pakistani Bride*. She has used her expertise to comment on the practice of "Bride Price" and analyzed its role in the Kohistani culture. The novelist delves deep into the arena of culture and power factors that control the social order. Dipika Sahai remarks:

*The Pakistani Bride* is a women's lyric cry in prose, against the existential fate and societal abuse. Sidhwa has fashioned complex metaphors to orchestrate the multiple agonies of a woman, a successful portrayal of pain and suffering in the character of Zaitoon. She has written dramatically of a particular culture, marriage, loyalty, honour and their conflict with old ways. (85-86)

The conflict of dissimilar cultures induces discord in the society, which in turn disturbs the pendulum of peace and serenity. Variation in culture happens to be the basis of conflict throughout the novel, mainly in three instances the clash of cultures cause mayhem. These clashes have been

appropriately fixed during the exposition, climax and denouement respectively. The clash of cultural beliefs is the cause for discord in all these instances. The journey of the protagonist Zaitoon from the fields to the plains and finally to the mountains is the yarn of the novella. The conflict between the protagonist and antagonist is exclusively based on ethnicity and societal norms.

The clash of culture in the exposition leads to the protagonist losing her parents and her identity. This incident escalates the alacrity of events, the five year old Punjabi girl, Munni is transformed into Zaitoon. Leaving behind the vague memories of her childhood and parents, she adopts the role of Qasim's daughter. Munni being ignorant of the partition riots and political commotion wonders at the strange events that transforms her life for the worse within hours. Her misery begins with lose of her playmate, a young calf which they abandon at the railway station.

Seeking safety and with the anticipation of reaching a safe haven, Munni's parents board the crammed train that leaves to Pakistan along with Munni and her younger brother. The flaring communal violence between the Sikh and Muslim community in the Indo-Pak border areas, spread like wild wind and lead to numerous massacres. The refugee train from Jullundur in which Munni's family travelled was derailed and the frantic mob butchered the vulnerable. Munni is rescued by Qasim, a Kohistani tribesman and she is taken to Lahore. Being a child, adoption of new culture and new norms are quite easy for Munni. Thus she becomes "Zaitoon", which means the dark olive tree that grows in the wild range of Karakoram Mountain. From the fields, she settles to the new sense of life in the city of Lahore.

Years later, out of his cavernous adulation for his native culture Qasim decides to give Zaitoon in marriage to Sakhi, a Kohistani man. The succeeding alteration of location happens after Zaitoon's marriage is fixed; she is entirely evicted from her lifestyle and is forced to fit in to the Kohistani cultural and social norms. Leaving the plains she goes to the mountains. Initially, Qasim's statements induce an adoration of Kohistani lifestyle in Zaitoon, it evokes a quest for adventure in her. Qasim says, "Bibi, you will like my village. Across the river, beyond those mountains, we are a free and manly lot.' ... 'You'll see how different it is from the plains. We are not bound hard and foot by government clerks and police. We live by our own rules- calling our own destiny! We are free as the air you breathe!" (Sidhwa 100)

Once she reaches the new landscape her illusions are fragmented and she sights reality. She realizes the wide divergence between Punjabi and Kohistani culture- her body, her language, her thoughts, her desires... everything was in sharp contrast with the Kohistani tribe. Her wish for liberty gets crushed in the iron fists of cultural norms and social order.

Despite her strong protest and solemn qualms about cultural compatibility, she is married to Sakhi. She becomes a victim of domestic violence, physical brutality and sexual oppression. The marriage finally proves futile bringing desolation to all. In the patriarchal Kohistani society, women are considered part of a man's property, they don't have rights of their own; they survive to gratify their husband. They are dearly brought and fiercely protected. The novelist states about the attitude of Kohistani men towards women – "...in these settlements a man may talk only with unmarriageable women- his mother, his sisters, aunts, and grandmothers- a tribal man's covetous look at the wrong clans woman provokes a murderous feud. They instinctively lower their eyes, it's a mark of respect. But let them spy an outsider and they go berserk in an orgy of sight-seeing!..." (Sidhwa 113)

Unlike the plains, the system of "Bride Price" prevails in the Kohistani region, the bridegroom gives some amount of money or gifts to the bride's family before the marriage is finalized. This practice is prevalent among the Kohistani tribe. Qasim married Afshan because the girl's father could not return the loan that he received from Qasim's father; hence the conflict was resolved by offering Afshan in marriage. Zaitoon is forced into marriage because of Qasim's hasty decision and dogma. Despite realizing the potential tribulations Qasim forces Zaitoon into marrying Sakhi, in order to keep up his word and thus prevent his honor from being sullied. He says, "Now understand this..." Qasim's tone was icily incisive. I've given my word. Your marriage is to be a week from today. Tomorrow your betrothed goes to invite guests from the neighbouring villages. I've given my word. On it depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life. If you besmirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands" (Sidhwa 158) .

As part of the custom, Qasim receives the "Bride Price" from Sakhi and surrenders his adopted daughter to her husband. Despite Qasim being least interested in receiving the "Bride Price", he accepts it because of the standard cultural practice. Sakhi by paying the price has secured the rights of ownership over Zaitoon, the bride becomes a commodity. Unlike the practice of dowry which burdens the bride's family, this custom offers to financially reimburse the expenditure. The practice of Bride Price exists mainly in the regions where survival is exigent. Finding a bride becomes a tough task for the youth, hence they fiercely protected their purchased bride.

Apart from the tyranny of her husband, Zaitoon is further tormented by the sense of alienation, the variation in the lifestyle, rites and rituals. Her colorful clothes are in sharp contrast with the coarse dull colored fabrics worn by the Kohistani women. Her garments lose their luster similar to her life. She is forced to survive on the dry maize bread dipped in water, which is the

staple diet of the villagers. Used to the spicy Punjabi cuisine, she feels starved. Her physical appearance stridently conveys her alien origin; hence she has both physical and mental barriers which prevent her from assimilating into the new culture.

The social standard in the Kohistani land teaches Sakhi to control the womenfolk in his house in order to gain social respect. Having bred with the belief in the superiority of his race he thinks it his right to dominate a woman from another community. Sakhi believes Zaitoon is inferior to him due to her different ethnic origin and he thinks it is his duty to rule her. Her mannerisms are mocked at, her movements are watched, her liberty is curtailed, and her fate proves to be no better than that of a bonded slave. Hamida, her mother-in-law is kind to her and it is the only solace that she receives in the coarse mountain range.

Sakhi is not husband she wants; nor is she the wife he can endure. Honor, commitment, marriage and loyalty are at stake, and there is really no way either to quash or to salvage them in the painful predicament in which Zaitoon's circumstances have placed her. (Hashmi 668)

Her friendly gesture of waving at the army truck which passes the village infuriates her husband and he attacks her with murderous fury. “ ‘ You whore’, he hissed. His fury was so intense; she thought he would kill her. He cleared his throat and spat full in her face. ‘You dirty, black little bitch, waving at those pigs...’ ‘.....You wanted him to stop and fuck you didn’t you? .... (Sidhwa 185). The savage attack leaves Zaitoon badly wounded and convinces that life in Kohistan is impossible. During the period of her recovery she contemplates the plan of escape. Once she regains enough strength she ventures forth into the forest with the hope of escaping from her husband, knowing well that the punishment for her act is death. The mysterious dark forest appears to her as pathway to liberty and peace, clutching few pieces of dry flat bread and a blanket she runs into the forest.

Sakhi is forced to abide by the established norms of the community, in order to protect his honor he should establish justice by brutally killing his runaway bride. If he fails to accomplish the task then for a lifetime he should bear the brunt of the community. By running away from the tribe, Zaitoon has broken the established cultural norms and committed a heinous crime. The entire tribe, disregarding all the differences unites to hunt her down.

After spending ten days in the jungle Zaitoon reaches the bridge, which would take her to the army camp, from where help would arrive. With the help of Major Mustaq, Zaitoon narrowly escapes from her husband. Major Mustaq tries to convince Sakhi that his wife perished in the jungle

but Sakhi realizes that Zaitoon has escaped with the help of the army men. In the denouement part, the mental conflict of Zaitoon and Sakhi is focused. While in the jungle, Zaitoon has the illusion of Sakhi asphyxiating her to death. Zaitoon has no animosity towards Sakhi because she understands that his act of vengeance is a norm of the tribe, he is forced to kill her because the consciousness of the whole tribe is behind him, forcing him to commit the deed.

Sakhi's turmoil is best understood by Major Mustaq, he at a point even sympathizes with the youth, thinking about the scorn that he would face from his tribe. He promises that none would know about Zaitoon's escape and hence Sakhi could remain in peace. Sakhi informs his tribe that he killed Zaitoon with his own hands and buried her in the forest. The tribesmen gloat out of honor and relief because of the brave deed of their fellow tribesman, therefore Sakhi is able to escape the heckling of the tribe.

The protagonist and antagonist are victims of cultural disparity; their inability to assimilate into a new culture perturbs their subsistence. Sakhi's prejudice about the inferiority of Zaitoon's ethnicity and cultural values circuitously influences his behavior. During the initial stages he abuses her because he feels that he is expected to intimidate her and prove his dominance as her husband and provider. There occurs a conflict in his mental space when he encounters the tender phases of her emotions; it evokes the humane traits and his affection and care surfaces. Display of his sympathy evokes a sense succor in her; on the contrary Sakhi's tribe considers it to be a highly henpecked behavior. Zaitoon's relief is short-lived because her husband is forced to reclaim his masculinity by thrashing her publicly.

Sakhi vents his fury on the oxen and when its flesh ruptures his mother interferes and tries to protect the animal. He neither spares his mother, she is also thrashed badly. Finally he directs his fury towards Zaitoon who comes to aid her mother-in-law. He thrashes her badly saying "You are my woman! I'll teach you to obey me!" (Sidhwa 172-73). He works out his authority over the objects under his control- the domesticated animal, the subservient mother, the docile consort. After trouncing them, he feels elated because he has established his masculinity and power. Beating the mother is a cardinal sin, which Sakhi fails to realize, it shocks the sensibility of Zaitoon. Surviving in Kohistan would gift her similar fate of her mother-in-law; she realizes the futility of such existence.

Zaitoon thinks that the tribal men are unkind and menacing; while Sakhi and Qasim think that the men from the plains are effeminate and scorn them. Having trained in the thought of might being right, they fail to recognize the need for compassion. They misinterpret chivalry as effeminacy, thus missing out on a prominent cultural value. Zaitoon is helped by a chivalrous army man and he

prevents her from slipping off the bridge, but Sakhi misapprehends and pictures it in the grossest possible manner. Zaitoon's innocent actions are misread and depicted as loutish and sordid.

The Indus River which flows in the region divides the land into two arenas. The habitable land for the meek and the might on the right side and the mysterious jungle range dominated by might on the left. The newly constructed bridge connects the two areas; it acts as a strong metaphor in the novel. After crossing the river Zaitoon understands that she has taken a major decision that would alter her *kismet* forever. She becomes a social rebel, and fights for her rights in various zones- spiritual, mental and cultural. Zaitoon's *kudi* which means will-power helps her to survive all odds, finally she finds safety.

Major Mustaq acts as the spokesperson of the novelist and voices her views about the problems of cultural discrepancy. When he realizes that the Punjabi girl Zaitoon is about to marry a Kohistani, he conveys his anguish about the fate of Zaitoon. The wide variation in the culture would eventually cause rift between the pair. It would have been better for Zaitoon to have accepted the proposal of the Punjabi jawan, but bound by her sense of duty to her adopted father she marries Sakhi. Major Mustaq after rescuing Zaitoon wishes that she had peaceful life with the people who would understand her behavioral pattern and cultural traits.

The restrictions enforced by the tribal society are binding and the tribe has been strong adherents of the norms for ages. The efforts of the government and the army to improve their standard of living are scorned at by the Kohistani clan. Construction of the bridge and the road which connects them to the other communities are images of tyranny, hence they despise progress. Army men even after years of acquaintance with the Kohistani region are not able to live amicably with the Kohistanis because of the clan's hostility towards the outsiders. Kohistani don't like being disturbed by anyone, they live according to their norms. They take immense pride in their ethnicity and are infuriated even at slight remarks about their traits. Major Mustaq casually calls Qasim as Chinaman, it evokes burly rage in Qasim and he retorts raucously.

'Chinaman!' he protested. Removing the turban from his shaved head, he trusts his bearded face forward. 'Look at this,' he said, tapping his nose that dipped, hooked and sprang out between his flat cheeks and slanting eyes - "Is this a Chinaman's nose? No! It leaps forth as a banner of my race! A legacy from Persian ancestors Who came through the hills with Cyrus and Darais...or from the Yahudis even...some say the lost tribe of Israel settled here...or..." (Sidhwa 132)

Even at the least provocation Qasim bursts out and does his best to proclaim the superiority of his clan. He says “ ‘ These veins flow with Kohistani blood, brave mountain blood.’ (Sidhwa 133)”. Qasim feels that the men from the plains are effeminate compared to the tribal people. He feels that the life in the plains lack freedom. The value of peace and social order are not understood by him, he feels comfortable with the tribal laws. There is a wide range of difference in the culture and manners of the Pakistanis who live in the hills and the plains. Kohistanis consider their culture to be supreme which prevents them from being cordial with other communities.

Societies which attempt to freeze their cultural traditions as absolute and final become atrophied in the sense that they are unable to recognize their immediate contemporary conflicts and problems. Adaptation of such a course seems convenient to those sections of society which need to contain, mask or conceal the prevailing conflicts, tensions and dilemmas.

Bapsi Sidhwa derived the inspiration to write the novel after she listened to the tale of a purchased bride, who was brutally slaughtered by her husband because she tried to escape from the tribe. The unfortunate fate of the sixteen-year-old Punjabi girl evoked sympathy in the writer, it left a deep impact in her mind. When she decided to write she decided that her protagonist would survive all ordeals and not perish, it was her strong determination to convey the message of will power that shaped the work. Bapsi Sidhwa developed a liking towards the Kohistani tribe that she worked on providing their beliefs and cultural practices. She does not judge but merely depicts the clan as it appeared to her. The novel strongly comments about the influence of cultural conflicts and its impact on the social order.

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