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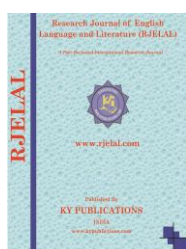
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TRANSGRESSING THE THRESHOLD OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RESTRICTIONS: A STUDY ON  
THE FEMALE CHARACTERS IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S NOVELS THE *PAKISTANI BRIDE* AND *WATER*

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper focuses on understanding the issues concerning women in colonized India and Pakistan during the eve of partition. During the pre and post Independence era, the society was mostly patriarchal, dominated by male superiority. Patriarchy is a social system in which males hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. Mostly women in a patriarchal society are silent victims whose voices are silenced by supreme male authority. The study would aim to analyze the role and condition of women in colonial India and how women chose to liberate themselves from by transgressing social norms dictated by a male dominated society. 'Transgressing' is an act to break a law or a moral code. Here the female characters struggle to survive and battle the toughest scenarios by breaking the physical and emotional barricades created by social and cultural restrictions. Bapsi Sidhwa's female protagonists are prototypes where they become the victimizer as well as the victimized. They endure the pains and tribulations for long , finally striking back at the oppressor. We can feel the pulsating throb for liberation in the young dreamy girl Zaitoon, the oppressed Afshan , the bold and outspoken Carol, the boisterous Chuyia and the widow Shakuntala who perseveres to set a young Chuyia as a liberated individual.

**Key Words:** Transgress, Patriarchy, liberate. Perseveres, boisterous, tribulations, dominate

Bapsi Sidhwa is an internationally acclaimed Pakistani novelist of Parsi descent who resides in the United States. Sidhwa describes herself as Punjabi-Parsi-Indian-Pakistani. Some of her famous novels include *Cracking India*, *The American Brat*, *The Pakistani Bride*, *Water* and *The Crow Eaters*. She is renowned for her collaborative work with film maker Deepa Mehta; who adapted *Cracking India* into a critically acclaimed movie *Fire* and her novel *Water* to a much speculated movie of the same title.

Bapsi Sidhwa has mesmerized a diverse crowd of readers, critics and writers with some of her outstanding novels and the unique

characterization in her novels. The characters in her novels are mostly female centric .She has an obsessive and penetrating outlook which was an outcome of her formative years and her own personal experiences during the time of partition. Her works cannot be isolated from the social and cultural elements of her age and are deep rooted in patriarchal traditions and customs.

As a Parsi writer from Pakistan and settled in a western society, her novels are a perfect choice to analyze and evaluate social and cultural norms. Most of Sidhwa's characters struggle against odds and discriminations. The women characters are forced into a world of discriminations and

tribulations, where they struggle for survival with utmost dignity. The characters transgress the conventional dogmas imposed on them by male patriarchs, social norms and culturally accepted traditions. Their perseverance to fight back the odds enables them to move forward in life and to embrace new social and political reforms.

In Sidhwa's novels women are portrayed as the victimizer and the victimized. The characters in her novels traverse through the established social, cultural and sexual boundaries, thereby making an attempt to transgress<sup>1</sup> the norms dictated by the society. The characters themselves are incapable of forsaking the social stigmas; but they deliberately attempt to reform and thereby improve their conditions. The author historically contextualizes the sad plight of women by colliding their experiences with the patterns of a communal upheaval. This resulted in mass migration, disillusion, dislocation and formation of new identity. The alienation and cultural conflicts force the protagonist to detest their native culture, thereby embracing new migrant societies and cultures.

The Pakistani Bride and Water deal with the age old customs prevalent in India, such as child marriage, forceful and repressive marital life, imposed widowhood, dowry, arranged marriages and submissive childhood. The protagonists are in a constant struggle to retain their identity in a male dominated scenario. They crave for a mental and psychological support, which can sustain and motivate them in times of hardship. In search for their identity, the characters are forced to forgo their comfort zone and traverse social and cultural boundaries. The stereotypical image of woman as a passive submissive and obedient bride is a social construct, where young girls at a very tender age are trained to obey and accept the orders of a male patriarch as in a master slave relationship. When girls were brutally beaten up, they still endured it with utmost patience, as it was an accepted norm where women are punished for disobeying authority or for flimsy reasons.

<sup>1</sup> Transgressing is the deliberate attempt of the protagonist to breach the norms of acceptability. They detest and deplore their existing identity and try to create a new identity and culture.

*The Pakistani Bride* was the first written and the second published work of Bapsi Sidhwa. The story deals with the pathetic condition of women in the patriarchal<sup>2</sup> Pakistani society. The story was based on a real incident where a young girl was brutally treated in her husband's home and how she escaped from there and hid in the cold mountains for fourteen days. Finally a few tribesmen and her husband caught her and threw her to the river Indus.

The author took the basic element of this story to create her own powerful characters. The story revolves around the tales of three characters Zaitoon, Carol and Afshan who were all oppressed in a chauvinistic society. Zaitoon was a young orphan who was adopted by Qasim, a man from the mountains, who left his hometown and worked as a watchman in an English bank in the plains of Jullundur. Zaitoon was groomed up as a refined and obedient Muslim girl. She fantasized about the idyllic life in the mountains and considered it as a paradise. She was thoroughly shaken, when she was married to a tribal, who abused her physically and mentally. Zaitoon always dreamt of the mountains as a paradise:

"...a region where men were heroic, proud and incorruptible, ruled by a code of honor that banned all injustice and evil...their women beautiful as houris, and the bright rosy cheeked children, lived beside crystal torrents of melted snow". (90)

Zaitoon's husband Sakhi who initially subdued her physically, later punished his wife as a chivalrous portrayal of his masculinity. Zaitoon knew that she had to bear the same plight of her mother-in-law Hamida; who was also subjected to physical torture by her own son. She realized the futility of living with Sakhi as a Kohistani bride. Even the society supported Sakhi and his ways. So Zaitoon decided to battle the tough times and escape; rather than living in a cruel world.

The second part of the plot narrates the tale of Afshan, who was married to a ten year old

<sup>2</sup> Patriarchy is a social system in which males hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property.

boy, Qasim in lieu of an unpaid loan. In the case of Afshan, her marriage was fixed by her father without her consent. The author sarcastically mentions how Qasim's father;

"The sturdy, middle aged tribesman knew just how generous the offer was. Any girl- and he had made sure that this one was able-bodied- was worth more than the loan due". (7)

Afshan was only a bargaining commodity in marriage, with six children all in a row to add fuel to fire. Finally her death was a relief to all her miseries.

Carol, the third bride in the novel, reached Pakistan after marrying Farukh. The outspoken young girl, who considered Pakistan as a land of romance was thoroughly disillusioned when she understood that the country of her dreams could never understand her casual behavior. Carol voices the anguish of the author herself, by deploring the pathetic condition of women in the Pakistani social scenario by stating:

"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. What had the tribal girl done to deserve such grotesque retribution? Had she fallen in love with the wrong man? No wonder women here formed such intense friendships, to protect themselves where physical right overweighs the subtler strengths of womanhood...that girl had bedroom, my insolence was punished with another sharp slap. He called me an exhibitionist, a woman without shame". (226)

Carol fell in love with Major Mushtaq, who sexually exploited her and finally Carol decided to leave Pakistan, understanding the fact that Pakistan and America were not just two different countries but were poles apart in values and culture. Her conflicts got resolved as she decided to return to her own land and culture.

*Water* is a novel dealing with the life and social constraints of widows in Post-Colonial India. The novel set in early 1983 portrays the caste system which was still prevalent in India. Those

days, when a Brahmin died, his wife became a widow and she had to lead an austere life of penance by shaving off her hair, wearing a plain white sari and spending the rest of her life for prayers and doing penitence for her sins, which was supposed to be the reason for her husband's death. Most of their life was spent on fasting, singing and doing penance for their sins. They could barely have a square meal a day and spend around eight to nine long hours singing and dancing in the temples.

The novel also gives a peep into the double standards and hypocrisy which existed in the social scenario at that time, as women were subjugated and had no existence outside marriage. Men were allowed to remarry, keep mistresses or visit brothels. The Brahmins were allowed to sleep with any women of their choice and those women were considered as blessed with the Brahmin's touch. In the novel we find a Brahmin who rages at his wife:

"A woman's role in life is to get married and have sons. That is why she is created: to have sons! That is all!" (120)

The story revolves around four women characters- Chuyia, Kalyani, Madhumati and Shakuntala; who were all inmates of the same widow ashram.

Chuyia was a young girl who was six years old and married to a widower of 44 years; turning to be a widow at the age of eight. She befriends Kalyani, a young beautiful widow who was forced to prostitution to support the ashram. She fell in love with Narayan, a young Gandhian who tried to educate her about twentieth century reforms like widow remarriage and abolition of casteism. Kalyani wished to marry Narayan, but was broken hearted when she understood that his father was one of her customers. She finally committed suicide by drowning herself in the river. Madhumati was the eldest in the ashram who assumed role of the head of the ashram and took decisions. She befriended Gulabi, a eunuch, who supplied customers for prostitution to the ashram. Shakuntala was a widow in her early forties, who tries to question the social order and authority. She took the help of one of the priests in the temple to learn the scriptures and questioned the norms in the ashram.

Chuyia was still too small and innocent to understand her condition as a widow. She was sent to some customer with Gulabi. Shakuntala tried to rescue Chuyia but all in vain. The story ends with a ray of hope as Gandhi's train passes through the village, and Shakuntala tried to stop it with the support of people and hands over Chuyia to Narayan.

The reference to Gandhi is a metaphorical symbol for hope and as a catalyst for political reform in colonial India. The novel ends with hope flickering through despair as we find Gandhi's train which symbolized social reform and rescue from the age old traditions and practices.

The common feature that we find in all these female characters is that all of them were victims of cruel masochistic pleasures subjected to the worst inhuman treatment of being brutally beaten up in public as well as private spaces. They feel incapable of retorting to the male counterparts and they try to escape as they feel that it is the only way to resolve their problems. They were subjected to violence and inhuman treatment where marriage was only like a transactional commodity. Widowhood was equally repulsive, as women were mere puppets in a patriarchal society. The act of transgression is not a conscious effort, but an act of helplessness, where the characters who were severely mentally and emotionally drained, tries the final act of escape. The more fortunate ones were able to rescue themselves and lead a free life, the others as Eric Hotler rightly states: "We feel free when we escape –even if it be but from the frying pan to the fire".

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