

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print);2321-3108 (online)

TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMA: READING BAPSI SIDHWA'S *THE PAKISTANI BRIDE* AS
A DISPLACEMENT NARRATIVE

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Article Received: 14/01/2022
Article Accepted: 03/02/2022
Published online:07/02/2022
DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.1.99](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.1.99)

Abstract

Displacement or forced migration has been a part of human history and is not something new to the modern age. While several factors such as social, political, military, economic etc. can become the cause of such displacement or forced migration, it has severe psychological and emotional consequences. These multi-faceted implications have become the subject of cinematic as well as several literary works. This paper examines Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* as a text of displacement, disillusionment and trauma. The partition of the Indian Subcontinent in August 1947 is one of the most significant historical events in the history of the subcontinent and left an indelible impact on the collective subconscious of the people of both India and Pakistan.

In a culture where women are considered second-class citizens and are "controlled" by their menfolk who view them as their "property", the partition and the subsequent displacement had a frightening impact. This paper looks into the consequences faced by the displaced population and its twofold impact upon the women of the country through Sidhwa's book.

Keywords: Displacement, Bapsi Sidhwa, *The Pakistani Bride*, Partition, Pakistan, India, trauma

Displacement forms one of the major themes in postcolonial literature mainly due to its enormous range of consequences on the post colonial societies and their psyches. Displacement aims to understand the identity crisis caused by colonialism. Colonized people all across the world were forced to abandon their homes, homelands, cultures, their peoples, traditions, languages and dissociate from their first places. This led to a dislodged identity, a split personality amongst the "displaced", where they were neither "here" nor "there". Displacement literally means shifting,

moving, or being put out of the original or natural place. It may be of varying forms but "displacement" usually leads to a sense of loss, estrangement, alienation and disorientation. Displacement occurs in two stages – physical and psychological. The former gives rise to the latter and that becomes a dominant factor in the lives of the displaced people. Postcolonial writers deal with both the issues in their writings and this paper aims to study the effects of displacement and the crisis of identity in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*.

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In a culture where women are considered second-class citizens and are "controlled" by their men folk who view them as their "property", the partition and the subsequent displacement had a frightening impact. This paper looks into the consequences faced by the displaced population and its twofold impact upon the women of the country through Sidhwa's book.

She was born in Karachi before the partition and migrated to Lahore thereafter. As a child she was a witness to the horrific and bloody Partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947. She says "I was told that Pakistan was too remote in time and place for Americans or the British to identify with" (Hower 299). Sidhwa has succeeded in consciously maintaining a religious distance in her writing. Being a Parsee, she has not let her religious proclivity colour her perspective either about Pakistan or the communal tension ensuing during the partition. In one of her interviews she says, "The struggle was between the Hindus and the Muslims, and as a Parsee (member of a Zoroastrian sect), I felt I could give a dispassionate account of this huge, momentous struggle" (Gutman).

Sidhwa has intricately woven the tale of displacement and cultural collision in the novel *The Pakistani Bride*. Being an expat herself Sidhwa has been a victim of multidimensional displacement. As a Parsee, her people were displaced from Iran and had to seek shelter in India. After the partition of the

Indian subcontinent, her family was forced to flee to the newly formed Pakistan from where she finally moved to The United States. She knows and understands the trauma of displacement and nostalgia for the homeland. Over a period of time Sidhwa herself is unable to identify with a "homeland". She knows not which country to call her homeland. She has shown this dilemma through the protagonists of the book, Qasim and Zaitoon. Homi Bhabha has explained the effect and trauma of displacement:

Each country has its own life, literature, art, music, ritual, life, death. There are multifarious layers of culture present in the world. There are multifarious signs and symbols signifying the locations and social systems of value. The cultural transformation has become an inevitable reality as migration is very common among the people. This tendency results into diasporic experiences as the people who leave their homeland have to suffer displacement and cultural disruption. People experience new things; they come in contact with new ideas and thoughts; they view new landscapes and come in contact with new people and this interaction inevitably brings cultural conflicts. The different myths, rituals and traditions bring new relations and give birth to new social and political awareness. The growth of multiculturalism adds new discourses as the society grows global (Bhabha 247)

The Pakistani Bride is based on a story narrated by army personals at an Army camp in Karakoram Mountains. A Punjabi girl was married off to a tribal man in the hills. The girl, unable to withstand the difference in culture and customs, could not live with the man in that place. She ultimately managed to escape after a month of her marriage. But the unforgiving and cruel mountains made it hard for her to escape to the plains. She struggled in the mountains for fourteen days and managed to survive somehow but in the end she was discovered by the tribesmen who had been incessantly searching for her. Unfortunately, her

running away was an extreme insult for the tribe and her husband and such an offence is unpardonable amongst the tribal people. The husband beheaded the unfortunate girl and threw her into the Indus River.

The story shook the soul of Sidhwa who, through her book later, vociferously criticized the brutal tribal codes of honour and their customs. In one of her interviews she explained her decision to write the story of the girl: "The girl's story haunted me: it reflected the hapless condition of many women not only in Pakistan but in the Indian subcontinent. Telling it became an obsession." (Sidhwa)

I felt I had to tell her story. I had not written before...I had a compulsion to write the girl's story and the story of the tribals hidden away in this beautiful part of the world. I started writing a short story about this girl, without my really being aware of it, it was developing into a long story. It was an obsession (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock, 1992).

In the book, *Zaitoon*, a Punjabi girl loses her parents to the communal riots during the partition and is adopted by Qasim who is himself a migrant. He has moved to the plains from the mountains after losing all his children and wife to the deadly disease of small pox. He names the girl Zaitoon after his own dead daughter. He brings her up well in Lahore and gives her all the privileges that he can afford to. She studies, learns to dance and manage the household and turns out to be a cultured and well-bred young girl. All is well till Qasim turns nostalgic about his homeland and his people and in a fit of impulse promises Zaitoon's hand in marriage to a fellow tribesman. Qasim's friend Nikka, and his wife Miriam try to discourage Qasim from marrying Zaitoon into a clearly unsuitable culture and society but Qasim decides to stick to his "word of honour". Zaitoon, being naïve and unaware, decides to follow her father's decision not knowing the consequences it would have for her in the future.

Sidhwa tries to explore the success or failure of relationships as a result of cultural differences. Through two intercultural and

interracial marriages we see how cultural collision creates a rift between the couples. Carol, a white American is married to the Pakistani Muslim Farrukh and Zaitoon is forced into marrying the tribal from the mountains – Sakhi. Though we see that the first marital bond is consensual and not forced yet it has severe implications on the success of the marriage mainly because Carol comes from a far more open and different culture than she has to live in in Pakistan. Both the women feel the brunt of the extreme patriarchal culture of their respective societies. For a girl like Zaitoon what would have been a considerably open and modern culture is for Carol an extremely suffocating and conservative culture. Hence, we see that cultural collision is highly relative and becomes exceedingly problematic for all those involved. But Sidhwa in particular highlights the sorry condition of women in Pakistan who have no say in the matters of their own life. They have to submit to patriarchal control or suffer the consequences. Dipika Sahai remarks:

The Pakistani Bride is a lyrical cry against the mental and spiritual torture of women. Sidhwa has used complex metaphors to depict the multiple agonies of Zaitoon who represent all the women of Pakistan. The plot of the novel depicts the poignant tale of a woman who is tortured; she is treated like a commodity by the tribal head. It is a tale of cultural conflict of Punjabi culture and the tribal culture of Kohistani tribe (Sahai 85-86)

The marginalization of women forces them to adhere to the age-old orthodox customs for fear for their life. They are considered to be the honour of the family instead of being considered normal human beings. If they disobey they have to pay for the disobedience with their life. Women are commodities who are traded at will by the men folk. Afshan is married to Qasim because her father is unable to repay the loan taken from Qasim's father. "To begin with, he had thought of marrying the girl himself. He had only one wife; but in a twinge of paternal conscience, he decided to bestow the girl on Qasim. It was his first duty." (The Pakistani 8) This objectification and commodification of women is prevalent not only in the tribal societies but also in

the modern cities, and religion and culture both have a significant role to play in this.

Through the Partition Sidhwa weaves the theme of dislocation deftly into the narrative. During the partition several people were rendered homeless, they were thrown out of their homeland into an alien place because of political decisions. Millions of Muslims and Hindus died because of the ensuing communal riots. The ones who survived this holocaust were the ones who were impacted the most because they had been a witness to the horror of the partition. They had to live with the traumatic memories of what they had seen, endured and lost. The wreckage that the partition and the violent bloodshed caused in the lives of the people was irreparable. They experienced a lifelong loss of identity and belongingness. Sidhwa writes: "The earth is not easy to carve up. India required a deft and sensitive surgeon, but the British, steeped in domestic preoccupation, hastily and carelessly butchered it. They were not deliberately mischievous only cruelly negligent. A million Indians died. The earth sealed its clumsy new boundaries in blood as town by town, farm by farm, the border was defined." (14-15)

The historic event of the partition is constructed dexterously into the entire plot through Zaitoon, Qasim and Carol. Sidhwa portrays through these characters, displacement at different levels and how it affects different people differently but most certainly negatively. Sidhwa has depicted the anguish and the inner struggle of the characters with a similar narrative vigor as the appalling carnage that dominated the division of the two nations.

Having grown up in an open environment of ease and plenty, Zaitoon is stunned at the eating habits of the tribals. Not only do they live in extremely difficult conditions but they live in impoverished conditions. Their clothes and their food speak out loud and clear about their lifestyle. Zaitoon, who is used to eating delicious and rich food, does not like the coarse bread that is served to her on her first day. When she complains about this to Qasim, he dismisses her by saying that he ate the same thing as she. For him it is normal; he has never been able to relish the food of the plains and has

longed for this food which he has eaten as a young boy growing up in the mountains. What he does not realize is that Zaitoon does not share his emotions and feelings for the mountains. His connection to the mountains is unique to him and not Zaitoon. She is a girl of the plains and cannot relate to a culture that is greatly different and also inferior in the sense that it is highly conservative, closed and lacks modern facilities. They are not her people and she feels like an alien amongst them. To top it all, she is made to feel inferior for her skin colour by the tribals and her husband also speaks down to her several times because of her ethnicity. Wondolleck comments on cultural conflict in the migrants:

The main traumatic experience suffered by the migrants is the loss of identity. The cultural conflicts have wider ramifications in the current post-colonial set up. When identities are intertwined with shared ideologies, the stakes in a conflict are much greater. It is very hard for migrants to get assimilated in the local culture so soon and in the words of hybrid culture becomes inevitable. (Wondolleck 43)

According to Ashcroft's theory of social identity, cultural differences between individuals are a result of deep rooted prejudices. These prejudices and biases create certain boundaries and tensions in societies leading to a feeling of alienation and separation. Ashcroft believes that each individual plays a significant role in the society and when he feels alienated his contribution to the society as an individual suffers greatly. All these factors give rise to confrontation among the migrants and the society. Northrop Frye, in his Psychological theory mentions that people have strong needs for inclusion as well as separation.

While we see Qasim and Zaitoon both living in displacement and dislocation, another character who is not to be ignored is Carol. Sidhwa makes Carol her mouthpiece for the vast differences in the cultures of America and Pakistan. Carol is caught up between the luxuries she experiences in the Pakistani military circle and the claustrophobic patriarchal environment. This internal battle drives her into the arms of Major Mushtaq. Throughout the

novel we see that the characters experience a loss of identity due to their displacement. Particularly Carol and Zaitoon turn out to be the biggest victims of cultural disparity because they are unable to assimilate the new cultures they enter into. There is an ever present conflict between a character's location and identity. In the words of Nasir Abbas Nayyar

Displacement essentially gives birth to a series of problematics. On one hand one cannot forget the people, culture, landscapes, and language of the abandoned place and on the other they find it difficult, due to variety of reasons, to disassociate themselves from the new place, country, and language that they chose to adopt or were forced to adopt. Nostalgic remembrance of motherland juxtaposes itself with a kind of inevitability of settlement in new land. This kind of juxtaposition results on one side in an ambivalent or hybrid view of their guest communities and culture and on the other side in a birth of an indefinite crisis of identity. Once displacement takes place, the possibilities of reclaiming a singular, solid, monolithic identity come to end.

Qasim himself is a victim of displacement. He has to leave his village in the mountains after he loses his entire family to the deadly smallpox. He moves to the plains of Punjab where he is always a misfit. He is unable to forget his place of origin and is at constant war with himself and the society at large. During the partition he is displaced once again and has to move to Lahore. While in the big city he has to make do with living as a subordinate to Nikka, his friend and partner, with whose help he is able to earn a decent living. But we soon find out that he has never been able to leave his past behind. Even after years of residing in a city and living a modern life he still yearns to go back to live in the hills with his own people. His tribesmen remain his people forever. All these feelings and emotions give rise to a strong sense of "longing" – longing to belong. He longs to belong to his present world but he is unable to. He fails miserably to belong to the people of the city. The same longing then turns into a strong sense of

belonging to his own people, to his own tribe and the mountains.

But in his yearning for his homeland and his people, he forgets that they are not the homeland and the people of Zaitoon. She does not feel for his people and his home the same way as he does. In fact, for her they all are aliens. They are not her people, she has never known them and she does not belong to them. Her home has always been the plains and her people Qasim, Miriam and Nikka. But here we witness the patriarchal cultural authority in the Pakistani society when he fixes Zaitoon's marriage without even consulting her and later when she pleads with him to not marry her off in such tribal lands, he shuts her off by saying that he has given his word and the word of a Kohistani is his honour and that if she breaks his words and dishonours him he would not hesitate to kill her.

Edward said in an interview says: "I think that if one is an intellectual and can understand the meaning and significance of exile; it is a situation when man is exposed to external forces of society and its culture. Exile is a unique experience; it compels man to think in new perspective because he has to struggle for new identity; his fractured identity I mean. That allows for independence commitment but independence and a certain kind of detachment." (Said 13)

Exile is very tormenting and it is not so easy to endure the painful tortures that a migrant experience when in exile. He feels a wide gulf between the culture of the local people and the native country. He is haunted by his own country and remembers the customs, traditions, festivals and people of his land. There is a psychological rift between a human being and his homeland; he is nostalgic about his original home and thus self is distracted (Said 173).

We see how Qasim is a victim of displacement and cultural collision. But he transmits his trauma to Zaitoon and in turn victimizes her too. She is doubly victimized by displacement. She had to flee from her homeland during the partition and in the process lost not only her home but also her

family. She learns to live her new life with strangers, people she does not know at all. When she has accepted life as it has been given to her and has adjusted to her circumstances she is uprooted once again and thrown into a new place and people. How many times does a person learn to live in new a culture and customs? She runs away in the end, signifying that enough is enough. There is a limit to how much one can bear. And in the end is displaced once again from what was "supposedly her home."

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