

Re-Reading of Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*: A Feminist Critique of Female Objectification in Pakistan

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Abstract

The paper undertakes a re-reading of Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* to examine the objectification of women in Pakistani patriarchal society, employing the theoretical framework of Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton. Sidhwa's literary text effectively captures the everyday instances of marginalized women who are suppressed by patriarchal norms and traditions. The framework of Nussbaum and Langton provides a robust framework for evaluating the various ways that social structures dehumanize and objectify women. Women objectification remains a ubiquitous problem, extensively embedded in social and cultural practices around the globe, and is especially prevalent in South Asian societies, including Pakistan. Employing the qualitative textual analysis method, the study scrutinizes the themes of objectification portrayed by Sidhwa in her fictional narrative such as, focusing on ownership, silencing, denial of autonomy, deprivation of subjectivity, imposition of inertness, and instrumentality. Through a focused critique, the text exposes the objectification of women, the findings of research reveal that on a large scale, females are treated as mere objects within the male-dominated social structure in Pakistani society. This re-reading of Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* illustrates how deeply rooted gender roles preserve systematic disparities, with long-term implications for women's autonomy and societal positioning. The research concludes that Sidhwa's fictional narrative is a powerful critique of patriarchal oppression, motivating readers to rethink, confront, and oppose these inequalities.

Keywords: Bapsi Sidhwa, Gender Inequality, Objectification, Patriarchy, *The Pakistani Bride*

Introduction

The objectification of women remains a prevalent and deeply ingrained issue across the globe, particularly in developing countries. Women's identity is reduced to physical attributes and social responsibilities within patriarchal institutions, stripping them of self-determination, subjectivity, and distinctiveness. In South Asian cultures, especially Pakistan, women are, on a large scale, viewed as mere objects to be owned, controlled, and exploited consciously or unconsciously by patriarchal hierarchies. This cultural context is thoroughly explored in Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* which highlights the lives of females trapped by traditional and social gender norms, social expectations, and patriarchal power dynamics.

According to Ahmed (2009), "The most important component of feminism for English fiction authors is how women are portrayed in society" (p. 90). Sidhwa's novel, set in rural Pakistan, illustrates the agony of female characters as they navigate restrictive customs, forced marriages, and a loss of personal autonomy. Both males and females in Pakistani society are restricted to rigid roles that maintain the established power structures. The rigid roles assigned to women within family and society impede their autonomy as societal expectations leave little room for self-determination.

This study aims to examine the objectification of women as portrayed in Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* through the lens of Nussbaum and Langton. Re-reading the novel through their theoretical framework sheds light on the various forms of objectification faced by women individually and collectively within Pakistan's cultural and social structures, especially in rural areas. The novel reveals these forms of objectification through instances of ownership, instrumentality, refusal of autonomy, silencing, and denial of identity. Beyond literary analysis, the research explores how women's lives are shaped by patriarchal conventions in rural Pakistan, offering insights that go beyond literature to actual gender equality initiatives. Grounded in a specific cultural context, the research integrates literary analysis with advocacy for social transformation, promoting critical thinking to initiate women's empowerment and equality. The paper is based on key research questions to be addressed to examine the theme of women objectification in Sidhwa's fictional narrative.

Literature Review

Several scholars have studied Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* from a variety of perspectives. While some have analyzed the cultural variables that influence society, others have employed psychoanalytic readings or explored the novel's political dimensions from different viewpoints. Korada (2023) studies the political aspects of Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*, paying particular attention to how political dynamics affect individuals, as illustrated by the experiences of the novel's characters. Although Sidhwa discussed politics only superficially, Korada (2023) notes, "Her keen observation of its impact on the common individuals and day-to-day activities was exceptional" (p. 3434). According to Korada (2023), the departure of the British from the Indian subcontinent resulted in violence and chaos, as the departing colonizers prioritized their repatriation over addressing the traumatic consequences of the partition. Sidhwa offers deep insights into the blood-soaked scenario by depicting the agonizing experiences of victims through the characters of Nikka and Qasim (p. 3435). The characters of Sidhwa effectively depict the ways through which political events impact the common individuals. Through a comprehensive analysis of the connection between personal experiences and broader societal influences, Sidhwa's narrative highlights how the political landscape shapes the lives of ordinary people.

Another scholar, Singla (2023), studies Sidhwa's novel from the perspective of cultural post-colonialism and gender roles. Her intention was to interpret *The Pakistani Bride* with regard to the post-colonial aftermath, giving particular consideration to how it influences the gender roles and ethical dynamics. Singha (2023) says, "The notion of postcoloniality is articulated to amplify the voices of indigenous cultures that were previously oppressed during colonial rule.... In *The Pakistani Bride* this culture-consciousness is foremost" (p. 93). The primary intention of Singla's research is to examine how Sidhwa's novel explores the distinct cultural practices of Pakistani culture in response to the colonial control of India by Britain. Moreover, it discusses the difficulties faced by women as a result of such cultural norms and expectations. According to Singla, while these norms may differ and have unique aspects compared to colonial norms when viewed through the lens of post-colonialism, they may not necessarily be more favorable for the condition of women. Geethanjali & Jayalaksham (2021) identify three types of cultural influences: "These include value conversion—replacing existing cultural values with new ones; value creation—developing new ideas for novel situations; and value connection—establishing conceptual links between previously unrelated or differently connected phenomena" (p. 2849). Women artists in Pakistan continually grapple with challenges related to gender identification and societal norms throughout their lives.

Nawaz (2019) delves into Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride*, examining the characters' use of defense mechanisms and the consequences within the theoretical context of Sigmund Freud. The study reveals that female characters such as Zaitoon employ defense measures to confront societal problems, reflecting resilience as well as determination against cultural expectations. Nawaz (2019) says, "The usage of defense mechanisms is a common and integral part of our lives because it is essential to manipulate, deny, or distort situations in order to get some advantages and also to avoid unpleasant realities of present life" (p. 679). Examining Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* through the lens of defense mechanisms exposes how the main character, Zaitoon, employs these mechanisms to handle practical and moral concerns. Zaitoon effectively uses defense mechanisms to confront negative emotions, navigate challenging circumstances, and undergo personal growth. This is notably evident in her application of repression, suppression, and rationalization to cope with parental neglect and marital dissatisfaction. According to Sulemani & Khan (2018), "Repression stands out as a crucial and widely employed strategy worldwide, proven to serve as the cornerstone for various defense mechanisms adopted by individuals" (p. 3749). Repression enables Zaitoon to maintain peace in society by conforming to societal expectations, reflecting how individuals, like children, may repress their anxieties to live harmoniously. While defense mechanisms like repression have both positive and negative aspects, Zaitoon's moderate use allows her to return to reality and self-understanding, unlike individuals who might be overwhelmed by defense mechanisms, leading to mental health issues.

This section reviews some of the existing works on *The Pakistani Bride* by Bapsi Sidhwa. Scholars have discussed the novel through political implications, cultural backgrounds, cultural post-colonialism, and defense mechanisms, while also focusing on feminist perspectives on the backdrop. The novel has not been explored through the objectification framework of Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton. So, this research gap is filled by research with a re-reading of *The Pakistani Bride* through the theoretical lenses of Nussbaum and Langton.

Research Methodology

The paper employs qualitative research methodology, which further makes use of textual analysis techniques to extract evidence from primary text supported by the theoretical framework. The research is text-based and employs thematic analysis to explore the various forms of objectification faced by the women as portrayed in the novel. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* acts as a primary source of data. While secondary sources such as research articles, electronic essays, blogs, websites, and reviews have also been consulted to enhance understanding and support the critical analysis. The research is limited to the textual analysis of Sidhwa's novel and does not include any primary data in the form of surveys and interviews. The key findings of the research are entirely based on the extractions from primary text and secondary sources that offer theoretical as well as critical perspectives on the themes of the novel.

Theoretical Framework

Historically, women have been regarded and treated as mere objects in male-dominated societies. The objectification of women has been a contentious subject among feminist critics and authors. The historical commodification of women, who were traded, sold, and exploited in class-based and colonial contexts, has influenced the societal roles of both genders.

Nussbaum (1994) states, "Feminist ideology consistently views men's sexual objectification of women not as a minor concern, but as a fundamental issue in women's lives, emphasizing that resistance to such objectification is a crucial aspect of feminist politics" (p. 250). Objectification refers to the treatment of non-objects as if they are objects, reducing them to a state where they can be exploited, manipulated, controlled, and understood purely through their physical attributes. Martha Nussbaum, a prominent philosopher and feminist critic, proposes a framework to clarify the concept of objectification, which is further expanded by another critic, Rae Langton integrates additional features into the framework.

Nussbaum (1994) asserts, "I suggest that in every case of objectification, the central issue revolves around the action of treating one entity as another, particularly treating a human being, which is not inherently an object, as if it were one" (p. 257). Nussbaum (1994) and Langton (2004) delineate several dimensions through which an individual can experience objectification and oppression. These include ownership, violability, instrumentality, deprivation of identity, refusal of autonomy, reduction to body, inertness, and silencing.

As noted by Nussbaum (1994), "The one objectifying treats the subject as a mere tool for their purposes, seeing it as devoid of autonomy and self-determination and the object is viewed as lacking agency and, perhaps, activity" (p. 57). It is also considered interchangeable and lacks fundamental boundary integrity, making it permissible to crush, break, or manipulate. Nussbaum (1994) further states that objectifier sees the subjects as a possession that can be acquired and sold, with no regard for their experiences or emotions.

Expanding Nussbaum's framework, Langton (2004) argues, "Silencing occurs when someone regards the subject as silent, lacking the ability to express itself verbally" (p. 229). Moreover, Langton adds the idea that reduction of appearance happens when someone considers a subject in terms of its sensory or visual attributions, focusing on how it appears or looks, and reduction of the body occurs when someone treats the subject in terms of specific body parts or physical attributes. This theoretical framework aids in evaluating Sidhwa's depiction of the objectification of women in her literary work, *The Pakistani Bride*, enabling the exploration of the oppressions experienced by women in rural Pakistani society.

Analysis and Discussion

This section of the paper analyzes various forms of objectification portrayed by Sidhwa in *The Pakistani Bride* and their role in fostering multiple oppressions. The commodification of women's bodies is heavily emphasized across diverse cultural contexts. Various economic as well as traditional factors contribute to the objectification and subjugation of women within a specific society.

Nussbaum (1994) maintains, "The person engaged in objectification treats the object as a means to their ends, devoid of autonomy and self-determination" (p. 57). This is evident in the cases of the female characters of Zaitoon, Carol, and Afshan, who, despite being part of entirely different social backgrounds, face similar challenges. Regardless of their unique social roles, all these women are treated as commodities by the men in their lives.

Ownership and Violability

First, Zaitoon is treated as an object by her father, who forces her to marry Sakhi to fulfill his promise. She is used as a tool to strengthen familial bonds and obligations to her cousin. As Zaitoon's father declares, "I've given my declaration. On it depends my respect. It is dearer to me than life. If you be-smear it, I will slaughter you with my revealed hands" (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 158). This treatment of Zaitoon reveals the rigid patriarchal norms of familial honor and tradition, where women are merely objects of their male peers, who can exploit them to their desires. In rural Pakistani society, the traditional norms are far stronger than the opinions and lives of women. The violent and possessive imagery in the phrase "slaughter you with my revealed hands" (p. 158) underscores the extremity of male dominance and how notions of "honor" are weaponized. His declaration becomes a symbol of toxic pride, equating personal respect with control over a woman's autonomy.

Similarly, Afshan's character reflects a denial of autonomy. Her individuality is subjected to the cultural restrictions of a tribal community, and she is seen merely as a means to uphold patriarchal traditions. Tribal societies have norms of marriage, such as Badal Marriage and Baad Marriage. Masad et al (2014) note, "Baad is an exchange of women in a marriage arrangement, either to mend hostility or to pay a debt or bond between two families" (p. 195). Afshan's father marries her to Qasim to waive his debt without considering her future. As Sidhwa (2008) writes, "He had only one wife, but in a twinge of parental conscience, he had decided to bestow the girl on Qasim" (p. 8). This action, shaped by societal values, reflects a deep-rooted perception of daughters as being insignificant. The word "bestow" evokes the image of an object being handed over, stripping Afshan of personhood and highlighting the transactional nature of such marriages. This choice of diction subtly critiques how affection or conscience is overridden by the compulsion to adhere to tribal codes.

After marriage, Afshan never feels at home with Qasim because she was given to him as payment, not chosen out of love. Qasim dehumanizes her, exclaiming, "Like more than a bitch in heat" (p. 157). A girl married through the ethnic code of Baad is never respected by her husband or her new family. As Masad et al (2014) note, "The girl is treated like a slave woman" (p. 196). The marriage of Afshan and Qasim illustrates the subordinate status of women across the Tribal regions of Pakistan. To call someone a "bitch in heat" displays Afshan as a mindless beast only operating on primal urges, and not as the constructed human with rational agent qualities she truly is. Qasim's choice of words shows both contempt and the deep-seated objectification inherent to Baad custom. In addition, Masad's portrayal of slave-like treatment falls under the idea of the commodification of women, highlighting the erosion of liberties and self-value that patriarchal societies have inflicted upon them. Afshan's emotional detachment is not simply private, it reflects society's deep disregard for women's suffering in mercenary marriages.

The concepts of ownership and violability are critical in comprehending the power dynamics that men impose over women in patriarchal societies. Ownership implies control over women as property, while violability emphasizes their vulnerability to physical as well as psychological abuse. Nussbaum (1994) explains, "Objectification occurs when someone perceives a subject as lacking boundary integrity, deeming it acceptable to break up, smash, or invade" (p. 57).

Sidhwa portrays it through sexual violence, especially during Zaitoon's wedding night, where Sakhi asserts his sexual ownership over her. When Zaitoon resists intimacy, Sakhi claims the possession of her as, "Why not? It's my cunt! he breathed, holding her crotch in a warm squeeze" (Sidhwa, 2008, p.162). These words represent a dominating assertion of ownership, emerging from the developed psyche of possession of women instead of feelings of love or affection. The crude and possessive language, particularly the word "my," signifies a complete erasure of Zaitoon's bodily autonomy, framing her not as a partner but as a piece of property. Sakhi's use of vulgar diction heightens the brutality of his mindset, illustrating how language itself becomes a tool of violence. Stoltenberg (2000) states that sexual objectification plays a critical role in developing, perpetuating, and manifesting male supremacy (p. 41). Sakhi exercises so intense control over the sexual organs of Zaitoon that she cannot even wave at the army trucks just for admiration.

To assert psychological dominance, Sakhi uses physical violence and inflicts physical harm, tearing her apart to shape her by his desires and thought patterns. He says, "You are my woman! I'll teach you to obey me" and response to Zaitoon, "Zaitoon knelt in misgiving and suspense.... Sakhi's retaliation is literal-he kicks her between her legs until she faints with pain" (p. 173-186). Though Zaitoon is aware of being exploited and abused, as noted by Ali and Khan

(2007), “Some women are unable to come forward to protect themselves from domestic violence as either they are too young, weak, or lack of support” (p. 27). The same is the case with Zaitoon; despite being aware of everything, she is helpless.

Furthermore, Sidhwa exposed male perception of women as just sexual objects, by portraying extra-marital affair of Carol with Mushtaq. He holds no respect for Carol and instead claims that he would have killed her if she were his wife, highlighting his collective psyche of possessiveness and ownership. However, because Carol is not his wife, she is denied even the basic protections and ownership dynamics linked with marriage, reducing her to the status of a disposable sexual object. This mindset powerfully exemplifies the degrading views embedded in patriarchal structures. Mushtaq’s conditional statement that he would have killed Carol if she were his wife reveals a disturbing logic that a woman’s value lies only in her relation to a man, and even that relationship becomes grounds for violence cloaked as honor. The implication is chilling—wives are termed as “property,” and any perceived betrayal is punishable, whereas other women are merely disposed of, exposing a pecking order among the subjected.

In addition to this, Sidhwa exposes the fundamental social context, portraying how men are granted freedom to do horrific acts against women. Nussbaum (1994) notes that objectifier sees the subject as interchangeable, either with other objects of the same type (p. 57). Sidhwa's presentation of imagery of Heera Mandi in Lahore portrays another psychological form of violence. It shows how men are free to find substitutes of their wives in the form of prostitutes when they get tired of them. The image of Heera Mandi, a genuine and symbolic space of commodified and systemic subjugation, epitomizes how women are rendered surplus and transactional beings. The marketplace setting evokes women as dehumanized commodities on sale, emplaced, priced, and devoured, highlighting how deep-seated masculine societal entitlement permits emotional and sexual maltreatment masquerading as cultural order.

She introduces the character of Shahnaz, describing her as “one hip jerking to the amusement of a jeering audience” (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 65). Sidhwa makes it clear that patriarchal society divides women into two categories, one like Zaitoon, who is deemed as ‘good’ because she is under the ownership of her husband, while another like Shahnaz, who is deemed as ‘bad’ because of her profession, regardless of situations which compelled her doing so. But the important thing to note is that women, whether as wives or prostitutes, are exploited by men. Shahnaz is described in the phrase ‘one hip jerking’ as a being reduced to a sexualized body part. This describes her life as being viewed solely through the pleasure and desire of men. The ‘jeering audience’ shows not just the ridicule, but also the systemic and institutional violence that is defined as the absence of humanity towards women in these prevailing roles. Such mocked disempowerment demonstrates the dualism of the space permissible to women: they are either suffocated and silenced into marriage, or scorned and despised in public.

However, an important distinction arises from the authoritative and ownership-driven mindset of men, prompting them to substitute their wives with prostitutes. This substitution represents an additional form of oppression within the feminist context. Qasim visits the brothel in Hira Mandi, Lahore, where he engages with other women, treating them as replacements for Mariam, his loyal and obedient wife. This behavior stems from Qasim perceiving his wife as an object rather than a partner, allowing him to substitute the object because commodities are perceived as having no intrinsic value to the individuals involved.

Silencing and Inertness

Silencing and reduction of the body illustrate two other oppressive mechanisms through which women are objectified. Women in male-dominated scenarios are restricted from expressing their views or making decisions. Silencing and reduction of the body occur as Langton (2004) says, “lacking the capacity to express themselves verbally, and some are regarded in terms of their sensory or visual attributions” (p. 229). These things are quite prominent in the novel.

Reduction of body based on both appearance and ethnic background is evident in the case of Carol and Zaitoon. Sakhi in his rage humiliates Zaitoon, “You dirty, black little bitch, waving at those pigs” (Sidhwa, 2008, p. 185). This exclamation regarding Zaitoon's appearance underscores the significance attributed to her sensory appeal by her husband. The perceived inadequacy in her physical presentation may subconsciously contribute to heightened feelings of fury and resentment directed toward her. This correlation between perceived attractiveness and emotional reactions implies a complex interplay between aesthetic judgments and emotional responses within the context of their relationship. Sakhi’s description shows a clear understanding of a woman’s stereotypical femininity as gender based on skin color discrimination. Sakhi inflicts violence upon herself by reducing her entire self to body, skin color, and slurs, encapsulating ethnic hostility as well as misogyny. Just like it has been discussed in the previous example of demeaning

expectation of quasi-diversity in the workplace, here, patriarchy dualizes misogyny and ethnicity to control women and deepen their victimization for failing to conform to set standards.

Women of color experience a compounded form of objectification as they are subjected to dual layers of scrutiny – not only are they sexually objectified, but they also face racial objectification. This intersectionality intensifies the challenges they encounter, as both their gender and racial identities contribute to the complexities of societal perceptions and stereotypes. Equally, in the case of Carol, her sexual liaisons with Mushtaq are sanctioned as a greater abstraction of barefaced bigotry towards western women fulfills his fantasies. Carol's contribution to this saga demonstrates that not only does she encounter disempowerment as a consequence of being a woman, but also as a result of the position white women are put in by the patriarchal order. Carol's characterization in this context means she is also considered through the prism of race that casts her as boundless permissiveness. Such theories ring a familiar bell to the 'exotic other' phrase used to refer to women of color, used to support the rationalization that women of different races do not possess dignity and self-respect, reinforcing an oppressive hierarchy that exploits these women based on race. In this case, her story underscores how gender and race work together, constructing her reality not only as a sexualized woman, but as a woman whose body is the active ground of racialized authority.

In this context, Carol experiences the reduction of the body due to her ethnic background, as her worth is perceived through the lens of racial stereotypes and biases. The silencing factor is exemplified through the earlier analysis of the marriage pacts involving Zaitoon and Afshan. Both of these women are systematically silenced and deprived of the right to articulate their fundamental rights within the context of their respective marriages.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research has analyzed various aspects of the objectification of women portrayed by Sidhwa in *The Pakistani Bride*, illustrating the oppressive dynamics imposed by patriarchal societies. Through the female characters such as Afshan, Carol, and Zaitoon, Sidhwa portrays the systematic dehumanization of women in Pakistani society, particularly in rural and tribal regions, in which women are treated as mere objects rather than as partners. The analysis of fictional characters through the lens of Nussbaum and Langton reveals the grave inequalities, exploitations, and abuses embedded in patriarchal societies, leading to the agony of women. By exposing these dynamics and objectification of women, *The Pakistani Bride* serves as both a sharp critique of repressive ideals and a call for action to dismantle these structures that promote inequality, domestic violence, and exploitation, making it a compelling narrative that bridges the art of fiction with advocacy for social change.

This study emphasizes the need for a more holistic approach to feminism that seeks to integrate culture as well as the systems of inequality around the world. The analysis of objectification in Sidhwa's works can shape teaching methodologies by supporting the pervasively patriarchal curriculum policies and relations with women and education on gender. Such analysis, furthermore, may assist in the construction of policies designed to negate the violence of discrimination against women, to safeguard women's rights, to establish and defend norms of equality, and to protect active engagements with and violence against women. In this manner, *The Pakistani Bride* explores beautiful literature and brutally shatters the myth of universal, benign social change, needed but with no action taken towards the social restructuring of women's rights.

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