

**“Word”, “Honour”, and Forced Marriages:
Depiction of Matrimonial Custom of Pakistani Tribals in
Bapsi Sidhwa’s The Bride**

الوعد و الشرف والزواج القسري
تصوير عادات الزواج في القبائل الباكستانية في رواية العروس لبابسي
سيدهوا

Muhammad Naeem-Ur-Rahman
Higher Education Department, Pakistan
Email: naeemsiddiqui.saleemi@gmail.com

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Abstract

This discussion aims to investigate how tribal woman is maltreated in the name of “word” and “honour” depicted in Bapsi Sidhwa’s The Bride. It explains how the words, “word” and “honour” are given connotation to exploit the freedom and the basic rights of women in tribal areas of Pakistan. Further, the objective of this study is to highlight the peculiar traditional customs rampant in the tribal areas of Pakistan which results in early marriages, child marriages, as well as forced marriages. Living under patriarchal norms the tribal woman is leading a life of slavery. Either a tribal woman is forced to marry a person who is three times older than she or even sometimes she is forced to marry a person who has not yet reached the age of puberty. Majority of the tribal women accept their lot stoically but those who nourish the feelings of rebellion in their minds, they face gruesome consequences. The tribal don’t follow the constitution of the country, rather, they follow the man-made laws devised by their elders. In order to strengthen the discussion, on the one side, the textual fabrics of the novel will be untangled, on the other hand, the views of those researchers will be considered into account who have carried out their research on the tribal matrimonial traditions.

Key Words: custom, honour, matrimony, tribe, word

المخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في كيفية إساءة معاملة المرأة القبلية باسم "الكلمة" و "الشرف" الموصوفين في رواية العروس لبابسي سيدهوا. وتشرح كيف يتم إعطاء دلالة لكلمات "كلمة" و "شرف" لاستغلال الحرية والحقوق الأساسية للمرأة في المناطق القبلية في باكستان. علاوة على ذلك، فإن الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تسليط الضوء على العادات التقليدية الغربية المنتشرة في المناطق القبلية في باكستان والتي تؤدي إلى الزواج المبكر، وزواج الأطفال، وكذلك الزواج القسري. تعيش المرأة القبلية في ظل الأعراف الأبوية حياة العبودية. فإما أن تُجبر المرأة القبلية على الزواج من شخص

يكبرها بثلاث مرات أو حتى تضطر أحياناً للزواج من شخص لم يبلغ سن البلوغ بعد. أغلبية نساء القبائل يتقبلن نصيبين برزانه ولكن أولئك الذين يغذون مشاعر التمرد في عقولهم يواجهون عواقب وخيمة. ولا تتبع القبائل دستور البلاد، بل تتبع القوانين الوضعية التي وضعها كبار السن. من أجل تعزيز النقاش، من ناحية، ستكون الخيوط النصية للرواية غير متشابكة، ومن ناحية أخرى، سيتم النظر في آراء هؤلاء الباحثين الذين أجروا أبحاثهم حول تقاليد الزواج القبلية

الكلمات الدالة: عرف، شرف، زواج، قبيلة، كلمة

Introduction

Usually the tribal people live in forests, hills, deserts and the places difficult to reach. Most of the Northern areas of Pakistan are engulfed by a long series of mountains, Pakistani tribal have been living there for centuries. They speak Pashto as their first language and divided into many sub-tribes such as Afridi, Yousafzai and Khattak. They make up almost thirty-two million of Pakistan's total population. Bapsi Sidhwa is a celebrated novelist of Pakistan. In addition to her famous non-fiction, "Beloved city: Writing on Lahore", she has written six novels: *The Crow Eaters*, *The Bride*, *Ice-Candy Man*, *An American Brat*, *Water* and *Their language of Love*. She has also taught at the renowned universities of the world as Columbia University, the University of Houston and Southampton University. She has also been awarded with many prestigious awards as Lilla Wallace Reader's Digest Writers Award, Sitara-i-Imtiaz, Pakistan's highest national honour in the field of arts. As it is universally true that literature reflects society, her novels are based on different social issues of Pakistan. *The Bride* (1982), her second novel, unfolds many of the tribal customs ranging from tribal feuds to their "own rule". (Sidhwa:1982: 90). It consists of thirty chapters.

Sidhwa does not make her writing prolix at any point, rather, a reader sticks to her writing and feels pleasure in going through her world of writing. Most of her critics believe that she combines suspense with lyricism in her prose, that is why, her prose gives aesthetic pleasure to readers. The first part of the *Bride* revolves around the character of Qasim, fourth child of a tribesman, Arbab, the second part of novel centres upon the character of Zaitoon, an orphan. Apart from the main plot, the novel has a sub-plot as well. Main plot and sub-plot, technically and thematically, interlinked with each other. Brought up in mountains, marriage was imposed on Qasim, when he was only ten years old. And his wife Afshan, was older than he. "By the time he was thirty four, Qasim and Afshan had lost three children, two to typhoid and one in a fall off a ledge. It did not matter really because two sons and one daughter

survived - a fair enough average (Sidhwa:1982 :06). To their misfortune, an epidemic broke-out, his children and wife fell victim to the calamity and died. "He was inconsolable. His face swollen with tears and his throat hoarse with wailing, he flailed his chest with his huge fists, but death, swift, premature and grotesquely unfair, had to be accepted" (Sidhwa:1982:07). A year later he went to Jullundur, a city now in India, in search of a job and secured a position of a bank as a watchman. The second half of the novel revolves around the character of Zaitoon. At the time of partition in 1947, Qasim was coming to Lahore from Jullundur by train along with a swarm of migrants, the train was ambushed and attacked by the rioters and, "their fleeing slaughtered" (Sidhwa:1982:09). Among the migrants, there was a family comprising three members: a husband, Skindar, his wife Zohra and their daughter Munni. During the rioting clashes Zohra was swept away, Skindar was trampled to death and Munni, the little girl came across Qasim, to whom she thought to be her father. Qasim named her Zaitoon, because his own daughter who died of epidemic disease, "was the size of his own little Zaitoon lost so long ago." (Sidhwa:1982:22). Along with Munni, Qasim, walking on foot, reached Lahore. Living there, he brings up Munni (now onwards she will be known with the name of Zaitoon) with care, finally decides to get her marry in his own "proud tribe." (Sidhwa:1982:23). Qasim takes her to "his ancestral village to get her married." (Sidhwa:1982:118). "She is altogether Punjabi." (Sidhwa:1982:118), but to be married in "isolated pockets of feuding tribes". (Sidhwa:1982:104). After marriage, she could not adjust herself into "terrible tribal". (Sidhwa:1982:113) and "resolved to run away". (Sidhwa:1982:170).

"Word" and The Tribals

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines word: "promise or GUARANTEE that you will do something or that something will happen or is true". (Wehmeier:2001:1551). Among the various unique characteristics of the Tribals have, "word" is one of them. Once They make up mind to do a thing, they do it even if they have to crawl. Reaching Lahore, in a refugee camp, Qasim and Zaitoon come across Nikka, a Pehelwan (Wrestler) by profession. Soon they develop a relation of friendship with each other, start a small business. Nikkah has a wife, Miriam, but he has no children. Zaitoon lives most of the time in the company of Miriam. Mariam nourishes

her, guides her and makes her familiar with the locality. Mariam tries her best to give Zaitoon motherly love and care. Zaitoon attended school for “full five years”. (Sidhwa:1982:44). She learns to read, to write and to read the Holy Quran. It is Miriam who “insisted Zaitoon stop going to school”. (Sidhwa:1982: 47). She says to Nikka, her husband:

“Now that she’s learned to read the Holy Quran, what will she do with more reading and writing- boil and drink it? She’s not going to become a baboo or an officer! No, Allah willing, She’ll get married and have children”.(Sidhwa:1982: 44)

But when Nikka says to her that Zaitoon is only a baby, she counters him by saying:

“A baby? She’s ten! I can already see her body shaping. The Pathan doesn’t realise she is in the hot plains of the Punjab-- Everything ripens early here.... She’ll be safe only at her mother-in-law’s.... A girl is never too young to marry” (Sidhwa:1982: 45)

When Zaitoon turns sixteen, Qasim decides her future. He has several tribal friends in Lahore. One of them came to meet Qasim and had decided the marriage of Zaitoon. His look has been depicted by the novelist in the following words:

“Voluminous gathers, like a dancer’s skirt, circled his baggy pantaloons. His turban, too, was different. Its careless swirls partially covered hair that fell to the tips of his ears in a straight red bob. His velvet, gold-threaded waistcoat slid back to reveal a double row of cartridges” (Sidhwa:1982:81)

After settling the future plans, talking in their dialects they depart. Since Nikka was overhearing what was going on between Qasim and the other tribal, he is not happy with the decision of Qasim about the marriage of Zaitoon. When Nikka disclosed the irrational decision of Qasim to Mariam, she could not control her emotions and started weeping. Zaitoon has been watching everything going on. Qasim sees Mariam weeping, goes to her and says to her: “Sister, I gave him my word” (Sidhwa:1982:83)She countered him

back:“Your word! Your word! Your word! What has your word to do with the child’s life? What? Tell me!”. (Sidhwa:1982:83). She goes on to say to Qasim:“Brother Qasim; She coaxed, how can a girl brought up in Lahore, educated-- how can she be happy in the mountains? Tribal ways are different, you don’t know how changed you are..... (Sidhawa:1982:83). When Qasim tries to assure her saying that the tribals are his own people and he knows them well. Miriam say to him:

“But you’ve been with us so long, you’re changed. Why, most of them are bandits, they don’t know to treat women! I tell you, she’ll turn to No one!” (Sidhawa:1982: 83)

But Qasim is adamant and again reiterates his “word”: “How dare you”, he said, you’ve never been there! You don’t understand a thing. I have given my word! I know Zaitoon will be happy. The matter should end”. (Sidhwa:1982:83)

Miriam believes that Qasim has sold Zaitoon in the land of a tribal for “five hundred rupees, some measly maiz and a few goats”. (Sidhwa:1982:84). Being a childless woman, she is ready to buy Zaitoon if it is true that he has sold her. Qasim reassures her, “Sister Miriam, it is my word the word of a Kohistani!”. (Sidhwa:1982:84). Qasim revealed the deal of marriage to Zaitoon in the following words:

“You saw the stranger I was talking to? She nodded. That was Misri Khan, my cousin. I’ve promised you in marriage to his son Sakhi.” (Sidhwa:1982:85)

Despite the fact that Miriam tries her utmost to dissuade Zaitoon from going with Qasim to the tribal areas, she clearly says to Miriam that, “I cannot cross my father.” (Sidhwa:1982:87). After covering a long tortuous way, they reached in the tribal domain. “Zaitoon was disappointed in her first glimpse of Dubair”(Sidhwa:1982:111).

She says to her father Qasim:“take me back. I’ll look after you always. How will you manage without me -and the food? If I must marry, marry me to someone from the plains. I will die rather than live here”.(Sidhwa:1982:143).

Qasim responds her back:

“I have given my word. Your marriage is to be a week from today. Tomorrow your betrothed goes to invite guests from the neighbouring villages. I’ve given my word. On it depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life. if you besmirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands.”(Sidhwa:1982:143).

Closing his hands round her throat, Qasim warns her: “you make me break my word, girl, and cover my name with ding! Do you understand that? Do you?”(Sidhwa:1982:143).Deborah Cameron(1990) says, “If women’s utterance is not forbidden, it is often ignored ;and if not ignored ,then received with howls of execration. It is the fear of censure which leads to self – censorship”.(Cameron,1990,06)

“Honour” and the Tribals

Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English defines Honour, “a good reputation, respect from other people” (Wehmeier:2001:653). As far as this definition of the word ‘honour’ is concerned, the tribal associate it with their women. When marriage is forced upon a tribal woman, whether she likes it or not, she will have to accept it, otherwise her father, or other male members, will think that their “honour” is tarnished. When Zaitoon tried to convince her father that he should not leave her in the company of tribals, he says: “On it depends my honour” (Sidhwa:1982:143). After marriage, when Zaitoon observes the harsh and oppressive attitude of her husband, she decides to run away. A runaway wife is better to be killed, in the rules of the Tribes. Sakhi, the husband of Zaitoon, searches her in the mountains and thinks, “I should have killed her by the river”.(Sidhwa:1982:173).The mother of Sakhi is weeping over the incident and thinking in her mind:“Honour! she thought bitterly. Everything for honour-and another life lost!”(Sidhwa:1982:174). The other women of the same community console her, “they’ll be back soon with that bitch’s corpse, your sons honour vindicated”(Sidhwa:1982:175). While searching her in the mountains, Yunus khan (brother of Sakhi) taunts Sakhi, “you fool! Your honour? Why didn’t you think of it when you allowed the bitch to run away?”

You knew she'd run. Are you a buggered up eunuch? You should have slit her throat right then!" (Sidhwa:1982:184).

Rabia Ali (2001) in her book, *The Dark Side of 'Honour'* (Women victims in Pakistan), highlights the countries and regions where women have been maltreated in the name of honour:

“Thus according to historical and anthropological studies the killing of women to restore male honour and maintain patriarchal structures has been taking place for centuries in lands that were the cradles of world civilization: in agrarian societies such as China and India (including present day Pakistan), in the tribal, Arab Middle East, throughout the lands of the Mediterranean (in Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Morocco, Italy, Spain), in Southern Europe, as well as in Latin American countries across the Atlantic”. (Ali:2001:15)

Yunus Khan, being a family member of Sakhi, provokes him towards honour killing. He suggested that if Sakhi had killed Zaitoon before she fled from his house, their “honour” would not have been tarnished. It is clear that any one, out of the whole range of male members of a family can kill a girl in the name of “honour”.

Rabia Ali (2001) goes on to say in this connection:

“In other words, while women are being killed by men, husband or lovers –in what is often described as “crimes of passion” all over the world in most countries today the killing of women in the name of honour has no customary or legal sanction. It is quite the opposite in countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco where a woman can be put to death by anyone out of a whole range of male relatives—husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, sons—who claim and receive

legitimacy for such a killing from the Community and from the state”.(Ali:2001:16)

Aleena Khan (2020), a Pakistani lawyer, thinks that even the constitution is a bit lenient about such “honour-killings”. In her words:

“the initial laws dealing with “honour” killing in Pakistan had their roots in the British colonial rule. In 1835, the British established a law commission exhibited significant leniency towards men whose honour was thought to be tarnished by the females of the family. It concluded that if it could be proved that a man had killed under such provocation, such killing should not be considered murder, but the lesser offence of man slaughter” (Khan:2020:76)

Misri Khan (the father of Sakhi) reached an army camp in order to search his daughter in law (Zaitoon) he implores, “my honour is in your hands”. (Sidhwa:1982:188)

Forced Marriages and the Tribals

The United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan (2006) defined forced marriage as one that “lacks the free and valid consent of at least one of the parties”. (Annan:2006). He goes on to say, “In its most extreme form, forced marriage can involve threatening behavior, abduction, imprisonment, physical violence, rape and, in some cases, murder. There has been little research on this form of violence”. (Annan:2006)

The very first chapter of the novel exposes in detail the custom of forced marriages prevalent in the tribal communities of Pakistan. Qasim was merely ten years old when marriage was imposed upon him. Why was he imposed upon a marriage at the age of ten? The answer to this question again lies in the deep rooted custom of “Vani”. “Vani” or “Swara” is a custom found in parts of Pakistan where girls, often minors, are given in marriage or servitude to an aggrieved family as compensation to end disputes, often murder. A feud cracked the relationship of Qasim’s father and Resham Khan (another tribesman). Resham Khan could not pay back the loan he got from Arbab, the

father of Qasim, resultantly, they reached on the estranged terms. Then, in order to settle the account and to come again on friendly terms, it was decided that Resham Khan would give her daughter to Arbab the father of Qasim. At first Arbab thought to marrying the girl himself. “He had only one wife; but on twinge of paternal conscience, he decided to bestow the girl on Qasim.” (Sidwa: 1982:02). It is evident that when forced marriages are taken place, there remains a gap, a gap of age, a gap of education and a gap of equal status. The same happened with Qasim, as the girl whom he was forced to marry when he had not even reached the age of puberty. But Afshan (his wife) “accepted her lot cheerfully” (Sidwa:1982:04). Qasim was sixteen years old when he became father. The marriage of Zaitoon is also a glaring example of forced marriages very common among the tribals. RafiaZakaria (2022), a teacher of Pakistani constitutional law and political philosophy, writes:

“It would be fair to say that marriages in Pakistan are “forced”, on one end of the spectrum are the extreme cases, one in which young girls, often even those who have not yet reached puberty, are forced to marry older men. These extreme cases often involve the use of young girls offered up as besides to settle disputes or pay debts”.(Zakaria:2022)

Kishwar Enam (2001), a famous Pakistani Paediatrician and an active member of child welfare society, concludes: “Teenagers getting married even to a person three times their age is not unusual in Pakistan” (Enam: 2021).

Another famous Pakistani researcher on the Tribal culture and traditions, Ali Baba Khel (2016) says:

“The tradition forces innocent girls to bear the brunt of crimes they never committed, but for which they must endure mental torture for the rest of their lives. The worst is when an infant or minor girl is given as Swara. The custom is not only against fundamental human rights, but also against the teaching of Islam which decrees that the will of both the bride and groom be sought before the marriage is finalized.” (Khel:2016)

How the will of a girl at the time of wedding is sought is depicted in the novel in the following way: “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. (Sidhwa: 1982:02). It is clear that instead of seeking the consent of the girl for the acceptance of her groom, the consent is sought from her aunt.

Talking about consent of a would-be groom and bride, Nabila Feroz Bhatti (2022) an executive body member of the Child Rights Movement Punjab says: “Consent is the basic principle for marriage, in which both persons should independently be able to accept or refuse according to their own free will. Does a child’s consent constitute informed consent? Is a child intellectually mature enough to make a wise decision and be able to take care of themselves, let alone a family?”. (Bhatti:2022)

Bhatti (2022), who is also a human rights activist in Pakistan, goes on to say:

“The issue of child marriage has always plagued our society. It tends to occur among the country’s most marginalized and vulnerable communities. While both boys and girls are married off early in many parts of Pakistan, a greater number of girls become victim of this age-old custom. The practice largely stems from the prevalence of gender inequality in society and patriarchal cultural norms, and it is further perpetuated due to weak legislation”. (Bhatti:2022)

Sofia Naveed et al (2015) also find the reasons of child marriages in Pakistan in deeply rooted traditions and customs. Quoting their words: “Pakistan society has been deeply rooted in traditions and customs. Most of the traditions put emphasis on child marriages particular of females even without their consent.(Naveed&Butt:2015:166)

According to a UNICEF report: “Pakistan in general and Pakhton (tribal) society in particular has a strong cultural heritage and distinct customs and traditions which mostly favor early marriages. Early marriages are practiced here at a higher ratio as compared to other parts of the country on the basis of economic instability, lack of awareness and strong cultural trend encourages such a custom.(UNICEF:2005)

Another Pakistani Researcher concludes: “The warring tribes in fact introduced the custom of Vani for patching up long standing family feuds, particularly those arising out of murder”. (Khan: 2006)

Conclusion

Taking everything into account, the novel *The Bride* by Bapsi Sidhwa deals with the unwarranted matrimonial customs of Pakistani tribes. The novel unfolds the reality that how the tribesmen stick to the “word” they speak when settling the matters of the marriages of their girls. They can die, they can sacrifice their precious lives but they will not back out from their promises. Their “honour” is linked with their women. If their women blindly obey what they command, their “honour” is maintained. But if they do something against their will, their “honour” is uprooted. If a girl revolts against their strange norms, the shadow of death looms upon her. The novel also exposes the rampant customs of early marriages, child marriages as well as forced marriages in tribal societies. These are the customs deeply rooted in their centuries-long tradition.

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