

Introduction

The Pakistani Bride has had an interesting publishing history. Although Bapsi Sidhwa wrote this novel before her others, it was not published until 1981, a year after *The Crow Eaters* appeared—the book that displayed the comic and satirical gifts for which she has since become known. Then in 1988 came *Cracking India*, which won critical success for combining comedy with historical drama.

Drama is what impels *The Pakistani Bride* and it strikes one, now that the book is being reissued, as an astonishingly accomplished first novel to be written by a woman who lived, as Sidhwa has described, the conventional life of a businessman's wife and mother of three children, and who had written nothing previously except for a few articles. She has said it is based on a real event she heard of on a visit with her husband to the Karakoram Mountains in the northwest of Pakistan on its border with Afghanistan—a remote, almost unexplored region now known the world over as the hideout of the Taliban and the men inspired by Osama bin Laden. A tribal man had brought his young daughter up from the plains of Punjab and given her in marriage, according to tradition, to a young man of a family to whom he had promised. In the wild tribal hinterland the girl had been subjected to such brutality and unremitting hardship that she had run away into the trackless mountains through which the Indus River runs in unfettered majesty. According to the strict code of honour by which her husband and his people lived in the absence of any other law, this act could not be forgiven; she was hunted down like an

animal and her headless body had been found floating in the shallows of the river.

Bapsi Sidhwa is a woman of strong feminist convictions and the story haunted her so that, on her return home, she began to write it down. With pain and outrage as its impulse, the novel could have turned into a didactic tract exposing the cruelty of a patriarchal and brutalized society out of touch with a world in which a woman could hold a respected status. Instead, the story that took Sidhwa four years to write grew increasingly complex and layered, incorporating many subsidiary characters and contrasting social worlds. The resulting novel delineates with sharp observation and insight a spartan and remote people who live by their own inflexible rules as well as the comfort and pleasure-loving people of the fertile Punjab plains to the south.

This story's complex subject matter required a strong narrative thrust and the adroit combination of separate elements into a clear, sharply etched pattern. Sidhwa handled the necessary craftsmanship in her capacity as a born storyteller or a practiced and experienced one. There are no loose ends or slow moments or wrong turns; the story has a momentum that steadily increases in tension until it reaches its highly cinematic climax—then breaks off to let the reader contemplate the worlds from which it emerged.

Three worlds come together to form the basic story. The first section contains a largely sympathetic portrait of the tribal society of Kohistan. We meet the central character, Qasim, as a ten-year-old boy being handed a gun by his father and being told he is to be married; a fellow tribal who has failed to repay a debt has promised him his daughter instead. The boy does not comprehend what marriage might entail but delighted with the weapon. Sidhwa charmingly describes how he meets his much older bride, who, shocked to find she is being married to

a child, humiliates him by bursting into incredulous laughter. When he does eventually become aware of her feminine body and tries to touch her, she reacts by giving him a thrashing. Only when a stranger comes up to separate them do they band together to pelt him with stones. Gradually the relationship develops, and at sixteen Qasim finds himself a father. More children are born to the pair but when there is an outbreak of smallpox, Qasim emerges as the sole survivor. With great compassion Sidhwa conveys the cruelty of a rugged land where people lead lives formed by the harsh environment.

In the second section Qasim goes down to the Punjab plains in search of work and is caught up in the madness of Partition—the historic breaking up of India and the birth of Pakistan in 1947, which Sidhwa takes up much more fully in *Cracking India*—during which he rescues a little girl whose parents are slaughtered, and he names her Zaitoon after his own dead daughter. The canvas expands to take in their new home in Lahore, a bustling cityscape vividly described. With Zaitoon we are introduced to a world where the girl is welcomed by the women and children of the entire neighborhood. “Entering their dwellings was like stepping into a gigantic womb, the fecund, fetid world of mothers and babies,” also described as “the mindless, velvet vortex of the womb.” Zaitoon is care-free in those years, one of “the little girls burdened with even younger children on their hips, the babies’ necks wobbling dangerously as their carriers played hop-scotch or crouched over a game of bone knuckles,” and safely embedded in the affection of elders.

By age sixteen this happy chapter of Zaitoon’s life comes to a close when Qasim, keeping a promise, marries her to his cousin’s son back in the mountain region. There is unbearable poignancy in the scene in which Qasim leaves her in her new, inhospitable home although she weeps and begs to be taken

away, only to be told “I’ve given my word . . . On it depends my honor. It is dearer to me than life. If you besmirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands . . . You make me break my word, girl, and you cover my name with dung. Do you understand that?” Zaitoon realizes that this is not mere histrionics—in these parts it is the brutal reality. And her married life indeed proves brutal, with her husband’s every look and word a cruel assault. There is no room here for sentiment or romanticism. To defy it, or escape it, she courts nothing less than death.

To bring in another perspective at this point in the story, Sidhwa introduces a total outsider: the American woman, Carol, who married a Pakistani in the United States and has come with him on a visit to the Karakoram Mountains. Her view of this place, and of the military personnel she encounters there, is indeed romantic—but she too learns the place a woman has in such a society: craved sexually but in every other way despised and regarded as an inferior being. Carol could have seemed totally extraneous to the scene but her disillusionment is woven together with Zaitoon’s tragedy in a way that makes the latter explicable to the Western, and westernized, reader.

Sidhwa spends the minimum time on explication, however; the story propels the reader along pell-mell. Every sentence contains a multitude of verbs, which give them vigor and speed. This narrative style could leave the reader feeling breathless if Sidhwa did not combine it with her gift for the telling phrase, the arresting image:

The uneasy city was awakening furtively, like a sick man pondering each movement lest pain recur.

Men, freshly dead, pale and velvety, still lay in alleys and in open drains.

Such images bring the reader to a halt and create pauses in a narrative crowded with event and propelled forward with urgency.

Sidhwa's ear for dialogue helps her convey the saltiness of the speech of common people and the pithiness of the proverbs with which they sprinkle it:

Too late, friend. Too bad you missed the bird when it sang in your window.

What will you do with more reading and writing—boil and drink it?

These turns of speech are the best argument, surely, for multilingualism.

Such gifts, evident in the *The Pakistani Bride*, Sidhwa was to use to the fullest in her later novels—*The Crow Eaters*, *Cracking India*, and *The American Brat*. What is unique to this, her first book, is her ability to convey the quality of a particular landscape. In the final section in which a young girl makes her way through the forbidding mountains of the Karakoram Range, the land itself acquires a personality—oppressive, brooding, and magnificent. At the end it is the landscape that is not the backdrop but the heart of her story.

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