Chapter-2

Subjugation of Women in

*The Pakistani Bride*
“Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity; the female sex.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

“Woman”— the word conjures up an image which encompasses many faces within it. Sometimes a woman is a sister, sometimes a daughter, sometimes a wife and most importantly a mother, the bearer of a new life on the earth. Unfortunately, since time immemorial she has been commodified and treated as an instrument of luxury. Our male chauvinistic society has always expected her to play different roles and all of them in a perfect way. As is described in Hindu Shastras:

- Karyeshu mantri (a minister while counselling)
- Karmeshu daasi (a servant in his work)
- Rupecha Lakshmi (like a celestial beauty in looks)
- Kshamaya dharitri (like the earth in forgiveness and endurance)
- Bhojyeshu mata (like a mother while serving and feeding food)
- Shayaneshu Rambha (like a beloved in bed)
- Shat Dharma yukta (having these six noble virtues)
- Kula dharma patni (she who follows all this as her dharma is a wife).\(^1\)

These and many more are the duties which have been assigned to a woman by our male-dominant society, and with a speechless patience the woman has accepted all of them and is discharging them diligently. On the contrary, her rights
as a human being have seldom found voice at the familial and social levels. Woman has always mutely suffered ineffable trials and tribulations perpetrated by man as well by her own submissive attitude, compliant nature and shattered ego.

For ages woman has been a matter of concern in the literary texts written by men. Myths, legends, epics and lyrics depict her as goddess, Mother Nature but at the same time in cunning terms condemn her as witch and seductress. Rarely has she been perceived simply as an individual with her own identity. The image and the role of woman have been observed and studied in various ways, and the acquired knowledge has been recorded in literature, works of art, religious texts, mythology and codes of social conduct.

Literature facilitates our understanding of female psychology, actions, life, thoughts and patterns of behaviour in certain periods of time, though in a fictitious form yet in many ways truthful. In the pages of literature women are shown to be struggling to live their lives in accordance with the likes and dislikes of men, using only silent means of escape and bearing male dominance as part of their lot. They have always been at the receiving end of men’s intimate partner abuse and control and for centuries they have struggled to find their place in a world that is predominantly male oriented. Ironically the place of women in society is constantly changing and being questioned. As a mirror to the society, literature has always reflected the changes in the representation of women that history has chronicled. Role of women in literature as a reflection of their roles in society, no doubt, has evolved gradually and has led women to develop from suppressed to independent roles. Modern literature has served to give voice to women’s rights with the emergence of feminist pioneers.
Though the difference between the medieval past and the present day cannot be ignored, yet the fact remains that right from the classical Greek theatre to the twentieth century, women are perceived to be more as sexual objects rather than normal human beings. Throughout the Ages of Literature the image of woman has remained one of subjugated, sub-ordinate being, always to maintain silence in the public sphere and give unstinted respect to father and husband. They have been continually instructed that their spiritual and social worth resides above everything else in their practice of and reputation for chastity. As Sushila Singh puts it in *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*:

“Human experience for centuries has been synonymous with masculine experience with the result that the collective image of humanity has been one-sided and incomplete. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely has an entity that concerns man either in his real life or in his fantasy life.”

Since creation, women have been treated and believed as inferior to men on the grounds that the women’s biology justifies the societal pressures that make them sub-ordinate to men. All that is passive, servile, docile, conventional, and emotional and all that pertains to a subordinate and secondary position is identified with what is called feminine.

A woman’s identity and her status are always established in relation to man and as dependent on and subordinate to man. A sense of her inferiority and male-superiority is inculcated in her mind, heart, and her very self right from her childhood and discrimination begins as she is treated differently by her family and the society. Simone De Beauvoir’s classic exposition of making of woman goes like this:
“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.”

Because of their sex, often referred to as “weaker sex”, women are forced to face many unfortunate situations like subjugation, violence—physical, mental and emotional, imprisonment in marriage, objectification, dehumanisation, child marriage, sexual abuse, domestic abuse, rape, ostracism, denial of and struggle for identity and many more. In fact, women’s subjugation, objectification, dehumanization, victimization and secondary position is one of those deep-seated evils confronting women all over the world which are as intense today as they were at the time of their origin. Politically unstable societies and events further continue to aggravate this evil and threaten the harmonious co-existence of women as independent entities together with the male egoist society. Women, being extremely vulnerable, are easy targets of any form of atrocity, oppression, humiliation, deprivation and discrimination in our patriarchal social set-up and the irony is that all this is shadowed by patriarchy under the mask of normalcy.

The term patriarchy implies a social structure in which relationships are power based and male members of the society have all the powers which they exercise over their female counterparts. Such a set up of society hands over the reign of power to men who use it to maintain the relationship of the dominating and the dominated between the two sexes thus the suffering of women is perpetuated. Kate Millett, a renowned feminist, observes that “the military, industry, technology,
universities, science, political office, and finance—in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands.”

Explaining patriarchal societies, Adrienne Rich expresses a similar view:

“Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and, in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.”

A consciousness of victimization and awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation gradually paved way for the feminist movement which according to David Bouchier “includes any form of opposition of social, personal or economic discrimination which women suffer because of their sex.”

Feminism, as an innovative approach, emerged in 1960’s in the Western world. The term signifies the emergence of female power in order to secure equality of women with men on familial, social, political, economic, educational, moral, religious, cultural, spiritual, intellectual, artistic, sexual and legal fronts. Chaman Nahal in his article “Feminism in English Fiction” defines feminism as a “mode of existence in which woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome: whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group or ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materialises.”

Aiming at identifying the discrimination, inequality and injustice with which half of the humanity is treated in our phallocentric society, feminism as a concept, as a movement and not less importantly, as a humanistic concern strives to recognise
and emphasize the dignity of women as human beings, their contribution to society and their value as equal counterpart and complimentary to men. In fact Feminism in its manifestations is “something more than the effort to express women’s experiences: it is at once a relatively comprehensive analysis of power relations between the sexes, and the effort to change or undo any power system that authorises and condones male power over women.”

Gerda Lerner emphasizes this ‘something more’ thing in her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* saying that feminism “is not always a movement, for it can be a level of consciousness, a stance, an attitude, as well as the basis for organised effort.”

As for the feminist literature, it is largely based on the principles of feminism, and is not always militantly aggressive. It includes all literary works dealing specifically with female experience and woman’s struggle for equality and acceptance as a human being and thereby turning the spotlight on woman, endowing her with a sense of selfhood and dignity. It touches upon various aspects of woman’s life and seeks to assert the value of woman as woman and express the struggle to establish her identity. Feminist writers endeavour to break off the shackles which are instrumental in women’s subjugation and victimization. Being aware of their degradation and second rate status imposed on women, these writers, through their works, emphasize the urgent need of emancipation of women by portraying their quest for identity and self-fulfilment and struggle against oppressive male dominance in order to establish new social standards where they can be their true selves. According to Helene Cixous, a postmodern feminist, feminist writing is not
just a new style of writing but it also signifies “the very possibility of change, space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural standards.”¹⁰

Feminism has influenced literary criticism also which aims at making women’s experience as important as men’s by exposing the misrepresentation and marginalization of women in literature. Social, historical, psychological, political and gender-related issues have always engaged creative writers; and feminist criticism, with its new explorations, provides us with an opportunity to re-assess, re-interpret such issues and broadens our range of responses to them. Feminist critics, thinkers and authors like Alice Walker, Naomi Littlebear, Judith Felterbey, Michele Wallace, Lillian Smith, Elaine Showalter, Simone De Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Mary Ellmainn, Adriene Rich, Toril Moi, Sandra M. Guilbert, Susan Gubar and others have postulated, popularised and precipitated the ideas of feminism and have given their valuable contribution in offering refreshingly new readings of the major writers established within the mainstream of literary canon.

A significant number of contemporary writers have strived to portray woman who has always been robbed off her own identity, in a voice of her own. Though not all the feminist writers follow a direct and similar approach towards the goal of equality yet with a subjective, rather than an objective approach in their works, they all seem to explain the difference between sex, which is natural and predetermined and gender which is created by the society during the process of socialisation along with a particular perception about gender roles. In a way, feminist writers “instil a
positive sense of feminine identity by portraying women who are self-actualizing, whose identities are not independent on them.”

Feminist writing includes both fictional and non-fictional works, but particularly novel, for being capable of allowing more comprehensive handling of the issues pertaining to women than any other mode of expression, echoes the victimization and subjugation of women more effectively. It is noteworthy that not all the authors of feminist novels are women, there are men also who champion the cause of feminism and through their works try to put forward a body of thought and practice that recognises, criticises and seeks to change inequalities based on gender. But this is also true that women novelists, themselves representing society’s marginalised and silenced half and having a deep insight into the female psyche, more authentically present woman’s side of life. With a voice of their own they offer a diverse range of feminine experience. In the last few decades a significant number of women novelists have contributed to the enrichment of literature especially feminist novels. Doris Lessing, Anita Desai, Mahashweta Devi, Buchi Emecheta, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison are but a few to name. Through sexual awakening, sexual victimization, sexual discrimination, suffering, pain, struggle, agony, helplessness and exploitation, their female characters learn of the gendered oppressions that work through their bodies.

Gifted with great creative genius, these women novelists take up cudgels against women’s suppression and exploitation by patriarchal social system and eloquently voice the question of self-definition by exploring the violent and subtle ways in which patriarchy silences female sexuality to overpower and curb women’s
voice. By exploring and sharing a range of victimisation of female figures in their works, these novelists have not only exposed how female sexuality and bodies are defined but also controlled and exploited by men. They have invigorated the realistic novel by using it as a tool to expose how gendered oppressions are inflicted upon women by men under the guise of socio-cultural and religious traditions. Grappling with themes of women’s existence, survival and identity, women writers in their novels often feature women as ones ready to make their own decisions, to express their personal choices and also prepared to deal with the consequences of their choices, decisions and actions.

The contribution of South Asian literary geniuses in this area is conspicuous. Though South Asia has a lengthy history of excellent literary achievement, but the sprouting of feminist fiction in the recent past has created new paradigms for English language. Almost every feminist novelist from the sub-continent has tried to give voice to the pain, desire, struggle and assertions of women in the patriarchal social set up and overtly or covertly has tried to assess the women’s question by depicting vividly the blurred and traumatic picture of women of the socially constructed male dominated society of ours. Bapsi Sidhwa is one such outspokenly feminist author from South Asia whose novels apart from vehemently dealing with other socio-political concerns like partition and cultural diaspora, also present vivid pictures of pain, desire, violence, oppression, subjugation that women are made to suffer at the altar of social institutions. Internationally renowned novelist from the Indian subcontinent, Bapsi Sidhwa was born in Pakistan and like her other South Asian counterparts viz. Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Namita Gokhle, Shobha De, Kamla Markandaya, Geeta Hariharan, Tasleema Nasrin, Arundhati Roy, Rukhsana
Ahmad, Monica Ali and others, gives voice to her feministic ideologies through her fiction. Present study takes up Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) to explore and analyse the suffering, sexual trauma and painful experience, resistance and struggle for existence of female figure.

Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the most prominent Pakistani-Anglophone novelists writing today. *The Pakistani Bride* is her first written and second published novel. The novel takes up as its theme one of the pivotal concerns of feminist discourse i.e. oppression and subjugation of ‘the soft target’, the ‘other sex’ in the patriarchal set-up. It not only vividly depicts the plight of the Pakistani girl Zaitoon but that of an American girl Carol also.

In feminist literature, a woman protagonist is generally assigned distinct personality of her own and she usually does not readily accept the traditional female role imposed by the society and makes her own decisions. But in this novel Zaitoon, the title character is portrayed as a pretty, young but helpless girl—a generic victim figure—with a striking feature of ethnicity and a will to survive and live. She is Muslim refugee from India and is adopted by a Pathan during the turbulent phase of the Partition of 1947. According to Makarand R. Paranjape, “*The Bride* is dedicated to the incredibly simple, deprived, and courageous women of this magnificent country.”

The novel is known to be based on a real and pessimistic incident which was narrated to Sidhwa when she and her husband Noshir were invited to a remote camp of army in the Karakoram Mountains. It was about a young Punjabi girl from plains who was taken by a tribal into the mountains and was married to a Kohistani tribal.
But the girl ran away from her tribal husband after a month of her marriage. This was unbearable to the husband as it was as good as losing his honour according to the value system of his community. The girl had managed to survive for nearly two weeks in the lofty Karakoram mountains but her husband eventually hunted her down and found her near a bridge over Indus river and severed her head on the spot. Her decapitated body was found in the river. Sidhwa was obsessed by the sordid tale of that Punjabi girl so much that she felt compelled to fictionalize the girl’s fate and through her novel attempt to criticize the horrors and brutality of the tribal code of honour and the cruel customs of their daily life. She writes:

“The girl’s story haunted me: it reflected the hapless condition of many women not only in Pakistan but in the Indian sub-continent. Telling it became an obsession. I thought I’d write a short story; after all it had barely taken 30 minutes to narrate. Before long I realized I was writing a novel. It became *The Bride* or *The Pakistani Bride* as it is titled in India.”

Sidhwa’s fictional version alters the fate of the heroine of her book by allowing her to run and to survive against all odds and all the horrors inflicted upon her by her husband and his family and thus the novel ends on a note of futuristic happiness. The novel stands as an exclusive encomium to women’s indomitable courage and audacity, adaptability and zest for life; and at the same time it is also an attack on the barbarity of tribal customs and ruthless code of honour. It won Sidhwa the *Pakistan National Honours* of the *Patras Bokhari* award in 1985.

The setting of the novel is the mountainous region of Kohistan which is situated on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and is one of the remotest posts of the
world. “When Bapsi Sidhwa set her 1983 debut novel *The Pakistani Bride*, she could have never foreseen the region would come into prominence twenty years later—as a suspected hideout for Al Qaeda militants.”

The tribal area of Kohistan and the city of Lahore in Punjab both fall within the territory of Pakistan, but are totally diverse culturally as well as geographically from each other. The male protagonist Qasim, a Kohistani tribal, shifts back and forth between Lahore and his tribe settled along the River Indus in Kohistan, also known as the ‘Land of Mountains’ and “occupied by diverse, little studied communities and peoples… The whole area of Kohistan is notorious in North Pakistan for its anarchy, its violence and danger, its lethal conflicts both within and without.” Through this shift of Qasim, Sidhwa exposes how men exploit women for their interest whether they are from the secluded communities of Kohistan or from the densely populated city of Lahore.

The novel is a condemnatory indictment of the Pakistani society in general and Kohistani community in particular with regard to savage treatment of women during and after the Partition of 1947. The novel refers to the historical Pakistan of the later 1940’s and 1950’s. A lot has changed in over six decades of existence, yet many of the customs, traditions and women’s living conditions described in the novel still prevail in Pakistan especially in rural areas. Sadaf Fareed observes that “Though the story speaks about Pakistani society or the Indian subcontinent yet the issues discussed are entirely universal….Although the book reflects the society of 1940s but the issues discussed here still seem contemporary.”
The novel *The Pakistani Bride* has multiple plots and can be roughly divided into four parts. The first part deals with marriage of Kohistani tribal Qasim with Afshan, the death of his family and his coincidental adopting of a Punjabi girl Munni (whom he later gives the name Zaitoon), who lost her parents during the turbulence and violence of the Partition of British India into India and Pakistan. The second part describes the childhood of Zaitoon and her taking over the place as the protagonist of the novel. In the third part Zaitoon’s marriage with tribal Sakhi is dealt with and a secondary protagonist Carol, an American woman, married to a Pakistani husband, is introduced. The fourth and the last part is a detailed account of how Zaitoon runs away from her brutal tribal husband, is chased by him through the mountains, and, is eventually saved.

The novel, thus, is mainly a story of three brides – Afshan, Zaitoon and Carol, Zaitoon being the title character. Through an array of different characters the novel takes up various issues for discussion like marriage, partition crisis and the condition of women in the sub-continent. However, the epicentre of gravity and nucleus of concern remains the violence, tyrannical and proprietorial attitude of men to which women are subjected.

At the very outset of the novel, the conversation between Qasim and his father about Qasim’s marriage and an old debt gives an expression that woman is nothing more than a bargaining commodity. Ten years old Qasim is told that his marriage has been fixed with fifteen years old Afshan. The girl’s father Resham Khan has not been able to reimburse the debt he owed to Qasim’s father and therefore he has instead offered his daughter for settlement as compensation for the
loss. The novel, thus, at the very first page interrogates the sanctity of the institution of marriage through the circumstances in which Afshan and Qasim get married. There was no reason for Qasim’s family not to accept her readily because:

“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.”¹⁷

This forced marriage is thus a transaction of bodies and not a relationship based on mutual consent and understanding. Even the ill-proportionate age gap between the bride and groom is not taken into consideration. The extent of such injustice to a woman is also evident when it is revealed that Qasim’s father once “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.” (PB 8) The fundamental view of women spelled out here is very clear especially in tribal culture. The girl is seen as something purchased, and he has also made it sure that she is ‘able bodied’. Having only ‘one wife’ with himself, he could have taken her for his own property but decides to hand over her to his son instead. Qasim, the ten-years old boy has also unconsciously incorporated his father’s attitude to women. He thinks of his future wife just as a property and material or a toy. “…there was the prospect of a playmate he knew he would have the sanction to tease, to order about and to bully!”(PB 8) Bapsi Sidhwa here underlines the harsh reality that a woman is treated by the society just as an object of gratification that can be sold or purchased and something of trivial importance and marriage is a kind of licence to man to tease, to order and to bully the woman.
The fate of Afshan thus entirely rested in the decision of Qasim’s father. She could have been made to live a life as Qasim’s step-mother. So it was never a pre-arranged marriage but a settlement to prevent a blood-feud wherein Afshan, without having any say was to accept her fate decided for her by others. The daughter is thus always a means for settlement, a commodity for transaction, for selling and buying, whatever the amount of loan may be and her wish is never important, neither at the time of her transaction as settlement for agreement nor at the time of her Nikah. When Afshan, the object of settlement, is getting married to Qasim, it is not she who accepts him verbally, rather some old aunt:

‘Thrice she was asked if she would accept Qasim, the son of Arbab, as her husband and thrice an old aunt murmured ‘yes’ on her behalf’. (PB 8)

Thus Afshan, who could have ended up as his step-mother, finally becomes Qasim’s wife. On her wedding night, like every other bridegroom, Afshan is also thrilled to imagine her very first meeting with her husband:

“Afshan knew her husband was locked in the room with her, and her body trembled with anticipation. Overwhelmed by modesty, she bowed her head still further. The edge of her veil almost touched her toes.” (PB 9)

To her utter disappointment she learns that her husband is too young. Sidhwa explains delicately the confusion and dismay of the newly wedded girl:

“When in all that time there was no flicker or movement, she peered through slit lashes and saw the sandalled feet of her husband, and then the shalwar-clad legs. Her heart constricted with dismay: she was married to a boy! Hastily she looked up.
She stared in amazement at the childish, frightened face and the slanting, cringing eyes watching her as if she were about to smack him.” (PB 9)

This was something hard to believe for the puzzled Afshan:

“Was this a joke? She glanced beyond him, fervently hoping to see the man who had pushed his small brother forward to tease her. But there was no one.

‘Are you my husband?’ she asked incredulously.” (PB 9)

The physical appearance of her husband comes as a shock to her. She doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “She had been told that her groom was very young, but she had thought that he would be, like herself, at least fifteen. She began to laugh, while tears of disappointment slid down her cheeks.” (PB 10)

The girl in our society during the process of her social conditioning is inculcated with the ideas of sacrifice, patience, obedience, submissiveness and the need to accept a lower status in life. “She is taught to be shy, gentle and dignified as a person, pure and faithful as a wife, and selfless, loving and thoughtful as a mother.”18 In fact the process of value internalization begins from the very beginning. Parents and teachers instil in a girl the ‘feminine’ values of martyrdom, self-abnegation, humility, forgiveness and subservience. She has to accept and adjust without any complaints. Afshan also has no other alternative but to accept her fate uncomplainingly. Sidhwa, through the story of Afshan, very sensitively highlights the sad plight of subjugated womenfolk who are forced to accept their life-partners imposed upon them as a result of bargain in economic transactions. They have to suppress their ambitions and forget their desired life just as Afshan does in the novel. One can’t turn a blind eye to her reaction when she is asked later in the story.
about her imagination for her future husband: “I used to wander by the streams or sit
on some high place dreaming of my future husband. Gusts of wind enveloped me
and I’d imagine the impatient caress of my lover. My body was young and full of
longing…” (PB 10) The agony that she had gone through in order to suppress her
desires and in the acceptance of her ill fate is quiet evident here. This is one of the
several ways how a woman, the central nerve of the family, is subjugated and
marginalised. Without expecting any recognition she carries out her duties assigned
to her by the man who controls her, subjugates her and enjoys privileged status in
family as well as in society.

Sidhwa draws attention to another way of victimization of women in the
form of sexual abuse which is woven into the fabric of society to determine the male
supremacy. In an incident when Afshan is washing herself at the stream, Qasim
sneaks up on her and tries to grip her but Afshan slaps her hard and screams abuses.
A stranger from the next village comes upon the scene and tries to rescue Afshan by
mercilessly beating Qasim. Qasim cries “But she is my wife.” (PB 11) Afshan also
implores, “Yes, yes, let go, don’t touch him.” (PB 11) The man releases Qasim but
castes filthy look at Afshan and tries to separate the two to get Afshan to himself:

“He stared at Afshan’s wet body, at the colour that flushed her cheeks and
her suddenly darkening eyes. His expression changed. A very indecisiveness crept
into his feature. He snickered, leering at her. Afshan covered her quickly.

Edging sideways, drawn by the momentum of his new interest, the stranger
sidled towards Afshan.” (PB 11-12)
Fortunately Qasim here protects his wife, holds her arm and runs away. This is one more harsh reality of our society that a woman is very often seen as an object of male lust. According to Mary Ann Fergusson “…in every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, Mistress and as sex objects in their roles in relationship to man.”19

Afshan’s story enfold women’s virtue of resilience. Her father treats her as a commodity, barters her away to avoid a feud over money and marries her to a boy five years younger to her. Though disappointed in the beginning, she accepts her new role as a daughter-in-law and as a wife without making any complaints. A woman, ‘the other sex’ is to be defined only in relation to man. She is exchanged as gift or ‘object of settlement’ between men to enhance or develop men’s economic and social relationships. She does not have any right to rule over her own body; instead she is treated as the property of her male kin.

At sixteen Qasim becomes father and in next eighteen years he begets five more children, but unfortunately three of them die. The novel is replete with stark realism, highlighting a lot of harsh social realities as the story proceeds. Pakistan has a very high mortality rate of infants. Though the novel is about the time of partition, but even today thousands of infants die in the country of diarrhoea, typhoid, smallpox and other diseases. By the time Qasim was thirty four he had lost three children, two due to typhoid and one in a fall off a ledge.

Later an outbreak of smallpox in the village attacked Qasim’s family. His five-year old daughter, his dearest child with wide, tawny eyes, was the first victim followed by other members of the family, two sons and Afshan, within a month.
Qasim, who had survived an attack of smallpox as a child, was the only one left of his family. The epidemic had caused ravage to his family.

A year later a clansman persuades Qasim to travel down to plains (Jullundur). There he gets a job as a watchman at an English bank and works for three years.

The second and the most important bride of the novel is Zaitoon, the protagonist. Through her story Sidhwa has given a detailed account of the feminine force as well as how women were victimized and repressed in the patriarchal Pakistani society during the turbulent days of the Partition. Her story is rather simple and straightforward. Zaitoon (Munni), a Punjabi girl is orphaned by the Partition at the age of four or five. Her parents along with millions of others are forced to flee in a train to Lahore because of the Partition. But at the boarder they are killed before her eyes by a group of attacking Sikhs. Qasim, also in the same train, somehow manages to escape and it is then Zaitoon blindly runs into him, calling him ‘father’ and in chaos he saves the little child. At first, overpowered by his tribal instinct to end up the thing that bothers him, he thinks to cut her throat but soon he finds in her a resemblance with her own dead daughter Zaitoon. He adopts her, names her Zaitoon after his own daughter and takes her to Lahore. And herefrom starts the life-journey of Zaitoon and she thoroughly represents how women are victimized and inflicted upon violence, oppression, subjugation, sexual inferiority and exploitation by men and the man-made society.

At the very young age of five, Zaitoon exhibits her feminine quality of adjusting herself according to the situation. Though she is brought up by Qasim, his
friend Nikka and his wife Miriam very affectionately, yet the boundaries of social norms make them restrict the girl’s freedom and basic rights. Even though living in the city of Lahore where attaining education was not very difficult for girls even in those times, yet Zaitoon is denied the opportunity of education. She is sent to school only till class three and when at eleven she becomes pubescent, Qasim, on Miriam’s advice stops her from going to school, for Miriam considers it total waste of time and says, “Now that she’s learned to read the Holy Quran, what will she do with more reading and writing—boil and drink it?” (PB 52) Here the novelist draws attention to the fact that women are subjugated not only by the male members of the society but female members also support in suppressing other female members. Miriam continues: “She is not going to become a baboo or an officer! No, Allah willing, she’ll get married and have children.” (PB 52) Sidhwa here points out the restricted and limited roles assigned to women in the patriarchal society of Pakistan. These simple but poignant lines show that their role as a child-bearing machine is of foremost importance. It is useless for women to get education as their primary duty is to become expert in household tasks and not to question the supremacy of men by being educated and getting higher or equal positions to men. Such a view is exposed through Miriam who with a sigh says, “Poor child… had she a mother she’d be learning to cook and sew … does Bhai Qasim think he’s rearing a boy? He ought to give some thought to her marriage … who’d want an educated …?” (PB 53) Thus the discrimination in our society starts at a very tender age.

Miriam’s suggestion to marry Zaitoon off is protested by Nikka saying that she is only a baby. To this she immediately reacts, “A baby? She’s ten! I can already
see her body shaping … she’ll be safe only at her mother in law’s … A girl is never too young to marry…” (PB 53)

Although the entire content is spoken by Miriam, who herself is a woman, but she can be exonerated by the fact that her ideology and thinking pattern have been controlled, guided and conditioned in and by the male-chauvinistic society. In this context Cheryl Lange’s observation is worth noticing:

“Gender plays an important role in the lives of human beings, starting at the moment of their birth when they are given a blue blanket or a pink blanket and sent forward on a path that will turn them into what their culture considers proper for men or women. From the very first breaths, humans are taught to follow a strict code of behaviour that differs depending on their sex. In a patriarchal society, this often means that a male will lead a privileged life in which he is thought to be the standard for human experience and female will lead a subjugated, subservient life in which she is defined only in relations to male.”

Sidhwa, in later sections of the novel, also describes how the gender segregation, i.e. leading almost separate lives by men and women in the Pakistani society again is a means of subjugating women. And this segregation is observed by Purdah, the ‘burqa’ or the curtain, both in the form of a dress and also in the form of spatial distance separating the male and female quarters within the houses and zenanas with the aim of concealing female body. This Purdah or veiling is also a form of repression and exploitation of women. Jasbir Jain, an eminent critic, expresses similar views on Purdah:
“Purdah imposes on women the psychology of prisoners, of victims and the subordinates while it turns men into galores and abettors in the process of this subordination.”

During her visits to neighbourhood with Miriam, Zaitoon feels that “Entering their dwellings was like stepping into gigantic wombs; the fecund, fetid world of mothers and babies.” (PB 55) Sidhwa gives a vivid description of injustice and discrimination against women in allotting the rooms inside the house:

“Rooms with windows open to the streets were allotted to the men: the dim maze of inner rooms to the women—a domain given over to procreation, female odours, and the interminable care of children. Smells of urine, stale food and cooking hung in the unventilated air, churning slowly, room to room permeating wood, brick and mortar. Generation of babies had wet mattresses, sofas and rugs, spilled milk, sherbets and foods and wiped hands on ragged curtains; and just in case smell should fade, armies of new-born infants went on arriving to ensure the odours were perpetuated.” (PB 56)

The description with words like ‘dim maze’, ‘interminable’, ‘unventilated’, ‘smells’, ‘odour’ shows the miserable, inhuman, squalid and unhygienic conditions in which womenfolk are forced to live within the four walls of the house. The idea of women as objects for sexual gratification and child-bearing machine again finds expression in the hint of continuous increase in the population of the house. The endless domestic chores and ‘armies of babies’ suggest that there is no room for a mind of one’s own. These sexually segregated female quarters also imply one more important fact that the duties like child bearing, nurturing, and household works etc.
all belong to female sexuality and are to be strictly confined within these secret and
dingy rooms. Young adolescent girls like Zaitoon are introduced to these sexually
segagated spaces, instructed in their future roles of motherhood and are thus robbed
of their innocence and carefree life at a very early stage of life. Whether they like it
or not, they are soon to be pulled into this vortex.

Marriage is one of the most important decisions of a girl’s life. The future of
a young girl regarding her husband and his family is always at stake because it
means stepping into a world of uncertainty. Qasim settles Zaitoon’s marriage to a
tribal man, his cousin Misri Khan’s Son Sakhi as soon as she turns hardly sixteen
and just like Afshan, Zaitoon is also not consulted and she silently complies with her
father’s decision to marry her to his nephew in Kohistan. Miriam and Nikka oppose
to his decision as they fear lest the cultural difference between people living in
Lahore on plains and the tribal people of Kohistan should make this marriage an
unhappy affair and even a failure. Miriam points out the contrast and protests
vehemently, “They are savages. Brutish, uncouth, and ignorant! She will be
miserable among them…most of them are bandits; they don’t know how to treat
women! I tell you, she’ll be a slave…” (PB 93-94) But the adamant Qasim brushes
aside her requests and pleadings; he furiously asserts his patriarchal rights saying:
“She is my daughter” and “It is my word—the word of a Kohistani!” (PB 94)

Qasim’s words are more important for him than feelings of Miriam and
peace and happiness of his daughter. This is the second instance in the novel that a
bride’s life is used as a commodity, as a scapegoat again, this time to start the trade
of relations, as a means to please and re-establish the almost broken relations of
Qasim with his tribe’s people of Kohistan. Wedding comes out to be the most fateful transaction of the bride’s life and thus the bride becomes a symbol of man’s power over the life, body, feelings, aspirations, desires and the future of a woman.

Miriam even tries to dissuade Zaitoon from marrying a tribal man explaining her the difference between the two cultures but Zaitoon enthralled by the splendid life in mountains and “visions of the glorious home of her father’s forefathers and of the lover of her fancies envisaged” (PB 98) shyly says, “I cannot cross my father” (PB 80). Later when they reach Dubair, Ashiq at the army camp also tries the same by explaining the possible problems that Zaitoon might come across in the mountains with the tribal people and urges her to stay with him; she refuses his proposal saying “It is my father’s wish. I must go with him.” (PB 144)

Zaitoon, being brought up and conditioned with an ideology that defiance against the despotic patriarchal structure is an unforgivable offence, becomes the victim not only of the authoritative and proprietorial attitude of her father but also of her own innocence, obedience and silence. The notions of modesty and submissiveness have been infused in her mind to such an extent that she accepts silently her role as a commodity of male gratification. Thus the exploitation and subjugation is further accentuated by women also by keeping themselves unvoiced and repressing their desires and opinions.

However, Zaitoon, in her very first night-stay in the hills, realises that her father’s decision is wrong; she tries to raise her voice but in a mild tone, “Abba, I am not of the hills. I am not of your tribe. I am not even yours...” (PB 140) but it remains unheard.
The major of Dubair is aware of tribal ways of living and knows that Zaitoon, who actually belongs to the plains, will not be able to endure the hardships of tribal life, but he cannot do anything for her. Sidhwa in sharp words gives an account of tribal behaviour as they peep through the windows to see Zaitoon:

“...the tribals hung around the wire-mesh window peering in as at animals in a cage... their avid, leering countenances... craning necks and faces wobbled for a moment, then, swearing and jeering...” (PB 152)

Zaitoon is terribly shaken. At first she had liked the place, the hills, but now she is aware that she is pushed to step in the old world of savagery. The river is marked as a boundary between the tribal area and the army. The world across the river on the side of the army is the world she is familiar with, and where she yearns to move back. While moving towards their final destination, Zaitoon half way across the bridge thinks with reluctance: “I cross this spot and my life changes.” (PB 153) But as the novelist says “the step into her new life had been taken a month back and she was moving fatefully on its momentum.” (PB 153) This new life of hers means the ‘closed world of mountains’ (PB 153), nearly the pathless wilderness. The description of landscape and nature here corresponds to her apprehensions, doubts and fears:

“The stark heights they were crossing vividly impressed on Zaitoon what might lie beyond. Brown mountains rose endlessly, followed far up and away by endless snow. Before them stretched centuries of an intractable wilderness, un-peopled and soundless.” (PB 154) The grandeur and majesty of nature here becomes dangerously suffocating and terrifying and symbolises man’s eternal emprise into the unknown and his struggle for survival against the cruelty of nature. It also
becomes symbolic of a woman’s struggle for survival against man nature as well as nature.

Zaitoon’s romantic notions that once she had about the hills and people living there are completely dashed to ground when she comes in contact with them. Her interview with her would be mother-in-law and other women, the sight of poor children and poor tribal people, their living style, what they eat and how they eat, the cave like huts make her realise that she will not be able to adjust herself with these tribal people. She is haunted by poverty and harshness of these people and feels:

“...unaccountably restless. She had a vague recollection of an unpleasant dream: she had been standing by the river, admiring its vivid colours, when a hand come out of the ice-blue depths and dragged her in, pulling her down, down...” (PB 156)

Anticipating of an unpleasant future, Zaitoon gets frightened, cries and makes a pathetic request to Qasim, “Abba, take me back. I’ll look after you always. How will you manage without me—and food? If I must marry, marry me to someone from the plains. That jawan at the camp, Abba, I think he likes me. I will die rather than live here.” (PB 157) Qasim shocked by her brazen language and blinded by his promise of marrying her to his tribal cousin’s son, gets furious and pushing her away says, “Hush Zaitoon, that’s no way to speak to your father... It is not seemly. A decent girl doesn’t tell her father to whom he should marry her.” (PB 158) By this conversation, Sidhwa reveals how woman is deprived of her voice especially in regard to her marriage in the male dominated society wherein she is her father’s property before marriage and this property he hands over to her husband
after her marriage. Choice is not given to her. She is forced to accept what these men decide for her. Whenever she tells about her choice for her husband she is instructed that a decent girl doesn’t tell her father to whom he should marry her. In fact, there are several ways that repress and hush the voice of women in the name of modesty and honour; and if it doesn’t work, they are silenced by threatening as Qasim does when Zaitoon dares to dissuade him from marrying her to a tribal man. Forgetting all his parental love and affection, he quickly pushes her back in her subordinate place and threatens her of dire consequences if she hurts his honour by making him break his words:

“I’ve given my word. Your marriage is to be a week from today. ... 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.” (PB 158) Sidhwa here explores how Qasim, the mountain man sacrifices his own daughter’s life to insecurity, uncertainty, hardships and savagery of the cruel traditions of tribal people in order to realize his own dreams and to safeguard his own honour by keeping his words. And here “Qasim behaves more like a landlord who gifts his precious garden to a person who only guarantees destruction and annihilation of this garden.”

Zaitoon’s forced marriage with Sakhi, another important male figure in her life, brings her no joy or comfort; rather it opens up her a gateway of agony and pain. Her suffering, torture and sexploitation begin on the very first day of her marriage. Her tyrant and callous husband knows no words of love and emotion and behaves like a beast. Sidhwa gives a shocking account of their first night revealing Sakhi’s barbaric behaviour, proprietorial lust and feeling of pride for this delicate and innocent girl of sixteen:
“Sakhi surveyed his diffident bride with mounting excitement. Here was a woman all his own, he thought with proprietorial lust and pride.... the corroding jealousy of the past few days suddenly surged up in him in a murderous fusion of hate and fever. He tore the ghoonghat from her head and holding her arms in a cruel grip he panted inarticulate hatred into her face... he tugged at the cord of shalwar and the silk fell to her ankles. Before she could raise her trousers Sakhi flung her back... She screamed and screamed. ‘Abba, save me’, she shrieked. Why didn’t Qasim come? Or any of the others?” (PB 159) The idea of woman as a conquered land again and again finds expression in Sakhi’s animal-behaviour, now and later in the novel. Imran Ahmad observes:

“She is treated as a saleable entity and a commodity of gratifying her husband’s animal instinct and fulfilling her father’s whims no matter at what cost.”

Zaitoon feels shocked when Qasim leaves the village. She cries and implores him to take her back with him to the plains because she has realised the absurdity of her romantic illusion about husband and marriage. Though Qasim too had an unreasoning impulse to take his daughter back with him on some pretext or other but he silenced her by telling, “think of the people watching you. You’re a married woman now ... not a child. Your place is with your husband.” (PB 167)

Zaitoon’s tyrannical and jealous husband doesn’t treat her the way she should be in the normal course of human behaviour. Being a cultured girl, she finds herself incapable of adjusting with tribal husband who humiliates her and suspects her integrity. In fact Sakhi’s sense of insecurity with his own wife evokes in him terrible, even murderous instincts of jealousy. She cannot understand his murderous
jealousy and hatred when she mentions the Major for Sakhi to seek employment. Even at their first night, while looking at his large and black eyed bride with thick lashes, “the corroding jealousy of the past few days suddenly surged up in him in a murderous fusion of hate and fever” (PB 160) Soon after marriage his “savage subjugating will” (PB 169) shatters Zaitoon’s fantasy like the ice broken into tiny pieces: “The past week had been too much for her: her emotions had soared to unaccustomed heights of adulation, tenderness and passion; her dreams had rocketed to the stars. Then came the mercurial change that sent her crashing back into blind chasms.” (PB 169)

Sakhi wants absolute obedience from Zaitoon. When he is taunted by his cousin Yunus Khan of not being man enough to control his wife, he “burned with an insane ungovernable fury.” (PB 171) “It would seem that the entire code of honour of the tribes rests on the notions of sexual superiority and possessiveness.” His cousin’s taunt leads Sakhi to increase his savagery towards his “possessions” to show his manliness. Blinded by a savage anger, particular to ‘a land where pride and wrath are nurtured from boyhood’ (PB 171), he first batters his ox mercilessly almost to death. And when his mother Hamida comes to save the animal, he beats her also with a stick and abuses without caring that she is his mother, “I’ll teach you, he hissed, I’ll teach you meddling woman. You think you can make a fool of me? Do you?” (PB 172) Far away from any sanctity of relationship, she is just a woman in status and should be under his control. He thrashes Zaitoon also barbarously when she tries to stop him from beating his mother:

“He struck her on her thighs, on her head, shouting, “You are my woman! I’ll teach you to obey me!” Zaitoon stumbled and sprawled face down... Zaitoon,
trembling like a leaf, and moaning in pain, was helped to her feet by the women.” (PB 172-173)

This episode brings into focus the tribal manhood and the animalistic views of honour. Sakhi exercises his rights of proprietorship on his “possessions”, his beast and his women. “He beats his wife Zaitoon, his mother Hamida and his bullock on the same day almost simultaneously putting women and animals in the same category of slaves.” He believes that woman whether she is a mother or a wife can be made a domestic pet only through suppression and violence and “being a woman almost implies being owned, and being like a beast of a burden. Just as the ox can be beaten, so can the women. In the perverse value system portrayed, the honour of a man is judged by how well he can oppress “his” women.”

Zaitoon longs for Qasim’s love, for Miriam’s companionship and for the protective aura of Nikka’s status because her husband Sakhi is totally blind to the feelings of his innocent wife and inflicts untold pains on her. Her “instinct for self preservation alone kept her going.” (PB 174) Sakhi exploits her sexually, physically, psychologically and tries to find faults with whatever she does and tortures her brutally even for false reasons. Sidhwa in The Pakistani Bride has dealt with the themes of marriage, honour, partition and the position of women in sub-continent but “alongside all these themes, it is the theme of violence inflicted upon women’s body by sado-masochistic, despotic and proprietary attitude of men that becomes the focus of attention and epicentre of gravity. No matter how insensitive a reader of The Pakistani Bride to women’s question may be, he can’t turn a blind eye to the scenes of torture and a deaf ear to the screams of pain that Sidhwa has powerfully
and artistically portrayed through the life of an orphan protagonist namely Zaitoon.”

Sakhi, the “tyrannical animal-trainer” (PB 174) of a husband treats her mercilessly and would “beat her on the slightest pretext. She no longer thought of marriage with any sense of romance. She now lived only to placate him keeping her head averted unless it was to listen to a command. Then her eyes were anxious and obsequious like those of Hamida.” (PB 174) Zaitoon’s waving hand to a far-off army vehicle leads her to a lot more difficulty. It becomes a matter of suspicion for Sakhi and he gets wild and furious. The thoughtless and cruel Sakhi hits her hard with sharp stones on her spine, head and forehead. Terrified Zaitoon hurriedly scrambles for safety but Sakhi drags her along the crags, inflicting infinite hatred on her.: “You whore,” he hissed... 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! .... I will kill you...” (PB 185) Sidhwa gives here a shocking and tragic account of Zaitoon’s pathetic plight and the devilish, horrible, inhuman and barbarous behaviour of Sakhi:

“Zaitoon stood in a cataleptic trance. Sakhi shook her like a rattle and at last she cried, ‘Forgive me, forgive me, I won’t do it again ... Forgive me,’ she kept repeating the words to quell his murderous rage. Sakhi’s face was bestial with anger. ‘I will kill you, you lying slut!’

He slapped her hard, and swinging her pitilessly by the arm, as a child swings a doll, he flung her from him. A sharp flint cut into her breast... Zaitoon flinched. He aimed a swift kick between her legs, and she fell back. Sakhi kicked her
again and again and pain stabbed through her. She heard herself screaming.” (PB 186)

With all her innocence, submissiveness, obedience and other feminine qualities, Zaitoon possesses an extra-ordinary will to live. This brutality of Sakhi makes her resolve to run away which is the only alternative before her instead of being a martyr to insults and tortures of the tribal Sakhi; and one day she goes to fetch water and hides herself behind the hills. She is aware that escaping in the treacherously pathless mountains is almost impossible but she also knows that to achieve emancipation, rather survival, she must start a rebellion against the cruel code of conduct in which she is caught up. “She knew that in flight lay her only hope of survival.” (PB 186)

According to tribal code of conduct, a woman cannot even think of divorce if she is not happy as it would mean raising a question of her husband’s honour. Strange is the tribal code of honour. For honour, a father offers his daughter as a commodity to settle the question of debts, for honour a father doesn’t hesitate to kill his beloved daughter and for honour a husband treats his wife barbarously. That’s not enough, even the entire community gets united to murder the woman who tries to hide herself from clutches of her brutal husband just to save their honour. Zaitoon, in spite of being aware of all this, chooses an unknown, indirect, difficult and untrodden path in the mountains with a faint hope if she escapes and crosses the bridge, she may get help. For the first time in life, she is alone, cut off from the society, no longer a daughter or a wife or even a woman, but a female human
struggling hard to survive, to save itself from the cruel clutches of male dominated society with its cruel codes of conduct and a false code of honour.

Sidhwa artistically gives a horrible and at the same time a piteous account of Zaitoon’s tortuous journey through the unfamiliar mountains whose magic and splendour had impressed her once, now seem to her as harsh, brutal and unforgiving as the Kohistani inhabitants. The misery, torture and suffering that Zaitoon comes across during her flight for survival through the mountains leave a deep and shocking impact on the reader. Empty stomach, she struggles hard against two enemies, Sakhi’s tribe and the mountains and is lost in the mountains:

“Zaitoon knew that somewhere in the serpentine vaults of the ravine and in the glacier-riven valleys she had lost her direction, and that river gorge could be hidden anywhere in the myriad furrows between the mountains...mountains closed in on her like a pack of wolves.” (PB 197)

Wolves, she of course comes across in the course of her flight for survival, and these wolves are in the guise of men. Two tribals from Chherkhl, appear from nowhere, keep her hostage for two hours and mercilessly rape her till she becomes unconscious. Here again sexual violence against a starved, tired, helpless girl brings into focus how worthless this poor creature is before the eyes of men and how men take advantage of the helplessness of women and thereby subjugate them physically and psychologically. Here again she is pushed into the set up of society as merely an object of sexual gratification and inferior and sub-ordinate woman. “When Zaitoon regained consciousness, her body screamed with pain. She wept, putting her trembling legs through the shalwar. Her brown skin gaped through new rents in the
cloth. She had not seen her legs in days and gazed in revulsion at the twitching, fleshless shanks...” (PB 230) All of a sudden the image of the mad woman in ragged shirt, open at the neck, with sun burnt skin, crazily smiling all the time, whom she had encountered at Lawrence Garden, Lahore comes before her eyes. This is one more horrible image that Sidhwa presents about the violence, sexploitation and subjugation of women:

“For a moment, Zaitoon saw herself rushing wild and wanton over the mountains. She now knew the woman had been raped. Abandoned and helpless, she had been living on the charity of rapists . . . and on theft.” (PB 231)

Sakhi, her husband, on the hunt for Zaitoon along with other tribesmen, is not at all concerned about her security rather he is more concerned about his so called ‘honour’ and humiliation that he will have to face due to his wife’s fleeing from him. There is not the least hint of repentance for what he has done to his wife that could not let her survive in his tribal set up.

For nine days and nights, Zaitoon wanders in the lofty hills like a wounded animal hunted by the tribal men. At times a fear of her life’s end by Sakhi sweeps over her:

“She feels him move and her destiny is compressed into seconds. She hurtles in a short-cut through all the wonders and wisdom of a life unlived. Instantly old, her tenure spent, she is ripe to die... Sakhi’s hand bites into her fleshless shoulder. Allah, let it be swift. I can’t bear any more.” (PB 235)

By the end of her flight, Zaitoon is such a total wreck and so starved that she doesn’t look like a human being: “She scurried over the rock like a skeletal wraith.”
Finally this journey ends up when Major Mushtaq finds her half-alive and half-dead, “lifted her, huddled in a natal curl in the blanket” (PB 239) and takes her to the army camp.

Fortunately, Zaitoon survives but she is so tormented and shocked that her mental hygiene is unpredictable. There is, however, no doubt that her journey from subjugation to survival, from captivity to emancipation is a victory against male chauvinistic system. Commenting on her journey Indira Bhatt says:

“Zaitoon’s odyssey from the plains to the snow mountains and back to the plains is symbolic of the inner journey of the young woman from the fantasy world of love, romance and heroes to the harsh and hostile realities of life, where man is the hunter and exploiter, cruel and inhuman treating woman and animal alike. It is a barbaric world of uncivilized people that Sidhwa brings to life and light.”28 Her struggle for emancipation from patriarchal oppression highlights a woman’s rare spirit of bravery and courage and “endorses a challenge to the stricures of patriarchy.”29

Zaitoon’s plight, the pivot of the novel is judiciously juxtaposed by the plight of an American girl Carol, the third bride in the novel and the most important woman besides Zaitoon exposing the main issue of the novel i.e. the position, the treatment and subjugation of women in one way or the other. Apparently surrounded by gentility and sophistication, she is also oppressed and exploited by men in the male-dominated world. The account of this civilized middle-class Western woman reinforces Zaitoon’s story and conveys how women are denied their identity and expected to have silent voice or no voice. Also, she reflects the dilemma of an open-
minded woman who unknowingly decides to settle down with a man who belongs to a very conservative religion. Her subjugation can be understood in her being a victim of sexual repression in a number of ways. Through her relationship with Farukh and Major Mushtaq and a chance encounter with some tribal people, Sidhwa underlines again how women are subjugated by being treated just as an object.

An ordinary young American girl of sixties Carol while working as a sales girl in a cosmetic store meets Farukh, a Pakistani engineering student, falls in love with him, marries him and accompanies him on his posting to the mounts of Kohistan. Carol also, like Zaitoon had romantic fantasies about Pakistan as a land of romance and adventure initially. She was attracted by Farukh’s old-fashioned, possessive and intense nature in the first place but that same nature on their arrival to Pakistan changes into insane jealousy and suspicion as their society has a strong segregation of genders where “a man may talk only with unmarriageable women—his mother, his sisters, his aunts and grandmothers.” (PB 131) Her Western upbringing fails her to understand that “her casual American ways in a country where few women were seen unveiled” (PB 176) attract the men. Farukh warns her, “These goddamned men even fall in love with holes in trees! Don’t let it flatter you.” (PB 176) But being naturally responsive and brought up in a society free from sexual repression, she does not remain unaffected by the “advances she had resisted, at first casually, then with increasing strain” (PB 176) made to her by the “bronze, liquid-eyed men.” (PB 177)

Though she tries to conform to the norms of the conservative society of Pakistan but she fails to understand the gender distinction and becomes an object of
her husband Farukh’s possessive jealousy. He interprets Carol’s ways and actions as expression of her sexual desires. Born and brought up in a sexually repressed society, he takes her friendly gestures for sexual invitations. Her laughter, friendly conversation and her ‘touching’ other men drive him mad, “I’m ashamed of you... You laugh too loudly. You touch men ...” (PB 108) Farukhs’s sense of insecurity and suspicion makes their marriage difficult with every passing day. Carol strives not to provoke his jealousy but in vain. He suspects her endlessly and accuses her of encouraging other men. He doesn’t believe her when she explains how someone tried to touch her, and she stopped him with a slap:

“You’re lying. You enjoyed it. Every bit of it. Most likely you encouraged him. You welcomed him. You devoured him. You opened your arms wide thrusting out your pink tits! ... Don’t be smart with me! You widened your legs like this, and...” (PB 111)

Though he doesn’t torture her physically like Sakhi, but the mental and emotional trauma that he puts her through with his ‘insatiable suspicions’ and ‘his morbid craving for what he called ‘the truth’ (PB 110) shatters her completely. As his overbearingly possessiveness loses its charm for her she realises that she “hated what it had done to her. It had corroded her innocence, stripped her, layer by layer, of civilised American niceties. She was frightened to see parts of herself change into a hideously vulgar person.” (PB 111)

The degeneration of an amorous relationship into distrust and suspiciousness breaks her heart and she gets attracted towards Major Mushtaq’s sexual stirrings. He sexually exploits Carol and uses her like his wife, as and when he wishes. He hardly
cares about her resistance given him time to time in response to his advances. Carol, on the other hand, passionately loves him despite knowing that he has a wife and four children to whom he belongs irrevocably. She decides to divorce Farukh and marry Mushtaq who flirts with her in the absence of Farukh. But she realizes that her body was only an object of desire for him when he shows his inability to marry her. He explains to her: “...in spite of you hear our being able to have four wives, we take marriage and divorce very seriously. It involves more than just emotions. It’s a social responsibility...” (PB 181) Sidhwa reveals male hypocrisy through Mushtaq who apparently seems to love his wife, cannot even think of forsaking her, and does not hesitate in sleeping with his friend’s wife.

There is one more episode, when Carol is made to feel uneasy and threatened, this time by the tribal males. One day while out touring with Mushtaq, she enters into the tribal territory across the bridge. Three tribal men including Sakhi and his cousin Yunus Khan throw stones at them and mockingly stare at Carol’s unveiled body. They skewer their jeering and lecherous glances at Carol in ruthless speculation rendering her selfless, something not human: “For the first time Carol knew the dizzy, humiliating slap of pure terror. The obscene stare stripped her of her identity. She was a cow, a female monkey, a gender opposed to that of the man—charmless, faceless, and exploitable.” (PB 120)

The novelist poignantly describes Carol’s disillusionment with life. While discussing Zaitoon’s fleeing, Mushtaq and Carol get into a discussion about men’s jealousy and the way women get killed or have their noses chopped off “for one reason or other . . . imagined insults, family honour, infidelity . . .” even “imagined
infidelity.” (PB 223) She asks Mushtaq, “Do you think Farukh would kill me?” and he answers, “Who knows? I might if you were my wife.” (PB 224) All this disturbs Carol and she suddenly has a realisation which bursts out in her words:

“So that’s all I mean to you,” she said, “That’s really what’s behind all the gallant and protective behaviour 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 that girl does as an individual to those tribals, not any more than a bitch in heat. You make me sick. All of you.” (PB 224)

And later when she comes across a young tribal woman’s head bobbing up and down in the dark waters of river, all her romantic fantasies are crushed to a total disillusionment in a crude and painful manner. Now she fully faces the harsh reality of women’s life in a conservative society where gender segregation and gender discrimination place women in a secondary and inferior position. She comprehends her own plight too: “She could no more survive among them than amidst a pride of lions. Even if she survived the privation . . . her independent attitude would get killed!” (PB 227) She too, like Zaitoon, has been exploited by men and men-made society. The miserable plight of Zaitoon also makes her apprehend her own plight as Zaitoon “unlocked a mystery, affording a telepathic peephole through which Carol had a glimpse of her own condition and the fateful condition of girls like her.” (PB 228) The woebegone tale of both the women exposes the subjugated position of women in Pakistani society.

Through the images and glimpse of the life of other women like Hamida and the dancing girl Shahnaz also Bapsi Sidhwa explores the plight of women and dual
mentality of men. That the social system with the dominance of men is indeed oppressive for women becomes clear even by the short presence of Hamida, Sakhi’s mother. Hamida, once tall, pretty is now a hideous hag, aged prematurely at only forty by the hard labour, continued pregnancies and disease. Even in this condition she is brutally thrashed by her own son. When Sakhi, his father Misri Khan and other clansmen silently prepare for Zaitoon’s hunt, she gets terrified about Zaitoon’s possible murder for ‘honour’ and “was overcome by the memory of her three dead sons: the weight of each child in her body for nine months, the excruciating pain, drudgery, sweat; and scant years later, the heartbreak when, one by one, each one of her sons was carried home on a crude stretcher swinging from the men’s shoulder...Men and honour. And now this girl...” (PB 191) Through this touching reflection of Hamida, Sidhwa reveals her bodily exploitation by her men. Her husband ‘used’ her to produce children whom she carried in her womb, nurtured with great labour but she has no rights over her husband and children.

Exploitation of women is also highlighted by the appearance of women working as prostitutes or dancing girls in chapter eight. Men in the novel go to Hira Mandi, the prostitution centre of Lahore, whenever they want to enjoy the company of women. Under the cover of a place of music and poetry, the girls here are forced to do the business of prostitution, strippers and courtesans. Nikka and Qasim also go to Hira Mandi to enjoy the dance of the dancing girl, Shahanaz. The youngest dancing girls of Hira Mandi are not much older than Qasim’s twelve years old daughter Zaitoon. But protection of his daughter and enjoying the sensual company of the dancing girls are separate issues for him. The incident ironically satirises the double standards of men. Women at their home are protected by burqa even from
the people’s glances and on the other hand, the helpless women working as dancing girls are compelled to remove the *purdah* and display their body to please the sex-starved men for a little money. In his analysis of *The Pakistani Bride*, Niaz Zaman comments on *purdah* saying:

“On its positive side purdah gives rise to a certain type of mystery, romance and excitement, though Sidhwa makes it very clear that the same segregation as its worst extreme is also responsible for the repressions that creates places like Hira Mandi where flesh is sold under the mask of culture...”

These dancing girls are denied identity; they are nobody. They are the ‘property’ of pimps who control their lives and movements and instead of hiding their property, exhibit it to all to earn money. In any case, women in a *purdah* at home, or without any *purdah* as in Hira Mandi have no right on their own body and mind.

Sidhwa here presents the pathetic picture of a disabled, blind and diseased woman also who is forced to dance before a number of spectators by a man who controls and guides her actions by hitting her with a cane. She is being mocked at by the spectators who obscenely shake her body and call to her as to a monkey. The scene is really tragic as it reveals that the sick woman who is useless in the house or in the bed for the man who ‘owns’ her, is used by him as a dehumanised entity, as an animal that he can display to earn some extra money.

Sidhwa in *The Pakistani Bride* is deeply concerned about the issue of exploitation of women. The passing mention of little girls ‘burdened with even
younger children on their hips’ (PB 57) and a ten years old girl being pregnant puts sharp focus on the sexual exploitation of women and little girls at the hands of men.

To sum up, Bapsi Sidhwa successfully deals with the travails of the ‘other sex’, ‘the soft-target’, ‘the feminine of man’. One cannot deny that though the setting and events of the novel is around the Partition yet the marginalisation, subjugation and exploitation of women with varying degree of intensity is still one of the universal harsh realities that the so-called civilised society is facing even today. All the major and minor female characters in the novel— like Afshan, Zaitoon, Carol, Miriam, Hamida and Shahanz-- are confined within the restricted framework of rules imposed by the patriarchal system of the society. None of these women is allowed to play any role in taking important decisions for her own life even though her whole being might be at stake. Through the life-stories of different women in the novel, Sidhwa shows how dangerous the patriarchal world can be for a woman who dares to challenge and resist the so called codes of conduct defined by the male members of the society.

However the novel has a ray of hope too. Sidhwa’s bride in spite of all the pains, atrocities and miseries, struggles and fights against all odds and finally survives though her husband is compelled by Mushtaq to believe that she is dead. The writer suggests certain optimistic possibilities for Zaitoon in the words of Major Mushtaq:

“She would be all right, he mused. In a few hours he would quietly stow her away in the vehicle taking Farukh and Carol to Lahore. Let Carol take care of her!
She could hide her in the States! Or perhaps Ashiq could propose marriage after a decent interval—she would be as securely hidden in his village...” (PB 245)

To conclude, “The novel not only highlights the struggle and courage of women but a condemnatory view of the practices of the patriarchal society of Pakistan that treats women in a barbaric manner as it is evident in the treatment meted out to women characters particularly Zaitoon. Bapsi Sidhwa thus depicts the victimization of her women at the hand of the age-old patriarchal tribal culture, social and environmental forces, and their victory over these forces.”

31
REFERENCES

1. Narayana Ram Acharya, ed. *Subhashita Ratna Bhandagara* (Bombay: Nirmaya Sagar Press, 1952), pg. 351. (Sanskrit)


17. Bapsi Sidhwa, *The Pakistani Bride* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990), pg. 7. (Subsequent references from the book are taken from the same edition. It is shortly referred as PB.)


23. Ibid.


