

The Silence of the Bride: Honour or Horror?

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“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

Simone de Beauvoir

One of the prominent feminist writers and thinkers, Simone de Beauvoir transformed into words, the ideology underlying the identity formation of a woman in every patriarchal society. Honour, shame, modesty, decorum, submission and sacrifice are all qualities ingrained into the feminine psyche since childhood. She is crafted and created into an epitome of virtue; an ideal of selflessness, love and compassion, and most importantly upholding the golden virtue of silence. Born with a voice she is conditioned to suppress it into submission and silence.

Patriarchal society runs on the well-oiled wheels of male supremacy and authority, and female inferiority and muteness. The supposed inferiority of women is more of a male dominated cultural manipulation of a woman's potential than a fact. The theory of gendered subalternity represents the silenced voice of these women who are made victims at the altar of patriarchy in the name of honour and shame.

In patriarchal culture it is the woman who is ordained to be the preserver and carrier of culture and tradition; the upholder of honour and pride. Her natural instincts and desires are sacrificed and her individuality squashed in order to maintain the codes of tradition and culture that binds her life and identity within the precincts of morality and family honour.

With the development of the feminist movement in social and literary circles, awareness has been raised regarding the plight and position of women. Various social activists and writers have come forth to shed light on the life and problems of women, as a way to create further awareness about the issue and bring a change in the society. Moreover their attempts are directed towards rendering an equal status to women as a human being with her own individual identity, dreams and desires.

In India also we have witnessed a gradual transformation in the position of women and the emergence of the new woman who is an amalgamation of the

best of both worlds- old and new. However the journey is still in its transitory phase and miles away from its final destination of equality and liberation. Along this journey many women have struggled, suffered and presented an exemplary example of courage and confidence. Some of these women though fictional in character inspire and motivate with their sheer grit and determination of spirit.

Various writers have rendered a voice to these millions of voiceless women. Conjured up through the imagination of their creators, often these characters are an echo of the real women who have inspired the writers. In *Shame*, Salman Rushdie writes about one such girl who was made a victim to patriarchy and became the inspiration for his protagonist Sufiya.

Not so long ago, in the East End of London, a Pakistani father murdered his only child, a daughter, because by making love to a white boy she had brought such dishonour upon her family that only blood could wash away the stain. The tragedy was intensified by the father's enormous and obvious love for his butchered child, and by the beleaguered reluctance of his friends and relatives (all 'Asians' . . . to condemn his actions. (Rushdie 115)

Every year in our country young girls pay a heavy price for following their hearts. By breaking the code of honour imposed upon them by their family and society they court an untimely death and sometimes even worse, intense abuse and torture at the hands of their own family. It is the untold story of many women across the world but predominant mostly in the orthodox and traditional societies.

Two women writers from the subcontinent who have given a loud and clear voice to the ongoing saga of exploitation and abuse of women are Bapsi Sidhwa and Namita Gokhale. These writers through their fictional work have brought forward the story of suffering and

pain that engulfs any woman who dares to transgress the predetermined codes of conduct and behaviour. In the two novels taken into consideration for the present paper, namely *The Pakistani Bride* (TPB) and *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* (SPM), the respective writers have voiced the anguish and struggle of two women, hailing from two different cultures and backgrounds, undertaking two different paths in life, yet similar in their confinement, frustration, exploitation, and their struggle for liberation.

Munni was a young child when the Partition horrors broke across India and Pakistan. Losing her parents to the bloodied frenzy of hatred spilling across the borders, she is rescued and adopted by Qasim who names her Zaitoon after his own dead daughter. Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* is the story of Zaitoon and her escape to freedom. In Gokhale's novel *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, the protagonist, Shakuntala has a change of name but this forging of a new identity is more of her own choice than a result of the circumstances.

Both the writers have trailed the growth and development of their protagonists' right from their childhood. The altar of patriarchy on which they will be ultimately sacrificed requires years of preparation and conditioning. And so we find Miriam, Zaitoon's neighbour and a surrogate mother to her object to Qasim's decision regarding her education. A similar and more pronounced judgment that suppresses Shakuntala's desire for knowledge is made by her widowed mother "as the scriptures were forbidden to women." (SPM 11). Young girls especially those belonging to orthodox traditions and hailing from socio-economically challenged backgrounds have to face more stringent restrictions and codes that define their existence within confined limits. Shakuntala is a far more spirited girl than Zaitoon and finds it more difficult to subdue her free spirit.

Denied the support and affection of her mother, who showers all her love on her son Govind; Shakuntala rebels strongly. In case of Zaitoon, love and affection is certainly not short in her life. Miriam and Qasim showers their love and care on her. Though Miriam is conventional in her approach and advises Qasim to take Zaitoon out of her school when she reaches puberty, yet it is her gentle care and love that enables Zaitoon to transcend the bounds of childhood and lead a happy carefree life under her tutelage. She learns the womanly skills expected of her like cooking, sewing, shopping, etc.; and the usual visits to the neighbours. But for Shakuntala her first steps towards womanhood are wrought with the feelings of pain, hurt and abandonment. When her mother finds her bleeding in the kitchen, she scolds her severely "Have you no modesty, girl . . . Defiling the household fires . . ." (SPM 31). She drags her to the low stoop beside the cowshed and leaves her there. A young child, Shakuntala is left shocked, confused and afraid. She is unaware of what is happening to her and fears that she might bleed to death alone. But the rebellious spirit that she has in her asserts itself and in a fit of rage she breaks through the door and walks towards the wilderness of the forest. It is a strange mysterious woman in the forest who consoles and comforts her, making her realize that she is not accursed but in fact "blessed" (SPM 34). Her words of wisdom seem strange to the naïve ears of Shakuntala at the time but in truth are a revelation of the feminine power that lies buried in every woman's soul; hidden and forgotten. "Remember that in every one of her forms the goddess is always Swamini, mistress of herself." (SPM 35).

When a girl reaches puberty it is common for families to settle their marriage as soon as possible without a thought as to their immaturity, dreams, aspirations or choice. Miriam clearly voices the concern and traditional

approach to marriage as the ultimate safe haven for a girl. ". . . she'll be safe only at her mother-in-law's . . . A girl is never too young to marry . . ." (TPB 53). Marriage is the ultimate destination or goal for every girl's life; in fact it is the only way she can complete herself and define her identity in a patriarchal society, as someone's wife.

Qasim promises the hand of Zaitoon to his cousin Misri Khan, a member of the Kohistani tribe to which he also belongs. Even when his friend Nikka and Miriam try to make him see sense about the incompatibility of a young girl from the plains growing up in the city of Lahore being wedded to a boy from the mountains, he stands by his promise that he had given to his brother from the tribe. The prospect of returning to his roots far exceeds his affection for the daughter he had come to love as his own. Zaitoon loves her father dearly and is too young to understand the complications and complexities of such a match. She stays by her father's word and follows him in his journey to the mountains enamoured by his tales of the mountains. For Shakuntala, marriage is an agreeable proposition than living a confined existence at her mother's home. "I was eager to be married, for I saw it as an escape from the bondage of my situation." (SPM 18).

Zaitoon appears docile compared to Shakuntala as she silently follows the words of her father without the slightest hesitation and apprehension. She travels through rough terrain and mountain steps accompanied by her father, and is full of sweet anticipation,

. . . her heart was buoyant – and at the same time filled with misgiving. Would he like her . . . She fell to dreaming. Surely her future husband would like her young face and her thick lashes. She felt alternately fearful and elated. (TPB 149).

It is only when she reaches the village and becomes conscious of her father's

inevitable departure that she feels scared of the new strange environment and people. Her fear and desperation compels her to speak to her father regarding her misgivings of the marriage for the first time. Her father tries to console her and becomes furious at her apprehensions. He threatens her, "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." (TPB 158). A girl has no say in the matter of choosing her partner. It is the parents or the elders who make the most important decision for her. In traditional and orthodox communities, a girl exercising her choice is met with great opposition and often with torture, abuse and death. Zaitoon is scared but her father's dilemma silences her into submission. Even Qasim feels an unnamed fear for his beloved child but is unable to turn back on his word.

Marriage being a happy alternative for the restricted and confined life of Shakuntala, she gladly embraces the changes that it brings into her life. In her surging hopes for marital bliss and the freedom and authority it would bestow on her, Shakuntala resembles Naveed in her optimism who pronounces, "Marriage is power . . . It is freedom . . . Then who can tell you what to do?" (Rushdie 155). But how free is free for a woman bound by the shackles of patriarchy? First she was bound by the codes of honour to her filial household and after marriage to her husband's. Wherever she is, she can only live in an illusion of freedom but never breathe the genuine air of liberation. Shakuntala is much younger to her husband, Srijan who is a widower, having been married twice before. Strong and rebellious in nature, she is however coached to appear demure and docile during her marriage, submitting willingly to the dictates and codes that determine the nature, character and behaviour of a girl: what she should do and what she shouldn't.

Now I was a bride, I had been instructed to look at the earth, to keep my gaze down and appear modest. Even as I garlanded my bridegroom, I looked down and saw only feet. (SPM 39).

Traditional societies follow gender segregation, with the result that both the sexes grow in a repressive atmosphere in total ignorance of the other.

Sidhwa describes the traditional household that is divided into two sections.

Rooms with windows that open to the street were allotted to the men: the dim maze of inner rooms to the women – a domain given over to procreation, female odours and the interminable care of children. (TPB 56).

Further description of the patriarchal structure of society and family follows that gives a glimpse of the

Proud husbands, fathers and brothers . . . the providers. Zealous guardians of family honour and virtue . . . in their homes . . . pampered patriarchs . . .

Kings of their homes they left as soon as . . . the household was visited by unrelated women . . . (TPB 56).

Carol, an American married to a Pakistani finds it difficult to adjust to the repressed atmosphere of her new home. Segregation and repression in the society makes her aware of a subtle yet strong undercurrent of sexually charged atmosphere. Ogled by the tribesmen, Carol is reduced to a mere thing.

The obscene stare stripped her of her identity. She was a cow, a female monkey, a gender opposed to that of a man – charmless, faceless, and exploitable. (TPB 120).

It is this segregation and repression because of which ignorance reigns over the consciousness of young, immature girls regarding man-woman relationship

and her role and position in it. Zaitoon is terrified when faced with her young bridegroom, Sakhi. Jealously possessive of his possessions, a man tries to grab them with his might. A woman; a wife is also a possession to be marked by him as his property with force and authority. Witness to Zaitoon's journey through the mountains with her father, accompanied by a young soldier, a stranger who helped her on the way, Sakhi is filled with murderous rage and rips Zaitoon's clothes off her, pushing her into a fit of terrified hysteria. Calmed down moments later, he consummates his marriage with her and Zaitoon feels emotion of love and longing surging within her for the man, her husband, who had assaulted her. She grows accustomed to the life in the hills but the sight of the mountain road trailing down the hills reminds her of home and people she knew. Her fascination for the road and the military vehicles is met with suspicion and hatred by Sakhi. She is often beaten and abused. What position a woman holds in the family is vividly revealed when Sakhi in a fit of rage violently strikes his mother, Hamida.

If life becomes a daily struggle and torment for Zaitoon after her marriage, it is full of bliss for Shakuntala. She glows with marital happiness and love. The lady of the household she cherishes her new found freedom, and enjoys her walks to the forest and her swims in the streams. However her freedom is bound to her duties as a wife. As a part of the after marriage rituals, Srijan had taken her outside to view the night sky and guide her sight towards,

. . . the star Arundhati. She . . . the purest of wives, the emblem of fidelity." And as Srijan guided her vision towards the star, he promises to guide her in their ". . . life together towards the vision of right and wrong. (TPB 42).

However her happy married life is eclipsed by the shadow of her inability to conceive. Srijan was left without an heir from his previous marriages and all hopes were centred on Shakuntala. The burden of barrenness is the lot of women to bear and Shakuntala finds herself buried underneath this weight. Various rituals are performed as foretold by astrologers and pundits which only makes her more aware of her inadequacy. When Srijan brings home the woman, Kamalini as her handmaiden, the secure world of Shakuntala's marital life starts to develop cracks of suspicion and betrayal. Her confidence shattered and feeling insecure of Srijan's love and interest, Shakuntala craves for and fights for his attention and love. She is unsettled and insecure because of Kamalini's presence and often wanders to the Matrika temple in the forest.

Eventually Shakuntala does conceive but her pregnancy fails to satisfy the craving in her heart that had always remained hidden within her. When asked by the priest why she was not happy, Shakuntala replies, "I want to see the world" (TPB 103) and is instructed by the priest to be content in her role as the wife, but contentment or peace is difficult to find when one is involved in a fight with oneself.

Zaitoon is trapped in an abusive and loveless marriage while Shakuntala is trapped by her own wandering soul. The thirst for 'self' and the thirst for experience that throbs within these women ultimately break free in their flight from home. "If you hold down one thing you hold down the adjoining. In the end, though, it all blows up in your face." (Rushdie 173). Exploitation and torture, both physical and psychological hurt and inflict wounds that run deep into the psyche of the victims. Zaitoon is battered and beaten; alienated in her new environment without love and support. Shakuntala on the other hand has

everything that a woman could possibly desire: a prosperous household, material comforts and a loving husband. But then things change. Her very identity is made a hostage to the presence of a mysterious and strange woman by her husband who instructs her, "Do not ask any questions . . . She has been brought here as your handmaiden, and that is all. See that you treat her well." (TPB 58).

Zaitoon has the spirit of perseverance and great courage. She flees from the clutches of her sadistic husband and the stringent environment of the tribe. Her journey down the mountains is filled with many perils and dangers but she risks everything for a chance to liberate herself. If her instinct of self-preservation had enabled her to adjust to her surroundings and chores, it was the same survival instinct that made her flee. Once her escape is known, the men from her family and tribe hunt for her across the mountains. Hamida ruefully thinks:

Honour! She thought bitterly. Everything for honour – and another life lost! Her loved ones dead and now the girl she was beginning to hold so dear sacrificed. She knew the infallibility of the mountain huntsmen . . . Men and honour. And now the girl . . . She, who had been so proud and valiant and wholeheartedly subservient to the ruthless code of her forebears, now loathed it with all her heart. (TPB 190-91)

The code that cried for blood to regain an honour lost, propelled the men to search and scan the entire landscape for Zaitoon with the zeal of fanaticism. Alone yet determined Zaitoon moves forth through difficult and unknown terrain, hungry and in pain. Frail and weak she tries to quench her thirst from the river when three men chance upon her and rape her mercilessly. Left to die, she drifts in and out of consciousness. Undaunted by

the excruciating pain, Zaitoon crawls farther and farther. Her life instinct strong and alert again, she continues her journey towards the bridge that will deliver her to the safety of the military outpost. She hides behind boulders of stone and within the hollow crevices, waiting patiently for a safe way across the bridge. She is rescued and ultimately wins back her freedom and her life.

The escape of Shakuntala from the comfortable confines of her home and her role as a wife happens not of its own accord but through the agency of an individual whom she chances upon while returning from her visit to the Shiva shrine. The stranger whom she encounters is a Yavana, a Greek traveler and merchant who is enticed by her beauty. The intimacy and exhilaration in his embrace, and the charm and attraction of the strange unknown world he embodies; a world for which she had always craved to know and experience engenders a strange feeling of abandonment in Shakuntala. She leaves him only to return later. Once the priest had explained to her the symbolism of her anklets; "Your anklets weigh down your feet to keep you rooted in your home and family." (SPM 103), and so when Shakuntala abandons her home and her husband to flee with the Yavana, Nearchus, she abandons them too. "Taking off my silver anklets, I flung them into the water and ran towards him." (SPM 115). With Nearchus she redefines her identity as Yaduri, a name that broke the taboos like she did for it stood in slang as a word that ". . . signified a yoni, a woman's private part." (SPM 119). The free spirit that she was born with, Shakuntala flies from her nest, abandoning and breaking the codes of society and culture. Her actions negate any attempts at comprehension at a superficial, practical and materialistic level. Giving in to her sensual instincts with a wild abandon, she embodies the free flowing spirit of nature

that breaks all bounds and barriers constructed to obstruct and control her way. She is the life force itself, wanton and free willed losing her way in the maze of sensory pleasures in her unquenchable thirst for an identity of her own; free and liberated.

“Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior; she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority.” (Beauvoir). Shakuntala destroys the rules and codes of patriarchy by forging her own path, breaking the taboos that kept her safely reigned in within the honour and decorum of socially sanctified relationships and roles. She travels with Nearchus across the country, eagerly absorbing all the details and experiences of his travels and knowledge of the world. His passionate and wild love excites and arouses Shakuntala, who devours as much as she herself is devoured. She had loved Sirjan and carried his child within her, yet she is also attached dearly with Nearchus. Their arrival at Kashi, the holy and mysterious city of redemption, renunciation and salvation touches her soul with an awareness of her own self. Stranded on the left bank of the city meant for outsiders, Shakuntala is reminded of her fall from grace. She becomes deeply conscious of her growing detachment from the body that indulges in sensual pleasures with Nearchus. Her thirst for travel and experiences satiated, she does not want to wander any longer and one night leaves Nearchus to journey across the river to the other side. Shakuntala's wanderings on the streets of Kashi and finally her death re-assert the sanctity and inevitability of the codes that define honour and morality for a woman. Fallen from grace and dignity, a woman's transgression can only be met with human or divine retribution. Shakuntala meandered in her path to find her own 'self' but even in her death she declared, “I had not wasted my life.” (SPM 208).

Patriarchy exerts its control and dominance over the women, no matter to which strata of society they belong. It might seem a little obvious in the case of educated and elite people but basically the attitude remains the same. In Kiran Desai it is a highly qualified and learned person, a Judge who vents his frustration and anger onto his innocent wife. In *The Pakistani Bride*, Carol who marries into an elite Pakistani family has to endure the suspicion and jealousy of her husband, Farukh. Her involvement with Major Mushtaq is an outcome of the repressive and constrictive atmosphere that she is forced to live in.

In an atmosphere that oppresses a woman and negates her identity, a woman literally has no voice of her own. If something bad happens to her it is always the fault of the woman. A woman's ordeal of life and death as faced by Zaitoon is something that she had, “asked for” (TPB 226) by daring to defy the codes of honour that defined her place and identity. Carol cannot help think of the fate of millions of women who according to the terms laid down by patriarchy asked for the torment, the torture, the abuse and the exploitation. Women the world over, through the ages, asked to be murdered, raped, exploited, enslaved, to get importunately impregnated, beaten-up, bullied and disinherited. (TPB 226).

A woman has her nose cut off, another gets striped and raped, a third gets killed. There are numerous tales of inhuman and beastly treatment that women of all ages have to face and endure in this world of ours. Many a young girl has to lose their dreams and compromise to a life of denial, play roles decreed out for them irrespective of their own desires and choices. Every year many a girl dies an unnatural death at the altar of patriarchal honour literally or symbolically. What is true honour but a respect for the life that flows through all of us; the divine spark that enlightens each

individual, men or women. If death horror?
becomes honour, then is it honour or

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