

Subjugation of Women in Marriage: A Study of Select South Asian Women Novelists

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In South Asian countries the rigid cultures and patriarchal attitudes which devalue the role of women, result in the wide spread occurrence of violence against women. The family structure, in which the man is the undisputed ruler of the household, allows subordination of women. Women's economic, social and cultural rights continue to be neglected. Women in Pakistan

and other South Asian countries face the threat of multiple forms of violence especially in marriage. Attitudes towards women are still traditional and conservative across these countries. Even globalization has often failed to wipe out deeply engrained concepts about women. The girl child is considered only a "visitor" in her parental house who eventually has to go to her "real" or married home.

Marriage in such countries is a social institution which allows a man and a woman to live together as husband and wife. In South Asian countries societies are generally patriarchal so women are supposed to leave their paternal house to live with their husbands. Post modern feminist Judith Butler contends that women are given as gifts from one patrilineal clan to another through the institute of marriage in order to consolidate the kinship relations. Anthropologist Levi Strauss in his book 'The Elementary Structures of Kinship' states that the 'bride functions as a relational term between groups of men. Having no

independent identity of her own, she reflects masculine identity. Clan members invariably male invoke the prerogative of identity through marriage. Patrilineality is achieved through the ritualistic expulsion and importation of women'.

This shift from paternal to husband's house has proved to be the root cause of women's sufferings, her subjugation and her inferior position in the society. This male egocentric society all the way tries to manipulate the laws and rules and enact them according to their benefit so as to further overpower and subjugate women. We find numerous examples in literature where women's subjugation starts with their marriage. The institution of marriage is manipulated

and exploited to give legal sanctions to the appropriation and abrogation of women's personal freedom and body. Women novelists from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the other South Asian countries have given voice to such subjugation of women.

This paper seeks to analyze the portrayal of the sufferings of women in marriage in the novels of Taslima Nasreen (Shodh), Tehmina Durrani (My Feudal Lord) and Bapsi Sidhwa (The Pakistani Bride). The writers have very deftly analyzed the universal problem of women's subjugation and their suppressed desire to survive with bare minimum level of self respect. The authors have very vehemently portrayed the

torn sentiments of womenfolk in order to achieve harmony in the male dominant society. The protagonists of all the three novels are women of self esteem, honour who receive great love and care from their parents. As soon as they marry, their life assume a completely opposite turn lending them into the world of feminine responsibilities and restrictions. Their feet become chained, restricting their movements. The women protagonists are alienated and left at the mercy of the new family for the approval of their smallest wish. But the protagonists are shown as having unconventional will power that help them retain their self esteem and refuse to accept the subjugated status. Jhumur in 'Shodh', Zaitoon in 'The Pakistani Bride' and Tehmina in 'My Feudal lord' present the image of the suffering but stoic women eventually breaking traditional boundaries, deep-rooted family values and consequently the institution of marriage.

Tehmina Durrani, renowned Pakistani novelist, in her autobiographical work **"My Feudal Lord"** speaks considerably of the vulnerable position of women in the Muslim society of Pakistan which makes husband, the master of a woman's fate. She is expected to live at the mercy of her husband, forgetting her personal identity as an individual. The woman who forgets her individuality and lives upto the expectations of her husband are marked as faithful, loyal and model wives but the one whose personal identity as a human being forces her to think and contemplate, is branded as disloyal, woman of loose morals etc. Tehmina Durrani is such a wife in 'My Feudal Lord'. Her autobiography is flooded with plethora of personal sufferings in her marriage to Mustafa Khar, one of the

Pakistan's most eminent political figures. No sooner did she marry Mustafa than she is completely overpowered by her powerful husband who took it for granted for his wife to be ever present at his disposal. She was kept under the strict control of the feudal lord. Whenever he felt like, he made love with her (even in jail, he forced Tehmina to have sex with him when she just had had her uterus operated upon), he beat her mercilessly, for no fault, and then made apologies to her and pleaded with her not to leave him. He forced her to love him despite all this cruel and beastly treatment. He wished to rule over Tehmina completely.

Eventually, she began to lose herself as a living and thinking individual. There was no escape for her from the prison called marriage. Her parents forced her to live with him knowing well that she was unhappy. They rather favoured Mustafa over her and as brainwashed by Mustafa, considered her insane and mentally upset. There was no end to her sufferings as Mustafa kept an extra marital relationship with her youngest sister, Adila, who was the age of his own daughter. He kept this affair as an open secret from her as he was little scared of her. Even when caught red handed, he brushed aside the blame by calling it her imagination and self concocted story because according to Mustafa, she was jealous of her own sister and suffered from inferiority complex. He beat her every now and then and played chameleon afterwards by apologizing 'most sincerely' his love towards her. He used to plead her not to leave him. Due to his brutish nature, his instability in married life and the sufferings he caused her, Tehmina left his house a number of times determined to divorce him but all her plans were nullified by him every

time. She was forced to return. He even kidnapped their children to blackmail her to return. He stripped her off her identity as a human being. Once he himself remarked after she gave him divorce-

‘Tehmina, you are nothing any more. ..You have no identity of your own. Nobody knows you’.

She was subjugated in marriage not only by her husband but her parents too refused to save her from his clutches. Not only Tehmina but all his five wives prior to her, especially Sherry were victimized to constant sufferings through the institute of marriage. Prior to their marriage both Tehmina and Sherry were quite normal individuals who could think and enjoy life, both were greatly respected by Mustafa himself. He was crazy for Tehmina, but no sooner did she marry him than she cease to be a living being for Mustafa. She became his possession, an object of sexual pleasure and a thing on which he could exercise his whims. It was Tehmina, who endured all the pain and tried to keep the marriage. She stood by him despite all his limitations. She stood by his side in his worst time and supported him in his effort to return to power but was betrayed at every step by him.

This long struggle gave her the strength to fight him back. She became Mustafa Khar herself. When he tried to captivate her to transport her to his ancestral village Kot Addu, she retaliated strongly. Disturbed, Mustafa asked her-

‘Tehmina, what have you become?’

She smiled confidently and replied-

‘I have become you, Mustafa.’

She emerged as a tireless fighter and succeeded in overthrowing the dark and dismal shadow of her husband from her life. She divorced him to live the rest of her life on her own terms. This decision isolated her from her family, friends and well wishers but she chose her path and with staunch determination, she won the custody of her beloved children. The final and permanent blow that she gave her ‘feudal lord’ was exposing his brutality to the world by writing her autobiography. She spoke for all the other Pakistani women who share her fate.

Bapsi Sidhwa, internationally renowned novelist from the Indian subcontinent was born in Pakistan and like her Indian counterparts *takes up* the same issue of the plight of women in a patriarchal society. In her novel *‘The Pakistani Bride’* she speaks not merely of the Pakistani girl Zaitoon but that of an American girl, Carol. The novel too, provides an incisive look into the subjugation of women in marriage. A young girl is victimized by the animalistic behavior of an insular tribal society. Zaitoon is brought up in a civilized society so she is educated and sensitive. She is promised into marriage to an uneducated tribal man Sakhi. Miriam her neighbor tries to dissuade him from marrying Zaitoon off to a tribal man as she senses that Qasim, Zaitoon’s father is fixing the marriage due to the money he received from her would be father-in-law, she offers him money to save the latter’s life. But he doesn’t budge a bit and brushes aside the blame by saying- “Sister Miriam, it is not for the goats and maize, please believe me. It is my word- the word of a Kohistani!”

Again a girl’s life is at stake, this time the daughter is used to re-establish the loose ends of relations. Qasim uses her daughter

as gift for his people to please them and to restart his tribal relations. It is another place in the novel where a woman is used as a commodity to start the trade of relations. Her life becomes a grim reality of unquestioning obedience and unending labor. When she comes face to face with reality, she pleads with her father not to leave her with the tribal man but he pushes him back saying 'I have 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'. Taken aback, she has no choice but to sacrifice her whole life to save the false pride of her father. The trauma starts only the day following her wedding. Her husband beats her on the slightest pretext. Her civilized mind can't accustom itself to the cruel and savage treatment given to the tribal women by their savage husbands. She makes every possible effort to save her marriage and suppress her self-esteem. Her only effort was to placate her husband so as not to get beaten. She struggles for autonomy and an identity of her own. Though shocked and shattered at the revelation of her marriage as a tragedy yet she regains her composure and decides to avert her fate by deciding to flee from her nightmarish world.

Her escape is taken as a blot on the patriarchal value system which takes pride in enslaving their women. So her husband, his brother as well as his father are determined to kill her to save their false pride amidst their savage tribe. They make every possible effort to nab her and eventually to crush her. She faces the challenges on her way boldly and with sheer willpower and grit she is able to overcome obstacles strewn in her path. She is ultimately protected and saved. Along with

Zaitoon, Carol, an American girl, married to a Pakistani army officer is equally oppressed in her relationship. In Carol, Sidhwa reveals the pangs of a western, upper-class woman in the male-dominated society. Bapsi Sidhwa has very realistically illustrated women's plight and exploitation in married life. Men exercise their masculine powers by brutally assaulting women. They make women endure the pain and humiliation of their barbarity. Though Sidhwa's women characters are beautiful and modest yet are strong-willed, and courageous. They try to accept their fate but when they find their identity at stake, they throw off all shackles and fight with full force. Zaitoon in *The Pakistani Bride* manages to save her life despite the ever persisting danger. Carol, an American girl, who is equally oppressed in her married life decides to break free and returns to her own American culture. Hence we find that Sidhwa's women characters are determined, strong-willed and courageous. They emerge victorious due to their strong will power.

'*Shodh*' by Bangla Deshi novelist, Taslima Nasreen is a story of revenge, dealing with a young woman Jhumur who is an educated and independent. She marries the man whom she loves. This novel presents a sharp contrast between the married and unmarried life of a woman. Taslima Nasreen takes us to the chained and restricted world of a married woman who is expected to fit into the stereotyped roles of an ideal wife and an ideal daughter-in-law. Being unmarried, Jhumur's movements were not restricted, she attained an M.Sc degree and participated actively in student politics. She received great respect and affection from her family and friends. Her father even wished her to behave like a man. Even her lover

admired her for her self confidence and her educational background.

Once married, life is never the same for Jhumur. It matters little that she married her lover who admired her for her independent thinking before marriage. No sooner does she marry him, he as well as his family impose a complete ban on her freedom. She is required to cover her head the whole day. She is not allowed to visit her parents or go for shopping. She is not expected to call her husband by his name. Before marriage Jhumur and Haroon seem to be a perfect couple, the relationship loses its charm once the egocentric, suspicious and chauvinistic male supersedes the lover Haroon. She is required to act as a model 'bou' (daughter-in-law). In spite of being an educated, courageous and open minded woman, her voice in the house-hold matters is suppressed. Her wishes, her desires are completely ignored by her lover turned husband. He even suspects her fidelity.

When she breaks the news of her pregnancy to her husband hoping to make him happy, to her utter dismay he accuses her of adultery. He says, "...it's not possible to become pregnant in six weeks" and forces her to get the child aborted. This left a menacing and dark impact on her psyche which was impossible to heal. She got the punishment due to no fault of hers. Her independence, dreams of happiness in marriage and child bearing are shattered. His ruthless behaviour causes a deep psychological trauma to Jhumur, who becomes vindictive and decides to avenge herself.

To avenge her husband for shattering her self esteem she actually develops relations with the paying guest of the house and

becomes pregnant. She gives birth to a boy and labels him as Haroon's son. When she finds Haroon craving for and loving somebody else's child as his own, she is all pity for him. She says, 'my heart swells with happiness when Haroon cuddles Ananda and calls him Baba'. She regains herself respect by teaching Haroon a lesson. She eventually regains her self- respect and individuality besides being a wife, mother, daughter in law. She makes it clear to the readers in the end of the novel- 'I have remade my own life. I love Haroon without surrendering myself, without doing away with all my aspirations' Thus, through the character of Jhumur, Taslima Nasrin exposes the ugly face of sophisticated elites of society and who under the garb of marriage rob their women of their liberty and self esteem. This novel reveals the hidden powers of female reproductive agency that can be deeply disturbing to patriarchal codes of sexual morality.

To conclude it can be said that all the three novelists have very deftly exposed the perpetual struggle of the womenfolk in the male dominated society which is least sensitive to the women's sufferings. The critical study of *the* novels under discussion help the reader develop an insight into the precariously poised position of womenfolk in the male dominated egoistic society. The novelists lay emphasis on women's never ending struggle against all odds to create a niche for themselves. The women protagonists Jhumur, Zaitoon and Tehmina face violence, humiliation and even identity crisis due to the unequal power relations between husband and wife in married life. But they emerge victorious in the end due to their strong will power. They regain their self esteem by winning their freedom.

Tehmina divorces her powerful politician husband which was nearly an impossible task. Jhumur takes revenge from her husband by committing adultery and giving a hard blow to his false pride. Zaitoon escapes her bondage by running away from the torturous life with her husband. They seem to convey the message that a woman may be docile, calm, shy and loving yet when need be she can be bold and revengeful. Women can only be emancipated from the clutches of the patriarchal society with their strong will power and tireless grit.

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