

## MOLESTING WOMEN TO HUMILIATE OPPONENTS: A FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF BAPSI SIDHWA'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES

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### ABSTRACT

*This study is primarily related to the issues of women and social conditions prevailing in the Indo-Pak Sub-continent. By analyzing a short stories' collection titled "Their Language of Love," authored by Bapsi Sidhwa, the research highlights suffering and adversity experienced by women. These narratives raise awareness about women's issues and identify their problems through fictional experiences. Through a feminist lens, this study illuminates the multifaceted oppression faced by women, spanning sexual, emotional, and political realms. It elucidates how societal structures perpetuate discrimination and exploitation, exerting control over women's body. This study is focused on the sense of female honour. A sense of honour is attached with the female body in the sub-continent. In the partition riots, Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims abused women to humiliate one another. Dishonouring women means dishonouring that community. Furthermore, the present research emphasizes literature's role in shedding light on women's issues, offering a nuanced picture through fictional narratives. Despite potential misrepresentations of feminism, literature serves as a powerful medium to challenge societal misconceptions and biases, fostering dialogue and awareness. Sidhwa's stories serve as poignant reflections of the complexities surrounding women's struggles, dissecting the interplay of social structures and cultural institutions that ensnare women in a web of oppression. By undertaking a feminist analysis of her work, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on women's rights and empowerment, aligning with broader efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and advocate for gender equality.*

**Keywords:** Molestation, feminism, humiliation, honour, patriarchy

### INTRODUCTION

The focus of the current study is a Pakistani diasporic author hailing from the Parsi community. She has earned a worldwide recognition as a writer of novels on women's issues. She might not have done that on purpose as most of details seem to be an outcome of the social and political events happening in her novels. Her fictional women are shown to be at odds with the conditions prevailing in the society. In a male dominated society, they do not enjoy decision making positions. They are not the ones who influence public events in political and religious spheres. They do not announce a war on the neighbours. They do not spread hate and animosity against others. It is the men who plan and execute conflicts, but it is the women who bear the brunt of men's follies. When men turn inhuman and fall upon opponents, they humiliate them after defeating them. One way of making the enemy feel humiliated is to make them feel helpless before their women. The Indo-Pak history is full of communal riots in which women are victimized to traumatize their men-folk. Women's molestation is used as a weapon of war. The partition of India is full of incidents of heinous crimes against women. Apart from a large-scale blood-shed and dislocation of the population, the partition is besmeared the blood of thousands of women who were harassed, abducted and raped. Their bodies were mutilated. The criminals belonged to all communities—Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. No religion has succeeded in inculcating respect for women in their mind. Women from all communities shared the same humiliation and barbarity. The hatred continued many years after the partition. India and Pakistan had Wars in 1965 and then 1971. The stories under discussion throw light on the trauma of women who undergo this suffering.

Apart from Sidhwa, numerous female writers of Pakistani descent are actively engaged in exploring feminist themes, offering readers a glimpse into the problems through their literary works. These writers demonstrate a profound awareness of the societal constraints and patriarchal structures that impede women within their community. They symbolize these constraints in various forms, shedding light on the tangible and intangible barriers faced by women. Furthermore, the research revealed that each thematic exploration undertaken by these writers serves as a reflection of the female psyche, illustrating how women perceive themselves and the societal forces shaping their identities. Yet, there remains a critical analysis to be conducted on the extent to which women issues are brought to light through literary works. The purpose is to bring awareness among the masses and to help ameliorate the conditions. An understanding of the issue can pave the way for the betterment of female condition. Bapsi Sidhwa emerges as a notable voice in this discourse, amplifying the socio-economic struggles faced by women in Pakistan through her fictional portrayals. Her narratives delve into the lives of diverse female protagonists who grapple not only for survival but also a semblance of respectability within society.

The issues confronting women globally find their roots in the pervasive system of patriarchy, which has endured across various societies since the dawn of organized human civilization. The origins of this system can be traced back to ancient civilizations like Greece, where men wielded power while relegating women to domestic roles and entertainment. Patriarchy, at its core, denotes male dominance, wherein the father or eldest male figure holds sway over all women and younger males within the familial and societal hierarchy. However, feminist discourse has expanded the definition of patriarchy beyond its literal interpretation, framing it as a broader social set up perpetuating male supremacy over women. Feminist scholars have developed nuanced theories to illustrate the mechanisms through which women are subordinated by men within this framework. They argue that patriarchy, bolstered by cultural, political, and religious institutions, renders women vulnerable to various forms of oppression. Feminist ideology contends that women should be granted equal rights and opportunities as men, challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and advocating for women's emancipation. This critique extends to traditional notions of femininity propagated by patriarchal ideologies, which constrain women's autonomy and agency. By interrogating gender politics, power dynamics, and sexuality, feminist theory seeks to unravel the complexities of injustice embedded within patriarchal systems. Key feminist texts, such as Simone de Beauvoir's initial work "The Second Sex," illuminate marginalization of women within patriarchal societies. De Beauvoir enunciates how women face discrimination on the basis of gender with reduced roles while men have placed themselves in positions of authority. The selected author for this research emerges as a poignant chronicler of women's experiences, drawing upon her intimate knowledge of Pakistani society and the historical events that have shaped it. Having witnessed firsthand the partition of India and subsequent upheavals, she brings a nuanced understanding of the atrocities inflicted upon women from different religious backgrounds. Her insights, rooted in personal experiences and astute observations, enrich the discourse surrounding women's struggles in both urban and rural Pakistan.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Bapsi Sidhwa has also written a number of novels. Considerable attention has been dedicated to the novels of Bapsi Sidhwa, recognizing her significant contributions to feminist discourse. With five esteemed novels to her name, Sidhwa's literary works are esteemed for their profound contemplation and adept handling of intricate women's issues. As a woman possessing personal insights into female struggles and armed with extensive literary knowledge and worldly exposure, Sidhwa emerges as an ideal candidate to explore these themes. Throughout history, writing has served as a potent tool for feminist thinkers, enabling them to advocate for women's rights and express themselves freely. Despite the constraints of Pakistan's patriarchal society, writers with feminist inclinations have utilized the written word to advance their cause. This feminist literary tradition, rooted in pre-partition Pakistan, encompasses various forms such as magazines and novels, serving as educational mediums for women. Notable figures like Bapsi Sidhwa, Rukhsana Ahmad, and others have contributed to this literary lineage, weaving narratives that challenge traditional gender roles and societal norms. Feminism within English fiction in the Sub-continent is often perceived as a curious notion. Both male and female Pakistani writers, spanning poets and fiction authors, have delved into a myriad of themes and subjects typically found in poetry and novels. These writers frequently confront the gender disparities prevalent in Pakistani society, which subject women, constituting over half of the population, to various socio-cultural constraints. Kamla Das, an Indian feminist thinker, delves into the everyday struggles and suffering of women. Similarly, Shashi Deshpande, another South Asian feminist voice, portrays the challenging realities faced by women. R.K. Narayan focuses on the plight of middle-class housewives, while Mulk Raj Anand satirizes the socio-religious hypocrisies pervasive in South-East Asian societies, encompassing India and Pakistan. Anita Desai's works primarily explore women's tribulations, while Kamla Das also engages in East-West comparisons. Shobha represents a new breed of women who challenge traditional lifestyles. Through their writings, Indian English writers demonstrate a keen awareness of women's issues and advocate for gender equality in their own unique ways. In contemporary fiction by women writers, female characters often grapple with their societal positions, questioning and reshaping their identities. Sidhwa's characters predominantly traverse through the initial phases of victimization before mustering the courage to confront their circumstances. These evolutions within fictional narratives mirror broader social and cultural dynamics, offering insights into the status of women within society. The text has a particular significance because characters are often mirroring the author's own experiences and ideals. While authors exert control over their characters, allowing them a degree of autonomy imbues the text with authenticity. Through their characters, authors project their perspectives on life and social realities, thereby defining themselves within their literary works. For Sidhwa, her novels serve as vehicles to channel her personal experiences and struggles. Through characters like Lenny in "Ice Candy Man," Sidhwa portrays the problems which women face in patriarchal societies, highlighting their quest for identity and autonomy. Despite societal constraints, Sidhwa's characters transcend their circumstances, emerging as heroes in their own right.

Sidhwa emerges as a formidable voice among contemporary feminist writers, using her works to illuminate the gradual shifts in women's rights and societal perceptions. In "Ice Candy Man," she envisions a world devoid of exploitation and oppression, advocating for justice and

equality across gender, class, and religion. By portraying female characters navigating the tumultuous backdrop of partition of India, Sidhwa underscores the resilience of women in the face of adversity. Writers of the Sub-Continent has been raising voice in favour of women even before the partition. Many novels have been written on the issues of women since the second half of the twentieth century. Some of the most popular literary figures who wrote on these lines include Bapsi Sidhwa, Rukhsana Ahmad, Bina Shah, Qaisra Shehraz, Talat Abbasi, Muhammad Hanif, Jameel Ahmad, Danyal Mohayuddin etc. While writing in English may limit her audience, Sidhwa effectively addresses women's issues in Pakistani society, challenging prevailing narratives and traditions. Her use of humor serves as a subtle critique of patriarchal structures, offering a counter-narrative that empowers female protagonists to assert their individuality and reject societal expectations. Sidhwa's portrayal of women's struggles underscores the enduring challenges they face in reconciling tradition with modernity, as articulated by scholars like Spivak. In essence, Bapsi Sidhwa's literary contributions not only shed light on women's experiences but also offer a compelling critique of patriarchal norms, paving the way for alternative narratives that celebrate female agency and resilience. Through her nuanced storytelling, Sidhwa invites readers to reconsider entrenched notions of gender and power, envisioning a more just and cooperating society for all.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Feminist theory emerged as a product of the feminist movement, initially spearheaded by educated white women in Europe and America before gaining traction worldwide. Over the past two centuries, feminism has evolved through distinct waves, each advocating for progressively broader rights and participation for women in political, social, and economic spheres. These waves have addressed a myriad of issues, ranging from basic rights to gender discrimination, reproductive rights, and even more abstract concepts like identity and gender. The movement's origins in Europe and North America saw a shift towards inclusivity with the involvement of feminist groups from former colonies, particularly in the post-colonial era of the 1960s and 70s. However, critiques emerged from black feminists and activists in Southeast Asia, highlighting the ethnocentric tendencies within Western feminism. The current research delves into an analysis of selected short stories from Bapsi Sidhwa's compilation "Their Language of Love" through a feminist lens, with a particular focus on patriarchal social structures prevalent in the sub-continent. Feminism is a concept of equality for women and justice and fair treatment. It urges men to give women their rights and stop all sorts of violence against them. This movement agitates for the cause of women and all that women badly need. A feminist theorist Mitchell defines patriarchy as it refers "kinship systems in which men exchange women" (Mitchell 1971). "Sexual politics is using sex to play politics or politics to play sex" (Kate Millet 1970) succinctly captures the intricate relationship between power, sexuality, and gender. Talking about patriarchy, Betty Friedan says, "Each suburban wife struggles with it alone." Feminism, as an expansive ideology, encompasses various theories and perspectives addressing women's issues across domestic, social, political, and economic spheres. However, this study narrows its scope to examine the manifestations of patriarchy within Asian society. Sylvia Walby's theory of patriarchy serves as a foundational framework for the present research. Walby defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices wherein men dominate, oppress, and exploit women across various spheres of life". She delineates six key social structures through which



patriarchal oppression is perpetuated, encompassing economic, social, and cultural dimensions. The current study adopts a qualitative approach, employing textual inference techniques to analyze the selected short stories in relation to Walby's six structures of patriarchy. Through textual analysis, the research aims to uncover the ways in which patriarchal practices are reflected and reinforced within the narratives, examining the characters, attitudes, events, and social practices depicted therein. The study's scope is delimited to an in-depth analysis of two short stories, namely "The Gentlemanly War" and "Defend Yourself Against Me," drawn from Sidhwa's collection "Their Language of Love." The aim of the study is to give an insight into the patriarchal structures and depict how men use women to dishonour opponents. The context in both the stories is Pakistani society and culture.

## ANALYSIS

### Male Violence and Patriarchal Relations in Sexuality

The present research undertakes an examination of selected short stories from Bapsi Sidhwa's compilation "Their Language of Love" through the lens of feminism, particularly focusing on patriarchal social structures prevalent in Pakistan. Feminism, as a multifaceted ideology, encompasses various theories and perspectives addressing women's issues across domestic, social, political, and economic spheres. However, this study delves into the manifestations of patriarchy within Pakistani society, concentrating on the theme of physical and sexual abuse as a weapon of war. The term patriarchy refers to male domination and the power relations in which "Men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways." (Kamla Bhasin, 1993) Men tend to be violent towards women whenever they are on the winning side in communal conflicts. It looks perverse in men to attack the weaker sex and victimize women to revenge upon their menfolk. It is sorrowful to think that women and children have nothing to do with these hate philosophies. Bellamy (2000) highlights the prevalence of harassment, forced pregnancies, and physical injuries inflicted upon women by their families or societies, often going unpunished. Pakistan and India have a legacy of communal riots and women are the ones who have suffered most as a result. The following lines refer to incidents of 1965 war when India attacked Lahore.

"What those armed men would do to the women? To Feroza, who was only six and tall for her age? The thought of victory-drunk thugs laying hands on my daughter was unbearable. (A gentlemanly war)". (p.6)

The selected text from Sidhwa's short story "A Gentlemanly War," depicts the protagonist's fears for her daughter's safety during the 1965 war between India and Pakistan. These fears underscore the vulnerability of women during times of conflict. The potential for violence against women at the hands of invading soldiers reflects a broader pattern of gender-based aggression inherent in patriarchal societies. This fear resonates with the historical backdrop of partition riots, where women endured abduction, rape, and mutilation as acts of communal vengeance. The worst to imagine was the thought of soldiers laying hands on her daughter, who was only six but tall enough for her age. "The thought was unbearable to her". The lines throw light on this heinous side of man that he victimizes the woman in all conflicts. Women have no direct role in creating all these conflicts but they receive the worst sort of aggression when men come into conflict.

Men have a very strange taste for hurting the sense of honour attached with the women. Similarly, "Defend Yourself Against Me" sheds light on the trauma inflicted upon women by communal violence during partition. Ammi Ji's reaction to the presence of Sikh guests at a party in London, reflects her unresolved trauma from witnessing the slaughter of her family during partition riots. The shared experiences of communal violence and loss among Punjabi expatriates in England reveal the enduring impact of violence on women.

The story also depicts commodification and exploitation of women's bodies as spoils of war. The abduction and sexual violence perpetrated against women from all religious communities during partition underscore the worst side of gender and communal conflict. Women of all religions became target of sexual violence as a means of asserting dominance and humiliating the enemy. Ammi Ji's words "God knows how many women were lifted, but, then, everybody carried women off. Sikhs and Hindus—Muslim women. Muslims—Sikh and Hindu women." (Defend yourself against me, p. 224) The elderly woman recounts her poignant recollections from the partition era, where women bore the brunt of the atrocities. Regardless of their community, women were frequently abducted and subjected to the horrors of war, with no group exempt from this heinous crime. Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims alike abducted women from opposing religious factions. Ammi Ji struggles to quantify the multitude of abducted women, their cries echoing hauntingly amidst the chaos. Various forms of persecution targeted women, with pregnant women especially subjected to barbaric treatment, forced to march unclothed through the streets, their bellies viciously slashed. The widespread abduction of men further exacerbates the magnitude of the tragedy, with no distinction among the perpetrators of crimes against women. Hindus and Sikhs abducted Muslim women, while Muslims took Hindu and Sikh women, reflecting the collective guilt across all communities. The upheaval caused by partition disrupted the established patriarchal order, leading to the exploitation of women's bodies by men from both sides, as a means to vent their rage and frustrations. This systematic sexual violence against women emerged as a pressing national issue, with Menon and Bhasin (1998) emphasizing the violation of women's sexuality through kidnappings and forced marriages, underscoring the vulnerability of women in such tumultuous circumstances. We get another evidence of brutality in the words of another guest Mrs. Khan who says, "My uncles, who crossed the border in a caravan of Muslim refugees, brought with them a stable of kidnapped Hindu and Sikh women . . . We Muslims are no better. We did the same things . . . Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, we are all evil bastards!" (Defend yourself against me, p. 239) The passage also sheds light on the same issue, this time through Mrs. Khan's account of the atrocities perpetrated by various religious communities against each other. He recounts crossing the border of India with a large group of Muslims, who brought along Hindu and Sikh women as war bounty. Mrs. Khan recalls stealing glances at these women, unable to forget the desperation evident on their faces. She candidly admits that Muslims are no better than Sikhs and Hindus in this regard.

Her frustration reaches a boiling point as he condemns all involved as "bastards," highlighting the lack of morality among communities willing to kill and especially molest women. The story's narrator recounts how he grew up listening to the elders in the house murmuring about the atrocities inflicted upon women during the partition. They spoke in hushed tones, avoiding clarity in front of the children, though the narrator was old enough to grasp the gravity of their discussions. These conversations revolved around various women who had been victimized, often referred to as someone's sister, daughter, or sister-in-law. Mrs. Khan described these women as spoils of war.

The story reveals that nearly every migrated family had a tale of suffering to tell, of men being slaughtered and women being sexually assaulted by the opposing community. "Who are these men?" Ammi-Ji screeches, 'I will never forgive your fathers! Get out, shaitans! Sons and grandsons of shaitans! Never, never, never!' (Defend yourself against me, p. 247) The passage describes Ammi Ji's reaction upon learning that the guests at her sons' home were Sikhs from Indian Punjab. Initially, her voice carried a fierce and forceful tone as she inquired about the identity of the guests. However, her demeanor shifted, and her voice lost its vigor, now emitting weak and fragile sounds. She expressed her inability to forgive the fathers of these guests for the heinous crimes committed against Muslim women, labeling them as "shaitans" and branding their sons as offspring of those devils. She vehemently declared her inability to forget the atrocities and her unwillingness to extend forgiveness.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of Sidhwa's short stories reveals the vast influence of patriarchal social structures on the life of women, particularly during times of conflict and communal unrest. The narratives offer poignant insights into the gendered dimensions of violence, trauma, and resilience within Pakistani society. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of women, Sidhwa's stories challenge prevailing narratives of victimhood and silence, inviting readers to confront the systemic inequalities perpetuated by patriarchal systems. Through nuanced storytelling and empathetic characterizations, Sidhwa amplifies the voices of marginalized women, illuminating the enduring struggle for gender equality and justice in contemporary society. The compilation of short stories, entitled "Their Language of Love," presents a diverse array of female characters grappling with various forms of patriarchy. These women find themselves ensnared in a web of traditions, cultural expectations, and social norms, bravely resisting against formidable odds. Their struggles encompass issues such as domestic violence, forced marriages, social insecurity, and conformity to male-imposed laws, all of which are depicted across different narratives within this collection. The chosen stories highlighted sexual violence against women as a weapon of war. Bapsi Sidhwa, primarily a novelist, maintains her reputation for advocating the rights of women through this anthology of short stories, utilizing the genre to champion the female cause.

The analysis titled "Male Violence and Patriarchal Relations in Sexuality," delves into incidents within the selected stories that underscore the prevalence of violence against women and their subordination to men in society. Patriarchal dominance extends even to sexual matters, where control is wielded through various mechanisms such as family, tribe, marriage, legal courts, and religious institutions. Women often find themselves victimized in times of conflict, whether in the context of war, familial disputes, or within political, legal, and religious frameworks. Sidhwa illustrates how women experienced fear during the 1965 India-Pakistan war, particularly mothers apprehensive of potential physical and sexual violence by Indian soldiers in the event of Lahore's occupation. Additionally, evidence of historical sexual violence against women surfaces during the partition of the subcontinent. An elderly mother, herself a victim of communal violence, expresses outrage upon encountering Sikhs from Indian Punjab while visiting her sons in England, as their presence serves as a stark reminder of the horrors endured during partition riots.

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