Chapter – Six

Plights of Women

In literature, novel is one of the best literary genres. The word ‘novel’ is an English transliteration of the Italian word, ‘novella’ used to describe a short compact, broadly realistic tale popular during the medieval period. The novel is a mixture of high art and popular culture interest in Meta fiction, that is, fiction, about the nature of fiction. R.J. Rees observes:

Until the Seventeenth Century The word “novel,” if it was used at all, meant a short story of the kind written and collected by Boccaccio in his Decameron. By about 1700 it had got something like its present meaning, which, as the Shorter Oxford Dictionary tells us, is ‘a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length in which characters and actions representative of real life are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity. (106)

Thus, novel has been a part of human culture for over a thousand years, although its Origins are somewhat debated. There have been stories and tales for thousands of years, but novels must combine a few unique characteristics in order to be defined as such, first a novel written down rather than told through an oral account. Secondly, novels are meant to be fictional in form, differentiating them from myths which are said to have their basis in reality or theology. It deals with human character in social situations, man as a social being. It deal with human characters in a social situations, man as a social being. It places more emphasis on character, especially one well rounded character that on plot.
When it comes to the voice of Women, there is then a big discord, as to who denies and who provides the voice. Voice is metaphorically, the influential power, a woman can exercise wilfully in the society. Sidhwa’s female characters in *The Bride*, as in all her other novels, are as strong if not stronger than the men who run their lives; in the way that they resist the limitations of the definition of woman which circumscribes their identity. In general, Sidhwa’s novels provide an alternative perspective to the predominant narrative of Pakistani literature, for it subverts the roles assigned to female figures. This alternative voice is successful in re-creating women’s sense of history and belonging. The concept of a ‘feminist historiography’ is best explained by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid’s ‘Introduction to Recasting Women’.

Historiography may be feminist without being, exclusively, women’s history. Such historiography acknowledges that each aspect of reality is gendered, and thus involved in questioning all that we think we know, in a sustained examination of analytical and epistemological apparatus, and in dismantling of the ideological presuppositions of so called gender-neutral methodologies. A feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women as something to be framed by a context in order to be able to think of gender difference as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s protagonists are women, who have refused to accept the narrow and constricting roles assigned to them under vague terms such as honour, shame and modesty among others. These labels assume different interpretations under different circumstances. All these explications are most often than not, in the hands of the patriarchal figures, ruthlessly exploit their advantage over the women.
Sidhwa’s narratives articulate the pain and injustices endured by these victims who are otherwise made to suffer in silence and whose protestations are denied a voice.

In *Crow Eaters*, Bapsi Sidhwa presents the culturally sanctioned sexual callousness and the larger forms of social violence. This is attested by the visit to the Hira Mandi by Freedy and his British friends. In a similar manner in *The Bride*, Qasim and Nikka are relieved of hunger. Cicely Havel has the following to say in his regard, as she writes, “the women in *The Bride* are as much the victims of machismo as its beneficiaries and it is a generalized combination of ignorance, regression and male privilege rather than a specific culture which Sidhwa criticizes” (116).

Faredoon Junglewalla, his wife Putli and his mother-in-law Jerbanoo, ensconced amidst the Toddywallas, Bankwallas, Botliwallahs and Chaiwallas, form the wafts and the weaves of the tapestry of the Parsee community of pre-partition Lahore and India.

Years ago, during the last years of the 19th century, Faredoon or Freddy as he was called had decided to uproot his family from a nondescript village in Central India and move north to greener pastures. His destination was Punjab, the fertile land of five rivers and the holy Sapta Sindhu of the ancient Zoroastrian texts. And so the young Freddy with a pregnant wife, young daughter and mother-in-law in toe, had set off in a bullock cart to Lahore.

With help from the local Parsees, Freddy settles down in Lahore. What follows is a cat-eat-mouse game between him and his cantankerous mother-in-law Jerbanoo. Old Jerbanoo is often greedy. And much to Freddy’s chagrin, this fact goes almost unnoticed by his wife Putli, who is now busy taking care of their
expanding family. Interspersed in their family saga are the stories of the Parsee community, their births and weddings, the customs and traditions and their copings with the recent brush with modernity. The normally liberal Freddy’s discomfort at his son’s love for a non Parsee girl is very apparent. Shampa Chatterjee observes:

I am not saying that only we have the spark. Other people have it too; Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, they too have developed pure strains through generations. But what happens when you marry outside your kind? The spark so delicately nurtured, so subtly balanced, meets something totally alien and unmatched. Its precise balance is scrambled. It reverts to the primitive. (109)

While the plot revolves around the Junglewalla clan, other characters and events shed much light on the spirit of oneness and the solidarity amongst the Parsees. Yet with this book Sidhwa has drawn a lot of flak from Parsees for her depiction of community. The title too (anyone who talks too much is said to have eaten crows) had created a furore of sorts. But the feeling of oneness is beautifully depicted in the narrative:

Visiting Parsees are rare. When they did steam into the city station, the community mood became festive. The Toddywallas, the Bankwallas, Chaiwallas, Bottliwallas and Junglewallas vied with each other in making the visitors welcome. They were wafted from home to home for breakfast, brunch, lunch, tea, drinks and dinner. The morning after, fortified with enough roasted chickens and hard-boiled eggs to feed an entire train, the hung-over wrecks were seen off at the station. Grandmas, grandpas, aunts, uncles and children
waved until the little fluttering handkerchiefs faded from view. (113)

Through the characters are most loud and boisterous, Sidhwa’s writing has a wonderful quality of restraint in it. At places the narrative is so quotidian and that one is often reminded of Rohinton Mistry. Was it a coincidence that Mistry’s world Firoz Shah Bagh was also a portrayal of the Parsees!

Commenting on the portrayal of women characters in Bapsi Sidhwa’s novels, K. Nirupa Rani observes:

Sidhwa’s men have distinct personality traits but her women are not extravagant they are ordinary, devoid of feelings. In their limited orbits they are socially active and lead only a superficial existence.

Even though they are active, they are flat characters. (123)

The generation of woman writers from 1970s broke with the past literary tradition. These Women writers were more concern with the individual rather than social or collective to the persona from the communal to the individual. This shift is clearly expressed by the questioning for identity and by the questing female protagonist which characterizes the urban middle class writing of the 1970s and the 1980s. As Anita Singh Writes:

Women were defined by their sexuality; and so were writers. A woman’s writing and Her life tended to be judged together on the sense terms … with draw backs, women’s expire was founded… internally divided by the contradictory demands made by bourgeois society’s ideals of feminist and its attitude to the women who had first won it was deeply ambivalent. (122)
Another initial major characteristic of the novel is realism—a full and authentic report of human life. The traditional novel has a unified and plausible plot structure sharply individualized and believable characters a pervasive illusion of reality. Novels are written by man and woman writers. Women novelists are making bold attempts to explore conditions of as a social and psychological phenomenon at the base of a movement for social change.

For instance, in *The Bride* Sidhwa says, “Women the world over through the ages asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, and enslaved to get impromptunately impregnated, beaten up, bullied and disinherited. It was an immutable law of nature” (126).

*The Bride* is an indictment of the Kohsitan community in particular and the Pakistani society in general with regard to its brutal treatment of women. The women are marginalized and have, in a number of cases, no say in decision-making processes or actions which may ultimately seal their fates. Qasim is offered a bride at the tender age of ten, not because he has done anything significant or heroic to deserve that honour, but for the mere fact that Resham Khan had been unable to make payment on the loan he had taken from Qasim’s father.

And so, Afshan is given in marriage to compensate for her father’s failure to come up with money. This is not a pre-arranged settlement, but is done to prevent a blood feud. The amount of money is not significant; it could have been ten rupees or a thousand rupees, the daughter is available anyway. This transaction reveals the status of a woman as nothing more than a bargaining commodity, whose role as such has already been decided. The full extent of this injustice is
brought into focus, when it is revealed that “To be with Qasim’s father had thought of marrying the girl himself” (8). Afshan becomes Qasim’s wife without knowing how close she had been ending up as his step-mother. The entire matter rested in Qasim’s father’s hands and the decision could have gone either way or all without Afshan having any say in the matter at all. She is forcibly ‘partitioned’ from her family and dis-located from her home to a new environment which she now has to call her ‘home’ revealing the problems of how to define ‘home’ But she, like the other female characters, has the resilience to adapt quickly to her new environment and she easily wins the love of Qasim’s mother. Her feelings towards Qasim are maternal rather than that of the wife he expected: He loves her vivacious, girlish ways and is totally won by her affection. He teases her and played pranks. When he is particularly unkind or obdurate, his wife and his mother combined to give him a thrashing. Then Qasim would shout, “I am your husband. How dare you!” and he would hate her” (10). Afshan is assertive enough to protect her ‘space’ in her personal life and to determine when Qasim is ready to come to her as a husband, when she is bathing herself in the stream.

The atmosphere of dislocation and partition is sustained throughout the novel as the conflict between a character’s location and identity is skilfully tackled by Sidhwa. Carol is another character dislocated in Pakistan and in way ‘partitioned’ from her home and culture in America. She is totally alien to the culture and her surroundings. She has left America, yet is unwilling to adapt to the ways of life that people lead in Pakistan. She still fervently clings to her view of the ‘strange’ customs and traditions of this country, which in her eyes are definitely inferior to her civilized way of life.
What Carol has imagined to be exotic has failed to live up to the harsh image of reality, as it is apparent in her personal relationship with her husband, Farukh. Yet she chooses to stay in Pakistan because it is still better than the life she has in San Jose. She has been able to adjust herself to some aspects of her adopted culture, maintaining a balance between her American upbringing and her present state.

Through Carol, Sidhwa introduces the economic class structure of Pakistan, in the process revealing its members’ privileges and hypocrisies. Carol chooses to stay in Pakistan because she is able to have an identity which would be non-existent if she has continued to work as a shop-assistant in a departmental store in San Jose.

Sidhwa conveys the fears and boredom of a single woman worker by making Carol stay in Pakistan, with its alien and sometimes claustrophobic culture rather than return to the drudgery of American life. And so, Carol chooses not to renew her contacts with the lands and culture that is hers. She is presented as a luminal figure in both her native and foreign societies, neither of the ‘identifies’ fits her character.

The major female figures, like Zaitoon, Carol and Mariam are confined to the narrow framework of rules imposed in general by the patriarchal society. They are not expected to play any pivotal role in the ‘significant’ decisions, even though their feelings and their whole being might be at stake. This aspect of their suppression is abundantly enunciated by the treatment meted out to the young Afshan.
Women become anonymous. Their identity is denied. They are treated as sexual objects or the ‘other’. They are muted and denied of all possible ways and means of existence. It is contrasted by Zaitoon and Carol. Ralph J. Crane comments:

Carol’s experience as he foreign wife of a Pakistani are juxtaposed with Zaitoon’s ordeal as an ‘outsider’ married to a Kohistani tribesman, and together Carol’s circumstances and Zatioon’s awful plight are used by Sidhwa to highlight the position of women in Pakistani society. (52)

Thus, Women stand on a continuously shifting ground. They are denied of space and status. The notions of ‘honour,’ ‘shame’ and ‘social position’ are all words scripted on a woman’s body by the male hegemony.

The incessant obsession is inherent in men to have control over women. The society places man’s honour in the conquest of woman’s body and the consequent annihilation of her identity. As Nikka establishes himself in his business, “Mariam, reflecting her husband’s rising status and respectability, took to observing strict purdah. She seldom ventured out without her veil.” (Brıde : 51)

Commenting on Sidhwa’s The Bride is a remarkable read. Priam Maya Dora observes:

Admittedly, the day I received my review copy, I was apprehensive about cracking it after I had seen a couple of scathing reviews on the Sawnet mailing list. And actually, I didn't even have to open the book to begin cringing. Right on the cover, under the title, is an eroticized picture of an enchantingly kohl-rimmed brown eye
peeping out from under festively-sequined fabric and topped off with a stick-on bindi. I don’t know whether I was more offended by the cultural inaccuracy of a bindi on a Muslim bride or the historical inaccuracy of the stick-on-ness of it. Alright; that is just visual presentation, and not every writer has authority over the packaging of their book. Still, just a few pages into the book, I was further puzzled by the description of the dancing girl in a Lahore brothel performing ‘kathakali.’ Because I believe in resisting a generalization of cultural details down to a stereotypical norm (and because I really enjoyed Sidhwa's earlier work), I began to advocate despite my doubt: maybe this is a Muslim girl who likes to wear bindis, may be the dancer was indeed performing Kathakali and not Kathak, and that's why she was so special. (135)

Sidhwa is a tremendous story-teller, and despite the apparent initial gaffes, it is easy to trust her voice and easier still to be drawn into the story, which culminates in a heart-stopping suspenseful chase. The story is primarily that of Zaitoon, who is orphaned during partition and brought up in Lahore by Qasim, a Pathan who has left his mountainous village for the plains of Pakistan after smallpox takes his entire family. To please Qasim, who she believes is her real father; Zaitoon agrees to marry a Pathani relation, Sakhi. She proceeds into the arranged marriage excited by the shopping, attention, and presents, and romanticizing her imminent adulthood and the machismo of her intended. Despite her unrealistically romantic notions, it becomes evident that her capriciousness and the sadistic jealousy of her husband do not mesh, and after a humiliating and hurtful skirmish
with him, she understands that she is in mortal peril and determines to run away.
Whether Zaitoon makes it to the safety of the Pakistani Army outpost is the
dynamic that drives the narrative.

There is also a second ‘Pakistani bride’ in the novel, whose life parallels
that of Zaitoon's at a slant in an economically privileged cultural milieu; Carol is a
young American woman who has dropped out of college to marry Farukh and has
returned to his native Pakistan with him. The jealousy, possessiveness and
compromises that mark the lives of both Zaitoon and Carol differ merely in degree
but it is a difference that literally marks the variance between life and death.

Although this is Sidhwa's most recently published novel, it is
chronologically her first, written well before her first published novel, *The Crow-
Eaters* (1983). Hence the disparity between the copyright and publication dates.
Anita Desai's foreword points out that the geographical locale of the novel is one
that is of great political interest in the USA since the events of September 11, 2001.
Personally, I thought it was a charming piece of postcolonial impudence how the
term ‘Pakistani bride’ so often coded as an iconic reference to cultural regression
in Western media is in this novel intended in reverse: Zaitoon the Pakistani bride is
too liberated and daring in the context of her Pathani- in-laws. By providing range
and scale to the continuum of Muslim characters peopling The Pakistani Bride,
Sidhwa challenges the Eurocentric inclination in stereotyping all Muslims as
monolithically alike in their beliefs.

What the society seems to dictate is that it is permissible for Mariam to work
alongside for individually on her own when it was difficult for Nikka to manage on
his own. But now that he has the ability to fulfil his financial obligation of running
the household, it is time for his wife to be segregated from the general public. It is taken for granted that the wife would comply with these guidelines. What the society seems to dictate is that as a man acquires the financial stability and stature in the society it is important for his ‘Bizet’ (honour) that his wife/daughter be protected from the men in the society. This is done because other men do not respect women and may look or make unwanted advancements towards these women.

What it means to promulgate, without saying it explicitly is that it is acceptable to look upon others’ honour wife as long as they are allowed to mingle with the general society because the husband does not have enough financial ability to take care of his family. The place of a man in a society and the degree of precautions he must undertake to protect his honour go hand in hand.

A much harsher honour code is employed in Kohistan. Zaitoon becomes the recipient of Sakhi; her husband’s to be disgust of the ‘other’. Just because he observes Zaitoon waving at the Army Jeep, he loses his temper, and in the process passes on all his hatred and bitterness to her, as he shouts, ‘You whore,’ he hissed. His fury was so intense she thought he would kill her. He cleared his throat and spat full in her face. “You dirty, black little bitches, waving at those pigs… you wanted him to stop and fuck you didn’t you?” (Bride : 185).

The tribal’s honour system, as presented in the novel seems to come from a very narrow point of view. This kind of presentation is very easily believed by those who may not possess enough knowledge about the Kohistanis. As for example, the Indian critic, Makarand Paranjape takes in everything presented in novel without questioning any of the events presented. According to him, “It
would seem that the entire code of honour of the tribes rests on the notions of sexual superiority and possessiveness” (*Bride* : 36).

Religious fanaticism has always fanned the fire of gender bias. In *An American Brat* there are veiled references to the sexual exploitation of women in Pakistan. Safia Bibi’s case is an example. The sixteen year old servant who is raped and made pregnant was charged with adultery. “It required the testimony of four ‘honourable’ male eye witnesses or eight female eye-witnesses to establish rape” (236). This law has reduced the work of the female eye witness fifty percent as if women’s eyes were incapable of perceiving the truth.

Carol’s Pakistani husband, Farukh, on the other hand, is presented as an intensely jealous husband because of the overt attention his American wife attracts in his so called liberal and educated circles. He belongs to the upper-middle class of Pakistanis, who in their ideas consider themselves much more westernized, and thus more open and liberal, and may generally tend to look down upon the traditional and antiquated ethics practised by the lower-middle and lower classes.

An example of this gulf of ideas is presented by Major Mushtaq’s disgust and anger at the barbaric customs of the Kohistanis. But these new ideals are not deeply ingrained enough for Farukh to realise that just because his wife may smile and talk to a man does not mean that she has a carnal relationship with him. He becomes Sakhi’s counterpart on this side of the bridge. This lack of conviction in his own beliefs makes him extremely suspicious of his wife and seems to widen the gap in their relationship. The most disturbing part of this situation is that he is not even aware of his actions because he has never questioned his beliefs. This
distance, which exists between husband and wife, Sidhwa seems to suggest, is one of the reasons which contributes to Carol’s sexual affair with the Major.

Major Mushtaq, who seems to love his wife, is presented as having no qualms about sleeping with his friend’s wife, for it fits in his liberal way of thinking. The same person reveals a much more traditional side of him when Carol admires Sakhi and Misri Khan and asks to be introduced as the novelist observes:

Mushtaq was furious. Get in and close the window, he commanded angrily… You know how their minds work. He’ll spread it all over, I am keeping a tart!... you are really something, are not you? Don’t you know by now that women don’t ask for introductions to such men? (*Bride* : 220)

Mushtaq’s outburst reveals the fear of a woman being more than what is expected of her and in this case, the desire of acquiring an identity, of being more than a foreign woman who is married to a Pakistani. The worst fate, among the characters in the novel is assigned to Zaitoon. First of all, she is used as a sacrifice by Qasim to re-establish his link with his homeland and then she is left in a totally alien and hostile environment without knowing what identity to assume.

As she is almost raped by Sakhi on their first night of marriage, she has no one who can explain and comfort her about the first days of her married life. On top of that, Sakhi, in accordance with the expectations of a man’s role in Kohistani traditions, starts the frequent and brutal beatings in order to tame Zaitoon whenever she dares to go against his wishes. She is a virtual prisoner with Sakhi being the omniscient being, who knows every move she makes because Yunus Khan, Sakhi’s younger brother keeps a watch over her.
Zaitoon is determined to get away from Kohistan and her husband before he kills her. As she runs away from the village, her leaving the husband is not only considered the disgrace which falls upon Sakhi’s household but also is interpreted as an insult to his whole tribe. They have been dishonoured and to be vindicated of that shame, they have, to find the woman and kill her.

No-one stops to question the reason which has led her to run away from her husband. She loses her identity as a human being and is hunted by the tribe. But Zaitoon is endowed with the tenacity and ability to stand-up and fight against all odds and she is able to escape the environment which would suffocate her otherwise. Even during her flight, she is unable to escape the violence which prevails in the stark hills of Kohistan.

Another group of Kohistanis who may also adhere to similar notions of honour if their own women are concerned, rape Zaitoon, a callous action which tears the shroud of ideals and of respect which these people put on their women. It is quite interesting that neither Sakhi nor his father, Misri Khan, who are so occupied with the obsession of finding Zaitoon, even stop to consider taking some action against the people who have raped her.

Zaitoon is pitted against a very hostile environment and she uses her sheer will-power to overcome the obstacles thrown her way. Through her perseverance, Zaitoon survives in the fight against the hostile environments where others might have easily perished. The irony of the whole incident is that Qasim Khan has brought her to his people so that she would lead a happy life; she ends up having to flee from the very people who are supposed to be her family. Commenting on Zaitoon’s decision to run away, Makarand R. Paranjape says:
Zaitoon’s symbolic retaliation in the above scene and her decision to run away are not at all signs of her militant feminism or deliberate defiance of the mail order. Throughout she had been portrayed as a docile, affectionate obedient child. Her heroic role has thus been thrust upon her. This is the only way she can survive. It is a spiritual struggle a last ditch stand of the weak and the oppressed. That is why her victory is marvellous and inspiring. Willy nilly she has become a symbol of all oppressed and exploited people. (*Bride:*100)

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 in treating women and animal alike. It is a barbaric world of uncivilized people that Sidhwa brings to life and light. In this regard, Gita Viswanath observes:

> Zaitoon, a young girl is victimized by the debilitating patriarchal prescriptions of an insular tribal society. The woman is held as repository of moral values in a patriarchal society. Within this ideological framework Zaitoon signifies the woman-as- victim paradigm in much feminist writing. (*Bride*: 39)

Zaitoon’s family is out to hunt and kill her, to wash away the disgrace with which she has supposedly muddied their honour. Her final escape is more than the result of a mere human effort, and as Cynthia Abrious states, Zaitoon is ultimately protected and saved, which suggests that an awesome, ancient, natural order
combined with a young girl’s defiant spirit can overcome the oppressive shackles of a conspiracy of men (*Bride*: 70-71).

It should be noted that Sidhwa does not present Zaitoon’s actual meeting with her father after her ordeal. Qasim Khan, being one of the Kohistanis probably does not possess logic, which is very different from that of Sakhi or Misri Khan. It would not come as a great surprise if he refuses to accept his daughter for his daughter running away from her husband’s house would be a dishonourable action according to his customs.

The hypocrisy of the whole myth about respect given to women in Pakistani society is exposed when Nikka takes Qasim to Hira Mandi. Sidhwa presents the very men who uphold their women’s privacy above everything and would not hesitate to even kill a man who would dare even to look indecorously at their honour. Yet, in the privacy of a dancing girl’s room, Nikka is able to pay for someone’s honour to dance naked in front of a whole group of drunken men. After their night of drinking and merriment, these people are able to slip back into the general community to assume their charade with their supercilious values.

Through Zaitoon’s fight and escape from the inhospitable environment and Kohistani men, Sidhwa seems to make a statement with regard to women’s plight in a country like Pakistan. The path freedom in this case of personal nature, can come about only after a ‘partition’. And as with the Partition of India, those in power would use whatever means they have in their disposal to prevent the person or a nation of attaining statehood/self-hood.

Sidhwa articulates that women, though jealously coveted by their men from outsides are more at risk from the very people who are supposed to guard and
value them. Zaitoon’s story runs parallel in a number of ways to nation’s turbulent history. Just as the Muslims of this country felt stifled and suppressed in India, Zaitoon knows that it is almost impossible for her to survive in the Kohistani community.

Just as there was vehement opposition of the majority of population of India to Pakistani’s freedom, the whole of Sakhi’s tribe hunting for Zaitoon is an apt parallel between the two stories. The desperate and trying struggle of both displays the resolve, will-power and the courage involved in the initial desire and the eventual achievement of freedom.

The Pakistani nation’s internal weaknesses, which can ultimately pit the society against itself, are laid bare by the way the patriarchy treats its women. And so the imagined “homeland” where a woman can be safe still retains the elusiveness of an often dreamt fantasy, as the dislocated and partitioned relationships of Nikka and Mariam, Sakhi and Zaitoon and Carol and Farukh dominate the domestic scene in the novel. Even though the tribal come across as a very cruel and repressive community, one questions the desire of the so-called plain’s civilization to civilize them. For it is quite obvious that one side is not on a higher moral ground in terms of their treatment of the women in their community. After all, it was Qasim (who had become a semi ‘plains person’) who brought an outsider to the mountains. Her escape and final return to the plains seems to suggest that it would be better to leave these two distinctly different cultures as far apart of possible.

_The Bride_ is not only offered the struggle and courage of a woman but a condemnatory view of the practices of the patriarchal society of Pakistan. Sidhwa
explicates the dangers posed to the development and stability of the country’s community, not by the outside forces but by those within. Zaitoon’s eventual freedom from her pursuers indicates Sidhwa’s critical, if also affirmative attitude towards women. One, in a sense, should fight the oppression by any means necessary. It is only after a determined struggle the true freedom is achieved. Sidhwa suggests in her novel that though Pakistan gained its independence in 1947, the women in that country continue the movement for their ‘independence’ till today.

At the border, a group of marauding Sikhs attacks the overcrowded train and murders most of the refugees. Qaism manages to escape and in the chaos he rescues a young girl whose parents have been slaughtered. With the help of Nikka and Miriam, a couple he meets in a refugee camp, he settles in Lahore and rears the child, whom he has named Zaitoon after his dead daughter. Mothered by Miriam— who has not borne children and thus is something of an outcast - Zaitoon rehearses the role for which she is destined: to become a bride. As well as receiving instruction from Miriam, Zaitoon spends much of her time in various zenanas—women’s quarters where the benign squalor draws her, as it did all its inmates, into the mindless, velvet vortex of the womb. Some zenanas are habited by brides who have entered plural marriages. Bound by tradition, all the women acquiesce to their own subjugation, and Zaitoon learns his lesson well.

The scene shifts to another bride, an American woman named Carol who has married a Pakistani man in the United States and then moved home with him. Unaccustomed to the subordinate role of women at all levels of Asian society, Carol rebels against the restrictions, against her husband’s jealousy and suspicions
and against the sexual repression that hinders free exchange between men and women. Carol is in turn flattered fascinated, and revolted by the sexual innuendos constantly directed toward her by Pakistani men.

A meeting between the two unlikely brides, Zaitoon and Carol occurs when Qasim promises his sixteen year old adopted daughter to a tribal man. Father and daughter travel from the bustling city of Lahore to the sparsely populated Himalayas, where the marriage is to take place, and spend night at the government house that Carol and her husband are visiting. When the two women meet, even with backgrounds so contradictory, they feel a kinship as brides in a land where women are considered chattel no matter what their social status may be.

Once Zaitoon has been married and left by Qasim in the primitive mountain village, the young bride soon realizes the absurdity of her romantic illusions about marriage. Unaccustomed to so harsh a lie, a Zaitoon rebels, and her husband Sakhi, goaded on by the other men, sets out to tame her. In constant fear of his beatings and his sexual force, she runs away from the village and spends days lost in the mountains as she searches for the government house where she can find refuge.

Zaitoon reaches safely after experiencing terrible physical privation and rape. Even though she is rescued, she remains a marked woman who can never return home, for she has failed as the bride. Moreover, she has been raped and will always bear the stigma of this physical violation, for which she can hardly be held responsible. Thus the simple title of this novel lies heavy with irony. To be ‘the bride’ in a patriarchal society that demeans women translates into bondage – sometimes subtle, other times total.
In an interview, Bapsi Sidhwa insists that she is not writing “overtly feminist literature” in *The Bride*; she goes on to explain that she wants the ideas to be embedded in the novel itself and adds that she has little use for “didactic fiction”. Certainly, in this book she succeeds in avoiding didacticism and integrating theme with the essential ingredients of plot, character, and setting. The novel is constructed with admirable economy as it unfolds a complex story introduces and develops numerous characters, and creates setting both exotic and realistic.

While *The Bride* has much to say about the patriarchal culture where women have little control over their fates, it does so without forsaking the demands of effective story telling. Sidhwa has succeeded in embedding ideas within a novel that is breath–taking in its action, engaging in its characterization and exotic in its rendering of place.

There is no tradition of women’s literature in Pakistan; in fact, the country has no tradition of English–language literature. Sidhwa can only be considered a pioneer in both areas. Whether *The Bride* has had any dramatic impact on the treatment of women in Pakistan remains doubtful, for it is altogether possible that each bride represented in the novel still exists, whether in the Zenana, in the mountains or in the drawing rooms of wealthy, Westernized Pakistanis. Perhaps, though, a woman - Western or Asian - reading the novel might realize at last that she need not acquiesce, that she need not accept her victimization.

Sidhwa’s work has somewhat slowly to establish itself internationally. Once *The Bride* has been fully discovered abroad, however, it will certainly find a
place in women’s literature. In the 1990s, plans by the ivory–Merchant company to film the novel seemed likely to win for it a wider readership.

Sidhwa based *The Bride* on an actual story she had heard about a Punjabi girl like Zaitoon who had entered into an arranged marriage with a Himalayan tribal man, attempted to escape, and after fourteen days of wandering in the mountains was found by her husband; he cut off her head and threw her body into the river. That Sidhwa allows her heroine to escape is significant.

By altering the original story, Sidhwa sends the message to women that they must rebel no matter the consequences. Further through the voice of the American bride she denies the male excuse expressed by Carol’s husband that women ‘ask for it,’ as observed below: Women the world over, through the ages, Carol thinks with sarcastic disgust, “asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved to get importunately impregnated, beaten up bullied and disinherited. It was an immutable law of nature” (97).

Sidhwa herself exemplifies the rebellion against this false ‘immutable law’ After a sheltered childhood in a wealthy Pakistani home, she entered an arranged marriage at the age of nineteen, soon became the mother of three children, and succumbed to the demands of her role as wife of a successful businessman. Like, Zaitoon, she escaped, in her case by writing fiction, secretly at first lest she be thought pretentious by her family and friends. After a long struggle to get published and recognized, her work-four novels in—all at last began to gain attention both in Asia and abroad.

Certainly Sidhwa’s stories are centred on always about women who dare to go beyond the limits set for them, along with her own story, can only raise the
awareness of women and of men as well. Although the men in her novels may often be weak, unreasonable, and cruel, Sidhwa sees them caught in the webs of another so called immutable law that needs to be reversed. They too must rebel against the role in which radiation has placed them. In Sidhwa’s view, only when this dual rebellion takes place will the story of ‘The bride’ is a happy one.

Thus, in the novel The Pakistani Bride, there is ample scope for the author to explore but Sidhwa could not go deep into the psyche of her female protagonist allowing methodical narration of events in sequential order.