

PURDAH AND SEXUAL REPRESSION IN BAPSI SIDHWA'S *THE PAKISTANI BRIDE* AND TEHMINA DURRANI'S *BLASPHEMY*

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Abstract

Purdah, the system of female seclusion, is a salient feature of Islam as a religion. The physical confinement, the emotional, intellectual and cultural deprivations and the control and repression of female sexuality that accompany the observance of the purdah are highlighted in the sub-continental novels featuring Muslim life. The writers dwell more on the debilitating and repressive effects of the purdah than on its protective aspects. This paper seeks to examine the diverse ramifications of the purdah in two Pakistan-based Muslim communities – the Kohistani tribals and the society of the Pirs – as featured in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) and Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* (1998). Images of sexual repression predominate in the two novels. Bapsi Sidhwa and Tehmina Durrani project images of the victimized purdah woman, defenceless against the patriarchal power structure. The conclusion of the paper is that though purdah has diverse manifestations in the tribal and Pir societies, it becomes a weapon of control and victimization of the Muslim woman in both the texts. The novelists do not stop with recounting the oppression; they also document the women's attempts at emancipation, though their attempts are crushed/muted.

Keywords:- Purdah, manifestations, emancipation, Blasphemy.

The institution of the purdah, with its control of female sexuality and the regulation of female identity, is largely culture-specific. For a comprehensive picture of the purdah to emerge, it has to be examined against the socio-cultural background wherein it operates. This paper seeks to examine the diverse ramifications of the purdah in two Pakistan-based Muslim communities – the Kohistani tribals and the society of the Pirs – as featured in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* (1983) and Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* (1998). The two communities either directly practise the purdah or covertly accept it in spirit. The forms of purdah in the novels range from the *burqa*, the all-concealing cloak, to an ideology that exercises control over the Muslim woman's mobility and sexuality. The novels are heterogeneous, occupying different cultural,

social and gendered locations. This heterogeneity fosters the exploration of differences and similarities within the broad thematic of the purdah.

Inspired by actual events *The Pakistani Bride* and *Blasphemy* depict closed Muslim communities with their own ethical, sexual, familial and social codes. Bapsi Sidhwa's portrayal of the Kohistani tribal community of the Karakoram mountain ranges in West Pakistan and Tehmina Durrani's depiction of the Pir society of South Pakistan abound in images of sexual repression. Writing in Pakistan, Bapsi Sidhwa and Tehmina Durrani are part of a purdah culture. Bapsi Sidhwa's Parsi identity partly externalizes her from the purdah world, for, the Parsi community does not seclude its women (Duchesne-Guillemin). On the other hand, Tehmina Durrani, on account of her Muslim identity, has gained an insider's insight into the issue of the purdah.

Hanna Papanek establishes a connection between the purdah and arranged marriage. As purdah highly reduces the social mobility of the woman, she has hardly any chance to choose her spouse by herself (39). In her autobiography *My Feudal Lord*, Tehmina Durrani writes: For a Pakistani woman, "the goal is marriage and, once achieved, the future is a life of total subordination" (74). Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* and Tehmina Durrani's *Blasphemy* feature women beaten down and subjugated by the arranged marriage system. Zaitoon, the protagonist of *The Pakistani Bride* and Heer, the narrator-protagonist of *Blasphemy* have moved through marriage from relatively open cultures to repressive ones.

Purdah demarcates the physical, emotional, ethical and intellectual spaces of the Muslim woman. Instances of the two major instruments of seclusion in the purdah societies, viz., the *burqa*, the all-concealing cloak and spatial separation are present in the Lahore life Sidhwa portrays. Miriam observes purdah from Qasim, a stranger. A strict separation of male and female quarters is maintained in the Muslim houses of Lahore that Miriam and Zaitoon occasionally visit.

The segregation between the sexes is stricter in the Pir society in *Blasphemy*. In the Pir's *haveli*, purdah begins not at puberty (as is customary in Muslim families) but at birth itself. Images of men, their voices, shadows and even their mention are forbidden in the women's quarters. Confined within the *haveli*, the Pir women have never seen the outside of their home. Heer is beaten up in full view of everyone for not observing purdah from a six-year-old boy. The only door accessible to the women of the household leads directly to the graves, which make up the shrine. In the shrine too, they are segregated. The five female cats (no tomcat is allowed inside) are a metaphor for the women in confinement. Even when they step out of the *haveli*, every precaution is taken to ensure that they do not see the open world. The car that takes Heer to hospital has thickly curtained windows with a leather partition segregating her from the driver. Literally and figuratively, there is no way out of the *haveli*. The physical segregation is complete. The absence of the physical purdah does not prove emancipatory for the Muslim woman, for then, she is subjected to the attitudinal purdah. More than just a physical covering for the woman, the purdah encompasses a whole set of norms regulating the conduct of women inside and outside the family. Zaitoon, the protagonist of *The Pakistani Bride*, though spared of wearing the *burqa*, is strictly tutored in all the patriarchal codes of female conduct and modesty, characteristic of a purdah society.

The Kohistani tribals in Sidhwa's novel are unfamiliar with the *burqa*. Nor can they afford to have architectural divisions in their houses, separating male and female quarters. But

theirs is a society that severely curtails the freedom of its women. They are subject to the notions of womanly modesty (a concept central to the purdah) and the practice of the eye-purdah. The tribal men of Kohistan carefully guard their women as their proud possessions and they lower their eyes at the sight of a clanswoman outside immediate kinship as a mark of respect. Sidhwa narrates two incidents where these protectors and guardians of female honour themselves turn out to be aggressors – one, the attempted rape on Afshan and the other, the sexual assault of Zaitoon by two tribal men of another group. Sidhwa here subtly critiques the rationale of the concept of protection inherent in the institution of the purdah. A purdah society heavily reduces the mental and emotional spaces of its women. Early marriage, the norm in the purdah societies, denies women access to education. In *The Pakistani Bride* and *Blasphemy* we see women, shrouded in their ignorance, becoming a party to perpetuating the same. Miriam disapproves of Qasim's attempt to educate Zaitoon. In her opinion, a girl has learnt enough when she has learnt to read the Quran. Miriam not just observes the purdah herself but also strongly advocates a life of seclusion for women with marriage as their ultimate goal. Heer's mother also seals her daughter's fate thus: “ ‘You must carry your share of responsibility towards your sisters and brother. You are fifteen years old, you can't sit at home forever [...] Besides I don't have the money to educate you' ” (BY 25). However, she does manage to find the money for Heer's marriage.

The higher the social status of the woman, the greater the segregation. The Pir women have to keep their distance from the other women in the *haveli*. Nor is there any companionship among themselves. But the servant maids could enjoy one another's company and are allowed greater mobility and visibility. Sidhwa also shows the close association of purdah and social status. With the advancement of her husband's status Miriam “took to observing strict purdah. She seldom ventured out without the veil” (PB 51).

The patriarchal perception of women as the custodians of honour – of the male, the family, and the community – justifies their seclusion. Purdah is a necessary instrument to safeguard honour. Sidhwa hints at the close association between the purdah and the concept of *izzat* or honour. The tribal society Zaitoon enters after marriage works upon the concept of *izzat* and its corollaries of control and obedience. It “places man's “honour” in the achievement of his woman's rather than his own” (Khan 145). This value system is well illustrated in the Pathan proverb which John Honigmann reports: “A man is known from the qualities of his wife” (qtd. in Papanek 37). In such a society, “Women's proper behaviour as sheltered persons becomes an important source of the status of their protectors” (Papanek 37). Zaitoon becomes a victim to her Pathan husband's misconceived notion of honour and manhood. At the time of her marriage, Heer's mother advises her to uphold her family honour by remaining subservient to her husband's will.

The segregation of sexes is asymmetrical. As it is the responsibility of the woman to avoid the man and not vice versa, it is she who is excluded from all spheres of progressive social activity. In other words, the purdah heavily reduces a woman's social space. Muslim purdah as different from its Hindu counterpart begins at puberty. Zaitoon's life after puberty, wholly absorbed in domestic chores like cooking and sewing, and whose boredom is mitigated only by paying and receiving visits to and from neighbourhood women, reminds one of the quiet and restrained life of a typical Victorian heroine. In this context it is interesting to note Hanna

Papanek's observation that the Victorian society is our "most recent antecedent of sex-role patterns" (37).

The Prophet desired and strove to raise the Muslim woman from her place as a slave and a means of sensual gratification to a higher social and matrimonial plane. But centuries later we see Muslim societies treating their women as mere instruments of men's carnal pleasure. *The Pakistani Bride* and *Blasphemy* illustrate how the male controls and possesses the female body. The woman has to toil incessantly like a beast of burden to quell the male appetite – both literal and sexual.

The tribal society Sidhwa features, exploits its women both as sex objects and as labourers. Zaitoon engages herself in all domestic chores on an ill-fed stomach. To Sakhi, a tribal, his wife is his possession: he treats her with proprietorial lust and pride. Hence at the mere sight of a man walking beside his girl, he seethes with wrath and envy. With a murderous fusion of hate and jealousy he assaults Zaitoon like a beast. He belongs to a culture where pride is considered a very significant element of masculine identity and status.

The physical oppression of women assumes hideous dimensions in Durrani's portrayal of the Pir society. Heer, the protagonist, is subjected to heinous punishments such as rape, prostitution and physical hardships by the Pir. Married at fifteen, she becomes the mother of five children at thirty and a grandmother at thirty-three. Early marriage, frequent pregnancies, forced abortions and unparalleled sexual exploitation and torture sap her youth, energy and vitality. She goes crazy as a result of physical and mental torture; she sees apparitions. Durrani poignantly portrays the corrosion of Heer's body:

He had spent me without replenishing anything. My eyes had become like stagnant swamps sunk in on themselves. My mouth had lost its words. My body felt senseless. It seemed like debris had collected in a dirt dump. The flesh would soon shift from my bones, then the skin would shift from the flesh, and yet the master required eternal youth. In the mirror, youth was speeding away. (BY 148)

The nightmare Heer is locked into is not hers alone; it affects the entire clan that owes allegiance to the Pir. The *haveli* is a fetid hell where unspeakable horrors are perpetrated day and night in the name of Allah. Kaali, Tara, Yathimri and several others are victims of the Pir's satanic lust. The Pir sexually exploits women not just to satisfy his lust but to bolster, expand and entrench his power – both temporal and spiritual. He offers his own wife to several of his cronies under the false identity of Piyari, the nautch girl. The protection of the womenfolk from sexual aggression is the male rationale for the purdah. Durrani exposes the hypocrisy of this stance. Pir Sain enforces the most rigid purdah on the females in his household and on his followers and simultaneously indulges in fornication of medieval proportions (Surya 40). He compels his women to watch blue films, forces his wife into videotaped sexual encounters with a series of men, molests his own daughter, rapes orphans and feeds on the weak, but still manages to preserve his divinity unchallenged. He uses his shawl embroidered with the ninety-nine names of Allah to mask his depravities.

Patriarchal societies view their women as objects of exchange and hence equivalent to property, requiring ownership. *The Pakistani Bride* and *Blasphemy* offer illustrations for the Muslim society's treatment of women as mere bargaining commodities. Afshan, the sixteen-year-old tribal girl in Sidhwa's novel, is married to a ten-year-old boy in exchange for a loan.

The widow in *Blasphemy* is sold to a tribal for four thousand rupees; he locks her in a room and offers her to anyone who pays by barter or currency. Thus she is transferred from the custody of one lecher to another. In such societies where power is vested in the male, “A woman’s position always depended on a man, whether she was rich or poor did not matter (BY 46). Her identity is defined in relation to a male – father, husband or son.

In patriarchy, anatomy is the destiny of the woman. Women are and should be “completely defined and understood within their biological capacities, sexual or reproductive” (Ruth 91). Sex is a woman’s only means of power over the man. Heer believes that it is her position as the Pir’s wife that saves her from total annihilation. Amma Sain lectures on the power of sex: “ [...] nothing except sex can hold a man ” and “ ‘When a wife has secured a hold over her husband’s bed, she can use it on everyone. It is an art ’ ” (BY 55). Amma Sain herself “had catered to her husband’s needs like a professional seductress whose enticing powers used in the dark of night converted into administrative ones in the day” (BY 55). She advises Heer to involve her husband with “actions”. The woman is nothing but the body. She has to be ‘enjoyed’ and at the same time kept under vigil. The destructive powers of women’s sexuality emphasized in all the books of Hadith, Fiqh as well as in the interpretations of the Quran are used to justify the imposition of the purdah (Rahman 30).

The institution of the purdah highlights a woman’s role as a sex object; it stifles her creativity. By over-emphasizing the body, it berates her other capabilities. Zarina Bhatti observes that the purdah, in fact, lends and promotes the derangement of women into sustaining heightened levels of *zenana* intrigue and duplicity (104). Seclusion and competition for male attention breed animosity among women. Bapsi Sidhwa shows the *zenana* atmosphere in Lahore as being polluted by an undercurrent of intrigue and one-upmanship. Women view themselves as objects of pleasure and become obsessed with the adornment of the body. Tehmina Durrani’s portrayal of female relationships in the *haveli* is generally unredeemed by images of warmth, supportiveness, compassion or camaraderie. The *haveli* is a beehive of intrigue, gossip, lies and mischief. “[...] Although we shared the same adversity, we were not companions in it. Survival meant avoiding the master’s wrath. Everybody’s loyalty was only to him” (BY 51).

Sheer helplessness drives women to collude in their own oppression. Heer becomes a tacit companion to her husband’s lust by bringing younger children for his pleasure so as to save her own daughter from being molested by the Pir. When Yathimri, the orphan girl with her ravishing youth, replaces Heer as the Pir’s woman, the latter is consumed with jealousy and fury. Feeling her ‘power’ threatened, she swoops down to catch Yathmri’s smallest mistakes and reports them to the Pir. For, it is her position as the Pir’s wife that exalts her status in the eyes of others. Victimized and brutalized, the women still rely on male favour as their only means to survival: “[...] the suppressed derived strength from suppressing others. It helped them to accept their own imprisonment and was an easy occupation for the trapped” (BY 51). Fear of punishment converts victims into witnesses and informers until women after women are subjected to the orgy of torture. The Pir’s mother justifies her son’s unflinching cruelty as “corrective measures” (BY 52). While the women turn against one another, thus adding to male power, we see the Pirs of Pakistan forming a powerful network. “Pir Sain respected all the ‘pirs’ and they respected him. None threatened the other; none was threatened. Each recognised the other as a pillar of the same system. Each was clear that its preservation and strength lay in mutual respect and reverence” (BY 64).

The segregation of sexes generates an overemphasis on sex interest both in children and adult women. The adornment of the body becomes their major preoccupation and pastime (Das 95). Sidhwa observes that the general separation of the sexes and the consequent sexual repression in Pakistan generates “an atmosphere of sensuality” (PB 111). Zaitoon lives in an atmosphere charged with sexuality. “Brought up in a sexual vacuum she did not think of sex as good or bad – it merely did not exist [...] she floundered unenlightened in a morass of sexual yearning” (PB 162). She eagerly imitates the coy love-scenes of Indo-Pakistani movies, the looks and dances and practises them on the occasion of marriage celebrations: “Jumping and gyrating, making eyes and winking, shaking her shoulders to set her adolescent breasts atremor, she flaunted her body with guileless abandon [...] The absence of men permitted an atmosphere of abandon within the *zenana*” (PB 88-89).

Pakistan is a sexually segregated society and therefore its people are sexually obsessed (Zaman 163-64). This explains the presence of “red-light” areas like the Hira Mandi. The prevalence of double standards in the purdah society is poignantly exposed when the men who seclude their women are shown as frequenting the brothels of Hira Mandi. Through the character of Shahnaz, Bapsi Sidhwa unveils the horror and degradation of the life of a courtesan, which represents the other side of the purdah society. Shahnaz’s song on purdah establishes how a veil, generally observed to conceal female charm, in fact, imparts a mysterious loveliness to her, which will disappear once she is unveiled:

Oh, let me stay in purdah – don’t lift my veil
If my purdah is removed [...] my mystery is betrayed.
Allah [...] forbid! Allah [...] forbid
My veil has ten thousand eyes.
- Yet you cannot see into mine.
But if you raise my veil even a bit -
Beware! You’ll burn.
So [...] let me stay in purdah – don’t lift my veil.
[...]
Oh God – who can have made me? -
Whoever it is – even he doesn’t know me [...]
Man worships me – Angels have bowed their heads [...]
If my purdah is removed – my mystery is betrayed. (PB 73)

As Niaz Zaman observes, “the eroticism and coyness, the repression and the mystery, the double perspective of purdah society, all these are contained in Shahnaz’s song” (164).

Purdah “is the creation of men, the bounds are defined, controlled and imposed by the male world [...]” (Jain “The Male Presence in the “Purdah” Novel” 216). The women are denied access to the power structures. Knowledge, wealth and political power remain the preserve of the male. In the tribal society in *The Pakistani Bride* “It is the men who lay down the law, who barter their womenfolk and control their life and death” (Jain “The Male Presence in the “Purdah” Novel” 219).

The Pir-dom Durrani portrays represents a bastion of male power built on the authority of the Holy Book, which the male interprets to his advantage. The Pirs, the keepers of the shrines of Sufi saints “are venerated in Pakistan for their holiness and their reputed ability to heal the sick and grant impossible wishes” (Goldenberg 28). As a patriarch of his clan, the Pir wields absolute

power. Reputed as a beneficent godman, he sits in his shrine dispensing talismans. He is the undisputed lord over a credulous community of the faithful. By acts of extreme cruelty he commands undying devotion from the common people. The Pir uses “his access to divinity for more temporal power, e.g., riches and political clout to decide the fate of governments, political wheeling-dealing with a distant prime minister from his corner in Southern Pakistan” (Bagchi 24). Pirhood becomes a licence to plunder, rape and even murder.

The power of the Pirs extends from the *haveli* to the shrine and spans the entire nation. As Dai, the nanni who raised Pir Sain, says: “ ‘The whole country is divided among the pirs’ ” (BY 63). They thrive on the fear, ignorance, poverty and insecurity of the gullible masses. The Pir is indeed a God on earth. He cleverly camouflages his bestiality, sadism and lustfulness beneath his divine right. Rumours of his and his cronies’ debaucheries are scotched with their power. The interlinking of institutionalised religion and politics serves as a purdah draping the sins of the male. At religious conferences, Islamic leaders from across the country of Pakistan sit together to discuss which Islamic injunctions best suit their interests. As custodians of law, they are above the law themselves.

The male buttresses his hold over religion by cultivating ignorance in women. In the Pir’s *haveli*, women are not supposed to have any pretensions to learning or scholarship. The only education Guppi, Heer’s daughter, is permitted, is reading the Quran in the Arabic script. When she begs to be allowed to read the Holy Book in a familiar tongue, she is terrorized into silence. Heer, better educated by her enlightened father, knows, but does not dare tell the child that if properly understood, the Holy Book would expose those who exploited it, which in turn would spark an uprising. The ignorance of women is necessary for the male to persist in his blasphemous acts with impunity. With his skilful manipulation of power the male puts a purdah over religious texts, which guarantee sexual equality. Durrani says: “Today there are two Islams: the Islam that is being practised, and an Islam being promoted by the Muslim leadership. The Muslim leadership has not allowed the people to see the real Islam” (qtd. in Goldenberg).

The majority of Muslim women “are almost unaware of the extent to which their human rights have been violated by their male-dominated and male-centred societies, which have continued to assert glibly and tirelessly that Islam has given women more rights than any other religious tradition” (Hassan 26). Afshan, the tribal girl in *The Pakistani Bride*, married to a boy in exchange for a loan, exemplifies the powerlessness of the illiterate Muslim woman. As a bride she presents a pathetic spectacle, “her head bowed beneath a voluminous red veil, she wept softly as befitted a bride” (PB 8). Thrice she is asked her consent for the marriage and thrice an old aunt gives it on her behalf – a pointer to the disparity between the theoretical and actual status of the Muslim woman. Though the consent of the girl is necessary for the Muslim marriage to become legally valid, often it is given by some elders on her behalf.

When the male manipulates religious texts to boost his power, the woman has no supporting system. “The doors that opened wide for a man slammed shut for a woman” (BY 74). The women in the tribal and the Pir societies are too powerless to register their protest against the rigidly oppressive patriarchal system, which allows them no space and pushes them to the margins. Hence most women choose the easier path – they blindly adhere to the stereotypical roles assigned by patriarchy. For want of a better alternative, Zaitoon plays the role of a submissive and modest wife, befitting the status of her husband: “[...] 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). Nothing but a desire for self-preservation keeps her going.

Unlike Zaitoon who submits to the subjugating will of her husband, Carol seizes upon alternatives. The intimacy she develops with Major Mushtaq suggests both her escape from a life of suffocation and her revenge on the man who annihilates her selfhood. However, she painfully realizes that what is life to her is nothing more than a mere pastime for the Major. Carol only satisfies “his need for a woman in the loneliness of his remote posting” (PB 180). The emptiness of the gallant and protective stance of the male is fully exposed to Carol when she learns that the Major would have killed her for her perfidy if she had been his wife. She eventually realizes that like the Punjabi girl, Zaitoon, she too is a mere plaything in the hands of men (Paranjape 93) and has no more control over her destiny than a caged animal. Finding the Pakistani civilization to be ancient and hurting she ultimately decides to return home. “Carol’s story nicely complements Zaitoon’s, and viewed together, they help convey the author’s view of the status of women in the novel” (Paranjape 93).

Islam granted the woman the right to seek divorce if she cannot live with her husband on equitable terms. The woman could stipulate divorce as a marriage condition. Islam also gave her the right to remarry after divorce. Nevertheless, the society looks askance at the woman who exercises the right to divorce. “A Pakistani woman will endure almost anything in order to hold a marriage together” (Durrani, *My Feudal Lord* 55). This is borne out by Heer’s marital life. She tells her daughter, “ ‘As you lose control in a storm, you have to ride the waves to survive, but drowning is easier than riding the waves’ ” (BY 139). Heer’s brutalized existence is a re-enactment of the marital life of Amma Sain, her mother-in-law. Amma Sain’s life was ruled by “The same violence and fear, the same demands for perfection and the same imprisonment” (BY 102). Passivity is passed on from generation to generation. Accustomed to the reality of the hellish life in the *haveli*, Guppi, Heer’s daughter, entertains no romantic illusions or fantasies of rebellion. “ ‘I don’t want to fight against my life’ ” (BY 109). All the women in the *haveli* thus live the master’s life.

Resilience of spirit emanates from a sense of community in shared work, pain and dreams. Bapsi Sidawa and Tehmina Durrani present pictures of strong female bonding to redeem the general picture of passivity, isolation and silence. Though against educating Zaitoon, Miriam vehemently and audaciously fights for the girl at the time of her proposed marriage to a tribal. She foresees the danger involved in the offer: “ ‘[...] they don’t know how to treat women! [...] She’ll be a slave, you watch, and she’ll have no one to turn to. No one!’ ” (PB 93-94). This modest and submissive purdah woman, who has never directly addressed Qasim, now indulges in a fierce verbal tirade against him. By attempting to redress the wrong to one woman through the agency of another, the author seems to assert the need for female bonding.

Despite their cultural polarity Zaitoon and Carol feel a strong kinship with each other, resulting perhaps from “an understanding they shared of their vulnerabilities as women” (PB 136). Totally unaware of the actuality of Zaitoon’s predicament Carol (charmed by Sakhi’s handsomeness) once fantasizes herself in the position of the girl. She imagines herself to be a goddess adored and respected by the tribals. But the horrifying reality of the girl’s life comes as a rude shock to her. The head of the young tribal girl, she sees floating down the river, makes her all the more alive to the dangers women are exposed to, in a system that professes to protect them. Farukh’s remark that she “asked for it” incenses Carol: “Women the world over asked to

be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, to get importunately impregnated, beaten up, bullied and disinherited” (PB 226). Carol earnestly expresses the readiness to risk her own life for the sake of the girl, “If she comes through I’ll do something for her, I really will” (PB 229). And she does. As Paranjape has put it, “If Zaitoon is the heroine of the novel, Carol is the best supporting actress [...]” (93).

The Pirs utilise their power ruthlessly to break all attempts at female bonding. Heer develops a bond with Kaali, the servant girl. She becomes Heer’s companion in laughter. They communicate non-verbally. But the punishment for transgressing the male-defined boundaries of friendship is torturous. Pir Sain injects boys with the virility serum meant for horses to ensure a productive mating season and lets them loose on Kaali. Through the Heer-Tara bonding, Durrani affirms the productive ties of love and loyalty among oppressed women. Heer tells Tara: “ ‘We are bonded together in suffering, you and I [...] we are captives of a false and evil system. A poisonous octopus grips us. Its tentacles usurped the strength of Islam to exploit us in every possible way. Its grip tightens but never lets us die’ ” (BY 195). With Tara’s help Heer proposes to wage a war against the shrine, the symbol of all exploitations. Despite her misgivings Tara encourages Heer: “ ‘Fear is the only demon standing in our way, bibiji [...]’ ” and pledges her commitment to the cause of avenging injustice (BY 196). Fighting against decades of established thought, it is no surprise that they fail in demolishing the vicious system. But they do succeed in causing fissures in it.

Given the vast and strong network of male power, open rebellion is inconceivable for the women in *The Pakistani Bride* and *Blasphemy*. However, women do attempt covertly at liberation and protest, often staking their life and honour. Cheel, who spends her whole life in blind allegiance to the Pir, has actually been waiting for an opportunity to take her revenge on those who murdered her kith and kin. She turns out to be the robed figure that murders Pir Sain. “She dared what none of the male members of her family had dared” (BY 194).

Driven by inhuman torture, Zaitoon catches hold of the only alternative open to her – she runs away. The act cannot be treated as “deliberate defiance of the male order”. It is her only hope of survival, “a last-ditch stand of the weak and the oppressed” (Paranjape 96). Zaitoon manages to survive after ten days’ rigorous and famished life in the perilous mountains, until at last she is rescued by Major Mushtaq. The hardships she encounters during the flight, along with the rape, drag her almost to the verge of insanity. Through the image of a crippled but flying eagle, Sidhwa poignantly reveals both the pathetic predicament of Zaitoon and her dauntless courage and faith (Bhatt 159). Her final escape seems to be more than the result of a mere personal affair. The escape of Zaitoon is the triumph of *khudi* or will, “the strength of nature – a force, perhaps of God, within one” (PB 229). Zaitoon’s escape is the author’s way of rewarding her individual will to survive.

By allowing her heroine to escape, Sidhwa makes a significant shift from the actual incident upon which she has based her novel. The Punjabi girl of the true story, married to a Himalayan tribal, tried to escape and after fourteen days of wandering in the mountains, was found by her husband and beheaded. “The novel retains the actual episode in a brief description of a head of a tribal woman floating downstream” (Zaman 161). The author has had several options to end the story – Zaitoon could have continued her life with the tribesman, letting herself be beaten into a spiritless woman like her mother-in-law, Hamida – a state of slow and gradual death; she could have met with her death due to starvation in the hill or at the hands of a

wild animal; the tribesmen could have captured and murdered her; the girl could have plunged into madness like the woman she met at Lawrence Gardens, Lahore (Paranjape 100). By rejecting all such options and choosing a happy ending, the author seems to have underscored her absolute faith and confidence in the deprived but courageous women of Pakistan, to whom she dedicates her novel. The author explains the impulse behind her alteration of the original story thus:

I first ended it where there's an illusionary scene, in which she has a nightmarish vision of being killed. That's where the book was supposed to end. But by this time I had a different feeling for the book. I'd inherited this girl's body and her emotions for so long that I felt it was a shame, considering all that she had been put through, that she should be then killed off [...] At least in the end she lives – she barely survives, but she lives. (qtd. in Dhawan and Kapadia 17-18)

Jasbir Jain observes: “The way a novel ends is a statement on the self – on its ability or inability to survive, specially when the ‘self’ is a woman cornered in a world which does not provide for her self-expression” (“Gender and Narrative Strategy” 53). By giving an alternative end to the story, Sidhwa indirectly makes a plea to the oppressed women for an assertion of selfhood.

For Heer, who lives in stricter segregation, an escape from the *haveli* is almost a closed option. The death of Pir Sain releases her from her hell to a certain extent. As Sakhi Bibi, one of the characters in the novel suggests, she could have spent her old age in prostration before Allah for granting her respite from a cruel husband. Instead, she chooses to expose the filth of the shrine.

Heer's journey out of the *haveli* begins from the graves. It is there that she is brought by her husband to be feasted upon by a horde of men. “The graves become her only point of contact to escape from the threat in the household” (Bagchi 24). There she relives her hell, but this time in full view and consciousness of the world. Now she is not just one subjected to the violation (of rape) but becomes a subject. She moves from the anonymity conferred by the *purdah* to subjecthood. It is a terrible resolution, for, it means sacrificing her honour and dignity. But it is the only way she could find to avenge herself and the countless women consumed by the Pir's lust. “To me, burying the evil and preserving my reputation meant preserving the evil. No exposure meant maintaining the status quo. That meant no change. I knew I had done the wrong thing for the right reason” (BY 208-09).

In her attempt to expose the distortion of Islam and the perpetuation of evils in its name, Heer has taken on not an individual but a legacy. The self-appointed custodians of law, who feel their divinity threatened, quash her unorchestrated rebellion with their titanic power. “Like a wounded bird I had flown without direction, but it was impossible to sustain such a flight” (BY 209). Once caught, she is confined to stricter imprisonment. Finally, the only way in which she can find life is through ‘death’ – she is declared dead so that her family can reclaim her as another person. However, with her gutsy act, she has managed to expose the façade of the Pir's divinity. For, at the end of the novel, we see Heer raised to the state of a martyr through a woman's speech: “‘O Allah, bless this soul for exposing the decadence of shrine-worship’ ” (BY 229). But in the process she also risks the birth of another shrine built around her. In Islam, shrine worship is regarded as a corruption of doctrine and values (Surya 40). Nevertheless, along

with religious precepts, a host of quasi-religious beliefs regulates the life of the average Muslim in the Indo-Pakistani sub-continent, women being the prime victims of the decadence.

Zaitoon and Heer enter repressive societies through marriage. While Hamida and Amma Sain, accustomed to the repression from birth, live with the shame and torture, the 'alien' women seize upon the earliest opportunity to escape or strike back. If they are able to assert their will at some point in their lives, it is because of the relative freedom they enjoyed in their natal families. The less repressive the cultures, the more individualistic the women prove to be.

For Bapsi Sidhwa and Tehmina Durrani, writing becomes the site of challenge, for, they take a discernible anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position in their novels. Her novel being a damning indictment of the misogynistic Pakistani Muslim culture, Sidhwa had grave apprehensions about the reception of the book by the people of Pakistan. This explains why the novel, the first to be written, was published only after *The Crow Eaters* (1978). However, Sidhwa's apprehensions were proved baseless and the novel was well received. In fact, it is often presented as a wedding gift to brides in Pakistan "though one wonders whether it is for information, admonition or consolation" (Dhawan and Kapadia 18). Tehmina Durrani, who with the writing of her autobiography *My Feudal Lord* (1994) broke the traditional silence of the Muslim woman, has, through the publication of her first novel, "exposed herself to the charge of blasphemy [...]" (Surya 40). For, *Blasphemy* is "a true story about how the Pirs in Pakistan [...] abuse their self arrogated ecclesiastical authority" (Daruwallah). Durrani believes that whatever be the consequences of speaking out, silence cannot be tolerated. "Silence condones injustice, breeds subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy" (*My Feudal Lord* 312). It is on the silence of the oppressed that tyrants like Pir Sain thrive.

Purdah has diverse manifestations in the tribal and Pir communities. Among the tribals the concepts of modesty and *izzat* serve as the purdah. In the Pir society purdah is both a concrete as well as an ideological presence. In both these societies, it becomes a weapon of control and victimization of the woman. In the patriarchal tribal and Pir societies, the woman is the private possession of the male and is sexually oppressed and brutalized. The novelists do not stop with recounting the oppression; they also document the women's attempts at emancipation. It is a tenuous individualism that directs the female subject's resistance in *The Pakistani Bride* and *Blasphemy*, which are set in closed communities, where the victimized female has no access to the organized power structures. The path to women's emancipation from the purdah, is shown by the novelists as being fraught with difficulties and dangers.

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